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"It's one of the very few I looked forward to getting back to when I had to put it down. Nappa offers such a wonderful sense of scene—the death when Clara comes in, the first meeting with Fanny, that fantastic scene with the landlady and canker worms. The author shows a great eye for the particularizing detail."

—**NAEEM MURR**, author of *The Boy, The Genius of the Sea,* and *The Perfect Man.*

"One of the main pleasures I have in these pages is the way Nappa brings the flavor of Longfellow's language into his own prose. The period feels vividly imagined, from the clothes and the furnishings to the way people speak and write to each other in letters… The world of this novel is very compelling and made me care about Longfellow in a way I would not have expected."

—**ZACHARY LAZAR**, author of *Sway* and *I Pity the Poor Immigrant*.

"I really liked it. Henry comes vibrantly to life in these pages, and the way Nappa massages in Longfellow's poetry and writing process is very deft."

—**RICHARD RUSSO**, Pulitzer Prize-winning, best-selling author of *Empire Falls*, *Nobody's Fool*, *Bridge of Sighs,* and many others.

"Jon Nappa's *Longfellow* is remarkable. The book does an amazing job of humanizing Henry. It works brilliantly."

—**SHAYE AREHEART**, founder/editor of the Shaye Areheart imprint of Crown Books

Writing with passion, compassion, wit, and erudition, Nappa delivers a compelling story laced with poetry and real insight into Longfellow's life and his art. Best of all, it inspired me to reexamine the poet's work, and with far greater depth and appreciation than before.

—**ROY SEKOFF**, founding editor of The Huffington Post, and creator of HuffPost Live, its award-winning live streaming video network.

What Longfellow Heard

A NOVEL

JON NAPPA

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This novel is a work of historical fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used with creative fictitious license. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or living persons, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or publisher.

Containing excerpts, in whole or in part, of actual letters, poems, prose, and journal entries of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and other historical persons.

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To my Beatrice—

My best friend, only lover, constant inspiration, and cherished wife.

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Look then into thine heart, and write!
Yes, into Life's deep stream!
All forms of sorrow and delight,
All solemn Voices of the Night,
That can soothe thee, or affright,—
Be these henceforth thy theme.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Chapter 1

A POET SEES. HE FEELS something about what he sees and writes it down, a task that grows heavy with time. That's how some describe the muse, but I don't.

Before ever writing a word, while mostly blind, a genuine poet feels. It is his nature to do so. He is stirred, agitated, or amused until at last awakened by what he feels, and only then, if he also listens well, does he see. And what he sees he begins to see everywhere. He sees it in the stars and the flowers, in the seas and the trees and the breeze, in beaming faces and trembling hands, and suddenly, he must behold it as intimately as possible. He craves it, pursues it, endeavors to capture it, and when his pen at last exhausts every single note of it, he feels it no more. He and his inspiration have gone the way of the wind.

They are not vanquished, only changed.

I wish you to no longer esteem me as an eminent man of letters. I am nearly finished in this life and almost done with being a poet. My sheets are full, my pens worn to stumps, and my lamp expiring. I've penned my last lines. Well, most of them.

It is as if I stand beneath an aged oak with trembling leaves feeling like one myself, straining to lift my head high enough to not see but hear. Crisp leaves speak if you listen. Their utterances are equal in strength to bring pleasure and pain, and they do both well.

Their slumbering sounds are like the sounds of a bell after it ceases moving and the clapper is still. A hollow murmur lingers for some moments, but only moments. Sounds of invitation follow, as formal as any written one. They are momentary, fading while in pursuit of your cognitive attendance. But if you contemplate them you may understand that the events they invite you to will not be the same themed galas you've previously attended, though many mistake them to be. No, if you are to make the most of the invitation you must understand there are no birds in last year's nests. You must cease looking for them there, for they will never return. Epiphanies are elsewhere.

If you think this invitation to be for a stroll into the forest primeval you are only half right. I would not call it a stroll, nor is it an invitation to the murmuring pines and hemlocks despite such timbers populating many places. On the contrary, it is into the murmurings themselves that we go, unless you turn away. I ask you to not be afraid, or if necessary, bring your fears with you, but do not turn back. There is something I'm feeling I want you to see. But you will never see it without listening first.

When you were younger such an invitation might have filled your imagination with images akin to fairies or heroes or mountains capped with snow. There are shadows and types of those things along the way, but there are other places within the murmurings where iron pounds the anvil and the heavens are black with sin, where men are shackled and called niggers and learned men craft false charges and women with anguished faces in pretty dresses melt in grisly fires and children ignore your voice and depart from the safety of your shade.

