
APEKONIT

the first crossing



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For the ones who were loved on both sides of the line.

He became a noted warrior and fought by the side of his red brothers in the campaigns of 1790 and 1791, when they defeated the armies of Harmar and St. Clair.

— MILO M. QUAIFFE, 1913

He had blackened his face before leaving the garrison, in token of his impending fate.

— WAU-BUN, 1856

Before it was anything else it was only a sound a mother made across a dooryard at dusk, when the light went long and gold over the Kentucky cane and the supper smoke stood straight up in the still air and a child down by the creek was not answering. Billy. Billy Wells. There was nothing in it then — no rank, no nation, no blood-price, no treason — only a red-haired boy who fished too late and came up the bank grass-stained and hungry into the last of his ordinary evenings.

He would wear other names before he was done. The people who took him gave him one for the color of his head. The army that hunted those people gave him a captain's bars. The government gave him a salary and a house and a title with a paymaster behind it. And on the last morning of his life he would give himself one more — not a word, not a sound, a thing he painted onto his own face with his own hand — and ride out under it to die. Four names on one man, and each of them a door he walked through, and behind every door people who loved him and people he was betraying, and more often than a heart can bear, the same people.

This is the story of a man who could not stop crossing over. And it is, even more, the story of the blood he carried across — for the strange and tender center of it is not that a white boy was made into a Miami warrior, remarkable as that was. It is that his blood went through the door and kept going, down the years and past his own grave, until a war fought to hold two peoples on two banks of one river ended with his own granddaughter keeping house among the victors, in a white mansion on a green bluff a few miles upstream from the ground where her grandfather's world was broken — the beaten chief's grandchild and the winners' kin folded into a single body, a single marriage, a single christened

child. The line was drawn in gunsmoke. The blood was across it before the smoke cleared, and it is crossing still.

The river runs through all of it. But the river is only the road it happened on.

One thing more, before the cane opens. You come to this story already knowing how the country ends — you may be reading it from inside that ending, on ground these very pages will watch signed away. Set the knowing down. Nobody on either bank of any river ahead of you knows it yet. The men who will burn the towns believe they are defending their children; the men who will burn the stations believe the same of theirs; twice in these pages the beaten army will be the Republic's, and there will be whole seasons when the likeliest map of this continent has no Ohio on it at all. Read it the way they had to live it — forward, in the dark, one choice at a time. And when the choosing comes, and it will keep coming, ask what you would have carried, and whom.

Hold the small name a moment — Billy — before the years come for it.

MOVEMENT I

Taken

CHAPTER ONE

The Station

Kentucky. Spring, 1784.

THE MORNING THEY TOOK HIM, THE FOG WAS ON THE CREEK AND the boy was happy.

He was twelve, or near enough — nobody had kept the page that would have said, the family Bible having gone through a flood and two removals and a burying, the way everything went in that country — and he had come down to the water in the gray before sunup with a cane pole and a twist of line, barefoot, his breath smoking. Kentucky in the planting month smelled of turned mud and cut cane and cold ash and the raw green of things pushing up, and the creek that fed the Ohio lay under its fog like something asleep, and the red-haired boy crouched on the bank of it with his whole life still in front of him and none of it yet strange.

His people were the Wells of the stations — Pennsylvania folk who had come down the Ohio on the flatboat tide after the war, into the stockaded clearings where a family kept its powder dry and its children close and buried its dead between the rows of corn. A station was a farm with its fist closed. Seen from the north bank of the river it was something else again: the newest tooth of a thing that had been eating westward for a hundred and fifty years, set down in a hunting ground no council had opened, by families who called the planting courage — and it was courage, and it was also the reason men would someday come out of the cane. Both of those things were true at once, the way nearly everything in this story is true at once, and the boy on the bank knew neither

of them. He knew the fog, and the fish. His father was two years gone, killed the way station men were killed, in an ordinary hour that turned; his mother gone too; and the children had been parceled out among kin and neighbors as orphaned children were, so that Billy woke each day under a roof that loved him without quite being his. What he had in place of a father was a brother. Samuel, grown, over at the Falls at Louisville, was hardening into the man he would be — a colonel of Kentucky with land warrants in his saddlebag and his name climbing the militia rolls — and the boy worshiped him the plain, uncomplicated way a boy worships the brother who has gone on ahead into the country of grown consequence. He meant to follow. He could see the whole shape of the life that waited for him, Sam's life cut a size smaller: a wife off some neighbor station, a horse, a piece of good bottom land, muster days and corn. It was a fine shape and he wanted it and he would never have a single hour of it.

He had red hair. In that country it was a small joke, the thing the men ribbed him for at the salt lick, the thing that made him easy to pick out of a yardful of cousins — and that morning it was still only hair, still only his, meaning nothing and marking nothing. By nightfall it would be a beacon burning on the wrong side of a war, and it would stay one to the end of his days: the one thing about him that no paint and no coat and no fluent tongue could ever quite put out, on either side of any line he ever crossed.

They came out of the cane while he watched his line. Men of the nations came down into the Beargrass country most springs — the stations were a standing larder of horses, and whatever the treaty men had signed away across the sea at Paris, the war between the peoples had not ended, because not one man who signed that paper had ever owned the war to end it. Some of the men who slipped through that cane had burned towns of their own behind them, and small graves of their own to ride for. A hand closed hard over the boy's mouth and the whole bright

morning swung shut like a door on its hinge, once, and that was all of it. No cry. No last look back at the roof that had kept him. Only — and this he carried to his grave, and it unmade him a thousand times in a thousand places — the smell of the creek as they lifted him off his own bank: mud and cane and cold spring water, the smell of home arriving in his nose in the very instant home ended. He would kneel by ten thousand rivers in the life that was coming, on both sides of the war, in triumph and in grief, and every one of them would hand him that same smell unasked and stop his heart for the length of one breath. The place a man is taken from does not stay behind him. It rides in the body. It comes up out of the water at his feet forever.

By dark he was ten miles north with the Ohio behind him, and every soul who had ever called him Billy was on the far side of it, and the boy who would answer to four names before he died had already lost the use of the first.



CHAPTER TWO

The Carrying

The trace north. 1784.

THEY WENT NORTH FAST AND THEY DID NOT GENTLE HIM.

His wrists learned it first, then his bare feet on the traces. The first night they bound him in a laurel hollow and he lay listening to the low talk around the fire in a tongue that ran and ran and never stopped and started the hard way English did, and he hated it, and hated them, and was twelve years old and certain he would be dead before the moon turned — and even then, even that first black night, some part of him leaned toward the sound of the language the way a cold thing leans toward heat. He could not have told you why. He would spend his whole life unable to tell anyone why, and mostly give up trying.

Then the tending began, which was harder to bear than the fear, because a boy can set his back against cruelty but nobody teaches him to hold the door against care. On the second day the water at a ford came up over his depth, and one of the men who had stolen him swung the boy onto his own shoulders without a word or a glance — the way you shoulder a thing you mean to keep — and carried him across; and Billy rode his enemy's back over the cold current with his heart slamming and his bound hands, for the first time, simply holding on. The strength under him was the same strength that had clapped down over his mouth on the creek bank. The same hands. It did not come out even. It never came out even, not that morning and not in the thirty years after, and that was the first true lesson of the country he was being carried into: that the hand which takes you and the hand which keeps you alive are, very of-

ten, the one hand — and a man has to find a way to love it or die of the contradiction.

They fed him what they ate. When he laid his foot open on a stone, someone knelt and took his ankle in a fist hard as a farrier's and packed the wound and bound it, all in silence, with a plain workaday gentleness that reached in past everything his terror had bolted shut. By the time they raised the Wabash he had stopped counting his chances to run at every halt. He told himself it was cunning, a scout's patience. It had a truer name, and he was years yet from being able to say it.

