

TWO

Maybe it was the aftermath of a dream that he couldn't remember – so he told me – but Theophilus Baxter woke up one morning in the middle of October 1658, with an unpleasant sensation of trouble. The second session of the General Court of Sagadahoc Bay would begin its final meeting later in the day. Although the discussions had been uproarious, Theophilus believed that his presentiment related to matters beyond the court's jurisdiction. He shook his head vigorously and walked barefoot across the cold floor to a water basin on a small table in the corner. A splash of water on his face drove away tiny fragments of sleep. While still in his nightshirt, he took his leather-bound Bible – one Elizabeth gave when they were married – from its shelf next to the door and brought it to the edge of his bed, where he sat down to say a short prayer and to read a passage from Paul's writings. He then dressed and went down the narrow pine stairs to the kitchen, where Elizabeth was setting the table for breakfast.

During a pause in their talk about the needs of the day, his premonition of eventfulness returned. Elizabeth noticed the look in his eyes, a look of happiness cut short. (You'll find scholarly summaries of our controversy in other places. I want to tell the personal side now, so I'll add and subtract, embroider and elaborate. I'll invent conversations. Some will complain about the liberties I'm taking, but our colony, an experiment in living, invites adventures that work to create understanding.)

"What is it now?" Elizabeth brought a tray of biscuits from the hearth to the table.

"We've had too much talk lately about God and the Bible," Theophilus said. "I don't understand much of the chatter, and I doubt anyone else does either. It's bad for the country. I had a dream last night about Lydia Bowstreet."

"What would you want to dream about that troublemaker for?"

"Things stick in our minds sometimes in the strangest way."

Elizabeth filled a pitcher with milk and put it in the center of the table. "Things should improve when Pastor Allerton gets home. And they'll get even better once you're finally elected governor."

"That won't be till the spring – if it happens at all."

Elizabeth's discomfort with her husband's melancholy flickered and trembled for a moment in her eyes. Theophilus looked out the window at the ships in Botolph Harbor. A horse-cart rattled by on the dirt road.

"Shouldn't you try to understand the questions everyone is talking about?" Elizabeth asked. "I'll help you – if you'll let me."

"Yes, of course," Theophilus said absentmindedly. "A good idea."

The children came in from finishing their chores, and in the changed atmosphere, the deputy governor turned his attention to quieting their mirth.

He took a black cape from the cupboard and went outside to walk by himself in the morning sunlight to the center of town. The tails of his cloak swished around his legs as he

passed the frame houses that stood a few yards apart from each other on Middle Street. He glanced seaward at the dozen small ships – barks, brigantines, and shallops – that had come to Botolph with a wide assortment of useful cargos: fish and cloth goods, spices and hogsheads of nails. These signs of our modestly-growing prosperity pleased him.

He turned onto King Street, where he saw a small knot of men gathered in front of a shop door. He walked toward them. In the center of the group, towering above the others on the top step of a rickety ladder, was Robin Swann, a lusty young man in his early twenties, hard at work pounding the side of the building with a hammer; the sound of his efforts echoed up and down King Street. “Go to it, Robin,” one of his friends called and then a second shout of encouragement helped to drive home the final nail, and Robin scampered down the ladder two steps at a time and gave his handiwork an appraising look. The sign glistened in the morning sun: above the word “milliner”, which stood out in clear, bold letters, was the figure of a white swan around whose shapely neck was a neat yellow ribbon. “It’s beautiful,” Robin said. He opened the shop door. Our newest enterprise would be ready for business in a few minutes.

“You’re getting an early start,” Theophilus said, joining the well-wishers. As always, there was a hint of reserve in his manner. Though he would have appreciated the support of Robin and his friends in his stand for governor, he knew that like others in town they’d allied themselves with untried ideas that were sweeping the peninsula.

“Wouldn’t do – would it, sir? – to fall behind the first day,” Robin replied.

