

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

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KEOWEE

Prologue

My story begins before the Fall, in that Indian summer time when the hills are tipped with oncoming gold, and the light hangs just above the trees, dotting the Blue Ridge with gilded freckles. The mornings and the evenings are cool, but it is the mornings I remember most: waking before the men, wrapping a shawl around my shoulders and slipping out through the fields, the dry grass crunching beneath my boots. Drifting down from Tomassee Knob the mist would spread over Cheohee Valley in a great, rivering pool of gray, the sun rising in the east flecking the horses' breath—suspended in the air before their nostrils—with slivers of shine. It was then the whole world was quiet, no crows eating my corn, the peacefulness not even broken by the bay of some wolf on the ridge, calling to the still-lit moon in the western sky. The whole world was silent then, and the Blue Ridge breathed beneath the deep purple earth. I thought I could feel it, a great heart beating in the wilderness.

He came to me in the morning. I had crossed the north fields and made my way to the creek at the edge of the forest, to check on the last of the Solomon's Seals I'd watched cling to the embankment in the final days of summer. Ferns reaching the height of my elbows billowed out from the ground, spreading for what looked like miles. The smell of sap emanated from fallen pines where woodpeckers searched for tiny bugs and snakes lay still in the cool undergrowth. Every once in a while a squirrel or rabbit leapt from its camouflaged hiding place, skirting the path I walked.

Coals from a recent fire smoldered black in a pile a few yards from a bend in the creek, and I looked up and further into the woods, wondering if a Cherokee scout or perhaps a trapper

had decided to take his rest on our land. But the woods were eerily still, and not a bird sang nor

cricket chirped. There was no movement except for the creek itself, bubbling up against a tiny dam made by runaway branches, cane and weeds. My eyes came to rest across the creek on shadows at the bottom of an enormous oak. Suddenly, the shadows shifted, and the shape of a man stepped forward, seeming to emerge seamlessly from the trunk, his feet making no sound in the leaves.

The breath caught in a knot in my throat and I placed a hand there, the other fumbling in my skirts for the lady's flintlock I'd been given. He walked closer, still without sound, and stood watching me from the edge of the creek bed. I pulled the pistol from its hold, pointing it unsteadily at the stranger.

"Come no closer," I ordered, the words tumbling awkwardly off my tongue and echoing softly in the small dip of valley.

He raised his head, eyes emerging from beneath the brim of a battered farmer's hat. Across that creek they looked as green to me as moss growing on boulders in the water. His hair was long, the fawn color of a well-worn leather saddle, and the ends were tipped with the same pale blonde

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that streaked through the rest, like he'd dipped his head in white paint. He looked like a white man turned savage, with his moccasin-laced boots and dirty, fringed deerskin shirt, a beaded strap crossing his chest, holding a hatchet and musket on his back. He did not speak, just looked at me from under that hat, shadows cast high on his cheekbones and the solid line of his jaw. The creek gurgling and my breathing were the only sounds. Soon, I knew, the settlement would awake, and the animals would need to be fed, the horses let to pasture.

Surely someone would notice I was missing.

It was the first time he had come to me, but it would not be the last. And though my story ends with him, he did not cause it to begin. I did that, on a midsummer day in the year of our Lord 1768, in the twenty-fifth year of my youth.

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Chapter 1

Charlestown

Spring, 1768

I was an unlikely adventurer, at least by all appearances. I knew what the people of Charlestown saw when they looked at me: a wealthy woman clad in the new fashions, small of stature but possessed of an unruly mane of yellow hair that made me seem taller—a bluestocking with a well-worn volume forever in hand, one who looked out at the world from a pair of disconcertingly direct blue eyes. The ladies, especially, would whisper “orphan,” and allow that the early demise of my parents could be reason enough for a man such as my grandfather to keep me a spinster at age twenty-five. The gentlemen viewed my person with vague calculation, surely wondering just how much—as the sole granddaughter of Campbell MacFadden, Esquire, heir by marriage to a profitable rice plantation—I was worth. And so when the trapper arrived in the hour before dawn, smelling of wood smoke and the sweat of a hard ride, I was ready: ready to abandon Charlestown and my life there, to shutter permanently those judging, prying eyes.

