

NANTUCKET LEGACY
BOOK TWO

MINDING
THE *LIGHT*

SUZANNE
WOODS
FISHER



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To Peter Foulger (1617–1690), grandfather to
Benjamin Franklin, spiritual mentor to
Mary Coffin Starbuck, and mayhap,
the first American Renaissance man.

Cast of Characters

17th century

Mary Coffin Starbuck: daughter of one of the first proprietors of Nantucket Island, highly revered, likened to Deborah the Judge of the Old Testament

Tristram Coffin: proprietor of Nantucket Island, father of Mary, husband of Dionis

Nathaniel Starbuck: son of proprietor Edward Starbuck, husband to Mary

Catherine Starbuck: Nathaniel's mother, married to Edward Starbuck

Esther Starbuck: Nathaniel's younger sister

Jethro Starbuck: Nathaniel's younger brother

Peter Foulger: surveyor, missionary to the Wampanoag Indians of Nantucket Island, joined the proprietors

19th century

Daphne Coffin: great-great-great-granddaughter of Mary Coffin Starbuck

Reynolds “Ren” Macy: whaling captain on the *Endeavour*,
father of Hitty and Henry, husband of Jane

Jane Coffin Macy: wife to Ren, sister to Daphne

Lillian Swain Coffin: mother of Jane and Daphne

Tristram Macy: cousin of Ren

Jeremiah Macy: father of Reynolds

Hitty and Henry Macy: twin children of Ren and Jane
Macy, age six

Abraham: black officer on Ren’s ship, the *Endeavour*

Patience: Wampanoag maidservant to Jane Coffin Macy

Glossary

Language of 19th-Century Nantucket

Many of these nautical expressions have found their way into our modern vernacular, such as “feeling blue” (when a ship lost its captain during a voyage and would fly blue flags) or “crew cut” (a short haircut given to the entire ship’s crew).

ambergris: a waxy, grayish substance found in the stomachs of sperm whales and once used in perfume to make the scent last longer

baleen: the comblike plates of cartilage in a whale’s mouth to strain plankton and other food from the water; very valuable for its strength and flexibility

boatsteerer/harpooner: crew at the bow of the whaling boat whose job is to spear the whale

broken voyage: a whaling ship that returns home with less than a full load of oil

cooper: barrel maker

cooperage: workplace of the cooper

cranky: an unstable sailing vessel, from the Dutch *krengd*

crew cut: a short haircut given to the whole crew

cut and run: an act of cutting the anchor line in an effort to make a quick getaway

deep six: a fathom, the unit of measurement for the depth of the sea, is six feet; sailors used the term to refer to throwing something overboard

disowned: under church discipline

elders: historically, those appointed to foster the ministry of the Quaker meetinghouse and the spiritual condition of its members

facing benches: the benches or seats in the front of the meeting room, facing the body of the meeting, on which Friends' ministers and elders generally sat

feeling blue: a custom when a ship lost its captain during a voyage—the ship would fly blue flags and have a blue band painted along her hull when she returned to port

fin up: dead

First Day: Sunday (Quakers did not use names for days of the week, nor for the months, as they had originated from pagan names)

First Month: January

flensing: butchering of the whale

Friends and Society of Friends: Quaker church members

forging ahead: a naval term for pressing on

from stem to stern: all-inclusive, very thorough

gam: to visit or talk with the crew of another whaling ship while at sea

gangplank: a movable bridge used to board or leave a ship

greenhand or greenie: an inexperienced sailor making his first whaling voyage

hold in the Light: to ask for God's presence to illuminate a situation or problem or person

hulk: an old sailing vessel that is no longer seaworthy

idler: a crewman whose tasks required daylight hours (cook, cooper, cabin boy)

lay: the percentage of a ship's profit that each crew member receives; a sailor's lay usually depends upon his experience and rank

lookout: the sailor stationed in the crosstree to watch for whales

Meeting: Quaker term for church

minding the Light: an expression used to remind Quakers that there is an Inward Light in each of them that can reveal God's will, if its direction is listened to and followed

