

# THE HOLDER OF THE WORLD

BHARATI MUKHERJEE



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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THE  
HOLDER  
OF THE  
WORLD

BHARATI  
MUKHERJEE

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*To Anne Middleton,*  
*and all travelers to uttermost shores*

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## Part Four

Chapter 1

*About the Author*

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*Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time ...*

JOHN KEATS

“Ode on a Grecian Urn”



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# PART ONE



I LIVE in three time zones simultaneously, and I don't mean Eastern, Central and Pacific. I mean the past, the present and the future.

The television news is on, Venn's at his lab, and I'm reading *Auctions & Acquisition*—one of the trade mags in my field. People and their property often get separated. Other people want to keep their assets hidden. Nothing is ever lost, but continents and centuries sometimes get in the way. Uniting people and possessions; it's like matching orphaned socks through time.

According to A & A, a small museum between Salem and Marblehead has acquired a large gem. It isn't the gem that interests me. It's the inscription and the provenance. Anything having to do with Mughal India gets my attention. Anything about the Salem Bibi, Precious-as-Pearl, feeds me.

Eventually, Venn says, he'll be able to write a program to help me, but the technology is still a little crude. We've been together nearly three years, which shrinks to about three weeks if you deduct his lab time. He animates information. He's out there beyond virtual reality, re-creating the universe, one nanosecond, one minute at a time. He comes from India.

Right now, somewhere off Kendall Square in an old MIT office building, he's establishing a grid, a data base. The program is called X-2989, which translates to October 29, 1989, the day his team decided, arbitrarily, to research. By "research" they mean the mass ingestion of all the world's newspapers, weather patterns, telephone directories, satellite passes, even arrests, every television show, political debate, airline schedule ... do you know how many checks were written that day, how many credit card purchases were made? Venn does. When the grid, the base, is complete, they will work on the interaction with a personality. Anyone. In five years, they'll be able to interpose me, or you, over the grid for upward of ten seconds. In the long run, the technology will enable any of us to insert ourselves anywhere and anytime on the time-space continuum for as long as the grid can hold.

It will look like a cheap set, he fears. He watches "Star Trek," both the old and new series, and remarks on the nakedness of the old sets, like studio sets of New York in 1940s movies. The past presents itself to us, always, somehow simplified. He wants to avoid that fatiguing unclutteredness, but knows he can't.

Finally, a use for sensory and informational overload.

Every time-traveler will create a different reality—just as we all do now. No two travelers will be able to retrieve the same reality, or even a fraction of the available realities. History is a big savings bank, says Venn, we can all make infinite reality withdrawals. But we'll be able to compare our disparate experience in the same reality, and won't that be fun? Jack and Jill's twenty-second visit to 3:00 p.m. on the twenty-ninth of October, 1989.

Every time-traveler will punch in the answers to a thousand personal questions—the team is working on the thousand most relevant facts, the thousand things that make me me, you, you—to construct a kind of personality genome. Each of us has her own fingerprint, her DNA, but she has a thousand other unique identifiers as well. From that profile X-2989 we can construct a version of you. By changing even one of the thousand answers, you can create

different personality and therefore elicit a different experience. Saying you're brown-eyed instead of blue will alter the withdrawal. Do blonds really have more fun? Stay tuned. Because of information overload, a five-minute American reality will be denser, more "lifelike," than five minutes in Africa. But the African reality may be more elemental, dreamlike, mythic.

With a thousand possible answers we can each create an infinity of possible characters. And so we contain a thousand variables, and history is a billion separate information bytes. Mathematically, the permutations do begin to resemble the randomness of life. Time will become as famous as place. There will be time-tourists sitting around saying, "Yeah, but have you ever been to April fourth? Man!"

My life has gotten just a little more complicated than my ability to describe it. That used to be the definition of madness, now it's just discontinuous overload.

My project is a little more complicated.

THE RUBY RESTS on a square of sun-faded green velvet under a dusty case in a maritime museum in an old fishing village many branches off a spur of the interstate between Peabody and Salem. Flies have perished inside the case. On a note card affixed to the glass by yellowed tape, in a slanted, spidery hand over the faded blue lines, an amateur curator has ballpointed the stone's length (4 cm) and weight (137 carats), its date and provenance (late 17c., Mughal). The pendant is of spinel ruby, unpolished and uncut, etched with names in an arabized script. A fanciful translation of the names is squeezed underneath:

*Jehangir, The World-Seizer*

*Shah Jahan, The World-Ruler*

*Aurangzeb, The World-Taker*

*Precious-as-Pearl, The World-Healer*

In adjoining cases are cups of translucent jade fitted with handles of silver and gold; bows studded with garnets and sapphires, pearls and emeralds; jewel-encrusted thumb rings; jewel-studded headbands for harem women; armlets and anklets, necklaces and bangles for self-indulgent Mughal men; scimitars rust dappled with ancient blood, push-daggers with double blades and slip-on tiger claws of hollow-ground animal horns.

