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Preface

In 2002, I discovered that my ancestors in America had owned a slave named Will.

Will Clarkson was born about 1739 in Africa, probably in what is now Senegal. He was captured by slave traders when he was sixteen and brought to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where he was sold at auction to a local white tanner, James Clarkson, and acquired his English name. All we actually know about him are a few fragments.

This fictional tale takes place between the years 1755 and 1789, woven through actual historical events of those years of the American Revolution and the lives of the other real people, both black and white, who made it happen.

For those who are interested, my notes at the end provide further insight into what was real then and imagined now.

Rye, New Hampshire
January 15, 2007

PART ONE

New World: 1755–1775

1

Maybe it was a mistake. But that big one alone should bring enough to make the voyage break even.

John Martin stood mast-straight at the helm of his brig, the *Exeter*, as she rounded the Isles of Shoals six miles off the New Hampshire coast. Expertly he brought the ship off her northwest course and headed her west for the mouth of the Piscataqua River, toward Portsmouth, the thriving English settlement on the river's south bank.

This stretch of the North Atlantic seacoast had been discovered in 1603 by the British sea Captain Martin Pring. In 1623, a group from Plymouth, England, settled at a spot, now in Rye, called Odiorne's Point. In 1630, a larger site called Strawberry Banke was established a few miles farther into the Piscataqua. Fishing was the settlers' main occupation. The entire area adopted the name Portsmouth in 1653, and in 1679 New Hampshire was made a separate royal colony. Rye was established as an independent parish in 1726.

Over the intervening years, to the mid-1750s, despite continued pillaging by the local Abenaki Indians during the infamous King Philip's War, Portsmouth had prospered. Indeed, by the time of the American Revolution it was one of the largest cities in the colonies. Shipbuilding, shipping, and trade were its staples. The English targeted New Hampshire's great forests for timber for both commercial and military vessels. Local sea captains and merchants

exported a wide variety of indigenous products and brought back more sophisticated goods from all parts of the world.

John Martin was a product of that prosperity, and worked hard to perpetuate it. He had started in the fishing business as a young man. He still owned and operated two boats for that purpose. Later he expanded, buying three sloops that carried timber and timber products to England, France, and Spain.

The *Exeter*, his newest ship, was a two-masted brigantine weighing one hundred tons. She measured ninety-five feet in length at the lower deck, with a fourteen-foot-deep hold. She was twenty-seven feet across at the beam. Martin was rightly proud of her, the largest ship registered in New Hampshire.

The new ship's voyage had been long and arduous. On the outgoing sail to London, the *Exeter* had been packed tight with nails, rope, lumber, and furniture. In London, Martin used part of his profits to buy a variety of English finery—clothes, trinkets, pottery—and set forth to the western coast of Africa, specifically the island of Goree, east of Gambia, and south of what is now known as Senegal. There he traded the English goods for tobacco, wine, beef, rice, corn, rum, pitch, tar, and turpentine. But most important, he purchased sixty-one Africans, listed in an inventory:

Twenty Men Slaves
 Seven More Boy Do (Ditto)
 Ten Boy Do
 Fifteen Women Do
 Two Women Girl Do
 Seven Girl Do
 —Sixty-one Slaves

"Shouldna bought so many," said Jacob Moulton, Martin's first mate, beside him at the ship's wheel. "Never let us sell anywhere neah that numbuh in Pawtsmouth."

"Stop worryin," Martin said. "We're going to make a lot of money on these Negroes."

The purchase of such a large number of slaves for resale in the northern colonies did represent a major financial gamble for Martin. Up to now, he and other merchant ship captains, such as

his friend Pierse Long, had brought only one or two slaves at a time into Portsmouth, usually on special order from one of their best customers for other goods. Even the wealthier families owned at most five but usually just one or two Negro “servants,” as they were called. If Martin was able to sell only a few, he’d have to turn back down the colonial coast to get rid of the rest—at substantial additional cost for the second voyage, and in areas where the prices he’d get would be much lower.

As the ship beat into the stiff offshore breeze on that clear day—October 21, 1755—Martin focused on the bright red and orange foliage on the shoreline. He looked forward to being home.



In near total darkness in the hold, the Africans had no more awareness that it was autumn than they had any indication of what lay ahead. Jammed into shelves on the sides of the hold and chained to the posts holding the shelf boards, many were sick with dysentery and all suffered from malnutrition. They had lived in fear ever since their capture in Gambia by a raiding party of slave traders who had overrun and burned their villages.

