The Pesthouse

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Extract

Everybody died at night. Most were sleeping at the time, the lucky ones who were too tired or drunk or deaf or wrapped too tightly in their spreads to hear the hillside, destabilized by rain, collapse and slip beneath the waters of the lake. So these sleepers (six or seven hundred, at a guess; no one ever came to count or claim the dead) breathed their last in passive company, unwarned and unexpectedly, without any fear. Their final moments, dormant in America.

But there are always some awake in the small times of the morning, the lovemakers, for instance, the night workers, the ones with stone-hard beds or aching backs, the ones with nagging consciences or bladders, the sick. And animals, of course.

The first of that community to die were the horses and the mules, which the travelers had picketed and blanketed against the cold out in the tetherings, between the houses and the lake, and beyond the human safety of stockades. They must have heard the landslide – they were so close and unprotected – though it was not especially bulky, not bulky enough, probably, to cause much damage on its own. In the time that it would take to draw a breath and yawn, there was a muted stony splash accompanied by a barometric pop,

a lesser set of sounds than thunder, but low and devious nevertheless, and worrying – for how could anyone not know by now how mischievous the world could be? The older horses, connoisseurs of one-night stands when everything was devious and worrying, were too weary after yet another day of heading dawnways, shifting carts, freight and passengers, to do much more than tic their ears and flare their nostrils. Even when, a moment later, the displaced waters of the lake produced a sloshing set of boisterous waves where there had not been any waves before, the full-growns would not raise their heads. But the younger horses and the ever-childish mules tugged against their ropes, and one or two even broke free but hadn't the foresight to seek high ground in the brief time that remained.

What happened next was almost silent. The landslip had hit the deepest side of the lake and, therefore, took some moments to reach the bottom, ten man heights from the surface, and then took some moments more for the avalanche of stone, earth, swarf and ancient buried scrap to show how heavy it was and squeeze the life out of the gas-rich sediments, the volatile silt and compacted weeds, the soda pockets, which had settled on the bed through centuries and were now ready – almost eager – for this catalyst. Shaken up and shaken out in one great flatulence, the water fizzed and belched until all the gases were discharged, to form a heavy, deadly, surface-hugging cloud, not as high as the pines but higher, certainly, than animals. There wasn't any wind that night to thin the suffocating vapors and no longer any rain to wash the poison from the air, but there was gravity to direct them down, beyond

the rapids and cascades, along the valley, past the tetherings, past the secret wooden bridge, past the metal fields, past the stone footings of the one-time shoe factory and tanning works, to seep between the palings of the pine stockades and settle on the town at the river's crossing point, where almost everyone was sleeping and dreaming of the ruined, rusty way ahead and all the paradise beyond.

Too near the lake and not sleeping was the boy called Nash, whose job that night was to protect the animals from cougars, wolves or thieves, or bush fish such as rattlers, possibly – though there'd be nothing he could do but shout and draw attention to himself if any of these many perils did approach the tetherings. He'd been too cold and wet even to doze, but not as cold and wet as usual. He huddled over his stove stones – which, following the midnight downpour, produced more smoke than heat – in his new and somehow terrifying coat. He'd traded for it only that day (with a man half his height again and three times his weight), giving a good supply of dried fruit, some pork twists and a leather water bag, hardly distinguishable from one another in taste or texture, and a flagon of apple juice that the giant, like a giant, had dispatched on the spot. So when the boy heard the landslip and the waves and stood to hear them better, should they come again, his coat spread out around him on the ground like chieftain robes intended for display but – at least for anybody as short as him – not ideal for walking.

Now Nash spotted the two loose mules and hurried out into the night to picket them again. He was not surprised when the coat snagged around his ankles and feet and brought him down. The coat had already toppled him several

times that night. He didn't hurt himself – boys bounce – but he felt more winded than made sense, more dislocated than he should, and stayed on the ground for a few moments to catch his breath and find his balance. His coat of farm goatskins and hair was as good as a bed and thick enough to keep the moisture out for a while. He'd have to shorten it, he thought. He'd have to cut off half a goat and turn the trimmings into belts or gloves, turn the trimmings into profit, actually. When he had time.