mortgage button: a Nantucket tradition of drilling a hole in the newel post of a household's banister, filling it with the ashes of the paid-off mortgage, and capping the hole with a button made of scrimshaw; in the south, it's called a brag button

moved to speak: an experience, in the quietness of the meeting, of feeling led by God to speak

mutiny: an uprising or rebellion of a ship's crew against the captain

Nantucket sleigh ride: a term used to describe the pulling of a whaleboat by a whale that has been harpooned and is "running"

on deck: a phrase used to ask if someone is present or available

Quaker: the unofficial name of a member of the Religious Society of Friends; originally the use was pejorative, but the word was claimed by Friends in recognition of the physical sensation that many feel when being moved by the Spirit

quarterboard: a wooden sign with carved name displayed on each ship

rigging: the ropes and chain used to control a ship's sails

saltbox: traditional New England-style wooden-frame house with a long, pitched roof that slopes down to the back; a saltbox has just one story in the back and two stories in the front

scrimshaw: whalebone adorned with carvings

seasoning: a process to ensure that decisions are truly grounded in God's will

seize: to tie up a sailor in the rigging as a form of punishment

slops: sailors' clothing (a ship's captain will charge his crew for any clothes he supplies)

syndicate: a group of businessmen who own a whaling ship or ships

Weighty Friend: a Friend who is informally recognized as having special experience and wisdom

worldly: having to do with secular values

1

As Daphne Coffin made her way onto the wooden planks of Straight Wharf, she heard someone call her name and whirled to see her sister Jane hurrying to catch up with her. Holding Jane's hands were two towheaded children, a boy on one side and a girl on the other.

"Has thee heard the bells?" Jane said, her face bright with happiness. "Ren's ship is in!"

"The *Endeavour*?" Daphne's eyes widened in disbelief while her mind took hold of this stunning surprise. Ren was home? At long last! "I heard the bells but didn't realize they rang for Ren's ship."

"Imagine, Daphne. Ren has not even met his own children yet."

Her sister looked exceptionally pretty, though her face was flushed with heat from the warmth of this sun-stippled day. Jane Coffin Macy was one of the loveliest girls on Nantucket Island. She had high, wide cheekbones and a dainty, pointed chin that gave her face a charming sweetheart shape. Brown eyes, blonde hair, a peaches-and-cream complexion, with lips that were always red, as if she'd been eating berries. "I'm so

glad thee is here this morning, Daphne.” She straightened the organza fichu that draped her shoulders and smoothed her skirt. “Thy presence will help me stay calm.”

Daphne looked a little closer at her older sister. There was a trembling air about her, a vulnerability that was nearly palpable. “Thee must be beside thyself with excitement. Here, let me take Hitty.” As she reached out to take her niece’s hand, Jane suddenly swayed, as if she were on the verge of fainting.

“M-Mama!” Jane’s son, Henry, clutched her arm.

Daphne grabbed her sister’s shoulders to steady her. “Jane, is thee not well?”

Jane dipped her chin so that her black bonnet shielded her face from the sun. “I’m fashed, ’tis all. A bit dizzy. I’m sure ’tis from anticipation.”

Daphne spun around as she heard the rhythmic slap of oars on water. The lighters were coming in now, slipping through the calm waters of Nantucket Bay, bringing the crew off the ship *Endeavour*. As captain, Ren would be the last one off, that much she knew. It would be a long wait this morning, but they would not budge from their post on the wharf. The wharves were no place for maids, so unless a ship was arriving into port, she did not go near them. But how she loved being down by the harbor! So many strange accents, unusual skin colors, piercings, tattoos.

The *Endeavour* stood black-limned behind the bar that lined Nantucket Harbor. Lighter after lighter sailed up to release crew to pour onto the wharf and hustle down to greet their loved ones or make their way to the taverns to celebrate their return.

Jane’s eyes were fixed on each lighter as it docked, gazing over the sailors, nodding to each one as they hurried past them, sea chests hoisted on their shoulders. Overhead, sea-

birds circled with shrieks and cries. “Over six *years*, Daphne,” Jane said in a low voice. “He’s been gone six *years*. Nearly seven.”

