

Longstreet's Toll

by John C. Geist

A rag doll's painted mouth and hollow eyes: like that.

1857 September-October, Philadelphia

After the first hour of the training course at Pinkerton's "Intelligence Agency" for the government, he knew with certainty that he belonged not in a company of lockstep spies. Nor belonged he in the company of the agency's founder, Allen Pinkerton: a monstrous bully.

The first day, his classmates saw him absorb, master, and improve on every skill his instructors were teaching. By week's end, classmates and instructors: enemies all.

Clearly, a career as an independent freelance agent would be best for him. A new tack was required. He devised an intricate plan to make periodic buffoonish mistakes that would draw the vengeful scorn and laughter of his instructors and classmates. Just until he was privy to the technical range of spycraft the agency had to offer.

After seven weeks of training, on the day before graduation he splashed a vile-smelling beer over his vest and appeared drunk in class. He was immediately expelled.

Skiping soundlessly to his instructor's office, he picked the lock in four seconds, slipped in, located his personnel file, put it into a slim handsome saddle bag, and exited the building, a forgotten man.

Forgotten? Well, maximally changed he by changing his name to Pinkerton. Pinkerton! No better name to create an endless permutating

set of dead-end trails to which anyone who inquired would be led. Lovely.

He would build his own Pinkerton fortune. Thank you, Allen.

2013 October, San Francisco, in the Bay

Maybe a quarter mile out. The bay is getting colder. Molly's swim pace drops. Praying that warm towels await her on the beach. A dense fog has rolled in. Where the hell is Crissy Field Beach? There, the sound of traffic. Maybe she is close. Or, maybe, God forbid, she is nearer the Golden Gate Bridge where the tide going out will sweep her out to sea. To die.

Molly, Molly. I'm here, Molly. Was that her partner calling or was it in her head? What the hell, pull towards it. Pull, pull, pull, pull, pull... and there she stands, waving. Jesus, there she is. And far behind her, a cop on a horse, or a trick of the fog.

It is dusk. Through the enormous picture window, the day's red and purple light fades. Molly stands facing her partner in their Nob Hill apartment, the entire floor of a nine-story building. Stands there in her burgundy goose-down bathrobe, hood up.

How can she be so dry and still feel like she is drowning? Molly flails about in her mind for a starting point. So much at stake. "When do you leave?"

Her partner thinks, *Three hours, thirty-*

three minutes and--

“To the East Coast this time? Well, that's more than you've ever said before. Thanks for the heads-up.”

Her partner thinks, *This is a different kind of danger. An inheritance.* Molly's partner holds two padded balls in her left hand and one in her righty. Unconsciously, she is kneading them with her thumbs.

Molly says, “You know how much I hate it when--”

Jerrilee blurts out, “There was a cop on a horse on the beach near that spit where you crawled out.”

Startled, as though her partner's voice had shot up in volume and dropped a half octave in pitch without warning, Molly is slow to respond. “Yeah, what about him?”

Jerri thinks, *He was on a beautiful horse that I swear I've seen before.*

“The filly? Yeah, she was pretty: white, with some brown and black area colors on her. You know, in the 19th century sometimes they would call--”

They would call her a “paint.”

“What I meant to say was that it doesn't feel good when you take off for weeks without warning.”

How does it feel when I suddenly reappear?

“Three years ago, when you came into my life out of nowhere, I no longer felt dull, unimportant. And that crazy research you hired me to do on parkour – physical fleeing escape techniques – was nuts.” Pause. “But I will never regret dropping my doctorate at Berkeley in--”

“Public policy?” Jesus, Molly, someone had to save you.

Yet it was Molly's research that made everything possible. True, Molly claimed that her research was just facts. But the way she ordered those “facts” built vital ideas. And the sum of Molly's “ideas” formed a configuration of such power that anyone touched by it seemed deeper.

Molly had research tentacles in every major university and commercial campus on the planet. She even had rare Yahoo and Google insider contacts that were plenty dangerous. And DARPA? Well! Just once Jerrilee had uttered the acronym to Molly. Conversation had quickly died for the night.

But on this night, Jerrilee fought thinking of -- of exposing – Molly's one great sin: her secret research into her – Jerri's – genetic past. From a blood sample filched from a tampon! Yuck. And yielding what? What mysterious ancestors had given rise to Jerri? The mix of pan European heritage told Molly little. Just the intriguing Cherokee Indian marker created a question. *That even surprised me, Molly.*

“What surprised you?”

These fantastic juggle balls, beautiful.

Yes, indeed. Molly had even carefully researched the creation of the juggle balls her partner now held: doe skin, packed with raw wool to exactly 23 psi, the contrasting blue and gray strips cut into classic Tao ying-yang patterns stitched up under a jewelers magnifying light that took for-ev-er! God, even after a year, you could smell its wild earthy scent. And Jerri's scent with it.

I tell you Molly, these juggle balls are your greatest creation. They give me special advantages in the wedding and bar mitzvah

circus gigs. Molly's partner belongs to a five-member micro-troop paradoxically named "Single Soldier Circus." Or so she claimed.

True or not, Jerri could solo entertain her with a mystifying blend of magic, juggling and ballet for hours on end, improvising whimsically when Molly, out of desperation, would dare to bolt for a potty break or try to duck into the garden for a snack. God, she could be hysterical! Or volcanic.

It's your incredible research on my bizarre but necessary subjects that makes it possible for me to return. I mean it.

