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Exceptional Child

In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young, it comes with bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares.

—*Abraham Lincoln, in a letter to Fanny McCullogh*
December 23rd, 1862

I

The boy had been crouched so long that his legs had fallen asleep beneath him—but he dared not move now. For here, in a small clearing in the frostbitten forest, were the creatures he had waited so long to see. The creatures he'd been sent to kill. He bit down on his lip to keep his teeth from chattering, and aimed his father's flintlock rifle exactly as he'd been taught. *The body*, he remembered. *The body, not the neck*. Quietly, carefully he pulled the hammer back and pointed the barrel at his target, a large male who'd fallen behind the others. Decades later, the boy would recall what happened next.

I hesitated. Not out of a conflict of conscience, but for the fear that my rifle had gotten too wet, and thus wouldn't fire. However, this fear proved unfounded, for when I pulled the

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trigger, the stock hit my shoulder with such force as to knock me clean onto my back.

Turkeys scattered in every direction as Abraham Lincoln, seven years old, picked himself off the snow-covered ground. Rising to his feet, he brought his fingers to the strange warmth he felt on his chin. "I'd bitten my lip clean through," he wrote. "But I hardly gave a holler. I was desperate to know if I had hit the poor devil or not."

He had. The large male flapped its wings wildly, pushing itself through the snow in small circles. Abe watched from a distance, "afraid it might somehow rise up and tear me to pieces." The flapping of wings; the dragging of feathers through snow. These were the only sounds in the world. They were joined by the crunching beneath Abe's feet as he found his nerve and approached. The wings beat less forcefully now.

It was dying.

He had shot it clean through the neck. The head hung at an unnatural angle—dragged across the ground as the bird continued to thrash. *The body, not the neck.* With every beat of its heart, blood poured from the wound and onto the snow, where it mixed with the dark droplets from Abe's bleeding lip and the tears that had already begun to fall down his face.

It gasped for breath, but could draw none, and its eyes wore a kind of fear I had never seen. I stood over the miserable bird for what seemed a twelvemonth, pleading with God to make its wings fall silent. Begging His forgiveness for so injuring a creature that had shown me no malice; presented no threat to my person or prosperity. Finally it was still, and, plucking up my courage, I dragged it through a mile of forest and laid it at my mother's feet—my head hung low so as to hide my tears.

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Abraham Lincoln would never take another life. And yet he would become one of the greatest killers of the nineteenth century.

The grieving boy didn't sleep a wink that night. "I could think only of the injustice I had done another living thing, and the fear I had seen in its eyes as the promise of life slipped away." Abe refused to eat any part of his kill, and lived on little more than bread as his mother, father, and older sister picked the carcass clean over the next two weeks. There is no record of their reaction to this hunger strike, but it must have been seen as eccentric. After all, to willingly go without food, as a matter of principle, was a remarkable choice for anyone in those days—particularly a boy who had been born and raised on America's frontier.

But then, Abe Lincoln had always been different.

America was still in its infancy when the future president was born on February 12th, 1809—a mere thirty-three years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Many of the giants of the American Revolution—Robert Treat Paine, Benjamin Rush, and Samuel Chase—were still alive. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson wouldn't resume their tumultuous friendship for another three years, and wouldn't die for another seventeen—incredibly, on the same day. The Fourth of July.

Those first American decades were ones of seemingly limitless growth and opportunity. By the time Abe Lincoln was born, residents of Boston and Philadelphia had seen their cities double in size in less than twenty years. New York's population had tripled in the same amount of time. The cities were becoming livelier, more prosperous. "For every farmer, there are two haberdashers; for every blacksmith, an opera house," joked Washington Irving in his New York periodical, *Salmagundi*.

But as the cities became more crowded, they became more dangerous. Like their counterparts in London, Paris, and Rome, America's city dwellers had come to expect a certain amount of crime. Theft was by far the most common offense. With no fingerprints on

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file or cameras to fear, thieves were limited only by their conscience and cunning. Muggings hardly warranted a mention in the local papers, unless the victim was a person of note.

