

Strangers in Our Midst

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I

Mayflower, mid-Atlantic
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Elisabeth Tilley

For days the ship groaned as the wind shrieked against the closed portholes and hatches. Sails were furled to prevent them from ripping to shreds as the *Mayflower* floundered up then down into the trough of the waves, then up again as if God were pulling us toward redemption, our ship's hull resting in His protective palm, only to dash us back toward eternal damnation.

Lightning illuminated the hundred souls crammed into the 'tweendecks. Children clung to their mothers. Men shouted useless warnings to their families. There would be no escape if the ship broke apart; death waited in the water. I had long prayed to escape the dull life of a cloth-maker's daughter but I had not imagined I'd be praying to escape an ocean grave.

Darkness returned with each crash of thunder, but truth be told, the terrifying storm relieved the dreariness of being confined to the 'tweendecks for six weeks.

The need for fresh air drew me from my bed. Flinging my covers off, I wrapped my shawl about me and placed my feet on the shifting floor. Feeling a warmth there, I reached down to find Rogue and felt the thrum of her barking beneath the cacophony of wind and goats' bleating. Each time lightning flashed, I could see her creep

toward the hatch. I got down on my hands and knees and found I too could keep my balance on all fours. At last I touched the ladder and pulled myself to my feet. I hung on desperately as the ship pitched and heaved.

An enormous spasm within the ship threw me hard. The floor rose up and struck me. A howl of fearful cries crashed through the darkness.

I repeated the Psalm that Father read at evening prayers, *I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax, it has melted within me.* Never in my thirteen years had I prayed with such fervor. Taking a deep breath, I gagged from the reek of puke, sweat, and overflowing piss pots. My thigh muscles strained as I grabbed a rung and pulled myself up once more, my ribs protesting each breath.

God will lead safely His people, Father often reminded us. At the moment, most of His people on the Mayflower were wailing and crying. If God preserved me, 'twould be a tale to capture any listener. As the sea pounded against the ship, I sucked in the fresh smell of the salty air seeping through the hatch, clearing my nose of foul odor. Turning to Rogue, I let go of the ladder only to be knocked down again. This time by a man.

“What are you doing up and about in the storm?” he yelled above the wind as he picked me up. “You should be in bed.”

The hard muscles in his arms pushed against my sore ribs as he set me on my feet. I gasped for air and caught the scents of sweat and the rope tar and ink on his hands.

“Stay back!” he commanded. “We’re going up to discover what happened to the ship.” He climbed the ladder and struggled to open the hatch. The light from above revealed him to be John Howland, Master John Carver’s clerk.

“I’m coming, Howland,” Master Carver called to his manservant. John Howland held the hatch open for his master, then it closed and only faint light came through the cracks.

“Elisabeth! Elisabeth Tilley!” cried a familiar voice. ‘Twas so dark I only saw a shape lurching toward me until it touched my shoulder. I flinched in pain but did not cry out.

“What are ye doing out of bed? Thy mother is afraid ye’ve been knocked about the head. She sent me to find thee.”

Bracing herself against the ladder, Aunt Agnes wrapped her warm green shawl about me, pulling it gently around my shoulders. With light fingers, she traced my nose and cheekbones.

“Nothing broken, praise God, but ye feel swollen.” Aunt paused with her fingers on my mouth, and then sniffed. “Bleeding, but not much.” I hadn’t noticed.

A faint light told me the sun was rising. The fierce wind calmed to low moans, and the dog skulked away.

Aunt Agnes bent her head to look into my face in the dim light. “God in Heaven preserve thee! Thy cheeks look like a cabbage!”

“Bide a moment while I gather my strength,” I said weakly.

“Must ye be carried?” she asked.

I had not yet depended on anyone to carry me about like a lost sheep and did not intend to start now. The Promised Land was no place for helpless lambs. Straightening, I took a step.

“Elisabeth!” she cried.

I staggered and sank to the floor.

Attitash

The rank odor stopped me. My eyes strained to locate the sour smell. A few paces ahead, near the little waterfall, a

tangled lump moved. Stepping closer I saw the yellow hair of a Stranger. His chest rose and fell, but he made no sound. I heard only the three-note bird warbling and the brook splashing over the rocks above the pool.

