

DANGEROUS JOHN

J. W. M. Morgan

“Too afraid of God to fear anything human.”

—John Brown on the fighters who would end slavery.

September 28, 1842

John Brown winced at each of the federal judge’s declarations distributing his pitiful remaining property to his creditors. He hardened his hollow cheeks and frowned as the dreary listing went on. He was bankrupt: the land was gone, the money was gone. Intent on amassing wealth and power for God’s just purposes, he had taken the risks of an entrepreneur again and again. He had built and run tanneries. He had developed land. He had driven large herds of cattle. He had dreamed he would become an abolitionist tycoon. Once wealthy and well-connected, he would turn his resources and his will to the greater task of destroying slavery.

Entering the dusty street in Richfield, Ohio, he missed a step and mildly

wrenched his ankle. He welcomed the pain, a reminder of his carelessness, his misdirected haste, his frequent errors. In his prosperous times, he had been “admired” and “respected.” But John Brown could not admire and respect himself. He knew himself as a failure. His mistakes were wasting time, wasting years. He was punished now for dreaming incorrectly. Greatly humbled, he must shorten his sight and concern himself with providing for his wife, Mary Day, and the twelve children. He would wear the mask of contrition. For this time, he must act small. The world, it seemed, wanted him small. But John Brown was not small.

Despite his humiliation in court and the pain pulsing in his ankle, John Brown maintained his usual long, springing step and his stern, uplifted gaze. He knew appearances, no matter how deceptive, greatly influenced worldly reactions, and he worked to come across in a manner which would advance his ambitions. He dressed plainly in a manner indisputably proper for a would-be entrepreneur in his time and position, in white shirt and tie, snuff-colored four-button vest and jacket, and cowskin boots. He was a sober, calculating white man of forty-two years, lean, clean-shaven, wiry, and willfully erect, not overly tall. He wore his full, dark hair brushed straight back. He knew his

angular face, strong, square mouth, and broad jaw could cut an impressive figure if he presented himself as always willful and forthright.

Near his cabin in the center of town, he saw a white woman pulling a wagon carrying two little tow-haired boys. He suffered a downdraft of dismay. The woman was finely dressed, what many might call attractive. Her wind-blown hair and smile suggested an untroubled experience of life. Her cheerful air confronted John Brown with his inescapable conundrum. Did such “happy” people not read the news? Could they not sense the splaying of the foundation we all stood upon? The world was about to bust apart. People must know this! And the white babies! He pitied them and feared for them. They could know nothing of the bloody struggle ahead.

Mary Day, coddling newborn Austin, read her husband’s frown but made no comment. She set out the supper of porridge and cornmeal. She and the children—the oldest, John Junior, was twenty-one—fit closely around the plain board table.

John Brown led the prayer. “May the bright day soon dawn when our nation is cleansed of the scourge of slavery. May we remain always thankful for the amazing, unforeseen, untold consequences that hang upon the right or wrong doing of things seemingly of little account. May we maintain a cheerful

outlook as we await God's reign and righting of all wrongs and the full granting of equal rights and respect to all humans."

As he raised his fork, he noted but made no mention of the fact that there was butter tonight, a luxury he didn't care for but tolerated for the others.

§

September 1843

Dysentery struck the family. Young Sarah, Charles, Peter, and Austin died. John Brown's sorrow exploded downward, expanded, and erased all confidence and surety that he even continued to inhabit this world himself. His distress launched him into delirium, an hours-long fever dream journey that began on the back of a giant falcon whose powerful wingbeat carried him to a great height and into darkness deeper, more silent, and colder than any he had ever known. The falcon, which at first had seemed a friend, now beat its wings with stubborn indifference. The bird could fly forever into this deepening chill.

He and the bird passed the long night flying, and then time collapsed inward upon itself and John passed days and days, maybe months and years, clinging to the bird, his mind neither fully awake nor asleep, his attention occupied with the muscular surging of giant wingbeats and the rush of air over

his head and body.

The yellow sun rose, a fabulous jewel in a setting of snow-capped mountains below. Here above was God's startling promise in the sky! John Brown's grip failed. He tumbled from the back of the bird.

He hit the leaf-strewn soil with a stunning thump. For some time, he lay still, too disoriented to move. When he was finally able, he sat up and looked around.

Above him, blighted vines drooped and stank. Big-toothed rodents scurried by, stirring the fallen leaves, making crackling noises. He heard a brook. The light here was heavily filtered by the vegetation. The air tasted of death, which was like rotting mushrooms and potatoes.

He got right to his feet. He knew if he lay still in this place, his soul would suffer lasting damage.