It was the banging on the door that woke me, more than the shouting. On the peninsula, banging on doors in the wee hours nearly always meant one of two things: a slave uprising, or a fire. On Tradd Street alone there had been three devastating fires the past year, conflagrations that destroyed entire blocks, and I threw off the covers and rounded my bed in moments, pulling a stout case from beneath my desk and dumping the contents of my drawers—papers, pamphlets, quills, stoppered inkpot—as quickly as I could. I heard Grandfather’s footfall on the stairs outside my bedroom door, his step bounding and spry.

“Hallo, the MacFadden house!” A man was shouting from the street, the banging commencing. “Hallo the house!”

With one arm I swept as many of my books as I could into the case, then latched it with twin *thunks*. I dragged it to the armoire, eschewing fragile slippers for my second-hand riding boots and yanking them on beneath my dressing gown. I caught the case up in my arms and rushed into the hall. Candles were lit in the foyer below, the open doorway casting edging dawn light and a wash of spring fragrance into the wide, high room. At the landing I halted, stunned by the sight of the man with my Grandfather: he wore muddy boots, deerskin leggings and a yellowed linen shirt, a knife at his waist and a rifle on his back, caught by a series of beaded leather straps. Hearing me, Grandfather turned and looked up, his broad Scots face ablaze with more than the excitement of the hour, and the stranger removed a grubby farmer’s hat, revealing a painfully freckled face and matted auburn hair caught back in a tail.

“Is there a fire?” I asked breathlessly, and Grandfather shook his head, more as if to clear it than in denial. Between his large, gnarled hands he was wringing something, and I squinted for a better look. Outside, the world was swiftly brightening, and through the transom window I caught sight of the lamplighter dousing the light across the street. So concentrated was I on my Grandfather’s expression that I almost didn’t catch the expected shout: “Six of the clock, and all’s well!”

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"Grandfather?" I asked, confused, and that was when he opened his hands like an offering, and candlelight glinted on the object there: a thick, silver man's ring embedded with a fat emerald, hung on a piece of rough leather.

"It's Owen," he said, a catch in his throat. He cleared it, louder now. "Quincy, he's alive."

In the eighteen years I'd known my cousin Owen, I'd lost him four times. The first was only months after he'd moved into the Tradd Street house with Grandfather and me. I was six

years old then, and had been warded to Campbell MacFadden myself only a year, sent to him after my parents—my father having been his only son—died on the crossing from Scotland. It was a tragic stretch of time for my Grandfather, because naught but a year later we were delivered of Owen. His parents—his mother having been Grandfather's firstborn—had perished in a house fire in Philadelphia. Owen arrived lanky and sullen, but found the South Carolina environs endlessly exotic, and within weeks he brightened: a serious boy with a streak of the trickster. On his tenth birthday he sank a dinghy on the Santee River only feet from the dock of the du Pont rice plantation: a smaller of the many plantations along that river, belonging to my dead grandmother's Huguenot family. We felt certain he'd been eaten by alligators until he'd stumbled through the azalea bushes on the water-side lawn hours later, dripping with muck and spotted to the knees with leeches.

The second was when he left Charlestown at seventeen to attend Harvard College in Massachusetts, and I was sure he would become so learned he'd outpace me by bounds, want nothing to do with his younger female cousin and return completely unlike the unpretentious Owen I'd known. Each Christmas, though, he'd emerge from the stage, luggage brimming with presents of books—books most men would deem too erudite to gift a mere girl.

The third time we lost him was in the spring of 1757, when he abandoned Cambridge and Harvard after only two years to join with the army in the war against the French. But he'd proved us wrong yet again, returning five years later from the Pennsylvania frontier, scarred but whole, and looking out from much older eyes. I, and Grandfather too I think, believed Owen would settle in Charlestown then, marry into one of the appropriate families in our insular circle and join Grandfather's practice. He'd been studying law, after all, before the War, and was possessed of a keen eye and an artful tongue; returning home a hero would only bolster the already stalwart MacFadden reputation.

