

Delaware & Raritan. 1850.

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I especially remember one fakir by name of G. Melksham Bourne (a bankrupt picture dealer from N.Y.) -- he came with letters -- lectured on Water, hygiene, Phrenology etc. and captured my father body & soul --
-- Washington A. Roebling

It was just a week ago that Bourne's son had worked up the nerve to go outside the house. He was ten, but small for his age; he had soft little hands, and big round green eyes which seemed older than the rest of him, a shock of pale hair, ill-fitting clothes which had been well-made but for someone else, that was clear enough. When the Bournes arrived -- the Professor, his wife, and Peter -- Washington had been instructed to carry their boxes and bags from the cart into the house. Little Peter Bourne had stood staring, clutching his mother's hand, while Washington wrestled their things across the threshold and up the stairs, into the room he'd had to vacate for these guests. Mrs Bourne and her son had hardly emerged since, except for meals -- if you could call them that -- but then, that morning, Peter had sidled into the light, blinking against the sunshine, holding the gatepost as if to keep himself upright.

Swan had arrived and was unloading his tools; Washington had gone out to help him.

-- Looks like we've got some assistance today, Swan had said, nodding at Peter.

-- I don't know, Washington said.

-- Bourne's son? Swan asked, and Washington nodded. Want to lend a hand, boy? Swan called in the easy way he had. But Peter just kept looking at the pair of them, and Swan smiled amiably. You suit yourself, lad, he said, we'll sort ourselves out here. Won't we, Wash?

-- The boat we came on had apple pie for dinner, the boy said then, as if it were an answer to Swan's question. The mention of pie made Washington's mouth water.

-- Did it, now? Swan said. You're a lucky fellow, then. I do like a slice of apple pie.

Peter had not spoken again, but watched as they gathered their things, and followed as they went into the house to work, his face even paler than usual, as if the air beyond the door had sucked something out of him. Swan sawed, hammered, planed: Washington's father let Swan off his work at the mill to come here to the house. The place had been half-built when the Roeblings had arrived from Pennsylvania. Swan treated Washington like his second-in-command, so that he learned the names of tools, how to let a blade bite wood, how the scent of oak differed from that of pine. Peter stared. But every day after that he had ventured outside, a little farther every day, tracing a path to the fence and just beyond it.

And now, in the afternoons, he would follow Washington if his mother sent him on an errand -- to collect an order of calico, or the boxes of figs Bourne's father had ordered. He was a silent shadow; but Washington did not wish to offer him the friendship it appeared he desired. Washington did not wish to risk what the sound of laughter in the house might provoke; he did not wish to hear the boy's confession or be enticed to give his own. Sometimes the boy would ask him this or that -- what kind of a tree that was or if he knew the name of the horse that drew a cart along the road. If Washington could answer, he would, but he would not go further than that. When they walked by the canal, the boy would read out the

names of the boats they passed. Hearing the names spoken in Peter's clear, high voice made Washington wonder how they had been chosen, what sort of canal-man preferred *Sally* to *Steady*, *Brunswick* to *Betty*. It had never occurred to him to consider this before, but he kept these thoughts to himself.

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See how far you can throw, Washington said. Out along the canal there was a pile of broken bricks on the towpath, ruddy brown and flat yellow with sharp, crumbling edges. He supposed a load had fallen off a wagon sometime, maybe even a wagon going to the mill. He liked the feel of the bricks in his fist, and the strength in his own arm as he pulled back his shoulder to hurl a chunk out across the water, the brick hitting the surface with a hollow gulp, the splash and swallow, a quick little rill of bubbles rising up and then disappearing. Sometimes he spoke under his breath when he threw, take *that*, take *that*, but now with Peter beside him he kept quiet, just throwing as hard as he could, as far as he could.

Go on, Washington said. This was five days after Peter Bourne had first ventured beyond the door of the house. Late morning. Washington had been sent out to the mill to collect some drawings of the new machinery there; his father, closeted with Bourne, still wished to know (of course he wished to know) what progress had been made. Now the drawings, rolled carefully and tied with black ribbon, sat in the dust at the side of the path; Washington had thrown his jacket over them so no stray breeze would blow them away. Once, he had lost some drawings this way. Take *that*, take *that*, his father had said as he raised the leather strap again and again and again.

