

During a colonoscopy, a high school teacher receives a vision that frees him from his obsession with the Civil War and his own charlatan ancestor.

The Emancipation of Mr. Cash

by Lance Levens

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Part I

“Your bowels look ... m-m-m... I’d give you a C minus, but hey, you’re the teacher. You eat too much red meat. Look there.”

A jerky white arrow on the screen points to my bowel lining. I don’t see anything.

“That scab-like crud on the surface,” the gastroenterologist says, “that’s Big Macs.”

“I eat a Big Mac every day,” I say.

“Mr. Cash, you and I need to have a come-to-Jesus talk. But right now, we’re looking for adenomatous polyps, your gut’s version of a killer street gang.

I feel the drugs: a loosening, a gentle release. Warm syrupy feelings trickle throughout my body.

Relaxing, walls crumbling...

Bye-bye, old walls, bye-bye my hesitation about marrying Isabelle. Golden lava’s oozing down the mountain, oozy-woozy, me quitting the slave plantation, aka high school history, the lava blobbing down..., Oo-o-o-hhh, there goes the plantation, too, the lackluster brown brick school building engulfed by the lava, the flagpole in front of the school falls in.

I drift down deeper until I arrive at my room, where I’m using a family diary in my advanced class to teach the Civil War. Written by Gretchen Hartmann “Lulu” Cash, 1840–1921, my literary German grandmother, four times removed. It documents her relationship during the war years with Cato “CC” Cincinnatus Cash. (C.C.)

In the back, study hall kids, about a dozen seniors, sleepily reading.

“CC flunked out of U Penn Med School,” I tell my three stars.
“1861. What happened that year?”

“The Yankees fired on Fort Sumter,” Peter says.

Nisha smiles at him.

Toine sneers.

“They did. But CC didn’t want to fight,” I say.

“Was he a pacifist?” Nisha asks.

“Con artist.”

“What got him kicked outta school?” Toine asks.

“He and two other students sneaked into the morgue, got drunk, and played five- card stud for a cadaver, a fetching negress.”

Peter and Toine grin. Nisha rolls her eyes.

Toine twists his dread locks around his finger. “Prolly some poor slave.”

“So, in January of 1862, stuck in Philadelphia, out of work and scared the draft will get him, CC puts together a rag tag band of artistes from flop houses and bars and the streets of Philadelphia. That includes two children: Bug, a black slave boy who can act, dance, and sing, and Deezy, a white boy, and escapee from Mrs. Peabody’s School of Christian Perfection.”

“How’d they make money?” Nisha asks. She’s already jotting down notes.

“Skits, dancing, singing, and selling fake medicine. “Hamlin’s Wizard Oil, Mrs. Inslow’s Soothing Syrup...”

“Never heard of ‘em,” Peter says. He’s writing, too.

“But as the war wore on, money dried up. Flour and sugar trumped a show. So, in the late spring of ‘62, after Shiloh and the death of Albert Sidney Johnston...”

Nisha looks up. “Who’s that?”

“At the time, the South’s best-known general.”

“People were so backward then,” she says.

“They weren’t backward,” Peter says, shaking his head., “They just had different values and customs.”

Toine throws him a nasty look. “Johnston owned a boat load of slaves,” he says, “if that’s what you mean by ‘different values’. Man had four hundred brothers out in the blazing sun in China Grove, Texas, making massa rich while his field hands living in mud floor shacks with five or ten kids. No air conditioning, no running water.”

Toine is an encyclopedia of historical stats, most of which feed his anger.

“So,” I say, “one breezy night...,” I slip off my desk and go to the map and point out Nashville, circa 1862, with my wooden pointer., “CC and Deezy are wandering around in a country cemetery...”

Tall pines and sycamores surround the graveyard. Rusty iron fences teeter towards the headstones, which are themselves crooked and crumbling. The wind soughs through the trees as crickets chirp and cicadas launch a long-winding wave of sound.

A young, rotund young man—almost girlish lashes, winsome smile—points out graves with a gold-tipped cane.

Following the cane’s directions, a skinny barefoot boy looks for a grave that’s fresh and not too deep. A twelve-year-old fugitive from the School of Christian Perfection in Montgomery, Aristides “Deezy”

Jones, “Deezy”, is a religious fanatic who can act, sing, dance, and pick pockets.

“I got one!” he whispers. He pulls up a femur, clotted with mud, but it’s intact. He holds it out in front of him and makes a gruesome face.

“Ye-e-e-ech!”

He wears suspenders and a bow tie, but no shirt or shoes. Sweat glistens off his chest and back in the moonlight. A sprig of waxed blond hair on the back of his head.

CC approaches and bends down. He stays up late reading Shakespeare, drinking laudanum, and smoking, so gray is already snaking into his wavy brown locks. A faded, frayed black suit, muddy shoes. His face is florid, and his lips flecked with cigar tobacco, a crumpled chimney pot hat on top, cocked back.

He’s about to take the bone when a dog streaks in and clamps onto it. Growling, the mutt tugs one way; Deezy tugs the other.

CC swings his cane at the dog, but the animal’s skinny and fast. He dodges the blows, keeping up his claim. He and Deezy spin round and round. The dog’s having fun.

“Damn you, Cerberus!” CC cries. “Thou wipe breech, thou godebillio!” He hurls rocks and mud clods, but the dog is in this fight to win. He rips his head back and forth.

Deezy drops pellets on the ground.

The dog releases the bone. He trots over and sniffs the pellets. Once the olfactory all-clear is given, he snarfs them up along with clay, twigs, and leaves, and then leaps onto Deezy with his front paws on his chest, begging for more.

