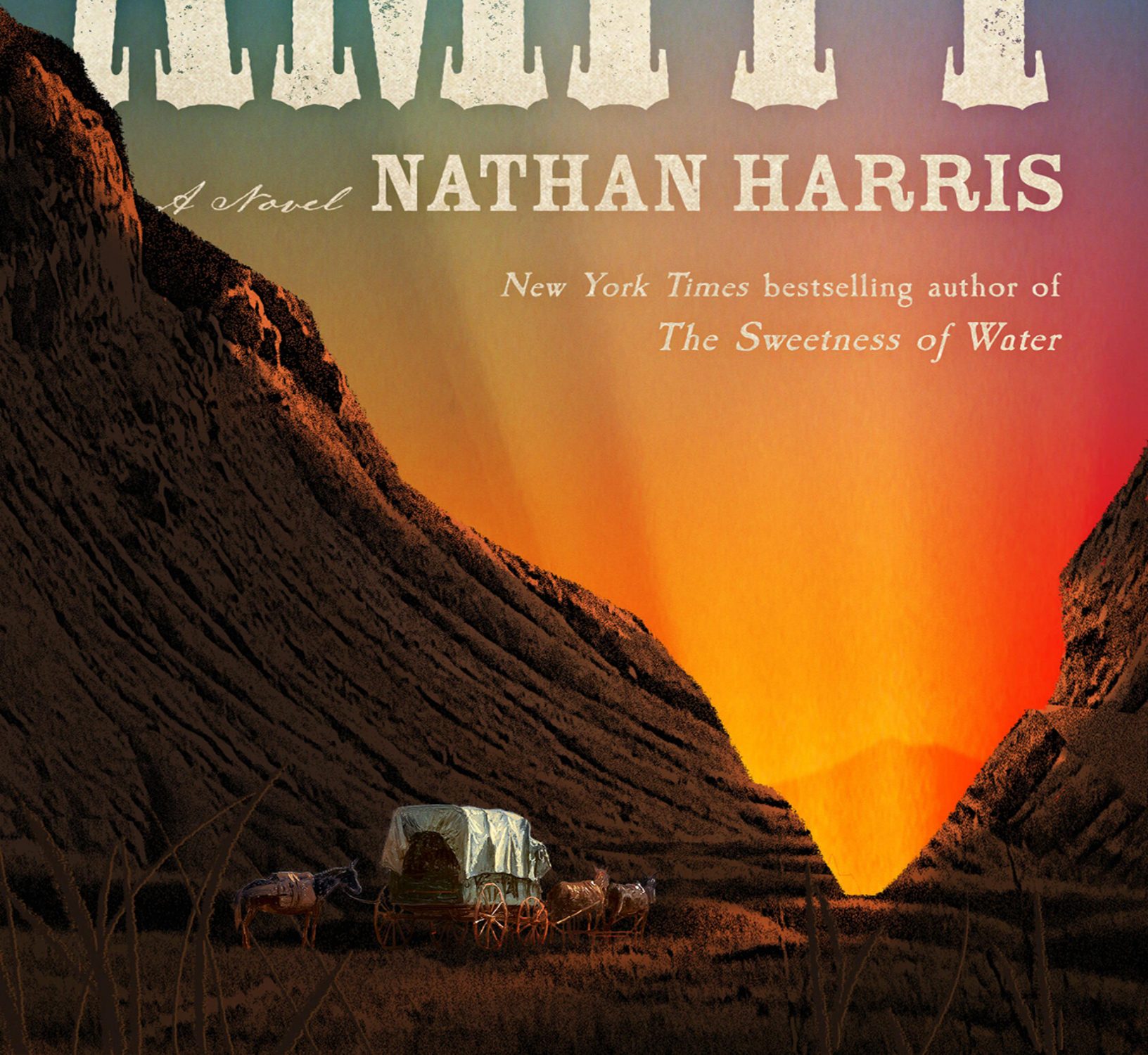


AMITY

A Novel **NATHAN HARRIS**

New York Times bestselling author of
The Sweetness of Water



AMITY

NATHAN HARRIS



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York Boston London

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Copyright © 2025 by Nathan Harris

Cover design by June Park

Cover art: Bridgeman Images (wagon); Getty Images (mountains)

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

littlebrown.com

First Edition: November 2025

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking

events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or email hachettespeakers@hbgusa.com.

