# Our Voices, Our Pens, Our Steadfast Resolve

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> *Between the documents preserved and the names forgotten lies this story. As historical fiction, it draws from the writings and letters of real figures of the American Revolution, yet imagines voices that history did not record, filling the silences with invention.*[1]

**Braintree, MA. March 31, 1776—John and Abigail Adams's home, mid-afternoon**

"Eliza—please fold this letter and wax the corners. We must deliver it to the Henshaw's boy before dinner. He leaves for Philadelphia tonight."

Eliza senses a jaw set, lips pursed with urgency. This will be one of dozens of letters that Abigail has written to John, which Eliza has folded and sealed. Eliza is curious about the relationship between John and Abigail. He is mostly absent and preoccupied with the affairs of the Second Continental Congress. She shakes the thoughts away. Hers is not to pry. She keeps her eyes off the words, afraid, first, that it is not her right to invade the intimacy of their lives. Even more, Eliza has been vigilant in not revealing that she knows how to read and write. It is not her place; it is beyond her station. She fears Abigail might judge her, thinking…well, who knows what she might think?

But in this moment, as a thick gust of wind and rain batters the window, she feels a chill, a shiver. Then—a crash from the hallway. Nabby's voice rises to a shrill note: "Charles took my slate, and he's drawing on it. Give it back!"

Abigail huffs air at her children's interruption and is out the door, flinging it shut before Eliza can say, "Yes, ma'am." The door bounces back, half-open.

Eliza approaches the desk. She averts her eyes to the widening crack of the door and hears Abigail's muffled voice down the hallway, trying to reason with Charles. Nabby's voice whines above the wind, impatient at the slow negotiations.

Eliza begins a fold near the date—March 31, 1776. Her eyes fix on one sentence:

> *I long to hear that you have declared an independency—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors*.

Eliza glances toward the door but still hears voices further down the hall. She cannot resist reading:

> *Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could*.[2]

A shiver runs through Eliza as she reads Abigail's boldness with her husband—the rhetorical fire, the political intent, and the moral force. Imagine—here is a woman who might influence the future of a new republic before it begins.

Abigail stands in the doorway. Eliza jerks and forces her fingers toward the small stamp stored in the inkwell box. She cannot look at Abigail's face and drops the seal from her trembling hand. As Eliza scrambles to retrieve it, Abigail says simply,

"See that the crest is clear and use the red wax. Once you have folded and sealed it, my dear Eliza, please write: *Mr. John Adams, Philadelphia* on the outside so Mr. Henshaw's boy doesn't lose track of where it is going."

Eliza takes a deep breath and tries to steady her hand as the Adams's signet sinks into the wax. Their eyes meet just for a moment. Eliza's cheeks burn. Neither says a word for now, but a new connection snaps into place. She writes, "*Mr. John Adams, Philadelphia*."

Abigail nods, a curve of her lip. "And, so," she says in a whisper, "YOU can be of more help than I imagined."

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In this moment, Eliza does not realize the extent of Abigail's resolve. Women come and go from the Adams's house. They gather to sew, share recipes, tie ribbons over and around bouquets of herbs or flowers from the gardens, and read magazines, poetry, periodicals, and pamphlets—to the bemusement of the men. The assumption is that these are sewing circles or tea gatherings focused on domestic, religious, and moral instruction. Yet Eliza will soon learn that each of these seemingly domestic arts is more than moral education or social gathering. Coded phrases are passed in letters, a recipe may carry a message to release a pamphlet for printing, or a metaphor or biblical allusion might serve as a signal to arrange boycotts of dry goods or tea. Or, just beneath the paper enfolding a loaf of yeasty bread, tied with twine, might be instructions for the distribution of a simple coded word.[3]

Mercy Otis Warren and the young Judith Sargent Murray are frequent visitors, and while Eliza overhears hushed conversations, she has no idea that Abigail, along with Mercy, Judith, Dinah Freeman, and so many others, have, for months, found ways to distribute pamphlets, responses in "Correspondence" sections of magazines, anonymous letters, satirical pieces, and coded critiques—circulating a revolutionary position on the role of women and calls for equality. All these actions carry a cynic's irony at the ignorance of men to the power of women's domestic endeavors, both in supporting revolutionary intentions and in making clear that women's rights should be acknowledged.

For now, Eliza is flushed with pride that Abigail knows she is literate. She takes the early evening trek to the Henshaw's and congratulates herself as she glances at the gathering clouds, feeling anticipation in the air, not realizing she will soon be entangled in a secretive attempt at revolution that is not without its dangers. For now, satisfaction settles in.

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It will not be until Eliza is in her room, removing the cloth that covers her handmade journal, that she takes in the weight of Abigail's discovery. She removes an inkwell and quill from a small purse hidden beneath her one drawer of folded undergarments, day caps, and her single linen bonnet. It must be nearly midnight. The house is quiet. She imagines Abigail still awake, thinking through what she has learned of Eliza. Will Mrs. Adams reconsider, and will Eliza find herself packing her things and looking for employment?

For now, however, she has an overwhelming urge to write:

*March 31, 1776*

*I have been found out. The mistress saw me reading her letter to Mr. Adams. I thought she might let me go on the spot for invading her privacy. I will tremble a bit until I see her over morning breakfast. I think there is more afoot in her purposes than I can imagine for now. Let it all come on.*

Eliza looks over the words, closes the journal after the ink dries, and pays careful attention to returning it to its original hiding place, along with the inkwell and quill. She imagines Abigail might come looking now that she knows Eliza is literate. But sleep overtakes fear and excitement. The moon slips just above the gable of the house and pours a soft haze into her attic window. She will learn soon enough that her place in this household is beyond handmaiden and servant.

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**Plymouth, MA—March 31, 2025, near nightfall**

*Lean in a little closer to this story*. Tonight, as on many March 31st nights before, I take time to remember Eliza. She is more than a life that survives in fragments and whispers. She is my bloodline. But what does it mean to remember her here with you? To tell her story as though it belongs to me alone would be another silence, another narrowing. The truth is, her story reaches past lineage. It presses outward, implicating you and me.

What you are, what you have today, tomorrow, and yesterday, entwines with how the events of these months in 1776 unfolded. While the desired ends—a broader declaration of equality for women or the enslaved—did not reach fruition in the moment, seeds were scattered and sown in ways that you and I cannot imagine. Neither you nor I were there to read Abigail's letter in the context of the situation and times when John read it. Yes, he admired her—her wit and wisdom—but he was most likely shaking his head, caught as he was in a wide gulf of difference between how he and Abigail would best enact what "*Remember the Ladies*" might mean in intent and action.

Perhaps, just perhaps, the failure in that moment to widen the circle of citizenship and liberty became a silence that endured, and one that still echoes—shaping laws, inhabiting institutions, and continuously reshaping the unfinished revolutions yet to be. And so, here I am, and you are, centuries later, tracing our inheritances from them and from each other.

We did not hear the conversation the next morning when Eliza came into the kitchen earlier than usual to find Abigail waiting for her. Eliza could not quite read whether it was a frown or bemusement in the curve of Mrs. Adams's lips and brow. We were not living in this moment; we did not find it necessary to take a side, to risk our reputations or lives. Many did, and for that we find ourselves in a tangle of legacies. The story I will tell you is one small story of many that have been told, and there are multitudes of others lost in the dustbins of history. The journals written by Eliza were passed through our family along with her stories, but we can only imagine how many others' stories, journals, or letters were destroyed or discarded through neglect, indifference, ignorance, or fear.

For now, know this: the story I tell here was passed through my family, generation by generation, through the offspring of Eliza and Isaiah, whose lives were always in danger from those who thought better of whom they each should love, what it means to join together rather than be owned, and what dangers scream out when biracial children are born. But that is only part of the story that wraps in and out of the months and weeks that Eliza is just entering. There is much to tell. Many generations of women in our family passed the stories along, each with their own flair. For now, know the stories hold a *truth of their own*, but also the imaginative

reasoning of tellers who had their own context, values, and beliefs about what this country might be, was, could be, and their places in it.