Leaves rustled. Twigs snapped. John Brown turned to face the sounds. A half-naked Black boy of eight or nine ran through the brush. The boy was wearing a huge leaf upside down on his head as a hat. John Brown saw marks on the boy's back where he had been struck many times with a shovel. The boy halted before him and stared. John Brown felt himself equally stripped of earthly cloaking.

John Brown's gaze was glued to the boy. And his heart felt similarly linked to the boy's suffering heart. He must help this boy! But before he could do any more, the boy ran off and vanished through the trees.

The path upward was narrow but well-worn. John Brown picked his way among the ruts and rocks. The low spots were wet and muddy. He did not look into the small pools of water, which he knew were windows into the death world below.

In one place, the mud was so soft his foot sank up to the ankle. When he tried to take his next step, the mud sucked him downward, as though the hand of a demon had seized him. He yanked his booted foot loose and continued upward.

He rounded a granite ledge. A hot, vaporous waterfall blocked his path. A skinny, old Black woman draped in only a thin cloak crouched on the near side of the steaming curtain. Most of the woman's hair was gone.

"You are too late," the old woman said. She held her arms in a cradling shape, forming the space where her infant had been.

John Brown's spine curled painfully and he gasped. Though he could not understand exactly how this could be, he knew he bore responsibility for the loss of the baby. He had failed to protect this woman. And how could he atone?

The only way was the great, impossible mission already rising into awareness in his view of his future.

He was wishing to question this stern, now vacant-eyed old woman. But it was not for her to relieve his suffering. Decomposed flesh fell from her face in bloody handfuls. The woman's bare bones collapsed into the mud. He passed her crumpled remains and plunged through the steaming waterfall. He quickened his pace on the upward trail.

The path opened on a broad clearing that was entirely in the shadow of the mountain. Here, no grass grew; the soil was rocky.

Bare-chested people danced around a fire. One wore an animal skin hat with eight-inch horns on each side of the head.

John Brown was immediately drawn to these native people. He wished he could communicate with them. He would have liked to join their dance.

The dancers were painted, some black with streaks of red, some pure red, some with blue streaks, and one a ghostly pale yellow. A squatting person played raucous music on a drum of animal skin drawn across a hollowed log. Others rattled wooden beads. Crow squawks and grunts arose from the dancers, who tossed their heads back and exposed their throats.

He wished to know all these people. He wanted to feel close. His feelings

were generous and loving. But he could not slow here. He had work to do. He held his eyes on the path and walked faster, always seeking the upward route.

After what felt like several days of climbing, he passed over the top of the ridge and entered the bowl of a valley and a sunlit meadow dotted with yellow and white flowers. There, on a huge pedestal, stood Christ. He was gigantic, at least thirty feet high. His eyes were closed. His skin was translucent. John Brown saw His belly move with breathing. The air about Him glowed yellow, a color of flower petals.

Vast hope surged within John Brown. Surely now he was approaching the gate of Heaven. His earthly battle must be ending. Surely now he would lay down his burden and finally and permanently enter the realm of bliss.

He came as close as he dared and kneeled. Though His eyes had not opened, John Brown saw Christ's cheeks tense.

For a long time, Christ did not speak or move. John could not bear the silence. "I am a pitiful creature," he announced.

Christ showed no reaction. John Brown flushed, first with shame, then with fear. He dropped forward and pressed his face to the moist grass. What presumption! What foolish nerve! He pressed his forehead harder to the grass.

"I find you less pitiful than many," Christ said.

The sound of His glorious voice annealed John Brown's spirit, as though his heart had been instantly, magically wrapped in gold-leaf. John Brown raised his head. Suddenly, he was cheerful. He was conversing with Christ!

"You have made a long journey," Christ said. His huge eyelids finally rose. His eyes were quivering emeralds, the size of a man's head. "Why?"

"I had no choice," John Brown said. "I had to come here."

"No choice?" Christ frowned. "Are you a victim of ambition? Have you succumbed to a personal desire?"

"Forgive me. I dare to hope for pure understanding of God's will."

Christ threw His head back and laughed. Visible, dark waves of Christ's loud, sharp laughter rippled upward and outward through the gray and pink clouds overhead. John Brown suffered a wave of worry that the sky itself might be permanently damaged by such intense laughter.

"You have tasted the torments?" Christ asked.

John Brown had to acknowledge that he had.

"And you have seen the glory?" He asked.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I've had some hints."

"Ah. Hints." Christ peeled back the skin over his right lower rib and opened His side. Strange, bright, red-orange glory struck John Brown dumb

and helpless. He humbled himself.