But for the moment, unaccountably, he was too comfortable to move. He had no time or energy for anything, not even sleep. He lost himself in the hairs and skins, forgot the night-time and the mud. He did feel sleepy, finally, but not alarmed. Too lost to be alarmed. The air was weighty, and its smell was stupefying – somewhere between the smell of mushrooms, eggs and rotting, clamped potatoes. He'd stand up in a moment, shuck off his dreams of belts and gloves, remove the coat and catch the mules. He'd be in trouble, otherwise. A mule was wealth. But, though his dreams soon ended, he never caught his breath and never caught the mules and never found out what had happened at the lake. This wasn't sleep oppressing him. He dimly recognized as much himself. He was the victim of magic, possibly, or fever – there was already fever in the town, he had heard – or a curse, the sort that storytellers knew about – or else some dead air from the grave, encouraged by the rain, had come to press its clammy lips on his. He'd tasted it. His lungs were rigid, suddenly. He was in the gripping custody of hair and skins. He'd been a fool to trust a giant. It must have seemed the coat had always meant to smother

him, was trained to kill. This was a homing coat that now would flee, as loyal and cunning as a dog, to rejoin the tall man who had traded it and, no doubt, would trade it many times again, exchanging death for apple juice.

Down in Ferrytown, not sleeping either, were two passengers from ten days west, a beauty boy – no beard – not twenty yet, and his slightly older wife. They'd found a berth in the loft of the dormitory, against the guest-house rules that naturally put the women behind locked doors in different quarters from the men but two-a-bed nevertheless. It was less comfy and colder than those first-floor beds where his parents and his sisters were but more private and consoling. These newly-weds didn't have to share their air with anyone. No wonder they'd been making love, as usual. Moving on each day and spending every night in some new space was oddly stimulating, they'd found, as was having sex as quietly as they could in sleeping company, against the rules. But now that lovemaking was concluded, they were quarreling in whispers, despite the likelihood that everything they said could be heard by strangers. The consolations of lovemaking don't last long when you are fearful, regardless of the massive hope beyond the fears. How many days would it be before they reached the ocean and the ships? The beauty boy thought one more month. He'd not pretend that things were better than they were. The far side of the river was an odd, perplexing place, he'd heard, haunted, wrecked and hard underfoot, with prairies of rubble where people had once lived in bastions and towers. The way ahead would be difficult beyond imagining. His wife did not believe such stories. She was uncompromisingly

optimistic, hopeful beyond reason. The rain that night had been more salty than she'd expected. When the rain tastes like tears, the sea is close. She'd seen a white bird ('That's a sign') and she'd heard another passenger say they'd reach the shore – the mighty river with one bank – in just three more days. Then the future could begin. So much for rubble, bastions and towers. Her husband was too easily impressed. She drifted off to thoughts of boarding ship in three days' time, and no more quarreling . . .

Not sleeping and on the verge of calling out for the busy couple in the loft to keep quiet was a woman who had strained her back. She'd been too eager earlier in the day to help her horse negotiate the steep descent into the valley and had fallen awkwardly. She sat up in her cot and flexed her spine, hoping not to wake the woman at her side. The pain shot down the outside of her left leg and cramped her toes. She crossed her fingers, willing it to go, and in a while the pain had disappeared . . .

Not sleeping was the ferryman who, having heard the rain, knew that he would have to drag himself from bed too soon, call his four sons and go down to the crossing to fasten the raft more securely and further in to the shore before the water surge. Not sleeping were the baker and his daughter who had just got up to start preparing flat bread, ash cake and pea loaf for the morning, enough dough and cornmeal for at least one hundred and sixty passengers who'd need to eat before they were ferried on the raft to the east bank of the river and yet another day of lugging to the coast . . .

Not sleeping was a woman who had been alarmed by

travel and by travelers – all her life – and was not much liked by anyone she met, but who had been much more terrified of staying put where she was born, while all her family and neighbors emigrated east, fired up by boredom, hope and poverty. Now she was sick from too much wayside grain and drinking sullied water for more than a month. She'd rather breathe her last than gag anymore, she'd told her husband. 'I should have stayed at home.' He'd said, 'You should have.' She pulled her knees up to her chest and tried to belch the colic out . . .

Not sleeping was a tall man from the plains – not quite a giant, except to boys – who had to go out, barefooted, in the cold to the town palisade for the second time that night to urinate. He would have worn his goatskin coat if he'd not traded it that day. He was standing with his trousers down and pissing apple juice when what had come out of the lake with such a show just moments previously arrived without a sound and almost without a shape to overwhelm whomever it could find, the wakeful and the slumbering.

This used to be America, this river crossing in the ten-month stretch of land, this sea-to-sea. It used to be the safest place on earth.