For our family, the story seemingly begins in the moment when Abigail turns back into her parlor to discover Eliza reading her letter to John. I often wonder what might have happened to my great-great-great-great-grandmother Eliza's life if Abigail had no political or revolutionary intentions of her own. A different response might simply mean that my life would not exist at all. That *is* how tenuous life and circumstance are. Nor might your life be what it is today without a small and very particular discovery, action, kindness, or betrayal. You are the consequence of your forebearers. The conjectures of influence are not to be known fully by any of us, but our story—and the stories of our country—entwine into complex weaves of threads that net and cross through the stories we carry and tell.

For now, we need to stay for a few more months and weeks in the Adams's house to see the seeds of plantings that take us to where you read what I am writing today. This is a time shortly after Washington's victory on Dorchester Heights, a critical juncture when the stakes of the revolution were heightened. We will come to learn how Eliza meets Isaiah, a young Black freeman apprenticed to a Mr. Bowman's Boston print shop. The press lived half in shadow, turning out clandestine roadsides, pamphlets, poems, plays, and essays that challenged not only British rule but also the hypocrisy of white men demanding freedom while owning slaves and ignoring women's rights.[4]

Abigail and her circle of women will do their part in writing and distributing their work through both public and secret networks, but we will never fully understand the extent. While newspapers like *The Massachusetts Spy* published letters, poems, and satirical pieces, pamphlets and broadsides also appeared as newspaper installments and were printed by Edes & Gill in Boston, then reissued in New York and Philadelphia in a timely manner. Manuscript circulation was robust—it included poems, essays in commonplace books, satires, plays, and letters. We have little evidence in historical records that the authors of the Declaration of Independence responded directly to what was written, but we can speculate that some of it ultimately ended up on the desks of delegates.

Let's imagine for a moment that Thomas Jefferson, reading Mercy Otis Warren's satirical play *The Group*, pauses for a moment at the character Meagre's monologue:

> *I look askance on all the human race,*
> *And if they're not to be appalled by fear,*
> *I wish the earth might drink that vital stream*
> *That warms the heart . . . To equal liberty,*
> *conferred on man by Him who formed the*
> *peasant and the King!*[5]

What might Jefferson think if he casts his conscience toward Monticello and his more than one hundred slaves? Will reading sentiments like Meagre's cause him to feel the disquiet of ambivalence in proclaiming universal truths while acknowledging that his own household stood as their refutation?[6] What might he think *if* he read Meagre's monologue as he penned a version of liberty in which he states his belief that the truths of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are self-evident? As time will reveal, Jefferson will father children with Sally Hemings who, as he is drafting a Declaration of liberty and freedom, is three years old and bound to his household. In 1785, when Sally is fourteen, her first child with Jefferson will be born. The liberty bell of freedom may have sounded sour notes for the disenfranchised majorities while ringing for others. For many, these aspirations are not self-evident. Sally Hemings was never legally freed nor emancipated by Jefferson's will.

This is a reminder: we cannot hide behind words or documents we participate in writing, no matter how aspirational, if we do not live up to the actions of our declarations for ourselves and others and remain true to them. Yet, as we remember Hemings and the generations of Jeffersons and Hemings, we cannot ignore that white women's liberties were often tethered to the bondage of Black women and men, intertwining their fates in a contrast of freedom and subjugation. And, yes, in the same moment, we might also credit Jefferson for the words he gave to a soon-to-be nation, which became touchstone ideas for the generations to come, who would continue to demand what was self-evident for some. All of this is a reminder that we are a fragile chain of memories, circumstance, and imagination.

But I digress. Let me take you back into Eliza's story.

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**Braintree, MA—April 1, 1776, early morning**

"Well, well," says Abigail. She is in the kitchen when Eliza arrives, which is unusual, and a quick thought about dismissal sends a chill through Eliza.

"I'm sorry…" Eliza begins, but Abigail's wave of her hand silences her.

"I need to say, Eliza…" Abigail holds her thought there while stirring a thin ribbon of honey into her tea, "that you are a mystery, but a pleasant one." She is near whispering as Betta prepares breakfast for the children. "I have a proposition that you might question. There are words of revolution in the air. Our men are savoring the words liberty and freedom. But what of us, Eliza? What of us, Nabby's future, and the generations of women to come?"

Eliza is uncertain if Abigail expects her to answer these questions. In this moment, as Eliza would tell it later, all she could think about was Phillis Wheatley. She had memorized the lines and copied them into her journal two winters before:

*In every human Breast,*
*God has implanted a Principle*
*Which we call Love of Freedom*.

It took a moment for Eliza to realize she had spoken these words aloud. Abigail's cup rattles against the saucer. "Those are Phillis Wheatley's words! Do you know the next line, Eliza? I remember it to be: *It is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance.*" She moves closer. "Eliza—full of surprises. I suspect there is more to come. Just where, my dear, did you read these words you memorized?"[7]

Memories overflow. Eliza's family lived above Mr. Elias's bookshop from the time she was born, and her mother used to sweep, mop, polish windows, and dust the precious books and bookshelves. Mr. Elias read to Eliza, taught her to read and write, and nurtured her interests. He

slept in the back room of the shop after his wife Elsa died, and Eliza's mother often brought him dinner or invited him upstairs. After her mother died, Eliza stayed on to clean the shop and care for Mr. Elias's meals. She was nearly seventeen when she entered the shop one morning and found him slumped over in a chair—a creased and frayed copy of *The Massachusetts Spy* in his hands.

"He was re-reading Wheatley when he died," was Eliza's last thought before Mr. Elias was carried away, the pages left scattered on the floor. Eliza folded them tenderly in her apron pocket to read over and over again in the uncertain days before Abigail Adams hired her. In the hush of the Adams's kitchen, memories of the bookshop now flooded back, and Mr. Elias's words came to her as she strained to see his face again: "New days are coming, Eliza. You women. Like my Elsa. You have freedom on your tongues. Wheatley had the nerve to write a letter to Reverend Samson Occom, advocating for freedom. And you, Eliza? What will become of you?"

Eliza realizes she has not responded to Abigail's question. "I read it in *The Massachusetts Spy*, in Mr. Elias's bookshop. We lived upstairs," she replies, her voice nearly breaking. "Phillis Wheatley has returned to Boston. There's talk in her verses that the men would do well to hear—though they may not thank us. I hope to see her before long. She has new verses."

Abigail's words hang in the air, but Nabby interrupts, her fork clattering on her breakfast plate as she waves for her mother's attention. "Could Eliza help me with needlepoint this morning? Please." Her face wrinkles between Abigail and Eliza.

"I think Eliza should read a poem with you first," Abigail responds drily. "One by Phillis Wheatley. Wouldn't that be grand?"

"But Eliza can't read," Nabby protests, turning with a shrug.

"Just wait, my Nabby," says Abigail. "Eliza is full of surprises. Go on, off with the two of you. A copy of *Poems on Various Subjects* is in my night table drawer. I have friends coming in an hour for a little gathering. Come down and meet them later, Eliza."

Meanwhile, Betta's day in the kitchen began at first light. By the time the women arrive, she has laid out a seed cake with a crock of butter, and a pot of cider is warming on the hearth. The air smells of cinnamon. She baked a loaf of rye bread wrapped in cloth to keep its crust crisp, along with wedges of cheese, a smoked fish, and a bowl of dried apples.

"For lunch," she says to them as she unties her apron and heads toward the back door. "I'll take my leave until later."

In the laundry outbuilding, Betta will join Margaret, the laundress, who is already heating cauldrons of water and scrubbing linens. She will then stop by the smokehouse beyond the orchard, tending to the smoked hams, game birds, and fish. Abigail estimates that Betta will not return until mid-afternoon.