Somewhere on that same watershed, six autumns before him, another stolen child had ridden north on a stranger's back and drunk the whole weary way from a little cup her captor had folded for her out of white birch bark — a Quaker girl of five off the Susquehanna, carried over the mountains into the nations, who would grow old and Miami and prosperous on the Mississinewa and, at sixty, refuse to be rescued back. She and the red-haired boy would never once meet. Neither would ever know the other had made the same crossing on the same rivers with the same double truth pressed into them — the killing at one door and the birch cup at the next spring, both real, both the work of the same people. But the ground they were carried over knew it. The rivers that bore them both knew. And the blood would find it out, generations on, the long slow way, at a graveside neither would live to see.

At the end of the traces stood a town, and the boy did not yet understand that it was a capital. Kekionga — the great gathering of Miami towns at the head of the Maumee, where the Saint Joseph and the Saint Marys came together and made the river that ran down to the lake — the oldest crossroads in the middle of the continent, the portage every empire wanted and the Miami had held and taxed longer than any of those empires had owned a flag. His own people's maps showed it, when they showed it at all, as a rumor and a smudge. To the boy it was cookfires and dogs and the smell of parched corn and a great weight of strangeness.

They took him down to the water and washed the journey off him, and dressed his hair in the way of the people, and clothed him new from the skin out, and then a family he would spend years learning stood in a low doorway and looked at him a long, long while, deciding.

He never once, in all his life, told a living soul what it was to stand in that doorway and be decided over. But the answer was written in everything he did afterward, because from that hour to his last he arranged never to be looked at that way again — he made himself, in every camp and council and parlor on both sides of the war, a man it was flatly impossible *not* to look at: the red-haired warrior, the famous scout, the captain in the blanket, the interpreter every treaty wanted at its elbow. The boy in the doorway learned in one evening which side of the looking a person can bear to live on, and he chose it, and he never let it go.

And the family looked, and talked low, and reached out their hands. And they took him — took him the way you take in a son, the way you take up a lost thing and shut the door behind it against the cold. Took him. There is no better word, and that one holds all of it, both halves at once, the theft and the tenderness, exactly the way the whole country would hold them forever, in the single word.



CHAPTER THREE

The Making

Kekionga. 1784–1790.

THE NAME CAME THE FIRST YEAR, AND IT CAME AS A JOKE, WHICH is how the truest names always come.

Apekonit. The wild carrot — the little red-crowned root that grows along the wet bottoms, red at the top like the head of the boy who now went everywhere among them. A child tossed it across a fire one evening the way children do, a hand reaching to rumple a new brother's hair; and the boy answered to it, because a child answers to what he is called; and then the seasons turned, and the turning did what no ceremony could — it wore the joke smooth. *Apekonit* stopped being a thing said about him and became the sound that meant him, the word an aunt called toward the river when the food was ready, the name inside his own head when he thought of himself at all. There came a day in his fifteenth or sixteenth year when a passing trader said *Wells* and the old name went over him like a coat cut for a smaller cousin, oddly shaped, not quite his anymore. Nobody had asked him to change. Nobody ever asks. That is the mercy of it and the horror of it both — that a self is not signed away in one terrible morning but simply, quietly, grown out of, the way a boy grows out of a shirt, with no morning on which he agrees.

The nation raised him the way it raised its own: through hunger and the ending of hunger, through cold and mockery and endless patient work in the woods. He learned the hundred moods of water and the reading of a bent stem and the long discipline of stillness that is nine parts of a hunter's art, and he was good at it, and then he was better than

good, and the town began to say so — and to a boy twice orphaned before he was ten, handed from house to house and then carried off whole, the praise of the town was a richer food than meat. He grew toward it like a plant toward a south window. By seventeen he sat at fires that mattered. The red hair that had been a joke was something else now, a thing the people had claimed for their own — *our red-haired one* — and among the Miami, in those good years, that was the whole of what it meant: belonging, plain as a brand on a good horse. He would be a marked man his whole life, singled out at a hundred yards in any crowd on earth. Only here, only now, only among these people, did the mark mean simply *ours*, with nothing dark underneath it. He would spend the rest of his days aching after the feeling of standing somewhere it was that simple, and never once find it again.

And Kentucky? Kentucky went the way a first language goes when a second one closes over it — not erased, only folded under, surfacing in dreams. He did not forget his brother Sam. He forgot what Sam was *for*. The Falls, the warrants, the muster days, the good bottom land he had meant to plant — they thinned into a story about a boy who no longer existed, a face at the bottom of a river he had stopped rowing back to. He had meant to live his brother's life cut a size smaller; he was living instead a life no one in his blood could have dreamed or borne to hear told. And here is the thing the whole long grief of his story turns on, so let it stand out plain and early: he was not suffering it. He was happy. Truly, quietly, ordinarily happy — a young man with a people and a place and a rising name, loved and loving, at home. He was the living proof of the one thing the whole bloody business of the frontier was built to deny: that the line was a door, and it opened both ways, and on the far side of it was not darkness at all but a town full of cookfires, and a family, and a name a boy came running to at dusk.

Then, in the leaf-fall of 1790, the country he had stopped belonging to sent an army to burn the town he belonged to now.

They came up from the Ohio under a general named Harmar — fifteen hundred of them, regulars and Kentucky militia, station men, some carrying griefs as real as any in the towns they were marching on: raided farms, dead brothers, children buried between the corn rows. Hold on to that, because it is the hard part, and the story is dishonest without it: the column came up the trace on grief, to make grief, every man in it certain he was making his family safe. And the nations broke it — let the columns blunder deep among the cornfields and the fords, then cut them apart in pieces and sent the survivors reeling back the way they came. The young man they called Apekonit was in that fight. But the hour of it he carried longest was not the killing. It was the running — the hour the towns were emptied ahead of the soldiers and the whole soft body of the nation was put on the traces at once, grandmothers and babies and cook-kettles and the old men, north, away from the fire. He ran with them. He carried what was pressed into his arms. These were his aunts stumbling under their loads, his small adopted cousins, the family that had stood in the doorway and chosen to keep him. And moving somewhere in that same terrified column, near enough to have reached out and touched, was a young woman of seventeen who had herself been carried into these people out of a white world — the Susquehanna girl, grown now, running north from the American army with the nation that had made her its own. Neither of them knew. They ran in the same dust from the same soldiers toward the same dark tree-line, two children of the same strange door, and no one told them, and the only witness was the ground under their feet — the ground that would keep the secret two hundred years and then, in its own slow time, hand it back.

He was eighteen, or twenty. He had been shot at now by the land of his birth, and had shot back, and the hair under his cap was as red as the day they took him, and not one soul in that fleeing column found it strange that their red-haired one ran among them with an old woman's

kettle banging at his knee. That is what belonging is. It is not a warmth in the chest. It is a place in the line when the line has to run.

And if your own people were anywhere on this continent in those years, they were somewhere in this chapter — in the column, or in the crowd, or at a station waiting for word of one or the other. There is no seat outside it. There never was.



CHAPTER FOUR

Wanangapeth

Kekionga country. 1790–1791.

HER NAME WAS WANANGAPETH, WHICH IS A SWEETNESS IN THE moving air, the softness that comes on ahead of warm weather; and she was the daughter of the sharpest mind on the continent.

Her father was Mihšihkinaahkwa — the Little Turtle — the war chief who had just broken two invasions of the young Republic and stood, in that hour, as the most dangerous soldier between the two oceans: a tall, grave, unhurried man whose coolness his own enemies set down in their reports, who would sit before long in Philadelphia parlors and quietly out-think the philosophers who came to marvel at him. Wanangapeth had grown up inside that mind's house, at the head of the Maumee, in the smoke and the low talk of the nation's councils, watching the men who ran a war come and go from her father's fire. A woman raised in that house missed nothing. She had her father's stillness and his eye for the long shape of a thing, and when her gaze settled on the strange red-haired young man the town had taken in — the one who laughed a half-beat late at every joke because he was still turning it out of one language into the other, the one marked at a hundred yards, the one who belonged to the people wholly and yet had come to them across the very line the whole war was being fought to hold — she saw him for exactly what he was, and for exactly what he might one day cost, and she chose him anyway.

