THE HOUSE OF HAWTHORNE

Spring 1864

Concord, Massachusetts

In the second-floor storage room where we never go, someone has wound the music box. Its eerie tinkling peels away the years like a bride’s clothing, inviting the memory of my first night as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s wife. As soon as the image enters my mind, it drifts away—delicate, elusive, and almost impossible to grasp, like a butterfly on the banks of Walden Pond. I open the oak door and enter the room, but only silence waits. The music box rests undisturbed on a table beneath a layer of dust.

“Naughty ghost,” I say. “Do not make mischief today, of all days.”

I walk to the window and look down toward the pine path, the well-worn trail between our home and the Alcotts’. There in the dark tangle of evergreens, where breezes whisper down the hill, a retreat of a half hour’s time renews my brooding husband. I have patted the pines’ sturdy trunks, thanking them for giving Nathaniel these moments of peace, and have sensed their replies in the fragrant sighing of their branches. He soon emerges, stooped and white haired. Even years after his swift aging during our difficulties in Italy, it is still jarring to see Nathaniel so altered in appearance. In my mind and heart he is ever my young summer husband.

In spite of my wish to meet him when he comes into the house, a presence in this room seems to insist that I remain here. Could it be one of the women Nathaniel’s ancestors judged for a witch and condemned to hang, or one of our deceased friends or relations? The remembrance of our dead loved ones paralyzes me so that I do not step into the hallway even when I hear Nathaniel’s footfall reach the landing and then climb the narrow stairs to the sky parlor. As we both approach six decades of life, he often tells me that I am his earthly savior—a gift from God to bring light to him, who is so apt to see dark. He has fought the coil and stain of the black weeds of his forefathers, even changing the spelling of his surname, to ascend from the bones they left scattered about Salem graveyards. He is still climbing, trying to rise above them.

Nathaniel’s need for elevation inspired the tower he had erected on the third floor of our home, the Wayside, in Concord, Massachusetts, fashioned after the mossy castle lookout where we once summered in Florence. The Wayside is the only home we have ever owned. It is the place where we finally unpacked all the trunks, where the wall colors have faded around portraits, where the dear rooms have embraced our family. The Wayside creaks and heaves sighs like an old, fat grandmama who has sat vigil for so many years that she has coughed the dust of British soldiers’ boots marching to the commencing battles of the Revolutionary War, has harbored frightened runaway Negroes on their North Star quests, and now hosts this stubborn ghost who enjoys giving us a fright.

I know the secrets in her, this house. There is a floorboard in this room that can be lifted, where a mahogany letterbox holds the papers Nathaniel insisted I cut out and burn from our journals and epistles. I imagine how they must quiver, eager to escape and breathe. Once Nathaniel has left on his journey, perhaps I will go through the artifacts. I should look forward to this airing of my spirit, like pinning clean laundry to the line, but I have a place Nathaniel has inserted into me like a grafting on a tree that says these things should stay private.

The floorboards creak above my head in the sad cadence of the man who haunts his writing space. The room is ten by ten feet, and a trapdoor allows him entrance and solitude, but the tower where he wanted to escape from civilization sticks like a belfry above our house, the tin roof giving no insulation from heat or cold, the windows illuminating his dark silhouette for every neighbor and traveler to see by the light of the astral lamp. The sky parlor was to be his respite, but like all places where Nathaniel thinks he will finally find peace and home, it has disappointed him.

Knowing that Nathaniel will remain upstairs until our carriage to Boston comes, and that our children are away or occupied, I cannot resist the letterbox. I count four planks from the window and reach my finger into the small knot in the wood to pry it loose. A musty smell emerges on a puff of old dust, making me sneeze. I wait to be sure my husband does not come in and worry over my health, which has plagued us so often these years.

When I am convinced he still walks in the tower, I lift the box with the courtship letters, the marriage journal, the sketches, and pressed flowers brought back from the places we traveled. A dried paintbrush holds the residue of a long-ago color—the emerald green of an Italian forest on a canvas I painted for Nathaniel, which he used to hide behind a black veil. The flowers are faded like old tapestries hung too long in the sun, and include a night-blooming cereus from my maiden days in Cuba, a white pond lily from the Concord River, and a red poppy from Florence. Under the flowers is a sketch I drew in the days of fevered, falling-in-love inspiration, of a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. One wing is unfurled, welcoming the breath of spring zephyrs into its body. The other is curled and wet, waiting to escape its confinement.