"Return from your circus? Now that is a show stopper." Slowly, Molly turns around and gestures while speaking. "I've done some calculations and I would guess that your circus revenues account for less than one percent of all this." Full circle. Motionless. Eye to eye.

Molly, don't--

"You've put me on an allowance fit for a queen."

A world class swimmer and a genius researcher suffering from low self-esteem is oxymoronic, Molly.

"Where do you go?"

Oh Christ, Molly, you're not my Mother!

"It's what partners tell each other."

When they must each other trust?

"When love, Jerri, both dost."

There is a pause. Jerri poises the juggle balls to play. *Then lay us in each other's arms.*

"Lest our words bring us harms."

Up, up the balls
A juggle tight.
A rhyme is where
It's smooth and light.
But rhythm there
an' there an' there--

22 January 1862

*Secretary of War Department
Confederate States Operations
Richmond, Virginia*

To:

*Major General James Longstreet,
Commander
First Corps of the Army of Northern
Virginia*

General,

*It is with a deep sorrow and sympathy
that we report and convey to you that
three of your children have perished
from the scarlet fever scourge.*

*Sincerely,
for General Joseph E. Johnston,
Major Frederick Sinclair*

1863 October, Singleton, Tennessee

Camille sits in her rented upstairs room, the last auburn curl coiffed and tucked. Or so says the mirror, sitting above dozens of perfumes. She adjusts her ivory shawl, stands, and glides to the French doors. She opens them onto a balcony above the bar, steps out, scans down Singleton's street, and studies a clerk entering the bank and a farmer leaving the grocery store next it. She thinks, *No matter where Paint is tethered, the essence of the*

*pattern is always the same. Today is the game.
And I choose the Georgia accent for my role!*

She nudges the potted geranium to her right with her shapely midcalf boot. *A test!* She sees in her mind her hand release the bunching of her dress, which drops in a courteous splash to cover her foot. The moment's exact time she pictures: 11:51 and seven seconds. *I know you, Mr. P. How you think, how you breathe. Damn, gloating kills.* Then she sees the time, 11:51 and seven seconds, on her lady's locket watch. Behind her. A watch that is fixed without supports of any kind in the center of her room, where everything moves except her gravity-absent, spatially rigid lady's locket watch. Swiftly she turns, eight swishes to the hall door, exits, leaving a pool-like quiet. The door closes. Click. The locket watch, still frozen at 11:51 and seven seconds, drops to the carpet. Thump.

2013 October

My habit is my craft. Circus junkie. Ah hell, she thinks. She is all of twenty-seven years. Naturally brilliant red hair with trace blue giving it an auburn tint with tight natural waves. Sporting the lightest casual footwear money can have constructed, she is dressed in worn denims and an ultramarine collarless shirt with three pockets tailored to its abdomen region. The shirt is long-sleeved, for fair skin flees the sun. Jerrilee's one-sixteenth Cherokee looks through her blue-eyed Northern European face sprinkled with flickering freckles.

She walks through an 18-room 19th century mansion situated nearly in the center of 17 hundred and sixty-four acres of pine forest, just five miles outside the town of Singleton, Tennessee. Merely 18 rooms. Yawn. And certainly the master bedroom alone is not so large as a Ringling Brothers big top. Wafting into her mind: *"Lived once a maid in the town of Singleton." A limerick? Where did you come from, I wonder?*

OK, Mansion, it's all in the mind. Molly would say, quoting from the film *Chicken Run*, "It's all in me head, it's all in me head." *The mind, my mind: what's the difference?* And again Molly would retort "Now that's really the question, ain't it?"

Fine. Let's assume, Mansion, you are alive, absurd as that may seem. And since we're in la la land, let's push our luck and assume that some of my ancestors are present in your mystical veins. So, ladies and gents, how do I get to know those of you who most inform who I am? And if I do find out who you are, will you tell me what is so extraordinary about you that is now to be found in me? How about guiding me to a big juicy clue?

With each step, Jerrilee unconsciously juggles her three padded balls, their yin-yang black-white creating unpredictable hypnotic patterns. "The habit." A highboy stands exactly halfway down a hall with a glass case holding atop it a rag doll. She imagines subbing the doll for one of her balls, its red yarn hair and limbs flapping comically in a twirly juggle. Then her mind snaps back to here-now, facing a closed door. Above it, a discreet brass plaque politely announces "Camille."

Up, up she pumps
the padded balls,
creates a trick.
Too fast to see:
Her hand a snake
that twists the knob,
pushes the door,
retreats in time
to catch the ball
next to juggle.

Oh my, that's slick.

An on-off smile plays on her face. She enters the mansion's library, sniffing disdainfully at its mustiness. Still, this is a swell place for the

shy to hide, where the girl might rest far away from the eyes of circus fans and the woman might heal from the cost exacted by industry and government for theft of their darkest secrets. The library's massive door slides smoothly shut behind her. By itself, click.

The great mansion, with its inexplicable awareness, is beginning to soften her heart. She could love it. *Off to the back burner that thought.* For now.

