SEBASTIAN BARRY

A Thousand Moons

A Novel

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Chapter One

I am Winona.

In early times I was Ojinjintka, which means rose. Thomas McNulty tried very hard to say this name, but he failed, and so he gave me my dead cousin's name because it was easier in his mouth. Winona means first-born. I was not first-born.

My mother, my elder sister, my cousins, my aunts, all were killed. They were souls of the Lakota that used to live on those old plains. I wasn't too young to remember – maybe I was six or seven – but all the same I didn't remember. I knew it happened because afterwards the soldiers brought me into the fort and I was an orphan.

A little girl can suffer many a seachange. By the time I got back to my people, I couldn't converse with them. I remember sitting in the teepee with the other women and not being able to answer them. By that time I was all of thirteen or so. After a few days I found the words again. The women rushed forward and embraced me as though I had only just arrived to them that very moment. Only when I spoke our language could they really see me. Then Thomas McNulty came to get me again and took me back to Tennessee.

Even when you come out of bloodshed and disaster in the end you have got to learn to live. You have to look about you, see how things are, grow things or buy things as the case may be.

The little town near by us in Tennessee was called Paris. Lige Magan's farm was about seven miles out. It was quite a few years after the war but the town was still full of rough Union soldiers kicking their heels, and the defeated butternut boys were a sort of secret presence, though they were not in their uniforms. Vagabonds on every little byway. And state militia watchful for those vagabonds.

It was a town of many eyes watching you anyhow, an uneasy place.

To present yourself in a dry-goods store to buy items you have got to have best English or something else happens. At the fort Mrs Neale had given me my first English words. In later times John Cole got me two books of grammar. I looked at them long and good.

It is bad enough being an Indian without talking like a raven. The white folks in Paris were not all good speakers themselves. Some were from other places. Germans, Swedes. Some were Irish like Thomas McNulty, and only got to English when they got to America.

But myself being a young Indian woman I guess I had to talk like an empress. Of course I could have offered my list of items that Rosalee Bouguereau, who worked on Lige's farm, had written out. But it was better to speak.

Else what was happening was, I was going to be beaten up every time I was in town. It was English kept me from that. Some

straggly farmhand might look at you and see the dark skin and the black hair and think that gave him a right to knock you down and kick you. No one saying boo to him for that. No sheriff or deputy neither.

It wasn't a crime to beat an Indian, not at all.

John Cole, even though he had been out as a soldier and was a good farmer, got bad treatment in town because his grandmother or the woman before his grandmother was an Indian person. So that was writ in his face a little. Even English couldn't protect him. Because he was a big grown man maybe, he couldn't hope for mercy just all the time. He had a lovely face as people attested in especial Thomas McNulty but I guess the townsmen could sometimes see the Indian in it. They beat him so bad and then he was just a plank of suffering in the bed and Thomas McNulty swearing he would go in and kill someone.

But Thomas McNulty's shortcoming was he was poor. We were all poor. Lige Magan was poor enough, and he *owned* the farm, and we were poor underneath Lige.

Poor worse than Lige.

When a poor person does anything he has to do it quietly. When a poor person kills, for instance, he has got to do it very quietly and run as fast as those little deer that float out of the woods.

Also, Thomas had been in Leavenworth prison for desertion, so the uniforms about the town made him jumpy, even though he always said he loved the army.

I myself was lower than Rosalee Bouguereau. She was a black-skinned saint of a woman let me tell you. She used to go out and

shoot rabbits with her brother's rifle along the back woods of Lige's farm there. In the famous battle with Tach Petrie – famous to us anyhow, when he and his accomplices had tried to rob us, advancing on our homestead with implacable intent – she distinguished herself by reloading the rifles faster than ever was – so said John Cole.

But she was a slave before the war and a slave is low down in the eyes of white folks of course.

So I was lower than that.

I was just the cinders of an Indian fire in the eyes of the town. Indians in bulk were long gone from Henry County. Cherokee. Chickasaw. Folks didn't like to see an ember drifting back.

In the eyes of the Great Mystery we were all souls alike. Trying to make our souls skinny enough to squeeze into paradise. That's what my mother said. Everything I remember of my mother is like the little pouch of things that a child carries to hold what is precious to her. When such a love is touched by Death then something deeper even than Death grows in your heart. My mother fussed over us, myself and my sister. She was interested in how fast we could run, and how high we could jump, and she never tired of telling us how pretty we were. We were just little girls, out there on the plains, under the starlight.