Little, Brown and Company books may be purchased in bulk for business, educational, or promotional use. For information, please contact your local bookseller or the Hachette Book Group Special Markets Department at special.markets@hbgusa.com.

Book interior design by Marie Mundaca

ISBN 9780316456432

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025937822

E3-20250806-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[**June: Part One, Mexico, 1864**](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[**June: Part Two, Mexico, 1864**](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[**June: Part Three, Mexico, 1865**](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[**June: Part Four, Mexico, 1865**](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[**June: Part Five, Amity, Mexico, 1866**](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Nathan Harris](#)

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

[Tap here to learn more.](#)



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

NEW ORLEANS—1866

I had few pleasures to call my own. There was the peace found in the attic where I was made to board, the transporting comfort of the books in Mrs. Harper's library, the deliciousness of the sweet bread I purchased with my allowance from the bakery down the road each Sunday of rest. But all of it paled in comparison to the joy brought upon me by Oliver, the terrier I considered my own and the most intelligent, loyal companion one could ask for.

Oliver belonged to Mrs. Harper's daughter, Florence, but I was his chief custodian, and in all ways that mattered he was mine. Florence kept him tethered to the shed in our backyard and each morning I would greet him with his bowl of food (my own creation that involved beetroot, leftover biscuits from the night previous, and a healthy portion of vegetables, all of which went toward preparing meals that rivaled my own). He would be waiting, the tuft of hair that fell from his snout almost imperceptibly, in its own way, breaking apart at the mouth as he seemed to smile upon my arrival. He had auburn hair with white spots all about, short yet curly, and paws that always sought out one's own hands, or one's chest, as though he wished to offer a shake hello. He came up to my calf and was as happy in one's arms as he was walking on the ground. His strength was impressive as well. The pole that kept him fastened would quiver as he leapt in excitement, which I could not get him to quit doing even with excessive instruction.

As I greeted him today, our neighbor, Mr. Claiborne, in his own backyard, was already spying on his gardener, demanding a standard of perfection that might never be met. I offered Mr. Claiborne a wave that was

not returned before setting the bowl down.

This moment with Oliver provided me a buoy, a bit of encouragement to meet the errands that would soon require my attention—cleaning the home entire, preparing supper for Mrs. Harper and Florence, doting on Mrs. Harper as she lay infirm on the couch due to whatever malady she had decided to manifest.

It was not of my choosing, the course of the day. I had my freedom now that the war had come to a close, but as a servant to Mrs. Harper I was still shackled to her in all ways that counted. Which she made known by her incessant need for my help. And so it was that this occasion with Oliver was cut short, for I heard my name, already being called from inside the house.

“Coleman, Coleman, please,” Mrs. Harper bellowed. Even Mr. Claiborne and the gardener shifted at the noise. Already I had prepared her and Florence their breakfast and cleaned up in their wake, and so I was disappointed to learn she required my attention without having had even the smallest chance of a break before the afternoon got underway. But it was no use to complain even to myself. I rose up at the call, dusting dirt from my trousers, and by the time I reentered the kitchen I could already see the dulled glimmer of the gasolier lit up in the parlor through the narrow hallway before me. The floor beneath me clattered as I walked and Mrs. Harper heard as much. She always did.

