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Searching for Margaret

By Jane Gordon

Thesis

Thesis advisor: Jacob Slichter

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the Master of Fine Arts degree
at Sarah Lawrence College, May 2018

Many years ago, a broken woman lived alone in a one-room house on a dirt road by the Hudson River. She was a simple individual, yet complex in the ways that each of us can be. She had her moments of fury, and they were frequent. She had her moments of superlative kindness, though they were few. Age, and agony, had done this to her.

In her younger days, when she lived west, in the hills of Pennsylvania, where the land curved and leaped and rolled, she had been a beauty, chestnut hair grazing her hips and flowing like the stream behind the cabin she shared with her kin, near the town of Chambersburg. Glimmering emerald eyes bestowed on her by her Scotch and Irish forebears. Plump lips a rapturous red. A knife-sharp wit, a quick mind, and a temper that perched at the edge of patience's cliff, eager to leap. A laugh that begot laughter, so contagious, like an infection that spreads without warning or wait through a space, but jubilant, breathless, full-throated.

I only know these pieces of her because she has been haunting me for three years. We have come to know one another, this woman and I, although we are different in many regards. She fought in the American Revolution – fought, heroically, in battle – 242 years ago.

But we are similar too. We are born from Scots-Irish ancestors. Our eyes and hair are the same. We are seeking something: I for her, she for what, and who, she lost.

I am here, writing this story so you, too, will know her the way I have come to know her. To me, she is a hero - a hero hardly anyone knows.

Here is how I came to find her.

Who: This writer

When: Summer 2015

On a Saturday in June, my mother-in-law and I were moving alongside the historied roadway next to Central Park, the green paradise in the midst of the grand isle of Manhattan, on the stumbling cobblestones that refuse to allow an innocent walker to become lost in thought. Our walk was made more precarious because she was in a wheelchair, I pushing her. Humid, wet air, a sopping, steaming towel of sweat, saturated our heads. We were both tired from the battle of wills and words we had before we left her apartment, what real-estate agents salivatingly called a Classic Seven, on Central Park West. She had been unwilling to venture into the public sphere in a vehicle that, she insisted, would make passersby label her “a cripple.” I had been unwilling to take a walk with a woman who could not walk without a wheelchair, particularly on the cumbersome cobblestones.

We had overcome our differences, though, because we loved each other, and because my mother-in-law, although stubborn, and I, always intractable, gave in to certain particulars. We would take the portable wheelchair, not the big one. We would stop for a poisonous snack, a hot dog.

Carriages beset by tourists and drawn by blinder-clad horses glistening with heat clop-clopped past. Dogs - kennels full - retrievers and poodles, Tibetan mastiffs and bearded collies, presidential Portuguese Water Dogs and Pomeranians, pattered along. All manner of humans held hands, some swinging them to and fro as if to celebrate: love, luck, heat, a moment of anonymous joy.

The sky, unworried by weather, went on its way, balls of cotton tumbling along the horizon, enlivening the traffic as if a clown at a child's party had invaded the bag of the gods and gone wild shaping shapes. A shark. A snowman. A woman. I stood still and stared.

A shout, and sweat-dripping construction workers resumed drilling darkness into the bowels of the sidewalks, the monstrous manic woodpeckering of their tools fracturing any pretense of peace. Pushing past the entrance to what I believed to be 78th Street, and I am quite certain I am remembering this detail accurately, I spotted a plaque sunk into a stone pillar.

I had walked this stretch of road for many years.

"In Memory of Margaret Corbin, a heroine of the American Revolution," it read.

I had never heard of her. How odd. But truly, what Revolutionary War heroines did I know? Molly Pitcher, because she brought water to suffering soldiers. Betsy Ross, who sewed the symbol of independence.

I could think of no others.

I thought of Margaret Corbin that day. In weeks following, I promptly forgot about her. My mother-in-law was dying, although I did not know this on that day. I knew she had lung cancer. I knew she was tired. I knew and I knew and I knew that every day with her was to be a happy day, happy or not, and this is to say that I was preoccupied. A Revolutionary War heroine was a momentary distraction. Or so I believed at the time.

One night, months later, I woke in the middle of the night to the memory of her name. I tiptoed out of bed so as not to wake my slumbering husband and into my adjoining office. Margaret Corbin, I typed. Up came a paragraph, then two, at the most three.

The world knew little more than I.

A Tuesday. I pick up my phone and call the head of the New York State chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. A teenaged girl answers. I am looking for information on a Margaret Corbin, I understand if you have never heard of her, few people have, but if you could just ask your mother to call me back I would be so grateful. Oh, she says, I can help you. Really, I know about Margaret Corbin.

I am silent in my surprise. My delight. I hear her flipping pages. She is so accommodating I want to stay on the phone with her, to wallow in her knowledge and her kindness. Here is the phone number for the state historian for the DAR, she says. Here is my mother's cell phone number. Call back if you need anything, anything really, else.

I think of my childhood friend, Aleaze Schaap, the granddaughter of a member of the DAR. I faintly recall her speaking of the affiliation when we were children. I remember her grandmother, Granny Smith, the wife of a senator from New Jersey, a scion in her own right, memorable for her milk-white coif, her shrinking but ever-erect stature, the soft kindness in her eyes whenever she spoke to us. Granny Smith

took Aleaze to Paris when Aleaze was a young teenager, a trip that left all of her homebound girlfriends in a purified awe, the sort that transcended even the ambitions of entitled girls whose hair fell in slinky thick strands down their backs, who dressed in brand-new clothing rather than that handed down or stolen from their older sisters' wardrobes, and who were driven to school in the morning in their father's BMWs and Mercedes. Travel – emancipation from the suburban malaise - was teenage ambition writ large, and Aleaze's grandmother seemed to know it.

Granny Smith is my idea of the Daughters of the American Revolution, a good idea. She is the manifestation of age in the teenaged girl I spoke to, full-throated, emerged womanhood setting her feet solidly in the cement of female empowerment.

Although I met her first in the mid 1970s, when not one woman was serving in the U.S. Senate, I feel confident that if she were alive on this day, she would herself be a senator. Perhaps. The road for women still brims with land mines. But we are all soldiers in our way, still.

A Wednesday. I punch in the number for the historian for the N.Y. State DAR, Patrice Birner. Yes, of course, I know Margaret Corbin, she says. Each year we celebrate her on Margaret Corbin Day. What? I say. My Margaret has her own day? She certainly does, Francine says. In Highland Falls, New York, 50 miles north of New York City, she does.

Highland Falls sounds familiar, and then I remember why. The singer Billy Joel grew up on Long Island. But after returning from Los Angeles in 1975, the year I graduated high school on Long Island, he saw the hills of Highland Falls running

astride the meandering Hudson and rented a small house there to write. "Summer, Highland Falls," was one of the songs. "They say that these are not the best of times, but they're the only times I've ever known," And suddenly I am connected to Highland Falls and the summer of 1975, when my high school days have finished and the future hovers, uncertain.

Margaret lived in Highland Falls, N.Y. for many years, tossed there in the tempest that was the aftermath of the American Revolution, a member of the Army's invalid corps. She was the first female member of the invalid corps, a dubious distinction being that if she had a say in it, she would perhaps had elected to keep her jaw, her left breast, and use of her left arm. Instead, the war tore them from her.

In her youth, she was a delight. Born outside Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, in 1751, when Chambersburg was truly a mill town – water mills went up first where the Falling Spring drops into Conococheague creek. A flour mill, a sawmill after that, in time a woolen mill. Log cabins. Ben Chambers, a Scots-Irish miller, settled the land about 15 years before Margaret was born. Here is what else I know: Margaret had a younger brother named John. Her parents were Scots-Irish, of the headstrong, argumentative, often-well-read Scots Irish, yet willing to give over whatever they had to family or friend in need.

Margaret's mother, historians believed, was named Sarah. Her father was Robert. Robert's father owned – or took – land near Chambersburg, and the family settled in around him. Pennsylvania winters were unforgiving, brutally cold, as barren as the Arctic and often as lonely. They kept a garden and some livestock, as most of their kin did. Sarah's mother had a brother who lived in Shippensburg, although

otherwise there is no record of him. This is what I know. What I think I might know follows, and there will be many a historian who will argue with me. But that is to be expected. My dear father, a lover of history in all its forms, whenever we spoke of history in any of its forms, his rosy cheeks alight like a Christmas bulb, his green eyes aglow, his mouth turned up like the slyest of leprechauns, reveled in saying, "History is an agreement of lies among historians." And who, when availed of the so-called and ever-changing facts of whatever matter was the matter at the moment, might argue with that?

Who: a young member of the Philadelphia Society of Women.

Where: The keeping room of a house in Buttermilk Falls, N.Y.

When: A Monday in the early 1790s, a few years after the American Revolution had ended.

I wanted the American Revolution to be a revolution of many kinds: a slave revolution, a class revolution, a woman's revolution. One must always hope. Why, just this past year two Quakers petitioned the new government to abolish slavery. I hope they succeed.

So when word reached me that a woman – a woman born and bred in Pennsylvania, the state where I was born and have lived my life – had acted with great courage in a battle hundreds of miles from her home, I wanted the world to know of her bravery.

She was horribly wounded, and her husband killed in the battle, leaving her without home or haven. Although the soldiers welcomed her as one of their own, she is broken, of little use, without man or kin. The poor wretch peers down the chasm of a precipitous future.

My father being a member of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, he had brought to my attention the minutes of the Supreme Executive Council, dated June 29, 1779. The minutes showed that the Assembly awarded the woman soldier \$30 for her troubles. One week later, on July 6, 1779, Congress gave her half the monthly pay drawn by a soldier in service of the states.

I wanted to help her. I imagine the woman soldier at battle, blistering the merciless Hessians with cannon fire as they snaked up her hill. I am told she was as relentless as they in their warring, a tiger for the cub that was our revolution.

I brought the matter to the board of the Philadelphia Society of Women, of which I am a member, to ask them to consider a small monument, a tribute to our gender. They immediately agreed. They insisted on a caveat I had not expected, however: that I interview her in person.

The board felt the need to pair me with Melinda Harcourt. I must admit I sighed. Melinda, may God bless her and keep her kind, is an unforgiving and elite sort, of stiffly starched British ancestry and certain expectations regarding all women, expectations, I may say, that I was hoping might have flared up and gone to ashes in the flames of war. Oh dear. I am a formidable sort myself, although father says I have much to learn. The battle draws nigh.

The woman soldier, I learned, was being cared for by a Mrs. Randall in a house that rents rooms in Buttermilk Falls, New York. The Society wrote Mrs. Randall to ask her to share our intent with the woman, and received an enthusiastic letter of response.

A woman warrior who will receive her due. This is, I am breathless in the telling, truly a revolution.

I will spare you the difficult details of my trip with Melinda to Buttermilk Falls along the rocky road from Philadelphia, except to say we bumped along in a covered carriage for near to 150 miles, Melinda sighing audibly for most of the miles. We

lodged at dusty hostels along the road, a second reality that did not suit Melinda at all. She had demanded we wear our silks along the trip, to maintain an air of precision and prosperity. A prickly personality made more precarious by discomfort bodes ill for travel. I say no more.

We lodged at Buttermilk Falls at nightfall on the third day, fallen leaves crackling and curling like whips at our feet. I was grateful that fur edged our silk capes. We pulled up our hoods, trimmed too with soft fur, to keep warm. Thank heaven a fashion of lower heels has prevailed this year. We were able to walk much farther than we otherwise would have been. My calves and ankles are grateful.

The next morning, our carriage brought us to the house where the woman lived. A house the color of an afternoon sky over Philadelphia, the only sky I have ever known until these past days. The house rests on a slope that rolls down into a stream that gallops and gasps toward the Hudson.

Its rooms are modest but many, the proprietors a somber gentleman and his silent son. Mrs. Randall met us at the door, a woman of about 45 years - although I find estimating a woman's age a dangerous occupation. She was cheerful and with a soft kindness and compassion about her that, I believe, is born into a person.

Mrs. Randall brought us to the woman, who was sitting on a small stone porch in a simple wood armchair.

Never have I viewed a woman more wretched, more splintered, more scarred than the one who appeared before me. I know this is what warring does to men. But

to women ... I have seen scabbed, bloodied hands from scrubbing. I have seen furrowed, forever-lined brows from fright and worry. I have watched limbs crumble to earth in stomach-churning contortions after a fall from a horse. I have seen and smelled the blood-and-stool spurting entrance of a babe into this world. I have heard the soul-choking sobs of loss, the stunned stares of shock when a child's life is lost, I have heard the brain-breaking shrieks such as the mythical Sirens must have emitted when the frock of a woman cooking catches fire. I have winced at the sight of a woman charged with spying ripped from the febrile grasp of her children, I have screamed at the scene of a drunkard wielding a knife upon a fellow drunkard, woman or man. And I have walked alongside those whose limbs and loved ones are but a memory.

But never have I seen anything like this.