Thomas McNulty sometimes liked to tell me I was as pretty as the things *he* thought were pretty – roses, robins and the like. It was mother's talk he was doing since I had no mother then. It was strange that in the old wars he had killed many of my people when he was a soldier. He might have killed even some of my own family, he didn't know.

'I was too young to remember,' I would say to him. Of course I hadn't been, but it came to the same thing.

It used to make me feel very strange listening to him talk about that. I would start to burn from the centre of my body. I had my own little pearl-handled gun that the poet McSweny gave me in Grand Rapids. I could have shot Thomas with that. Sometimes I thought I *should* shoot something – shoot someone. Of course I did shoot one of Tach Petrie's men, not actually during the famous battle, but another time, when they accosted us on the road – right through the chest. And he shot me, but it was only a bruise, not a wound.

I had the wound of being a lost child. Thing was it was they that healed me, Thomas McNulty and John Cole. They had done their damnedest I guess. So they both gave me the wound and healed it, which is a hard fact in its way.

I guess I had no choice in the matter. Once your mother is taken from you you can't ever catch up with her again. You can't cry out 'Wait for me' when the winds turn cold under a wolf moon and she has walked far ahead of you across the grasses searching for wood.

So Thomas McNulty rescued me twice. The second time, as Thomas ventured back through the battlefield with me in tow, dressed as it happened as a drummer boy, Starling Carlton wanted to kill me, right there. We bumped into him. He was waving his sword and shouting. He said all the Indians had to be killed, it was the major's orders, and he was going to do just that. So Thomas McNulty had to kill him instead. Thomas was very sad about that. They had been soldiers together a long time.

I remembered all of that clearly enough.

Oftentimes as a girl I would cry for no reason. I would drift away and find a secluded spot. There I would let the tears loose and it might be so dark behind my eyes it was as if I had fallen blind. John Cole would come look for me. And he had the sense to put an arm about me and not to ask me to say anything I had no words for, English or Lakota.

John Cole. A lot of his love for me was expressed in practical things. He got me the books with grammar as I said and set to teaching me even though he hadn't too much learning himself. Not just letters but numbers too he taught me.

When Lige Magan thought I was ready he went and asked about employment with his friend the lawyer Briscoe. All that sort of work I did a good while, writing and reckoning numbers. I was so proud to do it.

The lawyer Briscoe had a fine house and a garden with flowers that didn't belong to Tennessee, roses from England mostly. He wrote a book about his roses that was printed in Memphis. It took pride of place in his office.

Ojinjintka means rose as I said. I don't know what sort of rose. Maybe a lost prairie rose.

Not a true rose like one of the lawyer Briscoe's. A rose to my people.

The lawyer Briscoe pressed on me cherished books. I carried them home and read them in the parlour by the stove. The breeze from the meadow touching and touching the pages. Those pleasant evenings when there was nothing to do only listen to Rosalee's beloved brother Tennyson Bouguereau singing those

old songs he knew. Myself sunk in thoughts. Those thoughts that books bring to mind.

Of course that was all before Jas Jonski. A boy that never read a book, come to think of it. Could barely write a letter.

1870s it all must have been, after the war, and after Thomas got home from prison. It might even have been the year that General Custer was killed. Or just before.

But all the years went by fleet of foot. Like ponies running across the endless grasses.

Chapter Two

Jas Jonski was the clerk in the dry-goods store. He worked for a miserable ghost of a man called Mr Hicks. The first time I stepped into the store, I knew he liked me.

'You John Cole's daughter,' he said, without a trace of fear.

'How you know I John Cole's daughter?' I said. For my part it was worrying even to be recognised.

He said that last fall he had brought out some heavy supplies in the wagon and he wondered that I didn't remember as he had complimented me.

'You're even prettier now,' he said, brave as you like.

I didn't know what to say to him. In its own way it was like a sudden ambush. I was ready to defend myself. Thomas McNulty said a girl had to be sure and know how to use her knife, how to use her little pistol, all that. I had a thin little steel knife also in the hem of my petticoat, if the gun failed me. It was English steel. Thomas McNulty showed me all the best places to stick in a knife if you want to stop someone.

But every time I went into town for supplies, he was pleasant to me. As if maybe there was someone in town now to trust.