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Eliza enters the kitchen with a glow of pride still in her eyes from Nabby's astonishment that she can read. Four women are gathered at the big kitchen table with Abigail, and embers from the open oven fire glow.

"The pen might be too mighty for our men to silence. Let us call on all women to speak with their pens if not their voices. It is a moral duty to speak out against British tyranny. Let's remind our men that while they conceive their rights as natural and the privileges of women as fanciful, we must drown out their voices with words that announce both are born of the same justice."

Mercy Otis Warren's voice lingers on the word *justice.* "There are more of us than we can know, convening conversations and making our desires known. We are not alone in questioning where the talk of revolution is headed without us a part of it. Imagine if we could all connect into one LOUD voice…"

Eliza focuses her gaze on the woman speaking. A fine muslin cap, edged with narrow lace, frames her dark, watchful eyes. Eliza is startled by the steady eyes—gray as a storm cloud, yet assured and with a spark.

“My dears, meet my dear Eliza!” Abigail starts naming those at the table. “You just heard from Mrs. Hannah Winthrop from Cambridge. She had quite the journey this morning over muddy roads but brings with her an overflowing of sentiments about our current state of affairs.”[8] Eliza glances at her covered basket, which contains neatly folded muslin and a small pouch of chamomile on top. Abigail moves behind a woman in a lace cap. “Now, meet Mrs. Mercy Otis Warren of Plymouth—a great admirer of liberty and no stranger to biting words.”

Others at the table nod as Mrs. Warren, smoothing a ribbon in her hand, gazes at Eliza. “Ah, tell us, Eliza, are you as swift with a pen as you are with your feet in service to your mistress?”

“I already told them that you read and write, Eliza, and that you’ve memorized some of Wheatley!” Abigail passes a plate of seedcake to Mercy. “Eliza is discreet.”

Eliza feels particularly uncomfortable when Abigail pulls up a chair for her at the table. Mercy passes a slice of seedcake to Eliza and stares into her eyes. “Ah, the rarest of virtues—and dangerous when underestimated. You are perfect!”

Abigail cups the shoulder of a slender young woman next to Eliza. “This is Mrs. Jay of New York—Sarah Livingston Jay, daughter of Governor Livingston. She has the good sense to listen first and speak when it counts, a quality I much admire.”[9] Eliza’s first impression is that Mrs. Jay must be no more than eighteen or nineteen—and already married! Abigail adds, “Mrs. Jay is from New York and will be staying the night. She is on her way north from her father’s home in Elizabethtown. You will have more time to talk with her after dinner.”

Next, Abigail steps behind a formidable Black woman in a Madras headwrap, bright and colorful against her face. She has two small baskets of herbs on the table in front of her. “Meet Dinah Freeman. She comes in the service of the Freeman family of Plymouth and is entrusted with messages between our households.” Dinah opens a folded bundle from one of the baskets. The smell of dried lavender wafts through the room, but Eliza’s eyes dart toward a folded paper inside, along with several types of leaves, dried blossoms, and roots. She is eager to learn the story of this woman who is clearly, as Phillis Wheatley would name her, an “Afric’s muse.”[10]

Dinah takes a moment to hold a steady gaze on Eliza. “A good poultice draws out the poison slowly, quietly,” she says, removing and smoothing the folded paper. “Sometimes we must think about doing the same with an ill statute,” Dinah adds, stroking a small brooch on her collar.

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What Eliza will tell her daughters—and what they will pass on to their daughters—is that she was introduced that morning into a small circle of *The Circle*, the larger scope of which she never fully understood. What she had imagined as social gatherings were, in fact, a guise for establishing political agendas and action intended to influence the direction of the new republic before it was born.

This small group, along with others that Eliza would connect with over the months leading up to July of 1776, was crafting political essays, satirical plays, and manifestos advocating for the inclusion of women in the vision of freedom. Phillis Wheatley was a guide and inspiration, helping them recognize that freedom must be conceived as more than a necessity for men—or for women alone. Writings from *The Circle* were published in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York under cryptic initials or names, often carrying their own clandestine messages. Some women in the network were known—like Mercy Otis Warren, whom you met through her words and Abigail’s introduction. She, along with Phillis Wheatley and Hannah Griffitts, a Philadelphia Quaker poet, circulated poems under their real names. Susanna Wright, a Pennsylvania poet who corresponded with Benjamin Franklin, occasionally published essays under her own name. The poet Annis Boudinot Stockton, too, signed her name on poems sent to newspapers. For others, the stakes were high if discovered—due to their husbands’ political careers or to husbands who remained Loyalists.

*The Circle*, as Eliza described it in later years, was a network of small circles, careful to protect identities and find ways to distribute writings. But they also found joy in what later generations of our family would call “subversiveness.” Eliza took pleasure in recounting all the clandestine moves and messages: “We had the initials of an author on a manifesto that would carry more than the initials reveal: L.I.F. (Liberty is Female) or A.W.L. (A Woman’s Liberty). We

were always finding ways to add cleverness and wit to the daunting aspects of protest and persuasion."

On this first morning when she was invited to the table, Eliza learns that in each of the covered baskets the women brought with them—under layers of herbs, flowers, fruit, or folded cloth—were rolled manifesto pages, letters, missives, codes, or other correspondences for Abigail and the others, circulating as information through *The Circle*.

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Abigail takes a basket from the shelf and places quills and ink pots on the table. Mercy adds a stack of parchment paper.

"Everyone wants liberty, but not everyone agrees on what it might look like," Hannah declares as she places one letter addressed to *My Sisters* and one hand-sketched map with directions to some specific location.

"Let's help them imagine what we might agree on," says Mercy, taking up the letter and breaking the seal. "We have some writing of our own to do today to provide some persuasion. Let's see what we have here from our Sisters of Liberty. I wonder if this is penned by the hand of Mrs. Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton.[11] She is quietly revolutionary and is witty and clever." Mercy smirks, "Always living in the shadow of that very ambitious husband of hers."

Mercy unfolds the letter and reads aloud:

> *The men speak of liberty as though it only fits in the mouths of men. But liberty begins in silence, is in hands that wash other people's dishes, is carried in the wombs of wives. Now, as the men gather to carve out a republic, they forget those who carried them to where they are and where their aspirations will lead them*.[12]

Dinah interjects, "And if liberty is a worthy outcome, then it cannot be reserved only for those with powdered wigs and pens in their waistcoats."

"I think we have worked ourselves into a state ripe for writing," Abigail says, walking toward the table with the cider pot filled. "Here's one more bit of writing I want to read to warm us up—if the cider doesn't. I wrote this for John yesterday."

> *I am weary of waiting for others to recognize the rights of women. In a new world, we must refuse to let our voices be silenced by the revolution's progress. The fight for liberty is not only against the king but against the tyranny of a world that sees us as little more than caretakers of hearth and home. We are more. Our minds are as sharp as any man's, our hearts as steadfast. If we are to forge a new republic, then let us not forget the women who must shape it as much as the men*.[13]

"I would love to see the look on his face. It's a direct challenge to him and all the men who take the rights, freedom, and liberty as theirs alone! He must know he has a gathering storm at home if women's voices are not heard," Sarah adds.

The women lean into the table, the air thick with the smell of intrigue and boldness, and within moments, the sound of quills scratching on parchment fills the room. Abigail reminds them of today's challenge:

"We must finish what we can and find ways to organize our messages into a pamphlet. We will send our messenger to the printer in Boston tomorrow. All is arranged. No names. No initials. Liberty is being bantered about in rooms where women are not allowed to speak. We will speak with our pens. Our network has plans for distribution across the colonies if we do our part…And, now, perhaps, I will surprise you and my dear Eliza with the news that she will be our messenger. Who would have reason for surveillance or cause for concern with Eliza's travels? Tensions are high in Boston after 'Evacuation Day.' We want to arouse no suspicion."[14]

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Abigail gazes out the parlor window as Hannah takes her leave. Hannah spent the better part of the day writing and offering suggestions for the layout of the pamphlet. She makes the long trip to Abigail on the pretext of delivering herbal medicines to Mrs. Pratt, a woman in Braintree who is affected by illness while her husband is away with the Continental Army. She

departs early to make the delivery before the long ride home. As the women disperse, the air feels charged with possibility, as if each understands the importance of what will soon be delivered to Boston.