“Put the kettle on,” she said, and I followed her instructions. The house was ancient, having belonged to Mrs. Harper’s own father and his father before. Large transom windows banked against the full side of the dining room and they cast such a harsh light into the hallway that one could watch dust pirouette in the air as though it were a coordinated show. In the entryway, family portraits hung above the double-wide stairs, men of such identical appearance that I was hardly certain Mrs. Harper herself could discern her kinship to each of them.

There she was, on her chaise, so limp as to suggest she might slip off and plant herself on the ground and carry on moaning. The fireplace at the other end of the room had not been lit since winter, and on the mantel above it sat

the garniture that Mrs. Harper had instructed me to pack before fleeing Baton Rouge two years ago. The antiques there—a bronze statue of three black Moors, a silver-handle dagger—were gifts from Mr. Harper to his wife, and Mrs. Harper would eye them affectionately upon approaching the fireplace, usually under the pretext of cleaning them, when in reality it appeared, to me, that she thought of them as a last connection to the man, and that to make contact with them was to feel herself in his presence once more.

“Mrs. Harper, how do I find you?”

“You tell me, Coleman.”

“You appear as healthy as always, ma’am. Positively radiant.”

“Oh!” She put a hand to her heart, let it drop off the ledge of the couch, fingers splayed, before placing it back on the bulge of her stomach. Although she was bedridden, her episodes did not preclude a sense of adventure concerning where it was she actually took rest. Occasionally one would find her in a guest-room bed upstairs, or perhaps slumped over the kitchen counter after retrieving a glass of water (and having glimpsed me coming by, to give rescue).

She’d shuttered the blinds; better to exaggerate the glow of the gasolier, a maudlin yellow that amplified the direness of her circumstance. Theatrics, but this was the way of Mrs. Harper, and had such effects not been coordinated, I would have thought her *actually* unwell.

“Florence has snuck out to the park with that underwit again,” Mrs. Harper said.

“Hugh,” I said.

“*Hugh*. To be so selfish as to leave me here alone all day. Motivated by nothing but her adoration toward a boy who does not even have the intelligence to recognize her displays of affection.”

“She will be back soon. She knows not to miss supper.”

“That’s *hours* from now. I’m not an idiot, Coleman. I know you’re attempting to pacify me. But when you must resort to lies... it’s not just a failure of your position, but an offense as well.”

I apologized, knowing that doing so accomplished little. Her attachment to Florence had become uncommonly strong when Mr. Harper abandoned the home for Mexico, upon a trip to survey the land there, only to never return. This was the rift that led to all others, for the women had no one else to turn to. Now Florence was of marrying age, desperate to leave home, and what resulted between the two ladies was something of an unfortunate equation: The sum of her mother's desire for the daughter resulted in the daughter's *equally* strong desire to be apart from the mother. The hostile emotions of each individual only increased, and so neither could stand the current circumstance—which resulted in a rising anger, a hatred aimed at one another, an escalating dispute I did my best to avoid.

Mrs. Harper's finger tapped against her breast in rhythm to a tune I did not know and her makeup gave off an unusually pallid color under the light. Other than Florence, no one knew her as I did. I had been hers and Mr. Harper's until the age of nineteen, freed with nothing to my name and nowhere to go, and so I had stayed in her care, as her servant yet with the same duties as those that had come before the war. I was taken from my mother when I was only a boy. This woman was all I had now, and I was quite aware that in times like these, when the friction of her empty life was too much to bear, when her bones and organs jostled and rattled with the torment of her husband's abandonment, the terror of her daughter's pending adulthood, the death of her parents whose house she now occupied, she would find some way to use me: to put me toward some task that might ease the weight that crushed her so.

The kettle, finally, was screaming.

"My shoes are with the cobbler," she said. "I'd like you to return them to me. As soon as possible."

"A lovely idea," I said, speaking over the kettle, as though the house was not currently under assault.

"Bring Florence as well. She knows the man's work and she has the courage to tell him if the quality is unsatisfactory. You do not have the nerve, Coleman. This we both know."

