

Part One

*Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud;
Clouds and eclipses strain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker lives in the sweetest bud.
All men make faults."*

Sonnet 35

Our story begins...

Whether I die as a hero, or scoundrel—or if my life ends with a small depression in the soil to simply mark the final repository of my bones—will greatly depend on whether we Americans unite and go beyond the overthrowing of one king's tyranny to the establishment of a New World government that recognizes all men walk this Earth on the same level plane between the violent awakening of birth to the forever sleep of death.

I was born into slavery during the winter of 1723 at the Brinley farm in Framingham, Massachusetts; the exact date is uncertain. To make record keeping easier, all farm animals in Massachusetts Bay Colony are assigned the birthday of January first.

I have two names: Crispus Attucks, my birth name, and Michael Johnson, a name I must use while signing ship logs to avoid recapture. For forty-and-five-years, I have been roaming these colonies, the Atlantic and Pacific Islands, the Caribbean, the ripe shores of Western Africa and the European Mainland.

My earliest remembrance, my primal thought, is of the gray weather-beaten barn where my mother, Nana, and father, were penned—locked

away at nights so they could not steal us away from our slavery. They were not born with chains as appendages and did not understand or accept the heavy hand of white authority. When struck, they struck back. When they were dragged off to the pillory—hands bound by coarse jute rope or forged rusted iron—they spat back. You can only use what you have.

Nathaniel Francis Brinley, our owner, could find no remedy to bend their spines his way.

This cured oak wood barn had no windows to allow the morning sunlight or the harvest moonlight of September. I was told that the barn was a clean white once, but the thought of a new coat of white wash for a structure that housed pigs and rebellious slaves was too extravagant for Francis Brinley. The floor of the barn was solid cobblestone sitting atop thick red oak planks set with pitch and mortar, to prevent barnyard animals from burrowing to freedom.

I often wonder why that gray barn is my first earthly recollection, while my nursemaid's face is little more than a hazy blur. The only other memories of my childhood were those events that made me stronger.

Mattie Sconce, a cook and the one assigned to breastfeed me, took me, on orders from Brinley, to the front porch each morning, displaying me so I could be seen by my parents. I was used as ransom to make my creators tend the fields and build stone walls around the expanding Brinley farm.

Mattie Sconce would nurse me only when it was time to fetch water—a chore she detested. All of Mattie's nine children were runts and thus; given away as Christmas presents or, when the Atlantic coastal routes were impassable, sold off to slave traders after they were weaned. It was a rare day when Mattie forgot to remind me that I wasn't related to her.

I felt awkward around her, as if my care was another degrading exertion in her endless list of duties. And though her milk nourished me and made me strong, I never felt her warmth or any need to confide in her.

I remember the first time I saw a fire in the kitchen hearth—an open gloss brick fireplace with a ten gallon three-legged cauldron set atop a black iron-grated box that housed the orange coals. The yellow glow of the jumping fire fascinated me. Mattie beckoned me to the flame, curling her long boney fingers like the manipulating tentacle legs of a hairy spider. I came closer—the heat warmed me. Mattie smiled, showing her large pointy

teeth as she held her arms out to me—this small affection was new to me—I had to go forward.

“You like the fire, boy?”

I was too fixated on the glow to answer her, but felt better warmth when she gathered me into her arms. She eased me closer to the starter fire made from raw logs that would slowly burn into coals.

“You want to feel them licking yellow tongues don’t you boy?”

The heat became unbearable. As I squirmed away and jumped from her arms my head hit a row of single-handled iron skillet that made an unearthly chime.

Mattie grabbed me again and walked closer to the blaze, “Look at the fire, boy, and get use to the fire. Someday, it will be your home with Lucifer.”

I watched as my hands disappeared into the flames and felt the solid side of an orange coal ember. Mattie stopped burning me after the fire had grown too hot for her hands.

“That will teach you to fear fire and do what I say.”

At the age of four, she took me to the well to fetch water. I can’t remember her lesson that day but after that instruction, I was lifting and retrieving two wooden well buckets that were twice as tall as me.

When firewood was low, I remember filling the four-cord woodshed. I can’t remember the first year I started chopping wood or if the word “year” was then part of my vocabulary. I remember falling backward many times when I lifted the ax over my head. The weight of the maul was just too heavy—Mattie was kind enough to advise me choke up on the handle and take smaller swings.

