

“How many dead, Andrew?”

Mr. Brown shrugged. “It’s hard to say with certainty.”

“I’ve heard several hundred, at least,” said Mr. Carris.

Grandfather paused. “Even a few hundred isn’t enough to call it an epidemic,” he said.

“Some doctors warn we may see a thousand dead before it’s over. There are forty-thousand people living in Philadelphia, William. Can you imagine if one in forty were to die?”

The room quieted as we all pondered the number.

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“I don’t believe it,” said Grandfather finally. “People exaggerate. What news from our friend Evans?”

Mr. Brown looked up.

“His wife is ill, and he has closed his shop. My business dwindles daily. I have already lost one of my lads, gone with his family to Wilmington.”

“Mrs. Ogilvie said that everyone of fashion has fled to their country estates,” I offered.

“I heard one of her daughters was stricken,” said Mr. Brown. “Myself, I straddle a fence. One foot stays here in Philadelphia. The other foot is in the country. We know the air there is pure and the people safer. I say safer, mind, not safe. There are reports of fever in Bucks County and Delaware.”

“What of the government, then?” Grandfather asked.

“Jefferson still comes into town every morning, though everyone says he’ll soon quit and retire to his farm at Monticello,” said Mr. Carris.

“Bah! We don’t need Jefferson. We have the general. President Washington won’t abandon us!”

Mr. Carris blew his nose loudly. “The president retires to Virginia for a respite every September. He is not a man to change his habits. Even if he called the Congress back, few would dare return. I tell you, William, men who stood unafraid before British cannon run in fear from this foul pestilence. I fear for Philadelphia. I fear for the people, I fear for myself.”

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Grandfather did not say a word as we walked home. I silently counted on my fingers: twenty-eight days until the end of September, then on into October until the first frost. Frost always killed fever. Mr. Carris said it drained the poison from the air. The Ludingtons’ were sounding better. Sopping pigs couldn’t be that much harder than serving in the front room, and it would be better than falling ill or dying. I’d be there over harvest. They would make me work in the fields and feed me bread and water. But I wouldn’t get sick.

Grandfather stayed silent until we approached a limping man dressed in dark rags, pushing a cart.

“Wonder where that fellow’s going?” he said. “Looks like he belongs on the waterfront.”

A thin white arm flopped over the side of the cart as it jostled over the cobblestones.

“Hullo there, good man!” called Grandfather. “There is no place for the dead up here. Hullo!”

The man ignored us and pressed on steadily.

“Perhaps he is transporting a poor woman to Rickett’s Circus, like Mr. Carris said,” I suggested.

“She should be moved at night, when good people are safe in their beds. Now what is he doing?”

The man had stopped at the corner of High and Seventh, in front of our coffeehouse.

Grandfather sped up. “Sir, I protest most vehemently!”

I lifted my skirts and ran ahead of Grandfather. An....

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“I’ll pack a hamper of food for your trip,” she said. She paused by the sideboard to pick something up. “I nearly forgot. This was by the front door when I came in. It’s addressed to you.”

“Who would send anything to me?”

The parcel was flat and as large as my hand. I fumbled with the brown paper, trying to unwrap it carefully so we could use the paper again.

Eliza looked over my shoulder and made an approving noise, “Um-um-um.”

It was a painting, a vase full of delicate flowers, bright blue, lavender, and red carefully painted on a scrap of wood. The flowers looked alive, like they would move if a breeze stirred through the kitchen.

Eliza rummaged through the wrapping paper. “Here,” she said. “He sent a note.”

Mattie—I write you in haste. Master Peale is closing up the house with his family and assistants inside. To protect us from the fever. We have water from the well and food stored.

My thoughts race. These flowers are for you. Take good care, Mattie. I would not want you sick. We shall watch for balloons again, when this plague has passed.

N.B.

Morning came too quickly and it was time to leave.

“Mattie! The wagon is here!” Eliza called.