She alone is this Pinkerton mansion's heiress. Only her attorney knows this. And that woman's knowledge is secured by draconian contractual binding. Jerrilee's business secrets of apparent boring provenance shall follow her attorney to the grave. All of it is executed on paper, longhand. Contracts and copies written out in cursive. No exceptions – certainly no record on any computer or, God forbid, in the cloud. *Low, low risk the rule.*

Jerrilee pauses, the juggling balls dropping obediently into her torso-twisty pockets. Phip, phip, phip. She pulls a pair of light white cotton gloves from a rear pocket, puts them on and wipes the knobs of the mansion's library door clean. *Mistakes might be severely punished.*

Her hands mime juggling as she executes ... *five, six, seven*, balletic steps. *Molly.* A round face appears in Jerrilee's mind. The best and most honest critic. Sweet. With an acute intelligence. *Molly.* A very, very attractive partner. But with an absolutely suicidal curiosity. “So talk to me, Jerrilee. Put down the god damned balls and talk to me! Who pays for this? Oh no! Not the silent treatment. Fine. Forget it. I don't need any of this.”

Dead stop. Even now it feels like a slap in the face. *You have no idea how many hundreds of lives have been compromised for your security, for your comfort.*

But with the resilience of the young, Jerrilee's feelings roll over the landscape of her heart, changeable as weather, yet consequential to the physical world and its feelings.

She taps up the bottom of each pocket containing a juggle ball to return them to dreamy play. And she executes a slow pirouette to take in and catalog the library's contents in one three hundred and sixty-degree sweep, her mind an endlessly ticking clock. As with every other room, she is looking for something. Something out of place. Forgotten.

Why can't Molly with her formidable research skills and contacts find any useful links to my ancestral past?

That challenge had not stopped the last ancient ailing Pinkerton from finding her. And, leaving the Mansion and its contents to her in his will.

To Jerrilee, getting a mansion was fine. But getting herself found by anyone was disturbing. Her best guess was that the lab where Molly sent her DNA sample lied about their privacy policy or had a data breach. Somehow old Pinkerton got hold of her DNA info and made the genetic connection. Yet Molly's investigation of his ancestry turned up the blandest East Coast histories that were totally incapable of explaining her odd inclinations and abilities.

The balls drop to the oriental carpet in a soft patter. Evidence of a distraction? No. Something extraordinary. While her head slowly shifts on the diagonal, Jerrilee darts through the contents of her mind and thinks *20 degrees left, 19 feet, 6.4 inches off the ground. If the floor's level.*

There! There in this room whose walls appear to be completely lined by books lit by natural clerestory windows. In a corner, on the room's highest shelf, sits a drab, thin, faded

gray-brown volume hiding, an invisible wallflower in the company of thousands of 19th century books. With a naked spine.

"Lived once a maid in the town of Singleton...." Jesus, that absurd limerick. I set foot onto the estate and it's like I tripped some damn alarm. Who's there?

Jerrilee moves the north wall's library track ladder into position and hastens up its steps, slowly moves her gloved righty to tip the volume slightly, and lefty lifts it out of its place. *Hand stitched, surgical, bizarre. Some of the edges of the pages look charred. Enough dust – sitting here a century or more. Maybe never moved. No print or writing on gray covers.*

Like a fastidious archeologist, she slowly opens the book to its first leaf. Written at its center in a small crabbed hand: "Burn. L."

"Some thought her mad, others a simpleton." Go away, limerick!

1863 October

Pinkerton, dressed like an impeccable Virginian, emerged from General Grant's open-flapped field tent. Carefully looking straight ahead, he briskly strode a few paces to a beautifully groomed Paint, who was impatiently pawing her hooves, champing her bit. In front of her, a nervous corporal struggled with her reins. The intricately tooled saddle was fitted at its back with a vertical white flag, to make her rider highly visible. In his head endlessly looped:

*Smart handsome man, young Pinkerton
Made a two-hour canter to Singleton.
A dandied excursion (women loved his style)
His face was alight with a lovely smile,
Himself in the saddle one of Nature's delights,
Though exhausted was he by this prolonged
guile.*

Repeatedly, Union foot soldiers stopped

Pinkerton, who, wallet already pulled from his breast pocket, handed over his pass issued by General Grant. Each time it was examined closely by a soldier who could read.

Just outside the town of Singleton, Pinkerton halted, dismounted, disassembled his flag and pole, and stored the pieces in his saddle bag. Then remounting, he circled the town to enter by its eastern turnpike, planning yet another visit to the small Bank of Singleton.

The town's church bells toll "one... two... three..." He places his fine boot on the bank's threshold precisely on its last great chime. *Noon.*

Within the one-teller operation, smiling at the clerk aiding a very fair woman, a stranger, he admits himself by long practice through the fancy carved waist-high wooden gate. He walks past the clerk and through one of two doors into a room filled with hundreds of safe deposit boxes, a new innovation whose existence is only gradually entering the awareness of the town folk at large.

Approaching box 121, he takes a key from his breast pocket, opens its small front and pulls from it a metal tray. Pinkerton removes a light-colored wallet and checks its contents: *500 Confederate dollars placed here by God knows whom* and a pass issued by Confederate General Longstreet. Placing his dark Union wallet with its \$250 of Union cash and Grant's pass in the tray, he slides it back into the holder box, closes and locks its tiny front door. Slipping the Confederate wallet into his breast pocket, Pinkerton retraces every step made on previous journeys here. *Error is severely punished, but those supremely skilled at "the dance" get rich.*

Emerging from the bank, he walks next door to the town's grocer and leaves an empty wicker saddle basket with the clerk. He picks up an identical basket filled with the season's fruits, easily seen through its loose wicker weave.

Nearly touching him, a lovely belle presses into the counter and turns toward him, her face just eight inches from his. *Impossible. Outrageous.* He turns most carefully to the belle, the heavy wicker basket of fruit poised midair in his right hand.