I was the only male who worked in the kitchen, not knowing another man or what a man was supposed to be except to obey everyone. I became adept at hiding behind chairs, bushes and scrub pines to avoid being seen. I would walk into a room on my toes knowing where every solid support beam lay beneath the wide floorboards always scared that I didn’t belong and would soon be discovered.

I would hide in bushes so I could look at the barn from the farmhouse porch, not more than a few hundred paces to my parent’s warm bed, but I

lived away from them seeing them only in the mornings—black silhouettes against the verdure of hilly plains too far away to hear or touch. I grew up away from them in the fine white farmhouse, distant from the fields they worked—but so near to books!

When I was six years old, I wandered into the barn on a windy day behind the cover of a random grove of scrub pines. All the hands were in the fields, burning the ash remnants of the last crop scraps back into the soil.

The sides of the large oak barn were sun-cured hard as granite and sealed with pitch. I could hear the far away slave shacks creak and buckle while the old oak barn made no aging noises—save the earthward fluttering of old white wash chips—a sound like small icicles gliding to an ice covered drift from a low eave. One of the double doors was wide open, but stood anchored in the hardened mud, mute to the gusting winds.

I crept up to the entrance, bent over; frantically looking in both directions to make sure no one would see me. The acrid smells of pig urine and old straw grew stronger as I approached, torturing my nostrils. Razor sharp scythes, hoes and pointy pitchforks hung on the inside walls—I was so young, I convinced myself that these tools were used on my parents instead of the fields. Slow black flies lit on my face more than my hands could repel, covering my eyes. I turned to run, but fell forward face-first into cold-hardened pig flop.

My legs became entangled in heavy chains hidden beneath a downy layer of straw. This ferrous web, my first confining in irons, seemed to surround and hold my ankles while my hands were pressed hard against my face—wiping away the swarming flies so I could see. The chains intermingled with the straw. It seemed the more I struggled, the more I was trapped.

I heard a noise—the shuffling of heavy feet on the hard dirt path outside that rattled the ground. I froze still, breathing slowly so I wouldn't be heard. Another set of footsteps—soft regular ones—joined the other man.

“Shays, what are the conditions in the field?” I recognized the strained, low voice of Francis Brinley. His natural voice was high, almost a young girl's tone, when he was talking to family members. Whenever he spoke to a slave or an overseer, he summoned a lower timbre that seemed to demand respect and loyalty.

“Not good Mr. Brinley, Attucks is acting up again. He convinced some

of the field hands to slow down their labors.”

Two more sets of feet joined them, making eight. I looked over the small burrow of straw that my body constructed when I fell, but could see only their legs. I craned my neck, leaving the rest of my body still careful not to rattle the chains and give away my position. If I moved, the eight legs would come after me.

“What is the problem today?”

“He claims we don’t give the hands enough water. They get two water breaks a day. He seems to think they should be able to get fresh water any time they please.”

“What did you do with him?”

“Like we always do, we chained him to a tree.”

Fran Brinley spat on the hard ground. “That won’t be sufficient. I have had my fill of his proud ways. Let him build the stone walls around the farm for the next three days. He goes on the auction block Friday. I have held too much hope for him as a breeder, and I’ve been given no new hands since Crispus. Maybe we can find another stud for Nana.”

Tom O’Rourke, once Francis Brinley’s indentured servant but now a tenant farmer that acted as an overseer spoke up, “Do you think it wise to sell him? He is the best farmer and the only hand strong enough to build stone walls.”

“My mind is made up. Three days of stone work should put him in a keen shape that will fetch a good price at market. He is more bother than help. One should always sell recaptured slaves. They are too proud to work. Why is it so easy to break a horse, yet so difficult to harness this slave?”

The eight legs abruptly scurried away from the barn. Shaking from fright and relief, I loosened the tangled metal web carefully, so as not to make a sound—hastening their return. I stood up, brushing the straw and manure from my overalls while shooing away the constant flies.

Hunched over, I scabbled on all fours back to the farmhouse kitchen, hiding in the pantry near the stove so my lungs could fill up with the smells of hot Johnnie cakes and steaming rue tea.

Mattie Sconce found me hiding behind a barrel of corn flour. “There

you are! I had to fill the water three times today!” She backed up, shook her head and kicked me in the stomach, grinding the tip of her hard shoe into my ribs. “What do you mean hiding out on your chores? The cistern is near empty! You go fill it!”