“Sorry, buddy,” Deezy says, rubbing the dog’s dirty head. “Them’s my last.”

On two legs, the dog cocks his head and, looks back at CC, who scowls. Discouraged, the dog goes back down onto all fours and sniffs around the graveyard. He appears to recognize he’s on top of a bone gold mine—which he can’t touch. He circles some more and wanders off.

CC picks up the bone with his handkerchief. He wipes it clean of the dog’s saliva.

“What was that manna from heaven you dropped?” he asks.

“Rabbit turds,” Deezy says. “Always keep a pocket full. They good for what ails you.”

CC throws back his head and howls. “De-e-eezy Jones, I don’t know what I’d do without you!”

He gives the sweaty boy a hug.

Deezy grins up at him., “You’d wind up in the gutter, drunk and naked as Adam.”

“Someday, that ecclesiastical iteration of yours will lead to your predestined undoing.”

“Opium’ll get you first.”

A look of regret comes over CC’s florid face. “Alas, my addiction. It’s true. The slings and arrows have worked to unhouse my soul. And they may, who knows, eventually, work their wickedness on you, as well. One day, even the Bible-babbling Aristides Jones may be tempted to relieve the vice-like pressures of this life with one of the many magic elixirs our apothecaries have to offer.”

“Not me. I ain’t never drinking that laudanum. It’s ripped through your brain like a tornado.”

“How now, boy. Easy on the aspersions.”

Deezy falls to his knees, closes his eyes, and prays. “Blessed is the man who walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly...”

“Now what?” CC asks.

The boy opens his eyes and glares at the older man. “CC, we just robbed a grave. I’m asking the Lord and this poor soul to forgive us.”

“Oh... oof course, of course...”

“Please, mister,” Deezy prays, “or maybe you’re a nice gentle lady like my teacher Miss Olivia back at Perfection School. I know what we done is an abomination.”

The boy stretches the prayer to a half hour. CC lights the cigar stub he keeps in his coat pocket. As he sucks in, the stub brightens, a golden glow in the dark. He’s used to this. The boy covers Psalms 1 through 10, the Ten Commandments, and the Beatitudes, both the Matthean and Lukan versions.

He concludes: “Amen and amen.”

“Fine prayer, son. The Lord will surely honor it.”

Deezy looks up from his knees. His eyes glisten.

It amuses CC the way his protégé compartmentalizes life. He will spend half an hour praying over this stolen bone, then turn around and swipe a demi john of Tennessee mash.

He chuckles and scratches his head. “Well, I can see you’re preparing to hold a loftier colloquy with the Deity himself, so I’ll be off. Try not to stay for more than an hour. A necropolis attracts some misguided souls, especially after ghoulish Helios has taken to his slumber.”

CC leaves; Deezy prays on.

Something moves.

“De-e-eezy Jones!” a deep voice from the darkness.

Deezy opens his eyes wide. His heart pounds.

“De-e-eezy Jones!” The voice seems near, but far away. “Can you smell de stink of yo ’own flesh? A-sizzlin ’and a-poppin ’on Satan’s spit.”

The sweaty grave robber gives off a long sigh and falls back onto his palms. “How the dickens did you find us?” he says, grinning toward the nearest big pine trunk.

Bug steps out from behind the tree. “Followed CC’s smoke.”

He’s shirtless, bare foot, and he wears a dried frog leg he calls Mr. Jam around his neck, along with a string of buckeyes.

“What’d you do to your necklace?” Deezy hops up to examine it.

Bug slips it off.

“Holy Meshach!” Deezy says.

“Polished ‘em with the countess face cream,” Bug says.

Deezy sniffs. “M-m-m.” He holds them up. “Look how they shine in the moonlight!”

The two head back to camp, cornfields on both sides, the stalks head high. The sky is clear, a bulbous moon on the horizon.

Deezy holds the bone with his thumb and index finger. “Yuck, I ain’t carryin ’this thing one step more. Heah, you take it.”

Deezy is also scared of thunder and left-handed women.

He hands the bone to Bug, who backs away.

The bone drops into the sand.

“Naw suh,” Bug says, “touch that ... no tellin ’what kind of dreams I be havin ’tonight.”

“Hey!” Deezy says, louder. “Pick it up!”

“You the one drop it.”

“You’re the slave. Pick it up!”

“Oh, so now you playin ’Mr. Massa with your old buddy, Bug. How many times these last two years I saved your skinny butt when you got in a pickle, huh?”

At an impasse, lips thrust out, the two plop down in the sand.

About an hour later, CC, in a night cap, shuffles down the road, barefoot, holding a lantern high and wearing a long wool overcoat.

“Boys! It’s bedtime! Deezy, pick that bone up and ya’ll come on back to camp.”

Deezy shakes his head. “I ain’t totin ’no dead man’s bone.”

CC stares at him. “Bug?”

Bug shakes his head. “Boss, I don’t mean no disrespect, but that bone’s bound up with a spirit, and that spirit, he ‘gon ’tag along behind that bone like a puppy dog. Where that bone goes, the spirit goes.”

CC looks back and forth at the boys pouting in the middle of the road. Behind him, the faint glow of the campfire rises above the tree line.

“Boys, you do realize that this lowly Tennessee farmer’s thigh is going to make us all rich?”

“Rich?” Deezy says, looking up.

Sighing, CC picks up the bone and makes a magician’s grand gesture. “Presto prestissimo! Voila, you are now looking at the thigh

bone of the venerable General Albert Sidney Johnston, late of the CSA.”