This woman's agonies knew few bounds. A hole gaped where her left jawbone should have been, like the yawning black of a cave's doorway, infinite in its terrors. Bile burned my throat. My hair's roots rose. Nausea overcame me. I put my hand to the wall of the keeping room to steady myself. I did not want her to notice me noticing her.

Melinda, for all her fussiness, did not blink at the sight. She strode in like a general about to command his soldiers. She raised her eyes to the woman's head and rolled them past her face, across her breast and down to her toes.

The woman stood.

She was tall, treelike to me, almost five inches higher to the sky than I. Her wounds, or perhaps the weight of them, had stooped her some. Her body was gaunt, eyes as sunken as a burning ship sinking into the black depth of an oil-slicked sea.

Her left arm dangled by her side, useless. She had one large breast sloping down her right side. To the left, nothing.

Her eyes remained on ours as we took in the sight. I was comforted some by telling myself she had perhaps become accustomed to this scrutiny. But what wounds does a woman want all to see? None, I assure you. None. We hide them with gaiety. We hide them with white-powdered faces and wine-red lips and cheeks as bright as blood. We hide them with flowered silks and furs and shoes in fabric and leather.

She hid nothing. She waved her hand toward the seats we were to take. Then she began her story.

“The Great Wagon Road from Chambersburg to Shippensburg unfurled in fall like a poem, weeping willows draping dreamily over the path, blackgums sprouting fiery red fingers, red cedars as green as grass sweating a perfume that drew malingerers to press a nose to their barks. The smell of cedar!” the woman exulted. “I remember it from my infancy, I swear it, so potent and pungent no breathing soul could forget. I mention it, not that you could give a good goddamn.”

She looked sideways at us in our floor-length silks and brayed like a donkey at her little joke, fumbling for the almost-empty glass of rum on the table by her side. She held the glass to her lips and downed it in one noisy gulp.

She smacked it down on the table and clasped her cane, struggling to rise. "I'll need to be getting some more of that," she said. I rose to help her. She put up her right hand to ward me off. "Now get away, get away. I can do it myself."

She staggered into the kitchen, bent and thin as a soggy stick, a sight in her frayed flax skirt and stained white cotton shirt. A military cap sat askew on her head.

Mrs. Randall came in from the rear door, wiped her hands on her apron, and went to her. "What can I get you, dear? Something to eat?"

"Don't be pestering me there; I'm getting some rum for my pain," the woman crowed. "These fine ladies can wait." She staggered about the kitchen, knocking into the worktable and upending a cast-iron pan.

Finally, glass filled to the brim, she settled back into her seat and went on.

"Pennsylvania was a paradise in my child's eye," she said to us. "We kicked stones, we swung from the chestnut trees, we picked lowbush blueberry and black huckleberry and ate them until our faces glowed dark with their juices."

She contemplated the glass of rum, spoke slowly then.

"But you can't blame the Tuscarora Road for the lives that were saved by it nor the lives that were lost, now can you? In the course of a year or so, paradise turned to purgatory. The Indians, once they started their killing, no one could stop them. My parents didn't know I knew; they didn't want me to know fear. But I overheard their conversations, when they thought we were asleep. My father's voice, low and deep, retelling the stories he had heard. My mother's voice, soft and stunned, murmuring through her tears. They murdered my friends' fathers, slicing off their scalps to hang on

the big chestnut trees surrounding the Great Wagon Road. Hanging them for everyone to see.”

For a long moment she stared, dry-eyed, at the river outside the window. She breathed deeply.

“And then,” she said. “And then.” She let out a long sigh.

“And then they took the mothers.”

The woman raised her hand to her face and touched the space where her jaw had been. “I was quite lovely once,” she said. “But that was another me, the outer vestiges of a life. I am stripped naked now, past clothing and skin and, some say, sanity.”

I saw Melinda shift in her seat. A scowl settled in on her face. She made no effort to wipe it off. I felt a shot of panic soar from my belly through my chest and into my heart.

I will tell you what she told us.

Where: Outside Chambersburg, Pennsylvania

When: June 1756; Margaret is just five years old

A mother dreamed of flames roiling through fields, crawling up tree trunks, firing into the skies. She felt the heat, and twisted her body to escape it in her slumber. Within

moments, she shot awake. Beside her, her babe's skin burned a pepper red, his lips parted and gasping, his eyes wide. He struggled to cry out.

Sheets were tossed, candles lit, parental whispers urgent.

The mother, whose name was Sarah, wrapped the child in a wool blanket. The June night was cool, spring seesawing into summer and back again. Margaret, almost 5, sat on the bench in the main room. The mother placed John in her arms. *Just for a moment*, Sarah said to her daughter.

Sarah opened the door to the cabin; a breeze rustled her linen skirt and ruffled the edge Scottish scarf, striped and squared with ocean blues and forest greens, she had wrapped around her shoulders for warmth. She heard an owl cooing outside. Hoooo, it called. Hoooo? It asked.

Sarah ran, crouched, to the garden, slid open the gates, scanned the shadows for movement. She moved stealthily toward the blueberry bushes. Her fingers deftly slid down the limbs, blueberries tumbling off the branches and dropping into her knapsack. She turned to the turnips, yanking at the sweet young roots that served as an umbilical cord for the hardened orbs above. She commandeered the snap peas. She strained her arms to clear as many cherries from the tree as she was able.

The darkness slowed her. As an afterthought, she turned quickly to pull a cabbage from the ground and stumbled over a log set down to mark the path. She teetered momentarily, flailing in the dark to find some purchase. None was forthcoming. She swallowed a shriek as she thumped to the garden floor, flattening the asparagus.

She scolded herself.

Dawn would be breaking soon. She hoped the Indians were sleeping, although she had known days when she believed they never slept at all. Those were the worst days, the ones where stories scrambled from house to house, fort to fort, like a jackrabbit. Indians hiding in cellars. Indians stepping out from behind trees. Indians tomahawking small children and old women. She saw shadows hovering wherever she walked. She smelled the heavy odor of war paint. She felt fear piercing the air, like the tomahawk as it flew, before it struck, sizzling on its way toward the beating heart. The children noticed. They clung to her far more than usual.

The slightest noise: a rabbit in the cornstalks, a squirrel scrambling through the limbs of a tree, a frog fleeing a predator, startled her. Rustlings, rustlings everywhere, never before noticed. The high alert exhausted her, tried her patience and her perseverance.

She had spent her teen years in the cascading hills of Pennsylvania's Cumberland Valley, waking each morning to the grand cascade of the Kittoctinny Mountains. She had met a good man, married and given birth to two children. They built a simple log home and the springhouse on the stream, planted the garden and the fields. The days had been peaceful, filled, sometimes worrisome, a worry Mother Nature spawned and cultivated. A storm tore up the garden one year, a dry spring suffocated it, pests large and small helped themselves to the bounty. But Mother Nature was, for the most part, forgiving, kind.

Sarah! She heard the loud whisper and picked her way through the garden gate. Robert had saddled the horse. Sarah secured the pack to her back, and mounted. She touched the mare's left flank, gleaming in the moonlight.

Robert handed her the baby. Margaret could walk, for now.

Sarah kept a lookout for Indians as she pressed her lips to her baby's forehead. Robert led the horse, Margaret asleep over his shoulder.

They made their way north. The night air calmed the baby's breathing, but still, she could hear his lungs heaving. The owls seemed an army among the trees, sentries forging lookout posts along the road. Hoooo, they called as the foursome rode past. Hoooo? They asked as the sun's gray light, long before the sun arrived, paved the sky.

A day passed. The sun was low in the sky when they arrived at the fort. Robert opened his dog-eared book of days to show his wife the date: Thursday, June 10, 1756.

Sarah scanned the fort's periphery and the high, knife-edged fence that surrounded it. Men, women and children were hustling to and fro from tents. An outdoor fireplace drew a crowd. She could smell a turkey roasting.

She looked to the valley, across to the hills. The landscape was scarred with drab brown barricades scattered along the hillsides.

"Let me help you." The voice jolted Sarah from her reverie. Susan Giles stood there, her cheeks plump and orange-red as tomatoes. Her arms reached across her belly, massive with child, to take John. Shiny black locks cascaded over the pregnancy, like tree limbs reaching down to shelter the child within. Sarah handed down the baby.

As Susan Giles held him, John began to cry out.

"He's feverish," Susan Giles said. "Dr. Mercer returned to Shippensburg last week. I don't know much, but I know" – and she took her index finger to lift his chin for the mother to clearly see – "the swelling in his throat could be the canker."

Sarah gasped. It had come on so quickly. Or had she not been watching? She bent over, her hand to her belly, cramping with the pain of knowing.

The diphtheria. So many had died from it. Her eyes filled. Robert placed his hand on her head; Margaret knelt beside her to pray. “We must get him to Shippensburg. There’s a rider preparing to go within the hour; let us ask if he will take him. I think you should have Margaret go, too, if she will. She has possibly been infected. You have a brother in Shippensburg, have you not?”

Sarah stood, took John from the woman’s grasp, and said, “Will you bring me to the rider?”

Margaret hurried along by her mother’s side.

“I should stay here with you, Mother, you’ll need me to help,” she pleaded.

The mother shook her head. “If you become ill, we will have to make the same ride again, a difficult ride on the best of horses, two days at least. Father and I must look after the animals; we will bring you home as soon as it is safe.”

Within the hour, a tall, gangly, oily-haired boy of 16 rode up. The contrast of the boy to the horse he was riding startled Sarah. The horse was the most beautiful she had ever seen. A stallion, head held high, gait elegant, muscles thick and rippling. The sun’s rays glinted off his silken mane. All about him glimmered and shone.

“I am Lazarus McGaw, Mrs. Cochran,” he said. His voice, too, shocked Sarah; surprisingly strong for such a flimsy physique. Lazarus slid down from the horse and offered his hand to the mother, the father, to Margaret. Margaret blushed through her tears.

The mother knelt. She faced her daughter.

“Margaret, I need for you to have courage. Tell me you can.”

“I can, mother, I can. But you will come and get me soon, will you not?”

“I will. I will.”

“Soon, mother. Soon.”

“Yes, my love. Soon.”

Robert strapped the baby onto Lazarus’s back in a woven papoose. He held Margaret in his arms for a moment. He hoisted her onto the horse facing Lazarus. The baby cried out with the movement. Sarah waved the rider off.

--

Lazarus stroked the horse’s flank. He was the post rider, and for this trip had been commissioned to deliver a letter to Governor Morris requesting arms to fight the Indian raids. But now, besides his missive, he carried two living children with him..

He carried the sick baby on his back as if he were a pack. Lazarus cooed and cajoled as Juniper ran through the countryside. How long could a racehorse last, he wondered? Branches stretched their limbs out and up as they sped along the trail. Rabbits and squirrels stood by, as if a parade were passing.

Lazarus spotted a spring and reined the horse in. A thick of trees and shrubs offered cover. Lazarus shook his head to clear it. He stroked the horse’s flank. Such a beauty. The stallion was a coveted racehorse, taken from a dead Indian who had taken him from a British soldier. The soldier had been ambushed while moving Juniper from Fort Augusta, where he had been entertaining the settlers, to safety in Shippensburg. The horse seemed

no worse for the wear of the war. *Thank the Lord that horses are immune from politics,*
Lazarus said.

The little girl craned her neck to look at him. Her head had been nestled in his belly for the first few hours, her arms tight around his waist. Such closeness renders the wall around a person thin; she grimaced at him.

--“I am frightened,” she said.

--“I am too,” he said.

--“But I am brave,” she said. “Mother said I must be brave, and so I will be.”

She straightened her back, as though bravery would be better fed with a stiff spine.

He smiled. A sweet child. Such times for small children. He couldn't remember being afraid as a young boy. Not that he was fearless. Adventurous, surely. The Indians had been friends with the Scots-Irish back then, 10 years ago, before his ancestral countrymen began crowding ships from Ulster. In Philadelphia, they flooded off them, then flowed like the Susquehanna into the Cumberland Valley. Parades of people, he thought, into paradise.

The Indians had turned from amiable to angry when their hunting grounds sprouted corn, when settlers burned miles and miles of forest for farmland. With the French's urging, the Indians began killing the pioneers to push back the frontier. Thousands of settlers packed up and rushed back to the east. Lazarus and his family had stayed, for now. Lazarus tried not to think about what might be waiting for him around any bend of trees, below the undergrowth that once gave innocent cover to squirrels and rabbits. Now, a shadowy underworld lurked there. He kept his rifle and knife close.

-- "We must all be brave for these times," he said to the child. "If you will be brave, I will be brave."

She nodded. "Yes, we will do it together."

He stopped the horse for a moment, put his hands together, bowed his head, and prayed. She placed her hands together then, bowed her head, and prayed along with him. *Sweet child. Sweet child.*

They walked. They trotted. They galloped along the Tuscarora road, Lazarus craning his neck to watch for Indians. Once the sun slipped below the horizon, he stopped the horse to set up camp. He fed the children from a small pack, johnnycake and dried pork and water from his canteen. The skin on the little boy's face burned crimson.

