

Lincoln Raw

a biographical novel

That which does not kill us makes us stronger.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Chapter One

The Executive Mansion, Washington City - April 14, 1865

People gossip about my face. Some say I'm steeped in gloom over little Willy's death. Others insist this great conflict weighs on me like an oxen yoke. According to my copper-headed Kentucky playmate, Austin Gollaher, I was melancholy even as a baby.

In my youth, neighbors called me lazy. Cousin Dennis Hanks pronounced me a dullard. Today, some contend my countenance betrays uncommon wisdom, while others argue I'm simple and indolent, a gorilla posing as a man. A man's shadow merely betrays his presence. To know him, we must probe the stripes from which he bleeds.

Still in my faded dressing gown and broken down slippers, I look out my office window upon the city. Traces of last night's pyrotechnics hang in the air, and yesterday's mantle of gray has yielded to splashes of red, white, and blue. Flags and buntings announce the Rebel Army's surrender while reflections from the morning sun dance on the Potomac like scattered jewels.

The river's stench must have stopped General Lee's men from crossing over when they had the chance, warning them of an invisible plague lurking in its waters. Seeds of disease are deposited in the Potomac by rivulets of

human waste and refuse that flow along our streets and into its currents. Even this great mansion is no safe harbor from the pestilence. Our little Willy was taken by an epidemic of fever, and Mother is almost insane from grief.

I covet the luxury of mourning in the same fashion she does. Willy is not the only son I've lost since assuming this Office, and with every soldier's death, a piece of me dies also. The blood of those who've perished in this great conflict could fill the little Knob Creek near my boyhood home, and their families' tears would flood the fields around it.

I give a letter to my secretary, George Nicolay. Hardly more than a boy, he's entirely trustworthy, and nothing escapes his keen eyes. On our walks through the city, he can spot mal-intended ruffians from blocks away, though if we were set upon, reckon I'd be the one protecting his bony frame.

The letter is a reply to General James Van Alen who complains I exposed myself carelessly while visiting Richmond this week. Nicolay thinks it best to assure him appropriate precautions will be taken in the future. My friend Ward Hill Lamon, Marshall of Washington City, a massive man equal to me in height but much greater in girth, reminds me daily of those who want me dead. Hill claims there are more than eighty plots against my life. There are times he could have added me to that list. Nonetheless, were it not for my decision to dispatch him to Richmond on Wednesday, he'd be haranguing me over Mrs. Lincoln's plans to attend theatre this evening.

A recent dream buoys me; its details are etched in my memory, carved there by repetition. Invariably, it foreshadows momentous events. The morning would be made even brighter if it heralds the much anticipated news from General Sherman that the remaining rebel units under General Johnston have capitulated.

In my vision, I float at a rapid pace across a dark expanse of water to an unknown destination. But this time, unlike the previous occurrences, Austin Gollaher appears and calls me back to a memorable Sunday morning of our boyhood.



In 1816—my seventh year as I am told—we live on a tiny farm near the Gollaher family in Hodgenville, Kentucky. Once a wilderness, now this patch of earth is regarded as a peaceful valley. Surrounded by spiraling hills and deep gorges, our place lies along a branch of the Rolling Fork known as Knob Creek. Father tells us stories of the times before the Indians were vanquished from these parts—a time when they tormented people as far east as Virginia. He witnessed their inhumanity when he was a child.

When not tending the farm, Father works at the distillery down where the creek and Rolling Fork join together. That is, unless he's hunting, or out in the woods brooding, or dreaming up schemes to make a better life.

Last year's winter lingers as the next one begins. The few sprouts that emerged from our late-May planting succumbed to aberrant snows and frosts in June. We replanted, only to suffer more crop-killing frosts through late July and August. A half-inch layer of ice stayed on the ground through most of September, but has finally melted during a brief interlude of moderate October weather. The resulting runoff swells our little branch to its brim.

As the morning sun breaks over the horizon, a biting wind whistles through our cabin, confirming that the year-long winter has merely taken a respite and lurks nearby, ready to resume its assault. I roll out of my cornhusk bed to find Mother fixing breakfast. She's a rugged woman, but today she's decked out in her best Sunday dress. Her coarse black hair cascades onto her shoulders. It's the dress that snugs around her waist, rather than draping loosely from her bony shoulders to her narrow hips. She wears it when she hauls us down to the holy-roller camp meetings to hear preachers who've come through these parts; she can whoop it up with the best of them. It's also what she wears when Father is away and she sets about on affairs of her own.

