

Charles Frazier

Varina

A Novel



SCEPTRE

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1

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THE BLUE BOOK

Saratoga Springs, 1906

IF HE IS THE BOY IN THE BLUE BOOK, WHERE TO START? HE can't expect to recognize her after four decades, and he certainly doesn't expect her to recognize him. The last time they saw each other he would have been no more than six.

Firm memory of childhood eludes him until about eight years old, and before that it's mostly whispers of sound and images flashing like photographs. A dead boy lying on the ground, a grand house, a tall woman with black hair and a soothing voice.

A year ago, walking down a street in Albany, he heard a dozen syllables of someone singing "Alouette" through an open second-story window. The song twitched a strong nerve of memory from the deep past—a ribbon of road stretching forward, a swath of starry sky visible between tops of pine trees, a thin paring of moon, a brown-eyed mother hugging him close and pointing out the patterns of constellations, telling their names and stories. Entrained with those hazy memories came a surging feeling something like love.

FIRST SUNDAY OF AUGUST, early afternoon, James Blake walks through the heavy front doors of The Retreat carrying a marbled journal and a book bound in dark blue nubby cloth, bristling with torn newspaper place-marks. He wears his best gray suit, a club-collar shirt bleached perfect white, a striped black-and-gray waistcoat, a coral silk tie knotted loose. Three steps inside the door he removes his hat—a new boater—and walks purposefully to the front desk like he belongs there. The desk clerk looks him over and then pauses long enough to make sure Blake becomes aware that his shade of skin has been noted. The clerk—maybe fifty, thinning hair combed straight back, teeth marks intact—finally says, May I help?

Blake hands him a small envelope. Says, Could you deliver this to a guest? Mrs. Davis.

The clerk pats the envelope down onto his desktop without taking his eyes off Blake. He turns his palms up and says, She's expecting you?

—I doubt it.

—You're not here to interview her for some publication?

—No.

The clerk rings for a bellboy and then says, You might be more comfortable waiting outside. Turn left and there are benches. We'll notify you if Mrs. Davis is available.

—Here in front of the fireplace will be better. So I'll see her when she arrives.

THE LOBBY OF THE RETREAT matches every detail of public rooms in tasteful modern resort hotels designed in the Arts & Crafts style—Limbert furniture, Voysey rugs, Roycroft lighting. Except, faint and far down one of the long corridors, James thinks he hears someone scream.

He shifts uncomfortably in the strict angles of an oak and

leather settle facing the massive stone hearth. Broad windows and French doors look out across a green and blue landscape—fields, woods, valleys, hills. A few people scattered around the great room read books and flap papers from Boston and New York and Philadelphia. In a corner, a tousled young blond woman sits bowed in concentration at the piano trying to play “Sunflower Slow Drag.” It keeps getting away from her until she gives up and plays it half-speed.

Over the big hearth, a sentiment cuts deep into the massive keystone, lettered like a Gothic forgery on a famous man’s grave marker. It reads WHAT LIES BEHIND US AND WHAT LIES BEFORE US ARE TINY MATTERS COMPARED TO WHAT LIES WITHIN US. ~ EMERSON.

James stands and traces each letter with his forefinger, as if writing the sentence for the first time. It works to establish balance—like perfectly equal pinches of sand in each cup of a set of scales—and then he draws a deep breath and blows it all away. He touches each junction of that grand *E* and tries to reckon what state of guilt and dread about time past and time future Emerson proposed to comfort.

James sits again and thumbs through his blue book until he comes to a chapter toward the end that he has read and reread and underscored in pencil to the point that every line appears profound. Margins congest with question marks and checks and exclamations. If he’s right and the boy described in the book is him, this is all he knows of his origin. No living relatives, recently a widower, no links to the past until six months ago when a title on a bookstore shelf drew him—*First Days Among the Contrabands*. He had reached for it thinking it would be a mystery.

AN ELDERLY WOMAN enters the great room from one of the corridors. She resembles later photographs of Queen Victoria—much taller, but with similar gravity and tiredness dragging from

behind. Same hairstyle. Her dress a sheen of eggplant. She walks by the piano player and palms the small of her back to correct her posture.

James doesn't recognize the woman, but he makes an assumption and stands.

At the chair beside the settle, V stops and says, Mister Blake? I don't recollect your name, but I'm curious.

—Yes, ma'am. Thank you for seeing me. I'll be brief. What I wanted to speak to you about concerns the war.

She had started to sit, but now remains standing.

—Please. I'm long since exhausted with that insane war and don't need to re-dream a nightmare.

V turns to walk away but then turns back, angry. She tells him how uninterested she is in the past, except people keep trying to clench its fist around her throat. Whatever old story he needs to tell, she's heard a thousand of them—all the tales of waste and loss. And heaps of guilt too, for failing to find a bloodless way to end ownership of people—choosing a bloodbath instead. Since then, South and North have been busy constructing new memories and new histories, fictions fighting to become facts.

—If you haven't noticed, she says, we're a furious nation, and war drums beat in our chest. Our leaders proclaim better than they negotiate. The only bright spot is, the right side won. My only advice is to be where you are now—don't look back. Otherwise, good luck and good day, sir.

—My apologies, Mrs. Davis. I saw in the Albany paper that you were here, and I wanted to see you and ask about this book and about the children. I don't recall all the names, but I remember Joe.

—What could you possibly know about Joe?