“I still wish you’d gone in with your father,” Theophilus said. “We need good shipwrights.”

“Pa says I should strike out on my own. He’s taking my two brothers in with him.”

It was nearly time for Theophilus to make an early-morning call on the governor, his foe, my friend. Just as he was about to take his leave, the sight of young Ned Boland shouting his way up King Street from the waterfront awakened his curiosity. “The Mary and John has docked,” Ned called as his heavy shoes hit the packed dirt. “There’s news! Pastor Allerton is home.”

“Thank heaven,” Theophilus said to himself. I can picture his eyes twinkling with pleasure. The unexpected loneliness he’d felt during Josiah’s English travels was about to end.

“There’s news!” Ned continued to shout as he turned onto High Street toward the heart of town. “The Protector is dead! Cromwell is dead!”

“There’ll be plenty in England that’ll miss him,” one of Robin’s companions said as he lifted his hat to give his head a good scratch.

Theophilus walked along Sea Street, heading into a stiff breeze from the south, for his meeting with Governor Stonycroft. The door to the governor’s lodgings swung open just as he raised a hand to knock and young Sir Henry stood on the step facing him. “Good morning, Brother,” Sir Henry said with an amiability that I doubt softened the sharp contours of Theophilus’s suspicions. “I’m on the way to return a book to Sister Lydia. Why don’t you come along?”

Theophilus resented Sir Henry's attempts to forge a friendship between Lydia Bowstreet and himself. He'd disliked her ever since she arrived on the peninsula and believed that her talk about religion, which charmed many of our people, was nothing more than the effusions of an unchecked spirit. He mentioned the death of Oliver Cromwell.

"Poor man." Sir Henry tugged the cuff of his glove. "He's been in so many battles." He then ran away with the conversation in a supercilious fashion that tried Theophilus's patience – the Protector's death wouldn't have an immediate effect on us. "We don't have much to fear if Parliamentary forces keep control. And even if King Charles is called back from France, it will take a year or two for us to feel the change here."

"We ought to send Parliament a resolution," Theophilus suggested, "letting them know we're aware of the new situation and that we intend to remain loyal."

"Why don't you bring it up at the Court?" Sir Henry said. "I rely on you old-comers to let me know your way of doing things." He tucked the book he was carrying under his arm. Theophilus told me he saw the title: an English publication that purported to challenge the resurrection of the body. I said it must mean nothing more than that the governor was exercising the curiosity you'd expect in a person his age.

Stonycroft turned into Cove Woods and went down a leaf-strewn shortcut that would bring him to Lydia Bowstreet, his friend and also mine at the time.

Theophilus walked along Cove Street by himself and arrived at the center of town with a few minutes to spare. There were more people on the streets and paths now. The marketplace was bustling. A few delegates to the General Court made their way to the town house at the head of King Street. A group of ministers from out of town talked animatedly as they walked across the meetinghouse pasture toward my house for an informal conference.

I, Noah Greenfield – teacher to the church in Botolph, and according to some folks the most distinguished minister in Sagadac – I sat at a table in the center of my book-lined study on the top floor of our house, which overlooks the harbor from a steep rise of ground in the North End. I'd been at work since just before dawn, arranging some of my Thursday lectures on Ecclesiastes to send to a printer in London, for I had friends in the mother country who were always interested in what I had to say. I put out the candle in the pewter holder and continued my work. I paused now and then to dip my pen into the gray inkpot next to the candle holder, and the point scratched away again almost immediately, making the same rough sound it makes now.

I stopped my work when the sun overtopped the tallest of the masts in the harbor and made two neat piles of papers I'd scattered over the table. I pushed back my chair and went to the window, stretched, and put my hands on my hips, looking, I'm sure, like a forest animal, weasel or fox, ambling out of his lair for a look at the puzzling, glorious world that surrounds him. Though we lived nearly a mile from the center of town, I could hear the new bell in the cupola atop the meeting house calling our delegates to the General Court. Two shopkeepers heading for King Street walked by on the lane below. I heard Ned Boland announcing the return home of Pastor Allerton and the death of the Protector – news that took me away from scholarly

work I've kept up since my student days at Cambridge – to present events in Botolph and the conference downstairs in half an hour.