The light had turned to dark, and still the children were restive. He cooed to them to entice them to sleep. Although he was worried about being heard, he whisper-sang them a song he had sung to his own brothers and sisters:

Hi! says the blackbird, sitting on a chair,

Once I courted a lady fair;

She proved fickle and turned her back,

And ever since then I'm dressed in black.

Hi! says the blue-jay as she flew,

If I was a young man I'd have two;

If one proved fickle and chanced for to go,

I'd have a new string to my bow.

*Hi! says the little leather winged bat,
I will tell you the reason that,
The reason that I fly in the night
Is because I lost my heart's delight.*

By the third stanza the children were silent. He held them fast to his sides, and rested his head on his pack. Soon, his eyelids drooped. The woods were silent.

Margaret woke to the rat-a-tat-tat of a woodpecker drilling a hole in the pine tree above them. She looked about. John was asleep in his papoose. She could not see Lazarus. The horse was gone too. Her heart leaped in her throat. Had he left them?

She heard a rustle in the spoonwood bush.

-- "Margaret!" he whisper-shouted to her. "I am here."

In a moment, he emerged from the shrub, fixing his buckskin breeches. He went to the horse and untied it.

--"I am going to the river to water the horse and fill the canteen, just a short walk," he said to her, talking over his shoulder as he headed toward the horse. "I will be back soon; pack up what you can and we will be on our way."

She crawled over to the same spoonwood bush, thick with cupped white flowers spreading to the sun, pulled down her petticoat and relieved herself. About eight feet high, the bush towered twice as high as she stood. The sunlight flickered off the edges of the petals and sparked into her eyes, forcing her to squint. She heard a female voice, high, screechy, like a sharp knife dragged across the top of a washboard. Her ears recoiled.

The voices were shooting the stand of pines on the opposite side of the little camp. She stood stock still. She sucked in her breath and held it. Slowly, she parted the flowers. A barefoot young woman, dirty black hair streaking past her waist, black bonnet perched pertinently on her head, strode out into the middle of the camp.

The baby began to stir.

An unkempt man straggled in behind her. He wore a rumpled duffel coat with brass buttons that flickered in the sunlight. His shoes sported shiny wide brass buckles that belied the poverty he had most certainly encountered. He spied the knapsack Lazarus had left by the fire. He went to it.

He took his coat off and tossed it by the side of the bag, as if to say he might be there a while. He sat, cross-legged and placed the pack on his lap. Margaret watched silently as he rifled through it, shoving johnnycake into his mouth with abandon. The barefoot girl watched too.

--“Are you saving any for me?” the girl demanded.

She walked over to him, kicked at his thighs, and reached down for the shreds of what he had left.

The baby cried out.

“What’s this, a child?” the raggedy man said. He stood, brushing crumbs from his lap. He strolled over to the papoose. He looked about, suspicious.

“Someone left a pack and a sleeping child? No, no. They are off for a moment.”

Then he had a thought.

“Perhaps Indians have taken them, but missed the infant. No matter. We shall throw him in the river and save him the inconvenience of starving.”

A bird screeched. The woodpecker ratcheted up its rat-a-tat-tat. A crow screamed. Others joined it, a diabolical chorus of cawing crackling complaint. The man glanced about, as if to acknowledge the assembly. He reached his dirt-caked hands for the child.

The hands, sodden with sinister intent, reached for the babe.

All of a sudden, the fingers shot forward. They stiffened, the blood flow caught in midstream. The rest of the body quickly followed, freezing over the child.

The man hovered for a minute, absorbing the shock of the blade, sensing the slice of the skin without seeing it. He felt the scarlet blood spray from his back. His tongue froze too, the surprise of the attack stealing speech from it.

The man fell to the ground in a heap beside the now-screaming baby, a knife, the knife Lazarus had left at Margaret's side, smashed in his lower back. The little girl, her face freckled with blood, spun to face the woman.

--"Why, you little bitch!" the woman shrieked. "I'll cut your throat and eat your innards for breakfast!"

Her hat tumbled to the ground. Her hair flew out in sparks from her head. Her face twisted into a grotesque mask, eyes bulging, mouth showing the deep dark mush of rotting teeth, forehead skin rolling and pulsing with fire. She ran to the fallen man. As she did, she reached out her left arm and knocked Margaret to the ground. Gravity and force lifted the child up and away, toward the harboring shrubbery she had just abandoned. The woman straddled her bloodied companion. He was done. The woods went wild, trees roiling and rolling in the wind, crowds of crows cramming into the branches and shooting off again laughing with glee, field mice and beaver and squirrel creating more chaos as they raced from the scene and back again.

She yanked the knife from his back.

Margaret scrambled to her feet. She stood, her arms reaching up as far as she could extend them to stave off the inevitable blow and to build a bulwark against the forces that would harm her little brother. She heard her mother's voice.

Time slowed. Margaret saw the woman raise the knife, the fire of her fury spewing from her sickly arms, her sordid mouth, the oil slick of her hair. She turned to run. The woman laughed a cackle that mixed with the chorus of the crows. The forest cackled with her, the shrubs ran their leaves together in anticipation, the trees shook with gruesome glee.

She ran. Her eyes shot over her shoulder. The woman was crashing through the brush, screaming. She was gaining on her.

Her mother's voice.

Run, Margaret, run!

She ran faster.

Shots rang out. The woman crumpled to the ground.

Blood erupted from a gaping wound that peeled open the skin around her heart; the musket had struck its mark. Margaret rushed to her brother, scooped him up and ran behind a tree. She couldn't be certain who was shooting. She stared at the woman, the blood flowing from her breast like the stream at Rocky Spring. Her eyes stared at the rising sun as if she were stunned at its arrival.

Margaret saw Lazarus running toward her, the rifle still in his hands.

"Come, we must hurry, there may be more of them," he whispered.

Margaret ran to him. She wrapped her arms around his head and sobbed.

“I was frightened!” she cried.

He peeled her hands from him and kneeled before her.

“God forgive you if you were not frightened, child. Taking the life of a man or a woman is a serious act, and a final one. But what were your choices? To watch your brother die? You were brave. Braver than anyone I’ve ever seen be brave. God bless you child, you saved your brother.”

Through her tears, as she looked at the scrawny boy with the tree limbs for legs, she would never forget the warmth in his eyes, the gentle way he picked her up and held her as the tears flowed forth, the murmurings that reminded her of her mother. “Kindness is such a blessing,” her mother said as she drew her children close.

Lazarus pulled a shred of linen from his pack and wiped the knife clean. He repacked what little was left into the pack – “we will eat berries,” he said cheerily – and led them on a trail to the river, where she saw the horse tied to a tree, drinking from a small brook. “When will we be at Shippensburg?” she asked.

“By nightfall,” Lazarus said. He looked at his book of days. June 11, 1756.

A Friday.

Who: This writer

Where: New York

When: Summer 2015

“Did you find out any more about that woman in the battle of Fort Washington?” my mother-in-law asks one day. “A little bit,” I say. “Not much. I’m working on it.”

She sits on the Windsor wood chair, at the round wood table with the j-curved legs, as she has for the past 55 years. She runs her smooth tapered fingers over its splintering surface. Little has changed in the apartment in her time there, except for paint colors. The kitchen, which most recently wore sunshine yellow, is boasting a peach trimmed with tangerine this year.

She is wan, pale, thinning. A few months ago, she started to cough and couldn’t stop. A doctor visited her, and four of us surrounding her bed, in a gray room at Mount Sinai Hospital on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. You have a malignant tumor in your lung, the doctor said. I ask myself why doctors have such difficulty saying it’s lung cancer, or colon cancer, or bladder, breast, skin, prostate, rectal, throat, kidney, uterine, liver, thyroid or the cancers I’ve missed that I know are there, instead of you have a malignant tumor. I think telling people they have cancer perhaps makes them cry, and telling people they have a malignant tumor may leave them feeling a tumor is an enemy they can fight, even if they can’t.

At 81, my mother-in-law is still a pretty woman. Her brown eyes are bright. She keeps her hair auburn, the color of her youth, in a bob that wisps her chin. Fifty years ago, steroids treating multiple sclerosis hatched a madness within her, a crazed and impatient

nature she regretted bitterly in old age. She whispers sometimes, 'I was a terrible mother then.'

I cannot speak to then, I say. All I know is that you are a wonderful mother-in-law now. She writes me thank-you letters for mere comments. She writes me thank-you letters to my thank-you letters. She gives me a gift card for Ann Taylor one birthday, and when I bring it in to the Ann Taylor store in a strip mall in Chester, New Jersey, where I am visiting a friend, to see how much has been placed on it, the salesperson says loudly, for everyone to hear, Someone Really Loves You. And I load up on hundreds of dollars worth of Ann Taylor, my eyelashes blinking back tears.

A Sunday soon after, a story I have written appears in the Sunday Styles section of the New York Times. My phone rings in my Connecticut home early that Sunday morning, too early for me to catch it before the call goes to my answering machine. I read your story this morning, the voicemail says. It's beautiful. You are a wonderful writer, and it is a wonderful story. I just wanted to let you know.

I stand in front of the answering machine, pressing the message button again and again. Encouragement, I think, is beauty, an unfolding flower, an explosive sunrise, a jolt of adrenaline to the heart. I am raising four children. I am dealing with a difficult ex-husband, a critical mother, the challenges of working for a living. My mother-in-law's words are more than just syllables, more than just praise, more than just a voicemail. They are, to my ears and my heart, love incarnate.

Her own mother died when she was just six years old. She was just a child in Coldwater, Michigan who didn't yet understand death and its ramifications for her. Her father remarried one year later, a 20-year-old who worked in his office. My mother-in-

law spent the rest of her life asking empty rooms, I wonder what my mother was like. She spent the rest of her life asking, I wonder why my stepmother didn't like me. She spent the rest of her life making up for her own loss, by loving her children. And, thank heaven, by loving me.

But her health was growing worse. One day when I was visiting her in her apartment, I found her staring at an advertisement in the Times magazine for an Eileen Fisher ensemble. A white-haired pin-thin girl wearing a bias-cut white cotton sweater and loose-fitting white linen pants stood in a breeze, which I knew to be a fan in a photo studio, but still. The girl was 20 at best, a Renaissance angel hiding out in the New York Times magazine.

"I love this outfit," my 81-year-old mother-in-law said.

"Give me your credit card," I said. "I'll get you a small and a medium." I ran out to Eileen Fisher and returned with the clothing. She pulled them on. When she stepped gingerly over to the full-length mirror on the bathroom door, she gasped. "I look like an old lady," she pined. "You look beautiful," I said, tears welling.

"Even though I look old and wasted, I love it," she said. She beamed. I beamed. My father-in-law, Jay, walked in. "You look like a nurse," he said. I glared at him, and he repeated himself, stubborn in his control. "You look like a nurse."

She looked at him, she looked at herself, she stood her ground. "I'm keeping it," she said.

It was the first time I had ever seen her defy him, in 20 years of watching.

She is dying. I do not realize she is slipping away. I have hope, that radiation will help her be better, that we will resume our walks on the Upper West Side, our brunches at French Roast, our forays to Harry's Shoes, our brief indulgences at the Korean nail salon.

She looks better today, don't you think? we say to one another, because we can't bear the alternative. Love saves, we say.

How absurd we are in our hope.

My mother-in-law asks to die. She tells each of us that the psychiatrist knows she wants to jump out the window of the apartment, ten stories up. He wants to commit me to the psychiatric ward, she says. What good would that do? she asks. I'm dying. We say, no, no, eat, eat, you'll get better.

She wastes away. One day she cries out, help, help! We rush to her side. We are of no use. Delirium is crying out, the beginning of death throes, each sob a slash to the heart, until one night, there is only silence. Despite our hopes, despite our denials, she has left us.

We call family. We call friends. We write an obituary and pay to have it run in The New York Times, the paper she loved to read each day. We plan a memorial service. My mother-in-law's three children, including my husband, rifle through her closet to select an ensemble for her to wear in her death sleep, even though in Judaism the casket will be closed. They run their fingers along the woven fabric of the Eileen Fisher blouse and pants, soft as a first snow, the last purchase for herself that she ever made. Yes, they say. And they carefully pull the clothes off their hangers and carry them from 89th Street and

Central Park West to Riverside Chapel at West 76th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, so my mother-in-law can be beautiful one last time, in her Eileen Fisher white.

Who: This writer

Where: A kitchen in Bronxville, N.Y.

When: In the middle of my search

For a minute, I see myself. I am sitting on the upholstered gray chair. Impressionist pink and green flowers brim on a white background under my body. I am writing with the red pen, the only one I could find, in my black notebook, double-spirals of circular metal gripping the pages together.

I consider my hand.

My fingers and the pen swirl over the page like dancers in a waltz, bending and twirling and touching ever so carefully so as not to miss a step, moving through the air, across the lines, into the everness of story.

I inhale the air. I smell the pot on the stove. The lightness of quinoa as it simmers. The soft plant scent of broccoli as it steams. I hear the bodies on the floor above. The deep voice and the soft one. Back and forth they rock.