It was hard to tell which would collapse first, the

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wagon or the horse pulling it. The farmer and his wife sat up front, holding a baby with dried snot across its face. Grandfather rode in the back, waving triumphantly. Eliza eyed the horse with doubt.

“It’s a beauty, isn’t it?” he bellowed.

The horse stopped in front of the coffeehouse, puffing and wheezing. The farmer jumped down to load my valise and food hamper into the back of the wagon.

Grandfather headed into the house. “Be out in a tic,” he promised. He was acting like we were headed for a lark instead of fleeing an epidemic. I shook my head. It wouldn’t do to be angry.

I hugged Eliza one last time. She muttered a quiet blessing and tucked a lock of hair into my cap.

“You stay out there until two hard frosts,” she warned. “Promise me that.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I answered. “Thank you, Eliza. Thank you for everything. You’ve done so much . . .” I couldn’t choke out anything else.

She hugged me tighter.

“Hush, child. I’m doing no more than your mother would do in my place. This is how the Lord wants us to treat each other. She’ll be fine and we both know it. Don’t worry about her. You take care of yourself.”

She turned me around and gave me a shove toward the wagon.

“Thought you said the old man was coming,” the farmer said as he tied down the valise.

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I rolled my eyes while Mrs. Flagg giggled. “Excuse me,” I said, interrupting the two of them. “Where are we? And how long have we been here?”

Mrs. Flagg was all business. “No one has told you? Poor little chickie! You’re at Bush Hill, and a good thing it is you are!”

Bush Hill!

“We must leave,” I said as I pulled the blanket off my legs. “We must go. This is a dangerous place. Grandfather, take me home.” I tried to stand, but my legs gave way.

“Now, now, Mattie,” Grandfather stammered. Mrs. Flagg took me by the shoulders and sat me back down. Before I knew it, I was lying down with a sheet tucked so tightly over me that I couldn’t move.

“That will be enough standing up, young miss,” said Mrs. Flagg firmly. “You’ve nothing to fear. Bush Hill is now a respectable place. Your grandfather was a clever, kind man to bring you here.”

The city had turned a mansion on Bush Hill into a hospital for fever victims. According to the gossips, Bush Hill was one step away from Hell, filled with dead bodies and criminals who preyed on the weak. It was a place to stay away from, not a place where a young girl should lay about and sip broth, even if her grandfather was mooning over her nurse.

Mrs. Flagg lifted a mug of cool tea to my mouth. “You listen to me. **This here Bush Hill is not the same**

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Bush Hill of last week. Mr. Stephen Girard, Lord bless his name, has taken over and turned this into a right proper hospital. All them thieving scoundrels have been driven off. You’re lucky you were brought here. We have doctors, nurses, medicine, food—everything a fever victim needs. And we have enough problems without you running off the ward.”

Grandfather coughed, and I handed him my tea. He emptied the cup and handed it back to me. “Mattie knows all about Stephen Girard,” he told Mrs. Flagg. “He has visited our fine establishment several times. Indeed, it has been my honor to break bread with him.”

Break bread? Since when did he call stuffing down Eliza’s cinnamon rolls in the same room as Stephen Girard (and twenty others) “breaking bread?” Grandfather did admire Mr. Girard, that much was true. **Girard was a rich Frenchman with a finger in every pie; he was a merchant, an importer, and a banker.** But what did Mr. Girard have to do with Bush Hill?

“He came through here like a hurricane, he did,” Mrs. Flagg explained. “He fired the slovenly devils who caused all the trouble. Then he ordered repairs on the water pumps, hired good folks like me, and laid in supplies. We even have a fancy **French officer, Dr. Deveze, who supervises the patients,** and Mrs. Saville for our matron.”

“With a name like Bridget you are surely not French, are you, Mrs. Flagg?” asked Grandfather.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
September 22nd, 1793

Wives were deserted by husbands, and children by parents. The chambers of diseases were deserted, and the sick left to die of negligence. None could be found to remove the lifeless bodies. Their remains, suffered to decay by piecemeal, filled the air with deadly exhalations, and added tenfold to the devastation.