There are times when soft rays of sunshine may warm your face as slender fingers caressing your cheek. Passing rivers may flow with peaceful ease, but remember that no matter how mild the currents appear, they will in due time lead to a crashing place that falls into roar and spray—they always do—as do each of the inviting footpaths

spreading in myriad directions eventually lead to vulnerable places of wintry blasts where the rustling leaves fall earthward and decay until only naked branches remain and another language articulates. It is the silent language. In that quiet place, deep feelings become undeniably yours. There you will feel yourself straining to lift your wizened head to where the rustling leaves are no more, to where childish things have at last been put away, and to where you finally feel and hear something you've never felt nor heard before, except in distant ways resembling a musty dream, and then for the first time, not only see it clear, but see it everywhere. And you will keep seeing it, until you and it are exhausted and wearied and changed.

Chapter 2

I WAS SIX YEARS OLD and standing in the shadow of my mother's father, General Peleg Wadsworth. He was a Revolutionary War hero who had led the American forces in Maine before being captured by the British. He escaped through the rafters of his cell, and since then many times recounted his adventures to my siblings and I. He owned at least three houses including Wadsworth Hall in Hiram, but it was the brick house on Congress Street in Portland, the first brick house in the city, where I lived.

The two of us walked toward Munjoy's Hill. It was late afternoon in early September, and the seven-story signal tower and telescope lookout to which we were headed, although straight down the same street, seemed a great distance to my six-year-old strides. We descended one slope and ascended another.

Boom! The topmost branches of coastal pines jettisoned birds. *Boom! Boom!* The ship cannons were distant, beyond the range of the fortified places of Casco Bay. I heard them. Roars of exploding gunpowder continued in waves across the waves, making waves in me. Telltale smoke swirled in far-off ocean breeze though the battling ships remained unseen to unaided eyes.

My grandfather and I approached the tower resembling a lighthouse. In the wide open space sloping down to the sea, were town elders and their offspring peering back and forth between the distant naval action they could not see and Captain Moody, whose reports were relayed by unseen men mounted on each stairway landing and

the one man we could see standing outside the entrance to the red brick tower. Moody was on the observation deck at the top with his famed spyglass. My grandfather clutched my hand as we neared the thickest part of the crowd. Familiar faces nodded, even bowed while making way like a splitting sail.

Grandpa wore a tight-fitting Revolutionary War uniform with a puff and ruffle chest. His gnarly walking stick stabbed the grassy hill. His silver shoe buckles glistened, and his powdered club of hair flopped from under his cocked hat. A friend of his snorted a prideful cheer, his own hawking eye searching the distant parts of the sea. "The British dogs are being driven back to sea!"

A wave of jubilation washed over the crowd. Men slapped men on the back, women dabbed tears with hankies, and children wove in and out of the multitude with as much dexterity as the fleeing fish hawks. One man blurted, "Murder the bastards!"

I saw a man swipe his tongue along the wet corner of his mouth. "Back to old mother England where they belong." He pressed his yellow teeth hard along the length of his lip, and cheers erupted from those huddled near.

During my growing-up years this place was mostly filled with different sounds. Sailors and stevedores of every shade of white and brown moved betwixt rushing wagons and swinging wooden cranes with flying bales of freight. Cattle swallowed up great expanses of road while whips cracked the backs of men and the hides of animals. I never liked that and could not understand why my father and grandfather did not stop it although they hated it—they told me so, and often became irritable whenever they saw it. But it would pass as though it was something they were powerless to change. Burly men with rings in their ears gulped great quantities of ale and spoke loud with burps and blasts. They mocked and cursed the men with darker skin. But these were not the sounds of this day.

This day my ears rang with the distant booms of blustering

cannons and the much nearer reverberations of church bells sounding the time. My family and I later discussed this series of events at the dining table. Earlier that week, the fear of a marauding British vessel had swept every merchant ship and fishing boat of crew, and the wharves had become desolate of commerce. None of the tightly moored ships possessed defending guns or military men, except for young navy Captain Burroughs and his crew aboard the fishing boat-turned-brig-of-war, *Enterprise*, which had arrived a few days earlier from Portsmouth, New Hampshire. When Burroughs and his crew, and a local pilot named Drinkwater, rose to defend, there were none in Portland considered braver. I remember one day seeing Burroughs neatly dressed in pants and shirt and buttoned overcoat with captain's cap, but on the day of the conflict nothing but the sound effects of his actions were clear to me.