—I remember sitting with the others, trying to wake him up.

V pauses and then says, I don't know what you're after, but I've dealt with confidence artists for decades. Or else you're just recalling the funeral. Thousands attended.

—Not the funeral. I remember him lying on the pavement. And I remember him that night, upstairs. So still on the big bed with candles and flowers all around. He'd gotten smaller and very white, and his lips were a color I'd never seen. He looked like himself, but changed. It terrified me. I remember people coming and going late in the night. Every lamp and candle in the house lit and all the windows open and curtains blowing out.

V says, I'm lost.

SHE WORKS AT REMEMBRANCE, looks harder at Blake's broad forehead, brown skin, curling hair graying at the temples. She tries to cast back four decades to the war. When she arrived, who was there in that huddle of people on the cobbles beneath the balcony of the house stupidly called the Confederate White House?

She had been down by the river making an appearance at a celebration—a mass of people welcoming a boatload of men and women returned through prisoner exchange from Northern detention. A brass band played “Home, Sweet Home.” The kind of event where V's every move was watched side-eyed by those hoping for a gossip-worthy moment. She stood near her carriage and chatted with Mary Chesnut, who had been circulating through the crowd birdlike in her brief, bright attentions—snapping up bits of language, facial expressions, details of wardrobe, witty comments, stupid comments, moments of human grace and foolishness—every detail of observation to be entered into her journal at day's end.

A man, a stranger, walked up and stood close like trying to eavesdrop on their conversation. Then low and breathy, looking oddly off to the side, he said, Little Joe has gotten himself killed.

V turned to her driver, and trying not to scream said, Get me home now.

A fast rattling dash—the driver popping his whip above the horses, their shoes striking sparks off the cobbles—and she found

a crowd arranged in concentric arcs below the balcony at the high end of the house. Gawkers stood at the fringes, then a few neighbors and their servants, and then Ellen and the children ringed tight around Joe. He had recently turned five and had fallen twenty feet and lay completely broken on the cobblestones. Ellen bent over trying to hug the live children and to ease them away from Joe. But when she saw V, Ellen collapsed onto her knees and buried her face in her hands.

The children—Maggie and Jeffy and Billy and Jimmie—sat on the pavers saying Joe's name and trying to nudge him out of sleep. Joe lay on his side, and his limbs formed strange angles. A puddle of blood the size of a saucer thickened beneath his head. Maggie held Joe's hand and the three boys kept touching his shoulder. Joe and Jimmie were close to the same age and often shared clothes.

—Missus V, Ellen said. He was playing and fell between the railings. Must have.

With her face all scared and confused, Ellen looked so young.

V remembers trying to kneel beside Joe, how pregnant she was at the time, how heavy and awkward. She remembers looking at him and touching his face and feeling numb. And then slipping sideways from her knees onto her hip, a hard jolt against the cobbles. And then the new baby began flailing inside her.

V HOLDS HER RIGHT HAND OUT toward James Blake, pushes at him like gesturing *Stop*. Then she presses her left palm against the fingertips and bends the right hand back toward her wrist. She presses hard, but ninety degrees is her limit.

She says, Show me.

James Blake bends his hand until the fingernails almost fold against the top of his forearm. An inch gap.

—Lately, I can't go all the way back, he says.

—You're Jimmie Limber.

—I don't remember that name, but I believe the Jimmie in this book is me.

He holds out the bristling blue book.

V won't take it. She reaches two fingers and touches the inside of his wrist as if testing his pulse, his materiality.

—I don't need a book to know you, she says. I've believed for years that all my boys were long gone, crossed over. I've thought of it as my diminishing circle of boys pinching to a black point, like the period at the end of a sentence. But here you are.

—I hardly know anything about my life then, he says.

—Sit down and I'll tell you what I remember.

FUGITIVE

1865

THINGS FELL APART SLOWLY BEFORE THEY FELL APART fast. Late March—Friday night before Richmond burned—V fled the false White House and the capital city. That afternoon she and Ellen Barnes packed in a rush, knowing they might never be back. Billy and Jimmie went back and forth from V to Ellen, touching their arms or hips for reassurance. Ellen always kept her hair parted in the middle and oiled, pulled back tight against her scalp. But that day, long curling strands escaped, and she kept sweeping them back from her face.

—Don't fret, Jimmie Limber, Ellen said. Just a little jaunt south. Billy's been on one before, so ask him about it.

Ellen took an apple out of her apron pocket and held it in both hands to get the boys' attention. Then with hardly any effort or sense of motion, she snapped it perfectly in half and handed the pieces to the boys, and they went on their way laughing and

studying the apple halves as if the secret to Ellen's magic might reveal itself.

When the packing was done, Jeff took V aside and gave her a departure present. A purse pistol, slight and pretty, almost an art object suited for display in a museum.

—Do you know how to load and aim and fire? he said.

—I didn't grow up in Mississippi for nothing.

He said that if the country fell, she should take the children to Florida and find passage to Havana. Then he told V to keep the little pistol with her at all times, and if Federals tried to violate her, she should shoot herself. Or if she couldn't do that, at least fire it in their direction to make them kill her.

He gave her what money he could gather, and she had been building her own hoard of running money from selling furnishings and china and crystal. Her carriage horses had been seized for the army, and Jeff said he couldn't allow her to take food beyond a few pounds of flour and grits and dried beans. Wouldn't be fair. But he didn't at all believe Richmond or the nation faced doom. This alarm would be like all the others. Two weeks from now, she would be coming back. General Lee would find a way.