There's a story of an elderly widow named Agnes Pendel Brown, who lived with her longtime butler (nearly as old as she, and deaf as a stone) in a three-story brick mansion on Amsterdam Avenue. On December 2nd, 1799, Agnes and her butler turned in for the night—he on the first floor, she on the third. When they awoke the next morning, every piece of furniture, every work of art, every gown, serving dish, and candlestick holder (candles included) was gone. The only things the light-footed burglars left were the beds in which Agnes and her butler slept.

There was also the occasional murder. Before the Revolutionary War, homicides had been exceedingly rare in America's cities (it's impossible to provide exact numbers, but a review of three Boston newspapers between 1775 and 1780 yields mention of only eleven cases, ten of which were promptly solved). Most of these were so-called honor killings, such as duels or family squabbles. In most cases, no charges were brought. The laws of the early nineteenth century were vague and, with no regular police force to speak of, loosely enforced. It's worth noting that killing a slave was not considered murder, no matter the circumstances. It was merely "destruction of property."

Immediately after America won its independence, something strange began to happen. The murder rate in its cities started to rise dramatically, almost overnight. Unlike the honor killings of years past, these murders seemed random; senseless. Between 1802 and 1807, there were an incredible 204 unsolved homicides in New York City alone. Homicides with no witnesses, no motive, and often no discernible cause of death. Because the investigators (most of whom were untrained volunteers) kept no records, the only surviving clues come from a handful of faded newspaper articles. One in particular, from the *New York Spectator*, captures the panic that had enveloped the city by July of 1806.

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A Mr. Stokes, of 210 Tenth Street, happen'd upon the poor Victim, a mulatto Woman, whilst on his morning constitutional. The Gentleman remark'd that her eyes were wide open, and her body quite stiff, as if dry'd in the sun. A Constable by name of McLeay inform'd me that no blood was found near the unfortunate soul, nor on her garments, and that her only wound was a small score on the wrist. She is the forty-second to meet such an end this year. The Honorable Dewitt Clinton, Mayor, respectfully advizes the good citizenry to prolong their vigilance until the answerable scoundrel is captur'd. Women and Children are urg'd to walk with a Gentleman companion, and Gentlemen are urg'd to walk in pairs after dark.

The scene was eerily similar to a dozen others reported that summer. No trauma. No blood. Open eyes and rigid body. The face a mask of terror. A pattern emerged among the victims: they were free blacks, vagrants, prostitutes, travelers, and the mentally impaired—people with little or no connection to the city, no family, and whose murders were unlikely to incite angry mobs seeking justice. And New York was hardly alone in its troubles. Similar articles filled the papers of Boston and Philadelphia that summer, and similar rumors filled the mouths of their panicked populations. There was talk of shadowy madmen. Of foreign spies.

There was even talk of vampires.

II

Sinking Springs Farm was about as far from New York City as one could get in early nineteenth-century America. Despite its name, the 300-acre “farm” was mostly heavily wooded land—and its rocky eastern Kentucky soil made the prospects of bumper crops unlikely at best. Thomas Lincoln, thirty-one years old, had acquired it for a

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\$200 promissory note in the months before Abe was born. A carpenter by trade, Thomas hastily built a one-room cabin on his new land. It measured all of eighteen by twenty feet, with a hard dirt floor that was cold to the touch year-round. When it rained, water leaked through the roof in bucketfuls. When the wind howled, drafts forced their way through countless cracks in the walls. It was in these humble circumstances, on an unseasonably mild Sunday morning, that the sixteenth president of the United States came into the world. It's said that he didn't cry when he was born, but that he merely stared at his mother, quizzically, and then smiled at her.

Abe would have no memory of Sinking Springs. When he was two, a dispute arose over the deed to the land, so Thomas moved his family ten miles north, to the smaller, more fertile Knob Creek Farm. Despite the much-improved soil, Thomas—who could have made a comfortable living selling corn and grain to nearby settlers—plowed less than an acre of land.