But Owen had other ideas: he'd been exposed to the great frontier during the War, and to the land and adventure to be got there, and sitting at a desk inside a brick building on the Charlestown harbor—drawing up tedious legal notes for cotton and rice merchants—was not something he considered desirable life's work. Being a war hero and speaking passable Iroquois, he was offered a position as a land speculator for the Transylvania Company on the frontier west of the Appalachian Mountains. We'd

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received letters, and parcels containing small treasures like porcupine quills, Indian beads, and the occasional bear claw, but he did not come home again.

On a bitter day in February, only a year and a half ago, an aide to the Royal Governor brought a letter to our door that upended my sheltered little world. By way of the web of colonial politics, Governor Bull had got word of a South Carolinian of reputable family involved in a tragedy on the Kentucky frontier. And so Owen was finally lost to us forever, killed by a band of Shawnee raiding across the Ohio Valley; he, two other speculators and their Cherokee scout had been murdered at their encampment, their bodies burned.

Six months later we were brought Owen's saddlebags—or what remained of them, charred as they were—by a sad-eyed young emissary of the Transylvania Company. I spent days simply staring at the scorched leather, then finally fingering its contents: a wool bullet pouch containing three lead balls, a singed blue ribbon, and a dog-eared copy of *Robinson Crusoe*, the initials *O.M.S.* etched awkwardly in the binding. I mourned for Owen like a sister, and Grandfather retreated to his study for weeks on end, upon eventual emergence appearing an aged, empty copy of himself. It had been only in the last six months that we'd found happiness in each other's company again.

We knew he lived dangerously, Grandfather had said when he spoke finally of Owen's death, his warm hand lightly cupping my bare head: a benediction. *We must get on with it.*

I dropped the case on the landing and raced gracelessly down the stairs, my boots

clomping against the wood and my uncovered hair flying scandalously round my face. The trapper cleared his throat and averted his eyes, showing him to be a man of conscience, for all his rangy appearance. I put a hand to my chest where my heart beat madly, and one to Grandfather's forearm. "Is it true?" I demanded.

"He was taken captive by the Shawnee. They spared his life." Grandfather's voice was hollow, his eyes unnaturally bright. He took my hand, turned it palm up and dropped the ring into it. I stared at it momentarily, the tail of leather it had been looped through draped rather elegantly over my wrist.

"Sir, you'll want to know more," the trapper said lowly, his rural Continental accent unbearably slow.

"Yes, of course. Let us go to my study." Grandfather turned so quickly and marched down the hall that the trapper looked to me, and I shook my head woodenly. He'd started after the old man, a hand reaching up to play with the strap on his left shoulder, the one attached to his rifle, when Grandfather spun and stepped around him, eyes narrowing. "What are ye waiting for, girl? Come on!"

Grandfather's study was dark, and it smelled of books: of dust and leather, of old pages thumbed by generations of hands. He stepped to the unusual desk made especially for him by a friend of his, the famous cabinetmaker Thomas Elfe: a desk for a tall man, with thick, claw-footed legs, far removed from the current style. He lit an oil lamp there, gesturing at

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me without looking up at the trapper, who hovered uneasily beside one of a pair of ancient, wing-backed chairs. The man continued to rub a hand on the strap at his shoulder—assuring himself of his rifle, I thought.

“Tell her,” Grandfather ordered, his Highland Scotch burr thickening in his excitement.

“Tell my granddaughter what ye know.”

Too stupid with shock to demand a proper introduction, I held out the ring like a question, my mouth agape.

“Miss, my name is Clemens. I’m recently down from the Cherokee country—I’m a deerskin trapper, see. It was at Fort Ninety-Six I saw the advertisement Mr. MacFadden here posted, for word of his grandson.” He stopped, glancing back and forth between Grandfather and me, bewildered at what must have seemed our lack of propriety, or for that matter, our silence. He could not have known how much we’d loved Owen, how desperately we’d mourned... how unbelievable it was to think him alive. “Well, I knew the face soon as I saw it.”

“The face? Forgive me, but I don’t understand.” I walked to the desk, folding my hands as if in prayer and raising them to my lips, blowing air through my clasped fingers. The ring on its leather strap hung from my pinky like a loop of rein. “Grandfather, what does he mean? Whose ring is this?”

When the old man didn’t answer, only stared off into the dark corner as if in a trance, I clapped my hands together loudly. “Grandfather!”