The boy bent to pick up a piece of brick; he straightened and pushed his hair out of his eyes. His pallor made him look like an elf-child from a fairy book. An underhand throw, so the brick rose up and plopped down into the shallow water at the edge of the canal.

-- You can do better than that, Washington said. Can't you?

-- I don't know, the boy said. He turned his eyes to Washington, his brows drawn together. Washington almost felt sorry for him, but scorn rose up over sorry and pushed it aside. Since Professor Bourne's arrival, Washington was never not hungry. The emptiness in his stomach made for anger an easy home.

-- Look, Washington said. Like this. He picked up another piece of brick and jammed it into the boy's palm, hard against the flesh, and then closed his own fist around it, swiveling to stand behind Peter and pull the boy's arm back with his own. Close to Peter like this he could smell him, the sourness of sweat and something sweet too, maybe from the neckerchief he wore, scented by his mother, a woman nearly as invisible as her son. A tickle of Peter's hair in his nose. Hauled his arm back so the boy gasped and then their two arms together flew out forward and released the brick so it landed out in the canal with a satisfying splash. Washington thought he'd hurt Peter's arm, but Peter was smiling, seeing how far the brick had gone, the ripple he'd made on the dark slick of water.

-- Lookit that, the boy said. I can throw. Thanks, he said.

Washington had not been after thanks. He kicked at the pile of bricks and said nothing. Then he picked up another and took five or six steps back onto the green grass behind the towpath, almost as far as the old elm tree that marked the halfway point between home and the mill. He ran at the water, his arm drawn back, stopping short just at the very edge of the canal, the momentum of his run propelling the brick almost as far as the other shore, so the splash wet the bow of a shuttered barge docked there. Washington wiped his palms down his trouser legs, leaving streaks of red brick dust.

-- Go on, he said to Peter. You try.

The boy seemed bolder now, walking quickly to the heap of broken bricks, choosing one that fit neatly in his hand. He marched right to the elm, its shadow darkening

his face and hair, and then ran at the water, his feet in their city shoes kicking up puffs of dust. But at the edge of the canal he skidded, his foot slipping out beyond the path, and the brick went flying back towards the tree as he windmilled his arms, trying to keep his balance, his body pitched out over the water. Washington rushed forward, grabbed him by his wrist, yanked him back on to the path. They stood there for a moment, the sun on their heads, breathing hard, looking at each other. Washington thought Peter would be frightened, but his cheeks were pink and his eyes were shining.

-- Better do it again, he said.

-- Not now, Washington said. Time to get back. Father wants these things. He picked up his jacket and the drawings from the ground.

-- What happens when you get all those bricks in the water? The boy said.

-- Guess you get a dam in the canal.

-- Really? The boy's eyes wide.

-- Course not, ninny, Washington said. Can't just throw bricks in the water to get a dam.

-- Oh, said the boy. How do you get a dam?

-- Let's go, Washington said. Better hurry. Come on.

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-- *Wo ist Peter?* his mother asked, drying her hands on her apron. In the blue light of the room, her face was shadowed. The lamps had not yet been lit, and would not be until darkness crept right over the windowsills. His father measured the level of the oil in the lamps week to week; if too much oil was used, he would not pay for more, and then the darkness would be everywhere.

Washington was laying the table, setting a spoon beside each bowl. Nothing else was needed now, neither forks nor knives, and so he left them nested in the drawer by the kitchen. He shrugged in answer to his mother's question, looked away, but she did not see, or acted as if she did not. She asked again.

-- *Wo ist Peter?*

I don't know, he said in English, and now he met her eyes. Even this she did not understand. He would do this sometimes, push against her, her simplicity, her openness, because he knew he could, that there would be no price to pay. She shook her head, smiled, lifted her brow and her chin and he relented, repeating himself for her.

-- *Das weiß ich nicht*, he said. *Ich dachte er ist bei seinem Vater.*

He had assumed the Bourne boy was with his father, upstairs. He was often up there, closed in the room his own father had given over to these visitors. Washington hadn't noticed the boy's absence; Bourne was a blusterer, but his wife and their boy were nearly silent, clinging to the edges of the rooms. Mrs Bourne was already seated at the table, her hands in her lap, her eyes on the china plate his mother had set before her. Washington couldn't decide whether she was too proud to help, or too afraid, but he suspected it was the latter.

His mother shook her head again and pointed upstairs -- the room above was his father's study.