I exchange glances with my sister Sally. Her eyes are deep-set and grey like my own. In spite of her being two years older, she looks up at me, and me down at her. She's stout like Father, but that's the only way they're alike.

We don't ask what sort of business Mother is up to, but at breakfast, she tells us Mrs. Gollaher will be calling today.

I cock my head. "And Austin, too?"

"Yezzun. The two of y'all 'll have the whole day to play. Father done gone off scoutin' for land 'cross the 'hio River."

"How long he be gone?"

"He be back when he be back, as always," she answers.

Folks often talk of Providence smiling on them. When that happens, their insides must get warm the same as mine do when Mother tells me Father is away.

After breakfast, I take a perch on our split-rail fence and wait for Austin. He's three years older than me, but not taller. We'd rather be dead than apart, even though we don't always see eye to eye on things.

Once, while we're playing at his cabin he says, "You loose a coon or fox from your father's traps again, I'm tellin'."

I say back, "We've no right takin' more 'n we need. It's mean to harm animals for no reason."

We argue until Mrs. Gollaher takes his side and scolds me. It doesn't matter what they think. Right is right.

A week later, Father hauls me along to check his traps. He gets a coon in the first one, and about a dozen yards away a fox struggles to get free from a snare. Father yells, "Ha!" and crows about his trappin' skills. Then he loads his flintlock and aims at the coon's head.

My shoulders grow taut.

The rifle's report sends a sharp pain ricocheting through my throat and head.

I choke back tears as Father walks over to the next trap and bends down to inspect the fox. He crouches like a thieving pirate digging through his plunder, shakes his head, and sends me to the next trap thirty yards away. The trap sits at the end of a game trail, which winds through a thicket and comes out near the creek. In it he has caught another fine fox.

I'm standing there telling myself it's wrong to kill two handsome foxes on the same day when another report

from Father's rifle sends tremors down my spine. Tears seep down into my throat. After a moment, I straddle the wooden cage and bend over to open it. At first, the critter hunches down, recoiling toward the rear of the trap. I slap the back of the cage with my hand a few times to coax it, and finally it springs out and races into the brush. I'm still astride the cage, smiling, when Father walks up and cuffs me on the side of the head.

"You stupid boy," he mutters. Then he grabs my ear in his meaty hand and drags me home where he whips me. On hearing the whaps of the switch raising welts on my back, Mother races outside and grabs Father's hand.

She snarls, "This time ya done gone too far."

Father flings his switch down next to my bare feet and glowers at her. After a long silence, he storms away, muttering. *He ain't none of mine.*

"Where ya goin'?" Mother shouts after him.

"Huntin'," he shouts back.

His words ring in my ears. "He ain't none of mine."

What I'm always eager to hear Father grumble is, "Git jeself down to Hodgen's Mill with a sack of corn. Yer ma says we're gittin' low on meal." The Miller Hodgen, a large man whose nickname is Mr. John, grinds our corn by hand. He lives with his plump mother Missus Sarah in a spacious home built of stone and evenly sawn boards.

Missus Sarah's first question whenever I arrive is, "Hungry, Abraham?" And without waiting for my answer, she serves up a fancy plate loaded with sweet cakes. While I'm devouring her pastries, she sits next to me at the finely carved table. Smiling, she opens *Robinson Crusoe* and reads aloud. At the end of each page, she coaxes me to sound out the words and prompts me to take a stab at reading a line on my own.

"When you speak, dear boy," she tells me, "do so properly like Mr. Crusoe in the book. Well-spoken men go far in this world."

Though we read for over an hour, it seems like only a few minutes have passed when Mr. John comes in from the mill, carrying my sack of meal. That's Missus Sarah's clue to put aside her book to set the table for supper. I'm always invited to join them.

Sometimes, they let me stay with them for days, sleeping in a bedroom all to myself on a real bed. Mr. John often says they wish Mother and Father would give me to them for good. But when the homesickness sets in, they always send me off well fed and smiling.

Once, Austin and I are down at the mill together when Ol' Zack Evans, a swarthy, near-skeleton of a man, rides up on his blind rickety nag. When the beleaguered animal balks at the platform, Mr. Evans kicks her hard in the sides. The burly miller jumps down from the platform, seeming to shake the earth, and pulls Mr. Evans off his mount, pinning him to a post.

Mr. John's nostrils flare. "If ever you kick a horse again, I'll give you a thrashing you'll never forget."

Mr. Evans stares at the ground.