“I will have you go back to the world to declare to people their sins and the great peril that hangs over them if they do not repent,” Christ said.

“I had hoped I was finally free of all that.”

Christ shook His head and put a finger to His mouth to hush John Brown.

“You will lead the rebellion,” Christ said. He raised a hand in the air and twisted it, indicating John must now turn himself around, travel back, and resume his responsibilities in the waking world.

§

June 1854

“We must commit our bodies and our lives to the cause,” Owen Brown said at the family dinner table. John Brown saw tall, copper-haired Owen, now twenty-nine, as the most consistently right-thinking and boldest of his sons. He admired and respected Owen’s righteous passion, but for now kept out of the argument.

Owen whacked the table with his good right fist. His left arm, useless since birth, waggled at his side. He’d been reading aloud to the family from Horace Greeley’s *New-York Daily Tribune* the news that Congress had passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The votes of white male settlers would decide if the stain

of slavery would spread into the new territories of the United States.

They all knew Boston antislavery leader Charles L. Robinson had established the New England Emigrant Aid Company's first colony in Kansas Territory. The town was called Lawrence, on open land along the Oregon Trail, west of the junction of the Kansas and Wakarusa Rivers, named after businessman Amos Lawrence, who was funding the travel of many of the new settlers.

"We need to go to Kansas too," Owen said. He stroked his lush gray side whiskers and turned his haunting blue eyes, so like his father's, on each of his brothers. "It is not enough to know the Path. It is not enough to show the Path. We have to follow the Path."

John Brown smiled at Owen's earnest echoing of his own occasional railing.

"We will go," John Junior announced. He and his wife, Wealthy, and little John III would emigrate together to the new territory.

"Ellen and I and our boys as well," Jason said.

John Brown marveled as Fred and Salmon also committed to the trip. His sons choosing the righteous path swelled his heart and pinched his throat. But no matter what show these young men made of their optimism and righteousness, fear stalked all of John Brown's imaginings of their future. He was alone

in knowing the scope and grandeur of the violence ahead. He was a visiting angel on this earth, cursed and blessed as they were not. Somehow, he had fathered children who, despite their merits and their blessed souls, were merely human.

§

April 1855

Owen, Fred, and Salmon, all unmarried, claimed land forty miles south of Lawrence, eight miles west of the village of Osawatomie, and established their camp. They had brought tree cuttings and seed and driven ten cows to the new land. John Brown read in the newspapers that thousands of proslavery Missouri men had crossed the border into Kansas, defied the residency rules, and voted in the legislative election on March 30. They had taken over some polling places at gunpoint. John Brown feared for his family. He feared for his nation. Though he didn't know how this would come about, he knew he would soon be at the center of this struggle and subject to great danger. But somehow, he found that, at least for now, he had lost all ability to fear for himself.

Heavy spring rains raised the rivers, easing passage by boat. John Junior and Jason, with their wives and children, took the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to St. Louis, where they bought tents and farm tools, then continued on the

Missouri River. Aboard the riverboat, they encountered large amounts of drinking and swearing by proslavery men, many wearing sheaths with their famous Bowie knives and holsters for their pistols. These men were traveling to Kansas with the opposite purpose. They were intent on swelling the proslavery population and overwhelming the good-hearted, right-thinking people with their great numbers and their Evil passion.

John Brown learned by letter from John Junior that cholera had spread among the ship's passengers and killed four-year-old Austin, Jason and Ellen's son. The Browns had gotten off in Waverly, Missouri, to bury Austin. Though they had paid their way through to Kansas City, the steamer, captained by a proslavery man, left without them. They continued by stage. Along the way, farmers recognized them as Northerners, and likely antislavery settlers, and refused to sell them food. On May 7, they reached their brothers' camp. A few weeks later, another letter arrived. John Junior asked for guns.

That autumn, John Brown left his wife, Mary Day, his son, Watson, and three young daughters—one just an infant—on the farm in North Elba, New York, for the trip to Kansas. Going to Kansas was a compromise choice for him, actually a misexpression of a secret ambition much greater than merely stopping the spread of slavery. He planned to strike a crippling blow to a federal

arsenal and destabilize the entire insane system which allowed slavery to exist. But that dream was private for now. Son-in-law Henry Thompson boarded the wagon with him, leaving his wife, Ruth, John Brown's adult daughter. In Illinois, the two men met up with John Brown's son Oliver. En route, they bought revolvers, rifles, and ammunition. In Ohio's Western Reserve, abolitionist friends gave them special swords. These short, double-edged military broadswords, inscribed with eagles, were hollow and loaded with quicksilver. When held upright, the quicksilver dropped to the hilt. On the swing, the quicksilver slid toward the point, increasing the weight and the force of any blow.