How they yearned for beauty, these nomads of central Asia perched on Delhi's throne, how endless the bounty must have seemed, a gravel of jewels to encrust every surface, gems to pave their clothes, their plates, their swords. Peacocks of display, helpless sybarites consumed not with greed but its opposite: exhibition. And how bizarre to encounter it here, the spontaneous frenzy to display, not hoard, in this traditional capital of Puritan restraint. Spoils of the Fabled East hauled Salemward by pockmarked fortune builders. Trophies of garrisoned souls and bunkered hearts.

The Emperor and his courtiers pace the parapets above the harem, caged birds sing, and the soft-footed serving girl follows them at a measured distance, silently fanning with peacock feathers at the end of a long bamboo shaft. Below, a hundred silk saris dry on the adobe walls. Lustrous-skinned eunuchs set brass pitchers of scented water at the openings in the zenana wall. Old women snatch them up, then bar the venereal interior to the dust and heat. Above it all, the Emperor—a stern old man, sharp featured in profile with a long white beard—contemporary of the Sun King, of Peter the Great and of Oliver Cromwell, splices the sunlight with uncut gems. The world turns slowly now in a haze of blood, then glitters in a sea of gold, then drowns in the lush green that chokes his palace walks. He is the monarch of rains and absurd fertility, bred with dust and barrenness in his veins, this fervent child of desert faith, believer in submission now given infidel souls to enslave, unclean temples to scourge and a garden of evil fecundity to rule. How useless it must have seemed to those ambassadors of trade, those factors of the East India Company, to lecture an exiled Uzbek of monochromatic utility and the virtues of reticence.

The gaudiness of Allah, the porridge of Jehovah.

“CLOSING in fifteen minutes,” barks the curator, a pink-domed curiosity of a man with bushy white brows, a pink scalp and billowy earmuffs of white hair. His name is Satterfield; the captions are in his hand.

“Comes from the Old English. Slaughter Field,” he offers, uninvited. Perhaps he sees me as a searcher-after-origins, though nothing in my manner or dress should reveal it. High Yuppie Venn would say: toned body, sensible clothes, cordovan briefcase, all the outward manifestations of stability, confidence and breeding.

“Masters,” I say. “Beigh Masters.” I give him my card—estates planning, assets research. No one ever asks what it means: they assume I’m a lawyer or with the IRS. Back on the seepster’d isle, three hundred years ago, we were Musters, or musterers. A clever vowel change, in any event. “Looks like ‘Bee,’ sounds like ‘Bay-a,’ ” I say.

According to a brass plate in the foyer of this old clapboard house, now museum, on an outcropping of cod-, lobster- and scallop-rich granite where a feeble estuary meets the sea from this house a certain William Maverick once guided sloops of plundering privateers. Each conqueror museums his victim, terms him decadent, celebrates his own austere fortitude and claims it, and his God, as the keys to victory. William Maverick credited his own hard-knuckled tolerance of cold and pain and hunger to a Protestant God, and credited Him for guiding his hand over the sun-softened Catholics. It pleased him to know that “shark-sucking Spaniards would have an eternity to offer their novenas.”

It is perhaps not too great an adjustment to imagine pirates sailing from comfortable homes like this after laying in a supply of winter firewood for the wife and family, and chopping in then some fish and salt pork, molasses and tea, before raising a crew and setting out to plunder the Spanish Main. We’re like a reverse of Australia: Puritans to pirates in two generations. Our criminal class grew out of good religious native soil.

The first Masters to scorn the straitened stability of his lot was one Charles Jonathan Samuel Muster, born in Morpeth, Northumberland. In 1632, a youth of seventeen, C.J. Muster stowed away to Salem in a ship heavy with cows, horses, goats, glass and iron. With an extraordinary vision he must have had, to know so young that his future lay beyond the waters, outside the protections of all but the rudest constabulary, at the mercy of heathen Indians and the popish French. By 1640 he was himself the proprietor of a three-hundred-acre tract that he then leased to an in-law recently arrived, and then he returned to Salem and the life of sea trade, Jamaica to Halifax. Curiosity or romance has compelled us to slash, burn and move on, ever since.

Twelve years ago I did a research project which led to an undergraduate thesis on the Musters/Masters of Massachusetts for Asa Brownledge’s American Puritans seminar at Yale. Everything I know of my family comes from that time when I steeped myself in large transfers, sea logs and records of hogsheads of molasses and rum. And that seminar set in motion a hunger for connectedness, a belief that with sufficient passion and intelligence we can deconstruct the barriers of time and geography. Maybe that led, circuitously, to Venn. And to the Salem Bibi and the tangled lines of India and New England.