Daphne grinned. “I wonder if Ren might be covered in tattoos. Or wearing a thick tangle of whiskers that hides his chin.” She wrinkled her nose as some rank seamen went past. “Hopefully he will not smell like a beached whale.” When she caught the solemn look on her sister’s face, she quickly added, “Jane, ’tis a jest. Hand over heart, I was only jesting. Ren will return back as the same man.”

“How do I know what he’s like after six years at sea? We were married less than a month when he set sail.”

Daphne’s smile faded. “I suppose that is the plight of a captain’s wife. More goodbyes than hellos.”

“Still, I did not expect an absence of six long years.”

“He’s missed quite a bit.”

“He’s missed everything. The birth of his children, the death of Father, and everything in between.”

Daphne glanced at Jane and noticed a drip of perspiration trickling down the side of her cheek. “He is home now, Sister. Safe and sound.”

“But for how long?”

“Today is not the day to concern thyself with the next voyage.”

Jane paused a moment, as if she’d become lost in thoughts, or memories. “Thee is right.” She pushed the words out on a sharp expulsion of breath, then flashed a rueful smile. “Not today.”

She was a fine captain’s wife, Jane was. Reynolds Macy chose well, Daphne thought. She’d never heard her sister complain of loneliness, not once, not even after Hitty and Henry were born. Not until this moment.

Jane's eyes were fixed on the ship. "I have changed much in these six years."

"Not so much."

"But I have. Starting the Cent School, for one. Who knows what Ren will think of that venture?"

"It provides a great deal of help for island women, Jane, whose husbands are at sea. I'm certain he will understand."

"I'm not at all certain. And while thee might jest, no doubt Ren has changed too. What if we don't feel the same way about each other?"

Daphne put an arm around her sister's small shoulders, a vivid reminder of how opposite they were. Jane was delicate and fine-boned where Daphne was sturdy and curvy. Jane was reserved, graceful, as even-keeled as a ship, instinctively knowing how to react in any situation, while Daphne could be clumsy, blunt, at times socially awkward. In Daphne's eyes, her older sister was as close to perfection as a Quaker woman could be, one whose Inward Light reflected such a strong and steady beam. Despite being reprimanded by the Friends for marrying out of unity, Jane's faith never wavered.

They heard a shout and pounding feet coming up hard on them. "Any sign of him yet?" Tristram Macy, cousin and business partner to Ren, flew past them, turning his head for an answer.

"Nay, not yet," Jane called back, smiling. It was hard not to smile when Tristram was around.

Daphne lifted her hand in a wave to Tristram, whom she had seen only yesterday. He gave her no greeting, she noted.

Jane noticed as well. "He's distracted, that's all."

"Of course." Of course he was. And yet, and yet . . . there was always something off between them.

"Mayhap, with Ren safely returned, Tristram's thoughts

will turn to the future. Thee knows how worried he's been about the business. Soon, I think, he will propose marriage." Jane squeezed Daphne's hand. "Everyone hopes so."

All the world, or at least all of Nantucket, considered Tristram Macy to be Daphne's intended. The man she would marry, although he hadn't gotten round to asking her yet. How many times had Daphne thought Trist was going to propose marriage? Just the other day, they were walking along the beach at sunset—a perfect Nantucket evening. He had taken her hand and covered it with his own, and she thought, *Tonight. Surely, tonight he will ask.* But he didn't. Instead, he spoke with ardor about his new ship.

So how did Daphne feel about him? She and Tristram had known each other all their lives. She knew him when his stutter made him the target of school yard mocking. He knew her when she was round as a barrel, much like Hitty is now, before she started to grow and grow and grow, and her body rearranged itself.

She had watched as Trist evolved into a very handsome man, dashing and decadent, whose charming personality had a dazzling effect on women—including her own mother. Daphne did not feel dazzled by Tristram Macy, which might be why he favored her. Her feelings for him were akin to sitting by the hearth on a rainy day with a well-loved book to read and reread, warm and cozy.

