

## Prologue



### The City of Hope 1902

IT IS NOT uncommon, when one is young, to think that life is simple. In my case, I reasoned, it would require little besides discipline and effort. If I labored well, worshipped, confessed, and shunned all carnal desire, my soul would find sure and brilliant its path to Zion. And if I held faith as the brightest star in my firmament—and thus the easiest by which to chart my course—the universe would fall into order. Order, after all, means everything to a Shaker, and a Shaker is what I am.

But if we are to be sincere, then we know that we are not made for perfection. However we may try to fit the pattern, it pulls and bunches like a poorly sewn waistcoat and we exhaust ourselves with the fruitless smoothing of seams. I know something of this struggle, and now that I am old, I realize that my youthful presumptions about the way forward were based on a fundamental misunderstanding: I thought life was simple because I thought I was simple. On both counts, I was mistaken.

What I could not know was that, even in societies as steady as my own, life-changing tumult can be born of a single happening. And though, when first I heard of it, the event may have felt as unconnected to my daily existence as a sigh breathed in a distant land, it transpired that nothing would be the same after the day

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in August of 1837 when six young sisters received signs from the world beyond.

The communication took place in a settlement far from my own, after the resident schoolteacher had died of a sudden ague. My caretaker, Elder Sister Agnes, who had once lived and taught in the enclave, was summoned north while community elders searched for a permanent replacement. She was gone several months, and as she had been the one who raised me from birth, I missed her. I was barely ten years old at the time, and Elder Sister Agnes was the closest thing to a mother I had ever known.

A child will despise anything that deprives her of her beloved's attention, and I viewed the miracle of divine contact—for that is what it was—as an interloper and a thief. Once I had won my eldress back, I was determined to banish from my thoughts the cause of her absence. Perhaps that is why the import of what she had witnessed was lost on me until later. Certainly, I understand now how foolish the passions of a child truly are, how such willful blindness cannot last.

Yet, however little I allowed the remarkable day to mean to me at the time, the story threaded through and bound us all as believers, passing from community to community until there was no one who did not know of it. My eldress told me the account herself as though it were a parable from the Bible whose lessons she had yet to discover. She glowed as she recalled even the smallest details of the wondrous day. How faint breezes blew the smell of tomato vines through the open windows and carried songs sung by the brethren as they brought in the last of the summer hay. How the girls in the schoolhouse—young as ten, old as fourteen—struggled with penmanship that day. How their ears rang with my eldress's exhortations to keep their letters evenly spaced, cleanly drawn, pure and unadorned as the beliefs we are taught to hold dear. I knew how the studious sisters must have felt, listless and

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hypnotized by the droning of flies in the late-afternoon heat, for I, too, was a schoolgirl.

From this most ordinary of scenes erupted an episode the likes of which had never before been experienced. For all of a sudden, as my eldress described it, the girls' fidgeting ceased—a moment of calm before the room rang with the sound of furniture scraping the wooden floor, a crash, the crack of a desk toppling, and then, once more, silence. Virgie Thompson, one day shy of her eleventh year, jumped to her feet and began to sway. What Virgie saw my eldress could not say, but her blue eyes were fixed hard on a point in the distance directly in front of her. She made no sound at first, yet her lips moved ceaselessly, forming strange syllables that seemed to stream from her mouth. Her hands fluttered and twitched by her side as her head cocked from shoulder to shoulder, quickening until her hair had loosed itself into a tangle and it seemed her thin neck might snap.

“Virgie?” my eldress asked. “Are you all right, child?” The others were afraid to look, eyes glued to their careful writing. *Do All Your Work, the lines read, As Though It Were To Last 1,000 Years And You Were To Die Tomorrow.* I knew the saying well—indeed, I had copied it countless times myself. It was one of many left to us by our Beloved Mother Ann Lee—founder of all that we believe, equal in Heaven to the Lord Jesus Christ, sufferer at the savage hands of the World's people. Dead more than half a century at the time, Mother was yet as powerful from the beyond as she was when she walked this Earth, and my eldress had asked that the girls scratch her words over and over onto the pages before them, in the same blue-black ink with the same tidy hand.