In Missouri, John Brown, Oliver, and Henry Thompson exhumed Austin's body to carry it to his parents for proper burial.

In October, in cold weather, they had their happy reunion at Brown Station. The pretenses of polite greeting were over quickly, outweighed by John Brown's anger. He demanded explanation for the scarcity of food and lack of shelter. After five months, and with winter threatening, the family was still living under tattered canvas and in lean-tos.

"First it was dry, then in August the corn was flooded," John Junior explained. "Almost everyone here gets the fever and chills. I was sick myself. It can knock you out. Now, Jason has it. Goes on for weeks."

“We have to make ourselves strong,” John Brown insisted. “We need proper cabins.”

The Browns worked constructing shelters and harvesting what corn and other crops they could. But in early December, more than a thousand armed proslavery men gathered in freezing weather along the banks of the Wakarusa River to attack the antislavery haven of Lawrence, a town of only a few hundred settlers. The fraudulently elected government had established their capital in Lecompton, just fourteen miles northwest of Lawrence. There, proslavery legislators served the Devil vigorously, writing laws that made criticizing slavery a crime. Circulating a book or pamphlet promoting rebellion of slaves could be punished by death. Advising a slave to escape or harboring a runaway slave would get you five years’ imprisonment. By these laws, even possessing an abolitionist publication could be punished by years of hard labor.

Everyone at Brown Station knew the right-thinking people of Lawrence were proudly and freely committing all of these “crimes.”

“We will go. And we will fight,” John Brown told his family.

“We are limited in our resources,” John Junior said.

“The limits exist only here,” John Brown said, tapping his own temple. “And here.” He touched his chest. John Junior nodded, but looked doubtfully

toward the mound of bedding on the floor where Jason, Henry, and Owen shuddered, laid low with fever and chills. “We must go,” John Brown insisted. “We will do what we must do.”

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December 6, 1855

John Brown and the healthy sons, John Junior, Watson, Salmon, and Oliver, loaded their wagon for the forty-mile march northward to defend Lawrence. The weather was frigid. They traveled much of the night, camped, and began again in the early morning. At times, fierce wind blew dry snow like stinging sand against their faces. Before noon, the group arrived at a snow-covered earth and lumber barricade on the road into Lawrence. The free state defenders knew the Browns and welcomed them. The man commanding the barricade told the Browns that the previous night a proslavery patrol had intercepted three free state settlers on their way from Lawrence to their homes, about ten miles away, and killed one of them.

Inside Lawrence, John Brown sought out the town’s founder, free state leader Charles Robinson, who was coolly directing the boarding of the windows of the Free State Hotel.

“Our militia is ready,” he told Charles Robinson.

“Militia? How many are you?”

“Five.”

“And what exactly do you propose?” the obviously worried Massachusetts commander asked.

“We will face the enemy with fierce conviction,” John Brown said.

“And you are prepared for such battle?”

“I will personally lead the attack in the night while the enemy is sleeping.”

Charles Robinson, duly impressed by such bold, earnest talk, appointed John Brown commander of the newly created Liberty Guards of the First Brigade of Kansas Volunteers. “You will have more men. But you must wait,” Robinson said. “The numbers are terribly against us. We are going to try to talk our way out of a slaughter.”

John Brown gathered the men Charles Robinson assigned him, went to the earthworks on the southern outskirts, and recruited more volunteers for the assault. “We are blessed to strike the first great blow,” he told the men, who looked on him with great curiosity and interest. “And, yes, be absolutely certain we are fighting for God’s great Truth.”

But on December 8th, proslavery Governor Wilson Shannon, who had been appointed by President Franklin Pierce, held extensive discussions inside

the Free State Hotel. Missouri men Senator David Atchison and Colonel Albert Boone represented proslavery. James Lane and Charles Robinson represented free state interests. After hours of heated discussion, Governor Shannon ordered the militia and the proslavery volunteers to disband and leave the area.

Just five weeks later, on January 15, antislavery men, ignoring the proslavery government completely, held their own election for state officers and chose Charles Robinson as governor. Kansas Territory now had two rival governors and two rival legislatures, one on each side of the great issue. Each of these territorial governments declared the other illegitimate.

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Coming back along Mosquito Creek from a surveying job, John Brown and John Junior popped a wheel rim, which led them for the first time into the unpleasant interior of Dutch Henry Sherman's tavern. They could fix the wagon wheel in time. Just now, hunger was their focus.

