

The Day the Falls Stood Still

A Novel



CATHY MARIE
BUCHANAN



HARPER COLLINS E-BOOKS

THE DAY THE FALLS
STOOD STILL

A Novel

CATHY MARIE BUCHANAN

 HarperCollins e-books

FOR DAD,
WHO WALKED WITH ME IN THE NIAGARA GLEN

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[We are here at Niagara Falls] to declare that the awful symbol of Infinite Power, in whose dread presence we stand—these visions of Infinite Beauty here unfolded to the eye, are not a property, but a shrine—a temple erected by the hand of the Almighty for all the children of men; that it cannot be desecrated ... that [we] mark out the boundaries of the sanctuary, expel from the interior all ordinary human pursuits and claims, so that visitors and pilgrims from near or far may come hither, and be permitted to behold, to love, to worship, to adore.

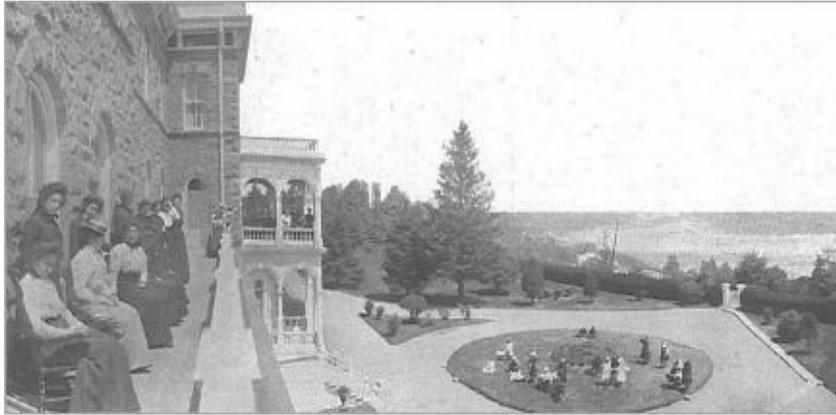
—ORATION DELIVERED BY JAMES C. CARTER AT THE
OPENING OF THE NEW YORK STATE RESERVATION
AT NIAGARA FALLS, JULY 15, 1885

Book
ONE

UPPER RIVER

June 1915–August 1915

1



Loretto Academy veranda

The stone walls of Loretto Academy are so thick I can sit curled up on a windowsill, arms around the knees tucked beneath my chin. It stands on a bluff not far from the Horseshoe Falls, and because I have been a student long enough to rank a room on the river side, I have only to open a pair of shutters to take in my own private view of the Niagara. Beyond the hedge and gate marking the perimeter of the academy, and the steep descent leading to the wooded shore, I can see the upper river and the falls. Endless water plummets from the brink to the rocks below, like the careless who slip, like the stunters who fail, like the suicidal who leap. I nudge my attention downriver, to clouds of rising mist.

In those clouds I have seen aberrations—flecks of shimmering silver, orbs of color a shade more intense than their surroundings. I have seen them more than once, and I have decided they are prayers, mine and everyone else’s, too.

There is a light rap on my door, and then Sister Ignatius, who teaches us English literature, steps into my room. I hop down from the windowsill, wondering why she has come with a stack of books and just minutes before all of us at the academy are due downstairs for the commencement of the class of 1915. “For you, Bess,” she says, handing the books over to me. “They’re old.” But the stack includes *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The House of Mirth*, books that are not old at all. There are others—*Wuthering Heights*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—that were written years earlier, but the copies in my arms are new. As I mutter a thank-you, she touches my cheek, and then she is back through the door and in the corridor saying, “Fifteen minutes until you’re expected in the dining hall.”