The rattle of wood on wood, louder and louder as Virgie's feet trembled against the leg of her tumbled chair, filled the room. Her narrow hips began to jerk while her arms shook and went limp, sounds now issuing forth from her mouth full and loud. They be-

gan deep in her throat and recalled no utterance made by human voice, but rather a deep growling that rose to a moan and then to the high-pitched keening of an eagle, her eyes wild, expressions of bliss and terror, woe and relief passing across her features, my eldress said, like the flicker of shadows in candlelight.

“Virgie, come back, dear,” Elder Sister Agnes implored, kneeling before her, trying to stay her movements by enveloping the child in her arms. To regard a young believer so lost to the Spirit disturbed her. She had seen grown men lament their sins, weeping and rolling in the mud outside the meetinghouse. She had watched Brother Eleazer Howell get down on his hands and knees in mortification to lick the floor clean where he’d stood. She had heard Sister Thankful Brice confess, wail over wail, to the carnality of her previous life. Such gifts occurred during Meeting, and such passions were commonly made manifest only in the adults of the society. Yet there before her, little Virgie would not, could not, be still.

From another corner of the room came the sound of singing. A strange, warbling tune unlike any my eldress knew. Divinity Brown, meek and dark-haired, had assumed a pose of beatific serenity as song swelled forth in great balloons of melody. Some of the words were familiar. She spoke of Heaven, of honey and a golden light. She called again and again to Mother in choruses that sounded as though a full choir was singing, so richly and tunefully did her voice weave the verses.

But then Divinity tumbled into other noises, eerie yowls that made no earthly sense. She chanted with the deliberateness of a three-year-old, *O sari anti va me, o sari anti va me, vum vum vo, vum vum vo!* Twirling, stamping her feet, she danced faster and faster until her skirts whipped into a great bell-shaped billow from which her thin, youthful figure emerged like the knob on a child’s top, spinning without cease. The incantations, repeated then var-

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ied, seemed to swallow her body as she quickened the rhythms, and her broad smile made it appear as though her face were being twisted from inside as her nonsensical Latin verse continued to drum forth. *I co lo lo san ti rum, I co lo lo san ti rum. Vive vive vum vum vum. Vive vive vum vum vum!*

Elder Sister Agnes rose from her place at Virgie's side and did her best to stand calmly by, then walked to the front of the room with her head raised and her eyes focused upon the black-painted canvas chalkboard in an effort, she told me, to hide her face from view. Why had Mother chosen to bestow such gifts inside the orderly confines of her schoolroom? How wild the Spirit World! The young sisters were lost to it, and my eldress feared for where they might have gone. Compared with the languidness of the summer day, the din was indescribable, and by the time she had wiped her countenance clear of confusion, she heard yet another strange sound as a body thudded to the floor—ten-year-old Hannah Whithers writhing at her feet, the child's fingers clenched as though pleading. Holly Dearborn then erupted into a fit of the jerks, flopping about the room with her arms and legs as loose as a scarecrow's. Severe and solitary at fourteen, Adelaide Hatch fell to her knees, praying in feverish foreign tones. And finally, Bridey White, the lone girl to remain seated at her desk, commenced howling like a dog.

My eldress sat down and drew her hands into prayer, lowering her head. The room resounded with the clamor of an asylum, but she resolved to wait and pray until the moment passed.

On their way back from the workhouses and barns, the settlement's sisters and brethren could hear the commotion inside the school. Later, my eldress said, they assembled around the stepping-stone in front of the gray-green door, sisters to one side, brethren to the other. The elders began to sing and pray as they listened until well after sunset to the noise from inside, and though it was

said that the older believers spoke quietly of the event as a miracle, those who were newer to our kind wondered in hushed tones if something had gone terribly wrong.