“The one shot dead at Shiloh?” Deezy says.

“The very wight. And his much-grieved kin were so generous as to allow our humble troupe to exhibit it both for the public’s edification, and, of course, for our own emolument.”

Deezy rolled rolls his eyes. “CC, I just dug it up outta that cemetery.”

“You know that, and Bug and I know that. The rest of the bookless and brainless farmers in this culture-parched country do not.”

“What’s he talkin’ ’bout?” Bug says, as they tramp back to camp. He’s carrying the bone.

Deezy kicks sand with his toes. “Lyin ’and cheatin’. What CC Cash does best.”

Long after the war, in the late nineteenth century, the name Dr. CC Cash was uttered on the streets and in the shops of Macon with reverence. After all, from his tidy, vine-covered office on Mulberry Street, the man had brought at least three generations of Maconites into this world. His august figure, his thick gray hair, and his somewhat disheveled suit graced the dogwood-dotted sidewalks for forty years, as much of an institution as the Old Confederate Soldier standing sentinel at the confluence of Cotton, Mulberry, and Second Streets.

But when he died, and his children actually read Lulu’s diary, they were scandalized. Not only was CC Cash a Civil War shyster, but his wife, the respectable matron Mrs. CC Cash, had been a dance hall girl, chanteuse, Roman Catholic, and a lesbian. In the diary, she held nothing back.

And in the next generation, CC's grandchildren, even more socially prominent than their parents, were even more scandalized. Should someone discover the diary and leak the contents to the local newspaper, reputations would fall; careers would be destroyed; families would break up.

My great-uncle Horace, a nervous, little man, with a sweaty face he constantly wiped with monogrammed handkerchiefs, founded a bank in Savannah. He became a financial success, but every time he returned to Macon for a visit home, he made a bee line to check on the diary, which, by then, was housed in the college at Milledgeville and guarded by Cash librarians.

That's right: we have our own librarians. They keep the paper from deteriorating and preserve the ink's stability. They also interpret the contents in scholarly seminars and papers, i.e., they make sure the juicy parts never appear in print.

In my classroom, Peter perks up. He tugs at his bow tie. He's the only black boy in school who wears one.

"CC puts the bone up for show the way the medieval church in Europe did with relics."

"Big source of income for the church," I say.

I'm sitting in my swivel chair behind my desk, the tips of my fingers touching.

Toine is antsy, drumming his fingers. All this relic talk doesn't interest him. "So, who does Bug belong to, Deezy or CC?"

"Hard to say."

Nisha shakes her head. "I can't imagine a world in which you *belong* to somebody."

“But Bug and Deezy are friends,” I say, opening my hands.

“A black slave and white boy?” Toine hisses.

“I know it sounds improbable,” I say, putting my elbows on my desk, “but that’s what’s so confusing about slavery. Sometimes friendships formed.”

They all shake their heads.

“Before or after the abuse?” Toine says.

Abuse: a hot-button issue for Toine. His father’s an abuser—when the man condescends to visit his family. His mom works two jobs to feed six kids and to keep a dilapidated, twenty-year-old Toyota. Some mornings, the boy shows up at school and sleeps all day. The night before, his daddy came home, and fighting and screaming broke out. DFCS has investigated several times, but nothing in their house has changed.

“If a dude can sell me,” he says, sitting up and leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, “how I be his friend? If you my friend, I can tell you off. There’s a lotta things I can tell you a slave couldn’t tell his master.” He looks up at me, seeking approval.

Peter wants to agree with me, but he can’t. “Toine’s right, Mr. Cash. The words ‘friend ’and ‘slave ’don’t belong in the same sentence.”

“Maybe,” I say to both. “The relationship was complicated. But then Albert Sidney Johnston’s thigh—the one we just saw robbed from a grave—steps onto center stage. We’re still outside Nashville, June of ’62.”

CC stands sweating in front of a tent, taking money in his hat as a few farmers trickle in. They've shown the bone around Nashville for two weeks, but the take is less than encouraging.

Fat, cumulus clouds threaten heavy rain. Tall, skinny pines rise around them and give off a turpentine scent. Whenever there's a break in the line of suckers, Bug sneaks under the tent with water in a bucket and with a gourd to refresh the actors, Lulu, Deezy, and Sophy Racquentin, the Thirty-fifth Countess of Boake, card sharp, actress, and savante of the black arts.

A pair of spinster sisters are in line, dressed in black, their heads covered in a mop caps. They cling to each other, whispering, as they pull out fans. Inside the tent, the air stifles, mixed with the smell of cigar smoke and perfume. When they hear the guitar plucking and Lulu singing, "Abide with Me," the pair sways to the rhythm. Ahead, a woman moans. The spinsters regard one another with knowing eyes. They're well acquainted with these sorrow-sated moments.

Finally, they stand before it. Hanging twin lanterns suffuse the scene with a soft, golden light. In widow's weeds, Sophy embraces the tiny coffin with her spotted, gnarled hands in black lace gloves with open fingertips, her arched head piece embroidered with black imitation flowers. She raises a hand to her brow and sighs. The small sarcophagus itself is made of cedar, and a pearl-colored silk cloth lines the inside. Resting on the cloth, lies the bone, ten inches long, imbued with the same tender love a mother would bestow on her small dead child. The two spinsters lean forward and read the inscription *sotto voce*:

Here lies the thigh bone of Gen. Albert Sydney Johnston, lately fallen at Shiloh Church beneath the blessed peach tree. The general gave the last drops of his patriotic blood that you may thrive in freedom.

