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Homecoming

THE DAY I returned to Templeton steeped in disgrace, the fifty-foot corpse of a monster surfaced in Lake Glimmerglass. It was one of those strange purple dawns that color July there, when the bowl made by the hills fills with a thick fog and even the songbirds sing timorously, unsure of day or night.

The fog was still deep when Dr. Cluny found the monster on his morning row. I imagine how it went: the slide of the scull's knife across the lake, the oar heads casting rings on the water, the red bow light pulsing into the dark. Then, sudden, looming over the doctor's shoulder, an island where there had never before been an island, the vast belly of the dead beast. Gliding backward, the old doctor couldn't see it. He neared; the bow-ball of

his boat pushed into the rubbery flesh like a finger into a balloon; the pressure of boat versus skin reached a tensile limit without piercing anything; the boat checked its bow-ward motion, and jerked to stern. The doctor turned, but he was prepared only for the possible, and didn't at first know what was before him. When he saw the large and terrible eye still milking over with death, the good doctor blinked. And then he fainted.

When Dr. Cluny came to, the dawn had thinned, the water was shot with bars of light, and he found himself rowing around and around the bellied-up beast, weeping. In his mouth there was the sweet burn of horehound candy, the exact savor of his long-ago childhood. Only when a seagull landed upon the flat chin of the leviathan and bent to steal a taste did Dr. Cluny return to himself; only then did he skid back over the water to the awakening town, shouting his news.

“Miracle,” he called. “Miracle. Come, quick, see.”

AT THAT PRECISE moment, I was idling in the park across the street from Averell Cottage, my childhood home. For at least an hour, I had been standing in the depression that the town flooded in winter to make a skating rink, gathering what courage I could. The fog veiled my grand, awkward house, with its original cottage from 1793, one wing from Victorian 1890, and another from the tasteless 1970s, turning the whole into something more coherent, almost beautiful. In my delirium, I thought I could see my mother inside with a few lifetimes of family antiques and the gentle ghost that lived in my childhood room, all traced like bones on an X-ray, delicate as chalk.

I felt the world around me creak and strain, snapping apart, fiber by fiber, like a rope pulled too tautly.

Back near Buffalo I had had a glimpse of myself in a rest-stop bathroom, and was horrified to find myself transformed into a stranger in rumpled, dirty clothing, my once-pretty face bloated and red with crying jags. I was drawn, thin, welted with the bites of a thousand Alaskan blackflies. My hair, shorn in April, was now growing out in weird brown tufts. I looked like some little chick, starving, molting, kicked out of the nest for late-discovered freakishness.

As the night thinned around me, I leaned over and retched. And I still hadn't moved when, down Lake Street, there came a muffled trampling sound. I knew before I saw them that the sounds were from the Running Buds, a small, dear band of middle-aged men who jog around the streets of Templeton every morning, in all weather, in ice, in rain, in this fine-pelted fog. When the Buds came nearer, I could hear gentle talking, some spitting, some wheezing over their footsteps. They moved out of the dark and into the glow of the single streetlamp on Lake Street, and seeing me in the park in my little depression, seeing, perhaps, something familiar about me but not quite recognizing who I was at that distance, all six of them raised their hands in my direction. I waved back and watched their thick bodies disappear down the street.

I FOUND MY feet crossing the street, heading up the driveway, passing through the garage doorway, and I opened the door to the mudroom to the smells of straw and dust and bitter orange, the smells of home. I almost turned around, returned to the car, waited for day. I hadn't seen my mother in more than a year: I couldn't afford the trip home, and, for the first time since I'd left, she hadn't offered to pay. Instead, though, I came in as

silently as I could, hoping to have a few good hours of sleep before awakening her. I placed my shoes beside her white nursing clogs, and went through the mudroom, then the kitchen.

But although I had expected Vi to be sleeping, she was sitting at the kitchen table with the *Freeman's Journal* spread before her, her profile reflected in the great plate glass door that looked out over the two-acre lawn, the lake, the hills. She must have had a night shift, because her feet were in an enamel bowl filled with hot water, her eyes closed, her face hanging above her tea as if she were trying to steam her features off. They were slipping that way, anyhow: at forty-six, my mother had the worn, pouchy skin of a woman who had done far too many drugs at far too young an age. Her shoulders were slumped, and the zipper in the back of her skirt was open, revealing a swatch of red cotton underwear and a muffin-top of flesh above it.

From my position in the kitchen door, my mother looked old. If I weren't already holding the pieces together with both squeezed hands, this sight would have broken my heart.

I must have moved or swallowed, because Vi turned her head and looked at me. Her eyes narrowed, she blinked and heaved a sigh, and passed a hand over her face. "Goddamn flashbacks," she muttered.

I snorted.

She looked at me again, her forehead creasing. "No. You're not a flashback, Willie. Are you?"