As the moon rose and the night became heavy with the scent of sage from the drying racks inside the herb house, the girls began to quiet themselves. Elder Sister Agnes gathered them together, and one by one, her pupils emerged pale with exhaustion, shuffling along the stone path that led to the yellow clapboard dwelling house. No one spoke as they passed—indeed, all pulled back in awe. The sight of the students in such a stunned, blank state after so many hours of commotion gave the impression that they had traveled far, that while it was unto their souls alone that communications from the Spirit World had been bestowed, an important sign had fallen before all of the believers.

Word of the goings-on spread quickly, and it was said that Mother's hand had begun guiding other young sisters into similar states in settlements to the north and south. My eldress's charges may have been the first instruments chosen to carry news of the Second Awakening, but it was said that ministers traveling between the Eastern villages in the months following that day recorded many related stories in their journals. Not all of the happenings involved such dramatic display. A young sister in Hancock drew luminous trees on paper and inscribed in perfect hand their brightly colored leaves with poems of peace and love. Visionists—for that was the name given to Mother Ann's chosen instruments—were allowed to make things that were not simply functional but beautiful, for they had created them under divine inspiration. The rest of us worshipped as we always have, through the songs and dances we performed in Meeting, through our industry, and through our belief that—save for the Visionists—no one blade of grass stood taller than any other in the verdant fields

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of our faith. We knew that order was dependent on union, even in the face of heavenly chaos.

Elder Sister Agnes felt that the day she described marked the beginning of an extraordinary time, a time of great wonder. Why else would there have followed talk of renaming the settlements? Not Hancock, nor Tyringham, nor Watervliet any longer, but *The City of Peace*, *The City of Love*, *Wisdom's Valley*. Why else would the sacred rites have begun, each on designated hilltops near the Church Family buildings? Why else would the elders in the largest of the villages have begun to forbid the attendance of Sunday visitors from the World to Sabbath Meetings, the better that our ecstasy might be expressed in private and seen only by those who could understand its meaning?

My eldress never forgot the miracle she watched unfolding in the souls of girls who, just hours before, were naught but little chatterers, a flock of tittering sparrows—just as common and without care. Still, it was several years before a Visionist came to The City of Hope. She appeared on a day that dawned as bleak and searingly cold as a metal blade left in the snow. And in such humble form. How could I have fathomed that her presence in our small, remote sanctuary—as unforeseen to her as to anyone—would change everything? At least, for me.

# *Polly Kimball*



Ashland, Massachusetts  
October 1842

SHE DARNs HER father's socks without needing to watch her work. Just as well, for the kitchen is dim save for the light thrown by the old Argand lamp, a relic from her grandfather Benjamin Briggs's time, a better time, a time she never knew. She feels the rough wool, the stick of her wooden needles as she weaves a net from shore to shore of the gaping hole. On the floor beside her, the pile of clothes needing mending is as high as her waist, but there is this: When her father is gone, the house is peaceful, and she and her mother need never speak of him.

Even so, he will be home soon. In the gloom of late afternoon, Mama's face is melancholy and the blue of her eyes is that of a willow-painted plate, scrubbed too hard, too often.

"Ben," she says to her young son playing with his bits of string and birch twigs by the fire. "Pick up your things now, there's a lad. It's coming on time for supper and your father..." She looks up with a doe's sense of impending danger as the door swings wide then bangs shut, the sweet apple smell of early fall gusting in from the orchard.

"Come 'ere!" Silas Kimball growls at the boy, dropping to his bony knees, pinning him to the floor. Silas thinks he is playing—

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cracked boots encrusted with manure from the cows and pigs, cold hands, beard smelling of cheese and whiskey.

“No holding me down!” Ben cries. “No holding down!”

But though Silas leans harder on the boy—his skinny six-year-old frame laid low as a sheep for shearing—Ben manages to wriggle free and runs across the boards to hide in Mama’s skirts.

“No better’n a runt hog, my son,” Polly’s father says in disgust. “Worthless half-wit.”