"Me and my boys ran that darky halfway to hell," a big man with a high, shiny forehead bragged. The Browns knew James Doyle by reputation. Doyle's notable forehead was speckled with pink dots. He was wearing the constable's badge. "A really dark one. The darker the better when they run. The dogs know 'em by smell. Turned out bad though—s spoiled goods."

“Kilt?” hulking tavern owner Dutch Henry asked. A deep, vertical crease separated Dutch Henry’s dark eyebrows. From his manner of always looking sidelong, John Brown suspected his left eye was glass.

“Yeah. Shame.”

Dutch Henry laughed from his huge belly. His revolver lay on the bar. He squinted at the Browns, who stood just inside the tavern door. “You looking for something?”

“Can we get a meal here?” John Brown asked.

Dutch Henry winced. He put a fingertip in one ear and twisted, as though to clear his hearing. “Get a girl, did you say?”

“Eggs maybe? Some corncake?”

“You ain’t from here. Yankees?”

“We have come down from New York State.” John Brown heard a man spit on the floor.

“Now, tell me what you fellas doing down here?”

“We took a claim a little to the west,” John Brown said.

“Did you? What the hell you go and do that fer?”

“Farming.”

“Yeah, sure. There’s no food for you here,” Dutch Henry said, despite the

plain smells of cooking.

John Brown and his son waited for some more cooperative gesture.

“Well?” Dutch Henry shrugged. “Do you want a girl?” He turned to James Doyle. “When they turn quiet a lotta times they’re the shy type.” Again, he asked the Browns. “I got a pretty one out back. Two. Native girls. Not cheap though.” Dutch Henry showed his one yellowed front tooth.

“What do we do?” John Junior asked his father.

“Right now, we leave and find food elsewhere.”

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Three weeks on, while John Brown and John Junior were plowing, Fred ran toward them breathless. “There’s men coming up the road,” he yelled to his father and big brother.

Father and son set down their farm tools and took up their rifles. They followed a well-worn shortcut through the woods to a narrow, tree-sheltered spot by the wagon tracks where they would have a good chance to control the encounter.

Constable Doyle and two armed young men John Brown took for Doyle’s sons came up the road on horseback.

“You’ll go no further,” John Brown said. He and John Junior were well

hidden in the brush.

“Who is that? Where are you?”

“Never mind,” John Brown said. “What’s your business here?”

“This will be the way to the Brown place?”

“Might be.”

“I have a warrant here to arrest John Brown and all those damn boys of his, signed by Judge Sterling G. Cato of the U.S. District Court.”

“Well, la-di-dah. Arrest for what?”

James Doyle fumbled, then found words. “For agitation. For arguing against what’s right and true. For making too much goddamn noise and trouble.”

“You’ll go no further,” John Brown said. He signaled John Junior to shoot his rifle overhead. The horses shied. James Doyle cursed. John Junior fired again. And a third shot. James Doyle wheeled his horse, leading his boys in turning and riding away.

“I believe we will see them again,” John Junior said.

“Doesn’t matter,” John Brown said. He felt then a crushing sense of destiny. He was lost to the world as he heard a sound from the future, a balladeer lamenting ... *a sad and sober story, Southern boys who lost their lives in search*

of Southern glory. Sadness for all who would endure the great tragedy swamped him.

“Father?” John Junior said. John Brown shuddered and pushed aside all foreknowledge of blood and early death. “Father, what do we do?”

“We...we play the part we must play.”

§

May 21, 1856

Henry Williams found John Brown and John Junior working in the cornfield and called out, “We have to rally. There’s hundreds of federals and volunteers massed to attack Lawrence.” Henry was John Junior’s first lieutenant in commanding the local volunteer militia they called the Pottawatomie Rifles. He’d made the long ride down from his home in a proslavery area not far from Lawrence.

“Who are these people who are so impassioned against decency?” John Brown asked, loading the farm tools into the wagon.

“Federal militia, a lot of ’em. A lot of Jefferson Buford’s crazy fools.”

Last fall, Jefferson Buford, who owned and operated a slave plantation on the Chattahoochee River in Alabama, had enlisted hundreds of fellow white

Southern men to fight to support slavery in Kansas Territory. Now, these believers in slavery had arrived by steamboat, eager to engage their enemy.

John Junior and Henry rallied the Pottawatomie Rifles, more than thirty mounted men. Others from Brown Station joined. By evening, almost forty righteous warriors were traveling the more than forty miles to Lawrence. They walked and rode through the night.