I pull back my shoulders, straightening from my slouched posture, and say, "Mr. Evans, the other day your boy tears off a bird's head and throws it at my feet. At first, he laughs, and Austin, here, warns him he'll get a good whuppin' if he doesn't say he's sorry. Your boy just shakes his head and says, 'Abraham don't never fight no one.' I ball up my hands into fists, clench my jaw, and stare hard at him 'til he buries his face in his hands and cries. Then he confesses he behaved shamefully. Now, your boy oughten not do such as that, and neither should you kick any more horses."

Several days later while returning from the mill alone, a brown-and-white dog is lying on the trail at the base of a precipice. Its shallow breathing is the only sign it's alive. I kneel beside it, set down my bag of cornmeal, and stare up to the top of the bluff. It's a long drop. The little fellow whimpers as I pet him, and his right foreleg shakes. His eyes look like he's been crying. No way he can walk far. It's a good thing he's not too heavy to carry.

After a while, though, my arm tires, so I drop the sack of cornmeal under a shade tree and lay my dog on the ground. A few yards away, there's a small spring where I fill my cap with cool water. Honey, that's my new pet's name, laps up badly needed refreshment while I fashion a crude splint for the injured leg, winding straps of soft bark from some nearby pawpaw bushes around a couple of

saplings I've cut down to size. Mr. John made one just like it once. My doctoring is good enough for Honey to hobble behind me the rest of the way home.

I'm within hailing distance of the cabin when I stop and tie Honey to a tree using the leather tie on my sack of meal. Since Father won't be at all happy about my new pet, Mother must approve before he sees him.

In near darkness, I steal up to the cabin and peer through the window. Father is asleep by the fireplace, so it's not hard to slip in and whisper to Mother, "Down by the big sycamore, I've tied up a dog. His leg's broke. Please, let me keep him in our empty pig pen. Father says we ain't gonna have no more hogs for a while, and it's got a roof to keep the rain out."

Mother smiles and asks where the dog came from.

I explain how I found him and beg, "Father won't like my dog; he'll see its broken leg and complain he's useless, but you and Sally will love him. Please, tell Father not to shoot him or give him away."

She rubs my coarse, black hair. People say we favor each other in looks and in temperament. Nothing of that sort is ever said about Father and me.

She says, "Seems ya loves the poor critter. I'll make sure your pa doesn't do it no harm."

Mother and I collect Honey from his hiding place and make him a home in the old pig pen. True to her promise, Mother convinces Father to let me keep him. But just the same, he's mean to my dog and always calls him ugly.

Every time Father looks askance at Honey, it makes me cringe. I'll never forget the darkness in his eyes when he discovered the first pet I brought home.

Back during the springtime of my sixth year, a litter of new born pigs catches my fancy over at the Hodgen's farm. I take them up and hold them one by one, stroking their cute little snouts. The smallest one nuzzles up against my chest and makes little loving squeaks. He so captivate me that Mr. John cannot get me to put him away. Finally, he says, "Abraham, you can have it if you can get it home."

My heart almost bursts. "Ya made this the best day of my life."

Mr. John chuckles. "What you gonna name him?"

"Let's see ... why ... how about, Friday after Mr. Crusoe's man in the storybook?"

"Well, take good care of Friday," he replies.

I gather up the hem of my tow-linen shirt forming a make-shift sack and carry him home cradled against my bosom. To make a bed for him, I line a hollow log with corn stalks, shucks, and leaves.

The poor piglet squeals all night, bringing grunts and muttering from Father who tosses about in his bed. In the morning, the first thing he says is, "That pig's gotta go." I hope he's just hungry and rush outside with corn meal, bread, and milk, but Friday doesn't touch any of it. He just continues his relentless squealing.

At last Mother says to me, "Ya best take that pig back to its mama; it'll die if ya keep it here."

It breaks my heart, but what Mother says is always the truth and the law to me. With my head bowed, I take Friday back to the Hodgens.

When the little fellow goes in the pen with his mother, she snorts with delight. He scurries to her teats, making joyous little squeaks. After she suckles him for a while, he looks happy and becomes so playful. I beg Mr. John to let me take him back. He nods, and I gather up Friday in my shirt and carry him home again.

On my return Mother plants her hands on her hips and glares at me. "How would ya feel if'n somebody took you away to a strange place and ya never saw yer ma or sister ever again?"

My heart pinches and my throat turns raw. Tears roll down my cheeks.

Mother rubs my head. "Now, if ya really loves that pig, you'd want him to be at home so he could be happy."

I continue blubbering, begging her to let me try him one more day. "When he sees how much I loves him, he'll change his mind." But the next day he still won't eat, and Mother convinces me to take him back once more. This time, however, she agrees to let me carry him back and forth. That way, we can play together by day, and he can suckle on his mother and sleep with her at night.