I tried to answer back, but her kick was fresh in my mind. I had crouched in the same position for some time and it took my body a few moments to loosen up so I could move. My slow response to her command earned me two more swift kicks that landed hard jarring two metal tins from the shelf.

“Clean up this tea first.”

I kneeled, trying to gather the tea into the tins as she looked over my shoulder. I dropped one of the tins before I could reach the cupboard. She kicked me twice again on both calves.

I limped to the well, carrying the empty house cisterns. I looked at the barn, hoping to catch a glimpse of my father, unable to run to him. I was too young then, and very much a broken slave, and not really sure of what to make of the barnyard conversation I had overheard.

I lowered the weighted wooden bucket into the well shaft, listening to the creaking rusty pulley echo against the rounded sides, then pulled hard on the weathered rope with one arm at a time until the bucket rested on the side of the shale block well. The cisterns took two buckets to fill. I lowered the bucket again wanting to run to the barn and release my parents, but I was not able to trade that want into action, as if my feet were tethered to the farmhouse grounds in perpetual servitude by some invisible lead.

I lined up the cisterns and placed the cross bar onto the nape of my neck by way of my bent back. Checking my balance, but staggering under the cisterns' wobbly weight quickly to the kitchen, at the very back of the farmhouse, I returned.

Mattie Sconce was at the porch sitting on an empty crate peeling sweet potatoes with a foot-long iron knife that had a lacquered oak block for a haft. She didn't look up from her chore; her ears pricked up, recognizing my choppy walk, “When you through with that, you come see me. You hear? I have other chores for you.”

I placed the cistern on the counter and returned to the porch. Mattie glued her eyes to the sweet potato, carefully digging out the ruts and stripping the brown skin off the fruit, ignoring me. “The wood in the shed

is low—seems like you got some chopping to do before you bed down. Where were you this afternoon?”

I remained quiet; hoping the question would be answered by my silence. She raised her foot without looking up.

“I went to the barn.”

“Trying to get a look at your daddy? You trying to see if he’s that all-powerful Moses the others talk about? Well I’m telling you he’s no Moses, just some low field hand who don’t know how to act, Calls himself a leader like he’s royalty. You better hope you’ll never see him.”

“Master Brinley said my daddy’s going on a block this Friday. What does that mean?”

Mattie laughed hard, dropping the potato. “It means you are never going to see him again. It means they taken him a long way from here, many miles by land or hundreds of miles by boat.”

My eyes welled up with water, but I promised myself that I would not cry (for my crying delighted Mattie), but some of the tears overran my eyelids. I wiped away the water, trying to hide the weakness.

“What you got to cry about? You never had no nine children sold away from you— six still feeding. You think I ever saw my mamma or daddy? My children weren’t prize slaves like you. You looking for comfort, you ain’t finding it here. I got my own to worry about and having to feed you was just about it.”

My father was never sold. On Saturday, Mattie told me he received twenty lashes and was sent back to the barn. In one month’s time, his silhouette once again blackened the green and brown hills of the Brinley Farm in Framingham, Massachusetts Bay Colony.

When I was seven years old, I met my birth mother, Nana Attucks, a full-blooded Natick Indian whose family fought during King Philip’s War. She deliberately drove a horse cart over her right foot, making her lame and useless for fieldwork. Her value as a field hand plummeted. She was assigned to the kitchen.

Mattie Sconce introduced me to her, happily smiling at the discharge of one of her duties. Nana limped up to me, her head bobbing in a motion like a cart with an oblong wheel. Her right foot was not sturdy and couldn’t take more than mere moments of pressure.

Nana was larger than the kitchen women were I often wondered why she was a slave. Her skin was lighter than all of the slaves I had seen, the color of harvest parsnips, and maybe only one shade darker than Francis Brinley.

She was different than the house servants. Her upper body was broad and firm the result of hard field work, hours of dragging a wooden hoe through gravel rich dirt back and forth in an endless cycle so our owner could eat well and his boys look their best in new woolen suits on Easter Sunday. Nana had the steely gaze of a master. Her eyes were quick to dart—alive—wide active lobes, hardly the meek look-away eyes of chattel.

I looked at my mother, not knowing what to do. I copied the customs of the Brinleys and put out my hand. “I am Crispus Attucks.”

“You are my son, the grandson of John Attucks.” She knelt down and buried her face into my soft belly skin. At once, I felt some familiar attraction, a warm malleable comfort that came back to me, not sure I had felt this before. At seven years old, in my mother’s arms, I felt an instant grace of worth and home.

