

Bleeding West Virginia

Oliver

Oliver Brown watched the crowd gather. For two blocks the street was crawling with people. Men, women, children, everyone, it seemed, had come to listen to his father speak. White citizens gathered toward the front, with their canes and top hats and overalls. The women dressed in day-gowns, bonnets on their heads. Behind them stood the slaves, a sea of black and brown covered in dirty stained shirts, wearing what looked like rags as pants. They outnumbered the white folks five to one, if Oliver's counting was any good. It had been pretty decent back in Ohio. He and his sister would test each other on math problems, both eager to impress their father with their knowledge. They would count the birds in the sky, subtract the number of clouds, and multiply by the number of visible animals in the meadow. But those numbers failed greatly in comparison to the number of people before him now. And it was clear to Oliver that these numbers were the ones his father cared about.

John Brown stood on a milk crate at the side of a large red brick building facing the crowd. When he raised his hands above his head, the indistinct chatter of the people grew quieter and quieter. When it had completely stopped, John Brown spoke:

"Last night the Lord himself came to me in a dream. I had just fallen asleep; my rifle nestled neatly between my wife and me. I lay awake there almost every night, staring at the crucifix on my bedroom ceiling, listening for sound of evil surely approaching. For in this world, no holy man is ever safe from the darkness of humanity. The triple-enforced, freshly painted, picket fence surrounding my property stalls any intruder, at least for a moment. And the sound of cold hands rustling chains, fumbling at the tar-dipped lock is what I've come to fear most. But it also excites me greatly. For when they cross that fence line onto my property, they'll see me looking at them through the iron sights. I'm a damn good shot, too. Ask my son, he'll tell you." John looked toward Oliver and smiled.

The young man, now nineteen years old, smiled back and nodded his head. *Not nearly as good a shot as you used to be*, Oliver thought. Oliver still remembered the days his father had spent with him, teaching him how to hunt and fish and grow crops. They would spend the entire day together, just the two of them, from sunrise to sunset. And at the end of the long day, they would walk slowly on the dirt

path back to the house, rifles on each of their shoulders. But those days were long past, and Oliver was barely allowed any alone time with his father now. John Brown had a much bigger picture in mind: a bloody picture, painted with red, white, and brown. Oliver turned his attention back to his father. He had heard this speech a hundred times, it seemed. He could probably recite it verbatim.

“The other week I took a slaver right between the eyes from 300 yards. But enough tales of my holy works; last night I saw God come down from heaven and say to me: ‘John Brown, my loyal subject, why have you let your countrymen stain this land with the sin of slavery? It is a dark sin, darker than the skin of their slaves, and evil, too. It displeases me greatly that men in authority have taken advantage of the gifts I have given them.’ I told the Lord, I said, ‘Lord, my true and almighty God, I have tried to reason with these monsters you call men. They will not hear me. They spit on me and my sons. But I love all of your creations, Lord. Except for those white devils you saw fit to lead this great nation.’ And he responded: ‘John Brown, my son, purge this sin of slavery from your land. Use whatever means necessary. No act done in favor of your Holy Father can be called a sin.’”

Oliver doubted that one. He could slay a thousand infants with a crucifix, but that did not make it a holy act. However, it would be best to keep those thoughts to himself, he knew. Oliver turned his head and spat on the ground, his saliva moisturizing the dry dirt. He turned to face his father again.

“I told my heavenly Father that I would end slavery, even if it cost me my life. I will sacrifice myself if I have to, and my sons if need be, just like his Son did so all of humanity could be free.”

You are a current day Abraham, father. And I am Isaac, Oliver thought. *Or does that make me Jesus?* He rolled his eyes and spat again.

“And now I tell this to you, slaves of Harpers Ferry: Throw down your shovels, throw down your rakes! Pick up a rifle, a knife, even a brick. Storm the master’s houses! Show them the same treatment they’ve shown you! Yesterday, me and my sons disguised ourselves as salesmen and approached a master on his plantation. When he reached out to shake my hand, I slit his wrist and his blood spilled onto the floor, and I swear to you, I saw the face of Jesus stained into the white carpet. My sons and I butchered this man. We chopped off his head and each of his limbs, and hung him, piece by piece, on each door frame of his children’s’ bedrooms; a dismemberment to represent the division of our great country.”