For a moment I cling to the possibility that I will return to the academy in the

fall for my final year. But Sister Ignatius is yet another example of the sisters having gone soft and sentimental, the way people tend to when they are saying good-bye. It began with Sisters Bede and Leocrita, who teach composition and Christian doctrine, returning a pair of examinations I had not sufficiently prepared for, preoccupied as I was with Father's whereabouts. The comments penciled into the margins were bewildering. "An interesting departure from your usual style." "An original idea." Where were the stern words reprimanding sloppiness and poorly formulated logic I had expected to find?

I mean to get through the evening dry-eyed and respectable, and at the outset all goes well enough. I file into the dining hall with the rest of the juniors, all of us in our white concert dresses, and take my place on the low platform at the front of the room. I stand there, mouthing the words to "The Last Rose of Summer" as the twelve seniors who will form the evening's graduating class make their way up the center aisle.

We had been told that with the war the decorations would be less elaborate than in other years. Still, the platform is lined with potted palms and ferns moved from elsewhere in the academy, and there are large vases of roses and peonies cut from Sister Leocrita's garden at either end. My gaze sweeps the rows of seated parents, moving from powdered nose to clean-shaven face, and finally comes to rest on a familiar navy hat trimmed with silk and an egret feather. Mother is impeccably dressed, though somewhat less fashionably than usual. Her skirt meets her boots rather than ending a few inches above the ankle as do the more daring styles. And her collar is high, stiffly starched. She faces straight ahead, her spine as straight as anyone's in the room, yet she twists the program in her hands. She is sitting beside the aisle, and, though the house is nearly full, the three seats next to hers remain unoccupied. Surely one is saved for Father.

I press on through the singing and then a piano solo, but midway through the violin duet, I am no longer able to pretend Father is merely late. He is not coming. It used to be that I would spot him from my window seat now and then, passing through the large brass doors of the Niagara Power Company, where he is company director. But I have not seen him in the six weeks since Mother and my sister, Isabel, broke with tradition and turned up without him for a Sunday visit at the academy. Ever since I have been steadfastly keeping watch. And while I sat in my window seat dreaming up a dozen explanations for his absences from both the power company and the academy on Sunday afternoons, the empty seat beside Mother tonight rules out all but the most horrible of my thoughts: Father has set out for the battlefields of Belgium and France. I blink wide-eyed, fluttery blinks meant to avoid tears, and slide my fingertips beneath the sleeve of my dress, hoping somehow to discover a handkerchief I know is not there.

The juniors and seniors who do not sing or play an instrument well have been given roles in tonight's morality playlet. And though I am playing Sanctity, a spirit who appears briefly to the main heroine, Rosalba, and points out her folly in seeking earthly glory, I am giving little thought to my role. In the opening scene, all the cast is onstage except for me and Kit Atwell, the girl with whom I have

been lucky enough to share a room for the last umpteen years, left alone to whisper behind the curtain strung across the rear of the platform.

Mother Febronie finally finishes introducing the playlet, and True Glory, Innocence, Wealth, and Beauty glide to the other side of the curtain, taking as much time as Sister Bede had insisted real spirits would.

“Kit.”

She tucks a lock of flaxen hair behind her ear and leans in close, prepared, despite orders for strict silence backstage. “No exceptions,” Sister Bede had said.

“My father, he’s gone off to the war,” I whisper, my hands cupped around her ear.

“What?” She mouths the word.

“He’s not here tonight.”

She shakes her head, vigorously. “I promised your mother I wouldn’t say anything.” She winces. “He was let go from the power company.”

It is entirely possible Kit knows yet another bit of news that I do not. Like mine, her family lives in Niagara Falls, and, more than any other girl at the academy, she is privy to the town’s goings-on. She is the eldest of six sisters, and though there is an older brother, Edward, he is none too clever and she is treated as the firstborn son. She knows the ins and outs of her father’s businesses: the stationery, tobacco, and furniture stores on the west side of Erie Avenue, and much of the real estate just opposite, the buildings housing Connor Bros. shoe store, Louis Fischer cigar store, Clark’s Hardware, E. S. Cole Jeweler, W. R. Price Men’s Wear, and John Logan Dry Goods.