Polly hangs her head. *Whose fault is that?* she thinks, remembering the day she’d left Ben asleep in his cradle so that she could run and feed the milk cow before he woke. From the barn, she’d heard a scream and, bolting back towards the house, saw Silas holding the baby’s head in a bucket full of water as Mama tried to wrench Ben from his father’s slippery grasp. He’d wanted a son for years, one who could help him on the farm. But Mama’s womb was weak and she had lost child after child until, by the time she finally managed to birth Ben, Silas had become so crazed with rage and the burden of never-ending debt that he saw the boy as naught but a drain, one he’d rather see dead than struggle to feed.

*Whose fault is that?* Polly would never forgive herself for letting Ben out of her sight. Though she had been but a nine-year-old girl at the time, Mama had trusted her to take care of her new brother. And the water? It changed Ben. After that day, no matter how he might grow in other ways, he would never be more than a sweet, vulnerable child. Silas had tried to murder him, but it was Polly who’d failed to protect him. *Whose fault...?*

After the outburst, all is quiet except for the rasping of her father’s breath and the child’s muffled sobs. Mama stirs the stew pot with Ben clinging to the skirt beneath her apron. Polly’s needles click as she watches. She is always watching. Motes of dust dance in the grease-scented air, swirling as her mother moves around the room. They make a mockery of her, for Mama tends to her cook-

ing and tidying as though she wishes not to disturb, as though she wishes not to be present at all, yet still the dust flurries about and makes a fuss.

Silas springs up and storms outside to drench his head beneath a gush of icy water drawn from the well. Polly can hear him hawking and spitting in the yard. How she despises him. He hasn't it in him to be kind, not for as long as Polly has known him. He consumes life, sucks it dry. She pictures him coughing up debris like an irritable barn owl, his pellets laced with tiny bones.

"Not a penny of credit left at the Dry Goods," he says as he comes in from washing, his hair dripping, his troubles tumbling forth like rocks down a hillside. "And here I am, thinking you and the girl been making bonnets while I work myself sick in the fields every day." He takes a step closer, and though Mama will not look away from the supper she stirs, Polly can see her shoulders stiffen.

"What is it you do all day, tell me that." His voice has become soft. "Why, it's close on winter and I don't see the dairying done," he says. "I don't see the potatoes dug. I don't see nothin' but two whores and an idiot settin' by in my house."

Then he turns on Ben and makes to kick at him, wanting Mama to look his way, knowing she would throw herself between harm and her boy in a minnow's twist. She twirls round and takes a step towards him, pushing Ben behind her. Polly puts down her mending and half raises herself.

"That's better," Silas says, lifting his arm. "You'll look to me when I talk, I'll learn you that much right now." Polly sweeps in on her brother and pulls him to her, hiding his face as her father swings the back of his hand at Mama's head and smacks her so hard that she falls against the hot iron pot.

"That's for being lazy," he says, brown gravy seeping up the bodice of Mama's faded green dress. He wallops her again. "That's for being the child-whore I married. That were my biggest

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mistake. Tyin' myself down. And for what? A litter of runts? Hang from my belt like hairless possum pups, that's what you three do. But things are going to change now. You watch and see."

He scans the darkening room. Polly wants him to look her way, to see the fury that burns inside her, but he will not. Her strength, she wants him to feel it. But tonight, as on so many nights, all she can do is watch, watch and cover Ben's eyes and ears.

*This night is different*, she thinks. The feeling flashes through Polly's mind though she can't say why. Not an hour had passed since the boy's singsong voice had filled the kitchen. Now, Silas picks up the knife Mama uses to cut carrots and field onions and brandishes it like a child playing pirate.

"Another thing," he says. "Something I heard from a gentleman I been talking to. Something about wills and land being left to little girls. You know anything 'bout that?" He draws closer to Mama. "Your papa weasel 'round me like that? Don't you lie. I never thought to be worried on it before now, but his talk got me wonderin'. Seems there's a fair number of boys left high and dry by their dead fathers. Wives' dead fathers, too." He laughs. "Seems a man isn't to be trusted no more. *We leave*." He imitates a whiny complaint. "*We drink. We got notes against us*. Better to pass everything on to you women, that's the story I heard."