In the morning, Captain Samuel Shore, a comrade from the Wakarusa War, found them atop the hills south of Lawrence. "More than seven hundred attacked Lawrence," Captain Shore said. "They carry the South Carolina flag and an American flag with a tiger in place of the stars. And flags saying White Supremacy and Southern Rights. They burned and smashed the whole place."

John Brown looked down on the burned remains of the Free State Hotel, still giving off wisps of smoke. "And what about our side?" he asked. "How about the defense?"

"Almost nothing. We were too few. The bandits tore up the newspaper office. They took hammers and axes to the printing presses and threw the type in the river. They fired a cannon at the Free State Hotel, then burned it. They burned Governor Robinson's house."

As Captain Shore detailed the disaster, dismay weighed down and silenced

the men like the falling of a heavy drape. John Brown witnessed the quieting and stilling of the men around him, but he did not share in it. "Order the attack," he instructed John Junior. "We will chase them to Lecompton."

"Father, no," John Junior said.

"Order the attack. The time is upon us. The wound lies open. We must cut."

"It's impossible."

"We must attack."

"We can't," John Junior said. "We are too few. It's impossible."

"Our path is finally cleared," John Brown roared. "Open your eyes, boy."

But John Junior, as commander, felt a different weight. "I can't, Father. I'm sorry. I am responsible for these men."

"You are responsible only to God!"

John Junior bowed his head and turned aside. John Brown suffered a moment of helpless exasperation. Had the Devil found a home in the heart of his eldest son? He glared at John Junior, who was now deaf to his father's pleas. John Brown reminded himself he must be patient with the ordinary people. Not all were touched by holy genius. The inspiration was not certain to pass from father to son. God could reach us all, of course, as He chose. But many

men were allowed to wander their lifetime in the wilderness. Perhaps that was the sad and disappointing case within the benighted mind of John Junior. And, of course, John Junior must think of his wife, Wealthy, and little John III back at the camp. Yes, there may have been a father's everyday concerns at play.

John Brown climbed upon a fallen tree and bellowed to the group, "Hear me, in decency and in faith. Like Heaven itself, our country has split in two. It is up to us to close the wound, to reunite the halves."

The men stared curiously at their strange prophet. Theodore Weiner, a big Austrian man whose shop had been robbed and vandalized many times by proslavery men, bellowed, "Let's go. Let's kill them all!"

John Brown continued, "The sinful part of our nation has split off like Satan and turned back against the righteous. It is up to us to conquer Evil and bring all Americans back to the one true Path." He tapped his chest with his forefingers and looked above the listeners. "We have long awaited this day. God has at last opened before us the Path toward justice," he said. "We must march forward." John Brown reached for his rifle, clutched it by the stock, and lifted it, aimed toward the sky.

"Let's go get 'em!" Henry Thompson roared. He shook his fist overhead.

John Brown saw and ignored his own boys, Fred and Oliver, retreating to

the rear of the group.

“The question we face may seem deceptively simple,” John Brown said, now in measured tones. And then in crescendo, “Who among us is ready to fight and kill and, yes, die for the dream?” And then, more quietly, he asked, “Who will follow me on a righteous raid which is sure to bring a much-needed victory to our side?”

Salmon Brown, Theodore Weiner, and Henry Thompson stepped forward.

“Thank you, son. Who will join these righteous three?”

“Let’s have a vote,” another of the Pottawatomie militiamen said. “It’s not so simple.” John Brown knew the man, a farmer with a sickly wife and five children.

“Yes, a vote,” said another.

“I say we go back to our farms,” another militiaman said. “I have children to feed.”

“And you will turn away from destiny?” John Brown asked. “You will turn away from the greatest chance God could grant, the chance to advance history on a better day.”

Someone said, “It is suicide.”

After much shuffling about and murmuring, John Junior called for a show

of hands. The majority voted to disband and go home.

John Brown felt the suck of Hell on his boots. He called aside First Lieutenant Henry Williams, who lived right in the middle of the Pottawatomie proslavery area. "Name me the worst of the worst," he said. "Judge Cato?"

"Cato is too far away in Lecompton," Williams said. "Your top man here is District Attorney Allen Wilkinson. He probably wrote out the charges against you and your boys. He wrote a lot of proslavery laws himself. John Junior could tell you." Henry made a wobbly drawing, a cabin perched along the creek, marked "W."

"Wilkinson, okay. Who else?"

"The Shermans," Henry said. "Give 'em time, they will kill everyone who shares our beliefs about human freedom and dignity. And James Doyle and his boys."