“Will that be all, Mr. Pinkerton?” asks the old grocer.

Confused. *Does she not see how close she be?* Locked into her gaze, he responds, “Yes, Henry, thank – “

“My, my, that is a **load** of fruit.” Her Georgia accent releases a tiny gliss of chime-like laughter. “Who **is** it for?” Her guileless face fills the whole of his astonished vision. “Your wife? Your daughter?”

Far too late, long after the grocer has turned his back on them, Pinkerton responds, “My godmother, bless her soul.” The fruit is getting heavy. Three tiny beads of perspiration appear on his brow.

Surrounded by the subtle waft of her Parisian “Tartuff” Perfume (secret ingredients accented by whale ambergris), wearing an antibellum pink pastel dress, shoulders covered by an open lace ivory hue shawl, the belle widens her smile, leans in an inch, raising an eyebrow. “And...where does she live?”

Pinkerton takes a second to memorize her details without moving his eyes, his right arm somewhat strained, simultaneously brightening his face to cover the panic creeping into his heart.

“She lives at my home, east down the turnpike.” Pinkerton tips his hat and smartly turns to exit.

“Where?” A parting shot from the belle.

Half glancing over his shoulder, showing the profile of a smile, Pinkerton is already through the door. Looking up: *The pot of geraniums on the bar's balcony has been moved six inches to the left. And the french doors are open. A test?*

Now count and measure each step. He notes in his stride: a few men and women cluelessly going about their business. Execute 53 steps... and I land three inches short. Damn.

Just before the uptilt of the back of his head, Camille saw that he had allowed her a tiny smile. *Because of **this** Fairy Godmother, you are still alive. Because of **me**, Mr. Pinkerton!*

From within, she stares at the open door of the grocery store; the grocer behind her stares at it as well. Her eyes are drawn up to a shelf just above the door holding three toys. She thinks, *Right there, between the toy drum and the rocking horse.* And old Henry, the grocer, looking up, thinks, *The girl's rag doll? Twelve cents, darling.* She reaches for her purse.

Pinkerton, one foot in the stirrup, freezes but an instant; *why had I never noticed the subtle Pennsylvanian accent beneath Henry's rough Kentuckian? And the woman. She was in the bank.* And there he had not noticed any scent of perfume! He finishes mounting Paint and moves her into a canter east. *Damn that belle. I might have killed them both. Yes, Pinky, and where would you find another town as convenient as this to enrich yourself? Accept the risk or get the hell out. That's the rule.*

A half hour later, he turns south into the woods. Even miles away, he can smell the most recent battle dead. *Neutral territory, my ass!* A quarter mile later his ride intersects a road leading into Confederate territory.

He dismounts, checks the contents of the fruit in the wicker basket for bruises or damage, removes from his saddleback the white flag

parts, assembles it, and mounts it on Paint, who rewards the fidgety feel on her back with a snort.

An hour later, Pinkerton enters General Longstreet's camp. Walking first to the staff officers' tents, he leaves some fruit for each. *I have randomly adjusted General Longstreet's numerical position in the visit queue to minimize risk. Oh hell, who even thinks that way?*

Longstreet, fortunately seeing him coming, closes his tent flaps in advance, thinking, *That God-damned snake.*

Pinkerton, raising his voice a notch: "General Longstreet?! I have some fruit for you, courtesy town of Singleton."

The tent flap flips open. "Please come in, Mr. _____?"

"Pinkerton, sir."

"Ah yes, Pinkerton."

Pinkerton slips into the tent. His eyes fixed on Longstreet, his hands tie the tent flaps behind his back. Shut. He moves to and sits in a centrally placed chair.

Longstreet moves behind Pinkerton, quietly takes out his penknife. He bends down to whisper, mouth to his ear, "Mr. Pinkerton, despite the danger, I send these letters with you because I feel very strongly about my friend."

Pinkerton's breathing becomes slow and shallow.

"Mr. Pinkerton, do you feel that strongly about anyone?"

Pinkerton's head turns like an automaton. He whispers face to face, "General, in this business, anyone I feel strongly about I might have to kill." Thinking himself a machine, his

head swivels smoothly to eyes-straight-ahead.

Jerking upright, Longstreet considers what seems a monster before him but is instantly sobered by memory of his own commands – those sending countless men to their deaths. Aloud, "And how does your 'godmother' fare, Mr. Pinkerton?" With practiced speed and precision, Longstreet cuts some very fine threads at the bottom back of Pinkerton's collar with his penknife. Snick, snick. Snick.

"She's developed a bit of a cough, General."

Longstreet gingerly extracts a folded and expensive sheet of fine correspondence paper from Pinkerton's collar and replaces it with another, which he stitches up with identical thread drawn by a tiny 3/8" curved surgical needle.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Pinkerton. Please convey my heartfelt wishes to her." Longstreet examines his work under a small wood-framed magnifying glass.

"Thank you, General, I will."

2013 October

"What did I do wrong? Why are you leaving me?" Jerrilee pushes Molly's panicky voice out of her head, replacing it with a picture of the rag doll reaching the top of a juggle arc where everything slows to a halt.

Refocusing, looking out from atop the ladder, she senses the library expects something from her.

Responding, she looks down into the gray stitched book, turns the fly leaf, and begins to read.