The stunned look vanished and he smiled suddenly, the old humor spreading warmly across his whiskered face, his blue eyes flashing with it. He wore no wig, just his own dark hair, powdered with white talcum and peppered by gray age. “It’s Owen’s ring, left to him by my Adelaide—by his mother.” He reached out, snatched the ring and held it beneath the lamp.

“See here, Quinn? The initials *A.M.S.*: Adelaide MacFadden Scott, Reginald Scott being Owen’s father, your uncle.” Mr. Clemens and I leaned forward to observe the spidery letters engraved in the silver, and when Grandfather stood straight and set the ring down on the desktop with a *clap* we both started. “It’s proof, child—proof he’s alive.”

“But where is he? Why hasn’t he come home?” I turned to the trapper again, my hands

pressed against my waist as if anchoring myself to the spot. “Mr. Clemens, please.”

“He’s with the Shawnee. Alive still, when I last saw him near Virginia and he gave me the ring.” The man shifted his feet, clearly uncomfortable indoors. “Begging your pardon, miss—he’ll not last long with the savages. You’d best send someone to make a trade.”

It was the opportunity for which I’d been recklessly longing: a chance at new life, at breaking free from the rigid confines of Charlestown society and from all that was expected of me. For twenty years I had been like a

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swimmer caught in a dangerous undertow, scarcely able to keep my head above the swells as I'd been swept further into the sea of my own predestiny. Since childhood I'd felt that I was different—that I did not belong anywhere except in my Grandfather's library pouring over books, enveloping myself in other worlds; or, out on the Santee—free to ride my horse at a wild gallop down lonely sand roads, Owen atop his own mount at my side, my sole companion.

But in the backcountry, I could be free. After rescuing Owen—for rescue him I must—I could make a home there. It was done nearly every day: settlers of all class and creed moving to the frontier, making new lives. Why should I not take part in such an exodus?

And so this was how I found myself standing on the promenade at White Point Park—a not-so-young woman who for all purpose should have been married and with children at her side long before—waiting and hoping that this man I loved like no other would give me the improbable leave to live my life.

“Child, ye will marry,” he said, standing ramrod straight, his face to the harbor. The gulls swooped behind the stone wall facing the sea, sending crabs scuttering about in the pluff mud. Their screeches were lost in the dull roar of the wind, but I could hear my grandfather above it all, his deep barrister's voice resolute and unyielding.

“I will not,” I answered, surprising myself. Grandfather flinched ever-so-slightly, yet his

gaze remained unwavering from the sea. “I love no man, and will not marry one only to satisfy the requirements of your will. I have reached the legal age. The dowry is mine, to do with as I wish. You said so yourself—”

“I said nothing of the sort!” He spun away from the wall, shoving big hands into the pockets of his greatcoat. His cheeks were red with rage, his silver-blue eyes making angry slits at the corners.

“You did,” I protested, unwilling to give up on a promise I knew he could not help but keep, no matter how long ago he'd made it. “When I was eleven years old Malcolm Pinckney tied a knot in my hair and stuffed it with cotton, and I was furious. I told you I hated boys and would never marry, even though I'd end up a spinster like Aunt Eloise. And you promised that I'd never end up a destitute old woman because you'd give me a dowry whether I married or not.” I reached out, grabbed the wide cuff of his coat and tugged. “I know you remember, sir.”

“I'll not have ye sacrifice your inheritance, Quincy. Not even for Owen—and certainly not for land in some godforsaken wilderness.” He rubbed a hand over his head, wigless as usual. He blew air out through his long nose. “Aye, I remember. But ye were a child.”

“I know. But you are a MacFadden, and you'll not betray your bond, even to a child.”

Carriages clacked on the cobblestones behind us as residents of the peninsula hurried to market before it closed for the evening. A slave and her charge, a small boy with a spinning wheel, played on the lawn of the park. The boy was laughing, refusing her will, and the woman admonished him—but I couldn't hear a word either said, only watched their lips

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move without sound. I could hear nothing but the rush of the ocean wind and the slap of waves against the seawall.