Except V knew it wasn't like the other alarms because he hadn't gifted her a suicide pistol before now.

A COUPLE OF WEEKS LATER, vagrants traveled southwest down springtime Carolina roads, red mud and pale leaves on the poplar trees only big as the tip of your little finger, a green haze at the tree line. They fled like a band of Gypsies—a ragged little caravan of saddle horses and wagons with hay and horse feed and a sort of kitchen wagon and another for baggage. Two leftover battlefield ambulances for those not a-saddle. The band comprised a white woman, a black woman, five children, and a dwindling supply of white men—which V called Noah's animals, because as

soon as they realized the war was truly lost, they began departing two by two.

Worse yet, the core of fugitives traveled under rumors of possible Federal warrants—including hanging charges, such as treason. If true, the price on their heads would be a mighty cash fortune in a time of destitution.

V had with her a scant bit of hard money and a bale or two of government bills. A single chicken, though, cost fistfuls of that nearly worthless paper. One-dollar bills—with her friend Clement Clay's graven image on the front—were useless except to wad by the dozens and light cookfires.

Wherever the fugitives traveled, rumor followed that their little caravan comprised the Treasure Train, the last hoard of gold and silver from the Rebel treasury, wagons heaped with millions in bullion instead of weary, scared children threatening to go croupy and feverish at every moment.

In delusion, bounty hunters surely rode hard behind, faces dark in the shadows of deep hat brims, daylight striking nothing but jawbones and chin grizzle, dirty necks, and once-white shirt collars banded with extrusions of their own amber grease. Below that, wool coats black as skilletts, muddy tall boots, and bay horses foaming yellow sweat.

And yet, all along the way, the woods-edge spooled by lined with redbud blooming pink and dogwood blooming white, bearing the holy cross of the Savior. The nail wounds hammered into his hands printed on every blossom, reproduced in their billions through the Southern woods and even blooming hopefully in the yards of homes recently burned down to middens of shiny black charcoal by the Northern army.

Their immediate goal? Escape to La Florida. Tierra Florida. Floridaland. A raw frontier with Spanish moss hanging ghostly and parasitic from granddaddy live oaks. Black mold streaked gray limestone Spanish forts from parapet to white sandy ground and

algae-green moat. Alligators, bears, lions, and purple snakes nine feet long roamed the swamps and jungles and scrublands. But only a scattering of people, and those reputed to be more unreasonably lawless and corrupt and predatory than anything you'd find even deep in Texas.

V penciled a thought on the endpaper of *Northanger Abbey*: *The frontier is no place for those who can't afford to run.*

A ROUGH STRETCH OF ROAD woke the children. The ambulance banged through rocks the size of pullets and potholes deep enough with red water to drown a shoat. The driver sawed at the reins, working the tired mules, trying to avoid the worst of it. But there was only so much he could do. All day the wagon went heading and pitching from mudhole to mudhole, and now the night gathered so dark you hardly saw the mules' haunches right in front of you.

Over the course of the journey, the children had become like weary sailors long out on the foam, able to sleep through all but the stormiest nights. But now, back in the bed of the ambulance, inside the cave of dirty beige canvas arched tight over bent oak-splint ribs, the children rose from their patchwork quilts all together and began fretting and whimpering. Winnie, though, just cried in place, being not even a year old. Every one of them suddenly needed easement.

V had been riding along for two hours, jostling dreamlike under a tiny taste of opium, feeling like the world had collapsed to rubble around her—an appropriate feeling, because it had. Not the best of times to have to budget medicine, though she had enough Dover's powder to last a month if she took it by the conservative directions on the label. But doing it that way, V felt little effect, not nearly enough to faze her anxiety, to loosen the tight knot her diaphragm and stomach had become even when

she slept. So in reality she had only a few days' supply left. Which would have been desperate but for the promise of seeing Mary Chesnut in Abbeville, South Carolina, soon. Maybe more a hope than a promise, but surely even in an apocalypse one wonderful fact must remain unchanged, that Mary flitted through the world with morphine aplenty and used it freely to combat whatever new hell life threw at her day by day. Influenza, nausea, deaths of loved ones, loneliness, headache, boredom. She claimed it also aided in the reading of novels.

And Mary would probably have something much better than Dover's, which was not even close to pharmaceutical quality. She called Dover's housewife morphine, because along with opium it contained fillers like ipecacuanha, which in doses too small to cause vomiting induces sweating, thought to be good for women of fiery temperament. And also potassium sulfate, a laxative. So, a little morphine, a good sweat, and a bowel movement—the cure for everything that ails you.

V WAITED, but after a time the children still hadn't settled. Fretting became weeping. Jeffy called her name. And when you're called you answer, one way or the other.

V chose yes. She climbed back to the bed and knelt and lit a little brass-and-glass candle lantern. She gathered the children to her, hugging each of them separately and then all together like an enormous stinky bouquet. She held baby Winnie in her lap and began teaching the older children a song—"Alouette"—making a game of it, finding a correspondence between the bucking and swaying of the ambulance and the tub-thumping, foot-stomping rhythm of the song, the accumulating repetitions. *Je te plumerai la tête.*

They played along happily for a while, in a language they didn't know, singing a song of cheerful butchery. All the details

of plucking the lovely skylark's feathers and pulling off its beak and legs and wings, its eyes and head. They all shuffled a little dance for a few moments of joy, shouting not words but sounds, their thin shoulders and angular arms and grubby hands expressing music in jagged movement.