Professor Bourne and Papa are together, she said. They have been talking all afternoon. Yes they had, he realized, and now he could hear it, the susurrations of their voices on the other side of the wooden ceiling. Well, his mother said, call your sisters, tell them to bring the baby in.

The girls were outside, holding Charles's little hands and showing him how to walk on the patchy grass. Come on, he called, leaning out into the twilight, Mother says you

are to come in now. As soon as he put his head out the door Elvira ran to him, throwing her weight against his leg and wrapping her arms around his waist. Yes, he said, that means you too, little Vi, we all have to suffer together.

-- Suffer? she said, her blue eyes bright. She had never heard the word, he supposed, which amazed him. He reached down and lifted her up so he could hold her on his hip. She laughed, although he knew she didn't understand him at all, but she loved him, and that was enough. He carried her into the house.

-- Sit, sit! his mother said, shooing her hands at her children, lifting Charles from Laura's arms, and setting him in the little pen, like a pen for an animal, Washington always thought, that Swan had built beside the kitchen. It had thick wooden slats and a rail too big for the child to see over, even when he pulled himself to stand. They all scrambled to find their places, Washington next to the empty seat at the head of the table, and opposite him another empty chair awaiting the presence of the Professor.

And now here he was, the Professor, his forceful tread on the stair, father following behind. Bourne was a tall, broad-shouldered man, taller than John Roebling, and the broad beard he wore over his chest made him seem even bigger. His father seemed narrow in comparison, almost slender. The Professor's hair was swept back from his forehead, dark with a silver streak that echoed the zealous gleam in his eye.

-- Now then, now then! he boomed, clapping his hands together and rubbing them briskly. All gathered for another healthful repast! A healthful family is a happy family, that is my motto! Healthy, happy! Healthy, happy!

His gaze swerved around the room, resting on each of them in turn, though his own wife, Washington noted, still did not raise her eyes from the table, and his mother smiled anxiously when it was her turn. Washington sat as still as he might while the great man peered at him; the Professor liked to call him *a fine boy*, although he had not sought the

Professor's high opinion. Behind the Professor his father moved quietly through the room, lighting the lamps, his own gaze unreadable. He settled himself at the head of the table, the Professor beside him. In front of his father was a burlap sack, the kind you might find in a barn. It looked as if it were, filled with animal fodder; next to it was a covered dish from which no heat emanated. The autumn was coming, the nights drawing in, though it was not yet fully dark.

-- Professor Bourne, said his father, will you do us the honour of serving tonight?

His father said this every night, as if he had never said it before; every night for the past week and more, since the Professor's arrival.

-- Why thank you, Herr Roebling, I would be delighted, the Professor said.

He pronounced the title with a trilling *rrr*, though Washington knew that his father wanted nothing more than for the world to think him an American born and bred. Sometimes still he would overhear his father, when he thought he was alone, saying over and over the English words he found difficult, even his son's own name, *Washington*, *Washington*, the sound of it like a hiss, and Washington's blood would chill until he realized what his father was doing, that his presence was not required.

But his father did not correct the Professor. He did not say, *I am Mister Roebling to you*. He did not shout at the Professor, or pound his fist, or strike him, or sweep the crockery and cutlery off the table so his mother would have to scrabble on the floor to catch the broken shards. He did not do any of those things. He merely nodded, and watched as the Professor reached for each of their plates in turn.

From the sack the Professor spooned a pile of sawdust, or that's what it looked like. Carefully he measured three spoonsful onto each plate; he then moistened the pile with a splash of water from a jug, placed by his elbow for the purpose. He uncovered the platter which Washington's mother had placed in the centre of the table; before the Professor's

arrival, it might have held thin slices of the ham she cured, sweet and salty with a neat oily rime of fat around each leaf of the meat. There was never much of that ham -- another effect of his father's stern economy -- but Washington's mouth watered at the memory of it. Now the platter held a scattering of figs, brown as dead leaves, but for some, inadequately dried, which had gone green at their stems, the mould appearing to emit a kind of glow in the lamplight. On each plate passed to him the Professor deposited two figs, one on either side of the heap of wet brown dust.

He clapped his hands again, rubbed the palms together once more. Washington avoided looking at his father, settled at the table's head; he glanced at Elvira, next to him. The little girl was staring at the Professor, her mouth wide open; Washington knocked his knee against hers, blinked, and her lips smacked shut. All the children were accustomed to speaking without words. It was much the safest way.