Rumors back in the African port had led them to believe they would suffer death by cannibalism at the hands of the white men. Some of the captives had already concluded that such an end would be preferable to continued confinement in the putrid conditions of the hold, which was, between biweekly mucking out, usually two inches deep in vomit and excrement. Already eleven captives had died en route, and three had committed suicide by jumping overboard when they were brought up on deck for a few moments of fresh air and a chance to stretch their limbs.



The ship turned quickly by Odiorne’s Point on the south and moved into the mouth of the Piscataqua, where His Majesty’s castle of Fort William and Mary and a lighthouse stood on the Great Island, also on the south. Martin then guided her past Long’s Island to starboard and toward Puddle Dock, where the original Strawberry Banke settlement had been. Just short of the Swing Bridge over

the entrance to the dock he brought the *Exeter* about, toward a row of warehouses that lined Gravesend Street, fronted on the water-side by Betts' Wharf.

The ship hit the wharf with a thud that terrified the captives belowdecks and sent some of them sprawling into the slime on the floor of the hold. They could hear shouting and felt the ship being secured to something solid.

"Bring em up!" Martin yelled to his first mate.

"Aye." Moulton threw back the main hatch and disappeared below with two of his men.

After a moment the African captives, one by one, emerged from the hold—first the men and boys, then the women and girls. They covered their eyes against the bright sun and shivered in the fall chill. Many were emaciated. Others bore the scars of whippings administered during the three-month-long voyage. Terror filled many eyes, rage others.

Moulton led them off the deck and lined them up in three rows on the wharf, prodding the men with his stick and pushing the women into the back row.

One young man Moulton did not attempt to prod or push. Six feet tall, about sixteen, with ebony skin and muscles that appeared about to burst, this man made up his own mind where he would stand. Then he strode there, to the left end of the front row. He turned and stood, calmer and more erect than the others, and his burning brown eyes resumed their intent focus on Moulton's every move.

This was Kwamba, of the Mandinka tribe. He was a direct descendant of King Sundiata Keita, of the Mali kingdom, a celebrated warrior killed in battle in the thirteenth century. In the generations since, the Mandinka people had dominated their African region and become legendary for their triumphs in battle. In Africa, Kwamba's father had very early taught the young boy about his ancestry. The teenager was fiercely proud of his heritage.

As Martin herded the captives into the warehouse, the first mate scurried off to post notices throughout town. He read the words on one of the stack of hand-written leaflets as he went:

Forty-seven likely Negro men, women, boys, and girls just imported from Africa, to be sold at the pier in front of Sheafe's Warehouse on Tuesday, October 22nd at eight in the morning.

Enquire of Captain Martin or Mr. Moulton.

The leaflets continued with a description of the subgroups from the list in the inventory.

Suddenly an imposing figure dressed in black coat and breeches, followed closely by a cluster of other townspeople, turned the corner on to the pier and charged toward Martin.

"What in God's name do you think you're doing?" William Bannister, Portsmouth's chairman of the selectmen, said.

"What are you—"

"You can't bring sixty Africans in here all at once, all knowing each other, speaking the same language."

"So?" Martin said.

"You fool! They'll plot to escape. With that many from the same tribes, they could even revolt or start a series of runaways to Boston or New York or west. We can't risk that. I'm telling you, the most you can sell here is ten. We'll allow you that many only because some of our merchants are sorely in need of labor."

Martin sighed. He knew it was no use to argue with Bannister, who ruled the town. His neighbors' apparent solidarity made matters worse.

"Aye, ten it'll be, then," he said.



These white men can't be that much smarter. I'll figure out a plan.

Kwamba lay chained on the cold dirt floor of the warehouse, trying to clear his mind and collect his thoughts in preparation for whatever would happen next. He willed himself to suppress his fury, to analyze his situation rationally.

He'd talked with some of the other captives. He knew he'd soon be sold, but he had no idea how that would happen. Escape beforehand looked impossible. His future would come down to what his new owner was like.

Baleem, one of his Mandinka tribesmen, said, "Hope I'm bought by a poor man. More likely to treat me good."

"Not me," Kwamba said. "I hope the person who buys me is a big man here so I can find out who rules this place and how they do it." He thought about the man in the black clothes. He needed to find out who he was. Figure out how he could get close to him. First he had to learn what they were saying, speak their language.

Interesting place. Busy people. Prosperous-looking people. Strong wooden buildings. Ships much bigger than our boats. He wondered what all the people were doing.

His thoughts turned back to Africa. His home, his parents, his three brothers and two sisters. It all seemed so long ago, so far away. Their games together. Tribeswomen dancing and drumming to drive the evil spirits from a sick patient. The hunting of swift animals for food. His mother and sisters working hard in the fields. His father and older brothers returning from victorious battles against neighboring tribes. Their strong love for each other. Never to see them again?

As he fell asleep, his face was wet.