And then they fell back happy and breathing hard onto the quilts. Soon they fell asleep, except for Jimmie Limber, who lay looking up at candle shadows on the arched canvas. He murmured the doubled three-beat chorus, dropping high to low—*Et la tête, et la tête, et les yeux, et les yeux*. Over and over.

V kissed him and said, Sleep, little man.

—Got us a long night? Jimmie Limber said.

—We need it to be, V said. If we're going to make it to Havana.

She kissed his forehead again and blew out the candle and climbed back over the wagon seat.

Delrey shifted the reins to one hand and lifted his hat and set it on his lap and scratched the crown of his head. He said, We really going all night?

—Camp at dawn off in the woods. Become nocturnal as possums, V said.



—Wait, James Blake says. Before you go on, I'm all confused about children. I'm not even imagining this right, much less remembering.

—Seven often seemed like a lot of children to me too, V says.

—But I just remember Joe. And a boy around my age and possibly an older girl.

—You're conflating Jeffy and Billy. You would have been half-way between them in age. And Maggie was enough older she would have largely ignored you little boys. But this will be easier on paper. Hand me your notebook and pencil.

James turns to a fresh page and watches as V draws dashes and lines and writes dates and names and place-names. She numbers the names and strikes lines through two of them and swoops a pair of brackets and hands back the open notebook.

—Attend, please, she says. And then she talks James through the list of names, explaining a family tree. Says, Samuel there, top of the chart, number one? Born in Washington?

—Yes. With a line through his name.

—Meaning that when your memory begins, Samuel had been gone ten years. You never knew him. And then Maggie? Number two, also born in Washington. Not struck through, so still alive when your memory begins and the only one alive now. Then Jeffy, born in Washington with no line through his name, so still alive when you came to us, though he passed away more than twenty-five years ago of yellow fever. And now skip down to number six, Billy—also born in Washington and with no line, though he died in Memphis a few years after the war. Diphtheria. Now go back to numbers four and five. Four is Joe, born in Washington, and you're there bracketed with him because you two were the same age. I have Richmond after your name with a question mark, because I assume that's where you were born but don't know for sure. And then finally, number seven, Winnie. Born in Richmond right after Joe died and a crying lap-baby when we ran south. She died nearly eight years ago.

V says, The point I'm making is that Joe's death is your memory's year zero—spring, 1864.

She reaches to his notebook and turns back the page corner and says, For future reference.

—Did one of the boys have black hair and a cannon? James asks.

—See, conflation. Billy was the only child with my dark hair, and Jeffy had a miniature cannon. The neighbors complained constantly that he was knocking chunks of plaster off their walls.

It shot iron balls the size of big marbles, and the black powder sent up clouds of smoke. It's a wonder he didn't kill somebody. Ellen was the only one who could wrangle the bunch of you, which is why I moved her up from the kitchen to the nursery. She could soothe you all to sleep at night and reason with you during the day to make you mind her. At most, if she was really mad, she would snatch you boys up by your collars onto your tiptoes to get your attention. I was never good at reasoning with children. I either gave hugs and kisses or impatient swats on the bottom.

James looks at his notebook and says, It's so much, seeing all these names together. So many children passed on. I can't imagine.

—Yes, I still sometimes hear those slow drumbeats, V says. Dirt clods striking small coffin lids muffled with straw. I grieved, of course. When Samuel died, I couldn't leave the house for two or three months. But he was my first and only child then. Later, deaths fell differently because living children need so much from you, and you can't indulge yourself and collapse into grief. Like with Joe—six weeks later Winnie arrived. Unless you're just worthless, you get up and put on the black dress and keep going.

V tells James how her children had died, scattered from New York to Washington to Richmond to Memphis, but had been dug up and dragged to Richmond to surround their father's monument. And of course Jeff was dug up from New Orleans and dragged there too. Even before he was dead yet, businessmen and governments from Georgia and Kentucky and Mississippi and Virginia tried to offer her deals for possession of the body when the time came. Bragging how they would make his obelisk taller and grander than Washington's. And that's not even factoring the money they offered her to seal the deal. But a hill in Hollywood Cemetery above the James River seemed the right choice, seasoned with the irony that she hated Richmond because it was where they met their apocalypse. And because Joe already waited by himself down the green hill.

Soon, she will be hauled there too, not that she cares one way or the other about graves. She imagines a little flat paving stone the dimensions of a shoe-box lid without even a name—just WIFE & MOTHER and a bracket of dates. Every sunny day, the shadow of his tall statue will cross over her like the gnomon of a sundial, like a blade.

—One thing I am sure of, though, V says to James. I'll never return to Richmond until it's feetfirst in a box.



Jimmie Limber came to the back of the wagon seat and reached to put a hand on V's arm. Not a word, just a touch—at which, she helped him climb over and sat him next to her and pulled him against her by his bony shoulder.

She said, Jimmie, do you need something?

—Nope. Can't sleep.

—Cold?

—Nope.

—Not scared, are you?

—I don't scare.

—Of course not, V said.

—Just want to watch the road.

Delrey said, I hope you can see it better than I can, Jimmie. We've run off into the pines three times already tonight. The mules can't tell woods and cornfields from road much better than I can.

