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MY FRIEND AND COMPANION

The Intimate Journey of Lewis and Clark

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PART ONE

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark shared a deep and significant bond, one that had major ramifications for their contribution to American history. Their ability to work as one, and to stand in for one another when the occasion required it, was an important factor in the success of their mission, and most historical studies of the co-captains of the Corps of Discovery, however brief, single out this particular aspect of their story. But what was the nature of that bond? In both academic and popular realms, issues of gender and sexuality are beginning to be more widely explored, and so it is understandable that the Lewis-Clark pairing might evoke similar inquiries about its intimate dynamics. With so many other aspects of the Lewis and Clark story having been examined in minute detail, from the medicines they prescribed to the food they ate, it is perhaps time to confront whatever controversy may arise, to explore this particular question in more depth, to lay out the evidence as it is now known, and to suggest some preliminary conclusions, with the caveat that much more needs to be uncovered before the issue can be fully understood.

The idea that issues of gender and sexuality might have a significant impact on historical events is hardly new. Whole libraries have been written about Henry VIII's libido and its impact on English history and on the Realpolitik of sixteenth-century Europe, yet until recently historians have been reluctant to cross the heterosexual barrier, to explore whether minority sexual orientations may have played an equally important role in the lives of familiar historical figures. Lewis and Clark's relationship certainly invites this type of inquiry, given the importance of the bond they forged as co-captains of the Corps of Discovery, and given the number of puzzling and unresolved mysteries surrounding that epic journey, most notably the circumstances surrounding Lewis's untimely death. Their relationship is central to their story. So intimately are the two men linked in the popular imagination that they have no independent identity. Clark lived on for thirty-two years after completion of the journey to the Pacific, serving as governor of the Missouri Territory and as Superintendent of Indian Affairs under every president from James Monroe to Martin Van Buren, and yet any mention of a post-expedition William Clark inevitably requires the designation "of Lewis and Clark fame" or the average reader will not make the connection. These two men have been paired in a conjoining that is unique in American history. Certainly the nature of that coupling deserves careful analysis.

Speculation is fueled because so very little is known about their sexual histories before and during the expedition. Clark always insisted, publicly and privately, that unlike his men, he and

Lewis did not avail themselves of the Native American women offered to them. Immediately upon returning from the expedition, Clark married Julia Hancock (sometimes described as the fiancée who waited patiently for him, even though she was only twelve years old when he set out for the Pacific Coast), and upon her death he married Harriet Kennerly Radford. Lewis, on the other hand, never married.

So strong is the presumption of heterosexuality where American national heroes are concerned that historians have been baffled to explain Lewis's prolonged bachelorhood. Donald Jackson writes, "Lewis's search for a wife was dogged and inexplicably futile."¹ Howard I. Kushner is equally puzzled: "As a young man, Lewis was constantly in search of the ideal woman, falling in and out of love quickly and often. In each instance *he discovered a reason or created a situation that made impossible the continuation or culmination of the romantic relationship.*"² [Emphasis added.] "There could be many reasons why Lewis did not marry," Rochonne Abrams suggests. "In that day there was a shortage of women, but one doubts if that would have affected so eligible a bachelor — he had family, wealth, position."³ Stephen Ambrose speculates about Lewis's sexual conduct, but then decides that the nature of the explorer's intimate relations with women "is almost unknown, and unknowable."⁴ John Bakeless, no doubt unwittingly, perhaps comes closest to uncovering the reason for Lewis's lifelong bachelorhood: "The truth is that Meriwether Lewis was no ladies' man, and — moody, solitary fellow that he was, more in love with wilderness adventure than with anything else — would probably have made a very bad husband for any of the conventionally elegant young ladies of his class and period."⁵

Moody and solitary Lewis certainly was. When he moved into the unfinished President's House (now the White House) in order to assume the position of personal secretary to Thomas Jefferson, he declined to take one of the many bedrooms on the second floor, but installed himself instead in the East Room, where he could maintain his privacy. Lewis and the president lived alone in the huge mansion "like two mice in a church," as Jefferson described it.⁶ In offering Lewis the position of personal secretary, Jefferson had invited him to become part of the president's "family" but Lewis (who had lost his father at an early age and who carried on a life-long struggle to separate himself from his domineering mother) had decidedly mixed feelings about families, and preferred to keep his distance.