I remember her walking me while I hugged her belly, half-smiling, and her head bent backward to balance the load and take the weight off her game foot. I felt something greater than love, almost a new weld, a severed connection reunited.

My mother encouraged me to learn how to read the words of our master. She distracted the tutor long enough for me to hide behind a wood stack, a place that afforded me a good sight of the lessons.

Mary Harper, a Boston widow with three children, served the Brinleys as a tutor and governess. She was a devout Quaker, not believing in slavery. Mary often made eye contact with me when I was hiding behind the logs, but ignored my outlawed presence.

Nathaniel Brinley, the youngest son whose mother died shortly after his birth, was an ill-mannered lad who often took advantage of Miss Harper by reminding her that she worked for his father, and he could have her and her children sent back to Boston at any time. Nathaniel, or Nat as he was called, was a sly, cunning child, mastering numbers and words easily. Nat seemed to know from birth that I was his property. He ordered me about even though I was two years his senior.

Robert Brinley, the eldest son, was born with an addled mind that developed too slowly; that was the reason he was not baptized with the Father's namesake, he lived only in the present. He could not remember the most remarkable event in the morning or plan anything beyond a few minutes. He took the brunt of Nat's mean-spirited jokes, when Mary and I weren't nearby to defend him.

Despite his low intelligence, Robert was his father's favorite. He was an unassuming boy whose sincere grin never left his fat round happy face. Francis Brinley made more allowances for Robert's behavior. When Nat and Robert misbehaved, Nat got the lion's share of the punishment, while Robert received a pat on the head and a forgiving paternal nod.

Nat loathed this treatment, though he always instigated the trouble. Robert was too simple to understand or perpetuate evil. After Nat received his just punishment, a few soft strokes of a willow switch, he sought out and soundly beat his defenseless brother, often drawing blood while safely away from his father's eyes. I was larger than the two boys and broke up the fights, never reporting them to Francis Brinley, for if I did, I would be blamed and punished.

Nat bossed me around when we were in the company of adults. I was a half-foot taller than Nat but meekly obeyed him with a bowed head, knowing that my meals could be suspended.

Though he was happily dull, Robert treated me with respect and fond kindness. He was always trying his best to please people—any people that were near him. Robert's only concern was friendship. The women who worked in the kitchen loved him because he was helpful and his slow mind could not fathom the concept of the value associated in human ownership.

Robert could not master numbers or words but was an excellent rifleman and horseman. In fact, he could perform the easiest tasks far better than anyone on the farm, but his mind could not absorb the complex ideas that went into everyday thought. His rifle aim was mere muscle memory, a reflex that could be used, forgotten and easily recalled. His mastery over horses was due to fearlessness brought on by his severe ignorance of risk.

I had mastered words and numbers as fast as Nat. I became headstrong, realizing our equal abilities. I rebelled against his authority once: One chilly autumn night, Nat ordered me to go to Clark's Pond—a mile and a half past a heavily wooded area to retrieve the fishing pole that he left

near a pine tree.

The thought of walking a mile and a half in the dark frightened me. “You’re the one who left the pole. You gather it.” It seemed right to me.

“It’s dark outside. If it rains, the pole will warp. Go get it!”

The command from a younger child infuriated me. I ignored his order by pretending not to hear him.

Nat walked around me and stood in my way, looking up at me with his grinning face. “I told you to go get my fishing pole! I want it now!”

I backed away from his confrontation. “I don’t know where you left it. Would you have me scour the entire bank with a lantern?”

Nat struck me with a closed fist, but his delivery was slow. I saw where the punch would land and flexed my upper body by holding my breath. His blow landed on my expanded chest, causing him great pain. He began to cry. “I want my fishing pole!”

I came forward to comfort him, letting my guard down.

His frown dissolved into that impish grin. Nat pushed me against the hearth. The bricks were hot from the stoked cooking fire. I balanced myself by pressing both hands against the metal vent that separated the living room from the fire. The cast iron was white hot; I could not release my hand for fear of falling into the open fireplace. The time I took to balance myself on the grate raised welts on my hands. The sharp pain of the burn put me in an angered state. I hit back, slapping Nat with my burned hand. The bubbling welts on my palm opened up and bled on him. Nat ran from the room and came back with Francis Brinley.

“My son is bleeding from a blow by you. Who do you think you are? Nat, you go to Crispus and slap him.”