There was something between us but I had no name for it. It seemed a good thing. I began to look forward to seeing him and I used to hurry the mules along to get there, much to their annoyance.

Yes, Jas Jonski was very sweet on me and after six months of measuring out cane sugar for me, and all the rest, my wagon lost a wheel and he ran me out to Lige Magan's place, and got talking to Thomas McNulty. Thomas McNulty would talk to the devil so Jas Jonski had no trouble with him. So Thomas McNulty and John Cole began to know who he was. I never saw John Cole look at someone with less admiration.

But Jas Jonski was either blind or in love and he didn't seem to notice. He started to come out to the farm regular and when he found out that Thomas McNulty liked this expensive molasses that came up from New Orleans, he used to bring a pot of that sometimes. He would sit there beaming and talking, and Thomas scooping out the molasses with a twig like a bear, and John Cole scowling and saying nothing. John Cole could take or leave molasses, unless it was the cheap stuff was put into the tobacco after the harvest. Jas Jonski beaming, like a sun that just wouldn't set no matter how dark the evening.

'I like the town,' Jas Jonski said to John Cole, 'but I sure do like all this countryside too.'

John Cole didn't say anything.

The most John Cole would allow of courtship was Jas Jonski walking me ten minutes in the wood. I wasn't even allowed to hold his hand. Jas Jonski's modest ambition was to own his own store and he also talked vaguely about moving to Nashville

where he had family. Not a few times he stopped and stood me in front of him and made declarations. It was exceedingly pleasant to see his face colour up with all his fervent protestations. Just like in the story books he *protested* his love.

Then Jas Jonski thought he might do well to marry me and he asked me about that. I didn't know how old I was but I guess I wasn't yet seventeen. I was born under the Full Buck Moon, that's all I knew for sure. He said he was nineteen. He was a red-haired boy with a burned-looking face all the year, not just high summer.

It was then John Cole got a red face too. Boiled up like a catfish.

'No, sir, madam,' he said.

I was working for the lawyer Briscoe after all which was an unusual occupation for a girl let alone an Indian. I think John Cole was intending me to be the first Indian president.

Well I thought I might very much like to marry Jas Jonski. Just liked the sound of it. I could sort of see it. I had a picture of it in my mind. I hadn't even kissed him yet but I could see my face tilting up for his kiss. We had held hands when we were out of John Cole's sight.

But John Cole being a wise man saw other things. He had no rosy pictures. He knew what the world was like and what the world would say and then what the world would do. How right he was in everything mostly.

But I was nearly seventeen or maybe I was seventeen and what did I know, nothing. Well, I knew some things. Way back in my mind was a black painting with blood and screaming in

it and blood bursting out. The soft bronze skin of my sister, my aunts. Sometimes I *could* remember things, or thought I could. Maybe I said I couldn't remember because I didn't want to – even to myself. Bluecoats tumbling in on top of us and bayonets and bullets and fire and souls killed in violent fashion. I don't know. Maybe it was just what Thomas McNulty told me. A blackened painting. But then the long clear memory of what Thomas McNulty and John Cole did, all the mighty efforts they made to please me and give me shelter.

Thomas McNulty wasn't a real mother but he nearly was. From time to time he would even wear a dress.

I was thinking Jas Jonski might continue on from John and Thomas, in the matter of pleasing a person, and giving shelter.

He was no particular picture of a person what with his reddened face. The whole cut of him was like the underside of a fallen log when you haul it up. Well, but, from twenty paces now I can attest he looked alright. Ah he was just an ordinary boy, a scanty boy really that came from old Poles who came over to America, but the thing that was really important about him to the people of Paris was, he was white. He was a whiteman. Now love may be blind but those townsfolk were not. Not so much.

People saying the same things to you over and over can wear you down. I knew that Mr Hicks thought Jas Jonski had gone mad. Maybe even was wicked in some way. To want to go marrying something closer to a monkey than a man, was how Mr Hicks framed it. Jas Jonski told me all this and was very angry but maybe a little affrighted also. Although Jas Jonski had

a mother in Nashville I was never taken there to see her, nothing like that.

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The day came when I got back to the farm all bruised. Rosalee Bouguereau screamed when she saw me and brought me out back to the wash-house because there was secret work to do on me that she didn't need the men to be seeing. Then she brought me into the house and mixed up a mash of leaves and gently rubbed it into my broken face.