The melancholy cry of a seagull interrupted my expectant musing. I watched the homely bird as it perched on my window sill. When the gull flew off, calling out again, I looked down at Harbor Lane and saw, walking around the base of Berryman's Hill, a solitary woman wearing a crimson cape and a black hood that half-hid her face. She walked rapidly, as if toward an urgent task of mercy. The gull called again in its skyward flight. Her pace slackened, she looked up. A smile brightened her face as she watched the bird's graceful dips and turns. Her happiness delighted my furry fox self. I waved, she returned my greeting. Before long, our seagull flew off in the direction of the Mary and John, and Lydia Bowstreet went on her way.

I watched five black-cloaked men, a team of penguins, making their way toward me up the lane. I gathered papers I thought I'd need and went downstairs to join my Antarctic colleagues for the second day of our meeting.

The more we talked, the less progress we made; the unanimity we craved eluded us like tadpoles in a child's grasp. "Again and again," said blunt-spoken Mark Pilcher from the church at Westford, one of several who will soar in and out of this story – seagull, crow, eagle, blue jay. I'll do well if I can give you a loving glimpse of each one, not easy, because we didn't consider that understanding and feelings are connected. "We keep coming back to the same two points," Pilcher said.

We have a unique way in Sagadac. We want our interpretation of the Scriptures to guide our colony. We don't have a single earthly authority to form our understanding. When disagreements come up, our ministers get together. The present controversy was the thorniest we'd had in our score of years in the wilderness. The question was how God deals with people he made in his image.

We know we can find him in the Bible, but does he speak to us directly – if we're at work in the house or out in the fields? A related question – how can we be certain he claims us as his own? Do good works help us win his favor? There were other questions, these were the heart of it.

Grumpy fox, I listened to what Pilcher and the others had to say until – powerless leader of the group – I spoke up myself. "If we say it's Christ who saves us and gives grace then righteous living is evidence that God has adopted us. But if prayers and sacrifices, keeping the commandments and loving our neighbors don't come from him, they count for nothing." God's Word breaks down resistance and replaces wilderness stubbornness with melting truth. "As for the other point, I believe the Lord sends comfort and power to our souls independently of Scripture, but not in contradiction to it."

Pilcher shook his head. A look in his eyes, disgruntled, flinty like the head of a tomahawk made me doubt I'd win his agreement. A burly man, he loved to chop down trees in the forest around Westford. I could see the aftereffects of his activity in the way he gripped the edge of my table, as if he could break it in half. He would never yield an inch.

The door opened at noontime and Rachel brought in a tray of muffins and cider. Her gracious manner relieved our masculine solemnity, but when the door closed behind her and the song of her voice vanished, our discussion started up again with all its tigerish force. William Davies, another man you should know, recently called to the church at New Hope, said he was waiting to hear what Brother Anthony Morgan had to say.

Several of us shifted in our chairs. Morgan sat by himself on a settle near the hearth, anxiously chewing on a thumbnail. A sandy-haired man, powerfully built, full of youthful energy and spirit, he stood up and began to circumnavigate the table with long bouncing steps. He'd been with us only half a year, so we listened closely, curious to discover his way of thinking. Enthusiasm shone in his eyes, and his voice boomed and rocked, for he hadn't trimmed his way of expressing himself to win other men. "For me," he said, "God breaks through all bounds. I can't count the times I've felt myself guided toward some action or thought or feeling by a force I couldn't see but knew I could trust. I've come to recognize this as God's Spirit working within me. But I don't single myself out. What lives in me lives in all Christians."

"No, no, no," Mark Pilcher said as he looked at Francis Cornford and Thaddeus Belknap for support. "That won't do at all. If we take on your view, everyone in the country will set himself up as a prophet."