And Kit would not lie, not on purpose, especially not to me. But what she says hardly makes sense. Isabel is engaged to Boyce Cruickshank of the Buffalo Cruickshanks, and his father is the founder and president of the American company that owns half the powerhouses on the river, including the Niagara Power Company, where Father is no longer employed if Kit is right. “I’m not so sure,” I say into her ear.

“My father told me. My mother was there, too. She said that someday Mr. Cruickshank would get his just deserts.”

“But Mr. Cruickshank wouldn’t let Father be sacked,” I whisper back, though even as the words leave my mouth I am remembering a Sunday afternoon visit with Isabel slumped on my bed in the tea dress I was making for her trousseau. We had finished marking the hem a few minutes earlier, and she was turning in a slow circle and going on about how skilled I was and the perfection of the dress, which really did fit her nearly flawless figure like a dream, when she abruptly flopped down onto my bed and said, “Boyce can be so lily-livered. I need a favor from his father and he’s afraid to ask.”

“The kippered herring?” I said, expecting Mr. Cruickshank had once and for all vetoed the fish being served at his son’s wedding.

“No,” she said, “but never mind.” She stood up from the bed and put on a smile that had struck me as false. “I’ll convince Boyce. It’ll just take a bit of work.”

Then she flipped back to my immense talent and “Oh, Bess, the embroidery!” and it brought to an end my tiny moment of wondering if the favor she needed from Mr. Cruickshank was more important than she was letting on.

Kit puts a hand on my elbow, waits, giving the news of Father a chance to sink in. I had spent a great deal of the last month in the academy chapel on bended knee—an hour each day after lunch, as Mother Febronie had agreed. At the outset my mind had often drifted to the term paper I had not yet written or the examination I had not yet studied for, and it had begun to seem senseless, the tired knees, the ever more feeble attempts to rein in my thoughts. But I glimpsed another fleck of silver above the falls and prayed in earnest from then on, at first for Father to turn up at the large brass doors of the Niagara Power Company and, when he did not, for God to watch over him at the front. And in return I had felt God knowing and bothering about me. He would not disappoint.

But all those hours, I should have been praying for Boyce to let Isabel have her way, for him to ask, or even beg, his father to reinstate our own, for Mr. Cruickshank to yield to the pleas of his only son. “I prayed all wrong,” I whisper to Kit.

I have only the foggiest notion of what an unemployed father means. Would he sell Glenview, our home on the Niagara River, and buy a smaller house? Would we live in rented rooms? Would I be expected to work? As a governess? As a clerk in a shop? All that seems certain is that I will not return to the academy after the summer holiday, which is surely awful enough.

My mind careens from one misgiving to the next until it lights upon a comforting thought. Isabel will not be included in whatever my family might become. She is promised to Boyce. She wears a gold ring set with a small ruby on her fourth finger, the finger once believed to be linked by a vein to the heart. And I know with certainty her good fortune will be held out on a platter to me. Always, she has let me have the larger slice of cake, and she whooped more loudly than anyone when I graduated from the little school and won the prize for sewing. Half-asleep, I have felt her palm smooth my brow, her lips brush my cheek. I have heard whispered words: “Sleep tight, Bess.”

Boyce will look after Isabel, and she in turn will look after me.

“Our cue,” Kit says, apologetically. “Are you steady enough? I could say you’re not well.”

“I’ll manage.”

And I do, though I stumble and miss a line and very likely convince the entire audience I have been hit with a terrible case of nerves.

After the curtain call and the applause and another piano solo and two choral pieces and a string quartet, and twelve seniors accepting certificates and handshakes all around, and a lengthy valedictory address, Mother Febronie announces strawberry shortcake and tea in the parlor. Then there is the shuffle of people getting up from their chairs.

I turn toward Kit across the platform, and she gives me the most solemn of nods. I lift a shoulder, force a smile, and then make a beeline for Mother.