—Charles Brockden Brown
Arthur Mervyn; or Memoirs of the Year 1793

For long days and nights, stories flew over my head as I slept in my narrow bed at Bush Hill. Nurses and doctors, weeping relatives, and volunteers from the **Free African Society** whispered their sorrows. They echoed around the beautiful hall with the glittering chandelier.

They told of a small child found huddled around the body of her dead mother. As volunteers placed the

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mother in a coffin, the child had cried out, “Why are you putting Mamma in that box?” They had to turn the child over to a neighbor and take the mother away for burial.

They told of the dying man who pulled himself to the window of his bedchamber and begged people to bring him a drink of water. Many passed by, hurrying away from the sound of his voice, until a brave soul entered the house to help him.

They told of thieves who crept in and stole jewelry off the dead and dying.

They told of good people who refused to take any money for helping strangers, even though they themselves were poor and near destitute.

They told of the mighty who had **fallen ill: Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and Dr. Rush himself. Both had recovered, though Dr. Rush’s sister had died. Hamilton had fled the city.**

They told of terror: patients who had tried to jump out of windows when the fever robbed their reason, screams that pierced the night, people who were buried alive, parents praying to die after burying all their children.

I laid my pillow over my head to protect myself from visions of the dead, but I could not breathe. No one told stories of a painter’s assistant named Nathaniel or a cook named Eliza. No one told of my mother. A breeze stirred through the open window, and the crystals of the chandelier struck a gentle chord. The voices faded.

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“Won’t do you no good,” the driver interrupted. “The **post office just closed down**. It could take until Christmas before they can deliver letters.”

Mrs. Bowles patted my arm. “Don’t fret, Matilda. If you like, you may choose to take employment at the orphanage. I’m sure the trustees would approve a small wage if you helped with the cleaning or minding the children. They have for Susannah. She’ll help with the laundry.”

Susannah didn’t look strong enough to wash a teaspoon, much less a tub full of clothing. “What will happen to her when the fever is over?” I whispered.

Mrs. Bowles lowered her voice. “She is at a difficult age. She’s too old to be treated as a child, but not old enough to be released on her own. Her parents owned a small house. The trustees will sell that and use the money for her dowry. We will hire her out to work as a servant or scullery maid. She’s attractive enough. I’m sure she’ll find a husband.”

A fly bit the ear of the child on Mrs. Bowles’s lap, and his howl cut off the conversation.

Scullery maid, that was one thing I would never be. I imagined Mother’s face when she arrived home and found what a splendid job I had done running the coffeehouse. I could just picture it—I would be seeing the last customers out the door when Mother would come up the steps. She would exclaim how clean and well-run the coffeehouse was. Grandfather would point out the

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fancy dry goods store I was building next door. I would blush, looking quite attractive in my new dress—French, of course. Perhaps I could hire Susannah to do the washing up. That would be a way of helping.

I broke off my daydream to take in our surroundings. Grandfather and the driver had stopped swapping stories. He turned to look back at me anxiously. We were in the center of a dying city.

It was night in the middle of the day. Heat from the brick houses filled the street like a bake oven. Clouds shielded the sun, colors were overshot with gray. No one was about; **businesses were closed and houses shuttered**. I could hear a woman weeping. Some houses were barred against intruders. **Yellow rags fluttered from railings and door knockers—pus yellow, fear yellow—to mark the homes of the sick and the dying**. I caught sight of a few men walking, but they fled down alleys at the sound of the wagon.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing to something on the marble steps of a three-story house.

“Don’t look, Matilda,” said Grandfather. “Turn your head and say a prayer.”

I looked. It appeared to be a bundle of bed linens that had been cast out of an upper window, but then I saw a leg and an arm.

“It’s a man. Stop the wagon, we must help him!”