Although this was an exaggeration, it was not entirely untrue. They had butchered that farmer. The dismemberment was all John's idea. The carpet stain, however, was complete fiction. Oliver played the scene over and over in his mind. It made him so sick to his stomach, he thought he might vomit right there, in front of the whole crowd.

"Act with me, under the right and true God, the only master you shall ever have again. For these white demons only respond to violence. Fight fire with fire, my black brothers! Freedom is yours! All you need to do is reach out and take it!"

Oliver heard the rise of cheers that erupted from the slaves in the back. The whites in the front of the crowd growled their disapproval and quickly dispersed. John Brown stood with his head held high, listening to the sounds of coming liberation. *Revolts all end in bloodshed. But you know that, don't you, father?* Oliver turned from the crowd and walked silently toward the tavern down the street. *I need a drink.*

Edward

Edward awoke in a silent panic; his nightclothes drenched in sticky sweat. The silver silk linens thrown across his bed were thick, but they did little to keep him warm. He was chilled to the bone, and had goose bumps prickling up his arms and neck. He did not dream often, but when he did his dreams were as vivid as his golden-stitched pillow embroidered with a picture of a farm house. It had been his father's pillow. The entire plantation had been Fredrick Cain's until his death bequeathed the family estate to Edward, his eldest son. This dream had been a nightmare. The details were starting to fade, but Edward wished the images would disappear completely, as randomly as they had appeared.

He remembered he was sitting at the dining room table for supper. Edna and Julie were serving him and his family roasted duck with a side of potatoes and carrots. Edward was at one head of the table while his wife, Lisa, was at the other. Their three girls sat between them. Jenny, Jackie, and Elizabeth had all been born in the last seven years with two years separating each. There was one empty chair, however. *Milo's chair. Where is Milo?* Edward thought. It was not like his eldest and heir to miss a meal, especially roasted duck. Edna was serving the wine when Edward caught her wrist, gently but firm, the way she liked to be touched by him. He rubbed the smooth brown skin of her forearm when he

spoke to her: "Where is Milo? He should have been in from the stables hours ago. Have you seen him?" He could still taste her on his breath, salty but sweet.

"No, sir," Edna said. "I haven't seen the young master since lunch. He ate two turkey sandwiches, he did. That boy is growin' every day." Edward watched her lips as she spoke -- delightfully pink puffy lips that Edward had always found to his liking. He liked the way her brown curls bobbed about her shoulders as she walked, too. The way she swung her hips was enough to make Edward loosen his collar. "I can check the stables for him, if it please you, master."

"It would please me greatly, Edna. Thank you." Edward's hand touched the small of her back as the girl left the room. He turned back toward the table to find his wife staring daggers at him. She was giving him that look again, that dead stare. Edward wasn't sure what was going on behind his wife's hazel eyes. Could it be jealousy or despair? Perhaps both. But there was no way she could know about them. Edward had been very careful about his visits with Edna. They only meet in the stables now, or in the summer kitchen, or by the lake behind the forest, but never in the main house. *Never again*, he thought. *I have shamed my wife enough. Never again will I dishonor her in our own bed.*

As Edward was about to take his first bite, a scream came from the door. Edna hurried back to the table with fear in her eyes. "Master Edward! There's men outside! They says they come for you!"

He didn't remember getting up from the table, nor did he remember opening the front door, but now he stood on his front porch looking out into a field of green and brown. Slaves he didn't recognize, slaves he didn't own were scattered across the entire plantation. In every direction Edward looked, he saw a sea of slaves with torches and spears. Some had swords and others carried rifles. At the very front of the pack, a giant white man sat on horseback. He must have been ten feet tall, maybe more. His face was old and hard and full of lines. On his waist hung a magnificent silver sword studded with diamonds. In his right hand he held the largest rifle Edward had ever seen, almost the size of a cannon. In the man's left hand he held a clump of brown fur. As the man raised his left hand toward the porch, Edward saw the clump take the shape of his son's face. The giant man's hand was buried into Milo's shaggy brown hair. The man tossed the boy's head at his father's feet and smiled. Edward stood horrified as he gazed into the giant's eyes. Fiery eyes that screamed for something. *But what?*

Only now, in his bed, did Edward recognize the giant man. "John Brown," he whispered into the darkness. "God help us all." His wife shifted in the bed next to him, still sound asleep. Edward slid himself out from under the covers, dressed in his robe, and headed silently for the stables.