Beneath the anger, Polly senses a strange elation coursing through him, quickening his movements. Her heart pounds as she studies him. He is in debt to every saloonkeeper in town, but it's clear he's not been denied his fill at one or another of the taverns on this particular day.

He is an outcast. Who would have spotted him a belt or two? And there's the look in his eyes. They glisten with something close to glee. Usually, she can see the signs—she has learned to take meaning from a clue as common as the sound of his boots on the step outside—but she does not know how to read him now.

“See, I care ’cause I been thinkin’ I might like a little time on my own, sell this land—*my land*—set myself up pretty somewhere. Just like Mister Fancy Coat told me,” he says. “Rest up without you and your waste. It wouldn’t be so difficult to manage now, would it? Gettin’ so’s I could be alone, I mean. Things happen after all, am I wrong? Takin’ sick, disappearings—like they say, twist of Fate.” He pushes Mama towards the table and lays down the knife. Even in the thin light of the lamp—it’s wick running low—the gleaming blade catches Polly’s eye. *Mister Fancy Coat*.

“I seen whole families go,” Silas continues. Kicking Mama’s feet out from under, he glares at her as she buckles to the floor and covers her head with her arms. “Death come easy here,” he says. “It’s livin’. *That’s* the struggle.”

He walks away, taps his hand over the tops of the cupboards in hopes of finding a forgotten bottle of cider; with his back turned, he cannot see Polly as she rises and guides Ben gently into her chair. She moves quickly and reaches out, her fingers barely grazing the cooking knife’s handle before she pulls away and slips quickly back into her place. He has found his prize, uncorked it, and he guzzles the liquor as he turns back to face the room. “Problem is, can’t do much more than slap you up ’til I know what’s mine,” he slurs, yawns. “Tired now, that’s what I am. But tomorrow? Tomorrow, we sort this out. We make sure your daddy didn’t leave me out of his prayers. We make sure—just like Mister Fancy Coat said—that you tell me the truth ’bout any dealings between you. Give me a nod,” he orders, kneeling to grab Mama’s chin and shake her head up and down. “Yes...that’s right,” he says, still pulling at her. “Yes, *Silas*.”

Silas stands unsteadily and looks at Polly, a queer smile hooking up one side of his mouth. “Lucky for you I met up with this little friend,” he says, holding up the bottle, then pulling it to him like

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an infant as he shuffles across the kitchen floor. “Lucky, too, that I’m in need of a lie-down.” One boot then another falls as he makes his way towards the room where he lies with Mama every night. “There’s always a tomorrow, ain’t there? Can’t count on much, but that’s for certain.”

Polly hears him tumble into bed.

She knows the stories about her father’s kin. His parents had been born of a bad lot—just two of a hundred ruffians, townspeople said, all descended from one drunk Dutchman up by the New York Lakes. He was—would always be—Silas Kimball, the son of stoop-backed, black-toothed marginals. Smelling like smoke and animal fat, mongrel skins for warmth, teeth ground down to nubs: talk had it that the three of them appeared as savages when they walked the path to town in need of a trade. His mother made dolls tied from sticks and corn silk and tried to barter them for food and cider, but the figures scared people with their haunting look and she couldn’t raise much. When Silas came, she bound him to her with hemp cord and fed him in plain view, not a thought given that she was baring herself for all the town to see. Wild as skunk cabbage, living in a makeshift shack in the woods, stealing from the fields of nearby farms—in most people’s opinion, as Polly heard it, the Kimballs were barely human.

Benjamin Briggs, Polly’s grandfather from Mama’s side, had been different. Wealthy, they said, an educated merchant and gentleman farmer come out from Hartford. But he couldn’t work alone the land he had tamed and there was no help to be found in town that wasn’t already at labor in the fields. So it came to pass that when young Silas showed up at his door—not long after the boy’s parents went missing—Polly’s grandfather gave him work and a roof over his head. Whether the vagrants were dead or just set to scabbling in some other place, no one knew. But with them

gone, Silas walked into a brighter future than ever he could have imagined. Or so it might have been.