Because it was a choice, whatever else it also was. Her father arranged it, surely; a war chief does not marry a daughter to the confederacy's

most gifted go-between by accident, and binding the door's own child to the chiefly blood was statecraft as much as anything Little Turtle ever did across a treaty table. But the Miami did not sell their daughters, and the women of the chiefly line held more true weight than any council speech — they held the portage and the trade and the quiet say-so that outlasted eloquence — and no father of that people could have handed such a daughter to a man she had set her face against. Somewhere in those months there was an hour, unwritten and now unrecoverable, in which a young woman looked at the nation's strangest young man and did not turn away. That hour is the hinge of everything that follows, and no one set it down, because the things that decide a bloodline are almost never the things anyone thinks to record.

Whatever moved in her that hour stayed hers. But what she did needs no guessing, and it was the bravest single act in this whole story, and it will appear in no history of the war, because the war's histories were kept by men, about battles. Every other woman of her rank married into her own world. Wanangapeth married the seam itself — the boy from the far side of the line — and then held that marriage together, unbroken, through the hardest years the valley ever knew, while the two men she loved most on the earth drifted, slowly and then all at once, onto opposite banks of the same river. She would not live to grow old. She would give him children who carried both worlds in a single skin, and then a fever would take her young; and one of those daughters, not yet born, not yet dreamed of, would grow up to keep house in a white man's mansion on the Maumee bluffs, married into the winning side, a few miles and one long lifetime downstream from the field where this girl's own father was about to be broken. Wanangapeth was the place where that blood changed rivers without ever once leaving home. She married the door, and everything came through it — the grief and the grace of it both, for a hundred and fifty years.

And in the season she was given to him, Apekonit stood at the very summit of the only world he had. Let the good of it be felt, all of it, because it is about to be spent to the last coin. He had a name the town called at dusk, a wife who was the daughter of the greatest man in sight in any direction, a nation that said *ours* and meant it. And that November, with the marriage still new, the high water of his whole life came in — on a frozen bottom at the head of the Wabash, where the Republic sent a second army blundering up into the cold and the confederacy closed over it in the gray before dawn and did not let go until the snow was a butcher's floor. Six hundred of the invaders dead in the leaves by midday; the cannon taken; the officers run down by the shine of their epaulettes; the worst morning the army of the United States has ever had, then or since. He was in it. He stood at last light on the ground his father-in-law had chosen and set like a snare, among the men of his own town, in the enormous ringing quiet that comes down after a thing that total, and he understood that he was standing on the winning side of the world. Two armies destroyed in thirteen months. The door they had dragged him through as a weeping boy had turned out to open on the strong house of the whole continent, and his wife was the daughter of the man who held it, and his red hair burned in the dusk like a struck match, and every warrior who saw it was glad. He was twenty, or near it. He would never be so happy again — but stand where he stood before you smile at him from the settled country, because in the winter after the Wabash the confederacy's claim was no dream. Two armies of the Republic destroyed in thirteen months. The British at Detroit promising. In the East, men in Congress asking out loud whether the Northwest was worth a third try, and voices answering no. On the honest maps of that winter the likeliest boundary ran along the Ohio — and the country you may be reading this from was the improbable outcome, not the certain one. History had not decided. It never has decided, at the moment it is happening; that is the one mercy of living forward and the

whole terror of reading backward. What came next would have to be argued for, chosen, funded, drilled, and paid in blood, march by march, by men not yet persuaded — and far to the east, in a camp that did not exist yet, a sleepless general the newspapers had not yet learned to fear was about to be handed the argument.



Apekonit. Say it soft. The wild carrot — a thin red-crowned root that grows along the wet bottoms of that country, and that any child sent to pull one for the pot learns the trick of, because it does not come up whole. Pull it and it snaps, and leaves half of itself down in the dark of the ground, and goes on living there, and comes up again.

They named him for the color of his head — for the one thing about him that could never be hidden or washed out or grown over — and in the naming they turned the mark of his strangeness into the sound of his belonging, so that the very thing that said he is not one of us became the word they called him home by. That is a kind of love the men who were coming to take this country never learned, and never wished to learn. They drew their lines to keep the peoples apart. These people made kin of a stolen enemy child and called him by his difference at every meal, tenderly, until the difference was only his name. It ran the wrong way, that love — the door that opened both directions, the blood that would not stay on its own side — and it was the thing their conquerors feared in them past any war-cry.

Pull the root, and it breaks, and half of it stays in the ground, and lives.

Remember that. It is going to matter more, in the end, than all the rest of it together.

MOVEMENT II

Chosen

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sum

The Miami towns. 1792–1793.

THE CERTAINTY DID NOT BREAK ALL AT ONCE. IT LEAKED.

Understand what the two years after that frozen morning at the Wabash actually were, inside the winning towns: they were triumph, and triumph, like a house thrown up too fast, has bad drains. The nations had destroyed two armies. The confederacy stood higher than it ever had or ever would again. The British at Detroit smiled and made promises and weighed out powder by the keg. And into the towns all through those same seasons came the ordinary traffic that victory drags in behind it — envoys under white flags, ransom parties, strings of white captives going one way and recovered ones coming back the other — because when the guns rest the two worlds have to do business, and business needs a man who can carry a meaning across the line without spilling it, and there was exactly one such man at the head of the Maumee, known to both sides at a hundred yards by the color of his head.

So they sent him to the edge, and it was natural, and it was even an honor, and it was the quiet beginning of the end of the only happiness he had ever managed to keep. For eight years he had lived at the warm center of one world. Now his working days were spent out on its cold rim, where it ground against the other one. He walked prisoners between the lines. He sat across the fire from frightened women and worn-down men and heard, coming up out of their mouths, the flat creek-water vowels of the Beargrass country — the sound of his own drowned boyhood

in the mouths of strangers his brother's age. And word had started to travel the other way as well, along the traders' roads: down at the Falls of the Ohio the Wells of Louisville had learned that their Billy was alive after all — red-haired, renamed, grown into a warrior, and sitting in the councils of the enemy. Blood has its ways of reaching across a war. It was reaching for him now.

What turned in him over those two years, nobody saw, because it was not a thing that can be seen. It was no lightning-stroke, and it was no failure of the heart; he never once stopped loving the people, defended them, fed them, mourned them to his last hour on the earth. It was a sum, adding itself up the slow way ice closes over still water on a cold night, one thin layer at a time. The faces of the prisoners. His brother's name in a trader's mouth. And, heaviest of all, the thing his own father-in-law had begun saying aloud in council, patiently, at ruinous cost to his own name, letting younger men call him a coward to his face for saying it: that the third army would not be beaten. That the Republic did not tire and did not forget and did not run short of men, and would keep coming up the rivers, year on year, until the arithmetic was finished. Little Turtle had counted it first and counted it truest — the plainest voice for peace in the whole confederacy was the voice of the man who had won its greatest battles — and the son-in-law sat at his elbow and turned those words into English for the Americans, and heard them, in the turning, twice: once for the treaty table, and once, slowly, for himself.

He took his father-in-law's own conclusion and carried it one step past where the old man could afford to go. Little Turtle reasoned: the war cannot be won, so let us make our peace as a people, standing. Apekonit reasoned: the war cannot be won, so someone the Americans trust had better be standing in the gap when the peace comes, or the peace will only be a longer grave. Whether that was wisdom or only a homesick man dressing his longing for the creek bank in the good

clothes of statesmanship, he himself most likely never fully knew — because no man ever does. A man's true reasons are a braided rope, and all he ever feels of them is the pull.

It is easy to judge him from a settled country. So do it honestly: put yourself at that fire's edge with both languages in your mouth. Stay, and you will fight beside your aunts' sons against a Republic that does not lose the same war twice the same way, and you may live to watch the towns burn with your children inside the burning. Go, and you will carry the war roads of the family that raised you to the men who mean to use them. Stay is a betrayal. Go is a betrayal. There is no third door; there almost never is. And whatever you just chose, in the second it took you to read this — notice how quickly you chose it, and be slower with him.