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Franklin Lopez had not been sleeping in Ferrytown, though he'd wanted to. He'd not been sleeping anywhere, in fact. Couldn't sleep. He'd weathered such pain the day before that he'd been forced to consider what anyone (other than his brother) who'd seen the wincing recoil in his limp or examined his inflamed leg had already told him, that he shouldn't walk another step. Certainly he shouldn't walk downhill on such a long and hazardous gradient, unless he wanted to damage his knee beyond repair and put paid to any hopes of getting to the coast and boarding ship before the worst of the fall storms. He and his brother, Jackson (named for their parents' small home town on the plains), had left the journey rather late as it was. Too late, perhaps. The prairie tall-grass had already whitened and buckled. Apart from nuts and mushrooms, there was little free food to be gathered at the trackside. The first rains had arrived, and soon the winds and snow would get to work. Traveling would become more hazardous and then impossible. Only the ill prepared, the ill fated and the ill timed were still strung out thinly along the previously busy route, hoping to make the final sailings before ice and squalls shut down the sea and, anyway, made shore to ship or ship to shore

impossible. The wayside going east was already littered with the melancholy camps and the shallow graves – soon to be torn up by wolves – of those whose bodies couldn't take the journey, those who had been fatally chilled by wading through rivers, those who had starved and weakened, those who had been thrown by their horses or poisoned by their suppers, those who had been crushed between the fears of going forward and the dread of going back.

Feet failed first, nothing could prepare the feet for this. Then the stomach gave way, soured by ditch and pond water and the usual makeshift meals of hardtack, jerked meat, pine nuts and scrapple – and, in the brothers' case on one occasion, a stew made from a hand-caught rabbit too diseased to run away, with nettle tops as greens. And if the stomach survived that, then the less sturdy travelers were betrayed by bones and joints, starting at their knees and working upward, pain on pain, through hips, up spine and into the shoulders and the neck, until there was nothing left to sour, fail or be betrayed except the soft pith of the head. Once summer turned and limped away, its sack crammed full of leaves, the route was challenging. Within a month the weather would have mugged the final stragglers, and the roads and ways would be empty again, untrodden till spring.

So Franklin understood that he could not readily afford to waste much time nursing such a slight injury. But neither could he afford the purchase of a horse or passage on a wagon where he could rest his leg. What should he do, then? Cut a stick and limp down to the coast? 'Just put up with the pain', as Jackson advised? Carry on regardless, let

nature take its course? He'd tried the stick, the putting up with pain, he'd trusted nature's course. His knee got worse. So finally he conceded. He'd have to find shelter and stay exactly where he was, high in the ridges, to sit out the swelling. It was an exasperating setback, and something that he was slow to tell his brother. But what other choice was there? His knee was too bloated to bend and too painful to take any weight. The flesh between his ankle and his thigh was sausaging with every step he took. The skin was stretched and cloudy. One more afternoon of walking could lame him for a month. A day or two of rest might rescue him. Besides, this injury was not a failure that he should feel ashamed of, no matter what the stiff expression on his brother's face seemed to suggest. He'd done better than some to get so far – more than sixty testing days of walking from the battered, weather-poisoned village of his birth – without much damage beyond the usual aches and pains, the usual broken skin and this damned knee, he told himself. He'd be a fool to take any chances now, if he wanted to enjoy the undulating rewards of the sailboat deck, and then to put ashore this year in the other place, whatever that might be, with his pith intact enough to make a good start.

'It'd be crazy to take the risk, Jacko,' he told his brother at last, coloring with self-consciousness as he spoke. He was still prone to being seized by sudden, girlish reddeners whenever he least wanted it.

'Only the crazy make it to the coast,' was the older man's reply. Yes, that was the wisdom of the road: you had to be crazy enough to take the risks, because the risks were unavoidable. 'Well, then, Franklin Lopez . . . you say.'

'I've said.'

'So say it again.'

'Well, do what you want, if you're the crazy one. I'm staying here till it's good enough, my knee.'

'How long's "till"?'

'Three days, four days, I guess.'

'I guess a month!'

Franklin knew better than to argue with his volcanic brother. He did not even shake his head. He watched Jackson mull over their problem for a few moments more, his eyes half closed, his lips moving, his fingers counting days. 'That knee'll snare us here a month, if not a month, then half a month. Too long,' Jackson added finally. 'By then the winter'll be on us like a pack of wolves. You hear me, little brother?' Little brother? Less in everything. 'You sit down now, then, that's the end of it. We're carrion.'