He was an illiterate, indolent man who could not so much as sign his name until instructed by my mother. He had not a scrap of ambition in him...not the slightest interest in bettering his circumstances, or in providing for his family beyond the barest necessities. He never planted a single row more than was needed to keep our bellies from aching, or sought a single penny more than was needed to keep the simplest clothes on our backs.

It was an unduly harsh assessment, written by a forty-one-year-old Abe on the day of his father's funeral (which he had chosen not to attend, and perhaps felt a pang of guilt over). While no one would ever accuse Thomas Lincoln of being "driven," he seems to have been a reliable, if not bountiful, provider. That he never abandoned his family in times of desperate hardship and grief, or abandoned the frontier for the comforts of city life (as many of his

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contemporaries did), speaks to his character. And while he didn't always understand or approve of his son's pursuits, he always permitted them (eventually). However, Abe would never be able to forgive him for the tragedy that would transform both of their lives.

Typical of the times, Thomas Lincoln's life had been one of continual struggle and frequent tragedy. Born in 1778, he moved from Virginia to Kentucky with his father, Abraham, and mother, Bathsheba, while still a child. When he was eight, Thomas saw his father murdered before his eyes. It was spring, and Abraham Sr. was busy clearing land to be planted, "when he was waylaid by a party of Shawnee savages." Thomas watched, helpless, as his father was bludgeoned to death—his throat cut and scalp taken. What (if anything) provoked the attack, or why his own life was spared, he couldn't say. Whatever the reasons, life was never the same for Thomas Lincoln. With no inheritance, he was left to wander from town to town, toiling in an endless series of odd jobs. He apprenticed with a carpenter, served as a prison guard, and rode flatboats on the Mississippi and Sangamon Rivers. He felled trees, plowed fields, and attended church when he could. There is no evidence that he ever set foot in a schoolhouse.

This wholly unremarkable life would have surely escaped the notice of history had Thomas not ventured into Elizabethtown one day when he was twenty-eight and, by chance, laid eyes on the young daughter of a Kentucky farmer. Their marriage, on June 12th, 1806, would change the shape of history in ways neither could have dreamed.

By all accounts, Nancy Hanks was a bright, gentle, and handsome woman who had a "remarkable" way with words (but seldom spoke among new acquaintances on account of painful shyness). She was literate, having enjoyed the formal education that her son never would. Nancy was a resourceful woman, and though books were hard to come by in the Kentucky wilderness, she always managed to have at least one borrowed or begged tome around for those rare

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moments when all the work of the day was done. Beginning when he was barely more than an infant, she would read Abe anything she could get her hands on: Voltaire's *Candide*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the poetry of Keats and Byron. But it was the Bible that young Abraham loved above all others. The attentive toddler would sit on her lap, thrilling to the larger-than-life stories of the Old Testament: David and Goliath, Noah's ark, the plagues of Egypt. He was especially fascinated by the tale of Job, the righteous man who had everything taken from him, every curse, sorrow, and betrayal leveled at him, yet continued to love and praise God. "He might have been a priest," a childhood friend would write years later in an election pamphlet, "if life had been kinder to him."

Knob Creek Farm was about as tough a place to live as one could find in the early 1800s. In the spring, frequent thunderstorms flooded the creek and turned crops into fields of waist-deep mud. In the winter, all color drained from the frozen landscape, and the trees became twisted fingers rattling against each other in the wind. It was here that Abe would experience many of his earliest memories: chasing his older sister, Sarah, through acres of blue ash and shagbark hickory; clinging to the back of a pony for a gentle summer ride; splitting kindling with a small ax beside his father. It was also here that he would experience the first of many devastating losses in his life.

When Abe was three, Nancy Lincoln gave birth to a boy christened Thomas, like his father. Sons were a double blessing to frontier families, and the elder Thomas no doubt looked to the day when he would have two able-bodied boys to share the work with. But those dreams were short-lived. The baby died just shy of a month old. Abe would write about it twenty years later, before he had lived to bury two of his own sons.

