

Burnt Meadow, 1765

Unpublished

By Dain Trafton

Thou shalt be true. This was the great commandment that my father spoke the day we stood before him in God's house, the solemn pews behind us filled and a spring wind making the waves lie flat as far as Dyer's Reach. Thou shalt be true. This I swore, and Phebe swore the same to me, and we were man and wife, which we had thought upon since we had sense to know such things. That night the stars dropped on the eaves. Naked we held each other on the rattling husks and did the thing that men and women do, softly so my parents would not hear. We had the joy of it, like nothing else, and were surprised when we were done to find it sad. Phebe rolled on her side and grieved. She whispered, "Ammi," which is my name, but I just touched her hip and did not speak, thinking of the grass scythed flat and shaken out to dry beside the Spurwink where it meets the tide, of the wagon's shaft bowed between the oxen's sides, of building the mow into the barn's tight peak for winter's need.

Before first light we rose, and in the drenched yard, the roosters calling from farm to farm, we packed our horse to leave my parents' home, to find new land, to have a house with clapboards of our own. At dawn the sea birds plunged and twisted in the columned air while Phebe held my mother's hand and put her head upon my father's breast. They were the only parents that she had, her own being slain when Gorham burned, and she was found wandering in the wilderness. "Wherever you go," my father said, "God watches you with his great eye. His mercy is forever." Little did I know then what God had in store.

Five days we walked newly wed through the crooked woods. At night we lay in one another's arms and listened to the breathing trees. "True love," I murmured in the dark. "True love," she answered, like an echo in a cave. Some mornings, though, she would not eat, staring at the beans as if they were her friends. Once she would not get up. Her legs were stones, she said. While I slept she'd heard the ice cracking on Jordan Pond where we cut the blocks that would not melt all summer in their sawdust nest. It was her woman's mood that I had seen before. I stroked her sides, saying I loved her, asking did she love me, did she? did she? until she answered, "Yes," and let me pull her to her feet and lead her on.

Burnt Meadow was the place we sought, and so we found it -- more burnt than meadow, for strips of budless trees, tangled and charred, ran along both sides of the shallow river as far as I could see. In a wigwam of scorched sticks and fresh-peeled skins, we crouched with Mr. Davis to learn where we should go. He rolled tobacco in itself, as sailors do.

"Two miles along the river's silken tide," he said, "the burnt land stops. Strike westward there across the bosky plain towards yonder elevation." He stretched a finger to the wall and touched a grinning beaver's ear. "Beneath the precipice that forms the mountain's eastern crown, there lies a fertile slope, adorned with noble oaks and maples. Fat land through which there purls a glassy brook. Follow the water to its source beneath a cliff wherein a cavern yawns.

From that place to the bottom of the slope five hundred paces either side the stream are yours to prosper in.”

I smiled, for prospering was what I meant to do, and gave him what I got one winter’s night with the rangers on Champlain. We had crossed the lake on darkened skates, swinging our arms at the moonless sky, our guns slung on our backs, our knives as sharp between our teeth as stars, to take the red men in their sleep. Two scalps were mine, which yielded forty pounds. I signed the deed while Phebe watched, her soul drawn in under her sky-blue bonnet, the one my mother bought for her at Foreside Wharf. The air was full of flies.

“Lightning,” said Mr. Davis when we stood outside. Idly he stroked our burdened horse and eyed my wife. “I mean the blasted trees.” Phebe looked grave, twisting the band I gave her, which my father brought from Louisbourg when I was just a boy. “Toujours” was written on the gold inside, and pressed against her skin.

“So fine a ring befits your hand,” Mr. Davis said. “It never could enrich it.”

She put her hand behind her back and blushed. I thought of the wave that rose out of a dead calm at Black Point, swelling out of nothing to drown our clothes that we had laid on the summer’s rocks.

“You must be a great man from Falmouth,” I said, “or a Portsmouth spark, the way you rig out words.”

“And so I may be,” he said, “if truth were known, one who has known Fortune in all her shifts, her linsey-woolsey and her taffety.”

“Farewell,” I said, taking Phebe’s arm. “Farewell.” And that was all I said to him, which God knows I did not mean.

“Adieu. Inform us here when you have made your logs. Oxen will be dispatched. The town will rally when you raise your house and barn.”

“Apace I led the way along the river bank, raising the ashy dust around my legs. On shattered pines that lay across the stream great turtles lounged. Some spread their beaks and hissed to see us pass. Sun-struck, a spotted serpent longer than my arm stretched himself across our path. I threw a stone, and he moved on. Fat bubbles winked and burst upon the water’s film, while hog-nosed fish looked up and waved their stealthy fins. Phebe stared back with tear-filled eyes.