THE YEAR that young Charles Muster secreted himself among the livestock aboard the *Gabriel*, a noblewoman in India died in childbirth. It was her fourteenth confinement, and she was the

Emperor's favorite wife. The Emperor went into white-gowned mourning while supervising the erection of a suitable monument. So while the Taj Mahal was slowly rising in a cleared forest on the banks of the Yamuna, young Muster was clearing the forest on the banks of the Quabaug and erecting a split-log cabin adjacent to a hog pen and tethered milch cow. Three years later, barely twenty, he abandoned the country and built the first of many houses on a overlook commanding a view of the sea and the spreading rooftops of Salem. For the rest of his life he scuttled between civilized Salem and the buckskinned fringes of the known world out beyond Worcester, then Springfield, then Barrington, gathering his tenants' tithes of corn and beans, salted meat and barrels of ale, selling what he couldn't consume and buying more tracts of uncleared forest with the profit, settling them with frugal, land-hungry arrivals from Northumberland, while running his own sea trade in rum and molasses, dabbling in slave sugar and tobacco, in cotton and spices, construction and pike building. He was a New World emperor. Even today, five townships carry his name.

In this Museum of Maritime Trade, the curator's note cards celebrate only Puritan pragmatism. There is no order, no hierarchy of intrinsic value or aesthetic worth; it's a fly's eye view of Puritan history. More display cases are devoted to nails, flintlock muskets, bullet molds, kettles, skillets, kitchen pots and pothooks, bellows and tongs than to carved-ivory powder primer flasks and nephrite jade winecups. The crude and blackened objects glower as reproaches to Mughal opulence, glow as tributes to Puritan practicality. As in the kingdom of tropical birds, the Mughal men were flashy with decoration, slow moving in their cosmetic masculinity. What must these worlds have thought, colliding with each other? How mutually staggered they must have been; one wonders which side first thought the other one mad.

About children reared in our latchkey culture, I have little doubt. I've heard their teachers on guided tours, listened to the whispered titters of Cub Scouts and Brownies: *We beat those Asians because our pots are heavy and black and our pothooks contain no jewels. No paintings, no inlays of rubies and pearls. Our men wore animal skins or jerkins of crude muslin and our women's virtue was guarded by bonnets and capes and full skirts. Those Indian guys wore earrings and dresses and necklaces. When they ran out of space on their bodies they punched holes in their wives' noses to hang more gold and pearl chains. Then they bored holes in their wives' ears to show off more junk, they crammed gold bracelets all the way up to their elbows so their arms were too heavy to lift, and they slipped new rings on their toes and thumbs so they could barely walk or make a fist.*

No wonder!

I move from unfurnished room to room, slaloming between *us* and *them*, imagining our wonder and *their* dread, now as a freebooter from colonial Rehoboth or Marblehead, and now as a Hindu king or Mughal emperor watching the dawn of a dreadful future through the bloody prism of a single perfect ruby, through an earring or a jewel from the heavy necklace.

The curator returns to an empty darkened room where he can watch me, while lifting the covers off two large, wooden crates. The tea-chest wood is nearly antique in itself, except for the crude, Magic Markered notation: "Salem Bibi's Stuffs." The Salem Bibi—meaning "the white wife from Salem"—Precious-as-Pearl! I have come to this obscure, user-hostile museum to track her down.

The opened crates overflow with clothing, none of it from the Bibi's time. It's like a Goodwill pickup. Satterfield paws through the upper layers, lets them spill around the crates unsorted, still in tangles. Only the moths will know this history.

More layers; the crates are like archaeology pits. I want to stop and examine, but the decades are peeling by too quickly. Not all that survives has value or meaning; believing that it does screens out real value, real meaning. Now we're getting down to better "stuffs" — fragments of cotton carpets and silk hangings, brocade sashes and exotic leggings.

I think we're about to hit pay dirt. An old rug. Satterfield looks up. "Closing time," he says. Museum hours: Closed weekends, Monday and Friday and Wednesday afternoon. Open Tuesday afternoon and Thursday morning.

"I've come a long way to see this," I say. "Won't you let me stay?"

My eyes are more often called steely or forthright than pleading, but to Satterfield they convey, this day at least, the proper respect and sincerity. I get down on my knees, and he lifts.

"Wherever did you get this?"

"A donation," he says. "People in these parts, they have a lot of heirlooms. A lot of seafaring families, grandfathers' chests and things."

"You mean someone had all this in his attic?"

"Friends of the museum."

"Looks Indian," I say. "Indian-Indian, not wah-wah Indian." I hate to play stupid for anyone, but I don't want him to suspect me. Traces of the Salem Bibi pop up from time to time in inaccessible and improbable little museums just like this one. They get auctioned and sold to anonymous buyers. I believe I know her identity, and the anonymous donor.

Mr. Satterfield settles on one knee and lifts out the frayed wool rug with a hunting motif—old, very old—and carefully unfolds it. Inside, there is a stack of small paintings; he lifts one, then two, and finally five crudely framed miniatures from the folds of the carpet. Then he smooths the carpet out.