CC penned the inscription, sounding it out a dozen times to achieve that treacly, sentimental tone that draws the farmer's wife like honeysuckle draws the bee.

What the women see is not just a bone, but a universe of values and manners and customs, and the graves of many gone to be with Jesus. Their heads quiver as one. They embrace, and their hands grip one another as Lulu in one corner plucks her guitar and sings and Deezy, dripping sweat, crouches in another corner, with smelling salts should anyone faint, as he plays solitaire.

A sister loses her grip, her knees buckle, but the other clutches her elbows and holds her up.

"Now, sister," she whispers, "Remember the gallant courage he showed on the field of battle. If he could endure that, then you can stand firm today."

Thus bolstered, the weaker sister straightens up, and the two make their way toward the exit.

CC greets them as they step out into the bright sunlight. He shakes their hands and bows too elaborately. As they hobble down the sandy road, ancient, shaky-legged roaches, he rolls his eyes and fantasizes about all the hicks, just like those two, waiting to be parted from their money.

That afternoon, CC rides into Nashville to the post office for a money order from his father.

When he returns to camp, the group gathers around him.

"Well?" Lulu asks. She's brushing her hair, which she does five hundred times a night. He shows them a puffy, melancholy face. "My lords and ladies thespian, ye of the tribe of Marlowe and Jonson..."

“Cut the crap, Boss,” Deezy says. “How much did he send?”

CC bobs his head. “Send is perhaps an ill-chosen verb, Aristides. I should select another, say, more along the lines of ‘withhold.’”

Lulu steps towards him and looks him square in the eye. “Tell me the plain truth. We haven’t had beef in weeks. Look at little Bug. His ribs are showing!”

Bug obliges by lifting his shirt and turning around so all can see his ribs protruding.

“He didn’t send you a single red cent?” Lulu says. She has stopped brushing, and the brush itself has become a potential weapon.

“Not one,” CC says. “In fact, Mr. Scipio Aemilianus Cash, *mon père et homme d’affaires extraordinaire*, proud proprietor of nine hundred chattel slaves and property valued at one point five million dollars, has just disinherited his only offspring and heir, namely, *moi*.”

The next Saturday night, the troupe relocates outside a small Tennessee town named Brandville. They set up the wagons inside a ring of pine knot flambeaus in a large grassy field.

For days, news of the disinheritance has laid them low. They depended on that money coming every three months. And even though CC’s father had made clear his objections to his son’s “work,” they had never expected this.

So, they add skits to the bone scam.

They practice and they post their bills at taverns, barber shops, and even Baptist churches.

The players have built a set that resembles a parlor. Deezy sits in a wingback chair, reading the paper, smoking a cigar. He wears a starched collar and wool pants. Playing the guitar off to the side, Lulu

sits in the shadows strumming a light, merry tune. Behind Deezy's a portrait of a plantation master. A fireplace, curtains and two windows. Flowers stand in a vase next to the portrait.

An ominous strum in minor key. The mood changes.

Bug steps out from behind a curtain with a derringer.

The crowd gasps.

He's dressed in a long, shabby overcoat and a floppy hat that swallows his head.

"Oh, my Lord!" a woman says.

Deezy reads on, oblivious. He chuckles and nods at something he's found in the paper. He tries to pitch his voice deep to sound like an adult.

Bug approaches stealthily, holding the weapon high and out in front.

Tip toe, tip toe....

"He's got a gun!" someone in the audience shouts.

"That little boy's gon 'kill ya, mister!"

No response from Deezy. His contented ignorance versus the obvious tragedy about to unfold has the crowd looking back and forth between the two actors. Women squeeze their husbands. Children close their eyes.

As Bug brings the derringer so close that the barrel is almost touching Deezy's head, from behind the wagon, CC fires a pistol. Deezy leaps up, holding his bleeding head (tomato juice squirting through his fingers).

A woman shrieks, and a child buries herself in her momma's dress. Crying breaks out everywhere.

Deezy staggers around the room, both hands gripping his head. He gasps and stumbles. "I am mortally wounded!" he shouts.

He crosses the stage several times, milking the scene, finding his way back to the audience and rolling his head around and dropping to his knees.

Tears stream down the cheeks of a short, skinny woman on the front row. She stands not ten feet from him, behind a red rope CC always puts out to keep the audience from rushing onto the stage to a dying Deezy. The woman's arms go out, then she pulls them back in. "You're still a baby," she says, "Ain't even shavin', yet."

Always professional, Deezy stays in character.

"Father in heaven," Deezy says, looking to the sky, "my heart is pure as the driven snow. My soul's ready, Lord, ready to cross the river Jordan to see my dear old mammy and dear old pappy. I hear 'em calling my name in that glory land beyond the sky..."

CC moves among the crowd, a snake easing through the grass to gobble up an unsuspecting field mouse. Hat out, he bobs and nods with a pasted-on smile.

"Thank you, madame. Oh, bless you madame, my heart overflows with gratitude." He meets their eyes and commiserates with them about the heart-rending demise of the poor boy in the skit, dying from such a wicked ambush.

The mothers dab at their eyes with handkerchiefs. The husbands and brothers are tearing up, too. CC consoles the women with a pat on the back. The women lean on his big, soft shoulder and gaze up into his sympathetic eyes.

"Oh, King of Kings, oh, Mighty Counsellor!" Deezy cries, keeping his eye on CC to see how much he's raking in. "Look with mercy on

my wayward brother, Elijah. The demon drink has got him. And all them squawlin' babies—have mercy on him, Lord.”

