

The Town Drunk

Presents

Self-Made Man

Nora Fleischer

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I suppose I had read Franklin's *Autobiography* too many times. The idea of seeking my fortune in a city where no one knew me from Adam!

I cannot express quite how tedious was my previous existence. Day after day with the same people, cleaning house in the morning, sitting like a lady in the afternoon, and every evening the same round of chitchat. Gardens and babies, and I don't know what else.

And there was Enoch. Somehow, we had been betrothed since childhood, though I don't believe either of us liked the other one whit. He was such a tiresome man. No ambition whatsoever! Content merely to whittle on the same porch where three generations of Weymouths had whittled before him.

What I ought to have done was to take a job at Lowell. But I can't abide noise, and I've always had a head for figures and—well, I've always liked money. More money than a mill girl makes, at any rate.

So I elected to cut my hair off, call myself Silas, and cut line for New York.

The beauties of my handwriting earned me a position at a shop on H---- St. Of course, everyone knows of the dishonesty of the mercantile trade, as it is currently practiced in New York. The thousand ways in which shoddy material can be guyed to appear the costliest silk. The bank bills that might have been manufactured in a cellar, for all their inherent value. And the clerks lied. Oh, what liars we were! It was a contest between us and the ladies on the other side of the counter, to short them measure, to mark up prices for the gullible, to sell them fabric that had been lying behind the counter for years as the "last latest mode, newly arrived from Paris."

One day, I thought, I would take the roll of bills I had earned and travel back home, for my family to see and wonder. But somehow I never did. I suppose that I was waiting for some marked success. Perhaps I would become the proprietor of my own store. And yet I couldn't help but believe that some grander future was waiting for me.

In short, you could have bought ten of me for a penny on any street in New York.

Fishman and I had been drinking for free that night. An election was in the offing, and we promised the Whigs that we would surely vote for the Whig candidate. Then we went down to the Democratic headquarters and promised those gentlemen the reverse. By eleven o' clock the two of us were three sheets to the wind. We sailed down the street, singing all the lewd songs that we knew.

It was a positive pleasure to stroll with my friend Fishman. Even drunk, he had a knack for cutting through the slothful, gaping crowd, drawing me along in his wake. On his face sat a bold half-smile, as if the great city were herself a clerk, and he the customer who knew the best wares were still behind the counter, waiting for the man who had the audacity to ask. How I admired him!

"Let's go to the Temperance hall next," said Fishman. "They serve lemonade there, and I've a flask of gin in my trousers."

"Why, Fishman!" I said. "You've been holding out on me, sir!"

He grinned at me. How handsome he was, with his dark, glittering eyes, his jet-black hair rumpled like Byron's!

We heard a halloo from the building opposite. It was Hiram Brockenborough, a southerner who worked with us at M---- and K----'s. He always put me in mind of our best mouser at home—lazy as a rug until there was a prospect, and then—pounce! "Davy! Si!" he cried. "Come in!"

"What have you found, Mr. B?" asked Fishman.

"The finest fellows in the world," said Hiram. "It's a club solely for clerks."

"And do they drink?" I asked.

Hiram laughed. "Come and see!"

We followed him inside to a grand hall, lit by many candles. Along the center of the hall was a rough-hewn table, bedecked with a grand spread of food—a cold collation, cheese—everything that a poor young fellow dreams of at night in his cell.

"And it's free," said Hiram, his cheeks chipmunked with crackers and cheese. "We just have to listen to the speech."

"Speech?" asked Fishman.

Applause thundered through the room. At the front, a farmer-faced man mounted the podium. A clerk learns to interpret the language of clothes, and his were saying that he wished he were much younger. "Friends!" he cried. "I will not keep you long. I know your time is valuable. More than this, I know that your time is not your own. Your employers prey on you. They see your ambitions, your dreams, your hopes, and they feed on them. They feed on your youth. They know you hope

to attain wealth and independence. And yet, how many of you will do so? They will leave your empty carcasses on the street as soon as you're of no use to them."