Near nightfall, Abigail, Sarah, and Eliza sit in the parlor with all the pieces of their pamphlet organized and ordered around Abigail's writing table. The coals from the fire cast a steady glow on the grate. Sarah glances around the room, taking in the shelves lined with books. "A scholar's library here, and we are creating another—one of all women's voices."

"And what cargo will you carry back to New York?" Abigail points to Sarah's portmanteau.

Sarah chuckles. "The paper is thin, but what it holds is weighty. And for you, Eliza, this will be quite the responsibility. You'll be back in Boston, your place of birth, tomorrow," she murmurs. "My advice: mind what's around you on High Street, and guard the packet as you would your own life."

Eliza notices a tingling sensation near her shoulders. She shudders and offers a small nod. The gravity of her charge is becoming clear. She reaches for a cup and pours tea to warm herself against this sudden chill.

In the morning, Eliza glances out her bedroom window to see a thick frost on the yard and a little frozen rain on the bare branches. She reconsiders the cloak she is wearing and takes a heavier one from the back of her door. Outside, near the hitching post, Abigail joins her. One of the Adams's mares is chewing on an apple. As Eliza mounts, the creak of the leather saddle is a reminder of the cold.

"Ride as far as Neck, then leave the horse with Mr. Sullivan. It's best to be on foot before you go into town. Fewer eyes will notice you." Eliza nods and tucks the packet deeper into the pocket of her cloak. Along the post road to the east, she catches the smell of the harbor; to the west, miles of frozen fields lie fallow. She watches her own breath and that of the mare as small ice crystals form in the air. She keeps her eyes focused on the road to avoid the jarring of the mare's gait over frozen mud and iced-over puddles. In Dorchester, she sees small groups of men

lifting planks and repairing them after months of troop movement. She realizes her hunger as she passes a street vendor with cod cakes. By the time she reaches Boston Neck, the hunger overtakes her. She hands the reins to Mr. Sullivan, offering a word of thanks from Abigail.

The last mile of her walk is on uneven cobbles with patches of ice, but the city is awake—carts rumbling over stone, the smell of woodsmoke mingling with the market vendors' cornmeal johnnycakes, yeasty bread, and fried salt pork slices. Eliza stops for a coffee and a slice of molasses gingerbread. After a gulp of the hot drink she realizes she is trembling. She takes a deep breath, then a few more sips of coffee and a bite of gingerbread, and moves down Long Lane until she comes to a modest sign with carved letters: *Mr. Bowman's Printing*.

The bell on the door has a calming effect as she enters; it is deep and tonal.

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As Eliza tells the story to her children—and they to their children, and so forth, until I hear it for the first time when I am twelve or thirteen—she says the first thing she noticed was the smell of ink upon entering the print shop. The second thing was Isaiah, one of two young men bent over wooden cases of letters.

"Help you?" The voice is steady and deep, coming from the young man setting type. He doesn't look up right away, but is concentrating on the small block of metal in his fingers. "I'm to give this to Mr. Bowman," Eliza says, as she removes the package from the inner pocket of her cloak.

The man stands tall, wipes his brow and hands, and walks toward her. His eyes settle on the seal. It is not of the Adams family but more nondescript, though Eliza senses he is familiar with its purpose. "Mr. Bowman is out," he says, lifting the package from her hand. "I'll see he gets this." Eliza nods, but she is not certain she should trust him.

"Travel from far?" he asks.

"From Braintree," she replies—and immediately catches herself. Who knows if anyone might be listening?

“Name is Isaiah. Yours?”

Eliza answers and then thinks better of this too.

“Your mistress must trust you with her thoughts,” Isaiah says, just before turning away to place the package on a shelf above the desk. He turns back to look at her, holding the gaze a moment longer than she finds comfortable. She feels her heartbeat throbbing.

“She trusts me.”

He pauses before saying, “Then, I trust you will be back.”

As I have been told, Eliza would pause at this point in her telling and gaze around the room—or out a window—as if to capture some feeling or memory that had faded, to feel again the heart-throb that she says began that very first day with the small exchange with Isaiah. He was a freed slave and an apprentice in the print shop where the owner, Mr. Bowman, printed broadside versions of essays and pamphlets, along with the regular work that kept the shop above suspicion. And, yes, she would say with a smile, a pause, and a faraway gaze, “I traveled back again and again in those months of April and into July. And you are all the legacy of what became of Isaiah and me in those months of intrigue, danger, and falling in love.”

*  *  *  *  *

Hoofbeats draw the attention of Abigail, Mercy, Dinah, and Eliza, who are gathered on this windy April day nearly two weeks after Eliza made her first delivery. They are at the kitchen table, preparing materials for the next delivery to the print shop. Before Betta opens the door, baskets of sewing appear on the table, and paper and pens disappear. In the doorway, a mud-spattered young man announces: “I’ve a letter for Mrs. Adams from Mr. John Adams in Philadelphia.” He reaches into the breast pocket of his shirt. Abigail rises and nods toward him. As he places the letter in her hands, he leans in and lowers his voice. “I have some news, Ma’am. General Howe’s ships have been sighted again. They say he’ll move north once the weather clears. Boston may not have seen the last of them.”

Abigail's fingers grip the letter. "I thank you for your service and your information, sir. Now go with Betta and have a hot meal before you continue. Betta, see to this young and very tired man." Abigail breaks the seal and unfolds John's letter. The others exchange needles for pens while she reads. She inhales and sighs, her voice on the edge of a tremor. She speaks in hushed whispers. "We have educating to do at our very own hearths." She sighs again. "Just listen to my husband's own words." She begins, her voice weary, with an edge of anger seeping through:

*April 14, 1776*

*You justly complain of my short letters, but the critical State of things and the multiplicity of avocations must plead my excuse.*

*As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of government everywhere; that children and apprentices were disobedient—that schools and colleges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians, and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a compliment—but you are so saucy, I won't blot it out.*

*Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems. Although they are in full force, you know they are little more than theory. We dare not exert our power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in practice you know we are the subjects. We have only the name of Masters—and rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave heroes, would fight.*[15]

"I cannot read the rest now. And there, my dears, is my husband's retort—and a sting it brings to my eyes and heart." She folds the letter slowly. All are quiet for a few minutes, daring not look at Abigail out of deference for what she might want to feel in silence. Mercy's eyes squint with resolve. Dinah's jaw goes firm. Eliza casts a glance at Abigail. Mercy cannot contain the silence: "Well, if a petticoat has such power to unnerve the gentlemen in Philadelphia,

perhaps we ought to sew a few with slogans and send them down by the cartloads. We might win our war without firing a shot."

The others break into momentary laughter, and Dinah adds, "Petticoats frighten them because they know who spins the thread, who cuts the cloth, who knows how to stitch a seam so tight it holds through a storm." She pauses, taking an elixir of herbs from her bag. "And if a man angers the woman who stitched it, she knows just where to pull so it all unravels." There's a flicker in Dinah's eyes—half-jest, half-spell—that makes Eliza wonder how serious a warning this is for the men in Philadelphia, and just how futile their attempts to change the minds and hearts of men might be.

Abigail takes a moment to look at the letter in her hand. Then she flings it onto the papers and pamphlets strewn on the table. "Well, if Master Adams thinks this Mrs. Adams's petticoat will be content to sit idle, he has sorely misjudged." The women lean into the table, the air charged with a purpose from the moments of shared wit, laughter, and disappointment that all leads to a deeper resolve. They work late into the night.