As for my own grief, I do not recall. I was perhaps too young to comprehend the meaning or irrevocability of it. However, I

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will never forget my mother and father's torment. To describe it would be an exercise in futility. It is the sort of suffering that cannot be done justice with words. I can say only this—that I suspect it is an anguish from which one never recovers. A walking death.

It's impossible to know what killed Thomas Lincoln Jr. The common causes ranged from dehydration, to pneumonia, to low birth weight. Congenital and chromosomal abnormalities were more than a century away from being understood or diagnosed. Even under the best conditions, the infant mortality rate was 10 percent in the early 1800s.

The elder Thomas built a small coffin and buried his son near the cabin. No grave marker remains. Nancy pulled herself together and doted on her remaining children—especially Abe. She encouraged his insatiable curiosity, his innate love of learning stories, names, and facts and reciting them again and again. Over her husband's objections, she began to teach Abe how to read and write before his fifth birthday. "Father had no use for books," he recalled years later, "short of burning them when the firewood got wet." Though there is no record of her feelings, Nancy Lincoln must have sensed that her son was gifted. Certainly she was determined to see him go on to better things than she or her husband could.

The Old Cumberland Trail ran directly through Knob Creek Farm. It was a highway of sorts, the main route between Louisville and Nashville, and characters of every stripe passed in both directions daily. Five-year-old Abe would sit on a fence rail for hours at a time, laughing at the molasses wagon driver who always made a show of cursing his mules, or waving at the post rider as he galloped by on horseback. Occasionally he saw slaves being taken to auction.

I recall seeing a horse cart pass, filled with Negroes. There were several. All women, and of varying age. They were...

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shackled at the wrist and chained together on the cart bed, without so much as a handful of loose hay to comfort the bumps of the road, or a blanket to relieve them from the winter air. The drivers, naturally, sat on the cushioned bench in front, each of them wrapped in wool. My eyes met those of the youngest Negro girl, who was close in age to myself. Perhaps five or six. I admit that I could not look at her more than a moment before turning away—such was the sorrow of her countenance.

As a Baptist, Thomas Lincoln had been raised to believe that slavery was a sin. It was one of the few lasting contributions he would make to his son's character.

Knob Creek became a place where weary travelers on the Old Cumberland Trail could spend the night. Sarah would make up a bed for each guest in one of the outbuildings (the farm consisted of a cabin, a storage shed, and a barn), and Nancy would serve a hot meal at sundown. The Lincolns never asked their overnight guests for payment, though most made contributions, either in money or, more often, in goods such as grain, sugar, and tobacco. After supper, the women would retire, and the men would pass the evening sipping whiskey and puffing pipes. Abe would lie awake in his bed in the loft above, listening to his father entertain their guests with a seemingly limitless reserve of stories, thrilling tales of the early settlers and the Revolutionary War, humorous anecdotes and allegories, and true (or partly true) stories from his own wandering days.

Father may have been wanting in some things, but here he was masterful. Night upon night, I marveled at his power to hold listeners in rapt attention. He could tell a story with such detail, such flourish, that afterwards a man would swear that it had been his own memory, and not a tale at all. I would...

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fight off sleep till well past midnight, trying to remember every word, and trying to fathom a way to tell the same story to my young friends in a manner they would understand.

Like his father, Abe had a natural gift for storytelling and would grow to master the art. His ability to communicate—to boil complex ideas down to simple, colorful parables—would be a powerful asset in later political life.

Travelers were expected to relay any news from the outside world. Most simply retold stories from the newspapers of Louisville or Nashville, or repeated gossip picked up along the road. “It was common to hear of the same drunk falling into the same ditch three times in a week, in three different voices.” Every so often, however, a traveler would arrive bearing stories of a different sort. Abe recalled trembling beneath his covers one night as a French immigrant described the madness of Paris in the 1780s.