The fact of it is one clause long. He decided. Everything else that happens to him is the cost of the deciding.



CHAPTER SIX

The Parting

A place on the Maumee. 1794.

THE OLD PEOPLE TOLD IT THIS WAY, AND NEEDED IT TOLD THIS way, and maybe that is the truest thing about it.

He did not slip off in the dark. He could have — slipping through woods unseen was his one great gift, he was the best-moving man on either side of the whole war — but the story the valley kept says he would not do it that way. With Wayne's army grinding its slow road north and the year bending toward its crisis, he went to Little Turtle and asked him to walk out a little, the two of them alone, to a place they both knew on the bank of the Maumee, beyond any ear. And there, the story says, he told the old man plainly. *I now leave your nation for my own people. We have long been friends. We are friends yet — until the sun reaches that height —* and he lifted his hand to a point in the sky. *From that hour we are enemies. Then if you wish to kill me, you may. If I wish to kill you, I may.* And when the sun stood where his hand had been, he crossed the river and went east through the trees to find Wayne's army, and did not look back, and the old man let him go.

Whether it fell out in just those words, no one can now say; there was no third person on that bank to write it down. But hold on to what the story insists upon, because a people are exact about the one thing they most need to be true. It insists that the betrayal was done by appointment, in daylight, face to face. It insists on a truce measured against the old clock of the sun, the way honorable men once measured out a duel. It insists that the leaving man handed the staying man the right to kill

him and took the same right back into his own hand — that they parted not as traitor and betrayed but as two equals inside a code neither of them would break. The valley had watched these two men love each other across the worst line ever drawn on the continent, and it could not bear for the parting to have shamed either one, and so it kept the parting in a shape that shamed neither. That is what such stories are for, and it is no small thing they do.

What is past all doubt is smaller and harder. A red-haired man walked into Anthony Wayne's camp that summer with the whole map of the confederacy folded up in his head. And back at Kekionga a woman stood in the doorway of her father's nation, married to the man who had just walked out of it to help destroy it — and did not gather up her children and cast the traitor off. Not that season. Not ever. Someone had told her; who, and in what words, and at which fire, is gone past all recovering. Whatever was said, here is what she did: when the sun passed the height and the two men of her life became enemies by arrangement, Wanangapeth stayed his wife. It took a longer courage than the speech on the riverbank, and no one ever made a story out of it, because the stories were made by men and were about the ones who left — never about the woman who stayed, which is the harder thing by far, and makes no scene that a singer can carry.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Timbers

The Maumee rapids. August 20, 1794.

THIS WORK THAT SUMMER WAS TO KNOW THINGS, AND GOD HELP him, he was better at it than any man alive.

They made him captain of the spies, which was only a name for what he already was: the one man in Wayne's Legion who could walk into the forest wearing the forest, pass for the thing he had actually been, and read the war-roads like a letter in his own hand, because his own hands had helped write them. His little band were half-wild men, prisoner-takers, riders in paint, and the army traded stories about them around its fires. But the stories were beside the point. The whole slow machine of Wayne's advance ran on knowing — where the camps stood, which fords were watched, how many warriors and how green the corn, which nations were still in the alliance and which were quietly slipping out of it — and every scrap of that knowing ran through Wells, and every scrap of it was a house he had eaten in, a ford he had been carried across at twelve, a man whose jokes he could have finished. The army had a clean word for what he did. It called it intelligence. There is an older and dirtier word for a man who gives up the secrets of the people who raised him, and he knew that word, and he swallowed it down whole every morning like a bitter ration, and did the work well anyway — because to do it badly would only have meant more dead on both sides and the same ending in the end. There was no version of that summer in which he came out of the woods with clean hands, and he did not lie to himself that there was.

On the morning of the twentieth of August the two armies met among the timber below the rapids of the Maumee, on ground where a tornado had thrown the great trees down years before, so that the whole fight went forward over a wreckage of trunks and upturned roots taller than a man. Wayne's Legion came on through the fallen wood with the bayonet — farm boys and debtors and second sons two years in the drilling, most of them scared to the teeth of a forest that had eaten two armies whole, going forward anyway because the man behind them had built them to — and the confederacy's line bent, and broke, and ran — and ran straight to the one place its whole strategy had counted on, the gates of the British fort standing just downstream, the fort of the ally who had smiled and promised and weighed out all that powder. And the British shut the gates. The men who had staked everything on the empire's word came pounding up to its door with the enemy at their backs and found it barred against them, and learned in that single afternoon, in their own hunted bodies, the thing Little Turtle had spent two years trying to tell them across the council fire: that the empire's promises were cannon carved out of wood.

Somewhere forward of that Legion line, where the knowing men rode, was a red-haired man on ground whose every tree and bend bore a name in the language that had replaced his first one, hearing the fight break exactly the way he had known — the way he had helped make certain — it would break. And running rearward through the smashed timber were men of Kekionga, men of his own town, faces he had danced beside at his own wedding. Whether any one of them looked up and saw him standing there among the victors, no one ever wrote down, and of all the things in this story it is the one a person most hopes he was spared.

He had been right. The old chief had been right, the wife's whole nation had just proven it in blood, and the crosser had helped prove it with his own two feet — all three of them now standing inside the same terri-

ble, faultless arithmetic, on opposite banks of one battlefield, in the wreck of the world that had lifted a weeping boy off a creek bank and made him a son. A man can be entirely right and lose everything except the being right. It happens far more than the histories care to say. It pays out nothing at all.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Greenville

The treaty ground. Summer, 1795.

A YEAR LATER THEY SAT DOWN ACROSS A TABLE WITH THE WHOLE broken world laid out between them, and the work of that long summer was words, and the words all went through the one man. Both directions. Every day for six weeks.

Interpreter is a small, gray word for what that was. Sit a moment inside it. For six weeks, every sentence the beaten nations spoke to the Republic, and every sentence the Republic spoke back — the drawing of the line, the surrender of the country, the little reserved squares of ground the Americans kept for their forts that would swell into cities — every word of all of it passed through the throat of a single man who was son to the losing side and captain to the winning one, so that each side, hearing its own hard meaning come back at it in the other tongue, heard it spoken in the voice of a man who was family to them both. The treaty that pried open the whole Northwest was spoken twice over, and one of the two speakings, in each direction, all season long, was his.

And when the business was done — the line drawn, the marks made, the peace declared — the old chief rose to speak for the Miami. He said that he was satisfied. He spoke of what his people would need in the changed world the paper had just made. And then, before the assembled commissioners of the government that had beaten him, set down in the official record of the day, the war chief of the Miami asked one particular thing: that this man Wells be stationed by the United States at Fort Wayne, to live there as the resident interpreter.

He asked for him back.

Not forgave him — asked for him. In open council, on the record, in the enemy's own paper, which was the most public place a man of that century had, Little Turtle reached across the very table the war had set between them and requested the return of the son-in-law who had walked away from him on a riverbank a year before to help ruin his nation. Send him home, the old man was saying. Post him at the head of the Maumee, on our own ground, in the house of his marriage. The Republic heard nothing in it but an administrative convenience, and granted it without a second thought. The two men heard what it truly was. No embrace was written down, no speech of reconciliation — that century did not keep its feelings in its minutes — only the request itself, lying there in the record to this day like a hand left open on a table, palm up.

So he went home. That is the plain fact underneath all the rest of it. The crossing was made, the war was lost, the betrayal was finished and paid in full — and the road it had all led down ran straight back to the town they had carried him into at twelve, to a post at his father-in-law's side, to the house where Wanangapeth had held everything together with no speech and no witness and no story to her name. The government believed it had hired an interpreter. What it had actually done, without ever noticing, was ratify a family.



Captain Wells. This was the Republic's name for him, and it is worth feeling the difference in the kind of it. The nations had named him for his body, for the red crown, for the one true thing about him that could never be hidden. His own blood people, taking him back, named him for a function — for what he did, and what he was worth to the machine. One name tells you what a man is to a family. The other tells you what he is to a government, and it comes with a wage, and it can be taken away.