—I see real good, Jimmie said.

—Well, V said.

—Yes, ma'am. Real well.

He watched down the road awhile and then said, Mighty dark to travel.

V said, We're deep in the world here, Jimmie.

He sat with her arm draped across his shoulders. If she tried to hug him too long he squirmed, but sometimes he rested his head against her, breathing deep but always awake and watching.

—I believe the road's about to bear left, he'd say. Long straight-away coming after a creek crossing. Might be a burned-out house after that. I can smell it.

He predicted little better than Delrey or the mules or V did, which is to say about like blind chance. But he tried hard.

Jimmie said, How far is it we're going?

V said, A hundred miles, and then a hundred miles more. Who knows how many times after that? Maybe a boat trip somewhere along the way. You boys will enjoy that.

—Keep going till we stop?

—Can you do that, Jimmie?

He thought about it a long time and then said, I'll try it.

V said, If you'll watch out for me, I'll watch out for you.

He stuck out his hand to shake on the deal. Little clammy palm.

V shook and then said, A kiss on the cheek too.

He turned his head and angled his cheek for a kiss.

She said, No, I meant you kiss me.

She turned her cheek, and he made a quick peck.

An hour before dawn started showing in the sky, Jimmie Limber faded away to sleep and V held him against her with both arms awhile for her own benefit and then lifted him back to the fragrant tick mattress and patchwork quilts with the others. Under the canvas, their bedding cast an odor of overripe fruit, though they'd had no fruit for weeks, unless you counted half-rotted winter squash.

V dissolved pinches of Dover's into a metal cup with a splash of red wine. She wanted to time it so the opium rose in her with the dawn. Both coming on in gradations of blue and gray like a bruise swelling above the pines.

LA FLORIDA. V sat on the wagon bench and looked down the road like it might appear around the next bend. Her mind kept circling back to when she was seventeen—two decades ago—wondering how she got from there to here. Thinking how all the lesser increments of time between then and now—years, months, days, hours, moments—drained constantly into the black sump where time resides after it's been used up, whether used well or squandered.

A part of her believed this one moment—Carolina woods, a wagonload of children, lights of heaven blazing on a clear spring night—was sufficient. An eternity in itself. A perfect instant if you erased guilt of the past and dread of the future. One key lay in not weighing the many impending threats and losses against grand past moments left behind, diminishing by the mile. Just breathe night air, listen to owls hoot, and be happy while it lasts. The dead are dead. Be happy for a wagonload of live children.

Glory aplenty through those past couple of decades, though. Several presidents—mostly dead now—thinking she was awfully pretty and smart and witty. That first stretch of time in Washington, she'd been eighteen, new wife of shiny new congressman Jeff, and thrilled to go to parties at the Polk White House and write her mother comic letters about how everyone dressed and how short and inconsequential Polk looked.

Another time, during her second era in Washington—so V was midtwenties and wife of the secretary of war—President Pierce walked alone from the real White House in a whirling snowstorm and knocked at the door and came in frosted top to bottom. He wore a heavy blue wool coat, military style with tall collars standing up to the tops of his ears. He lacked a hat, and his hair—usually a wavy voluminous mess—drooped slick and wet against the sides of his skull like the ears of a spaniel fresh from the water. He had been drinking as usual and stood in the

foyer taking his coat off, apologizing for the puddle of snowmelt around his boots.

His pretext for the visit had been to ask about her health. A rumor ran around town that she had fallen fatally bronchial. Which was totally untrue, and he knew it. But he was lonely and wanted to sit by a friendly fire for an hour and have a few more drinks and talk to people who liked him and had read all the same books he had read plus plenty more.

That president and his wife—just before making the trip from New Hampshire to Washington for the inaugural ceremony—had been broken irreparably by witnessing their young boy, their last living child, run down beneath the engine of a train. The bloody horror of that violent meeting between massive mechanical steam-powered force and a small biologic body—a thin bag of skin over meat and organs and nerves and brittle bones—required no embellishment. They rushed to the boy, who lay like he was asleep, and then they took his cap off, and the top of his head was unspeakable. That instant left its image of loss stamped on their faces and on their souls forever, and not even the highest office in the land could erase or even partially reimburse them.

As Pierce waded haltingly into the swamp of absolute politics that slavery created, his wife, Jane, chose to stay upstairs in the White House, trying to learn the skill of invisibility. People—meaning the press up and down the country and all those newspaper readers who believe everything they see in print—entertained themselves spreading gossip that she was insane, a crazy woman holed up in the attic. Famous women wild in their minds—even very quietly and privately—sell newspapers.

And of course the gossip was completely untrue in regard to Jane's insanity. During a state dinner or a party or a dance—whatever they called it that night—V ventured upstairs sleuthing. And what she found was a smart, sad woman, deeply sane, tiny inside her big dress, face the color of a bleached bedsheet except

around the eyes and cheekbones where it yellowed to old ivory. V discovered that Jane stayed upstairs because she had more serious and encompassing thoughts and emotions than could be contained in a White House gathering. She sat in a parlor surrounded by books, reading fairly desperately for pertinent helpful passages that might make sense of her broken life. She coughed sometimes into a handkerchief and, not looking at it, carefully folded the cloth without revealing what V later knew would have been a bright smear of lung blood. They talked about books, of course. V recommended a couple of her favorite Greeks, and Jane asked for justification, the basis of her recommendation. V said that in her opinion, when the old Greek writers committed to cutting, they drove bone-deep with the first stroke. She suggested translations other than the current popular ones. Subtle matters like how they handled onomatopoeia, which the Greeks spewed all over the page.