This was their final argument, the last of many, with Franklin daring to protest that his 'crazy' brother should press on to the coast without him (but not meaning it – who'd want to be abandoned to the winter and the woods, to be buried, along with the trail, beneath layers of mud, leaves and snow, even if it meant a few days free of bullying and censure?) and Jackson insisting that he'd stick by his infuriating, timid, blushing sibling till the last, if he really had to (but resenting Franklin's physical weakness, his infuriating, girlish laugh that seemed to buckle his whole body, his dreaminess, his hypochondria, and saying so repeatedly – 'That bitching knee's not half as bad as you make out' and 'Where'd we be if every time you got a touch of charley

horse you wanted three days' rest?' – until Franklin said, 'Ma's hearing every word you speak').

The brothers should not have taken their ma's advice two months before when they'd 'embarked' so late in the season of migration. 'Carry nothing with you,' she'd said, 'then no one will pay you any heed. And you can hurry on.' So they had left the plains equipped with just their boots, their knives, a double set of clothes rain-proofed with deer fat, a spark stone and some tinder in a pouch, a water bag and a back sack each, full of nothing-worth-stealing or so they thought: some cheese, dried fruit, salted pork and a couple of ground tarps.

To some extent their mother had been correct. They had moved fast, and no one had bothered them yet, while anyone else among the emigrants who'd been rash enough to travel in the company of carts and animals or had packed a year's supply of food and their prize possessions – best pots, jewelry, good cloth, good tools – paid a price for their comfort. The more they had, the more cruelly they were robbed, not by the other travelers but by the ones who wouldn't emigrate until they'd picked the carcass of America clean. But possibly two men like them – young, strong and imposingly tall – would not be robbed, even if they were walking naked with shards of polished silver in their beards. Jackson and Franklin Lopez, together, looked too capable of taking care of themselves to invite the attentions of thieves. And this had made them much valued as companions by other travelers, especially as their extra strength would always be prized by any wagoner, for example, who faced a hill or

mud, and would recompense them with a meal if only they would be his heavy horses for the afternoon.

No, Ma was right, wagons were slow and cumbersome. They might not have stomachs, feet and knees to let their owners down, but their axles snapped if stressed too much, and they were unsteady on gradients and hesitant at fords, with good reason. Rivers loved to test the strength of vehicles. A river's always pleased to have the opportunity to dismantle a wagon, to tear it into planks and carry it away in bits, together with its wagoner. Horses were less hesitant. They were fast and muscular. They didn't refuse the rivers or the gradients, so long as there were sticks and sugar lumps to urge them on, but they were flesh and bones and prone to injury and sickness. Just like men and women. But, just like men and women, horses' running costs were high, for oats and hay, board and lodging, tolls and tack.

Pack mules were the toughest of the lot. And cheap. More so than hinnies. A bucket of cottonwood bark or thistle and bitter water every night was all they needed. 'If a rabbit can pass, a mule will pass,' the mulemen boasted. But mules were stubborn, too. Both placid and stubborn. You could twitch the ropes in their lip rings or tug on their jerk lines until they bled, but still they wouldn't move unless it suited them. They had the patience to resist for ever. The brothers had been wise, so far, to travel without animals or wheels.

But now, with their few possessions laid out around them at the top of the descent and the first indications that the coming night would be a wet and cold one, the brothers – Franklin especially – regretted that they had not equipped

themselves better for such foreseeable emergencies. There were no cooking pots, they had no camping supplies, and except for a few scraps the store of food had been finished a month before. Their ma – she was far too old and metally at fifty-four, she'd said, to join them on their journey, too fat to go that far – was at that very moment most likely sitting on her stoop, rubbing her veins, and looking out across the now abandoned steads at the family cart and the three old roans for which she had no use. If Jackson and Franklin had only traveled with those horses and the cart, her sons would be at the river crossing by now, and Franklin would not be limping. Or at least they'd have some warmth and free shelter for the night, up on the rapidly cooling hillside. But they had never been the sort to disoblige their ma. Big but biddable, they were, for her. Big and unprepared for what the world could do to them.

Now the brothers had to face the prospect of some nights apart – the very thing that ma had said should not occur – while Jackson went ahead to sell his labor for a day or two and obtain some food. He'd leave his brother with their knives, the leaking water bag, the spark stone, the pair of tarps, their change of clothes and make do trading with his strength and overcoat. That heavy, much loved overcoat that his mother had stitched together from four farm goats would have to go despite the colder days ahead. It was the one thing that the brothers had that, though it had not quite been admired, had certainly been noticed by strangers. Being noticed might prove to be a handicap as they got closer to the lawless coast. So trading on the goats would be advisable. With any luck, Jackson would soon

return with provisions and possibly the part-share of an onward-going horse or at least the purchase of a cart ride among the women, the children and the old for his unmanly brother. Once in Ferrytown, if the worse came to the worst, they could pass the winter in relative safety. For the time being, though, Franklin would have an uncomfortable few nights on the mountainside; Jackson would have a proper bed. The best that Franklin could hope for was a mattress of pine cones.