1863 October

Sunday

My dear General Longstreet,

It has not been easy to find an agent with wits enough to risk his life daily that we might conduct this correspondence. Yet, he craves wealth. And who are we to stand in the way of his dreams? Debrief him.

But attend here this, just now: is it right that we fight on opposite sides of this war?

Are your Confederates as plagued with boot rot as mine? Are your officers sore at countless offenses? With the noise and confusion, has nature herself confounded your senses?

Is there any news from your family? I know you are loath to speak of your private self.

But I am a patient man, so I am content to wait.

An old, old Cadet,

Sam (or call me Ulysses if you feel contrary)

Tuesday

My dear General Grant,

This correspondence appears very dangerous. I do not know if we can trust Mr. P.

Sam, I chose this side because I see

Lincoln's government as a bully. We are enemies, are we not? We are sworn to capture or kill each other. And why? Is it so others too dainty to pick up a gun can increase their wealth, their material happiness, that our friendship needs must be destroyed?

But our great secret is that we are friends. Not spies, for we tell each other nothing of our battle plans. Nor should we comment on our camp conditions, I chide!

God help us should we some day face each other on the battlefield. What can we do to bring something worth living for out of this howling tragedy?

Humor! Would you never drop your cigar to consider that compared to this war, even the poorest humor is heavenly. Try that! You know we must come to it one day.

We must satirize all the holy postures that feed upon the torture and death here. Nothing less will secure our sanity.

*Your grim and confused friend,
James*

Thursday

Dear Longstreet,

Ah yes, the war. For a moment, I thought you had lost the sight, the sound, and the stink of it. Is this how you mean to correspond? You know, my men think me humorless.

Look you now, any fool can understand that as you are so tall, if you and I were to meet on the battlefield,

you would need to drop to your knees so I could properly punch your face.

And I know you would do that for me because we are friends.

Can you hear from over there my very great sigh? Very well, James, if you are so unhappy with your fare, invent something! I say invent something that will allow our friendship a brief respite from this war of brother against brother.

Because they are scattered all about -- collect you your wits, man!

Your diminutive foe,

Sam

P.S. And do not you worry about Mr. P. He is safe enough, I assure you, for I have purchased some theatrical insurance.

Friday

Grant,

As I said, there is agony enough around us each. And humor may save us both -- enemy-friends -- to the end. To wit: Even now my brain is boiling with fanciful invention.

James

1863 November in Singleton

Camille's cotton gray-gloved hands push the safety deposit box back into its recess.

Every day Pinkerton comes once or twice to the Bank of Singleton: first at the stroke of noon, then marching on over to the grocer for

fruit.

*Once she dropped her parasol clumsily in the bank just a second before he entered the safety deposit box room. Oh dear, everyone is staring at me, her face showing the thought. Later, she timed her crossing the street to the bar so that just as Pinkerton exited the bank to enter the grocer's, she broke into a sneezing fit so violent that no one could take their eyes off her. Except for you, Pinkerton. How does **not** looking at me -- when everyone else is -- help me keep you safe? Your oblivious patterns are drawing attention and moreover, driving me mad. Look at me, you fool. They must not hurt you. I will not allow it. Look at me. Please.*

1863 November

Thursday

Longstreet,

Speaking to wit, this savage game of a war is certainly not like our capers at West Point. Some say that Lee never got a demerit at the Point. Is that true?

Sam

Thursday later

Dear Sam,

As far as recollect has it, it is true that Lee never collected a demerit at West Point.

James

Friday

Longstreet,

Well now, how can it be that Lee managed to avoid every foul-mouthed, badly behaved, nasty, repulsive, vindictive upperclassman while suffering West Point?

Sam

Saturday

Grant,

It seems both an outrageous expense and risk to send such brief replies.

But as to Lee, he was always well informed. A smoother tactician on the dance floor or in the mess hall I have never beheld.

Your thrifty confederate,
James

Sunday

James,

I will not deny my growing hatred of Lee. (I jest – mock jealousy!)

But damn the “expense” of these letters! In a heap of smoking bones either of us could die. You know well, here I do not lie.

Besides, the pleasure of periodically insulting you with your enthusiastic

encouragement is worth all the risk in the world.

Time will allow no lengthy correspondence when she herself ceases to exist. Listen to that. How wise I am.

Ulysses

P.S. You see, this is the case: do not you be “short” with me! That is my place.

Monday

Dear Grant:

I am now ready to concede that the real easily deniable question at the guts of this war is not property. It is not states' rights. It is not power, nor God. The meaning of it is whether the enslavement of men, women, and children shall be ended.

When I lived on my uncle's plantation, often when I was nearly full grown and yet but 14 or 15, I would both explore the woods and wrestle with the sons of Negroes and Indians owned by my uncle or working for a pittance. And I tell you, Sam, that those boys were my friends as you and I are friends.

And yes, there were differences: as great as a smaller nose or a taller stature, or one sang well, another absorbed in rapture. But suffer this: there were no differences greater -- as keenly witted, just as kind, just as just as the best of us regardless of our color, for as to color we were blind. They were my friends, Sam, and are still.

You know well I hate slavery. There. Now

we are done with it.

James

Tuesday

Yes James,

We are done with it. But still I do not know whether I can stand this hateful war a breath longer. The men I have known. Gone. You, the gray enemy now frightening, now shattered into hideous bloody bone and flesh-torn tragedy. Yesterday, not 50 yards from me, I saw one of your cannon balls explode near one of my men – you know I blame you not – but my man in blue was lifted and spun 20 feet at least into the air, his arms and legs flapping wildly. When we are dead and gone, who will care for our families? How can the mourning ever begin to heal it? To heal all of it, James? My recurring nightmare.