Thereafter when V called at the White House, Jane never sent down a servant with a polite excuse. Sometimes they sat by the fire and had tea and talked between long intervals of silence. V learned that if she needed to fill the air with the sound of her own voice, she would never know what Jane thought about anything. Ask a question and then wait a quarter of a minute for an answer, an interval filled with thought. When Jane asked difficult questions in regard to Sophocles, V tried to answer with substance, having the advantage of reading the texts in their original language with help from a lexicon, though at the time she lacked sufficient experience of loss to understand them fully.

On days when Jane looked especially drained, eyes puffy, V's attempts to rouse her failed—just the chatter a young woman imagines to be engaging for a woman whose children had all died. On those visits, V looked Jane in the eyes and kissed her on both cheeks and said, See you soon.

Every visit—last thing, V's hand on the doorknob—Jane

always said, Thank you, dear girl, for remembering me. Much later, after the deaths of her own children, V believed she went just as far away from life as Jane, except that all of her didn't stay gone forever.

Then in four years came the inevitable next election. The wonderful drunk president didn't exactly lose the vote, because he was not even renominated by his own party. So, shortly, a new president was elected. And the thing about becoming president is that you don't just get your predecessor's job, you also get his house. V went to the White House to see if she could help pack or do anything whatsoever helpful. Jane kissed her and held her hand as they walked around, trying to make moving decisions. Jane looked at the sitting room upstairs and said, It is all beyond my knowledge.

The next president entered office in deep mourning too. In his case every day marked the loss of . . . what? A roommate? An old friend? The friend's name was King. Back when he and Buchanan were both members of the House they had lived together ten years in Brown's Hotel as roommates. Under unusual circumstances King became vice president to Pierce for a few weeks and swore his oath of office in Havana and then died almost immediately afterward.

Back in the Brown's Hotel days—before King was vice president and long before Buchanan was president—Andrew Jackson—a brutal piece of work even if you were trying to be complimentary—liked to call the pair Miss Nancy and Aunt Fancy. Every piece of correspondence between Buchanan and King was burned after King's death.

Buchanan never married. A pretty and very shrewd and sharp-eyed niece—who didn't particularly approve of V—served as hostess, arranging state dinners and gracefully whispering in her uncle's ear the names of people in the receiving line he might have misremembered. She was expert at diverting the attention of

unwelcome or tiring guests, as if she were dealing with a parade of fussy toddlers. Some newspaper writer, not knowing what to call her, since she wasn't the president's wife, made up the term First Lady, and it stuck.

Old Buchanan and V eventually became true friends without reference to her husband—then a senator. Or to her age—still shy of thirty. They were the kind of friends who gave each other bedroom slippers for Christmas. The sharper her tongue, the more he delighted in it. He was a lovely, lonely old bachelor, and V was so often at her best with older men. When he lay dying he sent for her, and she sat on the edge of his bed to say good-bye. His hair sprung greasy from his temples, white peaks and gray valleys. He held her hand and patted its smooth back with his old crepey palm and tried to console her.

—I'll miss you so much, he said.

—Then don't go, V said.

—Not my choice. Just don't forget me.

She snorted with laughter and said, Idiotic to imagine that's possible.

He gripped her hand, pressed her fingers into a fist and pulled it to his pleated lips and kissed the smooth dusky skin of her handback and then kissed the row of knuckles and the pale fingernails curled against the palm, and then he opened her hand flat and kissed the cup of her palm three times, like a spell in a fairy story.

—My dear, he said.

—You old fool, she said.

V JOSTLED ALONG on the wagon bench, wondering what to make of that past when her only future had become a muddy ribbon of road unspooling ahead with agonizing slowness and little ones confused and scared. All of them fugitives. Her husband—

wherever he was—the chief fugitive, still pretending they weren't defeated, crushed, broken. The letters from him that reached her before the railroads quit working were sweet and deluded, as if everything wasn't lost and gone forever.

She opened *Northanger Abbey* again and jotted: *Head full of sorrows, heart full of dreams. How to maintain the latter as life progresses? How not to let the first cancel the second?*

A mile farther down the road she thought, You can mire yourself in the past, but you can't change a damn thing in that lost world. Nothing to do but sit on the wagon bench beside Delrey and stare forward into the distance. Or go lie stunned, dozing under piles of quilts in the back of the ambulance with the children, who shape themselves and the world around them anew moment by moment and always need baths and smell musty and sweet and alive.



James holds the blue book out toward her, spine forward, gold letters on blue cloth. *First Days Among the Contrabands*.

He says, This book, it's the reason I'm here. Miss Botume, the author, went from Boston down to the Sea Islands off South Carolina in the middle of the war—occupied territory—to teach freed slaves. A brave act. She was young, full of ideas about making the world better. She would have been in danger if Confederates had retaken the islands. For legal reasons, the Federal government called all those people who'd been freed from slavery contraband, seized property, spoils of war. The book tells her experiences there, teaching those people reading and arithmetic and all sorts of other things previously kept secret from most of them. How to look at a clock and tell time, how to look at a coin and judge its value. She took care of me for a while. I wonder if I might read you a passage—see if it squares with your memory.