She reaches a hand toward me, brushes a wisp of hair from my cheek, smoothing it into place. I have worn my hair parted in the middle, swept up, and loosely knotted at the back of my head for several years. Gone are the days when I could let it fall as it might, as long as I ran a brush through it from time to time.

Now I must fuss with combs and barrettes. I have no talent for hairdressing, no patience for it either, so I am left uncertain of the reason behind the caress. Is she offering assistance to a girl of seventeen who has not yet mastered her hair or apologizing for keeping Father's dismissal a secret when it is my right to know? Maybe it is only her way of showing concern over my case of nerves.

"I know Father was sacked." I look at her coldly.

"Kit told you."

Not wanting to implicate my best friend, I say, "Half the girls know."

She places a palm on each of my shoulders, and I stand rigid a moment, my arms at my sides, until I slouch from beneath her hands. "I suppose you've heard about Isabel, too," she says.

I shrug, stumped.

"Oh," she says.

"Just say whatever it is."

"Boyce Cruickshank called off the engagement."

I stand stock-still, dumbfounded. No one walks out on Isabel. No one can resist her.

The Sunday afternoon visit Mother and Isabel had made without Father had been their last, and I had assumed that it was Mother's doing, that she had decided to steer herself and Isabel clear of the questions I was bound to ask about Father. But I had forgotten that Isabel is not as compliant as I, that she once showed up at the academy when she was forbidden to leave the house after missing her curfew three nights in a row.

I wrap my arms around my ribs, thinking of her home in bed, too heartbroken to rouse herself, even for a visit with me. "I want to go home," I say. "Tonight. And I don't want any cake." It calls for only a small change in plans. Along with the rest of the girls, I am slated to leave Loretto for the summer holiday in the morning. My trunk is already packed, waiting beside my bed. Then I add, "I'm not coming back."

I meant we should take my trunk tonight rather than return for it in the morning. But Mother interprets my statement as a question and says, "I'm afraid you won't be, Bess," a first admission from her that my days at Loretto have come to an end.

I wait for further explanation, and when it does not come, I lash out: "The sisters have made that obvious enough."

She cups my chin with her palms, her fingers spread flat on my cheeks. "I only wanted you to finish your year in peace."

I shake away her hands. "I'm packed, ready to go."

We climb the steps of the north stairwell, my fingers sliding over the smooth wood of the banister one last time. At the first landing, the point where the banister loops back, forming a graceful hairpin turn, Mother says, "I came on the trolley."

I had not considered how we would get my trunk home and say, "We could telephone Father."

"We'll manage on our own."

He is not coming to Loretto, not tonight, not as long as the other fathers, the ones with another year's tuition figured out, are swallowing forkfuls of cake in the parlor.

In my room, Mother sits down on my bed as though I might like to linger awhile, but I position myself at one end of the leather trunk embossed with ELIZABETH HEATH. “Maybe you should change,” she says.

Other than the white concert dress I am wearing, my options include two high-collared, floor-length black dresses sure to flag me as a Loretto girl almost anywhere in Niagara Falls, the bloomers I change into for athletics, three nightgowns, and a swimming costume. “I’m fine,” I say.

She loops her fingers around the handle opposite mine, counts to three, and says, “Lift.”

The trunk is more awkward than I thought and Mother, unexpectedly strong. It is I who slump under its weight, I who pant, as the trunk bumps from one stair to the next, leaving scuff marks behind. My hair is disheveled, a strand or two caught in my mouth. A section of hem already pulled loose, I have shortened my dress by tucking a section of skirt under the sash around my waist. This lack of comportment might be liberating if Mother appeared the slightest bit harassed, but she is as dignified as ever, even under the weight of the trunk.

Usually when I leave Loretto for the summer holiday, Father is here, waiting in his Cadillac at the north door. He feigns impatience, shaking his head with the other fathers as we girls embrace and weep our good-byes. This explicit testimony of a daughter’s happiness, of her popularity, has long provided proof of money well spent. But today as I pass through the doorway, I am unmoved. I give only a cursory glance to the arched window overhead, with its etching of the Last Supper. Jesus and his friends. Peter, who denied him. Judas, who betrayed him for thirty silver coins.