As his months in the President's House passed, Lewis became ever more withdrawn and secretive. He was subject to black spells of clinical depression that he could not shake. "While he lived with me in Washington," Jefferson later wrote, "I observed at times sensible depressions of mind."⁷ Jefferson attributed them to heredity, and particularly singled out Lewis's father as a possible source of the instability. This is the sole surviving reference to William Lewis's mental health, but as a neighbor in Albemarle County, Jefferson would have been in a position to observe the elder Lewis's behavior closely and to hear secondhand from many of the man's associates. Meriwether Lewis's depressions concerned Jefferson, but they did not alarm him. "I estimated their course by what I had seen in the family," he wrote. What Jefferson may have seen in William Lewis was that vigorous physical activity and mental challenges drew him back to an active engagement with the outside world. Early on in his planning Jefferson had considered Meriwether Lewis as a possible leader for the Corps of Discovery, but perhaps by 1803 he also saw the expedition as a way of drawing Lewis out of his spiraling depressions. The journey of exploration would at the very least get Lewis out of Washington, a place that had afforded him little happiness.

When Lewis's new assignment was announced, a rumor began to buzz around the Capital that Jefferson was exiling Lewis to the wilderness because of some grave misconduct that had been uncovered. The president, in explaining to Lewis Harvie why he had delayed offering Harvie the newly-vacant position of personal secretary, wrote that he was reluctant to show haste in replacing Meriwether because he wanted "to counteract ... a malignant & unfounded report that I was parting with him from dissatisfaction, a thing impossible either from his conduct or my dispositions towards him."⁸ Jefferson declined to specify what the malignant rumor was, but he was concerned enough about public perception to delay the appointment until Lewis was well-started on his new assignment.

Once confirmed as leader of the Corps of Discovery, Meriwether Lewis wrote to William Clark offering him a co-captaincy, a letter that has been called, “one of the most famous invitations to greatness the nation’s archives can provide.”⁹ The warm offer and its eager acceptance reveal an intense mutual regard, and yet little is known about the basis for their intimacy. Historians are able to document only six months of friendship prior to the expedition, a brief period in 1795-96 during which Clark was Lewis’s superior officer, when they both served under “Mad” Anthony Wayne. Despite their very brief acquaintance, the two men had quickly developed a close, affectionate and lasting rapport.

Biographer Stephen Ambrose was at loss when pressed by a curious reader to explain the unusually rapid bonding between the two young men (one of whom was a reclusive, moody loner): “Study the letters that they exchange, after having not been in contact so far as we know for almost a decade, and then Lewis writes out of the blue to Clark and makes this extraordinary offer to join him on one of the great explorations of all time as a co-commander, and read between the lines and read Clark’s reply.... Now how did that happen in a six month period together? I don’t know, of course, I tried desperately to find even one anecdote and couldn’t.”¹⁰ In his biography of Meriwether Lewis, *Undaunted Courage*, Ambrose addresses this puzzlement but is unable to find a satisfactory answer. “How this closeness came about cannot be known in any detail,” he writes, “but that it clearly was there long before the expedition cannot be doubted.”¹¹

This closeness led Lewis to insist that Clark be appointed as co-captain of the Corps of Discovery, and when the Secretary of War summarily refused to allow such an unorthodox command structure, Lewis decided to lie to the enlisted men and to present Clark as his exact equal in rank. Lewis’s fight to establish a co-captaincy goes to the heart of an issue that dominated the later years of his life. Lewis was obsessed — the term is not overstated — obsessed with defining his relationship to Clark. In a society that held back from discussing male-male intimacy, there was no way of labeling this *thing* that had so intensely developed between them during the brief six months they had served together. His relationship with Clark was the culmination for Lewis of years of isolation, yearning and frustration. So important was this intense friendship that he felt a deep need to give it a name and a context — and to have the world in some way acknowledge its validity. This drive for definition and affirmation motivated Lewis for the rest of his life, and it provides an answer to one of the enduring mysteries surrounding the Corps of Discovery.

The expedition undertaken by Lewis and Clark was first and foremost a scientific one. Certainly, Jefferson wanted to enhance America’s hold on the newly-purchased Louisiana Territory, and he was particularly interested in learning if it would be commercially feasible to navigate up the Missouri and down the Columbia, but his primary interests were zoological, botanical, astronomical and ethnographic. While the act of reaching the Pacific Coast overland would be important politically and psychologically for the nation, it was the information gathered along the way that most interested the president. For this reason, Jefferson placed a primary emphasis on journal-keeping, going so far as to describe the expedition (only slightly disingenuously) as “purely literary.”