Sam

P.S. In my darkest moments, I fear that neither the past nor the future cares at all about now. Why, why, why?

Wednesday

Ulysses,

Turn your mind elsewhere.
Examine this witty challenge, my

invention of which I formerly wrote and that you yourself prompted!

Indeed, attend you here this just now, because this is how we might proceed:

Let us each, this coming Sunday, go to the open field outside the charming town of Singleton. We shall each of us command just a hundred troops. There is a defensive trench on the green expanse just outside the town. Will you kindly occupy that, General? For my part, I shall take my hundred and line them up just out of gunshot range across the green from you. My present to you: a puzzle. Can you solve it?

What do you say, my friend? Shall we amuse ourselves?

Forever,
James

Wednesday later

Dear James,

Thank you, bless you, a distraction by God!

I am intrigued. Is not this place, this Singleton, locally famous for its eccentric tolling of twelve noon and *only* twelve noon every day?

Etc. etc.
Ulysses

Thursday

My Dearest Sam,

Yes indeed, that is the selfsame place,
Singleton.

Let us set the time limit from dawn to
dusk. No engagement. My gray lined up at
attention for the day. The challenge for your
blue: to observe and guess our peaceable intent.

Longstreet

Thursday later

James,

*I shall wager but one Confederate
dollar that I can solve your puzzle,
Longstreet! And perhaps I shall make a
puzzle in return for you!*

Sam

*P.S. Did it ever embarrass you at West
Point to stand next to my five-foot-four
inches of short with your six-foot-four
inches of tall, head-in-the-clouds?*

1863 November, Sunday

Today, the citizens of Singleton sit
quietly behind closed doors and shuttered
windows, having been warned by a Confederate
major of possible hostilities near their town.

Camille, better informed, stands in the
Singleton church belfry, ears plugged with
cotton, her military-issue field glass trained on a

line of Confederate troops perhaps 200 yards
off, while the huge bell behind her tolls
...nine...ten...eleven...

Monday

Dear Ulysses,

Yes, the view is pleasant up here.

I can hardly value any memory "higher"
or better in this mad war than yesterday's
Sunday excursion to the town of Singleton!

To begin with, on Saturday, I ordered
my Exec to select 100 men completely at chance
for this little expedition. No doubt by
observation you followed my initial command:
that our Confederate troops stand three feet
apart in a perfectly straight dress line. By God,
they must have spent all Saturday just cleaning
and polishing their gear!

My last command to them was "And
men, let's show them damn yanks what
discipline is! Eyes focused straight ahead for the
day!"

James

P.S. Sam, as to five-foot-four inches: you lie! No
one is that short.

Tuesday

Dear James,

*When we were cadets at the Point,
I can still remember that damn sergeant
bending down to scream in my ear,
"Preparation, preparation, preparation."*

General Longstreet, in Singleton on that beautiful cool autumn day, we saw your splendid gray line. You were exquisitely prepared.

But for my part, follow just now some details you could not have known:

In the trench, I put all but two of my soldiers at ease, to enjoy the day within it, however each one might.

The “odd” two I ordered to stand top side and continuously train their field glasses on your gray line. This was at 10 in the morning.

Now, you might have observed through your field glass that one was a Private and one a Lieutenant, Private Walsh and Lieutenant Sims by name. I further notified the twain I would be back at one o'clock to issue further instructions.

It's true, James, I lied. But not about my height.

Sam

Thursday

Sam,

Last Sunday my hundred gray coats were issued precise instructions.

Further, I ordered my Exec (a cunning and thorough officer) to train his field glass on whomever might be visible within your Union line, from 10 in the morning to two in the afternoon.

Impertinently (to my secret delight) he

asked, “General, is this order related to the town?”

Sam, I said, without a crinkle on my brow, “Colonel, you have your orders.”

“Sir,” he barked.

So, from my side, all was set in motion.

Oh – about your “lie”: precisely at two in the afternoon that Sunday, I ordered a report from my Exec.

“General, using my field glass, I observed topside, just behind the Union trench, General Grant conversing with what appeared to be a Lieutenant and a Private. Sir, this was shortly after ten. Then the twain began training their field glasses on our line.

“Leaving them, General Grant climbed the small hill behind the Union trench. He dropped to his belly and proceeded to bring his own field glass to his eye.”

Odd, I thought at first about your behavior.

“General, nothing seemed to change until 11:30. But at that point, the Lieutenant lowered his field glass and addressed the Private, who never wavered from looking through his own field glass.

“Next the Lieutenant disappeared into the trench. A few minutes later he reappeared about a hundred yards at its other end. He hoisted himself up to sit on its rim. Then snapped he a glance down their Union trench's line. Yet still stood the rigid spyglassed Private fixated on our gray men fine. Shifting my glass over to the Lieutenant, I could spy an ugly smirk on his face!”

“Colonel!” I warned.

“My apology, General. To continue, at

12:15, neither General Grant behind him nor the Private in front of him had shifted their respective positions at all. But shortly thereafter, that Lieutenant dropped into the trench. Then emerging at the other end of it three minutes later, he rejoined the Private and retrained his field glass on our gray line.

"At precisely one o'clock, General Grant rejoined and conversed with the pair. I would swear the Lieutenant was shaken by something Grant said, General."