It all came to this: could Grandfather send me to trade for Owen, surely a man's

job, dangerous and uncertain? He could not leave Charlestown, for there was none he'd trust to

conduct his business in his stead, and we could be at search in the wilderness an unforeseeable amount of time—months, certainly, perchance even years. Even the fact we'd enlisted the aid of one of his dearest friends, a traveling minister with knowledge of backcountry geography, did not seem to mollify his fears: indeed, the Reverend Archibald McDonough was to chaperone me and keep me safe for as long and as far as he could.

I watched Grandfather with my hands clutched in the fabric of my skirts, wondering if he'd answer with reason or rage. Though he undoubtedly loved me, sending me into the inhospitable frontier without him, even with money he'd given—and lacking a husband—might be more than he could bear.

The tidal bell clanged in the harbor and the wind shifted, flipping the weathervane on the Brewster mansion in the opposite direction. It seemed as if all the mighty wheels in Campbell MacFadden's brain were turning at once. He pulled on his mottled, red-gray beard and then whirled on his heel, snatching his tricorne from the park bench nearby and yanking it onto his head.

"Lass, if I made ye a bond I shall not break it. God help Owen should ye find him." He stalked to the four-in-hand where his coachman, Naji, waited patiently, tapping the crop on his tillied thigh. When he climbed inside he dropped heavily onto the bench, folding large-knuckled hands in his lap. I stood in disbelief, unable to move my feet. He turned and blew out his cheeks, slapping his hands on his knees. "By God, Quinn, I gave ye what ye wanted. Get in this carriage!"

My feet snapped from their spell and I hurried to the carriage, stumbling on broken cobblestones. I grasped Naji's outstretched glove and he leaned down, whispering into my ear as he helped me up. "You may want to remove that smile, miss."

"The two of ye quit your yapping and let's be off. I've had enough of the harbor today,"

Grandfather ordered, refusing to meet my eyes.

I looked out over the water as we started up Bay Street, opening my eyes wide to the sting of the wind. A wave bashed against a loading dock as we passed, droplets spraying my face. It was a benediction, a blessing for the new life I'd soon begin and a most favorable omen: I *would* find Owen, alive and whole.

I stretched my neck to get a last view of the sea before it disappeared behind the Exchange Building.

That night I dreamed of the Cherokee. The vision was ruthlessly

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quick, and I sat abruptly upright, pulling the neck of my dressing gown from my chest and flapping it; it was soaked where I'd sweated through the linen. Had I called out, I wondered?

I pressed the pads of my fingers into the hollow beneath each eyebrow, pushing hard against bone: the visions always ended in headache. I closed my eyes, seeking a shard of truth in the dark melee of my mind—if I could only remember, piece the dream together, it might help me. Against the black of my eyelids I focused on a single point of white, watching as it spread, inking into shapes and then shattering. *Don't go*, I begged silently, and light bloomed.

There were two men like shadows, a fire burning on the dirt between them, half-lighting their faces. Smoke snaked up through the branches of bare trees—it was bitterly cold.

One of the men spoke, guttural and strange. He poked the fire with a tree branch, sending sparks shooting skyward in a quick burst of red that faded instantly against the black. He turned to his companion, and his face was lost.

"The woman claims he lives," the other said, in English.

"Quincy, are ye well?"

I blinked, my focus momentarily blurring on the foot of my bed: there, the scalloped edge

of the white lace quilt, the twin filial posts, and across the room in the large mirror above my desk, me, my blonde hair a disheveled mess, matching the pale of my face. I felt as I always did after a vision: as if I'd been hovering underwater, eyes open, awaiting something sinister to emerge from the brine.

There was a banging at my door and the knob rattled. "Answer me, girl. Are ye well?"

"I am," I called out, forcing my voice to calm and slipping out of the bed. I padded to the door and stood before it, rubbing my face, hard. "I'm fine, Grandfather."

"Did ye dream?" His voice was a soft rumble.

"Yes."

"Did ye see Owen, lass?"

I heard the wishing, and I pressed an open palm to the thick oak between us. The house was making its night sounds: palmetto fronds brushing the piazza roof in high wind, a creak of movement on the first floor, air whistling down the chimneys and the shutters rattling against their iron hinges. Soon, hurricane season would be upon us.

"Quincy?"

I longed to say yes. Instead, I made a promise I could not keep. "Not yet."