He wore it eighteen years, and the honest thing to say is that he wanted it. The boy who had grown toward the town's praise like a plant toward a window did not stop needing the light because he had changed windows. Captain, agent, the government's own man at the head of the Maumee — every title was one more voice saying ours, and to be claimed was the single hunger the taking had planted in him at twelve and that he never once outgrew. The nations had claimed him by adoption, in love. The Republic claimed him by commission, for use. He spent his whole life either unable to tell the two apart or unwilling to admit that they were different — because a man who has been ours to two warring peoples has to believe that both of them meant it, or else stand in the wreckage and call one of his two lives a lie.

A rank is a name with a paymaster standing behind it. When the paymaster's war finally came, in the summer of 1812, the name would come due and present its bill, and he would pay it in full, on a lake shore, with his face painted black.

CHAPTER NINE

Philadelphia

Winter, 1798.

NINE OR TEN TIMES THAT WINTER THE FRENCHMAN OPENED HIS door to them, and kept his fire banked high because he felt the American cold in his bones, and this is the one chapter where the whole hard story stops and warms its hands, so let it be told warm.

They had come east together, the chief and the son-in-law — government business, and the doctors, for Little Turtle's gout had begun the long siege it would keep up to the end, and the great world's curiosity, which took the Miami chief up the way it took up any marvel. He sat for his portrait at the Republic's own request, by the same hand that had painted the President; the canvas had seventeen years to live before the British burned it with the Capitol. Somewhere in those eastern months an exiled Polish soldier, one broken revolutionary knowing another on sight, pressed on the old chief a pair of small pistols with a charge to fire them on the first man who ever came to rob his people of their rights — a gift that would ride in a granddaughter's memory clear to the end of the century. Everything gentle in the whole story seems to have gathered itself into that one Philadelphia winter, as though it somehow knew there would not be another.

And in the rooms of Monsieur Volney — a philosopher going patiently about the business of collecting a continent onto paper — the two of them did a thing neither had ever done in his life: they sat down together, day after day, and wrote the language down.

Picture it plainly. The Frenchman with his lists — *water, fire, hand, heart, I love, I am afraid* — asking in his French-bent English; Wells turning each word over and setting the Miami of it before his father-in-law like a stone laid on a blanket; the old chief weighing it, because he weighed everything, and giving back the true word in the same grave voice that had commanded the slaughter at the Wabash; and the pen scratching, and the fire ticking down, and the cold Philadelphia rain against the glass. Nine or ten evenings. A short vocabulary, tucked into the back of a traveler's book. Not one of the three men in that room could have dreamed what those lists were carrying — that the nation's own words, set down that winter by a foreign science, between a beaten chief and the son who had helped beat him, would lie in the paper two hundred years like seed under snow, and rise again in the mouths of Miami children in Oklahoma and Ohio long after everyone who could have spoken them was gone. The years would lose the chief's face when the painting burned. They kept his voice. It was kept here, in these rooms, in these few cold weeks, by the two of them working shoulder to shoulder — six years, almost to the season, after the sun passed the height on the Maumee.

That is the whole of the scene, and it needs nothing added to it. A father and a son who had chosen opposite ends of a war, in a strange city, in the dead of winter, writing down the one thing they still held in common and could neither lose nor leave behind — the homeland small enough to carry in the mouth. Every joining of the two worlds that the ledgers of that valley would spend the next hundred years tearing apart sat there for nine or ten evenings by a fire, quietly working. It could be done. For those few weeks it was done. It was never, by the two of them, done again.



CHAPTER TEN

The Agency

Fort Wayne. 1800–1805.

FIVE YEARS NOW, AND THEY DESERVE TO BE TOLD SLOWLY, BECAUSE they are the only ordinary years the man ever got, and ordinary was the one thing his life almost never made.

The post at the head of the Maumee — Fort Wayne they called it now, the name of the very general he had scouted for bolted onto the ground of his own marriage, an irony he lived so far inside he had likely stopped tasting it — the post was tables and scales and account-books: annuity goods to be weighed out, treaty silver to be counted, traders to be licensed, grievances to be carried up the line. He was the hinge of the whole machine the peace had built, and the machine ground down people he loved, and he worked it anyway, on the one belief that had steered his entire crossed life: that the grinding would go a little gentler with him at the hinge than with any stranger the Republic might send in his place. Some years he was right. But the whiskey came up the rivers regardless, wagon after wagon, and did to the towns what no army ever had; and his father-in-law argued against it to every white man of standing who would sit still to listen, in the same measured voice the philosophers had admired, and the wagons kept coming; and the two of them, the old chief and the agent, worked their opposite ends of a bargain they both privately knew for a slow defeat, because every fast defeat had already been tried and buried.

But these years are not really the agency. These years are the house.

A house set where the rivers meet, at the old carrying-place, in the smell of the portage seasons — horses in the yard, a fire in the kitchen, the ordinary racket of a family. It was Wanangapeth's country, and there is no window a person can look through to see the inside of it, so listen instead for the sounds: four children in the rooms. Ann. Rebecca. A boy they named William Wayne — *Wayne*, the army's name, the fort's name, stitched onto their own son, for reasons no one ever wrote down and this family never explained, because this family's namings were never once careless and never once innocent. And in the spring of 1800, a last daughter, Polly, who carried also the Miami name Amehkoonsihkwa, and whose grown face would one day be kept — when every book the Republic printed had let it go — in the archive of her mother's own people.

Four children in a house where three tongues crossed at the supper table: Miami from their mother and the town, English from the other half of their father, and between the two the easy borderland creole every such kitchen has ever spoken. Four children with a grandfather who was the most formidable man of the age and who came to that house — the lodge out in the yard, the porch shade, the gray years and the gout arriving together — and was, to them, not the mind of a confederacy at all but only the old man who opened his hand and showed them small heavy wonders across his palm: a pair of pistols out of Poland, which the youngest of them, five years old in the last good year, would carry in her memory down the length of a whole century, along with two entire songs and the most of a third, and the trick of splitting a porcupine quill, and the exact weight of a hand laid on the crown of her head.

Not one of those days got written down. Only this can be said for certain: that in the very middle of this ruinous story there were some two thousand mornings on which a man twice orphaned, twice renamed, twice a traitor, woke in one house beside one woman and their children and was — the word has been earned at last — claimed, wholly, by peo-

ple to whom he was not a scout or an asset or a marvel but simply the plain furniture of love: a father at the table, a husband in the doorway, a man whose red hair was going quietly to rust and gray and whom nobody in the room thought remarkable in the least. Happiness keeps no records. It is the one thing in the whole archive that never learned to write. Every other force in this story kept its accounts in ink; happiness kept five silent years at the head of the Maumee and left not a single line — and that silence is the best evidence there is that the man was, for once, and briefly, and entirely, home.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Fevers

Fort Wayne. 1805.

THE SICKNESS CAME UP OUT OF THE WET LOWLANDS THAT SUMMER the way it came most summers, on the bad air off the rivers, into the towns.

What the records keep of her death is one short clause: the year, 1805, and the fevers along the rivers, and nothing more — no day, no last week, no place of burial. The woman who had held the seam of this whole story together got from the keepers of the record the same thin handful of words her own granddaughter would one day be given in a family book. There will be no deathbed here — no lamplight, no last words, no final meeting of the eyes — because none was ever written, and to invent one would only be to fill her silence with a stranger's voice, and she is owed far better than that. The room was left empty. We can do no more than stand in the door of it.

So this chapter, too, is the house — the same house as the last one, turned now into the language of afterward. It is the kitchen where the shape of one woman's work still lived in the placement of every pot, so that the aunts and the neighbor women who came — and they came; the people did not leave a house full of motherless children to fend for itself — kept reaching for things a half-reach from where their own hands would have kept them, and set each thing back, every time, exactly where she had left it. It is a five-year-old girl named Polly for whom that whole terrible year would survive as almost nothing at all — *they told me later it had been fevers along the rivers*, she would say as an old, old woman, re-

porting the blank in a child's memory — because five years old keeps the weight of a hand on its head and lets the calendar go, and the mercy of that and the theft of that are the same single fact. It is a boy called Wayne, and two older girls who understood exactly what had happened, which is worse. And it is a man of thirty-five standing in the door of the empty room.