After two weeks, he finally learns to eat on his own,

and Mother lets me bring him home for good. I play with him and teach him tricks. We even play hide-and-go-seek. He always peeps around the corner of the cabin to see if I'm coming after him.

Father comes beside me one morning during Friday's feeding time and pours out a pail of corn. He says nothing, but licks his lips as he watches the pig devour its breakfast. Each morning thereafter he joins me in the feeding ritual, increasing his offering as the little fellow grows. Eventually, Friday gets too heavy for me to carry around and starts following me everywhere—to the barn, the plowed fields, even the forest.

We spend most days in the woods where I teach him how to brush leaves aside to find acorns and nuts. Sometimes he takes a lazy spell, rubs against my legs and stops in front of me to lie down. I can decipher his language when he says to me, "Why don't you carry me like you used to do?" When he grows a little larger, the table turns and he carries me. He does so as happily as I ever gave the same service to him.

One night Father stares darkly at his plate of venison stew and says, "That hog's fat enough for slaughterin'. Think we'll do the business tomorrow."

My breath hangs in my throat.

Mother asks, "Abraham, is somethin' the matter?"

I leap off my stool and run to bed without finishing my meal. I lie awake weeping, plotting to rise early and steal poor Friday away to safety. If Father thwarts me ... there must be some way to punish him for his cruelty.

Come morning, despite being famished, I pass up breakfast and hurry outside to check on Friday. The sight of Father filling a barrel with water, and the smoldering fire nearby for heating stones to make it scalding hot, takes my breath away.

My heart races as I slip past Father and coax Friday to follow me to the forest. When Father discovers us missing he hollers, "You, Abraham, fetch back that hog! You Abraham, you Abraham, fetch back that hog!" The louder he calls, the farther and faster Friday and I run until we're out of hearing range. We stay in the woods waiting for nightfall. On our return, Father scolds me and

switches me with a stick until my back oozes. He ties my pet to a tree stump and threatens to whip me twice as hard if I interfere again.

After another restless night, I rise early and sneak outside, planning once more to take Friday to hide in the woods. My heart sinks. Father is up before me again, his eyes narrow and dark as he prepares my pet for slaughter. Without breakfast once again, I start for the woods—this time alone.

Not long afterwards, Friday's squeals stab at my heart. I take off running, gasping for breath through mucous and tears, as if it's my life Father wants to take. A half mile away, at the creek, the sound of flowing water covers distant noises, and I race along its bank, finally in control of myself, breathing in unison with the current's rhythm. Calm settles over me when I stop to rest and distract myself by floating twigs downstream. Now and then, my serenity is disturbed by thoughts of how to mete out the punishment Father deserves. My mind often ponders what kind of world lies beyond our little Knob Creek farm. Maybe I'll run away.

By noon, my stomach growls, and I start for home. From the edge of the clearing by our cabin, Friday comes into clear view; he's split open, gutted, and hanging from a pole. Mist covers my eyes, blurring Friday's image. My stomach wrenches into knots, and my heart is heavy. I turn and race back into the woods and keep running along the creek side, determined to put as much distance as possible between me and Father's treachery.

A mile deep into the woods my legs grow weary, and hunger pangs prick my stomach. I stop and forage for acorns to stay my appetite. Once my hunger is abated, a tall hickory tree offers shelter from the glaring sun. My eyes sting from the saltiness of my tears. I rub them and blink, then rub them some more and blink again. The stinging subsides, and I gaze up at the overhanging branches, studying the leaves' shapes and following patterns in the rippled bark of the limbs. In time, sleep overtakes me. When my eyes open, dusk is settling over the forest. I get up and wander home, resigned to accept whatever punishment Father has in store for me.

A couple of months later, we're all settled in for supper when Mother sets cured ham on the table. The sight of it makes me gag. Forgetting any thoughts of hunger, I make a beeline for bed and burrow under a layer of animal skins to block out everything around me.

The next morning I glare at the spot where Father had slashed Friday's throat. Tears trickle down my cheeks. With a chip of bark, I scrape into a pile every grain of soil that had taken in Friday's blood and heap twigs and hot coals over the little mound. Pain gnaws at every bone in my body as the fire burns down to a bed of fine white ashes. I gather up the hem of my tow-linen shirt, forming a make-shift sack, and collect some soft dirt from the edge of the clearing to spread over the ashes, covering the earth's memory of my pet's murder.

So when Father looks askance at my new dog, something pinches at my heart.