I steadied myself, as for reasons not yet described, Florence despised me more than she despised her own mother. But I was in no position to protest. There was only one other proposal I wished granted. One I always made when leaving the home: “Might I bring Oliver?” I asked.

Mrs. Harper’s hand limply rose up and fluttered about, as though to dismiss me, or to dismiss the very notion that anything mattered at all. I would get her tea ready. Then I would fetch Oliver from his place beside the shed.

The air was damp and listless and the heat was something to wade through, thick as molasses. Our street was a quiet one, and although we were only nominally outside the Garden District it had the same regal air (yet it still managed to give Mrs. Harper fits that she was somehow relegated to outside the bounds of the city’s aristocracy). At this hour one would commonly find the neighborhood empty save for a group of women out for a stroll amongst themselves, or perhaps a nursemaid with a carriage, and so I found it odd to bear witness, at that very moment, to the man across the street staring squarely in my direction. He was seated on the headrest of the park bench there, his feet where one might typically sit. Oliver was in the crook of my right arm. Even he gave the start of a bark.

“Oliver,” I muttered.

The man’s gaze was scrupulous. He was perhaps double my age, his bald head flagrantly hatless, as if to make a statement. He was smoking a cigarette, and I could see the joints of his jaw stabbing against his cheeks with each pull; if such an act might be menacing, then it was so. I knew individuals like this—the sort of man commonly spied in back alleys at dusk, or the last customer at a taproom that even the bartender shies from. I had learned many times over that they were best given a nod and ignored altogether, which was exactly the route I chose on this occasion, offering him even a smile as I turned, took to the street, and went on my way.

Vaguely unsettling, perhaps strange, and yet such a sight still did not come close to disturbing me. For where I was walking toward this man would fit right in, and perhaps he had simply found himself a place to rest the wrong street over. Indeed, the beauty of New Orleans proper was found in its colorful variety of humans—the loons and cons, the beggars and peddlers. I perceived them like a splash of wine in a stew, the mole on a beautiful woman, those little gifts that draw one into what can only be described as a quotidian reverie. An often droll world, for a moment revealing its contrasts, its irregularities, and suddenly becoming very much alive. I witnessed a gentleman on Felicity Street with a fresh-pressed satin waistcoat that seemed brilliant in the sun, his cane clacking, not a bead of dew on his head, his fashion impeccable. And beyond him were a gang I recognized from this block, painters on break, their clothes smattered in a medley of hues, each man laughing so hard they nearly dropped the sandwiches they held.

“Coleman, how you farin’?” one of them said as I passed.

“Rude to ask after the man before his dog,” the second said.

“Happy as a bug, he is,” said the first, putting a hand to Oliver’s head as we passed.

I gave them a nod, a hello, knowing all too well they would give over the exact same words when I walked by next, the ritual of our passing one another. Across the road from me just then a fruit vendor eyed his produce with the same attention I gave a good book in Mrs. Harper’s library, and a pack of boys harassed a man with a custard cart, begging him to serve them for free. You could hardly hear yourself between the clapping of horseshoes and the shouts from passersby and the boy with the newspapers and the beggar bugler who elicited jeers each day for his crass noises and inability whatsoever to bugle at all (although I knew for a fact that the owner of Aster’s always gave him some soup come sundown, a well-deserved show of pity).

Already I was nearing Coliseum Square. The heat was now sweltering, my handkerchief sodden with use. But I had already spotted Florence. I let

Oliver to the ground, and although he spotted her as well, I might mention that he stayed right by my side as we approached.

The fountain behind her sparkled in the sun, its froth white as ivory, like feathers bursting forth from Florence's very being as though she might grow wings.

"What on earth are you doing here?" She looked to Oliver, to me, then back at Hugh, who had just stood up to approach me himself.

"Your mother sent me to fetch you."

"I do not wish to be fetched."

"Ah, but the task is already accomplished."