Nat rarely respected his father, but took pleasure obeying this command. He picked up a piece of oak sapling and slapped it across my mouth, drawing blood from my lip and cheek.

Robert witnessed the assault and came to my defense. “You hit him! He’s bleeding! Stop the blood!”

To this day, I believe Robert saved me from my first brutal beating.

Francis Brinley ordered Nat to stop beating me and hugged Robert. He looked over his son’s shoulder directly at me. “Let this be a lesson! You are

to obey Nat when I'm not around!"

I cowered to his authority and spent the night looking for the lost pole—much to my mother's disdain.

When the water and wood levels were sufficient, I was assigned to watch the Brinley boys as they swam in Clark's Pond, but was never told my duties. It was an odd arrangement: I had no authority over them. I watched them carefully and learned to swim, practicing their motions in my mind until I was confident to enter the water and duplicate my observations.

The boys wanted to dive into the pond from a low strong bough of a giant oak tree near the deep end, but Francis Brinley forbade them. Directly below the branch, covered by a thin layer of murky water, was a submerged rocky ledge. The boys would have to jump a good distance past the end of the bough to avoid hitting the protruded stone.

Nat and Robert obeyed their father's command for a month, but soon Nat grew tired of swimming and decided to watch his brother dive from the oak.

"Robbie! Go climb that tree and jump in."

"Yes, Nat," said Robert, ever to please. His feet scurried up the muddy bank near the big tree.

I was on the other side of the pond, but was alerted by Nat's wild thrashings in the water.

Robert placed his hands on the large bough, trying to find a stable way to scale the trunk. He pulled himself up to the branch, but became lopsided when too much of his torso swung on the other side of the tree. He fell over and skinned his back on a hard exposed root.

"Try it again, Robbie," goaded Nat. "Only this time, pull yourself up and place your knees on the branch."

It hadn't occurred to me what was about to happen next. I assumed Nat would be satisfied when his dull brother climbed the tree. Robert, wanting to amuse Nat, tried again and righted himself on the wide bough. He smiled broadly at his simple accomplishment. He bear hugged the trunk of the tree; somewhat securing his balance, but his feet were shaking on

the branch.

“Go ahead, jump in!” Nat egged him on.

I stood up and waved my hands. “No Robert, don’t do that.” I dove in the water, figuring it would take less time to swim a beeline than run around the pond. The water was cold but the commotion warmed me. I was not a graceful swimmer. Flailing my hands in a crude dog paddle, making sure my head was above the surface of the water, I thrashed my way toward the tree.

“Jump in, Robert!” coaxed Nat. “Are you going to listen to your brother— or a slave?”

I knew Robert had forgotten about his father’s warnings of the granite ledge. He looked down at the opaque water. Sometimes the image of the ledge could be seen by the outline of the current, but small ripples made by Nat’s beckoning muddied the shadow water that covered the ledge.

“Wait, Robert! Don’t jump!” The enveloping water covered my mouth. I watched helplessly, too far from Robert to grab him and pull him off the tree. He waved to me, smiling innocently with an unsure grin, still seeking his brother’s acceptance and approval. His head lowered, his arms tucked to his sides, he dove headfirst into the submerged rock!

His skull penetrated the surface, but stopped at his shoulders without a splash. I heard a sharp quick underwater burst, the sound a baking potato makes if not forked. His body stopped its descent and seemed to stand upright—almost balanced on his head for a split second—then lurched forward and rolled over. His bloody forehead broke the water and receded and disappeared.

Pushing hard at the water, nearing dry land and close enough for my feet to make contact with the bottom, I waded to the muddy bank, my feet sinking to the ankles in the silky muck. I dead reckoned where Robert landed by estimating the center of the circular ripples. I coasted past the submerged rock, diving several times into the muddy water without finding him—often forgetting to breathe. After several dives—each one a shorter duration than the last—his foot drifted to the surface. I towed Robert to shore and placed him under the shade of the red oak tree.

I examined him carefully; opening his eyelids, patting his face—somehow knowing he was dead, although not knowing what human death

looked like. No one yet explained death to me. His legs seemed too flexible. A round hole oozing with blood and what looked like liquid pig fat spewed from the middle of his forehead just below where his hairline began. His eyes were shut. I kept shaking Robert, patiently and gently waiting for him to wake, at first thinking his immobility was due to his slow mind.

I scanned the pond, determined to find Nat Brinley and drown him! He was gone. I was too busy reviving Robert to hear him leave the water. He returned to the pond with his father, pointing his finger at me!