Count what this man had already lost, and how each loss had come to him. Kentucky, torn away at twelve by a hand over the mouth. The cause of the nation, given up by his own decision on a riverbank, by appointment, with the sun for a witness. Every loss of his life until now had arrived wearing a face — a taking, a choosing, a treaty, a commission — a face he could look at and argue with and set his wits against; he had made himself, precisely, the great negotiator of losses, the man both empires sent to stand in the middle of the worst of them. And now here was the fever, which has no face and keeps no appointments and cannot be reasoned with or interpreted for — the first loss of his whole life that was nobody's decision at all — and it had taken from him the one person who had never once stood on the far side of any line from him. There was no code to part under this time. No height of the sun. She had been the single claim on him that never competed with the others, the one treaty both his nations had silently kept, and the fever tore it up in a week and never once met his eyes.

And for the only time, he did not cross over. Mark it, because it may be the truest thing he ever did. After every other loss in his life he had gone somewhere — over the river, over the lines, east into the government's rooms; motion was the only shape his grief had ever been allowed to take. But after Wanangapeth there was no line anywhere, on any map in the world, with what he had lost waiting on the other side of it, and so he stayed. He stayed at the head of the Maumee, in the house, with the children — and the staying, in a man built out of nothing but crossings, was the largest act of love he was ever to perform, and no record any-

where thought to set it down. The records were busy. It was 1805; there were treaties that year; the account-books were full.

The anchor of the seam was cut. Everything that comes after happens without her, and he never once stopped feeling the size of the place where she had been — the rest of his life reads only as the conduct of a man whose center has been taken out of him: the overwork, the flares of temper, the almost frantic reaching after his children's futures, the long slow lean toward a black morning seven years off on a far lake shore. Seven years were left to him, and in his bones he already knew how they would end. She, at least, was spared the knowing of it. That was the one mercy in the whole business, and it was the fever's doing, and not the record's.



MOVEMENT III

Returned

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Sending

Fort Wayne, c. 1807–1809.

THE QUIETEST CROSSING OF HIS LIFE HE MADE WITH A WAGON AND a letter, and nobody has ever called it a crossing, and it was the largest of them all.

He sent the children to Kentucky — to his brother Samuel's world, the Louisville that had gone right on becoming the country of consequence while their father became a thing that country had no column to hold. He sent his Miami children, Little Turtle's own grandchildren, down to the white kin to be schooled and finished and made legible; sent them across the very line he had spent his whole life failing to stand on only one side of. There was no scene to it, no speech, nothing anyone thought to write down — and yet in this act, more than in the betrayal on the riverbank, the man settled the shape of everything that came after him.

Weigh what he knew when he loaded that wagon. He knew, better than any living soul — he had made a whole career of knowing it — that the reckoning was coming due; that the towns were dying by the wagonload of whiskey and the country by the treaty-acre; that his father-in-law's peace had bought years and not a future; that the nation his children had been born into was being subtracted off the map inside his own lifetime, in the very ledgers he himself helped keep. And he knew the one thing those ledgers could not subtract: a name in the white world, a schooling in the white world, a piece of ground held by a paper the white courts would honor. He had watched the machine long enough to know

exactly which of its instruments protected and which destroyed — and that they were the same instruments; the deed that fenced you in was the deed that kept you standing; the dog in the yard ate the yard, but the wolves ate faster. So he did the coldest warm thing a father in his place could do. While the children were still young enough to take the change, he began turning them from Miami children the map would erase into American women the map would carry. He sent Amehkoonsihkwa away to be made into Polly. He knew to the grain what it would cost her, because he had paid the same coin himself, from the other direction, in a doorway at Kekionga thirty years before, and no man alive knew better how much of a self a change of world could spend.

Before you nod at the wisdom of it, stand a moment at the tailgate. Keep them, and they are Miami in a country that has decided Miami is a thing to be subtracted, and you will live to watch the map close over them. Send them, and they are safe, and salvaged, and going — Kentucky voices, Kentucky manners, a mother's songs thinning in them year by year like smoke in a room with the door left open. Choose, if it looks clear from where you sit. Take your time over it. He had none.

The far end of that wagon is a long, bitter road: the daughters finished in Kentucky, then entered on a church roll at Fort Wayne — *ladies of refinement and intelligent piety* — then married off into the world of accounts, Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Hackley and Mrs. Judge Wolcott; the son named Wayne drowned young in the lake with the conqueror's name on him like a stone at his neck; and, three generations on, the whole family struck clean off the tribal rolls, *removed therefrom by reason of separation from the nation* — struck, that is, for having done the exact thing their father had loaded the wagon to make them do. The stayed kin, erased for staying. The nation, keeping its name all the way to the boats. His children took the one road; his wife's people took the other; and the fork was right here, in a wagon, in a widower's arithmetic, around 1808 — and no marker stands on the spot, because markers are

for partings, and this was the opposite of a parting. This was a man handing his children across the line so that when the line finished falling it would fall on the far side of them.

He could not have known it would be two hundred years before the two roads met again — in a photograph, in the nation's own archive, his daughter's face handed back to her people over the top of the whole long subtraction. He could not know the bet would win. He only knew it was the one bet the house would let him make. He placed it, and closed up the wagon, and the children went south — and the house at the head of the Maumee, having lost its mother to the fever and now its children to the future, held nothing but the widower and the machine, and the machine ran on.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Prophet

The Maumee and the Wabash. 1808–1811.

A VOICE CAME UP OUT OF THE WEST IN THOSE YEARS PREACHING the undoing of every seam his life had been sewn from, and the unbearable thing about it was that the voice was right.

Tenskwatawa, whom the Americans called the Prophet, and behind him his brother, the one whose name the whole country would soon enough learn to fear — they preached a single, total sentence: unmake the crossings. Put down the white man's cloth and his iron and his whiskey and his God; put down, above all else, his cutting of the land into deeds and the nations into signatures; take back the one people the newcomers had spent a hundred years sorting into factions and fragments and treaty-signers. It was a doctrine aimed like a leveled rifle at the exact life William Wells had built — a life made of nothing but crossings, of the cloth and the iron and the interpreting and the deeds, a life whose whole argument was that the two worlds could be stitched and a man could make his home in the seam of them. The Prophet said the seam was the wound. He said the stitching itself was the sickness. And a great many of the young men, watching their towns die by the wagonload exactly as Wells watched them die, heard in it the first thing anyone had ever said that made sense of the dying, and went to him.

Wells fought it with paper. That is the quiet grief of his last working years: the great scout, the man of the war road and the silent woods, worn down to an agent bent over his memoranda — warnings to the governor, reports of the gathering at the Prophet's town, intelligence, al-

ways the intelligence, the one thing he had ever had to sell to power. He watched the movement rise with an agent's alarm, and with something underneath the alarm that no memorandum could hold: the plain knowledge that the Prophet was naming his own life as the disease. Every crossing Wells had ever made — for love, he would have said, always toward a person — the Prophet named as the very mechanism of the ruin. And Wells had no answer to give him, because at the level of the whole people the Prophet was not wrong. The crossings had been the solvent. The making of kin ran the wrong way for the men coming to take the country, but their cloth and their whiskey and their deeds ran the wrong way for the nation, and a man standing in the seam, whatever his own heart held, was a place where the solvent got in.

