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## What Belongs

“We might even be kissing cousins,” Merry Gibbs says in a wondering voice.

Henry Estes likes the sound of that; he likes the route her long legs take to get down to business with the ground, and he also likes what he sees coming *and* going as Merry agrees to try and sweet-talk her granddad into giving him more than the time of day.

Merry’s granddad remains full of suspicion behind his living room curtains, checking up on Henry every few minutes but unwilling to step outside.

“Granddad is really the one you want to talk to,” Merry says. “He’s been around forever and a day. And he’s full of stories about our family history.”

Henry’s enchantment with Merry gives way to another excitement: he may have found a living link. The rule of thumb is your

grandfather's grandfather — that's how far back most of us can claim memories. Merry's granddad is well into his eighties, and that puts him in the ballpark.

Henry is a doctoral student in Afro-American studies; it would be too much to hope for, but this Mr. Gibbs might even be a direct descendant of Mifflin Wistar Gibbs — the key subject of his dissertation. While researching his subject, he came across an interesting sidebar: in 1858, Mifflin Gibbs led a delegation of thirty-five blacks from San Francisco to Victoria, "to evaluate the prospects of employment and settlement in the newly created territory of British Columbia."

The Governor, James Douglas, gave his personal assurance that the black settlers would be "granted all the same rights and protection as all other citizens." On the strength of this assurance, several hundred blacks left San Francisco determined to seize the opportunity.

Mifflin Wistar Gibbs was a resourceful entrepreneur who soon made a considerable fortune in the early gold rush days of British Columbia. Gibbs had great success as a merchant, contractor and property developer. He served as treasurer on the first Victoria city council; he helped negotiate the entry of the new province of British Columbia into the Canadian Confederation. Mifflin Gibbs lived in Victoria for more than a decade, and on his return to the United States he had several other successful careers: he became a lawyer and registrar of new lands; he was the first black to be appointed as a judge in Arkansas, and indeed U.S. history. Towards the end of his long and distinguished life, Mifflin Gibbs was accorded another honour; he was appointed to the diplomatic post of United States Consul to Madagascar.

Henry Estes' academic interest is spurred by a personal connection: he is from Oakland, and his ancestors were almost certainly among the settlers. His thesis is in part an attempt to retrace the route that Gibbs and the settlers took, his research has veered off into an inquiry: what became of the settlers? why are there so few footprints?

## SCOTLAND, 1815

"When you sought my hand, you showed me only a sweet face and soft words, but now I see how truly stubborn a husband I am saddled with."

Jessie Hamilton's marriage to John Douglas is off to a rocky start. Her first task is to reacquaint her new husband with the manners and customs of his native Scotland.

"You cannot expect me to welcome your three bastards with open arms, and raise them in our very house, John Douglas?"

"I'll hear no such talk," John Douglas says. "These are my children, they will be treated as such, and raised in accordance with my wishes."

"Something has to be done." Jessie matches her new husband's wooden stare with practicality. "There is still some fair hope of acceptance for the two younger children, but the older boy shares your temper. He is sullen, and he is *dark*."

"James is a serious boy." John Douglas takes pride in his son. "He will not be a burden to you much longer, I've already made arrangements to send him away to Lanark for schooling."

Jessie is greatly relieved to hear this news. James is only twelve, and yet he is possessed of such a strong will that she greatly fears his influence on the two younger children, and indeed on his father.

"And after Lanark? What then?" Jessie will not admit to being a scheming sort of woman, but she feels the stir of new life in her womb, and she has already given some considerable thought to the protection of the interests of her future offspring.

"James will make his way in the world," John Douglas assures her. "His future holds as many possibilities as the sky holds stars; perhaps he will return to the Guianas and claim his birthright. Or perhaps he will make his way to a new frontier."

"At least speak to him about his surly manners," Jessie insists. Her husband has been away in the world, and perhaps he is right, perhaps there are places where bloodlines are of no consideration? But Scotland is not one of them. And Jessie resolves to do

everything in her power to make sure that her unwanted stepson's destiny unfolds in some faraway land.

John Douglas sighs with exasperation; he has spent many long years away in the Guianas in pursuit of his family's sugar interests. He has neither patience nor the need for the approbation of society. But for the ready sake of harmony with his new bride, he will speak to James before he leaves for Lanark.

"I am sure that I will like Lanark even less than this house, Father," James says with quiet certainty.