“I told Robert not to climb the tree, but he wouldn’t listen!” yelled Nat.

Francis Brinley pushed me into the trunk of the oak tree, and hugged his dead son. Robert’s arms hung listlessly from their sockets; palms bent backward—almost perpendicular to his torso. His limp neck, as if composed of loose skin and marrow, let his head droop back parallel with his arms. The hot sun filtered through the glove-shaped oak leaves onto the hole in his forehead, thickening and slowing the flow of fluids.

Francis leered at me with harsh eyes; his lids shut so tight that no white outline framed his iris—a glaring hate. I meekly retreated until my back rubbed against the wide and sinewy oak trunk. Brinley drew closer to me with Robert between us. He placed Robert at my feet and slapped me with his blood-wet palm, whipping my head into the tree. The sharp blow stung and put me off balance. “Where were you when this happened?”

I stared at Nat. “He was at the other side of the pond.”

“Why weren’t you closer to Robert? You knew my boy needed watching!”

I didn’t know what to say. I kept my accusing eyes on Nat. I was about to tell the truth “I…”

“He was watching me! Robert broke for the other shore before we could do anything about it!” Nat blurted, further covering his lies with new ones.

Francis Brinley grasped my shoulders and shook my frame. “Is that right?”

“Yes, sir.” I nodded, too afraid to shine a light on Nat Brinley’s murderous lying treachery. “I didn’t know I could swim to him.”

He walked over to Nat and put his arm around his son. The two carried Robert to the farmhouse.

I told my mother what had happened at the pond—she smiled, thinking it a good omen that her masters and their children would kill each other off.

I wept at the backyard burial. All the slaves attended—save my mother and father.

Master Brinley, eyes red from lack of sleep, cupped a handful of dirt, throwing some on the grave and placing the rest in his coat pocket. “Here lies my son Robert, next to his mother who preceded him in death. May the Lord commend his soul to Heaven and grant his final peace.” He looked at the knotty pine coffin, darkly stained with aged lampblack, and scowled. His breath became heavy; he shook his clenched fists at the sky. “Would it have been too much to allow him to see his manhood? Why are you against me, God?”

The field hands backed away from Francis Brinley—heads raised, searching the clouds for righteous lightning.

“Why are you a killer of small minded boys who never caused you a day of harm? What evil creator makes a small child, only to kill him horribly for the glory of his final reward? What kind of abominable fiend takes a mother from a newborn son? Aren’t you through with your revenge on my family? Why are you against me? What a small amount of mercy flows from your Heaven?” Francis dropped his fists.

All of us were silent with fear—even Nat backed away from his father. Only Daniel Shays, the head overseer, had the courage to see if Francis Brinley needed comfort.

“Mr. Brinley, perhaps you should go into the house with your boy? It’s not good to curse the Lord in front of the hands. They fear God more than they fear us.”

Francis turned quickly to Shays and laughed loudly, but his face showed almost the same hate the day Robert died. Daniel gently corralled Brinley’s shoulders and walked him into the farmhouse.

Tom O’Rourke ordered me to dig Robert’s grave—no small task for an eight-year-old boy. Each spade of compacted soil that I lifted and deposited made me feel more a part in the murder. The mounds of dirt I created seemed to me like vast hills—from the view of the valley of my deep hole. My young muscles tensed and strained. I was racked with guilt, but had

I told on Nat, I would have been beaten to death—somehow blamed for killing both of Brinley's sons.

My body sweated and writhed as I heaped dirt on the dead boy. Just before the sun set, I flattened the earth over Robert's grave, gently tapping the shovel over the rounded mound, "You rest, Robbie. Nat can't hurt you any more."

In the weeks that followed his son's burial, Francis Brinley started to act strangely. Many nights he wandered in a sort of drunken march; his feet went forward as his frame swung left and right, his arms scattered, hitting walls and tables, breaking vases and shattering glass. His feet fell heavily as he trudged past the library, into the hallway, to the kitchen and back again—keeping us all awake.

His dinner plate, once completely devoured, went back to the kitchen as served or in half portions. A thin man, Francis's face shrank to the formation of his skull, showing his recessed cheekbones and crater-sunken eyes.

A month after the burial, a gunshot went off on the front porch. The indentured overseers ran to the source of the noise, fearing that Brinley killed himself. Francis Brinley was drinking from a clay jug of cherry wine, while a smoking pistol was firmly secured in his other hand. Mattie Sconce told everyone that he lured a songbird to perch on the porch rail with stale pieces of bread and shot it at close range.