My dog, Suki, sniffed the man's cloth shirt. He must have been left behind when the big wind-canoe sailed back across the Big Salt Water. This Stranger looked like he'd been sick a long time or fell into boiling water. His cold blue eyes opened; his lips moved silently. My skin felt as if a snake had slithered across my neck.

I pulled my furs tighter and backed up a step. He raised his hand; it dropped. Suki barked. Her legs were straight, the hair on her neck stiff.

"L'eau..." He uttered in a hoarse voice.

I remained still.

Raising up on one arm, he tried again. "Nee-pee."

I gestured to the pool. "Nipi?" I asked suspiciously.

"Oui...Ahhe." Moving his arm slowly, he waved toward the pool, and then slumped, a faint grin on his sickly face.

I watched him as he reached toward his leg. Wrapped around it at the knee was a noose similar to those our men spread to catch deer. I looked to a nearby tree where a rope dangled, its end frayed.

"Nec-pee," he said again.

He was too weak to attack me. I would get him water.

I went to the stream and filled the beaker, and then returned and set it just within his arm's reach. He drank, spilling some. "Merci," he uttered. His voice was so low I wondered if he dreamed aloud. Holding his bad leg with one hand, he grimaced and gestured toward the thick bushes beyond the path. He strained to speak, "Mat-channi." He spoke so slowly I had to repeat the sounds in my head before I understood. Matchanni—our word for 'filled with bad spirits.' I raised my eyes but could see nothing. He pointed again to the bushes. "Nan-com-pees." He

paused to see if I understood our word for boy. When I nodded, he smiled and relaxed a little.

I moved toward the bushes slowly as a new smell assaulted my nose—not the peculiar stink of Strangers, but the thick, sharp smell of bad spirits when they claim our bodies. Taking short breaths to keep the smell from entering me, I followed the scent until its strong power stopped me. A few paces ahead of me, curled on his side in the tall grass lay a young boy. He looked as though he'd lived for four or five circles-of-seasons. My breath came faster. He might harbor the Strangers' evil spirits which attacked our bodies and sucked away the life of our Wampanoag People! I began chanting to keep the bad spirits away.

Cautiously, I pushed aside the tall grass. The child's black hair was still long and not pulled back. Wampanoag beads were strung around his legs and arms. Creeping closer, I knelt to put my hand near his mouth and felt a faint breath. He was sick, but still alive.

Hearing a bird-whistle, I looked up. My father was moving slowly toward the yellow-haired Stranger. Papa signaled for me to keep quiet. Once upon the Stranger, he put his spear against Yellow Hair's neck.

"Stay back, Attitash," my father commanded.

"His leg's badly hurt," I called. Papa looked down at the Stranger's damaged leg.

Following Papa's brave refusal to fear the Strangers' evil spirits, I picked up the thin little boy. Yellow Hair tried to gesture, but the spear point on his throat kept him silent. I laid the boy next to him and stood near Papa. His arm muscles tensed as he held the spear against Yellow Hair's throat then moved it slowly down to his chest.

"Look for his knife," he said.

My throat seized. I had given him water without checking for a weapon!

"Look in his belt pouch."

Singing a chant to repel the Spirits, I probed with trembling fingers and pulled out a small knife. Handing it to Papa, I returned to the little boy and stroked his hot cheek. The child opened his eyes, confusion filled them. Then he saw Yellow Hair and reached out his hand. Yellow Hair's face became so pained it hurt my heart.

As Papa fashioned a tree limb to support Yellow Hair's broken leg, I poured water in my hands and smoothed it over the boy's face. He looked as my brother might, once he grows out of the cradleboard.

"How do you know this Stranger?" I asked the boy.

His voice was the merest whisper. "He carried me."

I felt the child's heart turn to the Stranger.

"I'm taking him home," I told Papa and lifted him onto my back.

Papa kept his eye on Yellow Hair.

When I reached our home, Grandmother asked if I'd brought the water I'd gone to fetch. Before I could answer, her nostrils flared. Singing the prayer with me, she took the child in her arms. His eyes darted fearfully from Grandmother to me.

Papa soon followed with Yellow Hair. Grandmother strode toward him.

"Wait, Hopamoch." Her voice was low, but stern. "Do not think you can bring a Cloth-man into our house."