John Brown called sons Owen, Salmon, Fred, and Oliver to his side. Theodore Weiner joined them. James Townsley, also long abused by proslavery residents in Pottawatomie, joined. Henry Thompson, trembling with abolitionist fervor, came along.

The Northern Army parted from the main group, seven in James Townsley's open-top, two-horse wagon, Theodore Weiner riding alongside on his

pony. John Brown led the group to a grassy ravine in the woods just a mile north of Dutch Henry Sherman's obnoxious tavern, site of much malignant activity which John intended to snuff out. They camped where they could easily swoop down to the proslavery settlement at Pottawatomie Creek.

The men were eager to attack but John Brown insisted they pass the night and all of the following day in camp in preparation and in prayer. On Saturday morning, Owen and Henry Thompson were especially eager to get on with their assault, but Commander Brown wanted to operate in darkness and well after the main body of proslavery men had dispersed. "Our chances are better if we surprise them in their sleep," he said. "We will wait."

Mid-afternoon, Salmon was trembling and complaining of chills. He was going too often to relieve himself and spreading a notably unhealthy smell. Salmon was a tall, strong boy but only nineteen. John Brown pressed his case to Salmon and the others. Greater willpower was required. They must abolish hesitation and weakness. They had joined the war of liberation. God through mysterious generosity had granted them the chance to strike a great, early blow. They must answer His generosity with uncommon certitude and strength.

Throughout the day, John Brown led the group in praying for strength,

clarity, and the purest possible devotion to God's wish for spreading rights and freedom.

In the evening, in near darkness, the righteous raiders waded across Potawatomie Creek to the proslavery area with their rifles, swords, and pistols. "This way, I think," John Brown said, indicating a gully and a low hill. The map trembled in his hands. This was a tremor of excitement and strength. He might have been trembling, but all normal doubt had left him. He was at one with his actions. Not a human, really. He had given up his own will and now performed only his part as assigned by God.

The raiders approached a cabin perched on a slope. Rustling sounds came from within. Henry Thompson raised his arm to point out a moonlit rifle muzzle emerging through a chink in the wall. With a head gesture to the side, John Brown directed his group along the creek toward the next cabin. Two yellow bulldogs raced toward them across the yard, barking wildly. James Townsley swung his broadsword and killed one dog. He struck the second dog with a glancing blow. Fred leaped on the struggling dog and held it, while James Townsley ran his sword through its rib cage, and it fell.

At the commander's silent signal, Owen pounded on the cabin door with a force that might have exploded the planking inward. A man inside cursed.

Owen shouted, "We want Wilkinson." He pounded again with great violence.

The door opened. Constable James Doyle appeared. John Brown bellowed, "You are prisoner of the Northern Army."

"What Northern Army?" Doyle snarled. He spilled a string of curses.

"Arrest those boys," John Brown commanded. Owen, Salmon, and Henry Thompson forced the door wide open, entered the cabin, and seized James Doyle and his two sons, William and Drury.

Doyle's wife, the boys' mother, was on the bed clutching a younger boy's head to her chest. "He's innocent," she wailed. "He hasn't done anything."

John Brown looked past the crying mother and her young son. "Take these three outside and begin the work," he ordered.

The Northern Army marched the three soul-corrupted men a short way along the road toward Dutch Henry's Tavern. Owen made a dreadful cry, suddenly leaped forward, and, his useless left arm flapping at his side, grasping his broadsword overhead with his right. He ran at James Doyle, full knowledge of his father's pure will guiding him to the kill. Doyle turned back and raised his arm to block the sword. He threw a wild punch. Owen struck him with his gleaming blade where the collarbone joins the neck and chest, a fatal spot. The blow caught Doyle in his eagerness, breaking his defense. His hand and wrist

were numbed. He lowered to his knees and remained there, groaning deeply until he sank dead to the soil.

Tall Salmon raised his broadsword overhead and swung at a much shorter William Doyle. Salmon struck William's left arm above the wrist and cut through to the bone. Screaming, bleeding William grabbed the wrist of Salmon's upraised sword arm and twisted mightily. The sword wobbled and spun. The falling sword struck Salmon's shoulder but failed to pierce it. Salmon recovered the sword and swung, cutting William's neck so he reeled and his blood flowed. William fought on, giving ground to grasp a jagged stone from the dust. He raised the stone and struck Salmon on the cheek, bringing forth a cry and a spurt of red. He swung the stone again, beating Salmon to his knees, so he lay back on the ground. But Salmon scrambled backward, recovered to his feet, and advanced, sword in hand. He ran William through the chest and killed him.

Drury Doyle fled toward the house. Owen caught him and cut him down.