I make a bowl with the broccoli and quinoa. Steam rises. I spritz oil olive on top. A sprinkle of pink Himalayan salt. The voices upstairs rise. They make the sort of exclamations that accompany meeting a new baby or hearing happy news.

I put dinner to my mouth. Warm, salty, grainy, soft.

I see myself. My hand clasping the fork.

I am real. My hand dipping into the bowl.

I am aware. My hand moving toward my mouth.

It matters, I see now, where I look.

Who: a young member of the Philadelphia Society of Women.

Where: The keeping room of a house in Buttermilk Falls, N.Y.

When: A Monday in the early 1790s, a few years after the American Revolution had ended

Melinda is sitting at the edge of a high-backed floral chair. Its arms and back are spitting threads from overuse and neglect. Melinda pays mind not to touch either. She is positioned erectly in the center of the chair, coming into contact with only the seat. But it is the chair's most used part! I titter. Shush! I am a lady. Her other choice is to sit on the floor, which to Melinda is no choice at all.

She snaps her palm at a fly on her elbow, strikes the mark, and smashes its guts into her silk. Oh! She cries in disgust. Oh, oh!

I am using every restraint ever taught me to be silent.

The woman soldier is woozy from the rum; she has been helping herself all morning and we now are at lunchtime. Mrs. Randall hustles into the kitchen and begins to make us

a plate: dried pork, johnnycakes, a pot of tea in a lovely Pearlware teapot showing a cherub playing a trumpet.

Would you ladies enjoy some rum? She asks. No, no, no thank you, Melinda says in her haughtiest voice, as if we would even consider rum in daylight, which is absurd because just about everyone drinks rum in daylight and in dark these days, to ward off the grime of poverty, the losses of war, the confusion of a new government. Rum is plentiful and poured often, and from the looks of pain on the face of our friend the soldier, the most available means of escape from the desperate miasma of pain. She takes a long sip of rum; she begins to cry. Read on, and you will see why.

When: Morning, June 1756

Where: Bigham's Fort, western Pennsylvania

The women were preparing the early meal. Sarah sat on a tree stump near the roaring fire. Mr. Bigham had stocked his fort well, and she was not wanting for a pot or a plate. For that she was grateful. She felt safer here with all the hustle and bustle about her, safer with the men and their guns at the lookout post, safer with her women friends sitting nearby. But she didn't feel safe. Her children were on a horse in the wild with a strange boy. Her chickens and her cow roamed untended. She was without a home and family.

Robert walked up. He kneeled beside her, held her hands.

"We must be brave," he said. "You said it yourself."

Sarah forced a smile. Yes, we must

He was a handsome man, her husband, high cheeks and a wide smile, and perhaps what she loved most, eyes as blue as the river at dawn.

The June breeze rustled through his hair, as if an invisible hand was running its fingers through it, upending the locks, flattening them, shaking them loose. They heard a shout from the lookout house. They turned to look.

A shriek soared through the air. *War cries*. All of a sudden, they saw the movement surrounding them. Indians painted in a palette of dread dropped from the stockade onto the grass. Screaming. Whooping. Waving tomahawks. They swung their bodies over the sharp stockade as if it were a mere sawhorse. They fought back the men and threw open the gate. Savages flooded through, the war colors on their faces and chests glistening with sweat.

Robert, caught without his gun, sprinted toward the tent. He had almost reached it, an arm's length away, when a brave stepped in front of him, tomahawk raised. Robert reached his hand up to protect himself. The brave lowered the tomahawk and sliced him in the belly. Instinctively, Robert's hands shot to his waist. He groaned. The tomahawk crashed through his skull, splitting it in two. Robert fell to the ground, blood erupting from his center, from his head.

Sarah froze. She felt as though she were trapped in a stampede. All around her she heard the screams of the bloodied and the broken, the weeping of the children. She heard running, the ground pounding in a panicked heartbeat. She saw fire licking the far end of the fort. She saw crumpled corpses. She stared at the form of her beautiful, beloved husband, mortally wounded. Pure panic descended all about, swirling and

dipping and swarming through the fort, drenching it with fear. *Do they have my children?*

The brave strode over to her, raised a broad hand and wrapped it around her hair. Down his arms ran rivulets of blood, her lover's blood. It dripped onto her shoulders and down the back of her linen dress. She was too stunned to cry. The brave grabbed her sleeve and yanked her to the fort gate.

A number of the other women and a few of the men who had laid down their arms were gathered outside. She saw Susan Giles on her knees, her belly hanging from her hips, a brave standing over her. Blood streaked down her dress.

A tomahawk crashed down onto Susan Giles' back. She screamed. The brave rained more blows down upon the shrieking woman, chopping at her as if she were a carrot, slice upon slice of the sharp blade. Sarah heard the swish of the sharp edge. Susan Giles screamed, the high-pitched squeal of a stabbed swine, stunning those gathered there. Members stepped forward to help her. The Indians stood to block their movement but not their view.

The pregnant woman collapsed onto her side, moaning. Deep scarlet flowed through every thread, through her pores of her head, through her hands and her feet. The brave continued to chop away at her, removing all doubt as to the fate of her unborn child, all doubt as to the life of the mother. When he was done she was a tangle of flesh and bone and blood.

Sarah stood among the crowd of settlers, lips pursed in stunned shock, muscles taut as a hangman's noose, forcing her bulging eyes forward.

The brave grabbed the dead woman's hair. With his knife he rapidly slashed curves into the skin on the sides of her scalp. Once he had severed the skin from its moorings, he ripped it off the top of her head.

Sarah threw her head back in a silent wail of agony. Such villainy would be her future from now on, she knew.

She turned to look at the fort. Flames stretched their fingers to the skies. The stockade was burning, the buildings were torched, even the grasses were afire. The Indians prodded their captives to walk quickly. One never knew how far the fire might spread.

The days wore on for the children. They were lodging with Sarah's brother, Angus, in a grand house on the edge of Shippensburg, acres upon green rolling acres painting a pastoral picture from every window. Angus wore a spindly brown-gray beard the shade of a winter's tree bark, hair cropped close, cheeks a rubbed-ruddy red. He was a bear of a man, broad shoulders and big arms scooping Margaret from the floor as easily as he scooped the frozen cream he had made one winter. Hailstones, salt, cream and eggs, a creation he had discovered in a French cookbook that set the servants talking for weeks.

The babe's health was improving. Yet Margaret slept little. Despite her uncle's kindly attentions, despite the abundance of food and warmth and servants, despite the warren of rooms she could ramble through and the piles and piles of books he had brought back from Philadelphia, she wandered aimlessly, wondering and waiting for word from her parents.

Early the morning of June 24, 1756, Margaret heard a horse's hooves rattling up the limestone walk, and a rider's shouts. A moment of quiet. Hurried footsteps up the walk. Banging on the massive wood door. More steps in the entry. Hushed voices.

Margaret slid down the rear steps, through the slave's quarters into the keeping room. Her little heart beat so loudly in her chest she looked around to see if others could hear. But the house was asleep. She tiptoed through the door leading to the study, and hurried into the parlor.

She shivered. A cool June morning, and she had run down in her linen sheath. She looked about for a place to hide. The chestnut of the cupboard flanking the fireplace gleamed red in the early morning sunlight. She opened the cupboard door and scrambled in, pulling it shut behind her.

She had left a book of English nursery rhymes on the ledge above only the day before. She felt for it. When her fingers located its rough cover, she pulled the book down to her and held it fast against her chest, as though the imagination of others could protect her against the news of what she might hear from this rider. She breathed deeply, but no matter. Her tiny body shook with anticipation.

The voices moved into the parlor, feet away from where she was curled. She knew Uncle Angus's. She did not recognize the other.

"What, what has happened?" Uncle asked.

"Indians, sir," the rider said. "Morning before last, at Bigham's Fort."

For a moment, Uncle was silent.

"Tell me more," he said.

“Mr. Cochran is dead. They took a knife to him, slashed right there, in front of your sister. Then they endeavored to slice off his scalp. It was hanging on a tree not far from his body.”

“My sister? What of my sister?”

“Mrs. Cochran is their captive.”

Shock froze Margaret to her spot. She heard Uncle weeping.

“My sister, my bright, my beautiful sister,” he was saying. “And the children; what will I tell them?”

She stared at the wall of her little wooden confine. How could her parents be gone? Then she upended herself in the cupboard, no longer mistress of her body. She shook. She screamed. She howled with sobs.

Her uncle threw open the cupboard door.

“Oh, dear Lord, forgive me,” he said. He peeled her fingers from the cupboard shelf and held her. “What parts of this conversation have you heard?”

“Indians have killed my father,” she began. “My mother is captive.”

Tears burst from her eyes. She began to shake. The floors pounded with the weight of a dozen footfalls; the house was awake. What is it, what has happened? The whispers became pleas, the pleas became shouts.

Uncle stroked her hair.

“Weep, child, weep. There is nothing else we may do,” he said. “But when you are done, we must go on with our lives.”

Who: This writer

Where: Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, where Margaret grew up.

When: November 2016

Ghosts surround me. My mother-in-law. Margaret Corbin. And her mother, whose name, history books have told me, is Sarah. The name Sarah doesn't feel right to me. I can't explain why.

One day, I pack a bag and step into my little blue Prius C for a research trip to Pennsylvania. Margaret Corbin spent her formative years there. The trip to Pennsylvania from Bronxville, New York, is pretty straightforward: the Saw Mill River Parkway over the Henry Hudson Bridge onto the Henry Hudson Parkway to the George Washington Bridge. After that, I will be in New Jersey and on to Pennsylvania.

I punch the address for my Pennsylvania bed and breakfast into Waze, my traffic app. Waze immediately dismisses my straightforward approach. It tells me to take the Saw Mill River Parkway to the Mosholu Parkway, a road on which, after all my years traversing New York, I have never traveled.

The Mosholu leads me to the Broadway Bridge over the Harlem River into Manhattan. By and by, I find myself driving down the back alleys of Upper Manhattan, stopping at stoplights. Stopping at crosswalks. Stopping at stop signs. Stopping, stopping, stopping. How is this possibly saving me time?

As I sit at a crosswalk waiting for two pedestrians to saunter from one curb to another, I look up. A rock wall towers above me.

And suddenly, I know where I am.

Below a Revolutionary rock wall. In Washington Heights, below the Battle of Fort Washington. Margaret Corbin fought on this cliff, above this street, 241 years ago. She could have been standing above where I am now.

I stare at my phone. I was led here. I press my nose up to the phone screen. Is there a ghost in here?

I imagine her in her cap and petticoat, her linsey-woolsey skirt and cotton blouse pressing against her skin, a blue Continental Army coat buttoned up to keep her warm against the November wind.

She is hovering, long-limbed and limber, at the edge of the cliff. She is summoning her courage. She is, because she is so terribly human, frightened. So much to lose. As Virgil would have cautioned and she would have known, in war, courage and fear are comrades in arms.

I drive on to Pennsylvania, passing by way of historic Morristown and George Washington's headquarters. The cardboard cutouts of these figures in history are becoming human to me, eating, breathing, feeling humans who contemplate the meaning of their lives at the same time they consider what scarce supplies might be available for supper that night. They are people who lived on the edges as Margaret stood on that cliff, never knowing what might happen next.

I am beginning to feel as though I have entered a time warp, and someone has led me there. I speak aloud to that invisible someone as I zip along I-78 in New Jersey. Is my mother-in-law guiding me? Is Margaret?

A few days later, I park alongside a late-autumn garden at the McLean House Bed & Breakfast, on the main street of Shippensburg. My hostess, Jan Rose, who has lived most of her life in Shippensburg and who knows all the elegant old houses in a town where decrepit ones dominate on the main street at least, has made calls. We are off to visit an old house, one that would have been part of downtown Shippensburg when Margaret was living there.

The house is grand now, an upright Federal-style abode that was as popular in the late 1700s as McMansions are now. But the house began as a simpler structure, perhaps two rooms that centered on a keeping room. A massive fireplace. Simple boards. Wood, or perhaps even dirt, as the floor. Land all around, fertile and cheap, and sometimes free. A doorway leads to a small courtyard that leads to another doorway. Inside, a hard dirt floor and to the right, a hole in the wall. A hiding place from the Indians. I stick my head through the hole and hear water. It is the well, Jan says. Here, you could survive for days.

I drive out I-81. It is the road to Chambersburg, Margaret's birthplace and in her youth, the western boundary of the frontier. I am headed to the Franklin County Historical Society and Ann Hull, its peerless director.

As I amble along I-81 in the right lane, crawling under the speed limit, I crane my neck from left to right to imagine what Margaret must have seen: the rolling hills, the acres upon acres of forest and farmland, the two-story barns with their cathedral-like doorways. The cornfields in October have passed their harvest time. Ten feet high and the color of dried wheat, they are a choreographed choir swaying in the wind.

Chambersburg is a city now, construction cranes crowding the downtown and of all things, attracting a traffic jam into the center of the city. I find a parking spot immediately. The Franklin County Historical Society lives in an old jail, built in 1818. Pushing open the heavy door, I step from the bustle of downtown Chambersburg into the aging walls of a prison, with dungeons still intact in the basement. Rings in the walls and floors still hold, once connecting shackles with the prisoners who wore them.