“He is past helping, Miss,” the driver said as he urged on the horses. “I checked him on the way out to

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fetch you this morning. He were too far gone to go to the hospital. His family tossed him out so as they wouldn’t catch the fever. The death cart will get him soon for burying.”

I couldn’t help but stare as the wagon rolled by the stoop. He looked about seventeen and wore well-tailored clothes stained with the effects of the fever. Only his polished boots remained clean. His yellow eyes stared lifelessly at the clouds, and flies collected on his open mouth.

“Won’t there be a burial, a church service?” I asked as the driver turned east onto Walnut Street.

“Most preachers are sick or too exhausted to rise from their beds. A few stay in the square during the day, that takes care of the praying.”

How could the city have changed so much? Yellow fever was wrestling the life out of Philadelphia, infecting the cobblestones, the trees, the nature of the people. Was I living through another nightmare?

“What date is this?” I asked Mrs. Bowles.

“Today is September the twenty-fourth,” she answered.

“The twenty-fourth? That’s not possible.” I counted on my fingers. We fled on the eighth. “When we left, there were reports of a thousand dead. Do you know what the total is now?”

“It’s double that at least,” she said. “It slowed down those few cool days, but as soon as the temperature rose again, so did the number of corpses.”

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The driver pulled on his reins to stop the horses. The road was blocked by a line of slow-moving carts, each pushed by a man with a rag tied over his face, each holding a corpse.

“The Potters Field is ahead,” Mrs. Bowles said as she pointed to the front of the line. “That’s where they’re burying most of the dead. The preachers say a prayer, and someone throws a layer of dirt on top.”

Along one side of the square stretched a long row of mounded earth. The grave diggers had dug trenches as deeply as they could, then planted layer after layer of fever victims. Some of the dead were decently sewn into their winding sheets, but most were buried in the clothes they died in.

“A field plowed by the devil,” I murmured. “They’re not even using coffins.”

“I haven’t seen a coffin for four, five days now,” the driver answered. He flicked the reins and urged the horses on. At Fifth Street, the wagon stopped.

“Here’s the orphan house,” said Mrs. Bowles. “We’ve taken over the home of William Ralston, though we’ll soon need more room.”

It was an ordinary-looking house, more expensive than some, but typical of Philadelphia: brick front, windows trimmed in white paint, metal railings, and a thick oaken door. The driver helped down Mrs. Bowles and Susannah, then each of the children. Mrs. Bowles put Susannah in charge of shepherding three of the children

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His face dropped to his hands. The shop was perfectly quiet, save for the sound of the clock ticking on the wall and a fly caught in a spider’s web strung across a grimy windowpane.

“Mr. Brown? Sir?”

He took a deep breath and looked up.

“In the beginning of August, this was the largest city in the United States. Forty thousand people lived here. Near as I can tell,” he pointed to the jumble of notes and letters on the desk before him, “more than half the city has fled, twenty thousand people.”

“How many dead, Sir?”

“More than three thousand, enough to fill house after house, street after street.” “I went to the market, but found no food,” I said.

“Few farmers dare come into town. They charge exorbitant prices for their wares, and get whatever they ask,” he said bitterly. “Those who don’t die of the fever are beginning to starve. You’ve seen the rats?”

I nodded.

“The rats thrive. I should write that.” He dipped a quill into the ink pot and scribbled a note. “The only creatures to benefit from this pestilence are the rats. Go home, Matilda, take my regards to your grandfather, but tell him he must lock all the doors and pray for frost.”

I started to tell him what had happened, but a man burst through the door waving a letter and shouting.

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Eliza watched Nell sleeping. She lay curled on her side, clutching her headless doll. “You understand that she needs to go to the orphan house, don’t you? You should probably go there yourself.”

My stomach tightened.

“Please, Eliza, don’t make me go. I know you think I’m a child, bigger than Nell, but a baby still, and that I need someone to tell me to wash my face and finish my bread.” I struggled to control my voice. “I’m not. I’m not a little girl. I can take care of myself.”