* * * * *

As Eliza begins her second trip to Boston on April 17th, she carries not only the next installment of their work in her leather satchel for printing and distribution, but also the memory of Mr. Adams's letter, which she replays over and again, wondering if what they are attempting is pointless. She cannot forget Dinah's words. There is something deep and unsettling in Dinah, a wisdom beyond ordinary understanding. The words, spoken in Dinah's deep, husky voice, suggest a knowledge Eliza stretches to understand. Just what did Dinah mean when she said that a woman "knows just where to pull so it all unravels"? If we just knew where to pull, Eliza thinks, perhaps there might be an unraveling of attitudes toward the petticoats. Her hands tighten on the reins. She cannot stop the feeling of intrigue and anticipation.

What if Isaiah is not there today? She had seen him only once, but his image is clearly etched in her mind: Isaiah, sleeves rolled up, hands almost tender in their touch as he pulled each broadside from the press. She wonders if he will remember her, if he is anticipating seeing her as she is him. Boston is still in the distance, but Isaiah is already in view.

“Back so soon?” His voice is quiet.

“Soon enough to keep you busy,” she hastens to add, with a curve of a smile as she slides the packet from her satchel toward him.

“I’ll have these set tonight and on the streets before the week is out.” He pauses as if searching for something more to say. “I suppose I should see you off before the storm arrives. And before any curiosity is sparked about what business you have here.”

He moves to the doorway, one hand on the frame and the other on the knob, but still holding a steady gaze on Eliza. Her hand tightens on the satchel. From the back room, a man’s voice: “You certain you want this one out so soon? They are paying for snitches.” Eliza tightens, and Isaiah places two fingers on the ridge of her shoulder, scarcely a weight at all, but enough to steady her. “That’s why it goes out tonight.” He moves back, making way for her to move through the low-slung doorway, the vibration from his fingers still electric on her shoulder as she steps into the street.

* * * * *

In mid-May, another pamphlet is ready for delivery.

“We must get this to the printer tomorrow, Eliza. Are you ready for another long ride?” Dinah stands near the back door with Abigail. Everyone is jittery with uncertainty. On May 10th, when Congress recommended that the colonies form their own government, public dissent grew more robust, and the networks in The Circle felt more willing to be bold in their demands, protestations, and criticisms. But at the same time, they also felt the tightening grip of attempts to expose dissenters and control distribution through more direct purging of printers and pamphleteers, making caution even more important when delivering to Mr. Bowman.

Dinah is steadfast in her willingness to risk discovery—which, for her as a free slave, could have added consequences. She continues to be the main conduit of coded letters from The Circle, providing direction, advice, and information to the smaller circle that convenes in the

Adams's house. For today, an essay is finished. "If we move quickly, this will be in Mr. Bowman's hands tomorrow and in the hands of our people the next day," Mercy adds.

Eliza enters the print shop and feels the underlying tension. The rooms are unusually dark. She sees Isaiah and Mr. Bowman with stacks of leaflets. Mr. Bowman takes time to read what Mercy has sent. "This is dangerous," he proclaims. "It names no man but shames them all." He looks at Eliza. "Just when will you be found out? You think they will stop seizing people and presses? You will be accused of sedition."

Mr. Bowman glances up from the press, his eyes on the street beyond Eliza. "Trouble," he says under his breath. Eliza turns just enough to catch sight of two men—Continental patrolmen in faded blue coats.

In this moment, the door bangs open, just as Mr. Bowman tosses Eliza's precious cargo into the fire. It takes a moment for her to realize his reasoning. Her breath catches. Mr. Bowman speaks directly to her. "Your delivery?" Eliza always carries a bundle of receipts, ledger copies, and provisions as a decoy. She hands him the parcel. It takes a moment for her mind to adjust to the weight of the essay burning in the fire.

"We've orders to see what's being printed here. There are rumors…" the shorter patrolman shouts. They begin rifling through papers, scattering the packet from Eliza and sending type across the floor. Mr. Bowman steps forward: "Market broadside. Church notices. Local news." Isaiah sets down his handbills. "These are for Captain Black's company," he says evenly. "You can see his signature; it's authorized."

Everyone stands silent. The fire hisses and crackles with the burning words. Eliza thinks of its closing lines, now burned to ash: "*When silence is enforced, passion speaks louder still*." She keeps her eyes focused on Isaiah; his attention is fixed on her, like an anchor line between them, steadying her in the rough waters.

Soon enough, the soldiers lose interest. One shouts as they depart, "Keep this press honest!" Their main charge is to ferret out Loyalist printers and publications, but they would not be sympathetic to the calls for "freedom for all" by women or freemen. The shop is in disarray.

Eliza and Isaiah begin to pick up and sort the metal type. It will be late morning before the shop is back to normal, and Isaiah says, “I’ll see you as far as the square. You should start your journey home.” She nods. Outside, the April rains have begun, but she carries a warmth despite the disappointment of losing the essay. She and Isaiah have a shared understanding and trust that binds them together. As she departs, he asks, “How can writing be more dangerous than war?” She does not answer.

The essay is rewritten within two days, and though shaken by the last encounter, Eliza is eager to return to the print shop. Isaiah has been on her mind. She sees the kindness in his eyes, senses where his sympathies lie, and feels his fingers still, the electricity of his touch. She walks along Boston’s Fish Street in the bitter cold after the long trip from Braintree. Keeping her head down beneath the brim of her hat, she hopes not to encounter the two soldiers who might recognize her. The replacement packet is tucked at the bottom of a basket, under folded linens with bread, cheese, and ham on top. “Walk as though you have nothing to hide,” Dinah and Abigail counseled her several times before her departure.

She comes to a cart with steam curling from a kettle suspended over a brazier. A woman ladles a dark drink into clay mugs for two sailors. Eliza lingers just long enough to buy a mug, its heat seeping into her cold hands. As she begins to walk, three patriots in short blue coats come into her vision. One breaks away from the group and stands directly in front of her.

“You there—stop.” Eliza’s first thought is relief that it is not the same soldiers as before. Still, her hand tightens on the basket handle. The manifesto lies hidden beneath the folded linens and loaves of break.

“What’s in the basket?” one soldier demands.

Before Eliza can answer, a taller figure steps from the side street. Isaiah, printer’s apron smeared with ink, a roll of ordinary broadsheets under his arm, gazes toward her basket. “She’s delivering herbs and medicines for my mother,” he says evenly, nodding toward the basket. As if to provide it, he pulls from his apron pocket several small blue hand-blown glass bottles. “My mother’s concoctions,” he adds, the glass radiating shards of light.

Isaiah's voice is steady. One of the patriots moves forward. "Mind yourselves. Streets aren't safe." They move on. Only then does Eliza let out a breath she has been holding. She glances at Isaiah. Without meeting her eyes, Isaiah trades his harmless packet of broadsheets for the manifesto hidden in her basket—the real cargo bound for the press. The corner of his mouth curves in a sign of their conspirators' success. Both turn away casually, walking in opposite directions, and both will arrive at the print shop where Mercy's letter will be successfully printed and distributed.

Eliza pushes open the door of the print shop to find Mr. Bowman setting letters with deft fingers. "Close the door. Quick—keep the wind off the type." She slips the packet onto the worktable, and Mr. Bowman conceals it under stacks of broadsides. She catches Isaiah's gaze.

"You made it," he says quietly, the words carrying relief.

"Thank you," she replies, trying to keep her own voice steady.

Eliza hesitates, gives both Bowman and Isaiah a small nod, then turns toward the door and slips out into the street. Bowman watches Isaiah. "You've got that look, boy," he says, chuckling. "The one men and boys get before they start thinking with their hearts instead of their heads. Heads up, boy. She's in dangerous company."

Isaiah eyes Bowman. "She's braver than most."

Bowman frowns. "Sense boy, sense. Bravery's worth nothing if you get caught."