He opens the book to one of his markers and holds it for V to read the chapter title. *Jimmie*. Then, fast and urgent, he reads aloud: *An officer on board brought with him this small colored boy, sent by Mrs. Davis to General Saxton. She also sent a note by the boy, written with pencil on the blank leaf of a book. I quote from memory. She said:—"I send this boy to you, General Saxton, and beg you to take good care of him." His mother was a free colored woman in Richmond. She died when he was an infant, leaving him to the care of a friend, who was cruel and neglectful of him. One day Mrs. Davis and her children went to the house and found this woman beating the little fellow, who was then only two years old. So she took him home with her, intending to find a good place for him. But he was so bright and playful, her own children were unwilling to give him up. Then she decided to keep him until he was old enough to learn a trade. "That was five years ago, and he has shared our fortunes and misfortunes until the present time. But we can do nothing more for him. I send him to you, General Saxton, as you were a friend of our earlier and better times. You will find him affectionate and tractable. I beg you to be kind to him." This was the gist of her note.*

James looks up and waits.

V reaches her hand. Says, Might I look directly at the page?

She studies it and then says, *Gist*. It's an old French word. Means, to lie.

V runs her finger across several lines of text and then says, Your Miss Botume's fabricating my statements and using quotation marks to cover her tracks. Slapping memory and supposition together decades after the fact. Inventing her own history, which we all do. But to be truthful, I don't know exactly what I might have written in that moment. I was desperate. They were going to take you away. But I do know she has dates and times and ages all wrong. If I'd had you with me for five years, that would go back to when I lived in Washington. Also, I didn't know your mother. I was going down the street and saw you being beaten and took

you with me. And as for the future, it felt too uncertain to bother thinking about planning a trade for you or anyone else.

All V finds indisputable is the last bit of the passage: *Jefferson Davis was captured at Irwinville, Georgia, May 10, 1865. He had with him his family, his Postmaster General Reagan, his Private Secretary Harrison.*

With angry resentment V points out Miss Botume's omission of the bare fact that long before Jefferson and his worn-down gang of hard-shell Rebels caught up with them, V and the children—including Jimmie—had made it almost to the Georgia-Florida line.

—It was a long and dangerous journey, she says, and we survived day by day, and I'm proud of that. Jeff arrived just in time—a few hours—to get everybody captured by the Federals. I will always maintain that if he had left us on our own, we could have made it to Havana—mainly because I wanted to escape and he didn't.

V raises a forefinger to signal a pause and then looks toward a bank of tall windows and studies the view of valleys and ridges. James sits within himself and waits. He mostly looks at the cold fireplace and the Emerson. Her face is pale, and she begins taking deep, deliberate breaths.

When she resumes talking she finds a different voice, windless and quiet and gentle. She starts at the beginning of what she knows. How midway in the war, she found him on the streets of Richmond, a skinny, tiny boy taking a hard beating from a big drunk woman swinging a stick of kindling. The woman putting her shoulder into it, practically knocking him down with every blow. But he kept trying to stand up and bear it. V thought the woman was his mother, but when V stepped out of the carriage and went to stop her, the woman said he was a stray, hanging around too long begging food she didn't have to spare. He was filthy, and V lifted him by the armpits into the carriage and took him home. The only name he would

say was Jimmie. The boys recognized him from the Hill Cats Gang but didn't know his full name, or wouldn't say it. Down his back he had cuts and bruises, some fresh, some scabbed, some scarred. He was double-jointed, and when he was nervous and uncertain he folded one hand backward and then the other. So Maggie started calling him Jimmie Limber, and soon the other children and V and Ellen did too.

—But on Sundays, V says, when you dressed up for church, you wanted to be called James Brooks. Maybe that was your real name or maybe you made it up. At the end of the war, when they parted you from us, that's the name I wrote when I begged General Saxton to take care of you.

—I always wondered whether my name is real or if I made it up. I guess that question will never be answered. But my real question is simple. Why did you pick me up? James asks.

—I don't know. I just did it. You were so small.

—It must have been more complicated than that.

—Maybe so, but I can't explain it.

—YOU MENTIONED the Hill Cats Gang? James says.

—Little boys roaming streets and alleys and backyards of downtown Richmond. Women in the big houses criticized me for letting my children run wild, but it was good for you. And those women from the old Virginia families had little else to do but gossip and judge. The Hill Cats were enemies of the Butcher Cats from down toward Shockoe Bottom. Sometimes the older boys actually fought each other, but you little ones just threw pebbles and crab apples and yelled high-pitched threats. Police picked up a couple of Hill Cats once and hauled them into the Mayor's Court charged with throwing rocks at the Spotswood Hotel, but they argued innocence, since it was pieces of coal they threw, not rocks—and they won their case. Things got bad enough after a

battle the papers said involved as many as a hundred boys—which probably meant thirty—that Jeff walked down the hill one day to make peace between the gangs. He argued to the Butcher Cats that both gangs were neighbors, separated by only a few blocks, and that they had much in common and should get to know each other, should play together whether it was down in the Bottom or up on the Hill. He explained that it was in everyone's best interests to stop fighting and like each other. When he was done talking, the leader of the Butcher Cats—probably a boy of ten—told Jeff what a fine gentleman he was, but said that it was impossible that they would ever like the Hill Cats. And equally impossible they would ever stop fighting.

When Jeff came puffing back up the hill and told V of his failure, she said it felt like 1860 all over again.