People step in to help me, bring me books, show me where information is that might be useful. I sit, thumbing through property records and tax lists, marriage records and old newspapers. I find the Pennsylvania Gazette.

"It was the New York Times of the 18th Century," a fellow researcher tells me. A precious discovery.

The Gazette is filled with advertisements of rewards for returning escaped indentured servants and slaves, sales of land, salt, and linen, and in the 1750s, news of deaths of settlers in Indian raids.

The details are gruesome, but notable, too, for getting the word out about who was killed during the French and Indian War: hundreds and hundreds of Scots-Irish surnames: McGowan and Glendidden and Cuaghey and Chambers, Cochran and Crawford and Rutherford and Rutledge. On the Pennsylvania frontier in the early years my Margaret lived, the Scots-Irish were pitted against the Indians. And without organized government, ready militias, or ammunition, I see that they were doomed.

In the midst of all this reading, I find an article in the Pennsylvania Gazette, dated June 17, 1756. It stops me.

The article reads:

“We have advice from Carlisle that on Friday night last (June 11), Captain Bigham’s Fort, in Tuscarora Valley, was destroyed by the Indians.”

It goes on to describe the killing, bludgeoning and scalping of Susan Giles, who was about to give birth. The next account, on June 24, 1756, lists the dead and missing, including Robert Cochran, Margaret’s father. None of this surprises me.

But what does is one of the last names to be mentioned: “Alexander McAllister and his wife, James Adams.”

And then, the needle in the haystack, “Jane Cochran.”

There she was, in historical record. Margaret’s mother’s name was not Sarah.

It was Jane.

My name.

Coincidence, certainly. A simple name.

Still.

Who: a young member of the Philadelphia Society of Women.

Where: The keeping room of a house in Buttermilk Falls, N.Y.

When: A Monday in the early 1790s, a few years after the American Revolution had ended

Melinda shifts in her seat and yawns. She fixes a strand of her hair, stretching and strangling it beneath her bun. She crosses, uncrosses, crosses and uncrosses her legs. She stares out the window. The woman is no longer watching us. We have lost her in her memories, her losses, her sadness. I nod at her. I stare. I try to catch her eye. We are listening, I want to tell her. We are. At least I am. I will tell her story, no matter what the outcome.

Who: Margaret Corbin at age 16

Where: Her uncle's house, Shippensburg

Snow dropped from the skies laconically, cotton balls bouncing by the bedroom windowsill as she and Theta fluttered about, picking one dress, setting it aside, then selecting another. Margaret put her hands to her cheeks in theatrical fashion and giggled.

“What to wear, oh what to wear?” she cried in mock frustration. “We must all worry so. What to wear?”

Uncle had not appreciated their sarcasm.

“We do not want to confirm the reputation we Presbyterians have of being dour and sour-faced, now do we?” he had chided earlier when she had complained of fatigue. “We are hosting a gathering as others in the world celebrate the birthday they say Jesus had, although we do not believe he was born even in this season, no less this month or day. A simple dinner, with fine wine and ale. We shall toast your recent birth date.”

One by one the guests arrived, speckled with snow and stomping their boots on the entry floor. As Margaret finished dressing on the second floor, she picked the voices from the crowd on the first – the gurgling, giggly Sally, the trumpet-voiced Joseph, the sharp cackling Mary. And Uncle, his belly laugh so distinguishable she laughed at the drumbeat of it.

There was one voice she did not recognize, though, a slow, steady, certain voice, saying what sounded like weighty words, wouldn't that be refreshing, words she could not quite make out. Her ears strained to hear him.

And he waited to see her. He had heard talk, but one never believed talk. He saw the house, quite grand, well-tended, the house of the well-heeled. He saw the books lining the library, the portraits on the walls, the brown slaves. He assumed they were slaves, although he was careful with assumptions. Mr. McLachlan seemed to be

a man of good repute, but men liked their comfort. And settled men like Mr. McLachlan liked life the way it was, as long as it profited them. Mr. MacLachlan seemed to be profiting just fine.

They were standing as people do when they are tasting cocktails and tipping their tongues with polite chatter, amid the velvet curtains and couches, atop the woolen rugs imported from Europe, under the coffered ceiling of which Uncle had supervised the construction himself, when he felt an arrival, a spectral appearance, and he turned his neck, because he was in conversation with another young lady and did not want to appear rude, to catch a glimpse.

A young woman stood smiling, silent, in the entry. A riot of chestnut curls tumbled down her shoulders and back. They framed a pixie nose, plump cherry lips, soft, high-ridged cheekbones that reminded him of the Alleghenies. Eyes as shiny as glass buttons, glistening a robin's egg blue. He heard a ringing laugh that made him think of Sabbath morning churchbells. Breasts full and calling to him beneath confounding cloth.

Beautiful, he thought, as chastely as he could because he was a God-fearing man. But a man nonetheless, and this woman, this beauty, was wordlessly calling to him in a way the young lady who chattered away beside him did not, and he looked at her and nodded in an absent way before he strolled over toward the doorway.

He was too slow, though. The other men in the group had circled her like the smoke from Mr. MacLachlan's pipe, hovering in the air, unheeded. They were talking at her and she was ignoring them even as her straight, perfect teeth showed a smile – he knew that tired smile, bored, semi-tolerant – and her eyes met their gazes but

blankly – and he thought *I will save her but how?* Which made him stop and think for a moment on his path toward her, which led her to take notice of the one man in the room who had not reached her and she stepped out from the crush of testosterone and held out her hand.

“We have not met,” she said, “and I am Margaret Cochran, of this house. Please, tell me your name.” And in a desperate move to ingratiate himself, one of the men elbowed his way out of the crowd and said cheerily, “Margaret Cochran, may I present John Corbin, of the Virginia Corbins, my cousin and a visitor to our house for the winter.”

And that was all, all he needed to grasp her hand, and bow, and hold on for his life, as he breathed her air and saw her smile, an enamored smile, and he knew he had her then, even though she knew nothing of him, because he was smarter than these blokes, and better read, and kinder, and wanted more than her company, more than her attention, more than the feeling she made them feel about themselves.

He wanted her heart.

They married. Margaret, believing her mother might possibly return to Chambersburg, insisted on moving back. Her family owned land there, and gave them the land Margaret’s parents had worked. They woke before dawn each morning and tended it, tilling the soil, planting, hoeing and harvesting. They went to church, the Presbyterian church of their ancestry. They made love, but no children came of it.

Talk of independence began to fill the air. Margaret accompanied John to militia meetings. Although a woman in attendance was unorthodox, few if any wanted to challenge either the long-winded philosopher in John Corbin or the temper of his temperamental wife.

For a year, Margaret stood by as John learned to swab the bronze six-pound cannon. He encouraged her to do it herself, and watched as she did. You do this as well as any man I know, perhaps better, he told her. She memorized the tools, the movements, step-by-step.

A day arrived in September when John stayed at the tavern longer than usual. When he arrived at the house, he stood silently at the doorway, the moonlight casting his lanky frame into shadow. She had come out from the bedroom, and went to him.

The militia is set to march to New York, he told her. The British were attempting to split the Continental Army in two, by securing the highlands of the Hudson River. If they took Manhattan, they would have separated the New York and New England patriots from those in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and south.

Divida et impera – divide and rule – John said to her. He continued, And just as Caesar divided Gaul and Great Britain, the British seek to use the strategy for their own ends. In just four days, I journey to New York.

As was her way, and broaching no disagreement, she said to him, And if you must walk to New York, as your wife I will journey with you.

He laughed his hearty laugh, the laugh that had so endeared him to her at the first when they had met. He pulled her to him.

I know better than to argue this point with you, Margaret Cochran Corbin, he said. But promise me this: if the battle goes ill, you will leave me be and save yourself. Will you promise?

I don't know what I will think if you fall, she said thoughtfully. I will leave it to fate.

They walked the 220 miles from their home in Chambersburg to Fort Washington at the north of Manhattan, crossing the Hudson in canoes. After they arrived, John and his fellow Pennsylvania artillerymen helped drag two field cannons, with great fanfare and effort, up the hills to the top of Fort Washington, with help from the Maryland and Virginia riflemen who were to share the line facing north.

Margaret kept busy washing the men's clothes, sewing buttons and tears, and carrying water up the hill. For her efforts, they awarded her a coveted blue soldier's coat, silver buttons adorning a strip of red trim on both sides.

She could guess where they had obtained it, but thinking she was wearing a dead man's coat was not her plan. She avoided asking. John and his comrades wore hunting shirts with frock coats over them, best to stay warm and comfortable. Margaret kept her own coat secured in the tent, waiting for the day she might need it.

Who: This writer

Where: Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, the home of the Conococheague Institute

When: November 2016

I am hungry. Dairy products produce in me a severe allergic reaction, a choking sensation that slowly crushes my chest and threatens to strangle me. I am careful about what – and where – I eat. I brought boiled eggs and stored them in the refrigerator of the McLean House. My husband cooked me a squash and potato croquette that is excellent hot or cold. I roasted several sweet potatoes and packed them. But I have eaten everything I have brought.

Pennsylvania is a dangerous place for someone like me. Yet I found on Yelp a little spot in Greencastle called the Pure and Simple Café. In cow country, where dairy reigns supreme, I will somehow not starve.

Searching, I think. It's what we all do, each day, for minute joys, for simple happinesses, for safety. As I drive down an avenue toward Greencastle, a simple country town sprinkled side by side with dilapidated old shacks and imposing stone structures, I see Pennsylvania the way it has always been – the rolling hills flowing into simple homes fronted by small porches, the grand houses standing sentry among their landscaped grounds, the contrast between history and modernity, rich and poor.

Once I reach the little downtown, all semblance of contrast melts away. Countrified Pennsylvania, cleaned up and filled with coffee. I am searching for a sign. I spot it, white lettering on black. The Pure and Simple Café. I exhale my relief.

When I walk in, a woman greets me. I tell her I am dairy-allergic and ask her if I can safely eat there. Of course, she says in the calm manner of someone who has fed people like me before. A green salad. Nuts. Beets. Carrots. Chia seed pudding, which reminds me of my mother's creamy tapioca. Tapioca that would kill me now. But chia seed pudding won't. Sweet and succulent

The woman smiles and says, you are safe here.

So few places. But here, yes. Here, I am safe.

As I drive out toward the Conococheague Institute, I practice aloud the pronunciation its director has told me on the phone: Conica-jig. Conica-jig. Conica-jig.

Conica-jig.

The website of the Conococheague Institute says it exists to explore the clash and integration of cultures on the Conococheague (Pennsylvania) frontier. The Conococheague Creek runs off the Potomac through Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

The silence of its hills belies its history. The Institute focuses its attentions on the era of the French and Indian War, primarily, when Native American and immigrant blood gushed along Pennsylvania's pastures and paths in a life-and-death battle for the frontier.

I whiz by a sign on the right. The words take a moment to register in my head. I stop. Then I back up in this desolate but beautiful place, where I have not seen

another car for a while, and read “Conococheague Institute at Rock Hill Farm.” On the right stands a big white farmhouse, worse for wear. I crackle over a gravel driveway. November has stolen what life the gardens held; a drab winter hovers.

I enter the library and begin to sift.

Cookbooks from the 18th century. A recipe for Scotch eggs:

Lay several eggs in warm ashes. Using tongs, turn eggs several times (Do not put near red coals or they may explode.) In an hour and a half, eggs will be hard cooked. Peel. Cover with a layer of seasoned sausage. Place in a skillet over medium heat. Cook until meat is done. Remove to platter. Pour beef broth around eggs. Serve.

Furnishings: Benches. Cranky-looking wood chairs, but a seat nonetheless.

Simple wood tables where families like Margaret’s worked and ate. I wonder: did folks back then get carpal tunnel syndrome?

Music: for the ladies, harpsichords and long-handled string instruments called English guitars were deemed appropriate.

I see Margaret in her uncle’s living room during one of his parties, long waves of red hair spreading a sartorial shock against the green silk flowery number she has donned. She is sitting astride a harpsichord, feathering its strings.

I wander the grounds. A one-room house, a stone fireplace on its northern edge, sits near the library, stark in its simplicity. Her parents and she and her brother would have lived in a house like this when she was young, enclosed in a tiny space, kept warm by a fire and their own heat, tending the gardens, the acres about, and perhaps a sheep and a cow. Their presence seems harmless. But once tens of

thousands of them appeared on the frontier's horizon, dangerous to a Native American's way of life. On one side, opportunity. On the other, survival.

Who: This writer

Where: Hartford, Connecticut

When: December 2016

I am visiting an art show in Hartford, where I fall into conversation with a young woman. She is working on a project, she tells me, on invasive plants, compost, and found art. She has been cutting croppings of a particular invasive, *phragmites australis*. Otherwise known as the common reed, it is as tall as a cornstalk but with a clump of dust for a head.

“They are everywhere now,” she says, “pushing out the native species, filling fields, flanking the sides of highways as they force themselves in.”