“We’ll talk about it in the morning. We’ll talk about everything in the morning.” Eliza rubbed her shoulders and stretched her neck.

“Do you feel ill? Do you want to lie down?” I asked.

“I’m just tired and I can’t sleep yet. A woman’s work is never done, isn’t that what the fools say? Here,” she pulled a small pair of pants out of a basket at her feet and rummaged for a needle and spool of dark thread. “Robert and William are harder on their clothes than any dock worker I’ve ever seen. Stitch up the rips while I try to put this shirt back together. I’ll tell you what I’ve been doing.”

I bit off a length of thread and slid it through the eye of a needle as Eliza talked.

“A few weeks ago, Dr. Benjamin Rush wrote to Reverend Allen asking for help.”

“Reverend Allen from the Free African Society?”

“The same. The doctors thought us Africans couldn’t

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get yellow fever. Rev. Allen said this was a chance for black people to show we are every bit as good and important and useful as white people. The Society organized folks to visit the sick, to care for them and bury them if they died.”

Eliza’s voice drifted off as she caught a memory. She took a deep breath and picked her sewing up again.

“Is that why you were visiting those homes this morning?”

Eliza nodded. “Yes. Mother Smith takes my place minding the boys and Joseph. The Society has done a remarkable job, and I don’t mind saying that with pride. The Africans of Philadelphia have cared for thousands of people without taking notice of color. If only the doctors had been right, we could look to these days of suffering as days of hope.”

I stuck the needle in my thumb.

“What do you mean, ‘if only the doctors had been right?’ ”

Eliza held the shirt up to the light to check the evenness of the stitches.

“After a few weeks of nursing the sick and burying the dead, our own people started to sicken. Black people can get sick with yellow fever just like white people or Indians. I do know some who have never been sick, but there are white people who can say the same thing.”

We stitched in silence, each deep in thought.

“Are we going to die, Eliza?” I asked finally. Eliza snorted.

Every day more towns prohibited travel to or from Philadelphia. Even prices higher than any in memory couldn't tempt farmers into the city with fresh food. I tried not to eat more than I absolutely had to. I tightened the drawstring of my skirts a bit more every morning.

"I was going to send the old lady home today if she had turned up," Joseph continued. Robert climbed into his lap. "I'm strong enough to make my way around the house. Mother Smith doesn't have to worry about us no more."

"Do you want Mattie to stay with you?" Eliza asked as she wiped off William's sticky fingers and held out the rag to her brother. Nell held up her hands for me to clean. I brushed them off on my skirt and stood up to clear away the dishes.

"There's little enough business right now," Joseph said as he took the rag to wipe jam off Robert's face. "I think I can control this terrible trio for a bit. Folks out there need all the help they can get, even if it does come from a skinny white girl."

I swallowed hard. Was I really that useless?

Joseph laughed at the expression on my face. "I'm teasing. You worry too much, Mattie. You're a great help."

It was nice to hear him say that.

Robert squirmed away from the rag, but his father caught him and cleaned off most of the mess before he...

like a cello, and his smile lit up every shadow. I stopped worrying about being a ninny

"I wanted to jump out the window when I saw you a few weeks ago," he said. "I thought you were safely in the country."

"I was staying with Eliza and her family," I explained. "The coffeehouse had been broken into by intruders."

He lifted my chin. "You look like you need a week's worth of cakes. Didn't Eliza feed you?"

"There wasn't much food for anyone," I said. "What about you? What did you eat?"

"You know Mr. Peale. He always does things in a unique way. You've heard of the collection of animals he has?"

I nodded. Mr. Peale had opened a natural history museum in his house.

"We ate the specimens he had collected, before they were treated with arsenic and stuffed, of course."

"No! You didn't!"

"Yes, we did. And I'll never eat possum again, I promise you," said Nathaniel. "Disgusting. It was as much Master Peale's good humor that kept us going as much as anything."

He stopped. We were in front of the coffeehouse.