"This is fine roast beef," whispered Hiram. "And I am a 'cute judge."

I sliced off a piece for myself.

"All we can do, my young men," said the speaker, "is to unify ourselves in a great Brotherhood of Clerks."

"What can he mean?" whispered Fishman, his arms crossed.

"Our goals as Brotherhood we shall leave for another time," said the speaker. "Tonight, I only ask this of you—drink a toast to brotherhood!"

Somehow, a glass of red wine was in my hand.

"To brotherhood," I cried.

We all drank a hearty glass.

"This is foul," said Fishman, peering in the glass.

"No, it's not," I said. It was not actually wine, I realized. It was some sort of cordial that I could not identify.

"It's foul," said Fishman, and without warning, he spewed all over the table of food. When he was done, the three of us looked at each other and, wordlessly, ran into the street.

I'm not quite sure when Fishman and I left Hiram behind. I became convinced that I must get Fishman back to his rooms. But somewhere along the trip, the drinks I had consumed seemed to gang up together against my poor worn brain.



I woke up the next morning in a bed I did not recognize. I was not wearing a shirt, merely the long strip of fabric I used to restrain my breasts. Fishman was sleeping in the chair opposite and awoke with a start when he heard me stir.

"Where is my shirt, sir?" I said.

"In the basin, soaking out the vomit." He smiled coolly at me. "What a night! I drink to excess, and then I discover that my dearest friend is actually a female."

I sat up straight in bed, and the room seemed to rock around me. "Are you going to tell the boss?"

Fishman laughed. The sound pierced my aching head. “Is Winslow your actual name?”

“Yes.”

“But I suppose you weren’t born a Silas?”

“Alice,” I said.

“It doesn’t suit you. Not a Diana like you. Or perhaps you are a naiad? That’s what you look like, with your great blue eyes.”

“Don’t tease, Fishman.”

He regarded me as if he had all the time in the world. “And someday you will be president of a great bank. Or an insurance company. Or a manufacturing concern. Or all three, for a young man might achieve anything in New York! And only when you die and they come to lay you out will they find that you were no young man at all. What a clever fraud you are, Alice!”

I held his gaze steady, though I felt my hands shake in my lap. “Are you going to tell the boss?” I repeated.

He sat down on the bed next to me. “Make yourself into a man if you want to. Your odds are better. And it’s no affair of mine.”



How discomfited I felt as Fishman and I walked to work that morning! Fishman had given his word, but I could not trust him. What if one of his jokes should inadvertently reveal my secret? What if he should decide that my employment at M---- and K----’s was contrary to his interests? As Poor Richard said, two may keep a secret, *if one of them is dead*.

Brockenborough arrived just in time, looking pale and worn. I believe even he could tell that Fishman and I were feeling shy of each other. But the three of us were left no time to dwell on the matter. All day long, an endless parade of customers, each more demanding than the last, streamed up to our counters. As I attempted to sell a rural Jonathan moth-eaten wool at three times its value, Fishman was plagued by a sharp-eyed matron who was shopping for cheap gingham. Meanwhile, Brockenborough had the sort of patron I most loathed-- the glossy young lady who wished to turn over every scrap of cloth in the store, with no intention of purchasing any of it.

While I was listening to Jonathan’s endless “Waaal, I reckon”’s, I bethought myself of a certain bank bill in the drawer. The institution it was drawn on had gone under like a schooner with a hole in the bow, leaving—to extend the metaphor—only a few miserable, half-drowned survivors in its wake. It was quite likely, I believed, that news of this occurrence had not yet made its way to Jonathan’s rural retreat. I might give my rustic friend the price that he desired, slip him the useless bill in his change, and make a respectable profit. Assuming, of course, that none of the other clerks had yet passed this bill to one of their customers.

As I was rummaging through the drawer, I heard a commotion from Brockenborough's counter. To my shock, I saw him cuff the young lady across the face, vault over the counter, and leap upon her. He bit her ear and rolled her onto her back while she screamed for assistance.