"Not this time. Apparently," I said, coming over to her and kissing her on the part in her hair. She smelled antiseptic from the hospital, but, deeper, there was her own smell, something birdlike, like warm and dusty wings. She squeezed my hand, flushing.

“You look horrible. What in the world are you doing home?” she said.

“Oh, boy.” I sighed, and had to look away, at the thinning curls of fog on the lake. When I looked back, the smile had fallen off her face.

“What. The heck. Are you. Doing home?” she said, again, still squeezing, but harder with each word until the bones in my hand were crushing one another.

“Jesus,” I gasped.

“Well,” she said, “if you’re in trouble, you’d better be praying.” It was only then that I saw the crude cross of raw iron that hung heavily between her breasts, as if my mother had gone to the Farmers’ Museum up the road and blacksmithed her own crucifix out of two hobnails. I nudged the cross with my free hand and frowned.

“Vi?” I said. “Oh, don’t *tell* me you’ve become a Jesus freak. You’re a hippie, for God’s sake. Remember? Organized religion equals bad?”

She released my hand, and tugged the cross away. “That,” she said, “is none of your business.” For a long moment, though, Vi couldn’t look at me.

“Vi,” I said, “be serious. What’s going on?”

My mother sighed and said, “People change, Willie.”

“*You* don’t,” I said.

“You should be glad I do,” she said. She dropped her eyes, not yet remembering that I was standing there in her house when I should have been under the twenty-four-hour dazzle of an Alaskan tundra. I should have been blowing lichen off definitive proof that human culture existed there over thirty-five thousand years ago, some incisor embedded deep in the ground, some tool still glistening with seal grease, intact from the deep freezer of the steppe. I should have been under the aegis of Dr. Primus Dwyer, PhD, Barton P.

Thrasher Professor in the Sciences at Stanford University, where in a few short months I was supposed to finish my PhD dissertation, and graduate, heading toward a life of impossible luminescence.

When I told my mother in my sophomore year that I wanted to focus my furious ambitions in archaeology, she looked bitterly disappointed for a moment. “Oh, Willie,” she’d said then. “There is nothing left in this world for you to discover, honey. Why look backward when you can look forward?” I talked for hours then, of the intensity of wonder when you blew away the dust and found an ancient skull in your hand, when you held the flint knives and saw the chisel marks made by long-dead hands. Like so many people who have long ago burnt through all of their own passion, my mother recognized mine, and longed for it. Archaeology would take me into the great world, into deserts and tundras, as far away from Templeton as I believed she had always wanted me to be. By now, her ego and a good portion of what inheritance she had left were invested in this dream: me as intrepid explorer of bone and potsherds, tunneling into the vastness of prehistory. Now, in the lightening dawn, she looked at me. A motorboat was speeding across the lake at top throttle, and its whine rose even to us, set two acres back on glowing, overgrown lawn.

“Oh, Willie,” said my mother now. “Are you in trouble,” and it was a statement, not a question.

“Vi?” I said. “I messed up big-time.”

“Of course,” she said. “Why else would you find yourself in Templeton? You can hardly stand to come back once a year for Christmas.”

“Goddamn it, Vi,” I said, and I sat down in one of the kitchen chairs and rested my head on the table.

My mother looked at me and then sighed. “Willie,” she

said. "I'm sorry. I'm so tired. Tell me now what happened so I can get some sleep, and we'll deal with it later."

I looked at her, then had to look down at the table. I traced designs in the waxy residue of its surface. And then I told her one version of the story, vastly abridged.

"Well, Vi," I said. "It looks like I'm pregnant. And it's maybe Dr. Primus Dwyer's."

My mother held her fingers over her mouth. "Oh, heaven help us," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But, Vi, there's more." I said it in one exhale, in a great whoosh. I told her that I also tried to run over his wife with a bush plane, and she was the dean of students, and it was probable that charges of attempted manslaughter would prevent me from returning to Stanford again. I held my breath and waited for the knuckled sting of the back of her hand. Despite Vi's hippie mores, it was not uncommon in my childhood for us to get to this point in our battles, panting and narrow-eyed, stalemated across the table. And once or twice, for my greatest sins, she did send her hand across to settle it all with a smack.

But she didn't hit me now, and it was so silent I could hear the two-hundred-year-old grandfather clock in the dining room as the pendulum clicked, clicked, clicked. When I looked up, Vi was shaking her head. "I can't believe it," she said, pushing her tea farther from her with one finger. "I raised you to be exceptional, and here you are, a fuckup. Like your stupid fuckup mother." Her face wobbled and grew red.

I tried to touch her arm, but she snatched it away, as if mere contact with me could burn her. "I'm going to take a few pills," she said, standing. "I'm going to sleep for as long as I can sleep. And when I wake up, we're dealing

with this.” She moved heavily to the door. With her back still toward me, she paused. “And oh, Willie, your hair. You had such beautiful hair,” she said and moved away. I could hear her footsteps on every creaking floorboard in the old house, up the grand front stairway, far away over the hall and into the master bedroom.