When the men came in from the work Thomas McNulty was expostulating and grinding his teeth.

'I don't know why you ever let a little girl go into that town,' said Rosalee Bouguereau.

'Oh, hush now,' said her brother Tennyson, but even he didn't know what he meant by that. His elegant face was shrouded in fright.

It felt like my bones were all cracked in my face like a dropped plate. A few days later when I went out to plash my face in the water barrel I could see even in the shaking water that I was no picture. It was the same day I started to shake too, just like that water. I shook for two weeks, and though I stopped shaking I could aver that something in me, deep within, was shaking a long time after. Like the ricochet of a bullet, echoing in a rocky gully.

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My marriage dress was only half sewn at that time and Thomas McNulty used to have it up on a high-backed chair, so he could reach it easily and work on it, when he had a spare hour. It looked like a person, white as a ghost.

'I don't want to be married now, best put that dress away for another time,' I said.

'Mercy me,' said Thomas, with all the anguish of the seamstress who has spent hours and hours stitching.

There was a sort of despair in the house. Like the sky had fallen and no one had the mules and the ropes to drag it back up again.

John Cole said he would go in and talk to Sheriff Flynn.

'Don't you be such a fool,' said Thomas McNulty. He said it kindly, softly.

It was just that you wanted to do something. In that world if there was a misdeed, you felt like there should be something done to balance it immediately. Justice. Even before the whitemen came I think it was like that. My mother used to tell a story about my own people hundreds of years ago. There was a band that spoke our language but that had separated out from us and they began to eat their enemies after battle. They began to come to the places where we buried our dead and eat them too, stealing the corpses away in the night. They would try and capture one of us and eat us. How I trembled to hear that story. Eventually our tribe went to war with them, and killed many. In the end the last of them were in a big cave and we set piles of wood into the mouth of it and said if they didn't stop eating people, we would light the wood. They didn't want to stop so

the fire was lit. It burned for a week, deep in the mountain.

But if that was terrible to hear as a child it seemed also to speak of justice. Justice. To do something to right things immediately. You wanted to do that. Even if it meant killing. Otherwise much worse would be in line to happen. Thomas McNulty and John Cole felt it too, it was part of that world where we tried to live. They had defended the farm that time against Tach Petrie and his gang like I say who came with their guns to take the money earned from tobacco that year. They were brave as anyone that ever lived.

But we were poor and two of us were Indians.

There was no crime in hitting an Indian anyhow, as I said. Lige Magan went to the lawyer Briscoe who of course was his friend and his father's friend for affirmation of that and he affirmed it.

Lige Magan came back in dark pensive mood.

Thomas McNulty and John Cole didn't really have anything but me. I mean, that they couldn't live without. That they would give their lives for. So they said. It was terribly painful to hear them say that and then say they felt so bad that the one thing they had of such value had been injured and they didn't know what to do. And that maybe, as Lige Magan had found out, they couldn't rectify it even if they knew how.

Further west they would have just started shooting, if they could pinpoint the culprit.

Thomas McNulty wondered would there be any good in scouring up and down Paris for vagabonds and vagrants and maybe going up and down the roads hither and thither on the

same mission. John Cole said that in these days the roads were nothing but vagabonds and vagrants. Thomas McNulty sighed and said they had been such themselves many is the time.

They kept asking, 'Did you even see who done it? A stray person? Someone you knew?' I kept saying, 'I don't rightly know.'

I went and stood by John Cole's leg like a dog that isn't sure if it has done wrong or right.

Because I thought I should know and wondered if I did. I did remember very vaguely struggling away and out of the town, and then stumbling along like an injured pony till I got to the lawyer Briscoe's house and Lana Jane Sugrue his housekeeper called her two brothers and they ran me home in the lawyer Briscoe's buggy. I might have been crying and I might not. The brothers, Joe and Virg, hardly dared look at me, I saw them looking at each other nervously. I remembered the fields and wastelands rushing by as they frothed up the little pony. Every bump in the track I felt in the hard transom. And then they left me with hardly a word at the back of Lige's.

They didn't leave me round the front.

Chapter Three

It was Jas Jonski broke my face could have been my story. Of course it could. I didn't have it in my head though. That's where stories should live. Clear as a nice high stream in the hills. Jas Jonski, a man I had never even kissed. It was all too black to see. This little tempest of shaking kept going through me, head to toe. Someone had forced his way into me too because I was all rags and tatters down there. I could have told them I thought it was him but I don't know what wild horses would have held them back from killing him. It would not matter what John Cole was then, angel or Indian, it wouldn't have stopped him. He'd have gone into town with a fire of vengeance in him and nothing could have saved Jas Jonski.