Tina

The day was hot. No hotter than yesterday, yet Tina found herself restless and anxious. She had heard the recent stories from her master's daughter, Paige. Paige had often told her stories as Tina washed and brushed her hair, as was her duty. Tina had always been jealous of Paige's hair. Tina's hair was as black as night and kinky as a coil, while Paige's hair was long and straight and blonde. Tina had always admired the way it glistened in the sunlight. *No wonder she is so happy*, Tina thought, *I would be happy, too, if I were as beautiful*. But today Paige didn't seem happy. In fact, Tina had never seen her look so frightened. Paige had begun her story before Tina even had the opportunity to cook Paige's breakfast, let alone brush her pretty hair. Paige had run out of her bedchamber without brushing her teeth or changing her nightgown, shook Tina awake, and began reciting the darkest story Tina had ever heard. According to Paige, who overheard her father speaking with the town Marshall, there had been a massacre last week at the Revis Plantation.

"They found Mr. Revis all chopped up!" Paige told Tina. "They said his body was in all different places, scattered throughout the house." Paige was terrified. She was on the verge of hyperventilating. The doll she carried was squeezed so tight that Tina thought of snatching it away from Paige, just to let it breathe. But she would never do such a thing to a white girl. She was smarter than that. "Say something, Tina!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Paige. I don't know what to say. Did they find who did it?" Tina's voice was hoarse, still groggy from sleep.

"It was a group of freed slaves, led by some great big white man on a horse."

Slaves did that? Tina thought. *No, it couldn't be. Slaves would never. . .* Tina rose from her cot and dressed herself in a grey patch-sown kitchen gown. "Come on," she said to Paige. "Let's get you some breakfast."

"I don't want to eat!" Paige screamed. "I want my daddy!" The doll's neck was surely going to be crushed soon, Tina feared. She imagined the doll's head flying all the way across the room. Paige was so

loud that the other slaves began to stir from the cots next to her. Tina was afraid she would be to blame if the master was woken too early.

“Stop yelling, please. Everything will be okay. Master Charles is still asleep.” Tina tried to calm Paige by stroking her messy blonde hair.

“What if daddy isn’t sleeping? What if he gets killed next?”

Tina held the shaking girl tightly. “No one is going to hurt your father, I promise. I’m sure you must have heard wrong. There’s no way slaves would revolt. I never heard nothing like it.” *It couldn’t be happening, could it? Was this for real?*

“It’s true!” Paige pushed Tina off of her. “They killed Mr. Revis and hung his body parts all over the house, even over his children’s beds.” Paige was no longer crying, but fear flickered brightly in her eyes. “They killed him and they’re gonna kill my daddy, too. They’re nothing but... but savages!”

Tina looked blankly at Paige. “But that makes me a savage, too.”

“Maybe it does,” said Paige. “Maybe you’re all filthy savages.”

Maybe, Tina thought, staring at the doll’s half-removed head. And maybe I’ll hang Mister Charles’s head above your bed myself.

Oliver

“Early morning raids are for cowards,” Philip said as he filled his cup to the brim with ale. The sun was beginning to cast a faint light on the horizon. *The dawn of a new age*, Oliver Brown thought as he looked out the window of the nearly empty tavern. Philip filled a second cup and placed it on the smooth oak table. Streams of cold ale ran down the cup, staining the wood. “Drink up, Olly,” said Philip. “This ain’t a sober man’s business.”

Oliver took the cup and drained half of it, belched, and used his wrist to wipe the runnings off his chin. “My father never touches the stuff. Calls it the devil’s nectar.”