Isaiah nods. "We need to make plans for her to deliver somewhere safer now. Twice she has been seen."

Bowman stands up. "Get the next forms set. And keep your eyes open, Isaiah. Leave meeting places to the ladies to figure out. You'll only create trouble for yourself and others."

*  *  *  *  *

These many generations removed from my great-great-great-great-grandmother Eliza, and all that happened then, I still find myself moving through June each year with a quickened sense of purpose, a heightened awareness of the beauty around me, and little patience for the devastating ways we still treat each other with prejudice or injustice as July 4th approaches. This is the time of year when I go to our attic in Plymouth and sift through old family letters and boxes of papers, and, of course, the many journals Eliza wrote over the years—along with letters to her, recipes passed on, herbs of flower blossoms pressed between pages, and odds and ends of notes. Among them, folded with a ribbon, are dozens of letters from Abigail, dated years after the Revolution.

I am looking for a letter referred to in Eliza's journal dated June 17, 1790:

*Today a wonderful letter came from dear Mrs. Adams. It is a reminder of all we tried to accomplish and all that still needs to be done. The bonds we made in our endeavors to influence the course of events are as strong as ever. Mrs. Adams is remembering those times, and she brings back the tremors of fear and delight that guided me through the turbulence and danger of those late June and July days in 1776.*

The entry leads me to sift through boxes again that have still not been organized by date or writer. After two days of careful searching, folded between two other letters from Abigail, I find one dated June 5th, 1790. It may be the one Eliza received on June 17th, but there is no way to be certain:

*My Dear Eliza,*

*Just thinking of you today, as I do always in May and June. Remember my dear Eliza, the words John sent me in that tense June of '76 when all was in suspense? He wrote that a resolution had been passed and that a committee was appointed to prepare a Declaration of Independency. He told me to guard his letter, to know the work had begun that would change everything.*

*But do you remember, my dearest Eliza, we all sat around the table and read his letter and were of one mind that not everything would change? Remember our response? We*

*were daring ones and had fight in us. We began that day drafting our own Declaration, bold enough to think we might make a difference. And yet, here we are still in 1790, fighting for our place in freedom, with very little progress to name. And our wonderful friend Mercy is still publishing political commentary. And just now, Judith Sargent Murray, I hope you remember meeting her. She has just published "On the Equality of the Sexes."*

*Cracks are appearing, dear Eliza. Voices are demanding more. I still must smile at our response to the Declaration of Independency, drafting our own Declaration with such flair and successful distribution. Such a thrill was the danger, and yet, what did we accomplish? I still smile when I imagine John, in his boarding house in Philadelphia, reading any of our writing. Don't you imagine there must have been a time when some turn of phrase or a voice seemed disturbingly close to home and made him think of me? We never discussed if I had any part in the work of The Circle, but when he came home he would sometimes just gaze at me and say, "My dear Abigail, I never know what you are thinking."*

*Now, my dear Eliza, take care of yourself and your children and your wonderful Isaiah. I will say again, as I always do, give my greatest of regards to Dinah Freeman and all she did to assure you a safe place to love as you choose to love. My deepest regret is still that, after all you did for all of us, I was not in a position to do more than support from afar.*

*I imagine the future we imagined will still come, though we may not see it. This will be for our daughters and granddaughters and great-granddaughters to take up the fight with as much resolve as we gave to the cause. I regret the outcomes, but I hope the sentiments linger in the hearts of these next generations, and that they will have a reckoning better than we could achieve.*[16]

*Yours ever,*
*A. A.*

*  *  *  *  *

The story Eliza does not mention in her journals is her reaction when she learned, in early July 1776, that she was pregnant. Perhaps Eliza carried those memories in silence, passing them down through her and Isaiah's bloodlines rather than as a spoken story. We know this much. It was Dinah Freeman who took Eliza with her to Plymouth and who had the know-how to provide shelter and privacy for her lifetime in a small free Black neighborhood—a good distance from the main street, and a place where sympathetic neighbors kept secrets.

What I have come to realize is that, without Dinah's kindness and intervention, our family's very existence would be questionable. Eliza told the story of Dinah's discovery of her pregnancy mostly as a reminder to her family of Dinah's resolve and the legacy of commitments that our family should uphold as a model for our own lives. Most often, this story is told in variations of the following account.

By mid-October, when Dinah delivers willow bark for Abigail's headaches, she takes a careful look at Eliza. "You are carrying more than bundles these days," Dinah says, casting a steady eye on her.

"Isaiah said I should talk with you," Eliza's throat nearly chokes out the words.

For a moment, Dinah is silent. Then, with an exhale, she says, "My brother's boy. And I made the connection with the print shop that brought you and all this trouble together. What are we to do, dear Eliza?"

Eliza lets out a sigh—of shame, relief, fear? Dinah lifts her hand, silencing her. "You'll not face this alone. Isaiah is my blood, and that makes you safe under my roof. The Freemans have a place for you in Plymouth."

"How can I belong? How can my baby belong, Dinah?" Dinah's eyes squint. "You will learn, child. Freedom makes its own family." She reaches for a sprig of thyme from her basket and crushes it between her fingers until its aroma arises. "Secrecy is another elixir of life we all must carry."

Eventually, Dinah brought not only the pregnant Eliza but also Isaiah back to Plymouth, where they both lived on the Freeman properties. Their three daughters—Dinah, Abigail, and Mercy—lived openly as free Black women in the tight-knit community. Their survival depended on passing quietly. The connection between Dinah and Eliza deepened over the years as Eliza was carefully counseled in the arts of herbs and healing. And I know, too, that Eliza did not live in shadows and silence alone. With Dinah, she tended to births as well as the ongoing health and care of the community. Herbs for childbirth, remedies for fever, and rituals for purifying the air and spaces of sickrooms or funerals—all were ways of bringing life and love to the community that had given her the same. She was not only the carrier of hidden papers but also a maker of community life and bonds.

Hers was a life not in hiding, but in keeping life and giving back.[17]

* * * * *

**July 4, 2026. Plymouth, MA. Semi-quincentennial**

Today, 250 years later, I have one more story to share. Eliza wrote in her journal that near the end of June 1776, she made one final trip to Mr. Bowman's print shop with what was to be a declaration compiled by Abigail, Dinah, Mercy, Hannah, and Eliza. Folded between the pages of this entry is what I understand to be one remaining copy of *A Declaration of Our Own*. The intention was to distribute this widely and to ensure that copies reached the delegates as they drafted their final Declaration of Independence.

* * * * *

**June 29, 1776. The Kitchen Table, mid-morning**

Abigail breaks the seal on a letter from Philadelphia and passes the sheet to Eliza. "John writes that Congress has at last resolved. A declaration is coming." She catches her breath. "A declaration—but not for us. They fight one tyranny by leaving another untouched. We must gather tomorrow—Dinah, Mercy, and Hannah. You and me."

“Betta!! Call Amos to me. He is needed for deliveries.” The room falls quiet. Abigail paces, then writes notes for Amos to deliver to Dinah, Mercy, and Hannah. “We must write tomorrow and move to print quickly.”

When the women arrive, they gather at the kitchen table as they have so many times before. Eliza notes the weariness on each face, the eyes etched with resolve. It is Mercy who speaks first: “If they will not name us, then we must name ourselves.”

Abigail looks from Mercy to the others. “Then let’s draft a declaration of our own. Today. Now. Eliza will deliver it to Mr. Bowman this evening.” Eliza feels her breath catch. Is it fear or longing? She had not expected to return to Boston, and yet, even with her fears, the imagined touch of Isaiah calms her.

“We have little time, so let’s get to it,” Hannah urges.

“Begin with a cadence they know,” Mercy says, her voice catching the edge of cynicism. “*When in the course of human events*—but let’s be clear: we are not ornaments to their liberty; we are claimants of our own.”

Abigail is more measured. “Write it plain: We hold a truth that women are created equal. Created. Equal.”