Lewis, Clark and as many of the men as were willing and able, were to keep detailed journals describing their experiences, and those journals were to be copied and recopied along the way. “Your observations are to be taken with great pains & accuracy,” Jefferson instructed him, “to be entered distinctly & intelligibly for others as well as yourself.... Several copies of these as well as of your other notes should be made at leisure times, & put into the care of the most trust-worthy of your attendants, to guard, by multiplying them, against the accidental losses to which they will be exposed.”¹² Given this direct order from the Commander in Chief, historians have been puzzled that Meriwether Lewis apparently kept *no* daily journal for the first segment of the journey (from St. Charles to the Mandan Villages), a silence of nearly eleven months. “That gap is particularly bewildering,” writes Gary Moulton, most recent editor of the expedition records, “because we would expect Lewis to be more conscientious at the outset of the expedition, especially in light of Jefferson’s explicit instructions about the keeping of multiple journals.”¹³

Several theories have been advanced to explain the absence: that Lewis routinely delegated the task of journal-keeping to Clark for the first leg of the journey, or that Lewis experienced a long bout of depression that made writing impossible, or that Lewis kept a journal that was damaged or lost along the way, or that the journal was misplaced *after* the expedition returned. Moulton suggests that the gap might be part of “a larger pattern of negligence,” noting that there are other long stretches for which we have no entries from Lewis. Stephen Ambrose disagrees: “I am convinced that there once existed — and still may — an important body of Lewis journal entries.” But he concludes finally, “There is no explanation for the gaps.”¹⁴

And so the puzzlement has continued over the decades with theories of loss, negligence and disobedience of direct orders endlessly debated over and over but never resolved. There is one explanation, however, which apparently has never been considered. Might it be that Lewis’s first journal was purposely but secretly destroyed? This explanation answers both those who insist that Lewis *must* have kept a journal, and those who point out that there is no contemporary reference to a lost volume. The reasons for its destruction were of such a sensitive nature that it was necessary for the captains to remain silent about the act, and to obscure all evidence that the journal (or journals) ever existed — something the captains did with such success that historians are still debating what exactly happened.

What could have motivated them to destroy a part of the official expedition record? I would argue that the answer lies in Meriwether Lewis’s passionate attachment to William Clark. Perhaps Lewis was so infatuated with Clark, so amazed at the turn of events that had resulted in this intimate partnership, that he found it difficult to be discreet in his journal entries. The journals were never meant for unedited publication, and their contents would not be seen by the public without major revision, so Lewis may have felt there was little need for self-censorship. The journal entries need not have been (and most likely *would not* have been) explicitly sexual, but cumulatively they may have revealed more about the nature of Lewis and Clark’s emotional attachment than Clark felt comfortable acknowledging.

Once installed in the winter camp at Fort Mandan, Clark would have been at leisure to read over Lewis’s journal entries and he may then have told Lewis of his discomfort. Lewis may have agreed to make a fair copy of his journal which eliminated the offending passages, but then have been unable to complete the transcription. Perhaps the entire volume was at that point consigned to the flames, and the decision was made to rely on Clark’s journal (and those of the enlisted men) as a record of the first leg of the expedition.

Granted, such an act of deliberate destruction would be extreme — almost treasonous — but the gap in coverage does in fact exist, and all *other* explanations for that gap put forth over the last two hundred years have proved to be in some way unsatisfactory. *Fully cognizant that I have sketched here a tenuous chain of suppositions*, I would assert that there is a considerable body of circumstantial evidence that points to a secret agreement between the two men to cover up the details of their relationship.

First it should be noted that the destruction of Lewis’s early journal entries would not mean a significant loss of information. The route from St. Louis to the Mandan Villages was well-traveled and well-documented. The Corps encountered several fur traders along the way who were able to fill them in on the terrain, the Indian tribes and the history of the surrounding lands. Lewis’s primary contribution to scientific knowledge was the careful recording of distances and latitudes, and some detailed notes about weather, flora and fauna. These were maintained in separate volumes (now known as Codices O, R and Q) and were preserved. Much of Lewis’s daily journal entries would merely repeat what Clark or the other men said in their journals (and since Clark was at this point keeping preliminary field notes which he would then transcribe into his official journal a day or so later, his information was actually being recorded in duplicate already). While Lewis’s journal was important enough to merit some mention if it had been accidentally lost, it would not have been a totally unconscionable act to destroy the volume if it proved too compromising. Little unique scientific information would have been sacrificed, and much benefit would have been gained by healing what might have been a significant rift between the two men.

There is archival evidence to support my conjecture. William Clark wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson to accompany the scientific data sent back from Fort Mandan. Since the intention had always been to send Lewis's journal to Jefferson at this point in the journey, some explanation was required for sending Clark's instead. A draft of the letter survives in unmistakable handwriting, and demonstrates that Lewis was hovering nearby, making sure that the proper spin was placed on the awkward circumstance.