Only in recent years did such coolness arise between Vi and me. When I was little, I would play cribbage and euchre with my young mother until midnight, laughing so hard I never wanted to go to the few sleepovers and birthday parties I was invited to. My mother and I held an odd relationship with the town, as we were the last remnants of its founder, Marmaduke Temple, and direct descendants of the great novelist Jacob Franklin Temple, whose novels we read every year in high school, whose link to me would actually make a college professor burst into tears when I confessed it. But we were too poor and my mother was young, unmarried, and too weird with her macramé and loud politics, and so when we left the safety of our eccentric house, it always felt like Vi and me against the world. I remember vividly when I was ten or so—which would have made my mother my age, twenty-eight—listening outside her door as she wept for hours after being slighted in the grocery store, that one memory standing in for many. I dreamt at night of being so big I could march down Main Street, grinding our enemies under my furious ogre’s feet.

Alone now in the dawn, I drank the rest of my mother’s tea to melt the block of ice in my gut. Vi was wrong: I did want to come home. Templeton was to me like a less-important limb, something inherently mine, something I took for granted. My own tiny, lovely village with great old mansions and a glorious lake, my own grand little

hamlet where everyone knows your name, but with elaborate little frills that made it unlike anywhere else: the baseball museum, the Opera, the hospital that had vast arms extending into the rest of upstate, an odd mix of Podunk and cosmopolitan. I came back when I had to, to feel safe, to recharge; I just hadn't had to in so long.

For a while I sat alone at the table, watching the crows fall into the vegetable garden, pecking at the heirloom vegetables that thrived every year under Vi's benign neglect. Then the motorboat that had gone out before zipped back, and soon more motorboats were roaring out into the lake like a vee of geese. Curious, I slid open the glass door and went onto the porch, in the warming dawn. From where I stood, the hills around Lake Glimmerglass looked like the haunch end of a sleeping lion, smooth and pelted. I watched until the motorboats came back into sight, collectively straining to pull something pale behind them, something enormous and glinting in the new sun.

And that's how I found myself running barefoot over the cold grass down to Lakefront Park, even as weary as I was at that moment. I went past our pool, now so thick with algae that it had become a frog pond, plunking with a thousand belly flops of terror when I passed. I went down the stretch of lawn, across the concrete bridge over Shadow Brook, trespassed over Mrs. Harriman's backyard until I stood in the road at Lakefront Park, and watched the motorboats coast in.

I stood under the bronze statue of the Mohican, the best known of the characters by our town novelist, Jacob Franklin Temple, and, slowly, others gathered around me, people from my childhood who nodded at me in recognition, startled by the great change in my appearance, struck silent by the solemnity of the moment. Somehow,

none of us was surprised. Templeton is a town of accreted myth: that baseball was invented here; that a petrified giant, ten feet tall and pockmarked with age, was disinterred from under the old mill—a hoax; that ghosts lived among us. And we had been prepared for this day by the myths we'd always heard about a lake monster, the childhood tales around campfires in the summer camps on the lake, the small rumors filtered down. The town crazy, Piddle Smalley, would stand on a bench in Farkle Park wearing his pants backward—urine-soaked, which is why we called him Piddle—and shout about the rain-swollen April day when he stood on the Susquehanna bridge, staring down into the fat river, and something immense passed by, grinning its black teeth up at him. He'd shriek at the end of his story *Glimmey, Glimmey, Glimmey*, as if in invocation.

Most of Templeton was watching as the motorboats cut their engines and glided in. The *Chief Uncas* tourist boat groaned in the waves against the dock. The Running Buds climbed out with great gravitas, old joints creaking, and secured the beast's tethers to the iron hitches in the walls at the lake's edge. And in those brief minutes before the baseball tourists in town heard of our miracle and came running with their vulgar cameras and shouts and poses, before the news trucks drove ninety miles per hour from Oneonta, Utica, Albany, there, in the long, peaceful quiet, we had a few moments to consider our monster.

In that brief time, we were able to see it in its entirety. The beast was huge, a heavy cream color that darkened to lemon in places, and was floating on its back. It looked like a carp grown enormous, with a carp's fat belly and round eye, but with a long, articulated neck like a ballet dancer's, and four finned legs, plump as a frog's. The ropes of the motorboat had cut into its skin, and the wounds were open

to the day, still oozing dark, thick blood. I stepped forward to touch the beast, then everyone else did. When I placed my hand upon its belly, I felt its porous skin, its hairs as small and delicate as the ones on my own arms, but thicker, as if the beast were covered in peach fuzz. And, though I had expected the early sun to have warmed it, the monster burned cold, as if its very core was made of the ice some said still existed at the bottom of our glacial lake.