-- Peter? boomed Professor Bourne. Mrs Bourne kept her gaze resolutely on the table.

-- Molly, said the Professor. Where's our fine boy?

Mrs Bourne -- Molly, Washington thought to himself, for he had never heard her given name till now -- shook her head, the gesture almost imperceptible.

From the corner of his eye Washington could see his father lift the gold watch from the pocket in his waistcoat and glance down briefly at its face. His brows knit together for an instant; his mouth was pressed into a thin line.

Now the Professor smiled at Washington -- or at least, his lips were turned in a smile, and the skin at the corners of his eyes fanned into neat little lines, but his dark eyes were cold. Master Roebling, Bourne said. I thought you boys were at your studies.

-- No, sir, Washington said.

Bourne still stared at him. He expected more of an answer, clearly.

-- I thought he was with you, sir, he said. You and Father.

He saw his father's right hand twitch. It had been flat on the table; now it closed briefly into a fist, or nearly; his left hand, the damaged fingers curled into the palm, remained still. Washington recalled a snake he had once seen in the woods out beyond the edge of town, back home, as he still thought of it; a great black rope of a thing, dark as pitch, lying in the litter beneath the trees, its tapering tail flicking, once, twice, before it was still again, waiting.

-- Professor Bourne and I were correcting his manuscript, his father said, finally. His new text. "The Path to Health is the Path of the Spirit", it will be called. Professor Bourne and I were at work. You were told to watch the boy.

You were told to watch the boy. Washington felt the floor rock a little under his feet at the certainty of the pronouncement. There had been no such request. Next week he would be enrolled at the Trenton Academy, but for the last two weeks he had been allowed to help his mother with the new house, to hammer nails and saw wood with Swan, who would come by in the morning before heading for the mill. Swan would ask his mother where she would like a new shelf, or at what angle a draining rack for the dishes should go, and with the two of them to help her Washington would see her spirit lighten. Thinking of this he felt ashamed at the way he had spoken to her not a quarter hour before, as if she were a lesser creature than he. Now she, like Mrs Bourne, sat very still, but her glance moved between Washington and her husband, first one, then the other, back again.

His father had not mentioned the boy to him. Peter. Washington opened his mouth. He shut it again, before the truth could betray him.

-- Bring him to the table, his father said. Go and get him.

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It was nearly dark when he reached the canal. The sun sinking below the horizon, and the moon rising, gibbous, not as clear as it had been back in Pennsylvania, where the only light came from the few lamps of their neighbours' houses, and just yards beyond Main Street the land remained as it had been for centuries, for millennia before, home only to wolves and bears and the red men whose land this had once been. *Wilden*, some of the neighbours called them, savages. His father never said that word, and shook his head when he heard others speak so, but Washington was too afraid to ask him what they meant, or why his father disagreed.

Here in Trenton there was plenty of light. Not only from the clean slip of the moon but from furnaces, forges, fine houses and well-lit theatres, the engines of coal-barges as they pushed through the slick water. It was never dark here, someone was always awake, a restless energy which made it hard for Washington to sleep, as if the city shook him by the shoulder or whispered in his ear, all the hours of the days and nights. He had learned that the sound of a giant, snorting horse was really a passing train; a howling, high shriek the wire mill's new steam whistle. By now, at least, he could walk outside without starting at nearly every sound, and so tonight he paced along the edge of the canal, peering at its gleaming, translucent surface.

Now the evening star was shining, bright beyond the halo of the moon. The sky was purpling, thickening, and Washington wished he taken his coat from its hook. Peter! he called. He stood straight, put his hands around his mouth. Peter! His voice rang in his head before vanishing into the trees. He listened for an answer but nothing came; there was only the lapping of water against the lip of the canal. On the other side, a boat was moored, but its windows were black and it was silent and still, a block of darkness against the city's glimmering light.

Years later he would recall the opalescent sheen of the water -- an oily slick gleaming beyond the toes of his boots -- and below that something like quartz or moonstone, shining, he would have said, down below. It was only when he saw the boy's white hair, drifting like pondweed, that he understood what he saw.