Daphne saw Trist make his way toward the far end of the wharf, picking his way between clusters of townspeople, clapping hands with the crew as they emerged from lighters. By the pleased looks on their sun-weathered faces, added to the fact that the *Endeavour* sat low in the brine, it seemed the rumors were true—it had been a greasy voyage. Mayhap Jane was right. Now Tristram would believe the business he

and Ren had started was on solid footing and he would make plans for the future.

The two cousins had a business arrangement that suited them well. Reynolds captained the ship, Tristram found and managed investors. Or, as Trist liked to describe it in his cheeky way, “Ren makes the money. I spend it.”

Before long, Straight Wharf nearly emptied of sailors but for stevedores who unloaded the heavy wooden casks of whale oil off the lighters, rolling them down a wooden gangplank with a loud rumble—precious cargo ready to head to the warehouse. The same four remained in a tight clump: Jane and Daphne, Henry and Hitty. And Tristram, of course, though he was engaged in a deep conversation with the *Endeavour*’s first mate at the wharf’s edge.

Jane’s eyes snapped to a lighter approaching the dock. “There he is,” she said. “I’m sure of it.” Her fingers tightened on both of her children’s hands. “Come. It’s time to meet your father.” She started down the wharf to meet the lighter as it docked.

Ren stood at the bow with legs straddled, hands on his hips, elegant and graceful on the swiftly moving lighter. When he spotted his wife, he lifted both arms in greeting and she waved back, laughing.

Daphne was so pleased to see her brother-in-law return hale and hearty, she nearly lifted her skirts and ran down the deck, shouting his name. Five years ago she might have—nay, *would* have—done such a thing, but it would hardly be proper now. Then, she was still a girl, only fifteen. Today, she was a woman, trying to be proper, but it made her feel so stiff, like the whale-boned spikes that squeezed her middle so tight she could hardly breathe. How she missed the freedoms of girlhood! She squelched the desire to tumble straight into

the family's sweet reunion and watched demurely from a distance.

She'd forgotten how alike in looks Tristram and Ren were. Both with those broad Macy faces and deep-set eyes, dark hair. Ren's hair was sun streaked but cropped close, Tristram's was held back in a queue. Both with striking figures: trim, upright, confident. Standing behind Ren was a dark-skinned sailor she did not recognize. And then a familiar and weathered face, Jeremiah Macy, Ren's father, who coopered on the *Endeavour*. She hardly knew Jeremiah but by reputation—his older brother, Matthew, had married Phoebe Starbuck, great-grandmother to Daphne and Jane. Like most Nantucketers, they were all distantly related.

When the lighter drew within a rod's length, Ren leapt onto the deck, not even waiting until the mooring lines had been tied to the cleats. As soon as his boots—cracked white with salt—touched the solid planks of the wharf, he strode toward his wife and lifted her up in an embrace, swinging around in a circle. He gently set Jane down and bracketed her face with his two hands, holding it as if it were a precious treasure, gazing down into her eyes as if memorizing every feature.

Jane was the one who broke the intimate moment as she remembered the boy and girl who peered up uncertainly at the stranger. "Ren. Oh Ren. There will be time for us later. But now . . . come meet thy children."

Daphne watched a sudden transformation come over Ren. He blanched, losing that ever-imposing captain's countenance, and drew in a deep breath, as if having to recover from having the wind knocked out of him. As he turned his attention to his children, he seemed . . . ill at ease, unsure of what to do next, so he did nothing. Nothing but peer back at them. Prompted by Jane's elbow, Henry extended his hand for a shake.

Ren bent over to shake his son's small hand. "Um, lad, hello."

Henry kept a quizzical expression on him. The boy was so like Jane, reserved and formal. He poked his eyeglasses up on the bridge of his nose, staring at his father, until he received another elbow jab from his mother. "Hello, Captain, sir. I am Henry Jeremiah Macy."

Jane gently pushed Hitty forward. "And here is Mehitabel."