Fishman got there first, and pulled Hiram off the panicked young lady. Hiram growled, then looked at Fishman, puzzled, giving me enough time to tackle Hiram to the floor. I could hear his fine coat tear on the sawdust-covered boards as I used my weight to press him belly-down. He turned his neck, bared his teeth, and growled, a sharp, animal sound. His teeth—something unaccountable had happened to his teeth. They appeared, to my fevered imagination, to be pointed like a cat's. Fishman joined me on top of Hiram. "Call a constable!" he cried to the customers. "Quickly!"

"Hiram!" I said. "Speak to me, man!"

He hissed and spat. I wiped my face on my shirt and looked up to discover Jonathan departing the premises with my wool.

There was nothing to be done—Hiram did not recover his sanity. A team of constables bound him and hauled him off to Bellevue. How horrible it is to see the seat of reason overtaken, when the body retains its animal vigor! And his teeth—there was no possible explanation for their altered form. I began to believe that I must have imagined them.

Fishman and I closed the premises early, confident that our powers of salesmanship had been diminished by this unaccountable and pathetic event. As we walked back towards my apartments, we heard a newsboy calling out the late edition.

"Clerk murders customer!" he cried. "Read all about it!"

"So soon," I murmured.

"And yet, totally incorrect," said Fishman.

He purchased a copy, and we soon found, to our shock, that the case detailed was not the one we had witnessed.

"Perhaps—perhaps it would be irrational—" I said.

"Shall we visit the Brotherhood of Clerks?"

I nodded. I do not intend to claim special powers, but occasionally I am a woman of great sensibility. It is this attribute, in fact, to which I have always attributed my facility in knowing a customer's needs better than she does herself. For when we reached the Brotherhood, we found nothing but a smoking hole where the building had been.



A crowd of constables swarmed around the ruin. Fishman and I stared at the pit, and I felt an unaccountable urge to take his hand.

“Afternoon, gentlemen,” said a man next to us. I turned and saw a middle-aged man with a weatherbeaten face and faded brown eyes. A former sailor, if I was any judge. “I’m Constable Pym. And who might you two be?”

“I’m David Fishman, and this is Silas Winslow,” said Fishman. I nodded. “What happened, sir?”

“It’s the oddest thing,” said the constable. “All day long, clerks have been attacking their customers, all over the city. And the only thing these young men have in common is that they all attended a dinner here last night. And now we come to find this place has been burned. Arson, sirs.”

“Terrible,” said Fishman.

“Now may I suppose from your clothes that the two of you are in the clerkly line yourself?”

“Yes,” said Fishman.

“And you wouldn’t happen to know anyone who attended this dinner?”

“No. Winslow and I were headed to the oyster cellar on the next block—”

“The Diving Bell?”

“No, Paul’s.”

“Yes, of course.”

“And we saw the smoke, and thought to see the fire.”

“Doesn’t your friend talk?” asked the constable.

“Given opportunity,” I said.

The constable smiled. “Ask your friends, young men. And if one of them has attended this dinner—”

“We’ll know what to do,” said Fishman.

We walked onward towards Paul’s.

“I’ve often found,” said my friend, “that a man who is always truthful in the little things is thus enabled to pass a great whopper.”

I nodded.

“What could have happened?” Fishman looked back at the pillar of smoke. “What could have driven so many men mad?”

“It was the cordial,” I said, and winced.

Fishman stopped short. “Why do you say that?”

“I hope it was the cordial, for then you’re in no danger.” I opened my mouth so that he could see it—the rows of sharp, needlelike teeth that had sprouted within my mouth. Rows on rows, like a little army of teeth, marching down the roof of my mouth, growing larger close to the front, forcing out the previous occupants. Fishman gently touched my jaw. At the caress of his thumb along my mouth a molar plopped out and fell to the ground bloodlessly. It was perfectly formed and white to the roots, like a pearl dropped in ashes.