Dinah’s softer voice adds, “They proclaim liberty while tolerating bondage—both of women and of the enslaved. Tie these together in the same yoke. A sentence proclaiming that freeborn souls have an equal claim to liberty and freedom from the tyranny of those who bind them to laws in which they have no voice.”

Hannah adds, “We must end this with strength. A last line that echoes all we have attempted to do. And for the support of this declaration, we mutually pledge to each other our voices, our pens, and our steadfast resolve.”

Once written, Eliza takes an evening ride to Boston to deliver their declaration. Bowman looks up from the press as the first copy is fed through sluggish rollers. “We’ll get fifteen copies by morning if no one comes snooping around.” Eliza sees the title in bold black type: *A*

*Declaration of Our Own*. She looks to Isaiah, as if he might calm her fluttering heart. It will not be until she rushes breathlessly into the Adams's kitchen the next morning that Abigail will learn the type was set and three copies were fresh off the press when three of the militia men arrived—whether tipped off or by luck, Bowman was caught. Just as the door burst off its hinges, Bowman signaled to Isaiah and Eliza to go to the cellar and exit by the back window.

"Isaiah and I watched from the back woods. Mr. Bowman was taken away as a prisoner, and the shop was burned to the ground along with our declaration," Eliza pauses for Abigail's reaction. "Is it all for nothing?"

Abigail leans her forehead into her palm. "We must continue, my dear Eliza, and we will find our ways. For now, I feel the burden of weariness."

What Eliza will learn later is that their declaration was saved. One copy is now pressed between the pages of Eliza's and Isaiah's family Bible. One copy—that Isaiah folded carefully in his printer's apron as he and Eliza managed to escape through the cellar door. Along with that treasure, and all the journals, letters, recipes, and notes on treatments that are collected, the story we tell (as a deeper truth than mere "fact") is that our lineage was seeded that night, in a small cottage on Bowman's property where Isaiah had been living. It may have been days later, as Isaiah was collecting his few belongings to take a new job on High Street, that he folded his printer's apron into his bundle and remembered he had saved a copy of *A Declaration of Our Own*. I sometimes still imagine the scene when he revealed the copy to Eliza. His hand extends toward hers, holding a folded parchment. A broad smile spreads across his face, and he says nothing. The surprise—and swelling love for this man—is captured in the way she moves her lips to say, "YOU saved our words."

* * * * *

I read their declaration aloud each Fourth of July, beneath fireworks that light the sky in red, blue, and gold. I have read it at kitchen tables where mothers and daughters leaned close to listen. And I read it now, knowing that the parchment signed in Philadelphia was not the only declaration written in 1776.

Another declaration was written in ink and secrecy—at a kitchen table in Braintree, by women whose names do not all appear in the history books, but whose voices still carry in mine and yours. There is no end to the desire and hope that this message will break through at some point in the history of our country. When, and through what indirect paths it has and will take, we cannot know; and yet, with hope, we will find our way.

*  *  *  *  *

In my mind's eye, I see this gathering: a kitchen in Braintree, firelight glancing across determined faces, ink stains on fingertips. Abigail, Mercy, Dinah, Hannah, and Eliza bent together over the rough-hewn table, drafting words that would never reach Philadelphia but would never be lost either. I imagine Eliza's satchel slung across the chair, the folded sheets slipping into its leather mouth. I imagine Isaiah's press clattering in the night, setting type letter by letter, as if freedom could be coaxed into being one word at a time. I imagine Dinah leaning back, whispering that secrecy is an herb we must all carry.

I cannot prove that their words reached so far, yet I wonder. When I read the lines Elizabeth Cady Stanton penned at Seneca Falls in 1848, they sound like an echo—as if some ember from Abigail's kitchen table smoldered for seventy years before flaring into flame. Perhaps the hidden declaration was not lost after all, but seeded itself quietly in women's hearts until the day it was finally spoken aloud.[18]

I imagine myself standing on Burial Hill in Plymouth's Pilgrim Memorial State Park tonight, on July 4, 2026.[19] Fireworks begin just before dusk, and sparks of gold burst above the harbor. Children wave small flags, the crowd presses closer along the esplanade, and brass bands repeat "The Stars and Stripes Forever." I stand among them, but my thoughts are far from the spectacle. The boom of another rocket tears me back to the present—the sky awash in red and white, smoke curling on the breeze. People cheer, clap, and raise their voices in unison. Yet I hear another chorus beneath it, a harmony stitched across centuries: women's laughter at a kitchen table, the soft creak of a saddle as Eliza set off toward Boston, the sigh of the press swallowing the fire meant to silence it.

The better-known parchment of 1776 is preserved within a glass case for public viewing in the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom on Constitution Avenue in D.C., but I carry its shadow text—the one written in a kitchen, smuggled into a printer's apron and protected, pressed between Bible pages, and read or whispered across generations. Tonight, on the 250th year, I know both are true: the official Declaration, and the hidden one that women dared to write. And I know that censorship, violence, even fire, cannot silence the words they pledged to each other—*our voices, our pens, and our steadfast resolve.*

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# NOTES

[1] This chapter blends documented history with fictional invention. Abigail Adams, John Adams, Phillis Wheatley, Mercy Otis Warren, and other historical figures speak, at times, from their recorded words. Eliza, Isaiah, Dinah, Elias, Mr. Bowman and others are imagined fictional composites, created to give voice to those not always preserved in the archives. The story is told in two narrative voices: an omniscient narrator who reconstructs the Revolutionary moment, and a contemporary fictional narrator who claims descent from Eliza. The latter is a literary device, not a genealogical claim. This technique of dual narration works within the present moment of the scene, allowing readers to encounter events as they happen. This is what historical fiction can do at its best: it allows readers and writers to see through another's eyes, to hear words before history has distanced the events from their original happening. At its most powerful, perhaps, historical fiction offers us a way—both in reading and writing—to experience *transmigratory empathy* (a term I coined in my earlier work on Jane Addams): not sympathy at a distance, but a living-with another's possible experience, a dynamic state of "felt" experience through another's eyes and hands. See Vinz, "Evocations Toward A Committed Life," in Schaafsma, ed., *Jane Addams as Educator* (2014).

[2] Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776, preserved in the Adams Family Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society and available in Founders Online. In this famous letter, Abigail urged John to include women in the creation of a new republic. In this story, Abigail's letter becomes the centerpiece from which to interweave historical events and contexts into a narrative that enhances women's voices, blending speculative and fictional encounters through the story of

Eliza. Abigail's plea to "Remember the Ladies" has become one of the most quoted Revolutionary-era assertions of women's rights. Here, the story invites readers into the immediacy of its writing—an example of *transmigratory empathy*: literature and history giving us ways to inhabit moments before they harden into the "facts" of textbooks.

[3] Women did gather for literary, religious, and political discussion in the Revolutionary era in Boston, Plymouth, Philadelphia, and New York. Mercy Otis Warren's political satires, Hannah Griffitts's poems, and Susanna Wright's essays circulated in manuscript and print at the time. This story amplifies these circles, suggesting they carried not only domestic concerns but also coded messages and revolutionary intent.

[4] Mr. Bowman's print shop is drawn from depictions in Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America* (1810), 1:218–22. Thomas documents the role of printers such as Edes & Gill in producing pamphlets, broadsides, and essays that circulated widely in Boston in 1775–1776. His account also informs my imagined depiction of women smuggling papers under loaves of bread or among herbs in baskets, encouraging readers "to feel" and "to experience" how the domestic sphere could double as a covert generative space for expressing protest—again highlighting the roots of protest literature in the United States.