He defended the compromise all the same, to his last breath, because his children were made of it. That is the whole of his politics in those years, and it wants no dressing up: he was a man guarding a bridge he half believed was poison, because his own children were standing out on it, and the only other thing he could have done was call his entire life, and theirs, a mistake — and no man does that. So he wrote his warnings. He warned that young Virginian again — the aide from the fallen timber, now His Excellency the governor — who gathered the militia and marched on the Prophet's town at Tippecanoe in the fall of 1811 and burned it, with the Kentucky regiment of Wells's own brother Samuel in the line. The blood family and the undoing of the adopted nation, marching in the one column. Wells was not there. He was at Fort Wayne, in the seam, holding it together with paper, while the men of his birth burned the answer of the men of his adoption — and both of them, in their different ways, were his.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

July

Fort Wayne. Summer, 1812.

HIS FATHER-IN-LAW DIED IN THE JULY OF 1812, AND THE ACCOUNTS cannot agree on where, and that disagreement may be the truest thing they kept.

One tells it that he died in a house the government had built for him — the President's carpenters, the President's physician, the President's medicines set out on a table beside the bed of the man who had beaten the President's armies twice: the great chief breathing his last inside the very hospitality of the power he had failed to stop, gout-ridden, attended, honored, taken in. The other — the valley's own, carried down in its histories — will have nothing to do with the government's house. It lays him in his own lodge, in his own camp at the old orchard where the rivers meet, in the yard fronting the house of his son-in-law, Captain William Wells. The government's roof, or the family's ground. And there is no choosing between them, because the not-choosing is the man. Little Turtle spent his last twenty years being exactly this thing that no one could resolve: the chief the government housed and the chief who stayed in his own yard; the man who signed the peace and kept it to the letter and never for one hour stopped being the mind of a free nation; dined by Presidents, painted for the Republic, and dying — perhaps — a stone's throw from his crossed son's door, in a lodge, in an orchard, on his own ground. His century could not make him one thing. Let him lie in both places. It is the only honest grave.

For the son-in-law it was the anchor cut a second time, and worse than the first, because he was old enough now to see the whole shape of it. Wanangapeth, in 1805, had taken the middle out of him. Little Turtle, in the July of 1812, took the last man alive who had known him on both sides of the crossing — who had watched him be Apekonit and Captain Wells both, and had, in the very text of the treaty, in open council, asked for him back. The one man who had never once made him choose. Whatever passed between them at the end went unrecorded, as the other deathbed had, and needs no inventing; this much is enough. The seam was a man standing alone now. The wife who had held it, seven years gone. The father-in-law who had forgiven it, five weeks gone, just before the world tore open. The children sent south into their safety. He was fifty, or near it, the red gone gray, the greatest man of the age and the truest love of his life both in the ground now, and away to the west the Prophet's brother was riding for the British and a second great war was breaking over the valley the way the first one had. And William Wells sat in his emptied house at the head of the Maumee and waited — one feels it — for something to require a crossing, because requiring a crossing was the only shape his love had ever been let take, and a man does not learn a new shape at fifty.

In August the something came. It came as a letter, and a fort at the far end of the lake, and a girl.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Ride

Fort Wayne to Chicago. Early August, 1812.

THE ORDER THAT KILLED HIM WAS WRITTEN FOR ANOTHER MAN, and he read it as written to his blood.

Far out at the mouth of the Chicago river sat Fort Dearborn, a pin of a garrison on the western edge of everything, and its commander was Captain Nathan Heald, and Heald's wife was Rebekah — Rebekah Wells, daughter of Samuel of Louisville, which is to say the daughter of the brother, the girl out of the very world Billy Wells had been carried off from at twelve. She had married Heald the spring before and gone west to the far fort at his side; and now, in the caving-in August of 1812, with the second war loose and the western nations rising, the order came down from Detroit to give the fort up — to abandon it, hand the government's goods to the tribes gathered round it, and march the garrison overland to safety through a country that was turning against every American in it by the hour.

Wells knew that country the way he knew his own two hands. He knew the march for a death sentence dressed up as an order. And he knew who was inside those walls. So he made the last crossing of his life. He gathered up some thirty Miami — men of his adopted nation, riding out to cover the retreat of an army that was losing the war against them — and went hard up the lake toward Chicago, to bring his brother's daughter out of the trap the government had ordered her into.

Stand back and look at the whole shape of it once, because his entire life had been walking toward this shape: a man stolen from his blood

family as a boy and given a new nation; who left the new nation, by appointment, for the blood one; who married the new nation even so and buried his wife and his father-in-law deep in it; who sent his two-worlds children off toward the blood side to keep them alive; and who now, at the very end, rode the warriors of his adopted people out to save his blood niece from his adopted people's war. There is no flag anywhere in it. There never was a flag anywhere in it. Every mile of that hard ride was toward a face — Rebekah's, the brother's child, the last living thread back to the Kentucky bank where a boy had once gone down in the fog to fish. He had spent thirty years unable to belong to only one side, and he spent his last free days proving why: because he could not stop going toward the people he loved, and that going-toward — not treason, not ambition, not some muddle in the head — was the one unbroken law of the man, from the creek bank to the sand hills, the single thing about William Wells that never once crossed over.

He reached the fort. Men would argue for a hundred years afterward over whether the march could have been refused, whether Heald should have held the walls, whether Wells spoke for staying — and he did speak against the march, the garrison being well supplied — but the arguing misses the only thing that matters here, which is small and wholly human: he got there, to the girl, in time to put himself between her and what was coming.

What was coming had a cause, and the cause must be told, because without it the morning ahead is just savagery out of a clear sky, and it was not. In open council Heald had made the tribes gathered round the fort a bargain: the goods in the government store — the blankets and cloth and paints, and the ammunition and provisions with them — in exchange for safe escort overland, with reward at the journey's end. On the thirteenth the cloth and calicoes were handed out as stipulated. And that same night, on Heald's own order, the rest of the promise was quietly unmade — the powder carried to the sally-port well, the whiskey

rolled out the north gate with the barrel-heads knocked in, all of it poured away into the dark water — while young men of the Potawatomi, suspecting, crept close through the grass and watched the agreed price of the garrison's lives run into the river. By morning both sides of the stockade knew exactly what had been done. Put yourself, for one breath, on the grass side of that transaction: you have kept your half of a bargain with a power that has broken larger ones in your own lifetime, and in the night it pours your half into the river rather than let you hold it. What the young men resolved on then was wrong, and it will be told unsoftened. It did not come from nowhere. Almost nothing in this valley ever did.

And on the evening before the march, a chief named Black Partridge walked into the commander's quarters and did one of the most honorable things in this whole history. He took the medal the Americans had given him from around his neck and laid it down. *Our young men are resolved*, he said. *I cannot restrain them — and I will not wear a token of peace while I am compelled to act as an enemy.* Then he went out into the dark. There were men of honor on every side of the morning that was coming. Not one of them could stop it, and every one of them knew it.

On the morning of the fifteenth of August the gates swung open, and the column formed up to march out along the lake shore, and William Wells took the lead at the head of his little band of Miamis.

And before he climbed into the saddle, he blackened his face.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Sand Hills

The lake shore, Chicago. August 15, 1812.

HE PAINTED IT ONTO HIMSELF WITH HIS OWN TWO HANDS, EXACT-ly right, in the way of a Miami who rides out knowing he will not ride back — and this was the last of his names, and the truest, and it was not a word.

Feel what the paint said, because he meant every stroke of it. It was not despair; despair does not dress itself with care. It was the formal speech of a man declaring, in the one language that had never once needed an interpreter, that he had read the country and knew the sum and was riding out into it anyway, on purpose, for the people in the wagons behind him. It was Miami mourning, worn by the most crossed man on the continent, in the service of an American retreat, to bring a Kentucky girl out alive — every torn allegiance of his whole life gathered up into one black mask and spent at a single stroke. The fort's little band, God help them, struck up the Dead March as the column filed out through the gates. He rode at the very front, marked as he had been marked every day of his life, plain at a hundred yards, the red hair blacked over now, going first.

They had not gone two miles along the shore when the Potawatomi escort — the young men who had crouched in the grass and watched the promised powder go into the well — peeled off from the column's flank and took to the open prairie, and Wells, riding ahead with his Miamis, saw the ground change under him and came galloping back down the line — *they are going to attack; form, now* — and the words were barely

out of his mouth when the volley came ripping down off the sand hills, and after that it was not a battle but a killing, a hundred soldiers and their wives and children caught in the open against many times their number, and the whole of it was over in about the length of a bad dream.