In my old home, every evening, my family would sit in our accustomed places in the kitchen. My sister and I braided straw hats while my mother dried dishes and the men spat in the fire. So quiet and still, when we had all run out of things to say! And I could see in my mother’s face, my old grandmother’s, what my future would be. Like breathing in the miasma of an endless, melancholy swamp.

I went to New York and I never once turned tack. But now I wished for my old place by the hearth. For if I went to my boarding house rooms, who would care for me? And if I went mad like poor Brockenborough, I would end up in Bellevue, and it is a terrible place.

“We’ll go to my apartments,” said Fishman.

“I’m not safe,” I said. My tongue rasped against my teeth.

“You’d never hurt me.” He put his arm around my shoulders. “Did you know sharks have teeth like that? It’s always seemed a great saving in dentist’s bills. One falls out, grow a new one.”

I shivered.

“My Yankee shark,” he said, and smiled. “Come to my rooms, and tomorrow we shall find you a cure.”

Perhaps I should not have followed him. For while I admired Fishman—oh, too weak a word for the sensations he inspired in my frail heart—what I knew of him was nothing more than the shell of the oyster. No way to tell, until it was opened, if all was sweet or foul within. But where else was I to go?



In the morning it felt as though I awakened wearing fingerless gloves. I looked down and realized

that a translucent skin now connected all of my fingers, and my thumbs, up to the last knuckle. I shrieked, tearing my tongue again.

“Winslow?” said Fishman, drowsily.

My back ached. It felt as though something was bound to it, something that strained for release. I scrabbled at my shirt and tore at the band around my bosom. My hands did not work.

“Let me,” said Fishman. He took his penknife from the washstand, lifted the back of my shirt, and cut the band in two. The pain stopped, and the thing on my back sprang free. I held up my shirt so that I might see the thing reflected in Fishman’s cloudy shaving mirror. A great fin between my shoulder blades, nearly the shape of one of my new teeth.

Imagine, my reader, the sensations one would have at waking up one morning to find one’s hands missing, the arms tapering to a digitless round of bone. How much worse to find them not gone but changed, monstrous! My mouth full of teeth like thorns, a rigid fin affixed to my back. As if an unimaginable thief was stealing away the true Alice Winslow, piece by piece, and replacing her with a mockery. And no sign that there would be an end to it—oh, the horrid vision of my soul looking out of the glass eyes of an edifying curiosity in a case at a museum, for the crowd to gape at me forever, an unending stream of lumpish, apathetic country faces...

The door to Fishman’s room slammed open. It was Constable Pym. Too late, I let my shirt fall.

“Why, Miss Winslow,” he said. “It’s not often that I’m so genuinely surprised.”

And then a curious thing happened. The scent of his body entered my nostrils. And I felt as though the most delicious meal I had ever tasted or imagined had been placed before me. I leapt towards the constable, enjoying the frightened look on his face. Then I landed on the floor with a thump, for Fishman had tripped me.

“Close the door, constable. I’ll speak with you outside.” he said.

The door slammed shut.

Fishman helped me to my feet and sat me firmly on the bed. “Stay here, Winslow.” He pulled on his coat and followed the constable out.



I was soon bundled into the back of a carriage with Fishman, my hands and feet bound. I wore no shoes, for none would fit over my broadened, webbed feet. “You are certain where he is?” he asked.

I nodded. How could anyone have missed the stench? The strangest, strongest, most curious smell I had ever smelled, like an ill-kept menagerie, mingled with bolts of new cloth.

“He can take this back. He can cure you. I’m sure of it.”

I wanted to tell him that I was afraid that he was wrong. But how could I, when I could not speak without tearing my tongue?

So I told myself a story. Someday, I told myself, we would have an establishment of our own. We would call it Winslow & Fishman, and the name would be painted in great gold letters over the door. The grand windows would show the two of us, side by side, selling the finest silks and velvets, direct from Europe. Perhaps, if it was not too shocking to the sensibilities of our clients, I could even wear a dress. A bright blue silk for my eyes’ sake. And from time to time, Fishman would look at me and smile, as if I were the rarest thing in the shop.