The short, skinny woman pokes her tall hulk of a husband and nods toward the dying boy. “See what that rot gut whiskey you drink is doing to poor Elijah!”

“And take care of my sis, Lord. She ain't the belle of the ball, but she's got a heart of gold and she's dying to find her a Christian man.”

“I'll marry her!” came a shout from the rear.

Deezy falls in the dirt, clawing and gasping, and the crowd gives an in-suck of breath. Some of the women drop to their knees to pray.

“Good-bye, cruel world,” Deezy says. “Into your hands, good and gracious Lord, I commit my spirit, tainted as it is. I leave this here wicked place knowin' all my loved ones are safe in your bosom. Alas, alack, and well-a-day. I die, I die, I die...”

As Lulu plucks the guitar, she sings: “*Come thou fount of every blessing...*”

Bug and Sophy join CC and circulate among the crowd, holding out the hat for donations. This is the crucial moment when the marks are most vulnerable. The farmers and merchants from town reach into their wallets and fork over hard-earned cash. Sophy, looking innocent and feeble minded, selects which men will not know their purse has been lifted until they get back home, and she does her finger work. Tonight, they will strike the tents quickly and be in another town by dawn.

Back to my classroom and my students, shaking their heads.

“Mr. Cash,” Nisha says, chewing her pencil, “CC's a crook!”

“I told you,” I say. I'm pacing around the room for some exercise. “He was a shady dude. Some in my family call him out-and-out evil.”

“But why they believe that bad acting?” Toine twists his head around to follow me.

“No TV or internet,” I say, counting off the items on my fingers, “no movies, no smart phones. You’re much more sophisticated visually than they ever were.”

Toine shakes his head and chuckles. “A smooth operator.”

“Smooth?” Nisha says, glaring at him. “He was a thief!”

“Nisha!” Peter says, as he nods towards me.

“Oh, sorry, Mr. Cash,” Nisha says, blushing, “but I got an uncle like CC. The man never spoke a word of truth in his whole life. Always hanging around, mooching off my momma. Stealing. Makes me crazy.”

Nisha’s situation, like Toine’s, involves abuse, but of a different socio-economic class. Her mom raises her and three sisters on one salary, but the mom’s a high-powered lawyer in a firm that asks her to work seventy-two hours a week and to be thankful for it. Nisha eats fast food and micro-whatever. Most of her mental energies feed her phone, where she studies Merriam-Webster’s on-line, Norse etymologies, and Indo-European hypothetical vocabulary, or she swims in the sex-saturated waters of the daytime soaps. Last summer, she discovered *The Interpretation of Dreams*, so these days she uses Freud to unweave the amorous tapestries she’s obsessed with.

Last summer, there was a pregnancy scare. Did Nisha tell her mom, a lawyer who has her eye on a million-dollar palazzo in the most fashionable area in town? No. She called me. I found help from a counselor friend and a nurse. It turned out she wasn’t pregnant, and now she and her boyfriend are getting serious.

The mom still doesn’t know.

The principal, Mr. Dreck, enters my classroom, a tall, Valentino-style handsome man, dresses like a banker, trim moustache, applying

gloss to his lips and spraying mouthwash. He peruses the students like a veteran shopper. He points to a senior girl in the study hall group.

She giggles.

“Mr. Cash,” he says, “the Crimean War? No, the karaoke war? The Odd Fellows war? Darn it, Mr. Cash, what do you call the thing?”

“The Civil War,” I say, trying to think positive thoughts.

“The Civil War! That’s it! The one with all the burgs and belles and Beauregard’s.”

I smile. “The early years,” I say. “Just after Shiloh.”

“I need to see Miss Brown in the counselor’s office,” he says, nodding to the senior, who’s still giggling. “SAT registration. I’ll have her back in a jiff.”

“Certainly,” I say. I nod toward Miss Brown. She stands, grabs her book bag covered with glittering stars and stickers of balloons, and sidles toward the door.

The two leave the room. Clinking of the principal’s keys as he unlocks the weight room next door. Normally, no one uses it during my class.

Movement, voices, moans...

My three students grinning at me...

As she leans forward, Nisha says: “Mr. Cash, are you okay?”

I must have turned red.

“Me? Sure. Why shouldn’t I be?”

My Isabelle enters my classroom and approaches me. Jewish, long, black locks and, a slim figure. Today, she wears something colorful, loose-fitting: art teacher titillation. Dark brown eyes, and long, thin fingers, good for running through my hair.

“Hey, Miss Feinberg,” the students say.

They love Isabelle.

“Charles,” she says, softly.

Struggling to keep at least some sense of decorum in front of my students.

She pauses, listens to the noises from next door, and grins.

My students look at her and raise their eyebrows.

Isabelle draws closer. “Mr. Cash, does the open expression of love embarrass you?”

I shake my head.

The moaning grows louder.

“I’m not against the open expression of love.”

“Cha-a-a-rlles,” Isabelle whispers, her voice deep and alluring. She snuggles up beside me and nods conspiratorially at my students.

My students’ eyes light up. Intra-faculty romance intrigues them.

“Tra-di-tion,” she whispers in my ear, imitating my voice, “pro-pri-e-ty.”

My three gaze up at me as if they’ve peered into my soul.

“But where’s the ec-sta-sy?”

“Next door in the weight room,” I say.

Isabelle’s an observant Jew with profound faith. She’s worked hard to teach me, not to convert me, just to let me know who she is and who the folks are she cares about. Besides, with me, there’s not much to convert. I’m an Episcopalian.