"Pretty good shape for the age it's in."

I get down on my knees, smoothing the carpet in the manner of a guest who, with indifference but a show of interest, might pat a host's expansive hunting dog. "Well, aren't those very interesting paintings," I say. "Don't you think?" My voice has caught a high note; I want to cough or clear my throat, but it would seem almost disrespectful.

"We don't keep pictures here. This is a museum of maritime trade."

There is surely one moment in every life when hope surprises us like grace, and when love or at least its promise, landscapes the jungle into Eden. The paintings, five in all, are small—the largest the size of a man's face, the smallest no larger than a fist. They make me, who grew up in an atomized decade, feel connected to still-to-be-detected galaxies.

The corners are browned by seawater or monsoon stains. White ants have eaten through the courtiers' sycophantic faces and lovers' tangled legs, through muezzin-sounding minarets and lotus blooms clutched by eager visitors from pale-skinned continents oceans away. But the Mughal painters still startle with the brightness of their colors and the forcefulness of their feelings. Their world is confident, its paints are jewels, it too displays all it knows.

Here, the Salem Bibi, a yellow-haired woman in diaphanous skirt and veil, posed on a stone parapet instructing a parrot to sing, fulfills her visions in the lost, potent language of a miniature painting. She is always recognizable for the necklace of bone. Later, when the Indian imagination took her over, the bone became skulls.

"I need to pack these up," says Mr. Satterfield.

Here Precious-as-Pearl zigzags on elephantback, by masoola boat, in palanquins—the va and vibrant empire held in place by an austere Muslim as Europeans and Hindus eat away the edges.

In the first of the series, she stands ankle-deep in a cove, a gold-haired, pale-bodied child woman against a backdrop of New England evoked with wild, sensual color. The cove overhung with cold-weather, color-changing maples and oaks, whose leaves shimmer in monsoon's juicy green luxuriance. At the water's edge, a circle of Indians in bright feathered headdresses roast fish on an open fire. More braves stand in shallow water, spears aloft, and grotesque red salmon climb the underside of giant breakers. Their wolf-dogs howl, neck hairs rising, as children toss stones in play from the shingled beach. Around her submerged high arched instep, jellyfish, dark as desire, swirl and smudge the cove's glassy waves. Crouched behind her, in the tiny triangle of gravelly shore visible between her muscled legs, black-robed women with haggard faces tug loose edible tufts of samphire and sea grasses. I was right—they were fascinated by us. The artist cannot contain the wonders, fish and bird life bursts over the border.

“Really. It's getting very late.” He begins to turn the miniatures over and folds the ancient carpet over them.

“Where will you be selling them?” I ask, but he shrugs.

“That's up to the owner, isn't it?”

In a maritime trade museum in Massachusetts, I am witnessing the Old World's first vision of the New, of its natives, of its ferocious, improbable shapes, of its monstrous women, the only the Salem Bibi could have described or posed for. Her hips are thrust forward, muscles readied to wade into deeper, indigo water. But her arms are clasped high above her head, her chest is taut with audacious yearnings. Her neck, sinewy as a crane's, strains skyward. Across that sky, which is marigold yellow with a summer afternoon's light, her restless shape itself into a rose-legged, scarlet-crested crane and takes flight.

The bird woos with hoarse-throated screeches, then passes out of sight. The painting could be covered by the palm of my hand.

I lift the final one. I want to memorize every stroke.

In the largest of the series—its catalog name is *The Apocalypse*, but I call it *The Unravished Bride*—beautiful Salem Bibi stands on the cannon-breached rampart of a Hindu fort. Under a sky on fire, villages smolder on purple hillocks. Banners of green crescent moons flutter from a thousand tents beyond the forest, where tethered horses graze among the bloated carcasses of fallen mounts. Leopards and tigers prowl the outer ring of high grass; the scene is rich with crow-and-buzzard, hyena-and-jackal, in every way the opposite of fertile Marblehead. In a forest of blackened tree stumps just inside the fort's broken walls, hyenas lope off with severed human limbs; jackals chew through caparisoned carcasses of horses; a buzzard hops on a child's headless corpse.

Salem Bibi's lover, once a sprightly guerrilla warrior, now slumps against a charred tree trunk. He grasps a nephrite jade dagger hilt carved in the shape of a ram's head and, with his last blood-clotted breath, pledges revenge. His tiny, tensed knuckles glint and wink, like fireflies, against the darkness of his singed flesh. The poisoned tip of an arrow protrudes through the quilted thinness of his battle vest. An eye, gouged loose by an enemy dagger, pendulums against his famine-hollowed cheek, a glistening pink brushstroke of a sinew stretches



connecting it to the socket through which the smoky orange sky shows itself. The lover's or stationary eye fixes its opaque, worshipful gaze on the likeness of the Salem Bibi painted on the lover's right thumbnail.