The people had taken to calling it *la ville des morts*, the Frenchman said. *The City of Death*. Every night brought new screams, and every morning, new pale, wide-eyed bodies in the streets, or bloated victims fished from the sewers, which often ran red. They were the remains of men, women, children. They were innocent victims with no common bonds beyond their poverty, and there was nary a person in France who had any doubt as to the identity of their murderers. “It was *les vampires!*” he said. “We had seen them with our own eyes!” Vampires, he told us, had been the “quiet curse” of Paris for centuries. But now, with so much famine and disease...so many poor beggars packed tightly in the slums...they were growing ever bolder. Ever hungrier. “Yet Louis did nothing! He and his *aristocrates pompeux* did nothing while vampires feasted upon his starving subjects, until finally his subjects would tolerate no more.”

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Naturally, the Frenchman's story, like all vampire stories, was considered folly, a myth concocted to frighten children. Still, Abe found them endlessly fascinating. He spent hours dreaming up his own tales of "winged immortals," their "white fangs stained with blood, waiting in the darkness for the next unfortunate soul to wander their way." He thrilled in testing their effectiveness on his sister, who "frightened easier than a field mouse, but thought it was good fun nonetheless."

Thomas, on the other hand, was quick to scold Abe if he caught him spinning vampire yarns. Such stories were "childish nonsense" and had no place in polite conversation.

III

In 1816, another land dispute brought an end to the Lincolns' time at Knob Creek. Ownership was a murky concept on the frontier, with multiple deeds often issued for the same property, and records mysteriously appearing or disappearing (depending on the nature of the bribe). Rather than face a costly legal battle, Thomas uprooted his family for the second time in Abe's seven years, leading them west across the Ohio River and into Indiana. There, having apparently learned nothing from his previous land disputes, Thomas simply helped himself to a 160-acre plot of land in a heavily wooded settlement known as Little Pigeon Creek, near present-day Gentryville. The decision to leave Kentucky was both a practical and moral one. Practical, because there was plenty of cheap land to be had after the Indians were driven out following the War of 1812. Moral, because Thomas was an abolitionist, and Indiana was a free territory.

Compared to the farms at Sinking Springs and Knob Creek, the Lincolns' new homestead was truly untamed—surrounded by an "unbroken wilderness," where bears and bobcats roamed without boundaries or fear of man. Their first months were spent in a hastily

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constructed lean-to barely big enough for four people and open to the elements on one side. The biting cold of that first Indiana winter must have been unbearable.

Little Pigeon Creek was remote, but hardly lonely. There were eight or nine families less than a mile from the Lincolns' home, many of them fellow Kentuckians. "More than a dozen boys my age lived within a short walk. We . . . formed a militia, and waged a campaign of mischief that is still spoken of in southern Indiana." But the growing community was more than a repository for boisterous children. As was often the case on the frontier, families pooled their resources and talents to increase their chances of survival, planting and harvesting crops together, trading goods and labor, and lending a hand in times of illness or hardship. Considered the best carpenter in the area, Thomas rarely wanted for work. One of his first contributions was a tiny one-room schoolhouse, which Abe would attend infrequently in the coming years. During his first presidential campaign, he would write a brief autobiography, in which he admitted that the sum of his schooling amounted to "less than a year altogether." Even so, it was obvious to at least one of those early teachers, Azel Waters Dorsey, that Abraham Lincoln was "an exceptional child."

Following Abe's fateful turkey encounter, he announced that he would no longer hunt game. As punishment, Thomas put him to work splitting wood—thinking the physical toll would force him to reconsider. Though Abe could barely lift the blade higher than his waist, he spent hour after hour clumsily splitting and stacking logs.

It got to be that I could hardly tell where the ax stopped and my arm began. After a while, the handle would simply slip through my fingers, and my arms would hang at my sides like a pair of curtains. If Father saw me resting thus, he would cuss up a cyclone, take the ax from the ground, and split a dozen logs in a minute to shame me into working again. I kept at it, though, and with each passing day, my arms grew a little stronger.

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FIG.23A. - YOUNG ABE WRITES IN HIS JOURNAL BY FIRELIGHT, ACCOMPANIED BY SOME OF HIS EARLY VAMPIRE-HUNTING TOOLS.

Soon, Abe could split more logs in a minute than his father.