2

Mother and I lug the trunk across the wide expanse of lawn at the rear of the academy to Stanley Avenue. While we wait for the electric trolley, I inspect the string of small blisters forming where the trunk handle bit into my skin and wonder how we will manage the half mile between the trolley's final stop and our house, atop a bluff overlooking the Niagara Gorge and River Road.

As the trolley approaches, we take up our positions at either end of the trunk and stoop to grasp the handles. But then a young man, four or five years older than I am, gets off the trolley and says, "Let me give you a hand," and I remember seeing him a few weekends ago, during one of Loretto's Saturday outings along the Niagara River.

The outing had begun as always, a sister out in front, a tail of paired-off girls trailing behind. The man from the trolley was out walking, too, though in the direction opposite ours. With so few chances to glimpse the local boys, unless of course it was a visiting brother in the academy parlor on a Sunday afternoon, we girls poked one another, chins nudging in his direction. I was struck by the size of him, his shoulders, his height. When the gap between us had closed to a dozen yards, it occurred to me that he would likely enlist, as had 150,000 other volunteers, and be sent overseas. Like now, he was wearing the matching waistcoat and jacket, neckcloth, and flat cap of the working class, though he carried himself well. His hair hung a little long, with a few locks the color of wheat reaching beyond his ears. His skin was bronzed, suggesting he spent a great deal of time outdoors. His eyes were like the Niagara River: green, full of vigor, captivatingly so. He was handsome, but not at all in an aristocratic way. There was nothing to suggest an easy life, or time spent primping and preening. I wanted to speak to him, badly, to say something consoling or maybe hopeful, something to give him courage or peace. It struck me that he might not survive the war, that it would be momentarily wrong of me to look away. I said, "Good day," as we passed, causing my classmates to stir, and he tipped his cap.

Afterward I peered around each corner, between each pair of buildings, hoping to catch sight of him. But all I saw was the war, cropping up everywhere, like never before. I would glance toward a pair of surge tanks belonging to one of the power companies and see the barbed-wire barricades guarding them from the enemy, the saboteurs thought to be living in our midst. My attention would drift to a lamppost, to a poster pasted there, an illustration of a little girl with blond ringlets, standing knock-kneed, speaking the words "Oh please do! Daddy. Buy me a victory bond." On the next lamppost there would be another, this time a soldier pulling on the jacket of a uniform, beginning to turn, to rush away, laughing out the words "Come on. Let's finish the job."

All of it had come as a great shock. At the academy it had been easy to forget

that Britain, and thus Canada, was at war. Little had changed, other than music practice being shifted to afternoon study hall. In the evening the practice rooms of the music corridor, along with most of the academy, remained in darkness. In an effort to save electricity for the factories producing trench shovels, wound dressings, munitions, and the like, we gathered with our schoolbooks in the library and remained there until lights out.

As always, our procession paused at the falls, and I looked into the water of the upper river, at the round stones of the riverbed, each large enough to resist being torn from its resting place and flung over the brink. Clear water hurtled past the stones, then shattered to white as it plunged to the river below. Standing there at the brink of the falls, I asked for a young man to be spared, a young man for me.

From across the trolley aisle, I sneak glimpses, careful not to give Mother reason to watch. Eventually my gaze meets his, and we both quickly look away. After that I keep my eyes forward and do my best to appear contemplative and elegant, though I have been sweating since I first picked up the trunk. Even as I trail my fingertips along my collarbone, as I have seen Isabel do, I know that I am absurd, that he will forever disappear at the next stop or the one after that, that Loretto girls are reserved for men of a different lot. And, honestly, would not my time be better spent thinking about Father's situation or Isabel's broken heart?