The chime of the parlor’s clock reminds me that we have but an hour before the carriage arrives. I have packed Nathaniel’s belongings, so I may spend time with these artifacts from our past that are calling to me, urging me to look for something that I do not know is missing. I hold on to a small hope that this springtime journey to New Hampshire that Nathaniel will make with his dearest friend, former president Franklin Pierce, might restore my husband’s vitality. I will escort him to Boston by carriage, where he and Franklin will then catch a train north, making stops along the way. I pray that if Nathaniel uses this excursion to reflect on how far he has come, how unlike his ancestors he is, and what a rich and fascinating life of experience he has given us, perhaps he will no longer despair.

A dark eye peers out from under the butterfly sketch, giving me a strange thrill. I drew the son of a plantation owner before I met Nathaniel. It was during the year and a half I spent in Cuba, in my maiden days, when I discovered my capacity for love. In spite of that time of passion and growth, I was injured in my soul from Cuba, and I wonder whether it would have been better if I had never gone. I run my finger over the portrait’s lips, imagining what the planter’s life has been since I left him thirty years ago. My senses are aroused, and I can nearly smell the robust fragrance of Cuban coffee, feel the waxy tropical foliage, hear the melancholy melody brought forth from the planter’s long, dark fingers on the piano keys.

Nathaniel’s cough startles me. I am aware that another man’s likeness is under my hand while my husband stands across the room. Ridiculous though it is, I feel as guilty as if I were caught with a lover. I turn the paper facedown in the letterbox, hoping Nathaniel will not ask about its contents, arrange my face into a smile, and say, “Are you nearly ready, my love?”

He is mid grimace from the pain in his stomach, but upon my address, Nathaniel’s shoulders relax and his lips form a smile. I leave my memories and cross the room to him, wrapping my arms around him. Nathaniel’s coat is damp with sweat, and the heat coming from him frightens me.

“You are feverish,” I say. “You must go to bed. Stay with me.”

“I would like nothing better, my dove,” he says. “But this is a journey I must make.”

“Then let me come with you,” I say, knowing such a wish is impossible. I have asked no one to care for the children, and we haven’t the money for both of us to travel at this time.

“You must stay and keep our children well, and our hearths glowing.”

“For your return,” I say.

He does not answer, but brushes a lock of gray hair from my forehead.

“See that you come back to me,” I say. “I cannot bear this earth long without my companion.”

“Nor I,” he says.

I kiss Nathaniel, and when he pulls away his gaze falls on the box and rests there. I hold my breath, wondering whether he will ask about it, but he grimaces again, his pain appearing to distract him from any questions. He leaves to descend to the first floor and wait for the carriage, and I take one last look at the papers before putting them back into hiding, but the artifacts seem to shiver, to urge, and I am unable to part from them.

What do you want of me? I think. Am I to draw again? To paint? Is it even possible to resurrect the artist in me, whom I have neglected these many years?

Light coming in through the window falls on the Cuba Journal. I turn its pages, and imagine Nathaniel reading it in solitude as a young man, coming to know me safely in print before courting me in the flesh. I wonder which of my words kindled his heart’s fire and his writer’s pen. Was it my acceptance of the possibility of love, or the vivid portraiture of my words that inspired his? Did Nathaniel sense that a woman so open to newness in the society of others could serve as an interpreter of the world for him?

I begin reading and soon lose track of time. It as if the decades dissolve and I am back in that exotic land, immersed in the words of my own hand, in worlds crafted from my writings, that conjure a full palette of scenery, society, passion, and tragedy.

My wordsmith is wary of words, and finds them inadequate because they fail him, but I am more trusting. Burrowed in my journal is the story that wants me to remember that traveling to Cuba allowed me to emerge from my maidenhood to become the woman—the artist—who would wed Nathaniel Hawthorne.