

Catharine, Queen of the Tumbling Water – Excerpt

We sit in the London Coffee House on Front and Market Streets in a building with a large window facing the street.

Mr. Franklin tells me it is a very popular coffee house, but one he will not frequent on market days. “Out this very window on market days, my dear, one not only sees barrels of rum being sold to the Indians, but enslaved Africans being auctioned and sold. It is something I detest . . . slavery. But one step at a time . . . one foot in front of the other, I say.”

He removes his spectacles and dabs at his eyes with his handkerchief. I don’t know if he is crying or he has the eyes of the old ones that often run. I believe it is because the old ones have lived so long with grief that it overflows without consent. Our bodies know our stories and try to care for them for us. But has Benjamin Franklin known grief?

“I’m sorry, my dear . . . I am old and seem to have no control over these eyes . . . or the rest of my body, for that matter.”

Benjamin Franklin laughs and then looks into my face with gravity. I see then he has known sorrow.

“Chief Canassatego said that many arrows cannot be broken as easily as one and right now we’re trying to bundle the many arrows of our thirteen colonies together into our new country.”

“Your new country . . .”

“Our new country, Catharine. You and your people are also of this new country.”

“I liked the old country, Mr. Franklin, and have had no say in this new country. What Indian has? What woman has? What African has that you are in sympathy with?”

Mr. Franklin gulps his coffee and wipes the corners of his mouth. “A few years ago, I invited the chiefs here in Philadelphia to tell them that the advice of Chief Canassatego over thirty years ago had been taken. The Tree of Peace and your constitution we have studied. Why, everyone here at the convention has had personal experience with Indians. How could they not, or you, influence us? Our formidable John Adams has written about different types of government and this includes philosophers from Europe, the Iroquois Confederacy, and other native governments. The visits you and your people have made here to Philadelphia have been important, not only in making certain there is land for you to always live on, but for much more.”

Benjamin Franklin takes my hands that are folded loosely around the coffee cup I haven’t put to my mouth and holds them in his old knotty ones.

“Catharine, my meeting with you long ago gave me new eyes to see your people and later, I made the resolve to work to abolish slavery. And now in Philadelphia you are here when wisdom from many will be formed into a new government for all people. You, my dear, as well as your people, have become an integral part of this.”

I gently pull my hands away from his and take a sip of the coffee that is cold, but I like it this time. I take another sip and think maybe there will be other things I’ll try before I lay down to sleep with the ancestors in Eagle Cliff Falls.

Later, I hear about the signing of this new constitution and learn that Benjamin Franklin was in such poor health, he needed help with his pen, and as he signed, tears streamed from his eyes. He and the signers of the constitution took a light from our Ho-De’-No-Sau-Nee fire and carried it over to

light their own fire to make their nation. The prophet, Deganawida's name means two rivers flowing together. I pray to the Great Spirit that our two rivers can flow in peace and meet up with other waters to nurture this great Turtle Island.