Mama was ten-year-old May Briggs then, the sole kin left to a man widowed and mourning a wife and son lost in childbirth. Polly imagined her as a girl struggling to fill a woman's shoes and a man's empty heart, a child depended on for tending to everything from chores in the house and barn to minding the count. It was only right that if her father saw fit to take in this strange new boy, May should strive to make him feel welcome. It was surely what her own mother would have done, wasn't it? So she fed Silas and taught him how to care for the chickens and find the eggs they'd hidden in the yard; how to milk the cows with a gentle pull-and-squeeze so as not to get kicked and have the pail knocked dry; how to speak so people could understand him and stop thinking of him as half-boy, half-animal. She did this for her father, that he might have one less thing to trouble over.

Polly never understood how such simple lessons could have led where they did. How the townsfolk could have whispered that young May Briggs broke her father's heart when she married Silas in secret at thirteen. How a farmer as careful as Benjamin Briggs, with a barn tight and new, could have gotten himself killed by a falling loose beam. How, according to gossip, someone had to have worked the joint. How there was but one person who'd want such a decent man dead.

Silas. They say he'd grown to hate Benjamin Briggs as dreams of owning the farm himself began to fill his head. He assumed, by all rights, that the land would go to him if he married May. He didn't know about law. He figured property just passed from man to man, as it always had, so he'd good reason to want Benjamin Briggs dead. Still, no one could say for sure what really happened. "Accidents" are like that. Plenty of suspicion, no investigation, case closed.

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May was only a girl when Benjamin Briggs died—married to a boy just two years her senior, pregnant with his child, alone in a life that must have seemed turned on its head. And though Polly had asked in every way she could figure how it came to be that such a strange incident stole her grandfather from her, Mama would never say. Just stared, frightened-like, then turned away. Fact was, Polly had seen the back of her mother so many times that she had begun to think it was *she* who'd cursed the farm, for she was the seed Mama carried when everything went wrong.

She feels his weight in her dreams. So many nights, his acrid stink has covered her—blocking out her senses, taking her from the world she can see and hear and feel. His flesh is cold, his black hair prickly; he is sure and quiet. She does not scream or fight. As he pins her arms over her head with one hand, she looks beyond him. She hears a babble of voices over his chuffing. She accepts a thousand kindnesses raining down upon her from a crack in the ceiling. His beard scratches her cheek and her ear is filled with the wet roar of his breath. Still, her mind rises to pass throngs of angels misting round her like whirling clouds. They spin. They call out. How they dance across the night sky. Though his thighs bear down on her, she will not be restrained. She cannot breathe or move, and yet, as she takes leave of the angels and travels miles and miles from the heavens, she imagines she is running through a field of wildflowers, her arms spread wide and her face turned to the sun. She is vanishing beneath him, dividing into twin spirits that join hands as they fly far away.

This is what nighttime feels like: an odd cleaving of body and soul as she goes where he cannot follow. But she is lonely and imagines herself walking, elbows brushing, with a friend. She conjures the sound of chatter and nonsense song. She will sing and dance the sun to its cradle. She will talk with the wisdom of an

old towering oak. Her fingers will shimmer the air like leaves. She longs to tremble free of this dirty life. She is fifteen.

Quiet Polly, seated by the fire with her long straight frame carried high, awake now, her gaze steady. She thinks of the daylight hours. Day upon day, after coming home from helping Miss Laurel at the schoolhouse, she says little, save to offer assistance when the chore is too hard or heavy for her mother to carry out alone. Together, they fill the washing tub and carry pails of milk from the barn. Together they slop the pigs, toss grain to the chickens, fork hay into the manger. Seeing sweat at her mother's brow as she churns the butter, the blue-gray circles that color the loose skin beneath her eyes, Polly takes the old dash from her callused hands and recommences the slow, resistant work. Ben is the doll both of them dress and feed. He smiles, laughs, sings, and his noise is a language from another land.

How she would like her father gone. The fire snaps. Her ears ring with the memory of Ben's cries. She wants to hold the boy tight to her always—as if they could be one—but in her gut her hate glows like coals. How she would like her father gone.

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