“This is a heartsick place,” she said.

I broke a twig, black and brittle as a beetle’s wing, and with it limned a heart on her wrist, where the veins branched beneath the skin, which made her smile and lean against me the way she did at night.

It was three miles to where the burn stopped and a breeze glittered on the mountain side that Mr. Davis said was ours. Hand in hand, we headed up. Birds cried and flitted through the shade. Yellow, red, bright blue with rapid wings, they led us on, perching to wait when we were

slow, turning their heads the way seals will that lead a skiff down river on the ebbing tide. Such birds we'd never seen at home, where the ocean scours the air, nor did we know their names. They led us to the brook that split our land and up among such trees as one alone would serve to frame a house. The way was soft with ferns. In a clearing where the water spread to form a pool, the birds settled in a Balm of Gilead's highest boughs and shut their wings and sang against the sun's last light until their bodies glowed like fire.

My heart melted. I turned to Phebe, and she turned to me. We kissed, breathing each other's soul, and as we did, I looked at her closed eyes, at her dropping hair, and saw beyond, where the pool darkened fast, a speckled trout as fat as butter in my mother's churn rise from the foam to take a gnat and plunge back in. Another rolled his ruddy side, and still another, like a dogfish, showed his fin.

"God sends us food," I cried.

From a sack that hung around our horse's neck I took a line and cast unbaited on the boiling water. The hook was lure enough. I dragged a big trout out and knocked him on a rock and stretched him spitted on the flames. We bathed our faces in his savory smoke, and ate him to his milky eyes, except his bones, which we sent rolling down the stream, and threw our blankets on the ground, and knew such bliss as passed by far what we had known on our wedding night. The moon looked down. I could hear our horse, who tore the ferns and sighed and banged his hooves and once he whinnied high but then was still. More than once Mr. Davis came into my mind, but I scolded myself for a green girl and drove him out. At last I slept.

In the bright midnight I woke and heard a voice I hardly knew speaking my name. Phebe slept. I rolled onto my back. Nothing crouched on the rocks nearby or among the whitened trees. I raised my head and looked across the stream and saw a shadow on the other side that seemed a man about my father's size but shaggy as a bear, the moonlight running down his limbs, his face like milk. Mr. Davis, I thought, though I was not sure.

"Qui vive?" I cried. In an instant he was gone and I was in the pool to my waist without my gun, which I had laid I knew not where the night before. Braced, my toes grasping the aching rocks, almost floating, I listened but heard no sound, no cracking branch, no owl's alarm, nothing above the water's rush and snap, except for "God, God," which was Phebe.

"What?" she moaned when I knelt beside her.

"Some beast in the water," I said, telling myself I did it for her sake. "Nothing."

She stared as though to see my soul. I pushed her down and stretched myself beside her. All that night we lay as when we were young in the loft and crept together for the warmth alone, arm against arm, not more, waiting for morning, I thinking of Mr. Davis, how he puffed flies away from his lips, how he made the muskrat tails that dangled from his cap dance around his ears. Yet I had doubts, and in the morning when the birds stretched out their dewy throats and preened to make me bold, I crossed the stream and searched the bank and found no sign. What I had seen might have been a trick of light, such a thing as woods will do. Wait, I thought, and keep sharp watch.

We set to work. I framed a lean-to of young spruce and made it tight with bark. From the gashed poles the gum ran thick as melting pearl, which we pulled off to chew. Day after day I felled the trees that pinched our clearing in, sparing none, until it seemed a whirlwind like the one that leveled Scarborough had passed our way. I limbed the trunks and piled the brush to burn when it was dry, while Phebe scratched the ground to put in corn and beans, her sky-blue bonnet on, her eyes grown sad again. Something about the trees, she said, the falling trees. The trees were not the ones she'd known at home. "Toujours," I whispered in her ear. Each night we ate a trout, with blackberries we salvaged from the bears, sucking the pink flesh from the bones, bursting the sacks of juice against our tongues, sweeter than cod or rose hips on our sandy coast. We heard no ax or voice except our own. We smelled no smoke but ours, save now and then a whiff from the burnt land below.