I tapped Fishman’s leg. “Here,” I hissed through my ruined mouth.



It was an abandoned farmhouse on a broken-down farm, not far from the city.

I slipped inside the barn, into a crowd that smelled like a zoological garden. On a wheelless cart sat the farmer-faced man from the Brotherhood. As I watched, he flung a bill into the crowd. A crab-clawed clerk snapped at it—click! click! and snatch!—and the paper dangled teasingly from the great bluish claw until a bull-horned clerk charged him and gored him in the stomach. Oh, the hiss of dying crustacean despair and the bellow of taurine joy! But the bull-clerk had forgotten that he had only hooves for hands. He could not grasp the paper. And as he grumbled and muttered at the crumpled bill on the filthy floor, a peacock-clerk swooped in, grasped it in his talons, and fluttered to the rafters, chuckling crazily and spreading his tail in delight.

“What a lovely Brotherhood you are,” said the man on the cart, patting his pockets for another bill.

I was very calm. My heart barely seemed to beat. Only a fool shows his weak hand first. Fishman and I played poker with a whaler’s crew, and I took a week’s wages from a South Sea Islander. I am a fine poker player.

I groveled at the man’s feet. I inhaled his lovely human scent, like beef and bread. “Boss,” I hissed.

He smiled down at me. “Except, not quite a Brotherhood, are we, sister?”

I tried to climb on the wagon. My hands did not work. I let my blue eyes fill with tears.

He pulled me up beside him. “I was a boy on this farm,” he said. “And then I came to the city. As I walked down C--- Street, a clerk hailed me. He said I seemed hungry, and he offered me an apple.

“He had a friendly face. I told him about my aspirations, and he explained that a young man could not hope to find success unless he was dressed like a gentleman. I looked at my homespun suit and

I confided that I could not afford new clothes. ‘Well, then,’ he said. ‘A new hat will do.’ And he sold me the finest tricorne in the shop.”

I felt my hideous mouth split into a smile, and I tried in vain to conceal it.

“I see you understand,” he said. “But I did not, until the city’s urchins began to follow me, calling ‘Hi! Paul Revere! Yankee Doodle!’ I had spent nearly all my money on a dust-covered, worthless antique. And I thought then, what a fine thing it would be if a snake like him could be made to show his true face.”

I nodded at him as if he were the wisest man who had ever drawn breath. Across the room, a wide-eyed clerk turned his head completely around and stared at us.

“Isn’t it a blessed thing in a rotten world, sister, to see the truth? To see the cheats as they are?”

I crouched down. I would be sincere, if that was what he wanted. For I had been a girl on a farm like this. I had spun thread and milked cows and kneaded bread with my own strong hands. Was I not an honest country girl at heart?

“Boss. Master.” I spat blood and wiped it on my shirtsleeve. “Cure me, sir.”

He grinned. “There is no cure, sister. This is your nature. And now everyone can see it.”

I suppose he had some plan to march the Brotherhood through the city, a parade of horrors, like some terrible Fourth of July.

He was surprised when I leapt upon him, when I tore out his throat with my teeth. How innocent he was, for all his studied malevolence! For the joy of the axe that clefts the wood in perfect halves, the joy of the arrow that strikes the target’s center, is the joy of the shark with her prey in her teeth. Each cell of her body clamors for its perfect use—to seek and then to murder, and then to consume, down to the splintering bone!

I savored his death. I savored it in place of what he took from me.

The Brotherhood could smell the blood, could hear the leader’s truncated cry, and they rushed the wagon in a body. I bit off the Boss’s arm with my teeth. My hands worked well enough to use it as a club, to beat my brothers back from the wagon.

The smell of guns firing. The sound of gunshots, the animal whines as my brothers fell around me. And then a heavy crunch at the back of my head.



Something wet and rough was traveling the length of my body. I opened my eyes to discover myself in Fishman’s bed. Fishman was washing me with a rag.