Near Salem Bibi's dying lover, under a multirooted banyan tree smeared with oils and ashes holy to Hindus, the upper body of a lotus-seated yogi slain in midmeditation holds itself serenely erect. An infant, chubby and naked, crawls from blood-splattered shield to shield inventing happy games. A thief crouches behind a pretty purple boulder and eyes the necklaces of pearls, rubies, diamonds, on courtier-warriors' stilled chests. Broods of long-haired monkeys with black, judgmental faces ring the heaps of dead and dying.

In the clean, green distance beyond the conflagration's range, on a wide road that twists away from ruined forts and smoking villages, a gloomy, insomniac conqueror on a sober-eyed elephant leads his procession of triumph-aroused horsemen, foot soldiers, archers, gunners, lance bearers, spies, scouts, mullahs, clowns, poets, painters, bookkeepers, booty haulers, eunuchs, courtesans, singers, dancers, jugglers, wrestlers, cooks, palanquin bearers, tea pitchers, storytellers, to the next gory and glorious field of slaughter. Their eyes form a perfect, glitter-pointed triangle: Salem Bibi's, her Hindu lover's, the Mughal conqueror's.

On the low-parapeted roof of the fort, Salem Bibi chants stubborn and curative myths to survive by. Her braceleted hands hold aloft a huge, heavy orb of unalloyed gold and a clear multifaceted diamond through which a refracted lion and a lamb frolic in a grove of golden grass as supple as silk. At her henna-decorated, high-arched feet, a bird cage lies on its side; its microscopic door recently ripped off its hinges. The newly exposed hinge glows against the cage's duller metal, a speck of gold-leaf paint.

"Thank you, Mr. Satterfield."

It is a feast of the eyes, and I must steady myself, take a breath, palms outstretched on the museum's floor. You can study it for a lifetime and find something new each time you look. It's like an Indian dessert, things fried that shouldn't be, hot that should be cold, sweet that should be tart. And an art that knows no limit, no perspective and vanishing point, no limit to extravagance, or to detail, that temperamentally cannot exclude, a miniature art forever expanding.

*Go, Salem Bibi whispers, her kohl-limned sapphire eyes cleaving a low-hanging sky. Fly long and as hard as you can, my co-dreamer! Scout a fresh site on another hill. Found with me a city where lions lie with lambs, where pity quickens knowledge, where desire dissipates despair!*

THERE ARE no accidents. My Yale thesis on the Puritans did lead to graduate school, but it also took me here. My life with Venn Iyer, father of fractals and designer of inner space, is not an accident.

I drove out to this museum to track down for a client what he claims is the most perfect diamond in the world. The diamond has a name: the Emperor's Tear. For eleven years, I have been tracking the Salem Bibi, a woman from Salem who ended up in the Emperor's court. I know her as well as any scholar has known her subject; I know her like a doctor and a lawyer, like a mother and a daughter. With every new thing I've learned, I've come imperceptibly closer to the Emperor's Tear. In that final Götterdämmerung painting, she is holding it: I have seen the Emperor's Tear atop its golden orb. Three hundred years ago, it existed in her hands; I know where she came from and where she went. I couldn't care less

about the Emperor's Tear, by now. I care only about the Salem Bibi.

I should have let the keyboard do the tracking, but, like shamans and psychics, I've learned to go with hunches as well as data bases. The easiest way for a white-collar felon to make a stone vanish for a while is to loan it to a small, grateful museum under a plausible alias. And if the museum, finding itself too cluttered already, and out of its curatorial depths, were to sell it in some obscure auction in Europe or Canada, and the owner just happened to show up and buy it, he'd have title, free and clear, wouldn't he?

What I hadn't figured on was the secret life of a Puritan woman whom an emperor honored as Precious-as-Pearl, the Healer of the World.

SHE WAS Hannah Easton, only surviving child of Edward and Rebecca Easton, née Rebecca Walker of Brookfield, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Brookfield, today, lies about midway between Worcester and Springfield in the foothills of central Massachusetts, east of the gentle floodplain of the Connecticut River. In Hannah's time it was Indian country: smack in the middle of Nipmuc land with Mohican and Narragansett to the south, Pennacook and Abnaki to the north all the way to New France.

The dates are not important. I'll summarize them later.

All of Massachusetts must have been an extended family. A cousin shipped out, an in-law followed, an uncle got news of free land, a chance for rebeginning ... like villages in Poland and Italy and Ireland emptying for America two centuries later.

Case in point: my family.