2

On Tuesday a gray dawn broke over a rainy windswept harbor. John Martin and his mates were at the warehouse early, preparing for the auction. Based on the captives' physical condition and their likely ability to perform the jobs Portsmouth residents would be needing them for—housemaids, farmhands, shipwrights, coopers, rope-makers—Martin carefully selected the ones he would sell in Portsmouth: four men, one woman, three boys, and two girls. He decided to bring them out to be auctioned one at a time; the rest would stay in the warehouse awaiting their turns. He also decided that the strapping young man, Kwamba, would be put up last, after the earlier bidding had warmed up the buyers. In the warehouse, Moulton splashed the slaves with cold water to clean them up for sale. Martin then spoke with Ebenezer Trefethen, whom he'd hired to conduct the auction. Trefethen did all the auctioneering for the farmers in the area whether it was for cattle, horses, or hogs. To him, black humans were no different.

"Ben," Martin said to the auctioneer, "I don't want any of these to go for less than ten pounds. I'll stop a sale if final bids aren't that much."

"Don't worry. It's a good lot—we'll do fine."

As the hands on the clock on the Anglican church steeple approached eight, everything was ready. A crowd of about thirty people—mostly men and a handful of women, including two

African maids to provide bidding advice to their mistresses—had gathered at the end of the pier.

James Clarkson, Portsmouth's leading tanner, was there. His principal concern on this dreary fall day was the situation at his tannery. One of his long-time employees had died of throat distemper the previous winter. During the summer, Clarkson had rented a slave named Pomp from John Langdon, together with a team of oxen. Pomp was rather lazy, but he had a pleasant disposition, and Clarkson found him easy to teach and direct. All well enough as an interim solution. But now, with winter bearing down, the Clarksons needed help fast to meet the next spring's demands for finished leather. With the unskilled workers in town fully employed, James believed he had to turn to the only available permanent resource—slave labor.

Clarkson was surprised to see that Walter Abbott, the other major tanner in town, had also arrived. The two men had not spoken to each other for some ten years, ever since Abbott had lied to one of Clarkson's customers about the quality of his rival's saddles. Clarkson had responded by upbraiding Abbott at a church meeting. He knew that Abbott, shamed publicly, had not forgotten it.

The first African Moulton led out was a thin little girl who could not have been more than seven years old. She was wearing a makeshift dress of two burlap bags tied together. She held up the bag-dress by clutching the top under her chin. Her eyes darted back and forth as she tried to figure out what was going to happen. When she reached a center spot on the wharf, where Trefethen had placed an inverted wooden box, Moulton gestured that she stand up on it, but as she stepped up she slipped and fell into the mud. Some of the onlookers gasped or called out.

"Help her!" a woman cried.

The girl's bag-dress came off, and she stood back up naked. Moulton grabbed the bags and roughly pushed her up on the box as she was.

Trefethen had trouble getting a satisfactory opening bid for the girl, and he quickly settled for a final bid of ten pounds from Abraham Dearborn. Dearborn was handicapped by a wooden leg, the result of a wound received in 1748 when he'd fought for

the British during the first phase of the French and Indian War. James Clarkson figured Dearborn needed someone like this girl as a domestic helper. Dearborn retrieved the girl's bag-dress from Moulton, gave it to her, and, after she'd pulled it on, gently led her away by the hand. He was already trying to explain to her his name and that he was going to call her Violet. Much of the crowd applauded.

Second on the box was Timbu, about twenty, who became the object of spirited bidding between Walter Abbott and Elijah Hall. Clarkson made a couple of bids at the lower levels but then stopped. Hall, who needed another man to work in his blacksmith shop and to help make rigging and sails in his shipping-supplies business, was bidding rapidly. He succeeded as Trefethen knocked down the sale for him at twenty-two pounds. Abbott slapped his fist.

The young Mandinka girl Aiku, twelve years old, followed Timbu. Clarkson was surprised to see Frances Wentworth, the wife of the British Tory leader John Wentworth, bidding aggressively for Aiku. She prevailed at eighteen pounds. Clarkson surmised that Mrs. Wentworth wanted another maidservant to help with the maintenance of the family's mansion on Pleasant Street.

Next came Baleem, a healthy eighteen-year-old boy. Daniel Rindge, a local merchant who maintained a countinghouse that provided accounting and banking services to other businessmen throughout the province, led the bidding. A member of the Queen's Chapel Anglican Church of England, Ringe was a well-known ally of the king, who in turn saw to it that Rindge received appropriate financial support. This day he had competition for Baleem from half a dozen other leading members of the city's business community. At the end, Rindge happily paid Captain Martin twenty-five pounds, his final bid for the young African who would provide much needed janitorial services for Rindge's places of business.