Franklin might not be on his own entirely. Already he could hear the chirring of insects, the whistle of quails and barking deer. And there was a boulder hut – evidently occupied, though possibly by lunatics or bandits, Jackson warned, amused to alarm his brother – on the edge of the tree line a hundred paces off, where a large but unmaintained bald had been burned clear by hunters. There was no movement from within, so far as they could tell, just smoke. 'Keep your distance. That's best.'

And Franklin would not be entirely out of touch with his brother and their shared hopes. Despite the pain in his knee, he had succeeded in reaching the final woody swaggings in the sash of hills where there were almost uninterrupted views to the east. His hopes of getting free from America could be kept alive by a distant prospect of the lake, the town and the longed-for river crossing, after which, they'd been told, the going was less hilly, though punishing in more unusual ways.

It was late afternoon when his elder, tougher, taller brother shook his hand and set off down the track, promising to come back to the swaggings within three days.

The dusk was already pushing daylight back into the sun. Jackson would barely reach Ferrytown before dark. But he was fit and well, not injured yet, and, unlike all the travelers still on the descent with their carts and sledges, their mules and wheelbarrows, he was unencumbered by anything other than his coat. Unlike the mule trains, with their whistle-nagging masters and the packhorses with their bridle bells foretelling all the merriments ahead, he descended silently down the twists of Butter Hill, as it was known locally. (A hill so tortuous and uneven, they claimed, that any milk carried up or down it would be jolted and churned into butter.) You could not miss him, though, even in that gloaming. He was so much taller than the rest and hurrying like a man who was counting on a hot supper, and walking even taller than himself, catlike and stretched (while Franklin walked shrinkingly, his shoulders bunched). The pinto patterns of the goatskins marked him out as someone of account, the sort of man who should be welcome and respected anywhere he went.

Franklin had not dared say so to his brother, but he was more than nervous of the nights ahead. It was not so much the unlikely prospects on such a busy route of cougars, bears and snakes or the more certain prospect (on such a busy route) of human parasites that bothered him. Although he might not be as imposing as his brother – he was much lighter, easier in his skin and so less dangerous – he was still big and strong enough to take good care of himself, should he have no choice, even with Jackson by now far beyond his call. He had two knives. And there were rocks and branches with which to defend himself if any creature, beast or man,

were ill advised enough to take him on. But he was uneasy, nevertheless, for no man's tall enough to fend off darkness, shadows, damp and all the lonely terrors of the night.

Once he'd lost sight of his brother and the last few stragglers doing their best to negotiate the steep route through the rock chokes and the willow thickets down to the houses and a good sleep, Franklin made a cocoon of the two rolled tarps on a mattress of tinder-dry leaves and pine cones, and settled down for the night in a grassy bay with his back sack for a pillow. His knee was painful, but he was tired enough to sleep. He spoke the slumber verses to himself, to drive away regrets (the certainty that he would never see his ma again, would never walk their stead), and cleared his head of any thoughts of home or hungry animals or the comforts he was missing.

In what remained of the slanting light, Franklin Lopez tried to sleep while facing east, downhill. The closeness of Ferrytown was a comfort to him: from his high vantage point, he had seen the busy little lanes and yards, and watched the ferry, its raftboards packed with the day's last emigrants and their suddenly weightless possessions, as it was let out on its fat ropes to drift downstream, never quite capsizing, until the four helmsmen dug in their great oars and poles to bring the craft ashore in the shallows of the deeply graveled landing beach. He had seen the emigrants unload with hardly a wet rim, foot or hoof and set off on a boardwalk of tied logs – their burdens heavy again – across the flood meadows, steaming with mist. Soon the first of them reached the outer river bluffs; and then, the last of the mountains safely at their backs, they began the long haul

through what seemed to Franklin from his vantage point to be a green, ocean-like expanse of gently undulating flats and plains, stretching, swell upon swell, so far into the distance that his eyes ran out. He had then watched the ferry, unladen but now set against the river, being towed back upstream by a team of oxen on a winch and beached for the night at the moorings. He had seen the first lamps lit and heard what sounded like a song. Surely Franklin could not wish for a prospect more reassuring or more promising than this.

Once the moon came up above the leaden volumes of clouds, augmenting what was left of day, the lake in the valley – hidden up till then in mist – was like a silver pendant, with the river as its glinting chain. Franklin had not seen so much standing water before. Perhaps the sea would be like that, flat and safe and breathtaking.