"All hail Captain Burroughs," a sailor shouted from atop Munjoy's Hill, "Defender of our shores!"

So enamored was I with the imagined theater of a faraway sea fight, that I waved my tin gun in honor of brave Captain Burroughs and sported wildly splayed powder across my chestnut hair in emulation of my grandfather-general.

"I believe Burroughs has driven them away!" my grandfather's friend shouted. He looked down grinning. "Good day, General! The coast is clear. I believe." He assisted my grandfather farther up the hill. I remained a step lower but listened.

"It didn't take much to scare them off, hey?" Grandpa asked, his voice weak and his breathing heavy.

"Burroughs is much the aggressor," his friend said.

"Ha!" Grandpa leaned on his stick. "I can remember when I was twenty, hey?" He laughed so hard his puff-and-ruffles bounced over his chin. He reached forward and tousled my powdered hair.

Captain Moody appeared from the tower, his lips flubbing like a snorting horse. "Coast is clear!"

The crowd cheered several times.

Captain Moody approached us and pointed at the signal flags he had placed atop the tower moments earlier. It was the American ensign flying above the British ensign flying above a black ball. "What say you, young man? Do you know what that means?"

I stretched out my tin gun toward the unseen action so many leagues away and squeezed the toy trigger. "Bang! Bang!" I said.

"Are you certain of the outcome?" Grandpa asked Moody.

"As certain as possible from here. I'm sure the old Brits were just harassing to see what they might find. Burroughs knows what he's doing. He's made this a fine autumn day, wouldn't you say?"

I looked up at the trees and agreed they were beautiful.

It was one or two days later that the same lofty tops of the pines had since become smeared by hovering fog, silent but for murmurs of quaking limbs and trembling needles. The *Enterprise* had returned to anchor in the gray waters of Casco Bay with the British brig, *Boxer*, in tow. They were severely damaged. The dark hulks sat atop the water like gravestones, unwilling to sink but unable to move. The cries of the fish hawks and the jubilant cheers were replaced with somber drums and soft sobs.

Burroughs's men, encompassing two caskets in the center, paddled a barge ashore, their faces like water under gray sky. The usually raucous sailors and heaving, cursing workers along the wharves were not absent from their stations as they had been the day of the apparent victory, but were as silent now as when they were gone, looming like the anchored vessels—afloat but still. Burroughs's men lifted the caskets to the flatbed and the funeral procession plodded through Portland to the cemetery near Munjoy's Hill.

The two young sea captains, Burroughs of the *Enterprise* and Blythe of the *Boxer* no longer squared off in boisterous and patriotic

opposition but laid quietly side by side in respective coffins, with no breath left between them.

The community huddled. The collective sighing formed a new kind of fog. Somewhere a dog barked, an oar splashed or fish jumped, and a few people coughed while the preacher cleared his throat and thumbed his small black book, but it all puzzled me. What had been the purpose of the joyous celebrations earlier?

My family stood near me. I wore no powder in my hair despite my grandfather being as martially adorned as before. My right hand was empty of my tin gun though it was tucked into the waist of my creased black pants.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

I jerked.

Crack! Crack! Crack! The minute guns fired their salutes, and I clasped my hands over my ears. Distant cannons had sounded to me like muffled bells without the music, but the rifles pierced my head with a sound that brought pain. My face twisted and my eyes welled. *Crack! Crack! Crack!*

I felt grateful for my grandfather's hand resting on my shoulder, but I felt no comfort. The somber formality of the adults didn't fit with what I was feeling. The foreign commander whom I had previously understood to be wicked looked very much like the good commander whom I had always liked. I felt ashamed for feeling as poorly about the British captain as I did the young American, but I was also confused. The people around us had celebrated the battle as an honorable thing and had expressed hatred of the Brits to the point of calling for death. Yet now they spoke of honor and tragedy as pertaining to both young men who had died with their boots on. The sentiments moved like shifting tides.

I never imagined the captains would be so fair, so fine looking, and so fresh appearing, lying with their eyes closed and uniforms neatly tucked. It seemed a simple thing for them to open their eyes,

smile, and march off in their splendid uniforms taunting and touting each other with defiant words and bold challenges, just like I had often done in Deering's Woods with my brothers and friends. After such mock battles, I always returned home, washed up, and sat at the table sharing reports of our exploits, and with both of my eyes still blinking.

Thump!

The preacher was finished before I collected myself enough to dismiss what groaned deep inside. I watched another shovelful of dirt fall atop the caskets. *Thump*.