The fifth captive brought forward was a relatively older woman, about thirty. Hall Jackson, the town's physician, stood with his hands in the pockets of his long raincoat as he watched the proceedings. The doctor had told Clarkson that he needed somebody to help him in his two new projects: expanding the midwife capabilities of the females in the Portsmouth area and embarking on

a broad program of inoculating the town's citizens against small-pox. He made several bids for this woman, ultimately buying her for seventeen pounds. Hall's purchase was also greeted by warm applause from the onlookers. Clarkson noticed how quickly Hall set off for his office with the woman. Not wasting any time in starting her training.

Three more captives were sold very quickly, all above Martin's minimum. At last it was time for the final offering of the day. Moulton pulled Kwamba out of the warehouse and pushed him onto the small box in front of the crowd. The African, wearing only a skimpy burlap loincloth, could not help shivering as a cold drizzle began to fall. He was still chained but stood straight. The rain bouncing off his shoulders and arms and the rivulets flowing down his chest emphasized his muscular physique. At Trefethen's urging, potential bidders approached him, feeling and poking him. Abbott was among them, but Clarkson stayed in the rear. Kwamba, his hands clenched behind his back, didn't move.

"Gentlemen and ladies," shouted the auctioneer. "As you can see, this young man is a fine specimen, strong, in good health. He can handle any kind of work. Do I hear an opening bid of ten pounds for this magnificent Negro?"

"Fifteen," Abbott called out. Clarkson groaned, though he wasn't surprised; he had hoped to avoid a bidding war.

"All right, gentlemen, that's still very low. We have a long way to go for this one. Do I hear twenty?"

"Twenty," said James Stoodley, the tavern owner.

"I have twenty. Do I hear twenty-five? Twenty, I need twenty-five."

"Twenty-five," said Abbott, smiling at Stoodley.

"I have twenty-five from Mr. Abbott. Will you go to thirty, Mr. Stoodley?" said Trefethen.

Stoodley paused. Then, as the auctioneer was about to speak, he shouted, "Thirty!"

Abbott stroked his chin.



Kwamba couldn't understand any of the white men's words, but he quickly figured out that his future rested on which of these two men shouting at the auctioneer proved successful. He kept looking back and forth between the two of them, searching for any indications as to which one he'd rather be owned by. He simply couldn't tell.



The crowd inched forward, eager to see not only who would win, but also how high the price would go.

Unnoticed, Clarkson tensed as he calculated what to do.

"Going once at thirty, going twice . . ." said the auctioneer

"Thirty-one," Clarkson yelled from the rear.

"Thirty-two" came immediately from Abbott.

"Three," Clarkson said.

Abbott paused, stroking his chin again. "Thirty-five," he said finally.

Clarkson didn't hesitate. "Forty."

Abbott scowled, but he had reached his limit.

Trefethen knocked down the sale to Clarkson, who stepped forward to pay his money and claim his purchase. The crowd cheered the record sale price.

Moulton unlocked the chains at the African's ankle. Clarkson had a pistol under his belt. He threw a rope noose over Kwamba's head and led him away by the neck. They walked past a number of jeering young onlookers who poked at Kwamba with sticks as he followed his new master. Neither responded to the heckling as they made their way to a house at the corner of South Road and South School Street.



As they walked, Kwamba looked the big white man up and down closely but could tell little about him. The man looked directly and silently ahead up the street and paid no attention to his new possession. His manner made Kwamba even more curious. *What's he like?*

3

*T*he handsome Clarkson house was set back from the road, with two rows of lush oak and maple trees leading across a long green lawn to the front portico. It had thirteen rooms, easily accommodating not only James, who was a widower, but also his son Andrew, Andrew's wife Lydia, and their four children—James, Elizabeth, Lydia, and Sarah. James's other two sons, James Jr. and Walter, lived in separate houses, also owned by James Sr., farther down South Road toward Rye.

Behind the white clapboard house was an unpainted barn with its weathered gray boards hung vertically. Inside, three horses kicked at their stalls while four brown-and-white cows lazily chewed their cud. Two pigs squealed as they ran for the back door. A large black-and-red rooster guarded a bevy of chickens. Adjoining the barn was a small hut with red paint peeling off, its door banging in the wind.

Pointing with his gun, Clarkson marched his new slave toward that hut and pulled open the door. Inside were a wooden bunk with two moth-eaten blankets on it, a chair, and a box with some old clothes and a worn pair of boots.

Clarkson gestured to the African to sit on the edge of the bunk. For himself he pulled up the chair, turned it around, and sat down. He dropped the rope, which still dangled from Kwamba's neck. He began to speak across the top of the slats of the chair, looking intently into the boy's eyes.