[5] Mercy Otis Warren, *The Group* (1775). This satirical play, mocking Loyalist politicians in Massachusetts, was widely reprinted as pamphlet and newspaper installments. Here, I placed Meagre's monologue in Jefferson's imagined hands because it speaks of "equal liberty" in terms he never lived up to. There is no evidence that Jefferson read *The Group*, but I like to imagine the irony biting him if he did—a woman's satire exposing the hypocrisy of men in that moment. Decades later, he showed admiration for Warren's literary voice: in 1790, he wrote to her personally to thank her for *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous,* and he later ordered copies of her sweeping *History* for his cabinet. Fiction offers space to feel, to imagine how cultural threads stretch, bend, and entwine in ways shrouded within our archives and interpretations of historical moments. Both fiction and historical record offer unique ways of entering the dimensions of space and time in history.

[6] In an earlier draft of this passage, I wrote: "Will reading sentiments like Meagre's bring even the littlest blush of shame to his cheeks?" This question was an attempt, through my contemporary narrator, to give voice to my own ambivalence about how Jefferson straddled two

worlds: one defined by the lofty ideals of his rhetoric and aspirations, and the other by the daily contradictions of his household, which denied those truths. I thank Tom James for pointing out my lack of nuance with the question, and so you will find a rephrasing: "Will reading sentiments like Meagre's cause Jefferson to feel the disquiet of ambivalence in proclaiming universal truths while acknowledging that his own household stood as their refutation?" To help me think through the complexities of Jefferson's position, James cited Alan Taylor's *Thomas Jefferson's Education,* which proved very helpful in understanding Jefferson as a man, perhaps, of divided conscience; one who loved Enlightenment ideals and imagined reason and liberty as the foundations of a republic, yet relied on enslaved labor to sustain the very life he desired. See Taylor, *Thomas Jefferson's Education* (2019).

[7] Phillis Wheatley to the Reverend Samson Occom, February 11, 1774. First printed in the *Connecticut Gazette* (April 1, 1774) and reprinted in *The Massachusetts Spy*. Her words— "In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance"—are as bold as any penned by Jefferson. Here, Eliza comes to these words through her mentor, Mr. Elias, who dies with Wheatley's letter in his hands. Fiction allows us to make visible the ways ideas are passed—literally hand to hand—and to show how a servant girl might carry forward into her own life-actions the ideas of a poet.

[8] Domestic arts—sewing, weaving, recipes—often doubled as cover for political resistance in this era. Scholars have noted how "women's work" could mask subversive networks. I wanted Eliza to discover this: that what looked like moral instruction could also serve as political instruction.

[9] Sarah Livingston Jay was based in New York throughout the Revolution and rarely traveled to Massachusetts; her presence in Braintree here is fictionalized. For biographical context, see Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (1980). My placing her in Abigail's kitchen is an invention, but it offers us a different dimension of female power—diplomacy, quiet observation, restraint. Including her in the circle makes visible the diversity of women's strategies for influence.

[10] The character of Dinah Freeman and Phillis Wheatley's affectionate reference to her are fictional, but free Black communities did exist in Massachusetts by the 1770s, and women often

acted as herbalists, healers, and messengers. Dinah's voice allows me to bring African diasporic knowledge into the room and imagine alliances across lines of race, gender, and class. She represents the many free and enslaved Black women whose labor, healing practices, and communication networks undergirded both daily survival and resistance politics. Her herbal knowledge and guarded speech echo traditions of African diasporic women blending pragmatism, spirituality, and political subversion.

[11] An unsigned letter criticizing the Revolution's exclusion of women is attributed here—speculatively—to Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton. No archival evidence confirms she wrote such a document; Elizabeth's surviving letters often concern family matters rather than politics. Yet, as the daughter of Philip Schuyler, a major general in the Continental Army, and later wife of Alexander Hamilton, she lived at the nexus of Revolutionary politics and private life. Fiction gives her a bolder, anonymous voice here, suggesting how many women's political opinions likely circulated unsigned or were later lost—words hovering between household privacy and public dissent.

[12] The lines of Elizabeth's letter—"The men speak of liberty as though it only fits in the mouths of men… they forget those who carried them to where they are"—are fictional. No archival evidence attributes such words to Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton or any of her contemporaries. Yet the passage draws on Revolutionary-era tensions: women sustaining households, labor, and communities while men claimed the language of liberty for themselves. Attributing the letter speculatively to Elizabeth imagines the silences in surviving archives, suggesting how many women's political thoughts may have circulated anonymously, unsigned, or were later lost. The composite voice here gestures toward those unrecorded protests, giving historical absence a momentary presence on the page.

[13] This passage by Abigail Adams is fictional, written to evoke the tone and urgency of Abigail's real March 31, 1776 "Remember the Ladies" letter and the frustrations many women of the era likely felt. While Abigail did famously warn John that women would "foment a rebellion" if ignored, the historical record falls silent on longer, impassioned pleas for women's equality. This fictional letter steps into that silence, imagining what might have been said—and what history chose not to preserve—so that readers can feel the tensions between Revolutionary ideals and the realities women lived.

[14] Evacuation Day refers to March 17, 1776, when British troops withdrew from Boston after occupying the city for nearly eight years. George Washington's Continental Army had recently fortified Dorchester Heights with cannon brought from Fort Ticonderoga, making the British position untenable. The withdrawal marked the first major strategic victory of the Revolution and returned Boston to Patriot control. In the story, references to Evacuation Day anchor the fictional kitchen-table gatherings and courier missions within a real moment of political and military upheaval, when hopes for liberty surged even as questions about whose liberty remained unresolved.

[15] John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776, preserved in the Adams Family Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society and available in Founders Online. This historical document records Adams's playful tone—referring to women's demands as the "despotism of the petticoat"—revealing both affection for Abigail and an unwillingness to take her plea for women's rights seriously. For historians, the letter exposes how Revolutionary rhetoric about liberty largely excluded women, and for this fiction writer, it offers a moment where wit, intimacy, and patriarchy collide in a single document.

[16] *A Declaration of Our Own* is my fictional invention. Yet it grows directly out of Abigail Adams's March 1776 letter and the July Declaration in Philadelphia. By imagining women drafting their own declaration, I wanted to make visible their absence—to write what history omitted. This letter is a creation of the story, imagining Abigail Adams in 1790 looking back on women's clandestine efforts of 1776. No such letter survives in Abigail's papers, nor is there evidence she ever referenced a "Declaration of Our Own" drafted in secret. Yet the fiction draws upon real elements: Abigail's ongoing correspondence, her early advocacy for women in her "Remember the Ladies" letter, and her lifelong friendship with writers like Mercy Otis Warren. Setting this fictional letter years later allows the story to explore questions about legacy, regret, and endurance—what women of the Revolution might have felt as the promises of liberty passed them by, and how their hopes threaded forward into future generations.

[17] Free Black communities existed in Massachusetts and Plymouth before 1800. They were fragile and often surveilled, but they offered mutual aid and secrecy. By placing Eliza and Isaiah there, I wanted to highlight both the precariousness and resilience of these spaces. Interracial relationships in eighteenth-century New England were rare but not unheard of. Court records

document both unions and punishments. Eliza and Isaiah's love is fictional, but its danger was real. To imagine it is to practice transmigratory empathy at its most daring: to live-with a love story that the archives themselves often refused to preserve. Eliza's later role as midwife and healer draws on historical examples of women's work in free Black and mixed communities: tending births, deaths, and fevers. Giving her this life resists leaving her in shadows and insists that her story continued through acts of care and survival.

[18] Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Declaration of Sentiments* (1848) is a document signed by 68 women and 32 men, modeled upon the July 1776 Declaration. In my narrator's imagination, Stanton's words also echo those of Abigail's original circle. There is no direct line, but fiction invites us to wonder: what embers smoldered across those seventy years?

[19] July 4, 2026, is the semi-quincentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. My narrator's final reflections here connect past to present: Abigail's table, Eliza's rides, Dinah's herbs, Isaiah's press. To write and to read these stories has been a commmemorative exercise in transmigratory empathy: living-with lives not our own, across centuries, as if the ink were still wet and the voices still speaking. This, perhaps, is how history lives on—in the fragile chain between their words and ours.

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