"Some days felt like we were trapped in a nightmare," he said.

"It's hard to believe it's really over," I said. "It feels so..."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

October 30th, 1793

Blessed be God for the change in the weather. The disease visibly and universally declines.

—Dr. Benjamin Rush Letter, 1793

Nathaniel was a constant caller that week. Mr. Peale had given him a free rein to wander and enjoy himself after being cooped up in the house. Nathaniel said all of the Peales were outside as much as possible. He predicted that the painting family would soon produce a number of landscapes.

As word of the frost spread, hundreds of people swarmed into town. The returnees were all well-fed. They called to each other in annoying, bright voices. I wanted to tell them to hush. It felt like they were dancing on a grave with no thought to the suffering they had escaped. Those of us who had remained behind were gaunt and pale. People who were dosed with mercury spat frequently and...

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“Any news?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I’ve written several letters, but they’re useless until the post office opens. The newspaper won’t run any advertisements before the end of the year.”

“Don’t give up hope.”

It was Eliza’s idea to have a small feast of thanksgiving with Joseph and the boys. I suggested Mother Smith, too. We didn’t need to discuss Nathaniel. Of course he would come.

Keeping the children out of the kitchen while we were cooking reminded me of trying to catch fish in my petticoat. No matter how I tried to get hold of the giggling twins, they always slipped away. Nell was the sneaky one. She waited until my hands were full with the boys, then stole a bite from the table. I finally filled the butter churn and set it on the back porch. I told them they would get a wonderful treat just as soon as they turned that milk into butter. That kept them busy for a while.

At long last we sat down to a table filled with food.

Mother Smith blessed the meal. “Dear Lord, we give thanks for your blessings. For bringing us through these days of pestilence, we thank you. For saving our children, we thank you. For restoring us, for watching over us, for giving us this bounty, we thank you. Watch over those who have passed, Lord.”

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The fever lingered. Grandfather’s chair by the hearth stood empty. The parrot’s cage was gone. The ghosts of friends lost in the last months flitted across when I least expected them. And then there was the ache I avoided most of all.

The front door swung open with a crash. All conversation ceased.

It was Nathaniel, struggling to catch his breath.

“It’s the president!” he said. “President Washington. He’s returned. He’s coming down High Street right now!”

The men all abandoned their chairs at once and fought to get out the door. I looked back in the kitchen. “I’ve got a cake rising,” Eliza said. “I’m not leaving that for any man. You go on.”

“Come on, Mattie!” Nathaniel called. “Hurry!”

High Street was already lined with people, all peering anxiously up the road. Nathaniel grabbed my hand and pulled me along until we found a break in the crowd.

“There he is!” someone shouted.

“Huzzah! Huzzah! General George is back!” The crowd roared in approval. Men took off their hats and waved them, women fluttered handkerchiefs, and children jumped up and down. A group of three riders proceeded down the middle of the street.

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“Advisors,” Nathaniel said. “They don’t count. Look, there he is.”

The president rode a few paces behind, calmly smiling and waving at the crowd. He rode his beautiful white horse, reins in one hand, his hat in the other. He nodded to the crowd with a dignified air. If Grandfather were here, he’d be busting his buttons by now.

I never thought Washington was handsome, but on that horse, he looked like something special. He was our leader. The crowd continued cheering and waving until he was far down the block. **If the president was back, then the fever was truly over.** If the president was back, we were safe.

I threw my arms around Nathaniel and planted a big kiss on his cheek.

He pulled back in surprise.

“Do you always do that when the president rides by? If so, I’ll take a job working for him.”

I blushed and looked down at my feet.

“I’m just happy,” I said.

The crowd was thinning. Some people followed down High Street, others went back to what they had been doing. My afternoon customers hurried back to the coffeehouse. That was a comforting sight.

Nathaniel pointed back up the road. “Who do you think all of those people are?”

Following behind the president’s entourage came a scraggly parade of wagons and carriages.