It was somehow clear, even then, that the monster had been lonely. The folds above its eye made the old face look wistful, and it emanated such a strong sense of solitude that each human standing in the park that day felt miles from the others, though we were shoulder-to-shoulder, touching. Later, we would hear that when the divers couldn't reach the bottom of our lake, they called in deep-sea pods to search for another beast like the one that surfaced that day. We would hear that, scour as they might, they couldn't find another beast like ours, only detritus: rusted tractors and plastic buoys, and even an antique phonograph. They found a yellow-painted phaeton in its entirety, the bones of a small spaniel inside. They also found dozens of human skeletons, drowned or dumped corpses, arranged side-by-side in some trick of current or metaphysics, on a shallow shelf near Kingfisher Tower, beside Judith's Point.

That morning, before I drew my hand away from the monster, I felt an overwhelming sadness, a sudden memory of one time in high school when I slipped to the country club docks at midnight with my friends, and, giggling, naked, we went into the dark star-stippled water, and swam to the middle of the lake. We treaded water there in the blackness, all of us fallen silent in the feeling of swimming in such perfect space. I looked up and began to spin. The stars streaked circular above me, my body was wrapped in

the warm black, my hands had disappeared, my stomach was no longer, I was only a head, a pair of eyes. As I touched the beast I remembered how, even on that long-ago night, I could feel a tremendous thing moving in the depths below me, something vast and white and singing.



Marmaduke Temple

*CIRCA 1800, the Gilbert Stuart portrait
that now hangs in the Franklin House Museum*

2

Marmaduke Temple

AN EXCERPT FROM *Tales of the American Wilderness*, 1797

In the spring of 1785 I left my family in New Jersey and traveled into the vast and melancholy wilderness of New York to survey and lay my name on the place that has since made my fortune and renown. It was a wondrous time, after the revolution, and in our young country, a man such as I, a once-unlettered maker of puncheon and barrel, could build himself from nothing and become great. The journey was difficult and the land still frozen, and I was alone in those parts still trod by bloodthirsty natives. I felt all the eyes of the forest upon me and slept with a knife in my hand.

When at last I reached the edge of my land, I left my horse behind me to crop grass in a green and rich valley and struggled wearily up a great mountain to look upon a place yet untouched by man. The forest was quiet and I passed over the strange orange mushrooms, over the gnarled roots. All was dark at first, and the trees cast a midday twilight upon me. Then there was a rift in the darkness, a cliff where the trees dropped a hundred feet from the mountain's lip, and there I stepped into the light.

Below me the lake was cupped in its hills, shimmering like a plate of glass. Three hawks circled in the pale sky and the hills arched with pines. From my perch I watched a mother bear and her cubs emerge near the river's mouth to drink at the lake. There was no wind in this desolate New York wilderness, and all was calm.

Suddenly before me rose a vision of ghostly buildings on the edge of the lake, a true city of spires and rooftops, a phantom bustle in the streets, smoke. I sank to my knees in the strange ferns. On the lip of the lake wavered the city I was to build, Templeton, a place of impossible importance pressed upon that virgin land, a great metropolis like Philadelphia, or London. And when my eyes lifted to the hills, I saw that they were covered in good things: heifers, orchards, vineyards, fields of wheat. I would carve a great civilization from this savage place. I would build a city, myself, from nothing.

I must have been there for hours on that cliff's edge, for when I came back to myself my knees

ached. My vision had at last been blown by the wind into tendrils of dust and smoke and I had begun to see stranger visions, a huge billowing of something white and struggling in the water, something surrounded by a darkening stain before it sank again. I was later sure it was a cloud reflected in the glassy lake, but at the time this new vision filled my heart with a horrid thrill, and when I stood, I was weak and suddenly cold, shaking as if with an ague. I stood and moved back into the dark forest. Only in the cool embrace of the trees did I remember the glorious first vision I'd had, Templeton, rich with crops and industry. As I slipped over the damp humus I vowed I would return and stamp my will on the wild place, the image of my own hand. I would call the mountain where I had had my first taste of Templeton, Mount Vision, and the glassy lake upon which I looked, Lake Glimmerglass. And as I walked, I believed myself to be an Adam setting foot in a new Eden, sinless and wild-eyed, my sinews still stiff with creation.



Vivienne Upton

As a child, in the middle of a recitation for all of her father's historian friends. And later, as a young hippie.

3

Vivienne, Bright and Beautiful

A GIRL WAS in the sun on a shuddering bus, a rash of acne across her cheekbones. Her polyester dress had been dyed black in the ladies' room sink of some mid-western terminal, and the dye job was clearly quick and recent: the orange flowers were still bursting across the fabric, though now a cindered color, and there were black marks like bruises wherever the dress touched her skin. The dress didn't really touch much of her skin, however, as it was both a halter top and a mini-mini skirt, and the girl shouldn't really have been wearing it, as she was both far too plump for it and goosebumped, having traveled from a mild San Francisco February into an upstate New York ice storm. Of course, she didn't really feel the cold, having popped a very nice pill only a

few hours earlier, and was deep in a voluptuous, open-mouthed sleep.