Bright feathers flashed among the leaves. Our birds were by, although we saw them less. And other things I saw, or thought I saw, askew when my ax was falling on a log or my eyes were full of sweat. Strange waverings in the sun-dappled forest's edge as though a breeze were moving in the leaves when there was none. Pale glimmerings in the shade, like faces floating in a pool. One day the birds fell strangely still along the upper margin I had cleared. I waved my ax above my head and yelled, "Come out!" Nothing came, but Phebe heard and asked me why.

"I saw a deer," I said, "to give us other meat than trout. Change would be good."

Sabbaths we walked our land, blazing the trees five hundred paces on both sides of the stream from the river to the cliff that marked our boundary. From a cleft the stream gushed liquid ice above the golden, speckled stones, which Phebe loved to watch. One day she tucked her skirts around her waist the way she used to when we crossed the bar to Richmond's Island at low tide, and would wade in. I told her no, not in that greedy, aching current, on those slick stones. It was a small thing, I thought, but to her a grief. She said she was surprised that I, who brought her to this desert, would stop her now. I wondered at her spirit but made her pull her clothes down and come away.

The afternoon the oak chip sprang and cut my cheek, I got back early to find Mr. Davis and Phebe drinking tea. He grinned to see me. "The finest brew that Ceylon can produce," he said, raising his cup, "derived from Boston to this fair spot. I brought it for your lady, by your leave."

I asked him where the oxen were, meaning to quarrel.

"Breathing the sweet air of Saco," he said, "where they were born. Delay deprives us of their services."

"And the neighbors to help us raise a house?"

"Rumors of fire." He pursed his lips like Phebe. "The rich glebe on the Sandy to the north, and in the Mohawk Valley to the west that stretches to the inland seas draws ardent spirits from our midst, though some would tarry, madam, if they glimpsed you here. Last week, indeed, one hastening towards Cushnoc from the coast left this especially for you."

It was a letter from my father to us both. “The sheep have got the cough, but we are well. Your mother sends her love. The starved cow went to the mud and almost drowned, bellowing as the tide came in, but we put lines on her and hauled her out. That night she dropped her calf alive. Crows and robber birds have eaten what we planted in the field behind The Pinnacle, but closer in, our work was spared. There the corn spreads full and good. Last night we watched the moon sink into Richmond’s Island where the current turns upon itself, and thought of you. Today my text was Ruth, brave Ruth. God keep you safe, dear Ammi and dear Phebe, in your new home.”

I walked away, swinging my arms, my heart in two. I heard him laugh and say, “He had a wife whose eye would stop a partridge in its flight,” and “In Bowdoinham they say he was a wizard with the sex,” as well as other things I did not like, to which she made no answer. Most of what he said I could not hear. Slanting my eyes I saw her arms stiff at her sides.

When Mr. Davis left, scything the ferns with his springy legs, Phebe and I fought. She came to put calendula and beeswax to my cut, but I pushed her hand away, asking did Mr. Davis see her every day when I was gone.

She answered no, and I said, “I think you like his fancy ways.”

He had some good parts, she said. She took it kindly that he brought us tea.

“So he came to bring us tea?”

“Yes, for ours is spent.”

“I thought he came to look at your red face,” I said. She had not blushed, but now she did.

“Mr. Davis is our only help. We are alone with him in this place.”

“Alone with him in this place?” Smiling as though I found her meaning sly, I seized her hand and squeezed her finger until it bulged around the gold. I said, “My father had that ring in booty from the French.”

Dust lay that summer close upon the logs and brush. The corn we’d planted, what came up at all, grew pale and spindly, the kernels dry upon the ears. The curly headed beans pushed up through cracks or died within the ground. In the shrunken pool, the trout turned nervously upon themselves and would not strike, as though bewitched. Deer fled before me on the crackling land. Hunger was in my throat. Phebe, Phebe was in my mind, and Mr. Davis too. Twice each day, midmorning and midafternoon, I left my ax and went back through the woods to the briars that grew a clean shot above our lean-to. On my hands and knees among berries that were hard now and chewed by spiders, I minded how she moped about her work. I never caught her out, but sometimes when I returned at dark, I found strange food on the stump that was our pantry shelf: fat tails of beavers, savory without salt, bear’s grease in balls, with sassafras to keep it sweet, smoked strips of black snake, slender as the truth, things I’d heard my father say that Indian women love when they are in their time. She told me, her voice like water piling up behind a dam, that Mr. Davis came while I was gone.

At first I would not eat such stuff, but then I did, for strength to track the broken ferns and limbs he left across our land, the chunks of moss he kicked off and left parching on the needled ground. I put one into my mouth and chewed it and spat it out. In a dry spring, I found his footprint, hard, not shaped like mine. I spoke her name. Low, so he wouldn't hear, for I was close to his wigwam, where I watched him lolling, drinking tea, plucking muskrats from their pelts, blowing smoke on the blameless air. Nothing that I could kill him for. I trudged for home, my shadow keeping pace.