When we reach the end of the trolley line, he stands, and I notice what appears to be bedding rolled up and held together with a length of rope. As I sort through rationales for the bedroll—a delivery, a purchase, likely a camping trip—I focus on the facts. His jacket is pressed, his face clean-shaven, his general tidiness not at all like that of a tramp. “Can I help?” he says to Mother, indicating the trunk.

I notice his use of *can* when *may* is correct and wonder whether Mother will point out the error, but she only says, “Thank you,” and steps aside.

“I’ll take your bedroll,” I say.

He hands it to me. “Where to?” he asks, lifting the trunk from the trolley and effortlessly swinging it onto his shoulder. Introductions have not been made, and I wonder if it is out of deference to Mother, who has not offered her hand.

“Glenview,” Mother says. “But don’t go out of your way.”

“I’m heading to the whirlpool.”

“You’re camping?” I ask.

He nods, and we set off along River Road, walking three abreast.

“It’s late to be setting up camp,” I say.

“I already have a spot pretty much set up, a cave in the gorge wall. I’ve camped there since I was a kid, with my grandfather at first.”

As he walks he holds his head in a way that makes it seem he is listening to the river. His intensity is such that to speak would be to interrupt. “It’s worked up tonight,” he says.

“What is?” I ask, though I am almost sure I know what he meant.

“The river. The wind’s from the west.”

“I could see the river from my window at the academy.”

Too polite to do more than hint, Mother clears her throat.

He smiles, his eyes straight ahead, reflecting pinpricks of moonlight. “I’ve heard the nuns keep a vigil there, that there’s always one of them praying.”

Years ago Archbishop Lynch purchased the land on which the academy stands and deeded it to the Loretto community of nuns. He had seen a picture of the falls as a boy and thought it would make an idyllic place to adore the Creator of heaven and earth. The notion of the mist above the plunge pool shepherding prayers along to God stayed with him through the years, and soon enough a sister or one of the girls was always in the academy chapel, folded hands tucked beneath her chin. What better way to honor the archbishop’s vision than a continual stream of prayer? Every girl at Loretto knows this bit of history, this lore behind the most sacred of the academy’s traditions. “Perpetual adoration,” I say.

“It’s true then, the nuns believe the mist floats their prayers up to heaven?”

“I’ve seen what look like bits of silver hovering above the falls,” I say.

He nods, seeming to give careful consideration to my flecks, and then says, “Some people can’t see much beyond the ends of their noses.”

“I’ve seen bubbles where the colors are brighter.”

“Honestly, Bess,” Mother says.

“I’d like to see that,” he says, quietly enough to rule out defiance, loudly enough to let me know he is on my side.

A ways farther on, I make out Glenview, with its square front section facing the river and its rectangular rear. It stands atop the bluff without a single light lit. But even in darkness, Glenview is grand. The front façade is arranged symmetrically, with two ground-floor bay windows and a projecting central bay capped by a gable pediment. The builder had not skimped, and Mother likes to recite the evidence—the raised quoins of each corner, the hood moldings over each window and door, the keystones cut from single pieces of rock.

“You’re lucky, living in Silvertown,” he says, “so close to the river.”

Mother would be unhappy to hear it said we live in Silvertown, though it is true. Surrounding our house on land subdivided long since the days when it was farmed, a neighborhood commonly called Silvertown houses the workers of the International Silver Company, a stone’s throw away.

The presence of the silver factory is likely the reason Father was able to afford Glenview, though I doubt that when Mother agreed she had anticipated the number of workers who would opt to live so close by or the extent to which the polishers, grinders, and burnishers on the payroll would have names like Lococo and Petruzzo and Cupolo.

At Glenview he sets my trunk on the veranda and whisks away the hand Mother holds out offering him several coins. He tips his cap to Mother and then to me. I hold my breath, thinking of what I might say other than “Thank you,” which I have already said twice.