"It's a foolish man who rushes to judgement without first taking the time to look for himself," John Douglas tempers his advice to his headstrong son.

"Why do they say that I am too dark?" James queries his father. "Why is the matter of the colour of my skin of any consequence to anyone?"

"Only fools judge a man by outward appearance," John Douglas replies, hearing the hurt and confusion in his son. "What you hold in your heart is the true measure of a man."

"They say that my mother was once a slave?" James reveals more of the hurtful insults. "They also say, that since you never married my mother, I am to be a bastard always and forever."

"Your mother was the freest woman that I have ever know in my life, and the most beautiful," John Douglas states with absolute conviction.

"You are like her," John Douglas gives his son courage to take with him to school at Lanark. "You are a Scot West Indian. You are a new sort of man, James. You are the best of both worlds."

VICTORIA, 2005

"You want to go to the Ross Bay cemetery?" Merry quizzes. "Do you always take your dates with you to such places?"

"Are we on a date?" Henry mocks surprise.

“We had better be on a date, mister.” Merry sets him straight. “I didn’t get all nice for nothing. You want some of my picnic lunch? You’d best bring out your best manners. I want doors opened, and please and thank you, Merry, every step of the way.”

“I would never dream of treating you in any other way.” Henry catches on quick, he hurries ahead to hold the door to his rental car open for her. What could be more perfect than going to see where the dead are buried with the most alive woman he has met in the longest forever?

“What exactly are we looking for?” Merry asks.

“Headstones,” Henry Estes has not done much field research, but he has some textbook notions. “We want names, year of birth, year of death. I’ve been down to your provincial archives. I can’t say they were helpful, and I will say that they were downright suspicious. I didn’t present the right credentials. I got me some of that famous Canadian politeness. But I did manage to get a list of names.

“Several lists in fact. I got a list of newly registered voters. And I got a list of new citizens. Do you know that the militia — the first police force of Victoria — was composed entirely of blacks? ‘The African Rifles.’ They were a local attraction. People would turn out on Sunday afternoons to watch them do their drills. But I’ve yet to see one black face among your current police.”

“Why would something like that even be a bother to you?” Merry wonders.

“Black and white don’t go together, in Oakland, we keep to our own lanes.” Henry’s laughter doesn’t cover his unease with this topic. Merry thinks it’s way too early in the day to be so prickly, and she knows an easy way to change the subject.

“Tell me more about your Mr. Gibbs?” Merry asks.

“Mifflin Wistar Gibbs should be an American icon.” Henry warms up fast when it comes to pitching his thesis topic. “His life had more twists and improbable turns, more rags-to-riches adventures than even Horatio Alger at his syrupy best could have penned. Gibbs was born in Philadelphia, in 1823. He was active in

the Underground Railroad, and in the abolition movement. And he was a close friend of the famous orator, Frederick Douglass.”

Henry hopes that all his scholarship is making a favourable impression on Merry, and her smile is all the encouragement Henry needs.

“In 1850, Gibbs moved out west to San Francisco. He was a skilled carpenter by then, but prejudice wouldn’t allow him to practise that trade. He became a shoe shiner. That’s how he made a start on his fortune, shining shoes for ’49ers in front of the Union Hotel in San Francisco. Pretty soon he and his partner — Lester — owned an Emporium for fine boots and shoes, imported from as far away as Paris and London.

“There were plenty of opportunities in California back then, but it could all be taken away by force, or with the stroke of a pen. When a ‘poll tax’ was imposed on black businesses, Mifflin Gibbs refused to pay and his goods were confiscated for sale at a mock auction. He became a ‘circuit rider’ for equal justice, travelling up and down the state and organizing opposition to the ‘Black Laws.’ By the mid 1850s, Gibbs was publisher of the *Mirror of the Times*, an abolitionist newspaper. When the call went out for settlers in the new northern territory of British Columbia, Mifflin Gibbs led a delegation to check it out.

“Who sent out the call?” Merry asks.

“Turns out, it was the Governor himself,” Henry says. “Now why would a Governor way up here in Victoria, extend an invitation to a group of blacks all the way down there in San Francisco?”

## FORT ST. JAMES, 1825

“Do you favour your mother or your father?” James Douglas enquires.

“Am I Indian or Scottish?” Amelia Connolly correctly deduces his meaning. “I am neither.” Amelia has given this very question some considerable thought. “Why sometimes I think I must be a new sort of person.”