He drew off his boots as quickly as he could, his fingers fighting the tight knots he had laced that morning, and threw off his loose, long-sleeved shirt. When he hit the water the cold made his chest contract, but he forced himself to draw the deepest lungful of air he could, pulling the chill dusk right down inside himself before diving to the canal's bed where Peter's body lay. It was hardly six feet, maybe just a little more, to the bottom -- but of course he'd never thought to ask, no one had, whether the boy could swim.

He was spread-eagled down there, his arms and legs stretched out from his body; his collar floating loose and the white skin of his throat perfectly still, his green eyes open as if in surprise. Washington kept his own eyes open, wanting as much light as he could get as he fought to put his arms round the boy's shoulders, to pull him out of the mud and filth that lay beneath him, that was soft and thick against Washington's hands. But when he tried to pull Peter up to the surface the boy's body stuck fast, and Washington gasped, or tried to, the awful green water filling his mouth and nose and making him kick up to the surface, gagging and choking, gasping for air.

Another breath, down again, prepared this time, grabbing one of Peter's arms in both his hands, gripping tightly just below the shoulder, soaked wool against his palms while he kicked as hard as he could, seeking some resistance against the water which grew colder and colder by the minute. His chest burned as he held his breath; just as he thought he felt some movement he could bear it no longer and had to let go, breaking the surface once again, the air in his mouth the finest thing he'd ever tasted.

On his third descent the black silt released Peter's body. It took hours, or so it felt,

to pull it to the surface, the dead weight uncooperative, resistant. He had to paddle through the water, gripping the boy's body by the wrist so it dragged below him, a sucking anchor.

He hardly knew how he got out of the canal. He cracked his chin on the stone edge of the path with the effort, and on his tongue foul water mingled with his own blood.

He began to shiver uncontrollably as soon as he laid Peter out on the towpath by the side of the canal. Shoeless, shirtless, his teeth knocked together as if his jaws were controlled by some distant puppeteer, the strings pulling his limbs as he juddered and shook. He gathered his discarded shirt, yanking it over his head, the white cloth a shroud clamped over his nose and mouth until he could pull his face through. He crushed his heels down into the soles of his boots, the dank water squelching out through the leather. His fingers were too weak now to do up his bootlaces at all.

And then he almost spoke to the boy on the ground beside him. Come on, let's go, hurry up, we're already late for supper, it's dark, we must go home. Through the clear, still air the moon threw silver light all around; Peter's skin glowed with it, and his eyes stared upwards, fixed on the stars. The hazy band of the Milky Way was stretched across the sky, a path to follow out into the dark.

But Peter was gone. When Washington stood, his knees unsteady, and leaned over him, he could see that: a hollowness, an absence. Suddenly the bile rose in his throat and he nearly vomited all over the boy, only turning away so that his spew of swallowed canal water splattered on the grass instead. Briefly he was grateful that his stomach had been otherwise completely empty. He wiped his mouth with the back of his cold hand.

Well -- he must get Peter home. He had no recollection, now, of how far he had come from the house or how long it had taken him to get here. At least it would be easier to carry the boy on dry ground than it had been to haul him from the depths. But for several minutes he struggled to find a way to take Peter's body into his arms. He was used to

carrying his sisters, his baby brother; he had never bothered to consider that even when they struggled, or pretended to struggle, their living, breathing bodies worked with his own to make the effort mutual. Washington tried to think of all the work he'd done, the loads he'd carried, back in Pennsylvania, on the journey to this new place, even sometimes at the mill; furniture, bundles of clothes, raw wood, brick and stone. His father's leather valises piled in his arms, so high he could barely see over. Now he turned his face away to avoid the glassy blanks of Peter's eyes as he wrestled him up off the ground, staggering along the path, one arm grasping the boy's knees, the other his shoulders, freezing water running off both of them and soaking back into the earth.

Twice he had to lay Peter down again on the ground so he could rest; the task of raising him up grew harder each time, and finally he was frightened that if he set him down once more he would not have the strength to lift him. By now, Washington was weeping. But he was not aware that he wept, and would never remember his tears.

The lit windows of his father's house. The fence, the garden, the wooden door. Through the glass, as he approached, he saw his father and Bourne, their mouths moving, crumbs on Bourne's black beard, his father's back straight as an iron bar. Mrs Bourne's face, nearly as white and still as her son's. None of them knowing anything, this moment open and whole. He shifted the boy's weight in his arms so he could raise his hand to knock.

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