Rebecca Easton née Walker's grandmother was a cousin of Charles Jonathan Samuel Muster's father; her family had been legitimate passengers on the *Gabriel* (two years later to sink off Pemaquid, Maine) that Charles had stowed away on. Vaguely, then, I'm part of the story, the Salem Bibi is part of the tissue of my life. Walkers appear on the ship's records, but Charles Muster never did. They'd probably settled in Boston, or even Rhode Island. Perhaps primogeniture did him out of land or inheritance, but by 1653 Elias Walker, his wife and infant daughter, Rebecca, arrived in Brookfield and leased, from their distant relatives the Masters (the three sons of Charles Jonathan Samuel Muster), three hundred acres of prime Quabaug River bluff and bottomland. By all accounts, Elias Walker was a frugal farmer and stockman; by 1665, he had purchased his land outright. My direct Masters ancestors pocketed the cash and further dissipated their father's wealth.

At that time, Brookfield was a hesitant hilltop Puritan outpost deep inside Nipmuc country. Elias Walker held the usual attitudes of his time, and ours, toward the Indians: they are children; they are trusting; they are proud and generous. Even capable of nobility. But at heart they are savages: bestial, unspeakably cruel. He counseled, and cultivated, the path of mutual avoidance. Eight years later, the Walkers gained a neighbor, a sickly looking but resourceful recent arrival by the name of Edward Easton, who purchased with his English savings a brown ribbon of a field, a rickety shed, a cabin with privy and two barns.

The stage was set: older bachelor farmer with education and some money. The robust farmer's daughter next door was only eight years old when first glimpsed, but no one was going anywhere. By the time she was fifteen, in 1668, Rebecca Walker was married to Edward Easton.

By seventeen, she'd had two pregnancies. The second, a daughter named Hannah, survived. In the remotest of ways, Hannah Easton is a relative of mine. Hannah Easton would walk the parapets of a Mughal fort, would hold the world's most perfect diamond in her hands.

This was country for those raw and strong enough to hack prosperity out of wild, volatile land. And this was country for the middle-aged and bitter, discontented city dwellers and immigrants to start over in the wilderness, where the Prince of the Air was said to reign. Edward Easton was forty-three (already living on borrowed time, statistically speaking) the

year that Hannah was born.

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*1632 Charles Jonathan Samuel Muster arrives in Massachusetts*

*1653 Elias Walker and family arrive in Brookfield.*

*Birth of Rebecca Walker.*

*1661 Arrival of Edward Easton.*

*1668 Marriage of Rebecca and Edward.*

*1670 Birth of Hannah Easton.*

Of Edward Easton's life before the winter of 1661, when he showed up in Boston, little is known. He sailed out of the Downs soon after Charles II, the Stuart restored to the English throne, had Oliver Cromwell's embalmed body dug from its secret grave and decapitated, and the head stuck on a pole in Westminster Hall. They sent potent messages in those days. Edward, a Roundhead sympathizer, must have caught the first packet boat to the colonies.

In the Old World, Edward Easton had been an East India Company man with a sedentary occupation, a doughy-skinned, soft-bellied, fact-fevered scribe hunched over ledgerbooks, letters and memoranda in the Company's Leadenhall Street offices in London. Back in my junior year abroad, in London, I checked the Company's books and papers stored in the India Office in Whitehall. Edward Easton's entries stand out because of the singular primness and angularity of his handwriting.

I knew my own family's names and fragments of rumored history, of course. When I got to England, I went straight to the shipping records, the baptismal records, the recordings of deeds. Seeing the names of relatives, reading of their deaths and births and marriages and placed me within a context that I found somehow thrilling, as though nothing in the universe is ever lost, no gesture is futile. I've since then doubted the significance of many of those innocent discoveries, but seeing those "Salem Bibi's Stuffs" boxes on the floor of the maritime museum, those Mughal paintings, brought the importance of those feelings back.

A twenty-year-old girl, really, contemplating her place in the universe and the ways of the world had appropriated an ancestor, a man who had gone before her, and though he was writing of strangers, she cherished his observations like an intimate letter from home:

*A petty ruler on the Coromandel Coast of India is given the gifts of armour, a wool coat and a spying glass.*

*A ship on its way to Masulipatnam is stocked with 1420 hogs and 250 oxen.*

*The mother of a factor who died on board a Company vessel sailing home from Fort St. George is denied the diamonds she claims he was bringing back for her.*

*A cabin-boy is whipped and his lacerations brined for having stolen a vial of musk.*

Did the cabin boy live to be a sea captain? Did the petty ruler wear his bribe to his next battle and did the armor save his skin? Was Edward Easton's mind so demented with detail that he fled to the wilderness? Or did he merely look up and out the grimy window, see the

forest of mastheads and yard-arms on the river and the white Crosses of St. George fluttering like birds on the Company's pennants and finally walk away from his old self? As his wife and his daughter would do, again and again.

Edward Easton arrived in Boston with sufficient skills and savings to make him desirable as a son-in-law to any Boston patriarch with too many daughters, but within weeks he bought himself a horse and cantered westward. Was it disgust with the old life, or was he enticed by a new, wholly imagined one that drove him away from safe and stable port towns like Boston and Salem? Did the Puritans, with their gloomy quest for godliness, hold for him more terror—as, later, they would for Hannah—than the presumed Satan who reigned over Pennacook, Abnaki and Nipmuc?