The farmwife who boarded outside Erie, Pennsylvania, stared at the sleeping girl indignantly, chewing her own upper gum. At last she heaved out “hippie,” having brooded on the word like a hen on an egg for two hundred miles. Now that it was delivered of her, she fell asleep herself, in a position mirroring the young girl’s own.

The girl was, of course, Vivienne, my mother. It was early 1973, and she was seventeen years old, returning home to Templeton. She would always feel this wild girl was the truest of any of the people she had already been: adored daughter, bourgeois priss, rebel, runaway, dope-fiend San Francisco hippie; or all the people she would later be: mother, nurse, religious fanatic, prematurely old woman. Vivienne was a human onion, and when I came home at twenty-eight years old on the day the monster died, I was afraid that the Baptist freak she had peeled down to was her true, acrid, tear-inducing core.

But then she was only a girl, though a highly medicated one. A tin peace medallion patted and patted her braless chest with every jerk of the bus, as if in sympathy for her new orphanhood. Both of her parents, she knew hazily, had somehow expired, but she knew little about how or why, and it hadn’t really occurred to her that they were gone. When Vivienne opened her eyes next, it was to behold the white buildings of Templeton at the end of the lake, huddling there like a flock of geese, ready to hiss. She was so innocent she didn’t realize the town would soon turn on her. *That girl has gone too far*, the gossips would say. *Just look at her*. She was dangerous, they felt, a one-woman protest march, just tempting their children into pot and sex and sit-ins by the mere

unkempt look of her, those hairy legs, those bloodshot eyes.

Vi as yet had no idea of this imminent betrayal: Templeton was her town, she felt. She was related to the tremendous Marmaduke Temple, a direct descendant of both the great man and his great novelist son, Jacob Franklin Temple. She thought of the town as her ancestral seat, even though she also had a vague idea that, as a hippie, she wasn't supposed to believe in all that jazz anymore.

Poor Vivienne. When she disembarked from the bus by the old railroad depot and dragged the (stolen) blue suitcase to the curb, she didn't realize that there would be nobody to pick her up. She sat there for an hour, quaking with cold, sure she had told her father to come for her when the bus pulled in. At last, she remembered the car accident and the terrible telephone call during a party, when she thought for a long time that the attorney trying to tell her of her parents' death was a friend playing a practical joke.

Then the new orphan in her flimsy California dress dragged the suitcase behind her all the way down the lacquered ice on Main Street, past the courthouse, past the Civil War memorial, under the one blinking yellow yield light on Chestnut, all the way to Averell Cottage, where there were no lights, no warmth, nothing to greet her but even more silence.

She saw the note from the lawyer by the telephone but was too tired to read it. And it was only when she wearily climbed the stairs to where there were twin dips in the mattress where her parents had lain for so many years that she understood what had happened. That though this felt trippy, it was actual unsleepoffable reality. When she awoke in the morning in their bed, her parents were still gone, and she had missed their funeral by a day.

The next day Vivienne walked about with her head thick, as if overstuffed with wool, feeling for the first time like an orphan. But she didn't cry then, and wouldn't cry until years later, when, chopping a tomato still warm from the garden, she would put down her knife and go upstairs to the bed and weep and wail for three days straight, not even getting up when her four-year-old daughter stood in the doorway, sucking her finger, bringing up boxes of cereal and pushing the little o's one by one into her mother's wet red face. At the end of which time, Vi would dry her eyes, pick the three dried tomato seeds off her chin, and go back downstairs to restart the gazpacho she was making when she had her little breakdown.

The official story of my grandparents' deaths went like this: George and Phoebe Upton (née Tipton) died together by automobile. The obituary said that they were speeding too fast over East Lake Road when they hit an icy skid and roared off a thirty-foot precipice onto soft ice, which they cracked through. Knocked out from the crash, they drowned in the wintry water. George was the town historian, PhD Yale, working out of the New York State Historical Association library. This library was in the vast fieldstone farmhouse called Franklin Manor that George had, perhaps not unrelatedly, donated to NYSHA; although it was built by Jacob Franklin Temple and had been passed through the generations, it was so vast and expensive that George couldn't carry it with his limited means.

George was not a man to care about lost fortunes, but his tremulous little wife, Phoebe, often started her sentences with a sigh and, "When we were rich . . ." As in "When we were rich, the butcher *always* let us pay with credit," and "When we were rich, we knew the Roosevelts," though that was an outright fib: it was George's parents who had

known the Roosevelts. In town, it was commonly assumed the family had lost its fortune in the great crash of '29, though it was more due to George's absentminded mismanagement than anything else.