Two years had passed since those first months in the lean-to. The family now lived in a small, sturdy cabin with a stone fireplace, shingled roof, and raised wooden floor that stayed warm and dry in winter. As always, Thomas worked just enough to keep them clothed and fed. Nancy's great-aunt and great-uncle Tom and Elizabeth Sparrow had come from Kentucky to live in one of the outbuildings and help out around the farm. Things were good. "I have since learned to distrust such stillness," Abe wrote in 1852, "as it is always, always prelude to some great calamity."

One September night in 1818, Abe awoke with a start. He sat straight up in his bed and shielded his face with his hands, as if someone had been standing over him, threatening to bring a club down on his head. No one did. Realizing the danger was imagined,

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he lowered his hands, caught his breath, and looked around. Everyone was asleep. Judging by the embers in the fireplace, it was two or three in the morning.

Abe ventured outside wearing nothing but his sleeping gown, despite the early arrival of autumn. He walked toward the silhouette of the outhouse, still half asleep, closed the door behind him, and sat. As his eyes adjusted, the moonlight coming in through the planks suddenly seemed bright enough to read by. With no book to pass the time, Abe ran his hands through the tiny shafts of light, examining the patterns they made on his fingers.

Someone was talking outside.

Abe held his breath as the footfalls of two men grew closer, then stopped. *They're in front of the cabin.* One spoke in an angry whisper. Though he couldn't make out the words, Abe knew the voice didn't belong to anyone in Little Pigeon Creek. "The accent was English, and the pitch uncommonly high." The stranger ranted for a moment, then paused, waiting for an answer. It came. This time, the voice was very familiar. It belonged to Thomas Lincoln.

I pressed my eye to one of the spaces between the planks. It was indeed Father, and he was with someone I had never seen before. This stranger was a squat figure of a man, clad in finer attire than I had ever seen. He was missing his right arm below the elbow—the sleeve neatly pinned to his shoulder. Father, though easily the larger of the two, seemed to cower before this companion.

Abe struggled to make out their conversation, but they were too far away. He watched, trying his best to read their gestures, their lips, until...

Father, suddenly mindful of waking us, urged his companion away from the cabin. I held my breath as they drew closer,

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certain that I would be revealed by the hammering of my heart. They stopped not four yards from where I sat. It was in this manner that I overheard the last of the argument. "I cannot," said Father. The stranger stood in silence and disappointment.

Finally he gave his reply. "Then I'll take it in other ways."

IV

Tom and Elizabeth Sparrow were dying. For three days and nights, Nancy nursed her great-aunt and great-uncle through scorching fevers, delusions, and cramps so severe they made the six-foot Tom weep like a child. Abe and Sarah stuck close to their mother, helping her keep the compresses wet and the bedding clean, and praying with her for a miraculous recovery that they all knew, deep down, wouldn't come. The old folks had seen this before. They called it "the milk sick," a slow poisoning brought on by drinking tainted milk. It was untreatable and fatal. Abe had never watched someone die before, and he hoped that God would forgive him for being slightly curious to see it happen.

He hadn't dared confront his father about what he'd seen and heard a week earlier. Thomas had been especially distant (and largely absent) since that night, and seemed to want no part of the vigil taking place at Tom and Elizabeth's bedside.

They died in quick succession—he first, she a few hours later. Abe was secretly disappointed. He'd half expected a last desperate gasp for breath, or a touching soliloquy, as in the books he was now reading to himself at night. Instead, Tom and Elizabeth simply fell into a coma, lay still for several hours, and died. Thomas Lincoln, without so much as a word of condolence to his wife, set about fashioning a pair of coffins from planks and wooden pegs the next morning. The Sparrows were in the ground by supper.

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Father had never been particularly fond of Aunt and Uncle, and they were hardly the first relations he had buried. Yet I had never known him to be so quiet. He seemed lost in thought. Uneasy.

Four days later, Nancy Lincoln began to feel ill. At first, she insisted it was nothing more than a headache, no doubt brought on by the stress of Tom and Elizabeth's death. Nevertheless, Thomas sent for the nearest doctor, who lived thirty miles away. By the time he arrived, just before sunrise the next morning, Nancy was delusional with fever.