—BUT COULD WE GO BACK to the simplest parts of Miss Botume's memoir? James asks. Was I bright and playful, affectionate and tractable?

—Tractable? My God, no. You were spirited and independent. And of course careful and wary when you were uncertain. You had to have been to survive living stray during the shortages of the war. When you felt safe you were certainly affectionate, but you didn't give it away. It had to be earned. And that's what first made me love you. But in writing to my old friend General Saxton begging him to take care of you, I wasn't about to get into nuances. After all, he and my husband were on different sides. And as for whether you were bright, look at yourself now. My question is, what have you done with your brightness over the decades?

—I've been a teacher, James says. I've taught hundreds of children and adults reading and writing and arithmetic. Back when I started, a lot of my students were former slaves. It seemed

like so many of them learned written language and understood the fundamental relationships of numbers almost overnight. They inhaled it like they'd been drowning and suddenly lifted their heads into the air. All they wanted was more.

—When you began classes with our tutor, you learned to read in a month, maybe less. You raced along, impatient to get to the next word, to the next line of text. Forward was your direction. So teaching must be a satisfying profession for you.

—It is. But the difference between a little boy learning to read in the president's mansion and a woman of fifty who'd been denied it by law for much of her lifetime is large.

—Yes, you're right. And teaching is truly a noble profession. Little money in it, though. I say that noticing your expensive footwear in particular.

Blake tips his right foot at an angle to get a profile view as if he hasn't noticed what handsome gusseted chisel-toe boots he wears. They shine like a mirror reflecting the night sky.

He says, I get a discount. My wife's family owns clothes stores, a good business. In New York they've just moved from San Juan Hill to Harlem, and in Philadelphia they've been on South Street for twenty years.

—I'd like to meet her.

—Julie died almost two years ago. Consumption. But she was lucky, I guess. That translucent stage some people pass through lasted a long time for her, and when it faded she finished quickly without the worst of the hemorrhaging. Being close with her family has helped me through it, and maybe I've helped them some. They were generous before, and they're still generous now and keep telling me I'm part of the family forever. They want me to join the business.

—I'm very sorry for your loss, V says.

She pauses and says, Maybe you should listen to them.

—Teaching is what I do best, not manage a store or keep books or write advertising copy. I'm grateful to them, but I think I'm going to keep doing my job.

—Do you have children?

—No, ma'am.

—So you're totally free to move forward in life unencumbered, without needing to compound with your pride for the material interests of your family.

—I don't follow.

—I don't either. Never have, no matter how I parse the diction and grammar—whether *compound* is noun or verb—I'm still puzzled. After the war, Jeff wrote it in a letter, *I have compounded with my pride for the material interest of my family, and am ready to go on to the end as may best promote their happiness*. He's of course trying to blame me and the children for his fall. Guilt and pride nearly burnt our marriage down to the foundation.

V tells James that Jeff's letter arrived at her dingy apartment in London during a long separation after the war, much of the time with the entire width of the Atlantic between them. Those oddly constructed words and clauses and phrases were how he informed V he had taken a job beneath him in order to support his family. His great sacrifice was to lower himself and become president of an insurance company after being president of a country—or a failed rebellion or whatever label would be correct. The company covered the Southeast, Baltimore to Houston. Many of his former generals—also broke—tried to make money writing memoirs, struggled to make themselves sit alone at a desk every day and conjure their version of history constructed from the weightless tools of words and uncertain memory. And with a very uncertain payday at the end of the job. So they were eager to earn a steady salary in a more direct and concrete way as insurance salesmen and regional managers and that sort of thing. Go back to giving orders. V believes that General Hood was one of Jeff's insurance sales-

men. Hood lost the use of an arm at Gettysburg, and afterward it just drooped there at his side. And then a leg got taken off at Chickamauga, four inches below the hip. The doctor who did the sawing—as they hauled Hood away—put the leg alongside him in the ambulance, assuming he would die and would want it in the casket. But Hood didn't die. He came to Richmond and healed. He was barely over thirty, a tall, slim martyr with a long sad face made longer by his tangled beard. Mary Chesnut always said he looked like Don Quixote or a crazed Crusader fighting for crown and cross. He was shy with women, but battle lit him up wild as a Viking. Young Richmond ladies found him irresistible. But ever since the early days of the war, he had been under the spell of Mary Chesnut's good friend Buck Preston, who was beautiful and a genius at inflicting love. Hood gave a blockade-runner leaving for Europe a brief shopping list for Paris. Two cork legs, best quality. One diamond ring. When he presented the ring to Buck Preston, she declined his proposal. People accused her of being so shallow that she wouldn't marry him because he had one leg. Buck fired back that she wouldn't marry Hood if he had six legs. After the war he found a woman other than Buck to marry, and in ten years they had eleven children, quite a few of which were twins. Then the yellow fever that killed half of New Orleans killed Hood and his wife the same day, leaving those orphans behind.

—All that happened? James says. None of it? Some of it?

—All. But I got distracted from what I wanted to say to Jeff about compounding with his pride. I wrote back and told him that bad choices lead to bad consequences, like discussing misbehavior with a child. But he never accepted being wrong and never apologized for taking down our family. Or eleven states full of families. He and his older brother Joseph were alike in that. A shared trait. Never apologize for anything. Plow ahead always believing you're in the right.

—Go back, James says. You lived in London?