Fall came, and with it thunder every night but not the rain. The leaves drifted around our lean-to. Back to back we lay upon our sides and did not sleep. At dawn, the birds sang faintly in the whitening air. "Their throats are dry," Phebe said, and made a dish of bark and dipped it in the stream, and set it on a ledge that she could watch. She put out corn and berries. To see the birds drop down and hold their wings against their sides and peck she wept, but when I said that corn was more than we could spare, the weeping stopped.

"What would you spare?" she asked, and threw her skyey bonnet down, which now she wore as if it were a common housewife's cap.

I ground my teeth and kept my lips clapped shut, thinking, truth will out, which I had heard my father preach. And so it came to pass, though not the way I thought it would, beginning the night I rose and took my gun outside. First I stroked our horse, whose left front hoof was split. Feeling my hands along his neck he stretched his head straight up like a bittern full of grief in the marsh at home. I gazed across the dark pool, and walked the land I had cleared, atiptoe, breathless, and lay in a brush blind, from which in the first ashy light I saw a motion among the unfelled trees, and fired. A doe sprang out, her forelegs curved to take the air that would not bear her up. She rolled among the stumps and died. Inside I found her little one, dead, for birthing time was past, a perfect thing though strange. I laid it in the yellow ferns to show to Phebe, but when she came and saw the creature with its tongue thrust out, she struck her breasts. "I too am gone with child," she said, and ran. I caught her in my arms. She was tinder to my touch.

When I awoke the sun was past its height. Phebe was up. Through one cracked eye I watched her eat beans from the pot unwarmed, which she did greedily, with color in her cheek, her boots on, her bonnet too. When she finished, she wiped the spoon carefully, put the lid back on the pot without a sound, and left, heading up the stream, no word to me. I groaned as though I were waking from a dream, but she did not look back. The sun winked slant through the smooth-skinned trees while far away a woodpecker was drumming, drumming. I waited until he stopped. Then I got up and followed with my rifle, staying an eyeshot back, bending into the slope where the land was steep, grasping the rocks as though they were the mountain's bones or stuff that God tossed out when the world was new. When Phebe stopped to breathe or tip her bonnet down against the sun, I stopped too, shrinking until she clambered on among the hissing leaves.

At last she came to the shattered cliff at our land's end, where the stream still surged in that dry season, and knelt and drank and then stepped in, the water coursing around her calves,

then her knees, sweeping her skirts downstream. Above the steep the clouds looked down on the spinning world. I heard a crack. At Phebe's back, along the cliff, sudden as the air a wildman walked. It was Mr. Davis, dressed in skins, muskrat tails knotted in his hair.

Phebe heard him too and turned and almost fell, but caught herself. In an instant he was in the stream beside her, his arm around her waist, leading her out to seat her on the bank, though she hung back at first. Arms folded, he peered into her face and flapped his lips. She shook her head. He toed a pebble from the ground, picked it up, and tossed it at the stream, where it made no splash, but still she shook her head. When he reached down and took her hands that lay in her lap, she stood up and spoke things I could not hear. He dropped her hands. From a knot of muskrat tails behind his ear he plucked a pipe and struck a spark and puffed. Three smoke rings trembled into shreds halfway to Phebe, at which she laughed. Leaning close, he offered her the pipe, which she refused, and he threw it down and pulled her to him so her head fell onto his chest, where it stayed while over her bonnet's crushed brim he smiled towards me, smiled as though he knew that I was there among the spruce that grew along that high part of the stream. Against a trunk I braced my rifle, but for a moment God held my finger, and I saw her wrench away and strike him hard, and heard her call out, "Ammi," which is my name, bright and fragrant as a bell at sea.

"Mr. Davis," I yelled, and fired. Down my barrel I saw him gape and stagger, but he did not fall. He bounded onto the cliff, springing from ledge to ledge, thrusting his hands into crevices, hauling himself, I after him until we reached a smooth slab, where he went straight up but I could not and had to work my way around. When I reached the top he had disappeared. All I found was one drop of blood near a scorched stone. Some bushranger, some surveyor or scout, had camped there years ago, perhaps, when the land was new, hunting for scalps or marking pines. I had wounded Mr. Davis, but that was all. I searched, but he was gone.