"He's injured and will not harm us, wife's mother." Papa kept his eyes down respectfully, but his voice was firm. "He was taken captive by our people and speaks our tongue."

Grandmother's voice sounded like the first crack of the sky-fire god. "Our people took captives because his people killed our men!"

The boy was too young to remember, but I did. Strangers had let our men come onto their big wind-canoe to trade. Before the talk could begin, their firesticks killed all our men.

“Put him by the fire,” Grandmother said as she shoved a basket aside and spat on Yellow Hair. “He is nothing but another Do-Evil trying to possess us! If I could, I would send the bad spirits across the Big Salt Water forever.” She folded her arms across her sagging breasts. “At least we won’t have any more like *him* here until the cold moons are gone and warm moons bring soft winds.” The Stranger was laid in a small shelter hastily built from branches and woven mats. He was not given prayers and poultices; only the sick child received Grandmother’s healing.

During the night, the storm gods shook the trees and made Big Salt Water dance as if bad dreams filled it. No one else in our three-fire neeshwetu seemed to hear. My family was asleep by one fire, Grandmother piled high with furs at the honored end; aunt and uncle were asleep by another. I heard a stirring and noticed it was Uncle Seekonk’s clan nephew building up the fire. Uncle had recently brought Black Whale to our home to prepare him for his Vision Quest. He was tall for an almost-grown man and I had noticed how his wide eyes sparked with pleasure when our elders told stories. He did not seem to notice as I watched him now.

Elisabeth Tilley

“Why were ye out in the storm?” Aunt demanded.

“I thought to follow the dog to where I could get a breath of air.” I paused to draw one. “But I was knocked down twice. First by the storm, then by John Howland.”

A beam of sunlight broke through the port-hole crack, and Aunt peered into my face. “Elisabeth, John Howland is not the sort to knock a young maid down. Ye must have been dreaming.”

“Nay, he did not intend to. He was rushing up the ladder, he and Master Carver—”

Just then the hatch opened and Master Carver climbed down without looking at us. John Howland followed. He closed the hatch and came to me.

“Are you injured?”

“Nay.” I tried to shrug, but my ribs hurt.

“What did you find out?” Aunt Agnes interjected.

He grimaced. “Naught but the ship’s master telling us nothing. Master Carver went to the great cabin on the top deck and spoke to Captain Jones himself. Something has gone awry, but he won’t say.”

He again turned to me. “My apologies for knocking you down,” he said and strode off.

Aunt Agnes led me slowly back to the space allotted to our household. Families attempted to shield themselves from the others—a feeble effort, like everything on this mad ship, affording only the façade of privacy. Most families, like ours, had curtains hung round the beds. The few who’d brought servants also partitioned their area with boards from the dismantled shallop, as the small sail boat would not be needed until we reached the colony of Virginia.

Mother’s face, looking older than her fifty-some years, sagged with relief when she saw me. “Elisabeth, why do ye not stay where it’s safe when the wind is blowing so fiercely?” Her hands clenched with fury, but relief prevailed.

She turned to her sister-in-law. “What happened, Agnes? I had to cling to the bed and it felt like the ship split in two!”

“No one knows, sister.” Aunt Agnes took her shawl back from me. “I’m going back to bed,” she said and left.

I touched Mother’s hand, offering a silent appeasement for her worry.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “The stench was so strong I had to find fresh air.”

“Could ye not just pull the covers over thy nose?”

“I tried, but they stink, Mother.”

She could not dispute this. Earlier, she had opened the hatches all round to bring fresh air, but the increasing wind and rising waves washed seawater into our crowded space instead. It had soaked us, and all the bedding as well. Still, she had no patience for a trifle like moldy covers. Naught was to be done but to seal the hatches and endure the vile smell of moldy seawater until such time as God would bring fair weather.

“When will ye learn to endure the trials God gives us, Elisabeth?”

I changed the subject. “Do you need me to fetch something, Mother?”

“Yea, thank ye. A bit of ale, Elisabeth.”

I found our small jar for her, then returned to bed and pulled the putrid covers over my nose. I tried to think of the rosemary and thyme kept near our hearth in Bedfordshire, but the smell of rope tar, ink and sea salt on John Howland’s hands captured my thoughts.