Invaders from a foreign land, come to suffocate the natives. How Darwinian, I think. Survival of the fittest, a continuum not only in human nature, but in nature itself.

Who: This writer

**Where: Libraries, a blog called Greensleeves, the New York Historical Society,
a phone interview**

When: 2017-2018

Sources have told me West Point sponsors a Margaret Corbin Club for female cadets. West Point's cemetery has a Margaret Corbin monument in a field at its front. Her remains are said to be buried beneath it. Highland Falls, where West Point is located, holds a Margaret Corbin Day every year.

Within days, I receive a response from a Suzanne, who has spoken to a Susan.

"The library has no original manuscript materials relative to Margaret Corbin," the email reads. "In regard to Henry Knox, she indicates that we have no original papers in our Special Collections. In the library's general collections, they have the papers of Henry Knox on microfilm; however, from the description these do not appear to include diaries or journals. Susan has also indicated that there are no original manuscript materials relative to Margaret Corbin."

I am frustrated. In the last years of her life, Margaret Corbin was a fixture at West Point. She was part of the Army's Invalid Corps, and helped with whatever was needed. That she had a useless left arm and a horrifically scared face would have made her a memorable sight. And yet there was no documentation on her at all?

One late evening, I fish around on the Internet and come up with a blog, Greensleeves. The blogger admits doing most of his research work on the Internet, then questions the presence of Margaret's husband, John, at the battle of Fort

Washington. He writes, "Until I am confronted with primary source evidence both of her marriage to John Corbin and his service in a military unit that fought at Fort Washington, I have to consider an alternative hypothesis: that Margaret Corbin was a woman of the regiment without a husband, and that one was conveniently produced for her in suitably martyred form to support her pension claim. As for the patron, I believe his name is known and the evidence is there in the historic record. We will talk about him in a subsequent post."

Margaret Corbin's so-called patron, as named by Greensleeves, was General Henry Knox.

I send him an email. Please call me, I say. I want to talk to you about this. My feathers are a little ruffled; an armchair historian from northwest Connecticut is trying to impugn the morals of the American Revolution's singularly spectacular heroine.

The Virginia and Maryland regiments were called to Fort Washington. What she was doing there, a woman from Pennsylvania in a shredding army coat wrapped tight around her sheath and linen frock? She knew, quite expertly, how to woman a cannon. Someone taught her.

She cannot be a prostitute, I say to myself. Well, OK, she could be a prostitute. I have to remain open-minded. The business of her making a living is now my business, but prostitutes rarely keep records, or they didn't back then, anyway, and for good reason. No amount of research will help me here, and the rest is hearsay, and possibly sour grapes. I don't care if she's a peasant or a prostitute. I just want to understand her story. But, I think, West Point will care. Legend is easier than truth.

Weeks go by. He never calls.

Where would she have come up with the name Corbin? If she was a prostitute, chances are she would have kept her maiden name, Cochran. Why would a Pennsylvania prostitute be in northern Manhattan without any other Pennsylvanians? How does this make sense?

I decide to call someone who might know.

I find Dave Hsiung, the Charles and Shirley Knox professor of history at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pa. I pull his name off Juniata's website and punch in his phone number.

"This is Dave," he answers.

Wow. A human being answering the phone.

"Hi Dave," I say. I tell him my name, ask if he has a minute. He answers haltingly. I can tell from the hesitation in his voice he thinks I am trying to sell him something.

I dive in. He dives in with me. For an hour we talk about the American Revolution, about Pennsylvania's role in it, about why a Pennsylvania regiment would have fought at a battle in northern Manhattan.

"I can't see why a Pennsylvania regiment wouldn't be in New York," he says. "The spirit of revolutionary support was high in 1775 and early 1776. Maybe a particularly magnetic personality might have organized people, or maybe the state government said 'you need to contribute to the Continental Army,' especially since Pennsylvania is so close to southern New York. That's even more reason why it could have happened, and why she could have been there."

I am relieved that he is so smart. He is relieved I am not trying to sell him anything. I thank him for his time. "I thought you might hang up on me, you sounded so hesitant at first," I say. He laughs. "I thought you were going to ask me to donate blood," he says.

Well, with this story, you never know.

I am sitting at my desk, toying with concepts of war, with repetition, and with the thought that Jorge Agustin Nicolas Ruiz de Santayana, better known as George Santayana, the great thinker born in Spain, wrote in "The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense," – "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

We celebrate warriors after the fact. But war is dirty, murderous, often futile. Still, somebody's got to fight the bad guys, if we are certain we aren't them.

I wrote a small oddity of a piece that day, about war and continuum:

He is keeping his head on the battlefield after a rider slashes it off. As it rolls away he thinks he should probably watch his back but another rider has already stabbed him in it. He mustn't lose his head, he thinks, watching his men from the ground as their horses rear back from the spears. There is a moat yards away he can see that threatens to swallow the horses that will probably kill all of them, which it has, and he has lost his head and can't remember where it wandered off to but it's too late, he is back on the battlefield except these are Carthaginians, how'd he get here? Public

Enemy Number One, the men are shouting, and he asks who is Public Enemy Number Two as he gets them to execute the classic double envelopment and deserve his nickname and who is coining these nicknames anyway? He rides in victory as he foresees his doom and drinks poison before the Romans catch him and there he is again on the battlefield, this is exhausting, who are these people? He has reached the gates of Rome and his men are calling him the Scourge of God, which he doesn't love, he didn't like Public Enemy Number One either but that's long gone, and he can't remember how he got it, how'd he get here? And Romans surround him and he's a little worried until they bow to him and call him King Charlemagne. He can't recall what happened to the Scourge of God and he's full as he staggers off the battlefield although he can't remember eating a meal, and he's never liked the Romans, why they are calling him the Father of Modern Europe is beyond him, and somebody hands him a lamb chop because if he remembers correctly he hasn't eaten in days and suddenly he is on the battlefield again looking for his head and a broken signpost his horse has stumbled on reads 'Hastings,' and all the soldiers are yelling in what he thinks is French. He staggers through the battle as soldiers shout "Sir William! You are the conquerer!" and he can't remember what got him here fighting the pasty and the ale-swilling, and he hasn't had a bath in weeks and he's in the bath with a big-breasted woman feeding him grapes and he thinks he will stay there but he's back on the battlefield with grapes in his pocket and what is it with all these battlefields anyway? Everyone looks Chinese and there's oceans of them and he's pretty sure he can't swim, and somebody comes upon him and says oh Genghis Khan and he wonders if the O is part of his name like in Ireland where they've all got Os in front of their names but

Yichuan falls and as it does he thinks he remembers falling off his horse but he isn't certain except that suddenly he's on the battlefield again and he asks the guy next to him how long have I been here and the guy says thirty years that's why they call it the Thirty Years War and there's nine million dead and you're now one of them. He says since you're such a know it all I've haven't eaten in weeks as the lamb chop falls out of his pocket and the grapes trickle to the ground and I've got a hankering for a cherry can you tell me where to find one and in an instant he's chopping down a cherry tree even though that's a fiction but he holds the battlefield together through thick and thin even though that's a cliché and then he loses New York and that's no lie. He stops for a beer at a watering hole in the city and before he can reminisce about fighting Spanish domination in South America he's fighting Spanish domination in South America and they are calling Simon! Simon! And by the time he figures out he is Simon he is in the Virginia campaign and a bunch of rebels are trying to kill him and some guy named Lee who he thinks he knew from West Point but when was he ever at West Point? He doesn't even know where West Point is, meets with him to end the war and he is thinking of walking the dog on his street in Abilene, Kansas and thinking of joining the Army when he cuts his finger on the four stars hanging from his shirt – I've got to get off the battlefield, he says to himself, it's just too confusing – as he looks out on the English Channel and tries to recall if he ever learned how to swim and a kid hands him the numbers lost and he jumps in the water and wonders if he ever had children? While he walks on the beach at Normandy with his son John who just graduated West Point, he can't remember if he's ever been to Europe although he feels as though he has, and he decides all this military showmanship has aged him immeasurably and suddenly he

is on the battlefield and a man is yelling "Elmo!" and the "Sesame Street character" appearing to him in a dream shows him childhood is not out of reach no doubt because "Sesame Street" doesn't even exist yet and he is seeing Asian people trying to kill him and he realizes this is a recurring theme as his son John who is now the admiral orders him back to the battlefield. As he sticks his head out the Army tank even though he is a Navy guy and way too old to be anywhere near a battlefield, he thinks I should watch my back as a bullet hits it and I should keep my head as some nut with a sword lops it off. It rolls away and he sees the minefield up ahead and he's rolling toward it and boom! His head explodes.

Who: This writer

When: November 2017

Where: Fort Tryon Park in northern Manhattan, where the Battle of Fort Washington was fought

Take the A train to 190th Street, and find Margaret Corbin Plaza. The plaza is one path into Fort Tryon Park. Here, the Battle of Fort Washington was fought. Here, immigrants reside peaceably with natives. Here live Himalayan pines, their long, dense blue needles reminiscent of a dark forest. And rare Franklinia trees, named for Benjamin Franklin, who by the time Margaret arrived at Fort Tryon was boarding a ship to sail from Philadelphia for France to negotiate an alliance and whose namesake tree seeds were

taken from the only place they grew back then, in the Altamaha River Valley in Georgia, white flowers unearthing a sunny yellow center. And English ivy, its glowing green, perfectly symmetrical veins spreading through the purple canvas of its leaf like a dragonfly in flight. They live peaceably with native oaks and white pines and American elms that have done battle with Dutch elm disease and, for now, have won, hundreds of trees and shrubs, an army of 5 million that people the streets and parks of New York City.

New York City embraced Margaret Corbin in the same way it folded its arms around immigrants from throughout the world. It has named a plaza in Hudson Heights for her. Historic signs in Fort Tryon Park overlooking the Hudson mark where she operated her cannon.

My brother Jack, who lives in Queens, calls me one day to tell me he has read a story in the New York Post. “Your Revolutionary War woman, she’s in the paper,” he reports. “They’re renaming a street for her.”

Where? I ask.

Brooklyn.

It is a nod to historic malleability and the capacity of women to fix whatever is broken. A street named for the Anti-Semitic robber baron Austin Corbin is now M. Corbin Place. Ten years earlier, a street in Manhattan Beach, also Corbin Place, and originally named for Austin Corbin, was renamed for Margaret.

In Fort Tryon Park, I stand in the face of the wind whipping, whirling, whooshing over the rocks stacking the hills above the Hudson River. As she dragged pails of water up to the Continental soldiers, Margaret would have seen the Hessians crawling up the steep hills, holding on to tree trunks, to limbs, to twigs if nothing else was available.

I imagine her on the outpost above the hills, a place where she could watch the Hudson run north and south, where she could see the eastern hills and the Harlem waters flow, where she could watch the Hessians and the British ascend. The wind whacked away, as if heaven was gathering all its breath and blowing the life from her. Leaves smacked her face, knife-edged, crisp-dried from chill autumn nights. Running, skittering along the curves of the cliffs alongside the musket ball and the cannon fire. She knew the hills were overrun. She knew she couldn't be taken by the Hessians. They were known for their mercilessness, their savagery. A woman? She wouldn't last a minute.

I see a plaque at 183rd Street, at Bennett Park, about a half mile south of where Margaret who have worked the cannon to hold off the Hessians. It reads

“This Memorial Marks the Site of

Fort Washington

Summer 1776 Built

Taken by British

Nov. 16, 1776”

The day Margaret fought.

The day Margaret fell.

Who: a young member of the Philadelphia Society of Women.

Where: The keeping room of a house in Buttermilk Falls, N.Y.

When: A Monday in the early 1790s, a few years after the American Revolution had ended

Melinda stands abruptly. We have been sitting for hours, and she has refrained from drinking to avoid needing to relieve herself. But the time has come. She calls for her maid, who carries the bourdalou. Melinda disappears behind a curtain with the vessel. In a moment, we hear rustling. The bourdalou emerges, attached to her hand. The maid takes it. More rustling. Melinda emerges, her skirts in slight disarray. She smooths them. I feel her glare sizzling through my silks. It is time to go, she whisper-hisses in my ear.

A little more time, I plead. The story is not done, not yet.

Who: The woman soldier

Where: The battle of Fort Washington in Northern Manhattan, on the cliffs above the Hudson

When: November 16, 1776, the beginning of the American Revolution

On November 16, General Washington and his company sailed over from the shore at New Jersey to talk with the obstreperous Colonel Magaw, a Philadelphia lawyer. Word had spread that Washington wanted the Continentals to retreat; he was at risk of losing

not only officers but trained artillerymen and their weapons. The risk was too great, his army too young, his own experience as a military leader still new.

On the north side alone, the Continentals had just two cannon to do battle. And just a few soldiers knew how to work the pieces. Without taking in account Margaret. Few knew that she could operate the cannon.

Magaw insisted the Continentals could hold the fort. Fort Washington was the Continental's last outpost in Manhattan. If it was overrun, British ships would control the Hudson and threaten the Continental stronghold at West Point.