Her features were strikingly youthful. Plump cheeks gave way to sharp angled brows (consider the child whose toy has been taken), and her red hair fell down the sides and front of her face like elegant colonnades. She was also quite stout, and if I could offer her a compliment, I would reference the considerable presence she had in every room she entered, the great shadow that her personality cast, a vivacity that worked like an enchantment on others that most women would fail to derive on their best nights. She could also cut a man down with only a look, a few quick words. Something I mention only to note that her eyes in that very moment were nothing more than narrow slits of contempt. I could feel myself withering before her, and perhaps my body might have failed altogether had Hugh not drawn near, forcing Florence to act with some semblance of ardor regarding this sudden encounter.

"Please give us a moment," Florence said, permitting him to first pet Oliver.

"He is a splendid little thing," Hugh said. "I do wish I had brought Mona now, had I known."

"I thought the heat might be too much for little Oliver, I don't know what Coleman was thinking," Florence told him, which was an outrageous claim, for Oliver fared perfectly fine in the heat, and it was, after all, her choice to keep him outside tethered next to the shed when she had all the opportunity in the world to allow him indoors. These lies were only part of the greater

tactic of her keeping the dog in the first: some idea that Hugh's dog and Oliver—both of fine pedigree—might breed a litter, thus acting in Florence's mind as some symbolism to represent her and Hugh's future union.

"I will not be going," she said.

"Mrs. Harper will not be happy. You do not want her in a mood come supper."

"My mother will be in a mood regardless of what I do, as you know. I wish I could heal whatever ails her, yet I can't, and fetching her shoes will change nothing. Besides, Coleman, you are the one who will deal with it. I will be *here*. With Hugh. I imagine you wish you could do the same yourself."

"Stay *here*? With Hugh?" The man was now pointing and laughing at a fellow in face paint with an accordion strapped to his chest who was chasing pigeons around the park. "I think you're mistaken."

"Perhaps not with Hugh," she said with a sigh. "But if he is away out of that home, away from my mother and her nonsense..." Her lower lip jutted out, her chin raised in defiance, and I could not help, in that moment, but see the stubborn girl I had appreciated so much in a former life.

That early period together, when I first came to the family, was somewhat difficult to recall. What I know well is that I was given to Mrs. Harper upon her marriage as a gift from her father, sold alongside my sister June, and I was immediately put to use, for Mr. Harper's holdings were clearly more limited than he must have let on to Mrs. Harper's family, and he was barely able to eke out an existence that justified the lavishness of his spending. I was frequently loaned out to whomever in town needed assistance, whether that be in the field, before the blacksmith's anvil, or at the seat of a carriage delivering goods upon the orders of some local agent. I never knew what one day would bring in relation to the next, and Mr. Harper was so beaten down from scant business due to the war that his mood was always one of irritation.

If there was any reprieve, it was my freedom at night when June and I could relax in our own quarters, our beds beside one another in the basement, as hidden there as we were intended to be. Cobwebs cloaked

themselves over splintered chairs and abandoned toys from Florence's youth. Trunks of Mr. Harper's equipment were scattered about and often we would open them and assign his instruments magical properties, such as they might give us the ability to transport elsewhere, or become invisible—easier, then, to find ourselves away from our current predicament.

However dark and dank that basement might have been, it always had the feeling of being *ours*, that all formalities could be dropped to the floor like manacles; we could breathe freely; we could, in other words, simply be brother and sister. Yet it was around midnight, when the world went quiet, when we would often hear a creak upon the staircase, see the start of nightgown flow over the steps and would find, before us, Florence herself, having been unable to sleep and privy to our whispered chatter. She would assure us her parents could not hear, but that in her fright of being alone in the house she wished to join us for a time.

Well, the home was hers. She was welcome to go wherever she pleased. The two girls would share stories—or gossip—Florence from what she'd experienced at school, and June from whomever the guests of the home had been that day. I would watch them from my bed, and a strange sight I found it to be, the two giggling endlessly, hidden by the shadows and with so much darkness about that one would not strain to think them sisters.