John Brown then himself drew his pistol and shot the already dead James Doyle through the forehead.

"Onward," John Brown said without pause, fearing to interrupt this righteous fury. He banged on the next cabin's door. "Open! Or we will open it."

Allen Wilkinson opened the door in his bedclothes, his wife and children behind him in the cabin. The place smelled of sickness. Seeing his enemy trapped and helpless calmed John Brown and further firmed his will to continue the moral surgery. He said, "Get dressed and come with us."

"Can't you see my wife has measles? We have children here."

John Brown shrugged off this plea and ordered his sons to march Allen Wilkinson, in sock feet, out into the damp night air.

A short distance from the house, Allen Wilkinson, flushed with rage, wrenched himself free from Owen's grip and, with a profane roar, struck Henry Thompson on the face with his fist, drawing blood. Henry Thompson tackled him just above the knees, and Wilkinson's face hit and skidded in the dirt. Then, Theodore Weiner ran Wilkinson through from the backside with his broadsword. Allen Wilkinson crawled forward and, bleeding heavily, tried to claw loose a rock embedded in the soil, as if to throw it at his attackers. Theodore Weiner stepped on his wrist. The strength soon flowed from Allen Wilkinson.

"God is granting us early victories," John Brown said, meaning to assure and calm his fellow warriors. He was breathing painfully hard and taking extra care with his footing. His own strange excitement threatened to unnerve him.

He must tamp down his nervousness. He must be smart and act quickly. The Northern Army's opportunity to tip the scale of righteousness would soon pass.

John Brown pounded at the door of a third cabin with the base of his fist; then Owen put his shoulder to the door and broke it open. James Harris and his wife were in bed against one wall. Three men were sleeping in bedding on the floor at the far wall of the single room. Among them, John Brown recognized proslavery man William Sherman.

"I want your brother, Dutch Henry," John Brown said.

"Not here," William said. "He's off on the prairie searching for lost cattle."

"Pah." John Brown directed his sons to collect the guns and knives.

They interrogated James Harris and the two other men about and found them innocent of proslavery violence and opinions. They had no need to question William Sherman. He was a known fountain of racist hatred. John Brown commanded his sons to march him out into the darkness. A short distance on, William Sherman raised his large hand, as though to touch Owen's chin. Theodore Weiner sprang at him with his sword in his strong right arm, striking him squarely on the wrist and severing his hand. William Sherman reached for Henry Thompson, but Henry swung his sword at Sherman's neck. The blade sheared through the sinews, and William Sherman's head fell in the dust,

his lips still moving.

At Commander Brown's direction, the raiders returned to the cabin and appropriated horses, saddles, bridles, and guns for the struggle ahead.

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John Brown saw emerge above the leaves in the treetops the distillation of all dread: the diamond-eyed Specter of Negative Possibilities, a taunting, pointy-eared frog demon with green skin like an ice plant. He had long known of and feared the Specter, though he had never before seen it. The Specter spoke clearly. "You have opened the door that can never be closed."

Terror reduced John Brown to helplessness. "Please," he whimpered. "Please..."

"I will live within you 'til the end," the Specter said, then it flipped over backward and disappeared into an opening in the sky.

John Brown waked and moaned. He clutched his belly as though punched or poisoned and leaped up suddenly in the predawn dimness.

His breathing was shallow and fast. He was suffering amazing thirst and went to the spring to dip his cup. He felt cold and empty and strangely unfit to protect himself.

His fellow raiders lay about on blankets, most fully dressed, with weapons

close at hand. On a rise not far off, he saw Salmon sitting astride a fallen tree, rifle propped nearby, the night guard.

We have at last stepped off the cliff, he thought. Now, they would be targets, hunted men. The danger would only increase.

Fred stirred on his blanket, his wild hair tipping. Blood showed on the backside of his hand. He saw his father looking down on him and smiled. "Captain," he said. "Father."

John Brown nodded. Blistering, unnameable, unbearable emotion seemed capable of obliterating him. For a few hours, he had lived full scale. But the door had opened too wide. His light had burned too brightly.

He carried himself far away from the camp to a private grass-lined thicket for dawn prayer. Well apart from his righteous warriors, he kneeled on the forest floor.

"Help me, oh, God, help me."

He pressed his face to his hands and cried openly, spilling his tears on the grass and soil.

J.W.M. MORGAN is writing a series of linked stories about the inspiration of the abolitionist John Brown. His stories have appeared in *Azure*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *The Montreal Review*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *War, Literature & the Arts*, and other magazines. He lives in Oakland, California, where he teaches and mentors people who are developing basic skills.