The ball and powder reduced the bird to fluids and wind-blown feathers. A triangular score marred the porch rail. Francis kicked at the small sticky plumes and looked straight at me with the same hateful glare. "Will none of you help me chase these demons away?"

I walked to the porch with a broom and swept the pieces of the bird into the bushes and later packed down the garden loam to cover the remnants of Brinley's madness. I was no closer than five paces from Brinley in open air, but I could smell the sickly sweet perfume of turned cherry wine.

Daniel Shays opened the French doors of the farmhouse. His concerned eyes focused on Brinley, who slouched in the rocker as he elevated the clay jug to his lips—while waving the pistol at the slaves, pretending to squeeze the trigger.

Shays spat on the ground before him as he crept over in deliberate steps, and with both hands snatched the pistol away from the rocking

madman, flinging it across the porch rail into the bushes.

Daniel reached for the clay bottle of cherry wine. Brinley rolled back in his rocker to evade him, but the back of the chair stopped against the side of the porch rail, preventing his retreat. He looked at Shays with quivering sleepy eyes, searching for pity. Shays yanked the clay bottle from Brinley's hand and threw it against an oblong foundation boulder, shattering the flask into shards.

In one cradling motion, Daniel gathered Brinley like a bale of hay and lugged him—in uneven short choppy steps—up the main stairway to his bedroom.

Francis stayed in his room for a week. I ferried wine and stronger spirits to him. I would knock twice and hear a frail gravelly high-pitched voice beg, "Leave it and go!"

Once, while lost in thought chopping wood, I forgot to make my daily delivery. I ran to the root cellar where the fermenting wine gained strength, picked out the oldest bottle and carried it to Brinley's bedroom.

He came to the door, eager to gather the overdue wine. His paled and shriveled head reflected the light from my lantern and lit up the dull hallway with a white glare. He grabbed at the neck of the bottle with feeble and palsied hands. I didn't let the clay jug go, frightened that I would be beaten for the broken jug.

The unexpected shift in his weight made him stumble backward. He reached for the doorknob to steady himself, but his lopsided balance propelled him to fall on the bedroom floor.

The room was in shambles; his sheets and blankets were ripped, cloth cotton shreds draped on the toppled furniture and the floors. A patchwork quilt sewn by his late wife was covered with candle wax drippings. Pillows were opened at the seams—wispy feathers lay in waiting on the ground—ready to flee from his haphazard angry steps. Books with fresh broken bindings were carelessly strewn on the torn hooked rug—each of these destructions marking a prolonged fit.

Francis staggered as he tried to raise his upper body to a sitting position, achieving less than a perpendicular posture. He sweated and breathed heavily, almost like an old shaking man abed and dying. "I need strong drink!" He tried to grab me, swiping wildly with quaking clenched

fists, but I sensed he wasn't able to bother me. His squinting eyes drifted to the ceiling as his head fell back on the bed. I put the bottle on his bedside table—just out of his reach—and left the bedroom.

After two months of stumbling drunkenness, Brinley quit taking spirits, restoring himself to a new and changed sober madness. He took a keen interest in the menial functions of the farm, cutting down trees, burning brush and butchering livestock. Brinley had his own way of killing pigs; he cornered them in the barn behind a tethering fence until they were packed tightly. He swung the butt end of an ax, aiming at the tops of their heads.

Once, he made the mistake of swinging an ax at the largest swine in a corner of the barn. His delivery, like Nat's, was too slow—the pig bolted through knocking over the fence and bit through Brinley's pant leg. Francis bent over and felt the gash. He eyed his tattered pants, then watched as the pig chewed the bloody fabric. He dropped his ax and turned to run. The pig lowered his iron skull and charged Brinley, toppling him again to the floor of the slopping pen. The pig started to gnaw on Brinley's leather boot but was frantically kicked away.

Brinley exhaled hot steam. He picked himself up and brushed the sticky straw from his shirt and pants. He took hold of a wooden plank and carefully cornered his rebellious chattel.

"Shays!" shouted Brinley. "Come running! Bring some hands!" Daniel Shays and two slaves assembled. "Gather that pig and bring it to the front of the house! Stake it to the ground!"

Shays took the knife from his sheath.

Francis Brinley grabbed at Shays' blade, cutting his hand. He ignored the bleeding. "No, I want this animal alive! When you have roped it and secured it, gather all the slaves."