"Surely you mean General Grant, Colonel?"

"Yes sir, General Grant."

Unsatisfied, I said, "Is that all, Colonel? Did you see anything else of import?"

Ulysses, I swear I saw the ghost of a smile on my Exec's face. That young pup!

"Yes, General. Up on the hill, General Grant's glass was not trained on our line."

I waited. Mystified.

"His glass was trained on the Private and the Lieutenant!" He paused. "General, what here is your intention?"

Sam, for a dreadful moment I feared my Exec might suspect our game or worse. But then, advancing a bluff, I said, "Colonel, you are impertinent and dangerously familiar." We both knew I easily held power enough to break him if he persisted.

"Sir," he wisely responded.

I waited until I could sense the appropriate level of discomfort at a pay grade beneath me. Then coyly I added, "Anything else I might have missed while I was 'sleeping'?"

"General, you may have observed the Union troops pull out of the trench and

withdraw from sight by 1:45 o'clock."

I strapped on some guile. "Yes, Colonel. Now sound an orderly withdrawal."

"General?"

I put on my amazed look.

"Colonel?!"

Sam, the North may yet take the victory in this bloody mess. And although I too believe you are right about the equal humanity of the Negro, the Chineese, and the Indian, I would still deny it to the face of Lee. A shameful lie.

Sincerely with a little pique,
James

1863 November, in a Pine Forest

The constant scrutiny, the sense of mounting risks are beginning to show on Pinkerton's face. But the thought of his gains sweeps it all away. Cantering Paint, he tallies up the dozens of private agent courier trips he has made for his Generals, collecting and buying land with his Union dollars and investing in and storing farm tools with the Confederate dollars. He is rich now beyond his dreams. Rich enough to launch a fortune generations into the future. *Rich, rich, rich. All from my lovely well contrived patterns. Lordy, Singleton, you are so blind and witless.*

He pulls back the reins on Paint, halting her. Something is wrong: something odd within a larger picture. If he could deduce everyone else's intentions at a single glance, how difficult could it be to see his with dozens of exact repetitions?

The paralyzing answer formed as memory ruthlessly sharpened: checking in and out of the bar's upstairs rental room every day a different woman, different dresses, wigs, even padding to pretend different weights. *All those*

antics while I focus so hard on my pattern.

He had failed to register the variety of her accents. The good citizens of Singleton failing in turn to suspect him because they were mesmerized by endless performances of utterly unique women. *All her. I was not caught and hung because--*

Unbecoming to his manliness, unaccountable tears plow through the dust on his cheeks.

1863 November

Saturday

Dear James,

You digress. Remember that this particular correspondence is intended as a delight, a pleasure to relieve the endless grief of these times. Just let me remind you that you were to present – and I to guess -- your intent.

So, to catch the fox:

On that wonderful Sunday, when at one o'clock I rejoined my Lieutenant and Private, I asked Lieutenant Sims for his report.

"General, I have observed that on the gray line, troopers number 17, 57, and 92 have taken a half step forward."

I paused, holding my breath and imagining myself punching the Lieutenant, but then realizing I would need a box to stand on, I calmed myself and resolved to lighten up on my consumption of Brandy. So instead, I

turned to the Private like a hungry wolf contemplating a trapped rabbit.

"And Private, upon your life, tell me now whatever changes you observed."

Just picture the moment, James: The Lieutenant begins to visibly shake, while the Private, in stark contrast, is immobile as a boulder.

"General," says this Private, "on the last strike of the town's church bell at noontime, the entire rebel line, smooth as ever I saw, **took a half step back...EXCEPT for the three troopers** mentioned by the Lieutenant. Sir."

James, you would not believe it. I burst out laughing. It took me at least a minute to regain my wits. Then, calmly but with a grin I could not quite wipe off my face, I asked, "Private?"

"Sir?"

"What do you suppose the reb General intended by this unorthodox maneuver?"

James, by God I could see the eagerness in the Private's eyes.

"Speak up, Private!"

"General, when the town's church bell began to toll noon, maybe the reb General wanted to figure out which of his johnny rebs was deaf! Maybe that is why them there three johnny rebs stood stock still. 'Cause they couldn't hear the bell!"

Deaf! James, deaf! And out of the mouth of a baby.

Grant

Monday

My Dear General Grant,

Well done. But hear me just now this a bit further: On that same Sunday, using my own field glass watching your exchange with your Private and Lieutenant, I thought, "Well now, Ulysses is clear about which of those two troopers can follow orders to the letter."

What you don't know is that when your troops marched back to their regiment and mine left to rejoin ours, I lagged behind, undercover with my field glass trained on your trench. For I had counted only 99 troopers including yourself leave the field.

My patience was rewarded. Minutes later those soldiers you have named Private Walsh and Lieutenant Sims emerged from the trench, hats off, and proceeded to engage in a raging argument followed by a punishing fisticuffs that went on for some five or six minutes. Then, clearly exhausted and hauling their bruised and bloody selves off the ground, they stripped their uniforms down to long johns, folded them and, bowing to each other, formally exchanged them!

Now newly redressed "Lieutenant" Walsh followed contritely by "Private" Sims marched off to your blue camp I suppose.

Grant, was that the puzzle you promised to answer mine?

Nevertheless, Ulysses, I believe you Sunday's victor. Add to that – you found a clever way to spare your former Lieutenant from the firing squad for disobeying orders; one less victim of this bloody morass.