Every Sunday morning, I walk down to College Street in my searsucker suit and white bucks (in spring and summer) until I arrive at dear old vine-covered St. Paul's. It reminds me of a doily on some moth-eaten chair. Some days I don a straw hat. Got to look stylish. We read from the '28 prayer book, which I hold out away from my body with two hands. I pronounce "inestimable" without screwing up and feel justified as I walk out the door.

Isabelle reads her prayer books three times a day, seven days a week.

She wants to get married. I want to get married—a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. The word "commitment" sounds to me the way an aphorism sounded to her persecuted ancestors: *Arbeit Macht Frei* ("work sets you free").

And then there are my parents.

Isabelle believes in Yahweh. My parents believe in an early morning Cutty Sark and soda.

Swimming in my dream, we're at my fixer-upper on historic High Street in downtown Macon. It's chipping-off white, four Corinthian columns, ante-bellum, surrounded by magnolias on a cobblestone street. I live on the ground floor, refurbishing the second and third. Five years I've been at it.

Five years.

That's also how long Isabelle and I have been at this ... whatever this is. I know marriages that haven't made it that long. So, I procrastinate with the house, my good girl avers, the way I do with our marriage.

I haven't always put things off, but I'm thirty-eight, faced with choosing a life mate, a soul so close to mine that we breathe in synch. My resolve dissolves, my legs to Jell-O.

Consider the lines of the Prayer Book:

"... not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding."

I'd like to be a brute beast with no understanding.

We're strolling down High Street. A horse and buggy pass: clop, clop, clop. The horse releases turds. Plop, plop, plop, golden brown against the dark gray of the cobblestones.

Isabelle's in a petticoated dress, twirling a frilly parasol, showing all the world her bare embraceable shoulders. I'm in a gray wool Confederate uniform, gold insignia, sun-glinting, on my neck-constricting collar. The cicadas, like stars studded through the magnolias, roll out their languid alleluias.

No cars, no trucks, no fire engines, no ambulances, no box cars battering.

Only a thundering silence.

"This is the real you, isn't it?" she says, eyeing me. The coquette.

"I confess, I do feel comfortable."

I tug at my white gloves. Feeling a-ris-to-crat-tic. Like the feeling. Black boots to my knees, spit shined. My brass polished. The magnolia in front of my fix-me-upper wafting its symphony of odors over us.

"Comfortable," she says, "in a time that never existed, except in your mind, where you bulwark yourself behind an ossified chivalry and an antiseptic gallantry."

I wince. Art teachers aren't supposed to wield words with such truthful precision.

“Don’t be so melodramatic,” I say. “Let’s go up and enjoy the view from the balcony.”

We climb the steps to the second floor and my balcony, where we survey the town laid out before us. From our vantage point, the town slopes down towards the Ocmulgee riverbed. The tallest buildings have only three stories. To the east, we can see the deep brown river. A steamboat blows his its whistle as it navigates “the boiling waters.”

“We could be married and live here,” she says, spinning her parasol on her shoulder. “Plenty of rooms. Nearby shops. Your church, my temple.”

“Which ‘here’?” I ask., “The old here, or the new here?”

“The new, of course.”

Sneaking into the magnolia below us, my students snicker.

Isabelle and I peek over the balcony to see what they’re up to.

They’re barefoot, dressed in ragged slave clothes. Their hair is wild and woolly. No cell phones, no stylish jeans, no Nikes.

The three of them look up at us. They wave, then realize they’re not wearing their usual designer clothes.

Toine points and giggles at Nisha.

“Look at you, girl,” he yells, bent over, howling. “You a little pickaninny!”

“E-e-e-e-e-e!” she squeals. She’s barefoot, wearing a dirty shift, her hair knotted into a single pigtail.

Toine’s in overalls and a floppy hat, carrying a hoe. And he’s barefoot. Once he sees the way he’s dressed, he jumps up and down, a child throwing a tantrum.

Peter is dressed like Toine, only he's bareheaded. He seems startled, but more puzzled than mad.

Down High St. comes the clatter of a half dozen horsemen riding hard towards my students. Patrollers chasing runaway slaves. They carry axe handles, clubs, and rifles.

The three flee down the sidewalk, past the elegant antebellum houses.

"Yah-h-h-! aaah! We got 'em, now, boys!"

Their horses' hooves kick up gold sparks against the cobblestone street.

Nisha screams. The three scramble up steps to a freshly painted white cottage, where a frail man is playing the flute on the front porch.

"Please, mister," Nisha says pleads, "those men are after us! Can you hide us?"

The man coughs violently into a handkerchief. Nisha is shocked at the blood, but the man smiles and points to an old tarp lying on his porch. My three students crawl under it.

After the patrollers ride by, they peek out, wide-eyed and panting.

The doc brings me out. The lights hurt my eyes, so I blink and moan. A nurse offers me water from through a straw and dabs my forehead with a damp cloth. The hooves of the thundering horses are still pulsing in my ears.

"Hyperplastic polyps like kudzu," the doc says. He moves around and leans against the counter.

"Some dysplasia and possible ulcerative colitis. We'll know more later. So, a Big Mac a day...."

Lying on my side, facing him, I rub my eyes. “I’m addicted.”

The intensity of the dream! Still trying to convince myself the doc is real. This office is real.

“Look,” he holds out his hands, his left slathered with a white, slimy goo. “I know the burgers are tasty, but they contain L-car-ni-tine, which increases blood levels of trimethylamine-*N*-oxide — (TMAO’s). TMAO’s alter the metabolism of cholesterol and slow its removal when it clings to artery walls.”