As George often said, he couldn't care less for filthy lucre. He was strange: prematurely antique, stern, smelling of musty books and cattails. Vi never once had a hug from him. But she understood him, she always said: he was raised by his grandmother, whose sole enthusiasm was the orphanage where the old folks' home, Pomeroy Hall, is now, and Vi often wondered if he felt less like her kin and more like one of her orphans. His own mother had drowned in the lake when George was tiny, and after that he never saw his father, who, crippled with grief, moved to Manhattan and only sent a check and a terse note to the boy every month. Still, George was happy enough, in his way, Vi told me. He, she found out when she returned to Templeton, had a private obsession that had taken up all his attention.

That morning Vi found herself sitting, shivering, in the lawyer's office, glimpsing the idea that her father's passion for his work was deeper than she had imagined. In fact, the lawyer intimated, its souring was perhaps what led her phlegmatic father to send the Cadillac spinning over the brink.

"Ahem. Your father," he said gently, "was perhaps too, well, *susceptible* to criticism?"

To this, Vivienne could only say, "Hell, yeah," remembering the way her square daddy-o would freak out even at the slightest criticism of the Republican Party, Templeton, or his own uneven bowties. The lawyer smiled with great unction at the girl. Chauncey Todd was an old friend of her family's, a man who had a habit of drawling over words he

wanted to emphasize. He was also a breast-ogler, addressing her two great sagging boobs as if he were primarily sorry for their loss—of possible support, perhaps—and only secondarily for the girl's they were attached to. He wondered if what they said was true, and those hippie girls really were as *loose* as they were said to be.

“Vivienne,” he said hesitantly toward her nipples. “You have, ahem, perhaps heard of your father’s *book*?”

“Nah,” said Vivienne, giving her chest a gleeful little shake to make the old man sweat. “He wrote a book? Wow.”

In fact, she did know of the book, having received it in the mail with the fifty-dollar check she got every month from her parents. She even sent a rare note of congratulations, read three chapters, and then used it to prop up a wobbly leg on her bedside table. She simply forgot. The pot she smoked every day upon awakening, after eating, before bed, tended to make her forgetful.

And so the lawyer refreshed her memory. The book was eight years in the making, he reminded her: her father had begun it long before Vivienne turned rebellious and left town for “freer *waters*.” The book, he said, was about Marmaduke Temple and a shameful secret he had. This secret affected Vivienne herself, her mother’s family, as well as the view of Marmaduke Temple in the eyes of American historians everywhere. The lawyer paused, then, for effect.

“And what was the secret?” Vivienne asked, interested despite herself.

The lawyer cleared his throat; rhetorical drum-rolling. “Your father proposed that your mother’s old Templeton family, the *Averells*,” he said, “are the descendants of Marmaduke Temple and a *slave* girl he owned named

Hetty.” And he sat back, and looked up at her face for the first time all morning to see her reaction. There had been such tremendous outrage on all fronts since the book came out that the lawyer was expecting sudden shock to flit over my mother’s face.

But a dazed smile burst out, instead. “Cool,” said Vivienne, “I’m a Negro.”

In the time it took Chauncey Todd to digest this idea, the slow crunch of Vivienne’s mental machinery had brought her to a different place. Her face grew grave and disappointed. “Wait a second,” she said. “If my father was related to old Marmaduke and my mom was too, that’s incest, right? I mean, I’m a product of incest?” She felt this was a great tragedy. *That explains it*, she said to herself, though it was not quite clear what about herself had now been explained.

Chauncey Todd dragged a hand over his bewildered face and sighed at the breasts. “Now, Vivienne,” he said. “We’re talking perhaps *five* generations here. Your parents were only *slightly* related.”

“Ah,” she said. “Right.” She waited for a while, and then frowned again. “So, what’s the problem?”

Chauncey Todd felt as if he were on a merry-go-round spinning out of control. He squeezed his eyes shut. And, thus safe against my mother’s magnificent though untethered bosoms, he explained as calmly as he could that Marmaduke Temple was perhaps the archetypal American, the first self-made man; that he, a Quaker, had slaves was scandal enough; and far worse, that he, a married man, had relations with his slaves—scandalous! It made everyone very uncomfortable. It shattered the idol that was Marmaduke Temple. He was not the man everyone had thought he was. After twenty minutes of impassioned

speech, Chauncey Todd was panting, surprised at his own zeal, pleased with his eloquence. When he opened his eyes, Vivienne was gazing at him with more bewilderment.

“So?” she said at last. “Like, he was a human being, right? Nobody is saying he was a god or anything. Human beings do shitty things sometimes. Oh well. We’re over it. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Well,” said Chauncey Todd, “you are in the minority, here. The *extreme* minority. All of Templeton was *greatly* upset, I’ll have you know. And so was the nation’s historical community. Your father was berated for such speculative history. There was even talk of taking away his job at NYSHA. I, for one, as his confidant, know that he couldn’t bear the idea, and that he was *bewildered* with all of the negative press. He, like you, couldn’t understand what the *brouhaha*, if you will, was about. The poor, blind man,” he said soulfully, shaking his head, “had no idea what hit him. And so I do believe that perhaps your parents’ accident was *not* an accident.”