James

Wednesday

Dear Longstreet,

It is only fair to point out that your gray line's backstep do-si-do to the tune of a church bell maneuver was astounding. And to top that, you remained behind to spy on my "99" blue leaving the field. Bravo, you crafty badger! Let us score the "wager" a draw.

When this abomination of a war is over, I propose we "converge" at the singular town of Singleton. Then when we hear your church bell's toll, let us toast: "Here on 'that' Sunday, where none died."

Sincerely,

Sam

P.S. James, don't forget to burn these letters and any copies you might have foolishly decided to make.

Thursday

Dear Sam,

Till then and there.

James

P.S. Sam, please do not you be short with me.

2013 October

Jerrilee has just finished reading the letters when, as if waiting patiently like a bad penny, up pops: *"Possibly bad, but certainly not mad...."* Where does this insane limerick come from? Why do you course through my head again and again like something alive – something attached to this bizarre estate. Go away! Shut up, shut up, shut up!

She dismounts the library track ladder, the simply bound correspondence of two cursive styles gripped loosely in her righty. She dancer-straight folds her body over to retrieve her juggle balls from the carpet. She slowly paces the seemingly vast perimeter of the library, pausing at random to pull a volume from a shelf. Always a title by a prominent author, always an autographed first edition. Each breathtaking: Dickens, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson; priceless.

Then her mind jerks out of its reverie back to here-now. Swiftly pace ... *eight, nine, ten*, to the library's center. *Goddamn it!* Startled, shaken as her head and eyes snap to a glass case. Mounted just three feet to the right of the library's door. *How could I not... my eyes saw not the "elephant" in the room.* Within the glass case's ornate frame, hanging spread on three pegs – an open lace ivory shawl.

Sharp breath intake. *Trophy, bride, or both? ...Both.*

The high barren ceiling pressing down. Down. Exhale.

Then in a rare moment of contrition: *the mansion, the library, Grant and Longstreet. No. Sam and James, brothers. Molly.*

And regret.
*Molly, I have perfected my craft, I say.
No one knows.
Because it's safer for you that way.*

And defiance.
*My deeds for hire make me rich.
Correction -- make **us** rich.*

*Grim though some of them be.
For my handwritten ledger never touches me.*

Fire shoots up her spine.

I could burn the correspondence. I could burn this library, this mansion, to the ground. Its forest to the ground. I could do it. Burn it to the ground, bare! And me. Like that rag doll with red yarn hair.

1863 November

Friday

Dear Sam,

Too many of my officers seem increasingly suspicious of Mr. P. He is acting strange. Maybe one more letter. Perhaps not. In any event, I believe it is time to reward your patience. And I want you to know.

One of my Uncle's tenant farmers, a Cherokee Indian, had a wild son my age with a sister a year younger. Sam, I tell you she could see and hear things long before the rest of us, and run, I say she could fly across the skipping stones dotting a stream. And kind. She was kind.

James

2013 October

Jerrilee, burning up in a fever, pulls off the cotton gloves with her teeth.

The library cools the air with drafts, tending her grief, the mansion unknitting the lie. The lie that she is only fit for isolation. Jerrilee feels the mansion might rend her heart in unraveling that lie. *I have refused to face that*

*I abandoned Molly. What would she think of me
if she knew the awful truth about the money?
Accept the risk or get the hell out! That's the
rule.*

She releases the coarsely stitched book
of letters.

But it does not drop; it is fixed in space
just beyond her fingertips.

The mansion itself is shocked and
breathless.

Jerrilee's mind refuses to accept the
hallucinogenic evidence of her senses.

Undeterred, all of it sweeps into her, an
inexorable sea change.

She flees the cavernous room to a red
1950's landline phone that sits on a small
lacquered table just next the mansion's massive
entry.

Picks up its receiver.
Pinkerton and Camille.
Rotary dials.

"Hi Molly, it's me. Oh for God's sake,
stop crying."

The seconds ticking up in her mind, 57,
58, 59... She hears it first in her soul. She opens
the great door. A breeze wafts into her face.

It's Longstreet's toll!

She thrusts the phone's receiver, its line a
coily wraith dancing out, to the outdoor space.

Shouts "Listen, Molly, it's Singleton's
Church bell... four... five... six... seven... eight..."

She retracts the phone's receiver to her
sternum, looking sharply left, then right, down
the long spit-polished gray line, snapping eyes-
front-and-center, dipping down while stepping
back a pace, drawing up to the fullest crest of a
wave, on

"...twelve!"

And then, the scraps of the limerick push
to the surface, as if knowing well their cue:
*Lived once a maid in the town of Singleton.
Some thought her mad, others a simpleton.
Possibly bad,
but certainly not mad,
was this maid who wedded her Pinkerton.*

1863 November

Monday

Dear Grant,

You must know that I will not resign my
commission because I do not believe any other
general in our Confederate ranks can achieve
the South's objectives with less slaughter.

Yet you must believe me, if there were
any way to stop that cannon ball that hammers
you in your nightmares, I would.

I would undo it. It flew from us ripping
into you. And if I could not undo it, I would
stop it cold in the air with my sweating will.

If I were God, as easily as I write this to
you, all of life and material would continue to
course or careen on with its perplexing
intentions, except the ball. The iron ball forever
fixed in its space, ignored, impotent.

But then, if I were God, everyone would
still needs must call me...

your friend,
"James"

Author's Note

Thanks from the heart to my editor,
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not have seen the light of day.