I can’t take my eyes off the goop. It’s thick, like Crisco.

“Listen” he says. He notices I’m obsessing over his hand and wipes it off with a paper towel. “I understand. I’m tempted, too, especially with my three kids in the back of my van, clamoring for chow. Soccer practice: ‘McDonald’s, dad!’ Violin lessons: ‘McDonald’s, dad!’ Even the sexy French tutor I have to pick up and take home: ‘Ah, *monsieur*, le Beeeg Mac!’ Heck, there’s a Golden Arches two minutes from my house.”

The guy’s trying his best to reason with me. His little eyes dart as he speaks.

“But what I see daily,” he says, “fistulas, Crohn’s, irritable bowel syndrome. That, my friend, brings me back to GI reality, and I muster the courage to drive on past those heavenly odors without pulling in.”

“I can’t resist,” I say.

“Yeah. Easy for me to say, huh? Stress is a factor, too. Any big stress in your life?”

“Exhausting job, pushy parents, death by water, air, fire, earth. The twenty-four seven daily news cycle.”

“Turn the TV off.”

“I teach American history.”

“But Civil War, right?”

“The present’s rooted in the past,” I say., “For example, lately we’re talking about the Sambo Thesis put forward by a guy named Stanley Elkins in his book, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. Elkins claims slaves were infantilized.”

“Delicate issues.”

“My kids want to know.”

“Your administration know you teach this stuff?”

“No.”

He nods to the anesthesiologist.

“Time to get back to work,” the doc says.

The warm syrup trickles through my body as the drug snakes into crevices and flows through valleys, where it transforms me into a landscape of pleasure, relaxing ... goo-oo-oo-ooeey ... ea-ea-ea-eeeeasy pea-ea-ea-ea-syeeasy...

His screen shows zig-zag lines zipping past. Driving by a picket fence at a hundred miles an hour. Pop! Pop! Pop!

Back in my dream and the classroom, Peter tugs at his clothes and adjusts his bow tie. Dazed still, Toine twirls his dread locks. He’s sweating. Nisha fiddles with the red plastic comb in her hair, pulls out a mirror, and puckers as she applies lip gloss.

“That was freaking awful, Mr. Cash,” she says, screwing the top of her gloss back on. “Is that what it was like—for slaves, I mean? Hunted like animals?”

I nod. “I’m afraid so.”

“The dudes on horseback?” Peter asks.

“Patrollers. Patrolmen on the lookout for runaway slaves.”

Toine is still chuckling over Nisha’s slave outfit. She pouts and turns her head away.

Peter struggles to say something.

“Peter?” I say. “What’s on your mind?”

“Mr. Cash, I’m wondering... do you see.....I mean... do you see us ... as ... slaves?”

Silence.

My stomach flutters. This is the drugs talking, I tell myself. Or me speaking through Peter, asking myself a probing, uncomfortable question.

“No! Of course, I don’t.”

Peter appears reassured that I’ve spoken truth from my heart, but Toine is glaring.

“Peter, I think you’re onto something,” Isabelle slips smoothly into the desk next to him.

Nisha says, “you’ve studied the period so much, maybe you identify with those white, slave-owning aristocrats.”

I stand, walk around, pop an unsharpened pencil in the palm of my hand. Catch myself. Stop the popping.

“Charles,” Isabelle purrs, “has Nisha struck a nerve?”

“No. I just disagree,” I say. “What interests me doesn’t have to consume me.”

She gives me a you’ve-made-a-valid-point nod, followed by a you-don’t-really-believe-you’re-getting-off-that-easy grin. “Maybe you don’t recognize that it consumes you.”

Nisha takes the cue: “Are you trapped in an ante bellum cage, Mr. Cash?”

“It’s his safe zone,” Isabelle says to Nisha. “He can escape his family, his childhood...”

“Isabelle!” I snap.

From next door in the weight room, passion erupts, again.

Nisha turns around and shakes her head. “The principal has no principles.”

“Principal no different from slave owners,” Toine says. “If you can take it, you *will* take it.”

“I don’t agree, Toine,” I say. “Many slave owners tried to be honorable men.”

My three students stare at me.

They roll their eyes at one another.

Isabelle smiles beatifically.

“What?” I say, holding out both my hands.

“Mr. Cash, with all due respect,” Nisha says, “that’s unbelievably naïve. Miss Feinberg?”

“Mr. Cash is irrefutably naïve” Isabelle purrs. “That’s part of his charm.”

“Cash,” Toine says, “we talked about Elkins, and the Sambo theory. Slavery infantilized the Negro, made him passive, so he would tolerate anything, especially sexual abuse. Massa took what he wanted when he wanted it.”

“Infanta-what?” Nisha says, smirking. “Bet you don’t use that word in the hood.”

Toine makes a funny face.

“I just disagree,” I say., “Elkins bases all his research on Bruno Bettelheim and the Holocaust. Invalid comparison.”

“Okay,” Toine continues, “but don’t you affirm his claim that American abolitionists derailed their own project by insisting on ideological purity, by demanding that slavery be completely dismantled, compared, say, to the British abolitionists, who were more pragmatic and more effective?”

Open-mouthed, Peter and Nisha stare at their thuggish classmate.

“On that point,” I say, “Elkins is on firmer ground. The Brits were more pragmatic and more persistent. Look at what Wilberforce accomplished. One man. Thirty years.”

“And,” Toine says, (the thug has disappeared), “Daniel Patrick Moynihan employed the Sambo model as an empirical basis for Affirmative Action.”