What is known is that he headed for the outer rings of settlements, stopping over first in Billerica, then in Chelmsford, then in Lancaster—where he was invited to sup at the home of John White, the wealthy landholder, and offered a modest bookkeeping job by White's son-in-law, the Reverend Joseph Rowlandson, Lancaster's first minister—then in Worcester, and finally either running out of energy or finding in Brookfield the dreamscape for starting over.

For this accidental frontiersman, the 1660s was a decade of self-transformation. Like an alchemist who turns dross into gold, he hardened his slack and bookish body into the wiriness of a tiller, transformed the forest into farmland, and disenchantment into desire. And when that desire grew carnal and kept him awake all the summer nights of 1668, he married, after perfunctory courtship, the Walkers' bonny lass, strong and handsome, even comely, he wrote in that angular hand, with domestic skills and teachable aptitudes worthy of a freeborn woman of this new land.

He felt he might give her twenty years of husbandly service, begetting upon her a brood of worthy offspring. Already, he was cultivating a second career as village selectman.

I gasped the moment I opened Brookfield town registries and saw the same angular handwriting I'd known from Leadenhall. I thought then, with all the melodrama of undergraduate training, of Keats's odes, or of his "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," for here I was perhaps the only scholar in the world who had traced the work of an obscure clerk from London to Massachusetts. I could sense all the movements in his life, his determination to remake his life before it was too late, to go west to the colony instead of east, where surely his East India clerkship could have led him. I felt the same psychic bond with Edward Easton that Keats did with the revelers on the Grecian urn. He became a footnote in my thesis, but an assurance to me that my research in that era was somehow blessed. Of all the billions of births, the fires and floodings that separate me and my time from Easton and his, that the mundane work of this lone man should be preserved struck me as nothing less than miraculous and conferred on me a kind of wonderstruck confidence.

For most English colonists and certainly for Indian sachems, however, the 1660s was a win-or-die decade. So while Edward Easton was cutting trees down to stumps, raking his fields, sowing his wife's fertile womb, prizing rocks from the ground and hauling them to build a wall, burying his firstborn, trading wool stockings and blankets for herbs with the Nipmuc, the Wampanoag chief, Metacomet (whom the colonists renamed Philip), was suing and skirmishing to oust alien usurpers, and the French *habitants* were selling flintlocks to Ninigret, sachem of the Narragansett, in hopes of stirring up anti-English riots.

In 1671, on September 29, the day that Hannah turned a year old and first toddled for

enough away by herself to have to be brought back by a solicitous Nipmuc, and the day that in a cold drafty hall in distant Plymouth, the colonial government curtailed the sovereign powers of the Wampanoag and humiliated the proud King Philip by imposing a fine of one hundred pounds for violating their laws, Edward Easton, while in his outdoor privy savoring the poetic paradox in an imported, treasured copy of *Paradise Lost* and the physical paradox of constipation's painful pleasures, died of a bee sting.

OF HER MOTHER, the twenty-two-year-old widow whom Hannah lost when the Nipmuc laid siege to Brookfield in the scorched month of August 1675, she had one long, disturbing memory.

Rebecca Easton loved to sing. She sang psalms by the light of a fish-oil lamp, always to the same five or six tunes. And though she could neither read the words to the psalms nor the notes to the tunes that Edward, perhaps in a rare desperately nostalgic moment, had scribbled on the back cover of the Psalter, she taught the child to sing antiphonally with her.

Hannah's memory is of one such psalm-singing night, their last one. Rebecca by the window, her neck long and arched, her throat throbbing with song. A voice so strong and sweet that it softens the sternest spiritual phrases into voluptuous pleas. The greasy, pale light of the lamp; the acute smell of the lamp oil. Rebecca singing each line by herself first then nodding to encourage Hannah; Hannah repeating the line in a quavery, unformed voice. But, Hannah remembers, and this can never be separated from the angelic choir pouring from her mother's breast, there are faces at the window.

Of course, the memory coalesces several frames into a single emblematic moment. The child sees; the mother does not. The strangers are listening, tomahawks held high, about to smash the window and door, but they are stilled in midflight. The Indians know these songs especially the women who sit in the rear of the church, walking in and out during the sermons but rising with the congregation to sing. Her memory is a window, letting in the fecundity of an unfenced world.

She has also what she calls sightings, rather than memories, of that early childhood on the farm. Rebecca and some Indian helpers must farm alone; Rebecca is a widow. A Nipmuc woman teaching her to clean and dress deerskin. A boy-child promising to grow for her the plumpest squashes and pumpkins, the crispest beans, the brightest corn. A Nipmuc man hunting wild turkeys and pigeons, and she bouncing along behind Rebecca. A season of drought. The same Nipmuc man, Rebecca and Hannah—a frontier family—scraping the ladlefuls of stewed-together berries and bird eggs and ground nuts from a huge, carbon-encrusted pot. Her mother smiling as the Nipmuc presses a steaming gourd of coarse, spiced potage to Hannah's lips. She remembers her face against the soft deerskin of his jerkin.