One time, on our way to Hodgen's mill, Honey sets off after a coon. In no time, he gets himself stuck in a hollow log, and it takes me considerable effort to extract him. On arriving at the mill, Mr. John says we're last in line and the wait is long. Instead of going in with Missus Sarah to read, I pass the time exploring a nearby cave.

A few yards inside, I find myself wedged between two large rocks. Faint glimmers of daylight cast shadows off the jagged walls around me. For some time, I struggle to get loose, exhaling the last wisps of breath still in my lungs, contorting and angling myself every which way, trying to pry the boulders apart with my hands, but they don't budge. No effort is successful. I cannot gain my freedom.

All the time I'm wrestling with those rocks, Honey is whining and darting between my confinement and the mouth of the cave. But once darkness engulfs us, he races off, barking. When he doesn't return after several minutes, thoughts of dying in the pitch of night, or being eaten by a bear, weigh on me. On considering the first prospect, my body quakes, on the latter, my eyes shut and my throat seizes up.

About the time I've given up hope of being found, Honey's barking is back, and shimmers of light reflect off the cavern walls. Next, come echoes of Mr. John's anxious

voice calling my name. I let out a holler. Before long, my dog and my friend are standing in front of me. Being big and strong, Mr. John makes quick work of pulling me out. At one point, however, I'm resigned that my salvation will come at the price of leaving a patch of my hide on the coarse surface of the rocks.

Outside the cave we're greeted by a large search party, including Father. The good miller glares at Father and speaks sharply. "Now, Tom, Abraham here is my prisoner. You must promise not to whip him or even scold him. The trouble he's been through is lesson enough. I doubt he'll be going into that cave again."

Father tightens his hands into fists and says, "I'll raise my boy how I sees fit."

Mr. John puffs out his large chest. "I've told you before, me and my Ma would be grateful for you and the missus to give us young Abraham. We love him like a son and would take right good care of him. Now what I'm tellin' you is, if ever you raise a hand to him about this matter, I'll come and fetch him away and never give him back."

Father knows Mother would never forgive him if the Hodgens take me in for good. On top of that, he'd have no one to slough off chores on. Once home, he heeds Mr. John's warning, but his meanness comes out in other ways. He works me long hours each day at tilling the fields and whips me if I work too slowly. He says to me, "That nosy miller cain't blame me fer beatin' the laziness outta ya. It's fer yer own good."

In early autumn of that same year, an itinerant preacher, the Rev. Mr. Gentry, visits our settlement. His face glows to match the shine of his bald head as he inspects the outdoor church we've built under the shade of a large maple. "It's perfect for camp meeting," he says. "God led you to build the church in this spot for the special purpose of winning souls." Its pulpit is carved out of a stump, and the benches are whipsawed from felled trees.

Under the sway of Rev. Gentry's fire and brimstone sermons, Father makes another trip to the mourner's bench, repenting of his sinful ways. Afterwards, he gets called upon to pray aloud before the entire congregation. Our neighbors whisper among themselves they hope it

sticks this time. He proves their sentiments are anchored in fact when one night, after making a public prayer, he comes home and kicks Honey's bad leg.

The next morning I confess to Austin, "Don't know 'bout Father's religion."

"What makes you say that?" he asks.

I tell him about Father kicking my dog and say, "All Honey did was lay his nose on Father's knee, tryin' to be friendly. Can't believe anybody with even a little religion would kick a dog, 'specially kick its bad leg that's all twisted from a fall."

"Maybe your father thinks it's no harm to kick a dog. Could be he s'poses God don't care much for dogs."

I wrinkle my nose. "Why, he'd be a mighty funny God if he doesn't like a good dog."

If Father's behavior isn't enough to shake my faith in his religion, Rev. Gentry makes me doubly wary. Later that same morning, the parson knocks on our door and asks to borrow a hat to cover his head. He says his blew off in a stiff gust, landed in the creek, and got carried away. Mother offers him my coonskin hat which he promises to return.

In the afternoon when we gather as usual for the sermon, Rev. Gentry doesn't show.

Folks speculate he got a calling out of the blue to carry the gospel to a more needy flock.

I turn to Austin and say in a low voice, "Seems to me it's called stealing a perfectly good cap. No God who allows dogs to be kicked or a boy's hat to be stolen is of much use."

Austin whispers, "Those words would kill yer ma."

"She shan't hear them," I vow.

Review of Lincoln Raw—a biographical novel

Lincoln Raw is a deftly written biographical novel of extraordinary complexity that will leave the reader fully entertained and reflecting on it long after this outstanding book has been finished and set back upon the shelf. This is the stuff of which blockbuster movies are made! [Midwest Book Review]

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