“That claim has been made...”

“So,” he’s grinning now, “a certain Supreme Court justice got into Yale because slaves were infantilized?”

Toine does this a lot. He does research on the past, comes up with brilliant theories, but then tries to force them into the present, where they may not fit, like a great-looking shirt two sizes too small, but he still tries to shove, and push and make it fit. He’s so proud of himself at this moment. The student who knows more than the teacher.

“Toine,” I say, “the problem with Elkins is simple. Didn’t have a clue about the real South. Honor formed the basis of the ante-bellum South.”

“Honorable like CC,” Nisha says, grinning.

“Well, I admit...”

“Toine,” Peter says, “you got two dudes inside you. You got the brother. Talks ghetto, dreads and baggy pants, mumbles, and grunts, and then you got the dude says ‘Nonconsensual inter-racial relations were more the norm than the exception.’”

Toine shifts in his desk, uncomfortable.

“I want to know more about CC and Miss Lulu,” Nisha says. She’s in this for the romance, not anthropological theory or whether Toine is passing as a thug. During lunch, I see her sardined in a booth with our star quarterback, making out between bites of pizza.

In a large clearing in the Tennessee pine woods, a crowd has gathered for a minstrel show. CC’s troupe has set up outside Knoxville, and the townsfolk have come to see the players sing and act. Some in the crowd wear tailored jackets and stove top hats, and their women flaunt pink parasols, but most folks are simple farmers and their wives, the men’s shoes caked in dirt and their women covering their heads with simple cotton bonnets.

In the makeshift kitchen. Lulu stands at the counter, chopping onions and sniffing.

The audience chuckles.

Behind Lulu, Bug waves to the crowd. They snicker, but he gives the sign that shushes them, then he mimes Lulu chopping and crying.

The crowd laughs harder.

“Ain’t he a card!”

“They all like that. Cut up and sing and dance to beat the band.”

There is a plate of apple tarts on a shiny silver tray behind Lulu. Bug creeps towards it. His fingers reach out. His eyes light up.

“That boy’s gon ’steal your pies!” a woman cries in the crowd.

The on-stage thief glares at the woman, pouts and pulls the corners of his mouth down like a clown, looking sad. He points to his chest. “Me, a thief?” He shakes his head. “N-o-o-oooo!”

“Look at ’im,” the woman says, “lyin ’through his teeth!”

Lulu sings a melody. A black silk band and locket around her neck demarcates the high from low intent. Above the band, her blonde curls, high cheekbones, and blue eyes. Below, a generous, pale bosom whose exposure surpasses the norm allowed in this tiny Tennessee town.

Bug’s enchanted by Lulu’s song. Dreamy-eyed, he waltzes with a broom.

“Ain’t she got a purty voice,” a wife comments.

Her man chuckles under his breath. “Bet she’s singin’ ’bout some beau she’s a-meetin’ later on.”

Bug eyes the tart and assumes a wicked grin. His long tongue slurps around the circle of his lips, extends, and wiggles, obscene.

Lost in song, Lulu is oblivious to the goings-on behind her.

“Little missy,” the wife says, “you need to get your mind on your bidness!”

Bug’s nostrils quiver. Even from the far back of the crowd, his rapid nasal movement is visible. Bug is a physiological oddity.

Mouths drop open. Men and women point at the supernatural nostrils.

“Good God ah-mighty!”

Off to the side, where the crowd can’t see him, CC counts money and scribbles down the take in a leather-bound record book. He looks up and grins. His Bug is a money-making gem.

“Would you look at that?” another woman says. “That boy is some kind o ’freak!”

Bug clamps onto a tart.

A woman screams.

Bug raises his eyebrows, takes a whopping bite, and chews, savoring the sweetness, thrusting his tongue in and out, the juice dripping from his chin onto the ground.

“Oh, Lord,” a woman yells, “Josh, my heart’s beatin ’like a tom-tom!”

“He’s gon ’eat you out of house and home!” another woman yells. Bug is about to sneak out the back door when in walks Deezy, dressed as the massa, handlebar moustache, starched white shirt, shiny black leather boots.

He points an accusing finger at Bug, who falls on his knees and throws his right hand to his brow, his face assuming a tragic mask.

Bug sways back and forth. “Oh, woe is me! I am undone!”

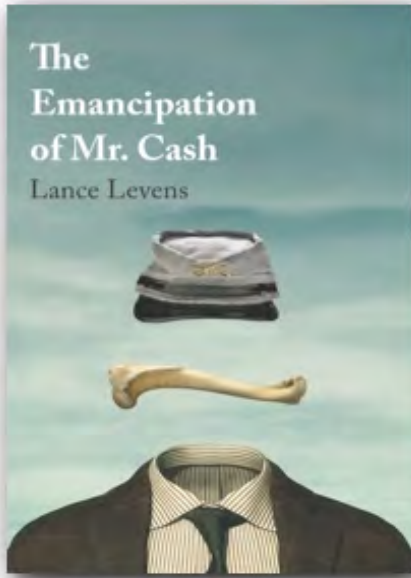
Deezy grabs him by the arm. The two tussle, swaying back and forth.

“Please, Massa, please...”

A cotton curtain flops down. Behind it, scrambling, scraping, clunking.

Minutes later, the curtain is back up. Deezy, Lulu, (plucking her guitar,) Cash, and Sophy are gathered quartet- style. Bug stands beside them, holding a rope attached to a mule.

*Come on, come on, come on, old man,
And don ’t be made a fool,
By everyone you meet in camp,
With ’Mister, here ’s your mule.’*



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