Shays looked hard at Francis Brinley waiting for him to change his mind. Master Brinley was somewhat sober, but with his seething anger—he was no longer in a state where he could be managed with reason. Shays turned to the slaves. "Get behind the pig. I'll rush it. You grab the hind legs. We can drag it to the front of the house."

Shays leaped at the pig. The swine grunted, lowering his front legs, ready to charge, leaving his hind legs high and vulnerable. The two slaves grabbed the exposed legs, grasping them with sure hands. The larger slave

slipped on barn debris and fell forward, bending the pig's leg against the joints. The hindquarter snapped and the pig frantically squealed, but the high-pitched noise was all the resistance the animal could muster.

The two hands dragged the now convulsing swine to the front of the farmhouse. They staked the beast to the ground, stretching all the leg joints to unnatural angles.

Brinley waited patiently while the pig was secured to the ground—then kicked the animal grinding his leathered toe into its ribs. He turned to me, “Crispus, run to the fields and call in all the hands!”

I ran with long strides, happy at the chance to meet my father. I looked for that large man who stood at the bottom of the hill every morning to see that I was still alive. I sprinted to the south field, calling out his name.

I looked among the bodies of the assembled slaves. All of them were bony, skinny and short—hardly the giant I saw every morning.

I turned to Tom O'Rourke. “Master Brinley sent me to fetch my father?”

“He was hired out to a land holder in Warren. He won't be back until the end of the month.”

“Where is this Warren?”

“Too far to fetch him. He'll have to miss whatever crazy old Brinley has in mind. Go on back to the farmhouse, boy!”

I looked at the man and turned back, saddened at the lost chance to speak to my father. Tom O'Rourke took over the chore of gathering the hands. I ambled back to the barn in time to see Master Brinley collect the whip off of the pillory post. The cat-o'-nine-tails were exposed to rain and sunlight. The coarse leather strips shrank, giving them the strength of granite—an ominous weapon.

Brinley snapped the whip at the barn door but made no mark. He ran to the tethered pig, twirling the whip over his head. “All of you surround me! I want you to see what happens to those who will not follow my almighty commands!”

The thin chattel herded around Brinley in a wide circle—not fearing the madman, but keenly aware of the range of the nine-headed whip.

The first lash opened the pig's back. I stared at the animal as it laid

squirming and squealing in a death rattle. The muscles near the pig's joints furiously contracted and expanded. The tethered animal was desperately trying to escape, stretching the ropes so he could right himself on all fours, then trying to find cover by pulling in his feet—while bathing in bright red torrents of his steaming blood. The pig's eyes, wild with hatred and fear, fixed on Francis Brinley, who ground the sole of his boot into the pig's exposed backside, keeping the beast down.

Daniel Shays walked Nat Brinley away from the beating, shaking his head. They stayed a comfortable distance from the whipping and sat in the shade of a tall pine tree.

Brinley's almighty whip often missed the pig, landing on the dry ground, scattering the dusty dirt around the condemned animal. A dust cloud grew to a thickened fog, so thick we could no longer see the struggling pig. Brinley stopped the whipping to let the dust settle.

I moved closer—the beast's erect head became a burden and flopped down, lying limply on the ground. The animal's measured breath fluttered to short irregular hisses. Then in finale, the pig's body jerked up as it inhaled slowly, then exhaled instantly. The eyes cooled and dulled to a lusterless and lifeless gray, replacing the white.

Brinley resumed his erratic lashes, his arms were fully flexed and grew tired at the continuous beating and slowed to an awkward, one third arc, stalled, disjointed delivery, that merely shook the pig's soggy red and yellowed carcass. Francis rested his arms at his side, pulled down by the weight of the soaked whip. He danced around the dead pig, twirling like a top. He began to giggle that increased to a long belly laugh as his twisting gyrations increased.

During this Dervish dance, the lash wrapped around his feet. He fell helplessly, laughing, holding onto the whip instead of breaking his fall with a free hand. Brinley's head landed on one of the stakes, making a dull thud—but even this pain wasn't enough for him to stop his mad laughing.

Shays came into the circle of assembled slaves, waving to O'Rourke. "Take them back to the fields."

He helped Master Brinley into the porch rocking chair. Francis stopped laughing and hit Shays in the ribs with the wooden handle of the whip. "Don't you dare move that pig! It shall serve as a reminder that no one takes from Francis Brinley without consequence!"