“You know, Mr. Chauncey Todd,” said my young mother. “I don’t think so. I mean, it’s not like the relations were ever a secret or anything. My mother and grandmother always said they were related to Marmaduke Temple through something illegitimate. Like, they used to make this joke about it. They were always so proud of it. But they said they couldn’t prove it. I mean, all my daddy did was prove it, right? It doesn’t change the facts. I mean, it’s history. Like, what’s history, but the facts we find out later, right? I don’t know, it’s like I’m getting all deep now.”

For a while, there was a silence between them in the dusty, walnut-paneled room. Chauncey Todd went to the window and looked down onto Main Street, where a small

pack of young male joggers was going by, their thighs a skim-milk blue under their tiny shorts. “Health *nuts*,” he said with disdain. He turned back around, gave the breasts a doleful stare, then sat down again. “I suppose, Vivienne,” he said, “we should carry on and finish our business for today. Now, for the *will*,” he said, and pulled the document from a folder.

This was when Vivienne learned that almost everything her parents had was gone. Edgewater, the brick mansion built by her great-great-granduncle Richard, the rent of which supported her family for years, would have to be sold for tax purposes. The Gilbert Stuart oil painting of a fleshy Marmaduke Temple and the smirking painting of novelist Jacob Franklin Temple had to be taken off the walls of Averell Cottage and sold to NYSHA to cover the funeral expenses. Almost the entire library of first-edition Jacob Franklin Temple books would have to be sold off to pay other bills, though she should feel free to keep one of each book as a family memento, Jacob having been in the habit of keeping five copies of his own editions on hand at any time. The jewels of her great-great-grandmother, Charlotte Franklin Temple, would be sold, though Vi would keep the pocket watch inscribed to the authoress from her dear father. George had already donated to NYSHA all of the valuable papers: Marmaduke’s maps and letters and Jacob’s notes of admiration from the likes of Edgar Allan Poe and Samuel Morse and General Lafayette, etc. Vi would get the family Bible, Marmaduke’s wife’s prayer book, the large collection of baseball memorabilia collected by her father’s father—Asterisk “Sy” Upton, the longtime baseball commissioner. The only furniture she could keep was the furniture already in Averell Cottage. She had

about fifteen thousand dollars in the bank when all was said and done, a gift from her grandfather at her birth, all that remained of Marmaduke's millions.

"The good news," said Chauncey Todd, "is that you get to keep *Averell Cottage*. Your mother had held it in trust for you *all* this time."

Vivienne stared forlornly at the lawyer, who was sitting back and pinching the bridge of his nose. On her long bus trip across the country, she had come to the secret resolution to sell off everything, take the money, and buy a sweet, wisteria-covered house in Carmel-by-the-Sea that overlooked the ocean. She would be a poet: words, she always told me when I was growing up, burned her fingertips from her late teens until her twenties. Years later, she would read my clumsy high school essays and rearrange the words with great innate skill until they tripped lightly across the page. On the bus home, she had imagined in detail the long life she would live in the cottage by the sea, how she wouldn't have to ever work again. We all have our theories about why people react the way they do, especially when they're acting eccentric; mine is that those daydreams of Carmel-by-the-Sea were how she staved off the sorrow ticking at her from inside, the incomprehensible loss of both her parents at once.

Now, in Chauncey Todd's office, it looked as if she would have to stay for a little while to get ramshackle Averell Cottage back into shape, and then try to sell it. Even then, she would probably only have enough money for a decade or so in a smaller place than the one she longed for, and then she would have to get a job, if she weren't a famous poet already.

The lawyer looked at her pale face with its burning carbuncles of acne, and felt a tiny mewling movement of

pity in his breast. "It is not *much*," he said, not unkindly. "But it can be a good life if you manage it well."

"Good. Fantastic," she said. And Chauncey Todd, unaccustomed to the sarcasm of the next generation, took her at her word, and beamed her bosoms a tender smile. In response, Vi took her left breast in hand and shook it at him for a good-bye, then trudged home in her scandalous dress and cork shoes, the ratty zigzag of her part lowered into the lake wind.

At home, she stood looking out the parlor window at the lake. Snow devils were whirling around on the ice, and the pines were spiked with white on the hills. Vivienne thought of old Marmaduke Temple boffing his slave, and laughed.

Then, standing there at the window, she surprised herself. At one time, she had been a princess, an obedient Shirley Temple in patent-leather shoes and pink organza dresses. At one time, she declaimed to crowds of historians perched on the seats of antique parlor chairs, who sent streams of pipe smoke at her as they shouted "Hooray!" If she had done well with her declamations, her father would briefly press his hand against her cheek as he escorted her up to bed. "My girl," he would say. "My brilliant girl." Now watching the winter out of Averell Cottage's windows, words she remembered from when she was little just bubbled up from nowhere. "*In the spring of 1785 I left my family in New Jersey and traveled into the vast and melancholy wilderness,*" she said aloud in a sort of half-murmur, ". . . all was dark at first, and the trees cast a midday twilight upon me. Then there was a rift in the darkness, a cliff where the trees dropped a hundred feet from the mountain's lip, and there I stepped into the light . . . There was no wind in this desolate New York wilderness, and all was calm. Suddenly before me rose a vision of ghostly buildings on the edge of the lake, a true city of spires and rooftops,

a phantom bustle in the streets, smoke. I sank to my knees in the strange ferns.”