That night the lightning ran along the mountain top and blazed the sky and made our lean-to momentarily more bright than noon. We looked into each other's eyes and neither spoke nor touched. Nor did we turn away. But still the rain held off. The air was dry as our two souls, and when the storm had passed, about the time of night my mother called heartsick, when things walk that no man loves, I heard the fire far off, hissing like summer grass when wind makes up beyond the islands and the ocean's curve. Pushing aside the skins that shut us in, I went out and walked through the cleared land. Above the trees on the mountain side the sky glowed fierce. I felt it on my face. The birds were singing, "Run." Our horse whinnied and trotted to me, crowding close, as horses will. Gladly I stroked his side and called him dear and made him stay, tied, while I brought Phebe out and put her on his back.

Down we fled through the throbbing woods, the wildfire hanging on our rear, driven by a gale, toads and mice crying around our feet, moose shattering the trees to make a path. Great catamounts, lean-boned and sharp, ran side by side with thin-mouthed deer, friends for that time. Bears grinned at shambling porcupines, who smoothed their quills. Skunks kept their urine in. Birds carved the ruddy air and urged us on until we reached the river, where they dove and skimmed to say, "Stay here," which was my thought.

In the deepest place I could find, halfway across, I made our horse lie and wrapped his eyes with my shirt to stop his hooves and sat with Phebe in my lap, the water to our chins, while the beasts kept on and climbed the farther bank, except the mice and toads and porcupines, for whom the river was too wide. They thrashed and drowned while turtles snapped at them. Around us nosed the sullen fish, and through the trees the flaming line storm strode, washing the world with fire. The babe in Phebe jumped. I held her hard with one hand and with the other yanked our horse's rope, twisting his head back so he could not rise.

"Toujours," I said, wondering at my voice, and Phebe wondered too. As solemnly as on our wedding night when she undid her clothes she raised her hand to show me her ring was there, gold, though the world buckled.

"Look down," I said. "God, look down with your great eye."

He did and seared my heart and showed me, right there among the turtles and the fish, my faults abounding. Not every one, which no man can know, but a brief account of my untruths, my meannesses, my fears, my jealousies, as in rangers' talk the cataracts and swamps stand out, although the whole way was rough. Then, for the first time since I was a boy in Spurwink where the roads run clean through the mown fields, and the farms ring the marsh, and the bitterns thump, stretching their heads straight up, I asked for the forgiveness that God promises, and Phebe's, and she comforted me.

It was the burnt land stopped the flames. They curled and blazed the air but could not reach us. At last they sank into the guttering trees and looked about fitfully for more to eat and mourned that there was nothing. Then the rain came. On our bent heads and on the river's steady flow and on the warping bodies of the toads and on our horse, God sent a hammering flood.

The water rose. Hand in hand we made our way between the river and the hissing ruins of the woods to Mr. Davis's, the only shelter we could find. We lay that night upon his pelts, wrapped in his clothes, and ate his food, listening to the rain. Chastely we embraced, our bodies trembling like our souls, and in the morning looked around our blasted land, the blackened columns of the trees, the huddled sticks, half melted pots, and broken tools where we had lived, all stinking of fire and mud and creatures that had not escaped.

"What shall we do?" I asked.

"Stay here," said Phebe, "and build again."

And so we have, with spruce I found still green on the mountain's other side. A lean-to like our first, small but sufficient, stocked with what we rifled from Mr. Davis, who has not returned. We hear he passed through Wells before the snow, his face turned west, boasting of Michillimackinack, where land is cheap. We keep sharp watch.

A traveler, a man with frightened eyes, brought us a letter from my father. "Along this coast," he wrote, "men say that fire wastes the inland woods. Some days we see the smoke and ask is that where you live. Come back. There is land enough in Spurwink if you will."

To which I answered, "Dear father and dear mother, to whom we send our heartfelt love. We cannot come. Our home is here, though burnt, and we are true."

It's winter now. We are alone. At night beneath the roof that slants down on our heads, we listen to the groaning snow, the mice that scratch along our walls, the wolf far off who makes our horse stalk up and down within his shed, and wonder how to save ourselves. Some mornings as we scrape our bowls we look askance, if we look at all, and do not speak, sometimes for days, each turned from each to do the things the cold requires. Until God looks again, as he always does. Then comes a night we wake in sheerest dark and take each other by the hands and rise and go out on the glittering crust that in the spring will fill the stream and mingle with the ash to grow the corn. We kiss. In Phebe new life waits like a speckled trout. I throw my arms up at the stars. I hear them pause upon their shining rounds and sing like birds.