Ren turned to the girl. He crouched down to her eye level. "Mehitabel. Hello, lass. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Everyone calls me Hitty," she replied and curtsied very low, as if she were a lady.

"Then, Hitty it will be."

"Did thee bring us presents?"

Again, Ren seemed baffled. "I'm certain," he said at last, "that I have a few treasures in my chest." With that, Hitty threw her arms around his neck. Daphne saw Ren's eyelids slide closed for a moment as his daughter's small arms clung to him.

Jane glanced up to see Daphne and raised an arm to her to bring her into the circle. "Ren, thee remembers my sister, Daphne."

Ren lifted his chin over the top of Hitty's head. His dark eyes moved back and forth over her face, wide with surprise. "Daphne? Why, you was just an awkward foal of a girl when I saw you last."

Daphne took a few steps forward to join them. "When I last saw thee, Reynolds Macy, thy hair was in a queue—"

He brushed a hand over his head. "Crew cut. The entire ship. A lice outbreak."

"—and thee was wooing my favorite sister and stealing her away from our childhood home."

Ren laughed, as did Daphne. She turned, expecting to see

Jane smiling too, and was startled to see the color drain from her sister's face as if a stopper was pulled from a sink. Her eyes rolled back in a most unholy manner, and she wilted onto the deck.



Jane lay under the canopy of her four-poster bed at home, drifting in and out of consciousness, speaking a few garbled sounds now and then. Daphne sat in the chair next to her, watching for any significant changes, waiting for Ren and Jeremiah to return with Dr. Mitchell. Jane's breathing was what concerned her most. It went from shallow breaths, slowing to nothing, then a shuddering gasp to get enough air. Her eyes opened now and then, looked around the room without any apparent recognition, before closing as if her eyelids weighed a hundred pounds.

Daphne felt tears welling, and struggled to keep them under control. *Stay calm*, she told herself. *This is nothing more than a fainting spell, brought on by the anticipation of Ren's return.* "It's all right," Daphne said to herself. Surely, this spell was nothing more than overexcitement. "Everything's all right."

But it didn't *feel* all right.

In her heart, Daphne knew something was seriously wrong. This was no mere summer cold. Jane hadn't seemed hardy this last year, prone to colds that led quickly to gripe or influenza, once even to a bout of pneumonia.

The door to Jane's chamber opened quietly, and Patience, the Indian maidservant, came in carrying a glass of sugared water. She lifted her dark eyebrows to give Daphne a questioning look.

"There is no change."

Patience handed Daphne the glass. Yet her hands shook so much as she dipped the spoon into the water that Patience took it away from her. Instead, she fed Jane tiny sips, rubbing her throat to make her swallow. Patience radiated a calm authority, soothing, serene, silent. Not knowing how to help, Daphne stood and backed away, letting the maidservant sit in the chair next to the bed and take over. Patience had been with Jane and Daphne their entire lives, and the lines of servant/employer blurred together more times than not.

“The little ones are in the kitchen,” Patience said. “You should go to them, reassure them that their mother is well.”

How could she possibly tell Henry and Hitty that their mother was well when, clearly, she wasn’t? “Captain Macy should be here soon with the doctor. I don’t want to leave Jane’s side until he returns.”

Patience set the glass on the nightstand and turned to Daphne. “She takes no more. Try again later.”

After Patience left, the room seemed eerily quiet but for Jane’s labored breathing. Daphne noticed a trickle of sugar water had slipped down Jane’s neck. She opened a drawer in the nightstand to look for some kind of cloth or handkerchief to wipe it. Instead of a cloth, she found an old sheepskin book, wound tight with a leather string. She lifted it from the drawer and untied the string. She opened it to the first page, ever so carefully, for it was very old, and a slip of paper fell out. A pang pricked Daphne’s heart as she recognized the handwriting, the familiar script of her father.

To my dearest daughter, Jane, on the occasion of her wedding.