When British General Howe sent his messenger to Fort Washington to demand unconditional surrender, Magaw shouted his retort to a gathering of Continental troops before sending the courier off with it. His words rang through the fort: "Actuated by the most glorious cause that mankind ever fought in, I am determined to defend this post to the very last extremity."

The men cheered.

Washington gave in to Magaw's insistence: there would be no retreat. The general shook Magaw's hand, and with his generals, hurried back down the hill, back to the shore of the Hudson, on to Fort Lee, across the river in New Jersey.

Suddenly, there was a flurry of activity among the men as they made their way down the slope toward the river. Washington turned and started back up the hill. His generals laid hands on him. The British and the Hessians were pouring into the fort. The generals yanked him back to the boat. They continued their trip across, General Washington continuing to turn his head, first downriver, then up toward his soldiers on the hill.

The shouts, the screams, the gunfire - the hills of upper Manhattan were overrun. Scores of Hessian ground troops swarmed up the hill on the north side. British frigates fired from the Hudson. Thousands of redcoats stormed the south and eastern hills, seemingly dropped from the sky.

A sentry rode in from the south.

“We are overwhelmed,” he cried. “For every one of us, there are three of the enemy!”

In less than two hours, the southern and eastern flanks of the fort collapsed.

As the Hessians scaled Forest Hill on the north, the Continental soldiers began to fire. The two cannons roared.

John shouted to Margaret to bring water. It had been scarce up on the mountain. Except for the paltry amount of rain they had seen, they had been forced to haul it up, with great exertion, from the farms below. There was not enough. There was never enough.

The Maryland and Virginia riflemen set their stances along the north side. John and the cannoneer, Richard McLennon, ran toward their cannon. Musket balls, capable of tearing a hole the size of a cast-iron frying pan, and grapeshot, which peppered the soldiers like a vengeful hailstorm, pummeled the two men.

Margaret watched as a musket ball flew through the air and found its target. The cannoneer was hit. She saw him rear back, then fall. She saw the soldiers flanking the cannon fall to the ground or in one case, run for cover. She heard, above the shooting and the screaming, John shouting to her “Come! Come! Margaret, come! You know the cannon better than I do!”

She did not know dead from wounded, but John needed her now, there was no time to quench thirst, stanch wounds, assess status. John moved to the cannoneer's position. She jumped to the other side. Together they worked the cannon for the better part of two hours, hammering the ball home, into the hundreds of Hessians snaking up the hillside. Cannons boomed. Muskets crackled. The wounded screamed.

Hundreds of Hessians fell. For a second, just a moment, there was a breath, until more soldiers crowded the slopes and John and Margaret returned to the pounding and clearing and hammering, rushing as the white smoke and the screams about them thickened.

Too few of us, too many of them, she thought. The enemy was moving toward her, the sun glinting off the brass plates of their tri-cornered caps, peering up from the trees to her cannons' perch on the hilltop. She saw a mass of men dragging a cannon in the woods below. She yelled to the riflemen. She yelled to John.

Just then, a hailstorm of grapeshot hit its mark.

She heard a scream. She turned.

No, no, she thought.

In her mind's eye, time's passage slowed. She watched John fall, floating to the ground amidst the white smoke. She saw his body crumble into a puddle of broken bone. She tried to cry out. But she made not a sound, so stupefied was she at the sight of her lover, a wound in his chest the size of two cannonballs, blood pumping from the hole where his heart had been. She had never seen so much blood, never seen his face contorted in so ghastly a fashion.

She stood but a moment. It seemed an eternity. Then she gathered her wits and ran to him.

“John? John! Pray, do not leave me!”

She could barely hear her own words. He moaned. Wounded soldiers, arms akimbo, legs blown off, wailed in agony, like a pack of dogs baying at the moon. The remaining cannon boomed. The rat-a-tat-tat of the Maryland and Virginia rifles crashed into the Hessian grapeshot mid-air.

“Save yourself,” he gasped. “Save our child.”

How had he known?

He breathed a shallow breath. She heard no more.

The only way she would leave this battle would be with him, she thought. But he had made his departure valiantly. *What had she been thinking? That she could fight this fight without him? Alone?*

She lay beside his body. She buried her face in the blood-soaked earth beside the smoking cannon, and wept.

Musket balls flew by her as in a dream. Grapeshot dropped behind and beside her, but failed to strike. She breathed in the scene. Bodies were strewn about like rag dolls. Holes gaped in their heads, tattered scraps of pink skin flapped in the wind, bloodied hollows showed where legs once linked to hip. Smoke stung her eyes. The perfume of rotting flesh punctured her nostrils.

She vomited on her coat.

The forced upending of her stomach contents shook her from her stupor. She joggled her head fiercely about, startling herself into motion. She pushed her weight onto her arms, and struggled to her feet, her jacket sagging with blood and vomit. She shivered. She pulled the jacket closed, and hoisted the bucket.

The pounding of footfalls broke her newfound concentration. A voice of authority commanded, “retire this cannon!”

Two soldiers appeared to pull the cannon to retreat. She hauled herself up to her full height, saw through the smoke the disapproving face of a Maryland colonel, and stared him down.

I have lost too much. My father, my mother, my home, my love. What have I left but this last devotion, of freedom, of fairness, of country?

“I am the mistress of this cannon!” she cried.

The captain measured the moment, decided he would most possibly never conquer this obstinate woman, and shouted, “Margaret Corbin, God bless you for what bravery you may summon in our defense.” Then he disappeared.

--

Her desperation overtakes her.

I must stop fretting, she silently admonishes herself. But what is a woman who does not fret? I know of no such creature.

But I am as able as a man. I know this cannon, and it knows me. I must focus on the task.

What am I thinking? I cannot do this.

What am I thinking? I can. I must.

She rapidly reviews: *secure the side ammunition boxes. Take hold of the dragropes to ensure the gun’s recoil. Left side: dress the cannon. Right side: dress the cannon. Clear the vent. Sponge. Ram the cartridge. Prime the piece. Aim.*

Fire!

The shot smashes through the trees, bouncing off branches, skittering along the ground, making the attackers dance. She rushes to the front to clear, sponge, ram, prime and aim, heaves the cannonball into the hole, and rushes back to light the fire. The shot clears another line.

She speeds back and forth, a murderous madwoman working her machinery. The Hessians advance. She fires. They fall.

Spider after spider collapses before her cannon.

Her weapon, perched atop this high hill, has laid waste to so many Hessians that their officers take note. They see the woman in the soldier's coat, a cap upon her head, massacring their own.

They drag 10 cannons through the woods. They aim upward, toward hers.

Load, fire, clear; load, fire, clear. She cannot see them. She is too consumed with her task. She does not hear them. No matter, she knows no German.

The order roars forth: "*Ready, aim, fire!*"

And fire they do, in unison, a battering ram of grapeshot, booming, screaming, crackling. It forms a tempest of which she has not yet endured, has never endured, and when it reaches her it is as though the fires of hell are upon her.

She is clearing the mouth of the cannon when the lightning strikes. It slams her back into the piece. Her left side is on fire.

She screams, an agonized howl of pain and protest piercing the white smoke. She clutches the cannon, sleek with blood and ash. She struggles to keep upright.

But her left arm, her strong arm, where has it gone? She looks at where she is willing it to be. Nothing.

She looks down at the thin thread that now binds her arm to her shoulder, a dangling mass of tendrils and blood. Next to it is the dank hole where her breast, her once-perfect breast, lived, blasted into the darkness of her dashed hopes.

She slides onto the ground, writhing in a torrent of blood. A burning sears her face; she reaches up to touch her skin. She feels shreds of hanging flesh.

She gasps for breath. Around her are the dead and dying, bloodied beyond recognition except for the color of their coats. When she is able to finally draw a breath, it hangs heavy with the smell of decaying flesh, of smoke, of vomit. She vomits again, and lays in the puddle of it.

But she still has her right arm; she tries to push up on it to see what was happening before her. It has no purchase; it collapses onto itself.

She lies on her back, sobbing, the tears rolling down the side of her eyes into her matted hair, into the cap he had pinned so lovingly about her head, into the dirt defiled with death and blood and the meager remains of her breakfast.

She hears a noise; it is his voice.

“John?” she whispers. “Are you here?”

Dear God, she thinks. He hasn't left me after all. He has come back to take me with him.

She lay there then, quietly, waiting to die.

Who: a young member of the Philadelphia Society of Women.

Where: The keeping room of a house in Buttermilk Falls, N.Y.

When: A Monday in the early 1790s, a few years after the American Revolution had ended

Melinda has fallen asleep. I am weeping. The woman soldier slumps in her chair, her pipe fallen to the floor. Rum slackens what bone remains to hold together her face, a wretched surface where tears drip one by one down her cheeks and fall into the chasm of the hole that was once her mouth. We have sat for hours, she and I, bound in the wound of an embrace both horrifying and heroic. No matter what words I chose now, they cannot – will not – matter. She has left me for good, bleeding but not bloodless, dying but not dead, in the purgatory where souls wander for infinity, seeking those they loved and those they lost.

I stand. I bend to pick up the pipe, which I deposit upon the table next to her glass. She is unmoving. I tug at Melinda's arm. Come, I say. It is time to go. Melinda sets her hands on her skirts and rises, mumbles a complaint, and stumbles toward the chair where Mrs. Randall set our wraps. I stand before the woman soldier. Thank you, I say to her, words unheard and unheeded. But I want it out there, in the fiery skies of the darkening day.

My gratitude.

Melinda is chosen to give the report to the board; I am too young, too new a member to be believed. She details the outer presentation of the woman soldier: drunken, a wretch

dressed head to toe in rags, her pipe abominable, her words vulgar. She is a living memorial to the reason why women should not be soldiers, Melinda says. She is an abomination to all that we hold dear in womanhood. We would be best to forget she ever existed.

And we do. We put her aside, and pretend she did not live. Except for my notes, which I have kept and when I have children, will place in their possession for posterity. At some point, perhaps, when more compassionate minds prevail, the heroism of Margaret Cochran Corbin will be remembered.

Who: This writer

Where: Highland Falls, N.Y., in the Hudson River highlands

When: November 2016

On a rainy November day, I drive down Route 9W in Highland Falls, New York, until a sign on the eastern side of the curving roadway stops me. Blue, with a gold rim and gold lettering, it reads “CAPTAIN MOLLY

Margaret Corbin, Heroine

Of the Battle of Fort

Washington, Passed Her Last

Days on the Former J.P. Morgan

Estate, near here”

And in tiny print on the bottom “Town of Highlands Historical Society”

The sign is planted in front of a 1950's brick duplex, at the corner of Rose Drive. Beside the sign sits another one. "Cragston," it reads. The name of the farm when Margaret Corbin lived on it, and the name of the estate once the financier J.P. Morgan bought it in the mid-1800s, long after Margaret had died. Her unmarked grave survived, though, on the property.

I turn down a winding road to a cul-de-sac. I park the car and walk a few feet until I am standing on a cliff overlooking the majestic Hudson River. Below, the waters of the Hudson shimmer like diamonds. Across the river I see mansions, clearings, a thickly carpeted evergreen and orange forest of pines, maples, and oaks. I look around me, at the lands where Margaret Corbin spent her last days, in a tiny house on this property, alone, in pain, for the most part forgotten.

The stone castles of West Point are a mile north. More than 250 years ago, West Point was a fort, built to keep the British at bay. Margaret had been delivered there as part of the all-male Invalid Regiment, to guard supplies and free up able-bodied men for fighting. She was a shell of her former self, a worn military-issue soldier's coat hiding ragged linen shifts, chestnut hair askew, her body bent from its wounds.

I check in to the inn on site, then head into town to find dinner. Main Street in Highland Falls, the town where West Point resides, is deserted. The restaurant I choose is quiet; a diner is seated in the casual section, red-checked tablecloths a perennial symbol of the country of Italian restaurants. A older woman approaches me. "Hello," she says with kindness. I reply in kind. "Can I eat here? I'm allergic to all milk products – cheese, butter, milk, cream."

This seems absurd. I am in an Italian restaurant in New York, where even airborne parmesan threatens. But she surprises. “Of course,” she says with what borders on glee. “We will take care of you,” and she quasi-adopts me, ushering me into the white-table-clothed room, bringing me water and a waiter, assuring me I am safe here.

And I think of Margaret, struggling along these streets, cold, sad, partly maddened with the still-raw agony of her horrific wounds. Her heart bloodied with loss. Her worth affronted by the indignity of her inability to fend for herself. She was the epitome of the walking wounded, because for all the war took, it left her with working legs.

I imagine her alone in her one-room cabin, only months before she leaves this earth and all its woundings. She steps out in a small clearing, stumbles over the ramshackle log bridge that spans the brook, and makes her way toward the cliffs. The woods envelope and shelter her, make no judgments, rejoice in each dawn. She holds onto the tree limbs as she struggles up the bluff to the clearing, stopping every so often to catch her breath.

The pains have grown worse, piercing her chest, doubling her over. Her muscles cramp, long, drawn-out agonies that feel as though a fist has clamped down on them and are wrenching them from their sockets, twisting and tearing until she gasps.