I didn't want John Cole strung up. And I didn't have the story just right in my head neither.

You only had to look like you done something wrong in America and they would hang you, if you were poor.

Anyway maybe I intended to put the matter right on my own account. I remember having that thought. It was the bravado of my distress. There was a time for your father and mother to

fight your battles, I remember thinking, and there was a time to fight them for yourself and I had reached that time I reckoned.

I will say I was very ashamed. I was very ashamed that Rosalee had to clean me. I was in a stupor of shame. I couldn't speak, not even to myself, about that. So in place of speaking I thought – I will settle the matter for myself. Well that was brave enough I guess. Thoughts like that are good for a while, for a moment. But how do you carry them out?

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It could be I am talking about things that occurred in Henry County, Tennessee in 1873 or 4, but I have never been so faithful on dates. And if they did occur, there was no true account of them at the time. There were bare facts, and a body, and then there were the real events that no one knew. That Jas Jonski was killed was the bare fact. Others were killed too but their killers were known. Who killed him? That was the big question in the town, for a little while. For longer than you might think. Maybe they still talk about it, down there in Paris, Tennessee. If I say that here following are the real events, you will remember that they are described at a great distance from the time of their happening. And that there is no one to agree to or challenge my account, now. Some of it I am inclined to challenge myself, because I say to myself, could that really have happened, and did I really do that? But we only have one path across the mire of remembrance in general.

Beyond the lawyer Briscoe and maybe a few others, in the minds of the townspeople I was not a human creature but a

savage. Closer to a wolf than a woman. My mother was killed like a shepherd would kill a wolf. That's a fact too. I guess there were two facts. I was less than the least of them. I was less than the whores in the whorehouse, except maybe for them I was just a whore, in the making. I was less than the black flies that followed everyone in the summer. Less than the old shit thrown to the backs of the houses.

Just something so *less* you could do what you wanted to it, bruise it, hit it, shoot it, skin it.

Just because John Cole raised me up as something so gold, he said, that the sun itself was jealous of me, didn't mean anyone else in the wide world thought that.

❍

The lawyer Briscoe was what Thomas McNulty called an 'original'. When I hear Thomas McNulty's voice in my head, the word is more properly written *riginal*. Lige Magan said there was no one else like him in all the broad lands of America. Not that anyone knew of.

'A course,' said Lige Magan, 'I ain't met everyone in America.'

The lawyer Briscoe – I never heard him referred to by any other handle – was about sixty years old at the time I got work with him. He still had a head of wiry hair which he kept tamped down with a jar of hair-oil. That hair-oil. It stunk like a rotten cabbage. And the thing I always marvelled at was how clean his hands were. Of course he had no farming to do. But he had little pumice implements that he used for rounding off

his nails, and he picked out any bit of dirt with a silver point.

He had been too old to fight in the war but that had probably been a good thing, he said, because like many in Tennessee his head was only dizzy with where to rest his allegiance. His party maybe was life.

He had an office in his house full of glimmering wood so that you might think water was lying just there on the floor, making it shift and tremble. He placed me at a little table in the corner, to do the numbers, beside a window that looked out along the high road. He wanted me to see who was coming and who was going and sometimes he asked me to note down the names, if I knew them. A lot of the people passing were the same people from day to day. There was Felix Potter the carter for instance, who had his name painted on his cart. If it was a new face I would ask the lawyer Briscoe to hurry to my little window and peer out. I had to make way for his stomach, which stuck out before him. That way I got to know nearly everyone in Paris that had business along the road. Then when someone came to engage him in work, I would usually have some idea who they were, and if there were papers proper to that person already in existence, I would gather them out of the documents cupboard.

Those documents were sometimes speaking things, sometimes silent as snow. There were lists of every black soul bought and sold in Henry County at the Negro Sales Office, which was the lawyer Briscoe's father's work. The monetary history of Mr Hicks's store was there, and four other general stores too, seventy years of provisioning, and years and years of government contracts to supply the vanished Indians — and fifty old sere pages

doing the accounts for militias that helped herd the Chickasaw and Cherokee out of Tennessee.