I agreed that Morgan's rough-hewn ways – he was like a log with branches stripped, but with bark left on the wood – needed polishing, but I liked him and said that his opinions weren't as heterodox as they sounded.

We talked for the rest of the afternoon. When the late-afternoon sun filled our dining room, Francis Cornford said we ought to continue talking the next day. "We'll surely find the grounds for agreement we're looking for." He had said the least of any of us. I suspect that in spirit he was back with his Indians at Toonlocket. "The things that separate us are secondary. Faith, hope, charity – fortunately we aren't quarreling about these."

We ended the day's business on a note of goodwill. I called Anthony Morgan aside as the others left. "Our friends want to have us all thinking the same way," he said with a vigor that our long conversation hadn't quenched."

I bent down to rake the fire that still glowed in the hearth. "Mark Pilcher and some of the rest have definite ideas. We'll have to respect them unless we want trouble." A shower of sparks went up the chimney as I rearranged the logs. Bright sparks of burning light brought Lydia Bowstreet to mind. "I happened to be looking out my window this morning just as your cousin was going by. Will you see her soon?"

"Tonight. The better I get to know her, the more remarkable she seems."

"She stands out. A fine example, except on the days when she tries to make herself as big as life."

When Anthony asked if it was bad to be as big as life, I saw a remnant of boyishness in him, waiting on the will of an older man. I got up from the hearth and put a hand on his shoulder. I told him I was glad he'd decided to live with us. "You're brave; you're intelligent. You were

useful to us while Pastor Allerton was away. I'm going to support your request to serve at the church in Botolph."

"That's kind of you." Boyishness gone, a healthy smile spread across his craggy face. He shook my hand with a strong and manly – if exaggerated – warmth. I thanked God for sending us people who wanted to be as large as life and prayed that such people – Lydia, Anthony, myself even – use their potency to help others.

A high wind swept through Botolph that night. The new sign above Robin Swann's shop creaked and swayed. The ships in the harbor rocked on the billowing tide. A few solitary foot-travelers passing down our twisting streets clutched their hats. Rain-clouds muffled the waning harvest moon. While many in town were getting ready for a gathering at the Bowstreets to announce the betrothal of her daughter Deborah, I climbed the hall stairs to the second floor and then went up a narrower staircase, really a ladder, that led to a chamber underneath the slanting roof. I paused at the landing. My son Michael lay on his bed beside the small window. A candle, just lit, stood on a table next to him, a book was spread open, printed side down, on his brown, woolen blanket. His eyes were closed. "Michael," I said softly, "are you awake?"

"Oh, hello, Father," Michael whispered. I sat on a stool beside him. He would have entered the college at New Hope the month before, if a severe attack of pleurisy hadn't ended our plans. We still weren't sure he'd recover. I asked what he'd been reading.

"Hebrews," he replied in a listless murmur but showed signs of vitality as he looked at my face. "I'm almost done with it. One thing this sickness has taught me is how to understand the Bible better. If I ever get my health back, I'll be the best blame minister the country's had yet." He asked me how the meeting went.

"Tedious but interesting," I said.

Michael smoothed the blanket with his pale hand. "Ma told me about Cromwell. I wonder what it will mean for England."

"A new government, I suspect. We were wise to keep our distance from him."

"England. It doesn't sound real to me."

"You were born here. All you know about England is what we've told you."

"I wonder if I'll ever go there for a visit. I like it here too much to live anywhere else."

I thought his talkativeness was a sign of improvement, but he coughed again, a deep, dry, chest-rattling sound that awakened a pain in my own chest as I watched him. I took him in my arms. When the seizure passed, he buried his face in his pillow. I touched his shoulder.

"Damnation," Michael said. "I refuse to die. I want to live."

"That's the spirit," I told him and said I'd come back for another visit later in the evening. I waited for him to fall asleep and went downstairs to supper.