Back then I would venture that the three of us would remain close for some time, and yet the silliness of such thinking would be only too clear in hindsight. For Mr. Harper acted as a corrosive element I had not considered, an actor who would soon unbind us from one another, reduce our affection to hatred. It was not that he disliked our relationships, or even had negative aims (although surely he found them imprudent). It was simply that he liked my sister more than his own daughter.

June would stand beside Mr. Harper as he had his afternoon tea, telling her of news related to the war, to his profession; June would make him laugh with a little aside that ridiculed passersby on the lane before the home; June could sense when he required a bit of whiskey before bed to calm his nerves. His daughter mirrored his parvenue of a wife, a woman beneath him not in

station but rather in intellect, someone easily affected and prone to childlike ideas. For this, Florence was shunted.

What if that was all? Perhaps Florence might have learned to cast aside the envy that seemed to be suppressed only by her outbursts and insults, her ever-increasing appetite, a collection of maladies that seemed to anger and horrify her father even further. She might even learn to forgive the man. Yet if one is to follow along of what came next, a more concentrated outline of the man's own demons, it becomes clear how the family could not recover from his actions.

Mr. Harper, a deputy surveyor, found his work dwindling, his debt ever growing. Who was to authorize government assignments when the government has no money nor has even been rightly determined at all? A man of models and numbers, bearings and distances, these things had now been robbed from him, and one could discern in the bruised pouches cradling his eyes, the tremors that caused newspapers to flicker in his hand as he read, the silence that grew to consume him whole, that the life he knew was vanishing before him. Perhaps it was a result of his own pain, his own failures, that caused some share of insanity to pervade his decision-making. Perhaps he was only recognizing that his life in Baton Rouge had come to an end and was best forgotten. The war was coming to a close when his job had been terminated altogether as the Confederate government faltered toward its slow but certain collapse. A day would arise in early spring when a fellow landowner would knock on the door and ask after him.

The conversations that followed were held in private, over the course of a number of weeks, yet June relayed all of the information to me as she heard it herself. There was a group of men, all of them in fear of retribution from the Union, who were jettisoning for Mexico, to build a life that accorded with their beliefs and to seek great fortune while doing so. The country was in a state of flux, the Mexicans under the rule of a monarchy imposed by the French. A rebellion was rising up in opposition, and control changed hands constantly among the factions. In the void, a persecuted people from the United States might find freedom. Be left alone to live the way they wished

to. Crops grew at a miracle pace, and such fertile land needed to be divided and mapped for all who risked the journey. Railroads needed building, and facilities for storage might be required as well. Word had reached them that the French might pay for such skills. Didn't he have some tutelage as an engineer? Might that not be handy? All of which could lead to so much work that a man like Wyatt Harper might never have another day of idleness again. Money could be sent home to his family until the job was completed. And somewhere in the strange workings of his own mind, in a final show of his bizarre infatuation, Mr. Harper decided not only to go, but also that he would take June as a servant in his temporary home on the frontier. The rest of us would depart for New Orleans to Mrs. Harper's childhood home, for Mr. Harper's estate in Baton Rouge would be sold to finance this journey—the money given over to the pool of funds the captain was steadily procuring.

I recall the occasion of my sister teaching me how to properly set a table, informing me of when winter curtains must come down for summer ones, how to dust the nooks and corners of the home, her cheeks wet with tears as she mocked my failures lovingly. I remember the packing of her chest, stealing, as though I did not notice, the cap I had only recently outgrown; the moment when we left for New Orleans, Mrs. Harper in tears as I drove, looking back to face those sobs and seeing her daughter stunned silent by her mother's grief, her father's rejection, the loss of her childhood home that she might well never see again.