The words of the man in question, Marmaduke Temple, at the epiphanic moment when he first laid eyes upon the place where he would build Templeton. This great, calm, heroic, rational man, now exposed as a base slave owner and philanderer among the unpaid help. What a lark!

For a second, Vi considered the stern portrait of Marmaduke over the mantelpiece. “I like you better now that I know that about you, old guy,” she said, and laughed. Something about her laughter, how it echoed and echoed in the cold house, cracked her up even more, and she gasped, her ribs hurt, she peed herself a little. But then she stopped, positive that there was a moment when the face of the man in the portrait twitched into a smirk and a wink. A little complicit grimace.

Vivienne gazed at the portrait, amazed, and then considered. She had seen stranger things, though those visions were usually induced by fun substances. But also, as a child, she often saw a ghost moving through Averell Cottage. To Vi, the ghost took the form of a giant quivering dove that left great misty feathers strewn about the house. A wink in oil paint was not outside the realm of possibility. She gave the portrait a little grin, winked back. Then she felt sick and ran to the bathroom to heave up her breakfast of canned pineapple, all she could find in the kitchen cabinets that wasn't tinned pork or Jell-O. She had been feeling sick in the mornings. Her navel had swollen a little. Last month, she didn't get a period.

VIVIENNE, IT SEEMED, was pregnant.

The story of my conception was one I knew from long before I could even speak: Vi's eyes would always light up

with joy and nostalgia when she described how she lived in San Francisco, in a commune, in what she liked to describe as “an experiment in free love,” though to me it always sounded like rented love, albeit rented cheaply. There having been four men but only three women in this commune, Vi never went to bed alone; and, as there were also always yogis and painters and sitar players and organic yogurt makers staying over, everyone, of course, was cordially invited to take part in the love fests.

She was only seventeen, she always said, sighing. What did she know about precautions? Vi awoke over the next month with vomit already in her mouth, and felt lethargic and heavy and sick. Even before they injected the bunny with her urine and watched it die, Vivienne knew.

On the day of the pregnancy test, Vi sat in her paper hospital gown, feet growing cold on the floor. The nurse, a girl three grades older than Vi in high school, was blushing. “I’m sorry,” she said. “You’re pregnant, Miss Upton,” and she could not look Vi in the eye.

Enter: me. Wilhelmina Sunshine Upton, called a hippie-dippie “Sunshine” until I was two and already stubborn and refused to answer to that name.

The moment Vi was told by that soft little nurse that she was pregnant, she knew she had to stay in Templeton. In the vague swamp that was my mother’s brain, she knew that she couldn’t kick the drugs if she returned to San Francisco, and that it would be almost impossible to find more in Templeton. Her heart was good, and she didn’t want to retard her little cooking baby. Also, if she were going to go back to San Francisco, she would have no idea which of the commune’s men had fathered her child; before I was born, any one of the four (plus) could have been my true father. When I was born, however, more than ten and a half long

months after she came home—I was even pigheaded in the womb, she always said in explanation—she had pared my fathers down to three: she was fairly certain when she saw my pink skin that it wasn't the black man. This was what she told me later, even when I was two years old, and couldn't imagine what sex was. She was frank, my mother, always. And, until I understood the mechanics of the act, I loved the idea of having three fathers: if one was good, imagine being blessed with three!

I was once sent home from kindergarten for making this boast. Mrs. Parrot squinted down at me with pity as she pinned the note onto my jacket, and gave me a pat on the head. When my mother unpinned the note in our old Volvo, she chortled, then at home pasted it into my baby album. *Dear Ms. Upton, it read. Wilhelmina bragged today of having three fathers, for which I send her home as chastizement. Be wary of speaking of your promiscuous past before impressionable kids. Little pictures have big ears. Mrs. P.*

“Can't even spell, that wench,” my mother said as she applied glue to the back of the note, tears of laughter dampening her cheeks.

But at the moment she greeted the little pulsing me in the hospital, hands spread over her midsection, Vi knew she would stay to raise her child in a healthy way, far from hedonistic temptation. She would be a good mother in Templeton, she decided; I would grow up safely there.

To be frank, this part of the story always sounded a little fishy to me, but I could never figure out why. I just swallowed it. And, until I visited San Francisco later, I was grateful to have been raised in my small and beautiful town. Then, when I saw that gorgeous, gilded city under the fog, I regretted Templeton and its tiny ways, its subservience to the baseball tourists that came in hordes