This journal belonged to Great Mary, a woman renowned for her wisdom. It has been a Starbuck family

tradition for the one who receives the journal to quietly and carefully choose whom to pass it along to. My grandmother Phoebe bestowed it to my mother, and she gave it to me, so I am now giving it to thee. May it bring thee some of Great Mary's wisdom.

*With love from thy
adoring Papa*

Daphne picked up the sheepskin book, felt the weight of it in her hands. She had grown up hearing stories of Great Mary, everyone born on the island had, and if they were off-islanders, they didn't deserve to know of her. Mary Coffin Starbuck, one of the first proprietors who settled the island, was referred to as the Deborah of Nantucket, a nod to the only female judge in the Old Testament. She was considered the wisest woman on the island. Settlers and Indians alike had sought out her opinions and judgments.

Daphne smoothed her hands over the leather. What would *that* be like? To be so highly respected and admired? It was an interesting notion. She knew without doubt that among Friends, her family was more a focus of gossip and rumor than admiration and respect. Daphne's mother, Lillian Swain Coffin, spent most of her time trying to cover scandal quickly before others learned of it. Sadly, scandal kept arriving at Lillian's doorstep, unbidden and unwanted.

Gently, Daphne opened the journal to a random page and squinted. The ink was faded, difficult to make out in places. And yet here were the thoughts, written for posterity, of her ancestor Great Mary.

Daphne wanted to ask Jane about this journal, to ask if she'd read it through, of what she'd learned of Great Mary.

She closed the journal and tied the leather string around it, leaving it just as she'd found it. As she tucked the journal back into the drawer, she wished Jane had not kept its existence hidden from her. She thought they had no secrets between them, but apparently, like so many things of late, she was wrong.

Mary Coffin Starbuck

23 April 1662

'Tis not an easy thing to meld into another's family. Today, Nathaniel and I have been married for one month. For the most part, I have found married life to be quite pleasant, quite agreeable. My father-in-law Edward has been thoroughly welcoming, though he is frequently absent with his work with the Wampanoags on the other side of the island. Jethro, only eleven, is a darling boy, sweet and thoughtful, much like my Nathaniel. But Catherine, my mother-in-law, and twelve-year-old Esther display a shortage of patience with me. I don't seem to do anything in the "Starbuck Way."

For good reason!

There were seldom, if any, occasions when I had been invited to Nathaniel's home prior to our marriage, and now I understand why Catherine was reluctant to open her home. Her housekeeping is shockingly chaotic. There does not seem to be an order to household work. After one month, I have yet to discern any rhythm in the household. Which day is wash day, or bake day, or garden day? They all blur together, depending on what need is most critical.

I try to be helpful, as I was yesterday afternoon when I cleaned the kitchen while Catherine and Esther were visiting Jane Swain. I scrubbed every inch of the ~~dark and~~ dark kitchen, and made a place for everything on the sideboard so that I could put the crockery in its rightful spot. Muddled housekeeping leads to muddled thinking, my dear grandmother Coffin always said.

When Catherine and Esther returned, they gasped at my work—a gasp of delight, I first assumed. But no! Catherine was furious—in a cold, unexpressed way that I have become all too familiar with. Esther glared at me. They spent the evening undoing all I had done. And they said not a word of appreciation to me about my scrubbing and sweeping.

I was just trying to be useful!

And another “opportunity” to increase my tolerance arrived last evening, during the meal. Catherine criticized me for speaking my mind. She shushed me at dinner last night. Shushed me! I have never once been shushed in my family home. I noticed a smirk on Esther’s face. Nathaniel kept his eyes fixed firmly on his plate. Edward was not at home. He alone seems to have influence over the women in his household.

And yet, I must not be unkind. Mother warned me to be mindful of my tendency toward forthrightness. Soon, she assures me, they will come to know me, and will love me as a daughter and sister.

No doubt she is right. Adjustments take time. Still, it is hard to feel settled in a place that itself is so unsettled. I wonder of the other Starbuck siblings who live off island but are considering their mother’s request to move here, if they are all so difficult to befriend.

And as I went to bed last night, I said an extra prayer of thanks for how greatly Nathaniel takes after his father.