It had proved impossible to civilise us, the documents said. It made me cry to read such things. There was nothing more civilised than my mother's breast, and myself nestled there.

But numbers didn't weep and were needed for everything.

He was very keen that I keep a wary eye on that road. This was so he could stay alive as much as anything else, because strangers at that time in Tennessee after the war were not a trustworthy commodity. And the lawyer Briscoe's views in truth were very East Tennessee for a man that lived in the west of that state. East Tennessee had many that had wanted not to secede. Not only were there oftentimes gaggles of soldiers but also mysterious dark men that might have been soldiers once but had lost at that. Twilight was an awful busy time sometimes on that road. This was even though the new governor was all for the old rebels, and they had got their votes back too, whereas the previous one had been all for the Union, and taking the votes off them – or indeed *because* of that dance of time.

He himself sat at a big table that had come in on the first carts to Tennessee. Nearly a hundred years before, he said, before Tennessee was even Tennessee. His great-grandfather was the first Briscoe in. The lawyer Briscoe had strong feelings about Tennessee. He liked to talk about its old beginnings and he often used an old Tennessee phrase when he was talking, 'between the mountains and the river'. That's where Tennessee lay, according to the lawyer Briscoe, between the Mississippi and the Appalachians. I guess it did lie there. 'Between the two

rivers' was a phrase for West Tennessee, because sure enough it lay between the Tennessee river and the Mississippi.

The lawyer Briscoe had what you might call big ideas about the world in general. He was an enthusiast for what he called 'unfashionable causes'. I think I must have been one of them. He thought that the old president Andrew Jackson had done great mischief to the Chickasaw long ago by driving them away to Indian Country. As for Ulysses S. Grant, the present president, he sighed a lot about him. A good soldier maybe but did a good soldier make a good president?

The lawyer Briscoe was married to a woman from Boston and had seven children but his wife had taken the children away with her back to Boston. In her place he had Lana Jane Sugrue to keep house for him, and her two brothers, Joe and Virg, who drove me out to Lige's that time. Lana Jane was from Louisiana and used words like *couture* and *coiffure*. She was very small and wore a hat indoors and out because she was nearly bald.

I sat at my little table and I kept the books. And then at six John Cole would come get me in the cart, because the lawyer Briscoe's house was south of Paris and there was no need so to run the gauntlet of the town. John Cole prompted by the silence of the journey would talk about New England where he was born and all his adventures in the world with Thomas McNulty, which had been many. Sometimes he was gay enough and told me humorous accounts of things but most of the time John Cole was a person that liked to say serious things.

'Most important thing in the world,' he said, 'is anyone who bring harm to you, he likely die.'

The seasons would sit in backdrop to his words and if it was winter he would be buttoned up nearly to the two black sparks of his eyes and myself likewise but somehow he could always keep the talk going, even in the icy days.

When he was around Thomas McNulty, which was as much of the time as he could manoeuvre, he barely said a word.

When Thomas was dressed as my mamma, either way he was just the same. His voice didn't change or anything like that. After he came back from Kansas he didn't put on the dresses so much. If the lawyer Briscoe was a *riginal*, he was one too. Thomas McNulty always said he came from nothing. He meant it to the letter of the phrase. All his people died far away in Ireland, just as mine did in Wyoming. They died of hunger and many Indians died of the same complaint. He said he came from nothing but he lived with kings and queens now. It never entered his head that we were nothing too.

He had this way of jutting out his face when he talked about John Cole, and his chin would go up and down, like the latch on a machine. John Cole was always in Thomas McNulty's good books. He would blush saying things about him. Just ordinary things, but his cheeks would flush when he said them.

'Guess we gotta ask John Cole about that,' he would say, perhaps, if it was a point of argument. Then his face would jut out. He didn't mean it to be funny but I would laugh. I am sure he saw me laughing but he never paid it any heed. He never asked what was amusing me anyhow. And if he had I couldn't have said.

I could always talk to Thomas McNulty about everything just as easy as you'd like, until I found the limit of that.

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Rosalee Bouguereau maybe was sad too when the dress was put aside because it was she who had directed operations as the queen in the shadows and she had gone to the trouble of cutting a hundred bits of white cloth and twisting them about and sewing them as small roses under the neckline. Rosalee Bouguereau had been a true slave till lately as I say but if her mind was on that she didn't show it but only a leaning towards what might best be called happiness.