In the entrance hall I count to ten and say, “He forgot his bedroll.” Then I set off across the yard without giving Mother a chance to intervene.

“Your bedroll,” I say, when I have nearly caught up.

“I’ll be needing it,” he says, without seeming surprised to find me on his heels.

“It’s a warm enough evening.”

“It’ll cool off in a bit.”

I want to change the conversation from the weather, which is a sure sign there is nothing to say. “I suppose the ground can get pretty hard.”

“Yep.” He nudges the packed dirt at the side of the road with the toe of his boot.

I want to ask his name, but the courage with which I set out after him has deserted me. “Well, then,” I say and pause awkwardly before saying, “Good night.”

“Good night,” he says back.

Before I have a chance to contemplate our parting, he is walking away from me, toward the river.

In the same four-poster bed I have slept in since I was a child, I am unable to sleep. I do my best to focus on the walk from the trolley stop, and am able to conjure an image of him rolling the stiffness from his shoulder after he set down my trunk. Still, other less pleasant details elbow their way into my thoughts: No maid opened the door and ushered Mother and me inside before hurrying off to fetch tea. The coverlet of my bed was not turned down. Far worse, no father clapped me on the back, welcoming me home. No sister flung her arms around my neck. Last year Isabel made meringue cookies for my homecoming and we laughed our heads off, I with strands of the cotton batting she had stuffed inside each cookie stuck between my teeth.

Though I am home, in Father’s house, and he would not approve, I creep out of bed and lift my rosary from a corner of my trunk, where it is hidden beneath my underclothes. He likes to remind me that I am a Methodist, despite more than a decade of attending Mass each morning. What he does not know is that I sometimes joined the other girls in taking the Blessed Sacrament, that I have kept a rosary deep in my pocket for a half dozen years and sometimes bless myself with the sign of the cross.

Fingers sliding from crucifix to beads, I race through the Apostles’ Creed, an Our Father, three Hail Marys, and a Glory Be. I linger on the fifth bead and pray in earnest.

O Father, forgive me, my family, our sins. Save us from the misery and poverty that I do not think we know how to bear. We are in need of your mercy, all of us. I am afraid. Amen.

Then I sleep.

The Reporter, April 7, 1848

NEWCOMER RESCUES MEN FROM RIVERBED

There is a newcomer in town, Fergus Cole, and at least a dozen men owe their lives to him. He came from the Ottawa Valley logging camps, arriving a week ago, March 30, the date plenty of folks are calling the day the falls stood still. It was a curious sight that met him—the cliff face of Niagara’s famous cataract with so little water going over it that he was able to walk a good ways out onto the riverbed. Half the town was out there, in the mud, milling around, some with logging carts recovering lost timbers, others digging up relics from the War of 1812.

By nightfall the crowd had thinned and Mr. Cole got it in his head that the river was only blocked at its mouth by jammed-up ice. “I remembered the wind changing directions a day earlier, all of a sudden gusting hard from the west,” he said. Though he claims he is not much of a geographer, he knew enough to recall that Lake Erie fed the river and that its axis ran east–west. He decided that thawing ice had accumulated in the middle of the lake, that when the wind shifted the entire flotilla of ice was blown into the mouth of the river all at once, becoming lodged. “I knew the dam wouldn’t last, not with the pounding wind,” he said. He warned as many people as would listen, and some left the riverbed. “When I felt the earth tremble beneath my feet, I started yelling and scooping up folks and pushing the ones I couldn’t carry toward shore.” According to several onlookers, he was kicked and insulted, even threatened with a bayonet. James Stephens, a straggler dragged from the riverbed just moments before the Niagara came hurtling down the channel like a tidal wave, said, “He grabbed me by the collar and hollered in my face, ‘Can’t you hear the river coming back?’ I tried to shake loose. Not a single one of us could hear the low rumble Fergus Cole could.”

Mr. Cole waves away any suggestion of his arrival putting him off. “That river’s something special,” he said. “I’ll be setting down roots.”