King Philip changed Hannah's life as completely and as forcefully as King Charles II of England had changed her father's.

All through June and July of 1675, paranoia traveled up and down the Bay Path. Philip was arming his warriors for an all-out war! Wampanoag were breaking into and entering colonists' houses in Swansea and raiding farms abandoned on the thin, frayed neck of peninsular land. Isolated farmers were gathered up and garrisoned, losing their crops and cattle to the marauders. Messengers from Governor Winslow of Plymouth fanned the frenzy. Philip's men were looting and burning Middleborough, Dartmouth, Plymouth. The heathens were axing, scalping, abducting the decent Christian men and women and children

of Mendon.

Hannah dreamed of Philip pressing his war-roused face at the window. Why not? Strange troopers coming through spoke of Philip as though he were an omnipresent phantom. One moment he was staking out pease fields, next moment he was fortifying snake-crowded swamps. And the next, he was impaling scalped heads and slashing the bulging sacs of milk from cows.

Then, on the night of the second of August, Philip's War came to the Easton hearth in the person of Rebecca's Nipmuc lover. If he had intended the marking as disguise, it didn't work. Hannah knew him as her inadmissible father, the only man she'd ever seen her mother with. The child raised her hand. The mother stopped singing, and slowly turned around.

This is the night Hannah has willed herself not to remember. What happened survives only as Rebecca's neighbors' gossip, embellished with the speculations of scholars. The lover, now painted and feathered as befits a warrior, comes to woo her one last time. And Rebecca surprises him. Reading Hannah's eyes, she stands and slowly turns, facing the window without surprise or terror. She stands on a reed rug by the window, the very window where Hannah remembers her having led women and children through psalms, and peels her white, radiant body out of the Puritan widow's somber bodice and skirt as a viper sheds skin before wriggling into the brush. Her body is thick, strong, the flesh streaked and bruised, trussed with undergarments.

The Nipmuc enters the cabin, suddenly immense in his full battle regalia. He cradles the whimpering Easton hound under one arm.

Rebecca scoops Hannah out of her bed, clasps her and weeps as though the child were dead. The Nipmuc jerks his arm, the hound lurches, and a spume of blood leaps from his arm across the table. He swabs Rebecca's old garments in the blood, smears them with his feet over the floor, stabs holes in the cloth as they darken with blood, then hands her something new and Indian and clean to wear.

Outside, a Nipmuc woman who had taught her to sew deerskin into breeches, takes the child. Hannah watches the cabin grow small, and a fireball erupt from the spilled fish-oil lamp, as Rebecca and the Nipmuc take off for the river, and the woman, running hard and low to the ground, cuts into the woods, along the path to the Fitch farm half a mile away. She does not cry, and the vow she makes, bobbing in the arms of the nameless woman she has known all her life, to remain silent about this night, to sustain her mother in the ultimate lie, the ultimate unnatural crime of Puritan life, she will keep for sixty years.

Hannah's subsequent years can be read as a sermon on any topic, as proof of any interpretation. But she wills the memory of this night away; she will orphan herself to the memory, deny its existence, for that is the way her mother has planned it. She alone knows the nature of her mother's disappearance; she must carry the denial of this memory—a lump tenfold heavier than the memory itself—the rest of her life, chastising the lump inside her that is Rebecca with self-doubt and self-hate. Had she been perceived the daughter of a fornicator, not the offspring of an upright widow, no family would have taken her in. It is necessary not only to retain the memory of her beloved, absent mother, but to deny its finer, blinding, lustful image. To preserve above all the orphan's tragic tale above the wicked woman's demonic possession.

Has any child been so burdened? She has witnessed the Fall, not Adam's Fall, Rebecca

Fall. Her mother's Fall, infinitely more sinful than the Fall of a man. She is the witness not merely of the occasion of sin, but of the birth of sin itself.

And I who have studied Hannah's life nearly as closely as I have studied my own would say that Hannah Easton, whatever the name she carried in Massachusetts, in England, in India or even into history to this very day, loved her mother more profoundly than any daughter has ever loved a mother.

I feel for Hannah as the Nipmuc woman carries her off and drops her noiselessly on a pioneer family's doorstep, deflecting forever the natural course and location of her girlhood. And I envy Rebecca as she, impulsively, carelessly, leaps behind her lover, who is already on his horse, and vanishes into the wilderness. She has escaped her prison, against prevailing odds that would have branded her. Her lover might have come to the window that night to kill them both. Instead, he became the first man to read the scene between them and to do something sacred; in the fish-oil glow, to hear the music.



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