“Your father calls the rain God’s tears,” Philip said laughing. “‘God weeps for all of his enslaved children,’ your father says. But maybe God’s weeping for me. I haven’t had a full night’s rest since I joined this damn rebellion.”

“We’ve all had to make sacrifices,” Oliver said. “You’ll be rewarded in heaven, I’m sure of it.”

“Jesus, Oliver, you’re beginning to sound like your father.”

Oliver pulled a dagger out of his pocket, put the point of the blade vertically on the table, and used his finger to delicately spin it. “Or, perhaps, you won’t be rewarded. Not if you continue to take our Lord’s name in vain.”

“Damn you and your Lord. I’m not doing this for a reward. I’m doing this because it just ain’t right to own another human being. It ain’t right at all.” Philip finished his cup and went back to the bar to fill it up once more.

“Oh, really?” Oliver said from the table. “I thought you were doing this for that kitchen girl on Stokeworth’s farm.”

Philip smiled and headed back toward the table, spilling droplets of ale on the floor as he walked. “Might have something to do with it.” He sat down across from Oliver. “Is it more honorable to fight for love or religion?”

“Both. Neither. I really can’t say,” said Oliver. He lifted his cup to drink but stopped before he reached his mouth. *Philip has the right of it*, he thought. *A surprise attack isn’t honorable at all.*

“Then why are *you* doing this, Olly?”

Oliver stared at the ale in front of his face. He sloshed it around trying to think. “Because my father commanded it.”

“Ah, I see,” said Philip. “I guess we’re all slaves in our own way.”

Slaves to religion, slaves to our country, slaves to our family, Oliver thought. “That’s the smartest thing you’ve ever said, Phil.”

A faint horn sounded in the distance. It was almost quiet enough to go unnoticed, *almost*. "It might be the last thing I ever say. That's our signal," said Phil. Oliver finished his ale in one gulp, slammed the cup on the table, and rose without a word.

Violence isn't the answer. Oliver could hear his sister's words as clear as the day she'd said them back home in Ohio. *No, sis, but it's the only answer we've got. And I've got to make father proud.* He strapped his holster to his belt and fingered his dagger in its sheath. Oliver looked at Philip. "Let's get this mess over with," he said. Philip nodded and the two crept silently out of the empty tavern into the hazy morning light.

James

Lieutenant James Ewell Brown Stuart paced the armory. The windows had been boarded, and only dim rays of sunlight came crawling through the door that had been smashed to pieces. The faint glow of Stuart's cigar illuminated his mustache when he inhaled. His leather boots on the brick floor made the only sound; his footsteps echoing in the quiet room. "How many did we manage to kill?" he asked.

"Ten, sir," answered a Confederate soldier. His grey cotton coat sprayed with red and brown.

"How many escaped?"

"Five, we believe, sir." The soldier took off his hat to scratch his head. Although he looked to be young, his hair was already thinning.

"And we've captured these seven."

"Yes, sir. That is correct."

"That wasn't a question, soldier."

"Of course not, Lieutenant. My apologies."

James Stuart continued to pace around the room. He walked circles around the seven rebels each individually restrained. He stopped in front of the oldest man and tapped his cigar. The ashes fell

gracefully, dancing in the rays of sun until settling unnoticeably into the old man's grey hair. Old and frail, he was, but prouder than the rest, and half a foot taller. The old man's shoulders were straight and square, his eyes staring back at his captor. *It would be easier just to kill him*, James thought. *But I suppose I should question him first.* "So you're the leader. The famous and feared John Brown that I've heard so much about. You're not ten feet tall at all. In fact, on your knees you barely reach three."

John Brown held his head high, his arms tied around his back, his mouth dripping blood. "I need only be as tall as the Lord needs me to be," he said.

James puffed his cigar. "That doesn't even make sense, you old fool." He delivered a strong kick to the captor's stomach. John's body folded in half. James grabbed him by the hair to straighten him. He crouched down so he could stare into John Brown's brown eyes. "Where is your God now, John?"

The old man's voice was hoarse and scratchy from dehydration. "The Heavenly Father is preparing a seat for me. When I meet him, I'll be sure to speak highly of you, Lieutenant."