My sister and I knelt at her side, trembling from fear and want of sleep. Father sat on a nearby chair as the doctor examined her. I knew that she was dying. I knew that God was punishing me. Punishing me for my curiosity over Aunt and Uncle's death. Punishing me for killing a creature that had shown me no malice. I alone was responsible. When the doctor was finished, he asked for a word with Father outside. When they returned, Father could not help his tears. None of us could.

That night, Abe sat alone by his mother's side. Sarah had fallen asleep next to the fire, and Thomas had nodded off in his chair for the moment. Nancy had finally fallen into a coma. She'd been screaming for hours—first from the delusions, and then from the pain. At one point, Thomas and the doctor had restrained her while she shrieked about “looking the devil in the eyes.”

Abe took the compress off her forehead and dipped it in the water bowl by his feet. He'd have to light another candle soon. The one by her bedside was beginning to flicker. As he lifted the compress and wrung it out, a hand seized his wrist.

“My baby boy,” whispered Nancy.

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The transformation was total. Her face was calm, her voice gentle and even. There was something of a light in her eyes again. My heart leapt. This could only be the miracle I had so earnestly prayed for. She looked at me and smiled. "My baby boy," she whispered again. "Live." Tears began to run down my cheeks. I wondered if this was just some cruel dream. "Mama?" I asked. "Live," she repeated. I wept. God had forgiven me. God had given her back to me. She smiled again. I felt her hand slip from my wrist, and I watched her eyes close. "Mama?" Once more, this time barely above a whisper, she repeated, "Live." She never opened her eyes again.

Nancy Hanks Lincoln died on October 5th, 1818, age thirty-four. Thomas buried her on a hillside behind the cabin.

Abe was alone in the world.

His mother had been his soul mate. She had shown him love and encouragement since the day he was born. She had read to him all those nights, always holding the book in her left hand and gently twirling a finger through his dark hair with the right as he fell asleep on her lap. Hers had been the first face to greet him when he entered the world. He hadn't cried. He had simply looked at her and smiled. She was love, and light. And she was gone. Abe wept for her.

No sooner was she buried than Abe resolved to run away. The thought of staying in Little Pigeon Creek with his eleven-year-old sister and grief-stricken father was more than he could bear. Before his mother was thirty-six hours dead, Abe Lincoln, nine years old, trudged through the Indiana wilderness, carrying all of his meager possessions in a wool blanket. His plan was brilliantly simple. He would walk as far as the Ohio River. There, he would beg his way onto a flatboat and float down to the lower Mississippi, then into New Orleans, where he'd be able to stow away on any number of ships. Perhaps he'd find his way to New York or Boston. Perhaps he'd sail to Europe, to see the immortal cathedrals and castles he'd often imagined.

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FIG. 12-B. - YOUNG ABE STANDS OVER HIS MOTHER'S GRAVE IN AN EARLY 1900'S ENGRAVING TITLED 'A PLEDGE OF VENGEANCE'.

If there was a flaw in his plan, it was his time of departure. Abe chose to leave home in the afternoon, and by the time he'd put four miles behind him, the short winter day was fading to darkness. Surrounded by untamed wilderness, with nothing more than a wool blanket and a handful of food to his name, Abe stopped, sat against a tree, and sobbed. He was alone in the dark, and he was homesick for a place that no longer existed. He longed for his mother. He longed to feel his sister's hair against his face as he wept

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on her shoulder. To his surprise, he even found himself longing for his father's embrace.

There was a faint cry in the night—a long, animal cry that echoed all around me. I thought at once of the bears that our neighbor Reuben Grigsby had spotted near the creek not two days before, and felt like a rube for leaving home without so much as a knife. There was another cry, and another. They seemed to move all around me, and the more I heard, the more obvious it became that no bear, or panther, or animal was making them. They had a different sound. A human sound. All at once I realized what I was hearing. Without bothering to take my belongings, I jumped up and ran toward home as fast as my feet would carry me.

They were screams.