She wasn't happy the day I came home with bruises. She was mighty distressed as she cleaned me off. She had to go in between my legs. She must have seen a lot of hurt to women when she was a slave.

But of course West Tennessee didn't like black folks either side of the war.

'They don't like no black man getting up,' Lige Magan would say. 'It all just butternut country.'

Lige had the easy-going humour of the victorious soldier that has noticed the perils of victory.

'East Tennessee,' he said, 'was all Lincoln country in the war, they fought in Union blue, just like us – but this West Tennessee – cotton fields and Confederate jackets.' He was shaking his head at this bit of history, as if a thing confounding and confusing, which it was.

'I guess Grant he ain't so bad,' said Thomas McNulty. 'No friend to no butternuts.'

Rosalee Bouguereau couldn't give two hoots about Ulysses S. Grant and the way things turned out maybe she was right in that. She just wanted her pies to come out as she had willed them to do and for us to be at our ease in the winter evenings when weather kept all dreams indoors, and she wouldn't have chosen to be cleaning up after what happened to me, I would wager good money on that.

Her brother Tennyson was trying to work a field for himself and otherwise work for Lige and Lige gave Rosalee a wage for her work in the house and so Rosalee reckoned she had dominion over herself. Just about.

I can't report all these years later that she was welcome in Paris no more than John Cole or myself and she had to keep her eyes to the ground when she walked there. But she did walk there and went into the haberdashery by the back as careful as you like. She knew her ribbons better than old Ma Cohen the haberdasher's wife, I would say that.

She cleaned me that day with the very grace and gentle murmur of a mother.

For a woman who had never been married she knew more about marriage than Thomas McNulty in various particulars. I knew nothing about it in any particular. I guess a whiteman's pastor could have prepared a girl for marriage though I would doubt if such instruction could have been given to me since they wouldn't allow me schooling when I was a little girl. Anyway it mattered not a whit because Rosalee had tried to see to all that. She explained to me how the engines of love would work and what went where and how to brook all that and she explained

what men probably liked and what they probably didn't like. This was at the very limit of her knowledge, I'll be bound. She had no model for her wisdom only being a woman herself and in her early years as I say she had lived in the old slave shacks that were still north-west of the great infield in Lige's place, falling back into the weeds and weather. There used to be three dozen slaves. In there, she said, humanity was a book without a cover.

She had got a little enamel basin with hot water in it and a clean rag and she dabbed away at me. Oh mercy. She knew well what had happened but we didn't either of us have words for it, as I recall. The language she employed was gentleness and she cleaned me off and then she put her two arms around me and rocked me and said I was such a good girl and wasn't to mind. But I did mind, terribly, of course. As well she knew. Rosalee's eyes had that queer half-yellow half-orange colour of a harvest moon, I never did see the likes of those eyes again on anyone. She was a kind woman that had been treated like she was nothing for a long time. Lige had a big theory that she was a queen. He liked to say that.

'Who knows but that she might be a queen,' he'd say.

Up to this point, Jas Jonski had been going to be marrying a happy girl. Although Lige's farm, according to Lige, wasn't worth two cents after the war, it gave us enough for immediate needs. And I was in good work. And these had been good days for John Cole and Thomas McNulty too because it was after the great emergency that had befallen Thomas at Fort Leavenworth when his old captain Major Neale swung to his rescue and saved him from the gallows.

I remember well the day he came home after his long time in prison and I don't believe in all the history of the world there was ever so happy a face atop a body as Thomas McNulty's face that day. He had walked down on his own the five hundred miles from Kansas.

For our part John Cole and myself had walked half the road to the town because we knew Thomas McNulty would swing right of the woods and avoid Paris and reappear like a very buck at the trees' edge.

I don't know if you ever saw a man take another man in his arms but if you haven't I can tell you it is a touching sight. Because men are fixed to be so cold and brave, in their eyes. Maybe that afflicted Jas Jonski, but not my two men. They took a grip of each other by the ragged trees and maybe Thomas McNulty was clothed worse than any forest weed, and John Cole to a stranger's eyes was as rough as a ditch, but I knew the story of them in particular and so I could justly suspect the fierce force that burned through them, from one breast to another, in the fever of that embrace.

I suppose if I had had an ambition for Jas Jonski it would have been that he loved me as well as that.

Then Rosalee holding me in her arms.

I guess the world can be sad enough.