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## LONDON, 1777

In the damp, windowless room David Thompson ate a thin soup that had limped along for a week, bolstered daily by one of his mother's desperate inventions (roots scrounged from the park, offal from the market). Her Welsh voice sang him to sleep each night, the clotted musical syllables lulling him. David was seven and had little memory of his father, who had died five years earlier. He dreamed of food, roasted turkey and potatoes, of heat. With his gift for numbers, a gift that had emerged even before his formal schooling began, he calculated when the soup would be gone, based on volume and the number of people it had to feed (one adult, two children). The answer appeared not as a figure but as an image, a fixed point in time with his family sitting at the desolate table.

It was autumn when his mother took him by the hand and they walked to the Grey Coat School of London near Westminster Abbey, a school that took the orphaned and indigent. They walked

for more than an hour, their breath visible in the air, his mother talking the whole way, giving him a list of rules to live by: take the Christian path, avoid cold baths, be polite, practise thrift. Observe people closely and respond to them in kind. Don't eat foreign meats, wear a scarf, shun prostitutes and alcohol, read what you can. Never forsake your God, especially when it appears that He has forsaken you.

She left him in the care of an appropriately grey woman with a mournful face. Before leaving she buried her face against her son's shoulder, holding him for several minutes, squeezing the last of him before turning to go, walking quickly away on the dark cobblestones, hollowed in a way that hunger alone hadn't accomplished.

The young David tried to ignore the cruelties of the headmistress and the other children, and adapted happily to the food, which was coarse but regular. He slept on a pillow of such rough material that it chafed his face. But he loved the books that were now available to him. Once this world was opened, he stayed in it whenever he could, reading *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Another world, a world uninhabited by the other children, was opened with numbers. As he walked in Grey Coat's field he counted the paces it took to cover its periphery and calculated the number of steps it would take to walk to Wales. He assessed the school population, counting the number of teachers and figuring out how many strokes of the cane were delivered per teacher per student per week (eleven).

Thompson observed the other boys. Busby wept each night; Wright was quarrelsome; Donner clever; Oliphant melancholy and unreliable; McWhey an untrustworthy ferret eager to report the misdeeds of others, a natural cleric. Thompson spent most of his holidays in Westminster Abbey, reading the inscriptions—"The shortness of the span of life forbids us to cherish remote hope; already night overtakes thee"—or wandering the cloisters, or sitting in his favourite place, the Henry VII chapel. On a day

that drizzled rain, he watched a grave being dug, the shovelfuls of earth containing bone from the many dead that lay beneath the abbey, their bodies mingled with one another and the earth. The gravedigger had stringy hair and rotting teeth. He paused at his shovel and stared up at Thompson.

“Shall I dig one for you?” he said, and laughed.

In school they recited the names of the kings in order and studied their noble acts but none of their idiosyncrasies: the drunkenness, sexual peculiarities, physical deformities, mental shortcomings, inclinations toward incest or madness, their lack of both divinity and commonness. The great men were mourned by a nation that had only ever seen likenesses of them, portraits commissioned to flatter, the small corpses eclipsed by monument.

In April 1784, the Hudson’s Bay Company sent a representative to Grey Coat looking for employees to work in the New World. Thompson was fourteen, a candidate. The Bay man was large and dark haired, with a deep voice, and as he surveyed the children in the field the teachers gave him brief profiles of boys they thought might be useful, inflating their abilities and neglecting their inadequacies. The Bay man watched them run stupidly in a herd, and pointed to Thompson.

“He has a facility with numbers and a gift for solitude,” the teacher said.

Thompson was summoned and the Bay man looked at him, at his small shoulders and his face with its lack of cunning. Thompson stared up at the man, who smelled of sour clothes.

“Do you love adventure, boy?” he asked, baring his small grey teeth.

“Yes sir.”

“Do you believe there are monsters at the edge of the world?”

“No sir.”

“Well, there are.”

Behind the Bay man, shapes began to move quietly on the horizon, striped circles that rose up from the dark spires of London. Thompson saw Busby pointing, his normally slack mouth even slacker. He followed Busby's finger to a sky filled with round balloons, bulbous on top, tapering down, each one carrying a basket. From the baskets, people waved and shouted. The hot-air balloons bobbed along the skyline, drifting east. They were madly incongruous with anything Thompson knew, the opposite of the sober facts and numbers that the teachers hammered into him. People flying through the air—the most wondrous thing he had ever seen! People could look down and see the world as God did. Thompson counted the balloons (twenty-nine), noted their colours, and observed their speed. Would they float to China? Could they continue around the world? How could you steer a round vessel that was moved by only wind? Perhaps you simply let nature guide you to whatever land it chose.

The Bay man watched the striped parade hovering over the city. "Foolishness," he said.

He spoke to seven boys, and in the end chose two. The other boy ran away when he realized the immensity of the task.

They sailed in May. Thompson imagined that the ship would sail to a magical portal on the horizon, and that on the other side would be a Gulliver world. Captain Cook's map of the world had just been published. Mankind knew the boundaries now, and had only to fill in the spaces. Cook himself had died five years earlier, and Oliphant had described the event with his usual authority: "Blackbeard drew his sword and cut off Cook's head, and Cook's mouth kept talking for an hour, a stream of pure filth."

The truth wasn't much less fanciful. Cook was killed on the Sandwich Islands by natives who had watched the large white-sailed ships congregate off their shore and regarded with suspicion the pale men who came to the beach in small boats. They didn't smell like gods. The natives were wary of friendship and indifferent to trade. They slaughtered Cook and his men and

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broiled them over a fire on the perfect white sand, and then ate their fears.

As the Hudson's Bay ship moved slowly away from England, Thompson wrote in his journal: *In the month of May, 1784 at the Port of London, I embarked in the ship Prince Rupert belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company, as apprentice and clerk to the said company, bound for Churchill Factory. I bid a long and sad farewell to my noble, my sacred country, an exile forever.*