“Winslow,” he said. “You’re all right.” His eyes were red from weeping. I had not known he cared for me so deeply. I had not known he felt anything so deeply.

I sat up. My hard Yankee skull had survived the policeman’s truncheon. But nothing had changed. I was still a monster.

Fishman put the rag back in the basin. He sat next to me on the bed. He placed his lips gently atop my ruined mouth and pulled away with a smile.

He had kissed me. I placed my hand on my mouth as if I could still feel the imprint of his lips, as if I could hold the kiss in place.

“We should leave before Pym finds I brought you here,” he said. He threw open the door to his wardrobe. “Choose anything you like, Winslow. Wear my best suit, if you wish. Anything you fancy.”

He had to help me dress. I could not have buttoned my shirt for the life of me. Then he smoothed back my hair. But he would not let me look in the mirror.

“You’re lovely,” he said. “Believe me.”

He tied my wrists together and put us both into a cab. He had to sit on me so that I would not attack the driver. It was only belatedly that I realized that I had left my bankroll behind, in my pants pocket, along with a handful of human teeth.

We emerged at the harbor. I believed that I saw Fishman give the driver his entire bankroll as I gnawed at the delicious strap of leather that bound my hands. But I must have been mistaken.

When the driver was gone, my head cleared again. A dark, still night. On the ships I could smell the sailors, safe at rest, too far away to charge my madness. Fishman lifted me to his chest. I chewed through the last piece of leather and dropped it to the ground. I embraced him and rested my head against him. “Trust me,” he whispered. “Trust me.”

I opened my eyes when we stopped. We were at the edge of the pier. Dark as it was, I saw my reflection in the water quite clearly. My eyes were as they had always been, but my mouth seemed to stretch from ear to ear, revealing a jagged, terrible set of teeth.

And then I understood what Davy was giving me. A kind death for the monster, his friend. Drowning is the nicest of deaths, they say, and the worst is death by fire.

But then he jumped with me. The force of the water drove us apart. *Davy!* I thought. He had no reason to drown. And I couldn’t abide it if my last moment of human knowledge, if my last memory, was that he had died with me.

The shock of the cold and the weight of the water stunned me for a moment. But my feet and hands were admirably suited for swimming. Lovely cool seawater drew through my mouth and

into my veins and out through slashes on my back. *Keep calm*, I cautioned myself. *Only look, there he is!* I wrapped my arms around him and dragged him towards the surface.

Stop yanking on me, Winslow. Let go! I heard his voice inside my head, clear as printing. I let go, and stared at him in shock. From the waist up, he appeared unchanged. From the waist down, his legs had been supplanted by an elegant, dove-grey tail.

For a moment, I only goggled at him. Then I began to laugh.

What is it? he asked.

Fish-Man! I thought.

He grinned. *You're not the only fellow to change his name when he hit New York.* Around us the ocean seemed to stretch out endlessly. We could go wherever we willed. But I could sense something off in the distance. The juddering and striving of a city, concealed deep under the waves, smelling of money and freedom and hope. *My own city*, I thought. I would hold it in my small webbed hand, I would tear it in my teeth until the blood stained the water cherry red.

As he wrapped his arms around me, I could tell that Fishman felt the same.

How about this for an advertisement, Winslow? Fishman thought. *"Alice Winslow and David Fishman, lately arrived in Atlantis from New York, offer the most fashionable styles in cottons, wools, and all other fabrics, to discerning customers." Or should that be, "to exacting customers?"*

And side by side, the two of us swam there together.



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Nora writes: *"Self-Made Man" was born when Pat Esden, a fellow member of the Codex Writers' Group, dared me to combine all my obsessions into one short story. Many of the details about business ethics in early New York came from a panel at SHEAR 2006 consisting of Brett Mizelle, Paul J. Erickson, and Wendy Woloson. Thanks to Paul for providing additional verisimilitude, and to all the other people who read this story, especially two anonymous reviewers I wish I could thank by name.*