So it is that Florence's petulance to me felt like less a hatred directed at my own person than a hatred aimed at the world that had spurned her. I was a witness, a knowing party, the servant who knew her deepest secrets. I'd learned in my role to accommodate her pain even as I housed my own. Indeed, if anything I envied her. To expose one's anger was a privilege. One I often, in private, longed for myself.

Here she was before me in the park; the sun casting her aglow like a diamond spun under the gaze of a jeweler's loupe. Oliver had returned to my side, sniffing the grass, looking up at me with searching eyes. Hugh lingered behind Florence like her very shadow.

“If you insist,” I said, “I will go retrieve the shoes alone.”

With this, Florence looked upon me with the pity of the victor.

“Get me on the way back,” she said. “I’ll join you for the walk home.”

I patted my side for Oliver to follow, and left to collect Mrs. Harper’s shoes.

The sun loomed overhead like a penny spat clean. As we neared home, the silence between Florence and me was so deafening that you could hear Mrs. Harper’s shoes click together in their box with every step, as though a fourth party walked amongst us.

Florence’s skin glistened under the heat, her cheeks blotched, matching the shade of her hair. The gate to the home was shut and I placed a hand to open it before Florence stopped me.

“A moment. Please,” she said.

One could look past the brick steps leading to the front door, see the opened curtains behind the window shutters, and know without question that Mrs. Harper had already witnessed our arrival. She was probably off now, scurrying to freshen up before greeting us with a moan, clutched to the railing of the stairs, begging for assistance.

Florence glanced at the house just as I had, but as the seconds passed our gazes averted to the ground, then met, as though in the silence had been ushered forth an apology, a salve to cleanse the tension born in the park.

“Why do you do it?” she asked under her breath. “Why do you stay here, caring for her? Putting up with it all. You’re *free*, Coleman. You do know that. She would let you go.”

It brought to mind the only instance when my sister had asked me to abandon the family with her. It was a week before she’d departed with Mr. Harper, when we were packing his goods, alone once more in the basement. Her hand fell upon my wrist, and her words were quiet, deliberate, spoken in a manner of seriousness we did not often share. *We could go*, she’d said.

Start anew. Away from them. You know that, don't you? I'd stood there, Mr. Harper's toolbox in hand, and my arms shook not from the press of its weight but from the idea of leaving the family forever, the ever-dwindling security of my position, the little semblance of routine which I craved more than anything else.

"Mr. Harper says he will send for us shortly," I'd told her sheepishly. "There is no harm in waiting. Freedom will find us all the same there, won't it?"

Her hand, then, falling from my wrist in defeat...

June never mentioned such a notion again and even when I broached the matter myself, some days later, more open to exploring the possibility than I'd been at first, there was no encouragement from her to take action. For I believe she knew, better than anyone else, the cowardice that lay at my core. My fear of the unknown. The answer to Florence's question was now clear, in that way. I needed only to look toward the vista before me: that home, that street, Oliver waiting in the backyard for his next meal or his next walk. It was all I had, and it was all I knew, no different from my previous life in Baton Rouge. I could not say this. No matter how close we had grown in a different life, Florence was still my employer. I was still her mother's help.

"You and your mother are fine women," I said. "She treats me well. And it's my honor to return the favor."

Florence laughed, her head swiveling in disbelief. For the first time that day, her tone was kind. "Hand me the shoes, Coleman. Let's tell her I went along to get them. How does that sound?"

"Thank you," I said, certain not to betray my relief. "It is appreciated."

"Yes, I'm sure it is," she said. Then, repeating herself: "I'm sure it is."

She gazed into the box with a look of approval before nodding for me to go forth. I picked up Oliver when he lingered at the gate. He was trying to lick my face as we entered the home, and for a moment I was so focused on this point that I failed to recognize the silence of the place, the strangeness of Mrs. Harper's eventual greeting, curt enough to be unusual: "In here," she said, beckoning us from the parlor.