James struck John in the nose so hard he could hear the bone crack, although he wasn't sure if the noise came from John's nose or his own knuckle. "I suppose I'll start with the obligatory questioning," James said. "Where else are you planning the attack? Where is the rest of your rebellion?"

John Brown struggled to turn his head and see his fellow captives. "A godly man needs only a few loyal disciples."

James Stuart sighed and blew a puff of smoke into the crowd of John's restrained apostles. "So this is it then?" He chuckled. "How could you possibly think to overthrow the South with this lackluster group of sheep?"

"Others will see what liberation we've ensued. They will follow the call long after I am dead."

"They will not be waiting long, I promise you that. What others? Tell me!"

John Brown spit blood on James's boots. "Rot in Hell, demon."

"Very well," Stuart said. "Let's see if your men have as strong a tongue as you." James Stuart lifted the chin of the young man to the left of John Brown. "What's your name, soldier?"

"O-Oliver. Oliver Brown."

“Kin, huh? I see. Where is the rest of your militia?”

Oliver continued to stare at the ground. “There are no others.”

“Liar,” Stuart said. “Don’t lie to me, boy.” He threw his cigar across the room, unsheathed his dagger from his belt, and held it in front of Oliver’s face. “I hate liars.” When he cut Oliver free the boy fell to the floor. The restraining ropes were soaked with dark red blood. “Gut shot. You won’t live much longer.” Stuart pulled Oliver’s left arm from under his limp, blood-soaked body. He held his dagger up to his hand and pressed the point to the tip of Oliver’s finger. “Where are they?”

“No. . . others,” the boy said weakly. He let out a sharp squeal of pain as Stuart punctured his skin. It wasn’t until the blade protruded out the back of his finger that Oliver shouted: “We were planning to head east! We were going to round up as many slaves as we could and build an army!”

“Good,” Stuart said. “What else?”

“Oliver! Shut your mouth! Tell nothing to this demon!” John Brown shouted at his son, loud enough for all the angels in heaven to hear.

“Father, please. Kill me. The pain... I can’t take it anymore.”

“If you’re going to die,” his father said calmly, “die like a man.”

“Good advice,” Stuart said. He took his dagger to Oliver’s throat and, as always, the boy obeyed his father.

Oliver

Despite the shouting of the Lieutenant in the grey coat, the only sound Oliver heard was the slow dripping of blood from his stomach to the floor. His finger nail hung loosely from his skin; the pain,

an indescribable throb. With his left eye swollen shut, Oliver could barely make out the burning ember from the Lieutenant's cigar half way across the room. The swelling dripping noise inside his head seemed to stop when the man in the grey coat put his hand on Oliver's shoulder. "Good," the man said. "What else?"

What else? Anything else. I'll tell you anything, just make it go away. Oliver opened his mouth to speak, but began to cough instead. The pain in his stomach was a dagger with every breath.

"Oliver!" The boy heard his father's voice. A strong, booming voice he'd heard so many times before. Oliver could see his father now, standing at the edge of the lake, shouting for his son, encouraging him to reel in the five foot pike he'd seen on that September day swimming gracefully in the lake beside their farm in Ohio. Oliver was in his canoe, his fishing rod arched like a rainbow, reeling with all his might. He had to catch the big one. He had to! Then his father would believe that he truly saw the monster fish. They would eat it that night for supper, and for lunch the next day, it was so big. Reeling, reeling, reeling until his arms were numb. He looked up at his father, hoping he would acknowledge his effort.

"Shut your mouth! Tell nothing to this demon!" his father yelled.

Demon? No, father, it's only a fish. The ache in Oliver's arms redirected to his stomach and his finger, both still dripping blood. He was reeling still, his arms, his stomach, his entire body now burning. The fish was getting away. "Father," the boy managed to say. "Please kill me. The pain. . . I can't take it anymore." Oliver felt tears begging to swell.

John Brown looked into his son's swollen eyes. "If you're going to die, die like a man."

Like a man? Oliver thought. *I'm sorry, father. I've let you down.*

"Good advice," the Lieutenant said. Oliver saw a blade flash before his eyes, like the shimmering scales of a fish in the lake, and a moment later, the rod snapped.