And in the middle of it the thing happened that must not be softened, because he did not earn the softening, and to smooth it away would only be one more telling that failed to keep the whole of him. A young warrior climbed up into the baggage wagon where the garrison's children had been put for safety, twelve of them, and killed them there. Wells, fighting close by, saw it done. And the man who had been the seam his whole life, the taken-in one, the living proof that the line was a door — broke. *Is that their game*, he cried out, *butchering the women and children? Then I will kill too* — and he wheeled his horse and rode for the Potawatomi camp back by the fort, where their women and their children had been left, to do to them the very thing he had just watched done. The crossing collapsed in an instant. In his last minutes the man who was made all of going-toward went, for once in his life, toward killing — toward the exact act, against the exact people, that his whole existence had stood up to refute. Grief did it. Grief is the acid that eats through every crossing there is. It cannot be looked away from and it will not be excused: at the end, for a few galloping minutes, Apekonit was only a man whose people's children had been slaughtered in front of his eyes, which is a man capable of anything, on any side, under any color of paint.

They cut him off before he ever reached the camp. He flattened himself along his horse's neck and loaded and fired and turned in the saddle and fired again, the old woodcraft working beautifully, uselessly, to the very end — until the balls found the horse under him and then found him, and two of the Potawatomi, Winnemeg and Wau-han-see, men who knew exactly who he was, tried to hold the others back and lift him up out of it; and as they carried him a third man, Pee-so-tum, stepped in and

drove a knife into his back, and William Wells died on the lake shore at Chicago with his face painted black, some twenty-eight years, more or less, from the fog on a Kentucky creek.

And then the last of it, which is one single act told in two languages that will never agree. In English it is an atrocity and nothing else: they took his heart, and cut it, and it was eaten. In Miami it is the highest sentence a body can be given: they took his heart, and cut it, and shared it, to take his bravery into themselves — because you do not eat the heart of a coward or a stranger. You eat the heart of the bravest enemy you ever faced in your life, to carry a little of him on inside you, and a man whose heart is carried that way is not desecrated at all. He is taken in. He is made kin, at the very last, by the oldest rite the woodland ever kept. It was the same rite, exactly, that had lifted a red-haired boy off a creek bank thirty years before and made him a son. His life began by being taken into these people and it ended by being taken into these people, and the English word for the beginning was *adoption* and the English word for the end was *savagery*, and they were the one act, and only the color of the paint had changed. And a wounded woman named Mrs. Helm — alive that afternoon only because Black Partridge, the man who had laid down his medal the night before, had wrestled her from a raised tomahawk and plunged her into the lake and held her head above the water while the killing ran itself out — was carried bleeding past the wigwams, and looked up, and saw a scalp swinging from Pee-so-tum's hand, and knew it at once, by the black ribbon tied around the queue, for Captain Wells. The red hair, black-ribboned, going at the last exactly where the whole man had always gone — into the keeping of the people who loved him and killed him, on both sides of a line he was never once able, from the day they carried him over the water, to believe in.

Rebekah lived. She held on through all of it: came out of the sand hills alive, was taken, was ransomed, reached Detroit at last, and lived on for decades more — her uncle's whole desperate ride redeemed in the

only coin he had ever truly cared for, a face he loved, still in the world. He had crossed one final time, and it had worked; the girl was carried out; the thing he rode and died for outlived him. It cost him his life, and for a few last minutes very nearly his soul, and he would have made the trade again without a heartbeat's pause, because he always had. Every crossing toward a person he loved. It was the one law he ever truly kept, and he kept it down into the grave, and past it.



The last name was not a word.

Billy Wells was a mother's voice across a dooryard at dusk. Apekonit was the wild carrot, the mark made into kinship. Captain Wells was a rank with a paymaster standing behind it. And the fourth name — the one he painted onto his own face with his own hand on the last morning of his life — had no letters in it and needed none, because it was not addressed to any clerk or any council, but only to the country and to himself. It said: I know the sum. I am going anyway. For these. It is the only name in his whole life he chose entirely, with no father and no nation and no government holding the pen — and he wrote it in the one medium that can never be entered in a ledger or struck from a roll or lost in the crossing from one language to another. Then he rode out under it, and the country read it exactly, and answered it in kind, and took his heart to keep.

He was named four times. He chose once.

Say the last name by not saying it. It is the black paint on a man's own face, and it means the whole of him, and it is the one thing about him that could never afterward be improved upon, and never, once, let go.

C O D A — T H E F O U R

THEN THE ARITHMETIC HE HAD LOADED INTO THAT WAGON RAN its long sum all the way out to the end, and it took a hundred and eighty years, and it came out, at the very last, in his favor — which is a thing no ledger in this whole story had ever once done, and may never do again.

The four children lived the paper lives their father had bought them. They married into the world of accounts; they held their sections by deeds the courts would honor; they became, on the record, white women of standing on the Maumee — and the price of it came due exactly as he must have known it would. The family was struck clean off the tribal rolls, *removed therefrom by reason of separation from the nation*: erased from their own people for the crime of having been made safe. And meanwhile the nation itself, his wife's people, Little Turtle's people, went the other road entire. In 1846 the Myaamia who had not been carved out by name were loaded onto canal boats at Peru and drawn east up the Wabash, up over the summit at Kekionga — over the old carrying-place their councils had held for two hundred years, the very ground of the house where Wells had married and mourned and waited — and then turned south for the Ohio and Kansas, and three hundred and twenty-five of them were counted ashore at a Missouri landing that cold November. The removed kept the nationhood and lost the ground. The stayed kept the ground and lost the name. His children were on the safe side of the line when it finished falling, exactly where he had set them down. He had read the country right. He had always read the country right. It was the one gift that never once failed him, and it never once made him happy.

And in 1894 an old man in a quiet river town — his own grandson, William Wells Wolcott, named down three generations for a boy off a Kentucky creek bank — sat at a rolltop desk and wrote out a petition

asking the government to write his family *back* into the nation it had struck them from. And in that petition, for the first time on any paper the Republic ever kept, the whole line was set down true and in its right order: Mary Wells Wolcott, daughter of Captain William Wells, killed at Chicago in 1812, and of Wanangapeth, called Sweet Breeze, daughter of Mihšihkinaahkwa, the Little Turtle. The seam, named at long last, by its own blood, on purpose.

And in this century the nation opened up its own archive, and there — set down by its own people, in the language woken back out of the old word-lists — is a photograph. A woman seated in a dark dress and a pale shawl, her hair parted in the fashion of her years, a vase of flowers on the table at her side. Amehkoonsihkwa. The last daughter. The one he sent south to be made into Polly so that she might live through the falling of the line. She lived through it. Her descendants are Miami citizens today, near and many. The face the Republic's own books never troubled to keep, her people kept. The wagon arrived. The bet paid out. The two roads that forked in a widower's cold arithmetic at the head of the Maumee ran their separate two-hundred-year lengths, through removal and through erasure, and came back together at the last in a nation's keeping of its own — the one sum in this whole valley's long accounting that was ever, in the end, worked in love's favor instead of the ledger's.

The rest of that homecoming belongs to the women, and to another telling. This one ends where the man ended: on a lake shore, at the head of a doomed column, his face blacked by his own hand, going first — going, the way he had gone his whole life long, toward the people, across every line they ever drew between them, and past the last one of all.

Wanangapeth.

Apekonit.

Amehkoonsihkwa.

Written down at last, in their own hand — and his, in the only ink he ever wholly owned.

— E N D —





Here ends *Apekonit* — the first crossing of the Maumee Valley storehouse,
and the companion to The General Harrison: this book is the crossing; that
one its daughters. The people are real; where the record is silent, the book
says so.

SET IN EB GARAMOND · THE MAUMEE VALLEY · MMXXVI

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