As the crowd dispersed, my grandfather pressed my shoulder to turn me away and begin the quiet walk home. I yielded to his urging but my heart and head buzzed with a dull sound. I felt nauseous, and my pants felt tight, my stomach feeling pressed. I grabbed the tin gun tucked at my waist and hurled it.

"Henry!" My mother's tone was disapproving.

"It's okay, Zilpah," my father said. "Leave him."

"But Stephen—" my mother started.

I charged ahead. I was about to throw up and didn't want anyone to see. My thoughts became thick and hot, as if written in hot coal inside my brain. I stumbled and fell headlong. I rose to all fours and lost it. The heat burst out of my mouth like liquid fire.

"I remember the sea-fight far away,
How it thundered o'er the tide!
And the dead captains, as they lay
In their graves, o'erlooking the tranquil bay,
Where they in battle died.
And the sound of that mournful song
Goes through me with a thrill:
A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

Over time, I had watched many ships come and go by night and by day. Most of them were not ships of war, and they eventually birthed in me a longing to return with one of them to the far-off places they came from, but not as a soldier on a quest for glory. I had new ideas because I had heard new things. Some of the newest soundings were from stories my mother read aloud, but there were many others I read by myself. The voices of books filled my brain. One of the voices was Washington Irving. One story of an old man who fell asleep for a very long time and another story that had a headless horseman were only parts of *The Sketchbook*, which detailed far-away travels that truly mesmerized me. I ached to travel to Europe as a reader who wanted into the page.

When I reached eighteen years of age I graduated fourth in my Bowdoin College class, fearful my father might have plans for me unbefitting my soul. I demanded he inform me of his intentions. As I feared, he hoped I would enter the legal profession alongside him and my older brother, Stephen V. I recoiled instantly and raised my voice as much as I dared. "You think more partially than justly," I said. "Such a coat does not suit me. I know myself to burn for eminence in literature and will not disguise it in the least. My entire soul burns for it, and my every earthly thought centers on it."

My father saw it differently at first, and convincingly offered no other future but the one he prescribed, so much so that the five-hour stagecoach ride across the thirty miles from Brunswick to Portland on that September day my brother and I graduated couldn't have been more endless. I knew it to be a trip to the gallows of abandoned dreams. My life would be a short, unhappy one.

It was at the family dinner table that very night, my father revealed a most extraordinary opportunity. No doubt, I realize now, he must have managed to secure it for me due to his influence as the son of one of the Bowdoin co-founders and a trustee himself, but he kept such maneuverings hidden from my sight. From that

meal forward, throughout all the days of his remaining life, he never swerved from claiming the opportunity was attributable only to my academic performance, even going so far as to say that one of my teacher's, Benjamin Orr, had been supremely impressed with my translations of Horace's Odes from Latin to English, and my handling of the French language. With that as the only explanation he would offer, my father announced in the midst of the main course, for all my family to hear, that I was being offered the new chair of Modern Languages at Bowdoin at only eighteen years of age.

If ever my mouth hung open as wide as Casco Bay, it was then. I could not imagine how I might ever become more surprised than that if it were not for the moment immediately following.

"But first"—my father was barely able to repress his smile—"you must assist your brother and me at my law office until spring when you will depart for Europe. There you will spend one year perfecting your knowledge of French, Spanish, German, and Italian. That is the requirement laid down by the college." As my mother burst into tears my father continued. "It is impossible to give you all the instructions which your youth and inexperience require, but I hope to conjure you to remember the objects of your journey."

Chapter 3

I REMEMBER MEETING Professor George Ticknor, chair of Harvard's modern language department. He was thrilled with the prospect of a young man going to Europe as I was. He gave me several letters of introduction, including one to my favorite author residing in Spain, Washington Irving. He also made great emphasis upon my being certain to study the German language and literature at the University of Gottingen.

By the time I was ready to leave for Europe in May of '26, I had also crafted as much poetry as I could, believing myself to be in possession of as much innate skill and inspiration as would be expected from any bard or skald or troubadour from across the ages. I will spare you from even a single line of those trite songs that I cobbled together in those days despite more than a dozen of them being published during the year before my departure. I will not name the capacious gazette that gave them shelter other than to describe it as a foundling hospital for poor poetry. Truly I tell you, my muse in those days would have been better off in a house of corrections. Nevertheless, at nineteen, to Europe I sailed.

The trip that had been intended for one year lasted three. I traveled and studied in France, Spain, Italy, and Germany. The letters of introduction from my father and his friends permitted me exposure to successful men and women and tutors, including the great Irving. But strange adventures and stranger characters are to be expected