She steps to the edge of the cliff, breaths deeply. The river usually flowed north to south except here it crashed west, to the west point of Martelaer’s Rock. Then it forged east, and straightened out again beyond where she could safely see. The stone fortifications along the river that had been erected to stave off the British were a work of

mastery, she thinks. Despite her life's darkness, she has come to love the twists and turns of the winsome river.

She walks to the mountain brook that tumbles over the cliff's stones, between the hills and the mountain ridges, and marvels at the blue waters as they turn to white. They flow over huge boulders of granite as they hurl down to the surface of the river, frothing furiously. So foaming white are they that when the explorer Henry Hudson first saw the rushing waters, he called them "Boter Melck." Buttermilk Falls.

She stands before the cliffs each morning, stooped, arm dangling by her side, face and body mangled beyond any recognition of womanhood, a lone figure in the wilderness between earth and sky. The sun, the moon, the small creatures of the earth had the courage to look her straight in the eye. Otherwise, few.

As kind as so many have tried to be, she knows that behind their masks they pity her and her fractured physique. They talk of her and her oddities when she is elsewhere. They sneer at her insufferability. And what was insufferability but an unwillingness to abide the incessant agonies, the indignities? Still, she is aware of her unpleasant nature. She misses her gaiety, her wit, her spontaneity. But they are long gone, frivolities particular to beautiful young women, not withered wrecks.

She gazes out along the river. No longer beautiful, she still knew beauty when she saw it. The Hudson, the cliffs, the sea-blue sky, beauty of the kind she knew and loved. And this beauty loved her back.

One day, when her sufferings had ceased, she would lie within its womb and be one again with the earth.

Who: The Daughters of the American Revolution

Where: Highland Falls, N.Y., formerly Buttermilk Falls

When: Margaret dies, is forgotten, and is rediscovered in 1926

In 1800, Margaret died. A contingent of acquaintances from Highland Falls buried her in a box under the dirt of the farm where she had been living, in an unmarked grave. For 126 years, shaded by a cedar tree and then guarded by its stump, her grave lay silent, untouched, except for the ministrings of J.P. Morgan's gardener in the mid 1800s, who lovingly tended the lavender blues of the periwinkle that proliferated around the site. He didn't know for whom he was caring. But he did it anyway.

In 1926, six years after American women woman won their hard-fought right to vote, a phone rang in the house of Frances Tupper Nash. Mrs. Tupper Nash was the respected, indomitable, kind, and persevering head of the New York state division of the Daughters of the American Revolution. She knew how to get people moving.

The call concerned a certain Margaret Corbin, a so-called Revolutionary War heroine. Did Mrs. Tupper Nash know that Margaret Corbin was supposedly buried somewhere in Highland Falls? Did she know anything about Margaret Corbin? Did she care?

Of course she did. Within hours she had compiled a committee: her right-hand in the DAR, Mrs. Alton Brooks Parker. Dr. Dixon Ryan Fox, a professor of history at Columbia University. Peter Nelson, of the division of Archives and History at the New York State Department of Education. They talked others into helping. And then they all went to work.

They unearthed records. They found that Margaret Corbin had fought fiercely at the Battle of Fort Washington in Manhattan. They found that she was horrifically wounded and became the first woman named as a member of the Army's Invalid Regiment. They found that she was the first woman to be granted a military pension from the United States Army, \$6 a month and a new suit of clothes – a soldier's clothes, made for a man – every year.

Perhaps of most interest, they found a man, a Captain Faurot, who was a retired ship's officer. He told them his grandfather had shared stories of burying Margaret Corbin, on a bitterly cold day in November in 1800. He told them, too, that his grandfather had shown him the grave. Captain Faurot knew just where she lay.

Mrs. Tupper Nash was an ambitious woman, ambitious for all who had served in the American Revolution, and flush from women gaining the vote, particularly ambitious for the women who had risked their lives in its cause. She boldly stated her intention: she wanted Margaret Corbin buried at West Point. Where, at that point, only dead male soldiers lay. Margaret Corbin was a soldier of the United States Army and an acknowledged heroine of a battle of the American Revolution, Mrs. Tupper Nash said. Her bones belonged in a military cemetery.

On March 16, 1926, a day when gray clouds filled the sky, when the wind cut through the wool overcoats and fat hats that were the fashion of the day, a contingent of the passionately involved and the just plain curious chugged over to the old farm in their Chevrolets and their Chryslers, and possibly one of the brand-new Cadillac touring cars with the whitewall tires and the convertible cloth top. They thrashed through thickets, wended around trees, and mucked through mud until they found the site, marked by a

simple wooden cross and a rough headstone missing a name, by the stump of the cedar tree.

One man wielded a shovel, another a camera. Standing in a newly dug hole, recorded for posterity in a black-and-white photo, was a hatless Edward Hagan Hall, wielding a shovel. Once he unearthed the box and opened it, there lay bones, neatly arrayed.

Mr. Hall and his helpers gathered the bones up and brought them to West Point. A surgeon there took them, to verify, as much as he possibly could with the tools that he had then, that they were indeed Margaret Corbin, heroine of the Battle of Fort Washington.

After a time, he called Mrs. Tupper Nash. The skeleton had suffered, in life, a severe wound to the face, he said. The left arm was useless, dangling. And the left breast was nearly gone from a musket shot. To him, he said, this was definitive proof the skeleton that had lain anonymously in the grave all those years at Cragston was indeed that of Margaret Corbin.

Who: This writer

Where: Upstate New York

When: Late winter 2017

The campus of West Point is about a mile from Cragston. One day I drive over to the Visitors Center. I fill out the paperwork for a pass to the cemetery, then sit in a plastic chair in front of a desk supporting a computer and an unsmiling officer who is furiously

tapping on a keyboard. For the first few minutes I sit calmly, surveying the landscape of four sheet-rocked walls and rows upon rows of plastic chairs like the one in which I am sitting. I begin fidget. Then I remind myself that if I fidget I look as though I am guilty, of what I don't know, but guilty nonetheless. I stop fidgeting. I sit on my hands. I think back to when I was a child at St. Teresa of Avila elementary school in Queens, twisting into a pretzel in an effort to soothe my itches and stanch anxiety.

Finally, the officer hands me a paper card. "Where am I going?" I ask. He points west. Down the road, make a right. I drive down the road, I make the right, and there, spread before me, is the commanding campus of West Point.

Stone castles and run-on brick buildings loom to the left, the storming Hudson to the right. I stop at a gate to have my card checked. The officer waves me on. I stop at a second gate to have my card checked. This officer walks alongside my car, peering into the windows, strolling to the rear, peering into more windows. I crane my neck into the rear seats to remind myself of what the car is carrying: my backpack, random empty grocery bags for the next time I go to Whole Foods, three umbrellas I acquired in questionable ways. "Go to the end of Washington Street," he says finally. "The cemetery is on your right."

I pull into a circular drive, at the rear of which stands a massive stone chapel flanked by four majestic Doric columns. To the right of the chapel, and behind it, acres on acres of gravestones roll out before me, down the hill and beyond.

And there, to the left, close to the road, is a field, empty, except for one monument. A wild turkey struts about the field, every few minutes spreading its feathers into a striped, multi-layered parasol. It cranes its neck, as if searching. I stood for a moment, watching

it, wondering if turkeys were a typical sight at West Point. “Margaret, is that you?” I say, not too loudly, to the strutting visitor.

Upon a granite monument twice my size, etched onto a bronze plaque adorning the face, reads:

“ IN - MEMORY - OF
- MARGARET CORBIN -
A - HEROINE - OF - THE - REVOLUTION
KNOWN - AS - CAPTAIN - MOLLY
1751-1800”

It went on to detail her birth, her role in the Battle of Fort Washington, her wounds, her death. Then it said,

“IN - APPRECIATION - OF - HER - DEEDS - FOR - THE - CAUSE - OF - LIBERTY
AND - THAT - HER - HEROISM - MAY - NOT - BE - FORGOTTEN
HER - DUST - WAS - REMOVED - TO - THIS - SPOT - AND - THIS - MEMORIAL
ERECTED - BY
THE - NATIONAL - SOCIETY - OF - THE - DAUGHTERS - OF - THE
AMERICAN - REVOLUTION - IN - NEW - YORK - STATE
1926.”

The turkey plunkered by. I watched it leave, grander in her step than any wild turkey I had ever seen. I thought of the spat over the wild turkey vs. the bald eagle when the founders were naming our national symbol, how Benjamin Franklin had called the bald eagle “lazy” and the turkey “a bird of courage.”

I turned back to Margaret's grave. I ran my fingers over the bronze lettering, acknowledged the small stones that visitors had left on the ledge of the granite, pondered the engraving, above the words, of a woman in battle.

I turned to leave. The turkey was gone. The wind was behind my back as I walked back to the car. Finally, I thought, I was free of my quest, knowing that in a field in the midst of this fortress, Margaret Corbin was at rest, in peace, at home with her fellow fallen heroes.

Or was she?

The phone rang late one evening. I was sitting in bed, reading Cormac McCarthy's murderous "Blood Meridian," a novel that takes place in the 1850s on the Texas-Mexico border.

On the other side of the line was Patrice Birner, the N.Y. state DAR historian.

Jane, Jane, how are you? This is Patrice. I thought you would want to know

Know what, Patrice?

The air, already still, froze in time. The footfalls in the apartment above held as though waiting for the words. The voice on the phone stammered its news.

The bones, in the graveyard at West Point, the ones in Margaret Corbin's grave?

Yes?

They aren't hers, Patrice says. They aren't Margaret Corbin's bones.

What?

We are both silent for a moment.

Whose bones are in the grave? I ask.

A tall 19th century male, she says. Work was being done in the cemetery and the Army was concerned that Margaret's bones might be disturbed, so officials decided to dig them up. While they were seeing daylight, the bones were forensically tested and found to not be Margaret's.

Could it be true? Or is the U.S. Army divesting itself of Margaret? Have they read the post that I read implying she was a prostitute? I'd rather have a courageous prostitute fighting for me than a cowardly soldier. I immediately call my friend at the Highland Falls Historical Society.

What do you think? I ask her. She says she thinks it is fishy. But who is going to fight the U.S. Army?

Patrice sends me a press release from the U.S. Army. It reads:

“ During a crypt installation project in 2016, a construction contractor used excavation equipment inside the burial section around Corbin's gravesite, causing a significant disturbance to the buried remains. The Army immediately directed that all excavation stop and secured the site. The remains were recovered by the Army Corps of Engineers Chief Archeologist Michael “Sonny” Trimble, Ph.D. The recovered remains were then fully examined by State University of New York - Binghamton Forensics Anthropologist Elizabeth DiGangi, Ph.D.

Her examination determined that the remains were biologically consistent with a tall, middle-aged man alive between the colonial period and 19th century. The report says:

“Therefore, the remains are not that of Corbin, but rather an unknown male. The entire area around the gravesite was searched with a ground-penetrating radar with no

additional findings. The remains of the unknown were reinterred at the West Point Cemetery.”

I call Elizabeth DiGiangi at the State University of New York in Binghamton. I email her too. I ask her to tell me how the process worked, and was she absolutely certain about it? She sent me an email in return:

“Thanks very much for your messages. It’s great that your thesis is about Molly Corbin. However, you would need to obtain permission from the Army before I could talk to you about my involvement.” --- Dr. DiGangi

I punch in the number for West Point.

The search continues.

How do we chose to remember
Or forget?
We draw pictures
Write stories
Form clubs
Make a day.
Build monuments.
Put up road signs.
Pave a road.

A plaque on a stone set in a hillside
where you stood
astride a cannon.
Trees grow over it, shelter it.
Hide it.

A golden plate set upon granite. Towering
In a field
alone.
A turkey trots by. Spreads
Its plumage. Stops.
Does it know where your bones are?

They are not here.

A sign on a country road.
Who is that? A child asks.
I don't know. A mother answers.
Maybe we should look it up
On the Internet.

A grand circle near the French convent
Clutching the hillside
Over the highway
Where we drive.
Your name upon it.
Near the plaque set in stone
on the hillside
Miles from the golden plate
The sign on the country road
The secret place
Where your bones rest
Or stir in awkward moments
As you hear your name
Again
And again
And then
Who?
Who?

Still she wanders, seeking what she lost - in the hills of Pennsylvania, on the heights of Manhattan and Highland Falls. Her heartache is our heartache, her loss our loss. But wherever she is, she must know that some of us remember.

A golden memorial stands at West Point, in Highland Falls, N.Y., steps from the cliffs of the Hudson, dedicated to Margaret Corbin. Further south, a grand plaza in Hudson Heights, at the northern tip of Manhattan and above the jagged rocks that flank the Hudson, carries her name. Numerous plaques in New York and Pennsylvania, in

buildings and in parks, honor her existence. Now two streets in Brooklyn - originally named for a famous man - carry her name too.

The real story of Margaret Corbin may never be known. But her name – and her deed – will echo in the hearts of courageous women and men everywhere. In the countryside and in the cities, she lives.