Clark began by writing, "As Capt. Lewis has not Leasure to Send," he then changed it to read, "As Capt. Lewis has not Leasure to write a correct Cobby journal of our proceedings &c." Here Lewis stepped in, took the pen out of Clark's hand, crossed out the opening phrase and substituted, "It being the wish of Capt. Lewis I take the liberty." The substitution removed the only indication that Lewis had once planned to make a corrected copy of his journal to send back to the president — and indicates that such a journal *did* once exist. Clark then continued, "by the request of Captain Lewis to send you." This also was crossed out, and Clark wrote, "to send you for your own perusal, the notes which I have taken in the form of a journal in their original state. You will readily perceive in reading over those notes, that many parts are incorrect," — Clark here wrote "principally" and then struck it out — "owing to the variety information recived at different times" and Clark stopped, perhaps mortified by the idea that the erudite Jefferson would be reading his poor grammar and worse spelling.

Lewis took over the pen from him in mid-sentence and continued writing as though he were Clark himself, "I most sincerely wish that leasure had permitted me to offer them in a more correct form. Receive I pray you my unfained acknowledgements for your friendly recollection of me in your letters to my friend and companion Capt. Lewis, and be assured of the sincere regard with which I have the honor to be Your most Obt. & Humble Servt."¹⁵ The alternations in handwriting may reveal a contretemps between the two men, with Clark uncomfortable about lying to the president, and Lewis eager to show him that it was possible to mask the facts while still telling the literal truth.

What might have been the nature of the journal entries that the men chose to hide? Though most of the record keeping in the surviving journals is routine and didactic, there are also interspersed comments and vignettes that are of a very different tone. In an unexpurgated passage that somehow survived subsequent censorship, Lewis at one point provides a graphic allusion to homosexual activity. His jocular description of interpreter Toussaint Charbonneau's creation of boudin sausage out of a buffalo's intestine presents a homoerotic scene that is jarringly out of place in the otherwise staid narrative.

Lewis describes the burly Charbonneau manipulating the long suety tube of buffalo intestine: "About 6 feet of the lower extremity of the large gut of the Buffaloe is the first mosel that the cook makes loves to, this he holds fast at one end and with the right hand, while with the forefinger and thumb of the left he gently compresses it, and discharges what he says *is not good to eat....*" Charbonneau next kneads together a mixture of ground muscle, meat and kidney suet seasoned with pepper and salt. "[T]hus far advanced, our skillfull opporater C—o seizes his recepticle ... and tying it fast at one end turns it inwards and begins now with repeated evolutions of the hand and arm, and a brisk motion of the finger and thumb to put in what he says is *bon pour manger*; thus by stuffing and compressing he soon distends the recepticle to the utmost limmits of it's power of expansion."¹⁶ The unmistakable allusion to mutual masturbation (a man stroking and more specifically "*making love to*" a distended sausage) is so explicit and so detailed in its imagery that it may provide an example of the type of revelatory writing that discomfited Clark and led to the destruction of the first volume.

Lewis's earliest surviving journal entries are filled with ribald descriptions of animal sexuality and mating habits that read almost like temporary flights of mania, surprising eruptions in an otherwise sober scientific journal. But from the point where the expedition reaches the Rockies, Lewis seems to have experienced a spiritual deepening and an emotional maturing. Gone are the flippant sexual allusions, replaced by long philosophical passages of great lyric beauty. But also for the first time we begin to find darker notes here and there in Lewis's journal, the first hints that his chronic depression was beginning to reassert itself. His journal entry for 26 August 1805 breaks off

in mid-sentence, and succeeding pages have been torn out. Scattered entries have survived only as loose sheets, and nothing is known about the fate of the rest of this journal.

Not until 1 January 1806 — four months later — do Lewis’s journal entries again appear with regularity. When they begin again Lewis acknowledges the arrival of the New Year, but says nothing about a resolution to become a better journal-keeper. Indeed there is no reference of any kind to his having missed an entire *four months’* worth of entries. His silence on the matter as well as the existence of a few random sheets of loose pages are strongly suggestive that another of the journals had been destroyed — perhaps for the same reason as the first.

William Clark’s feelings are more difficult to trace through the journals than are Lewis’s, since Clark tended to be less introspective — and perhaps less candid — when he picked up his pen. But at the same time he was prone to doodle and to jot random words in his journals, and these provide tantalizing hints of what was going on in his mind. At Camp Dubois (before heading out on the expedition) he copied into his journal an entire paragraph verbatim from a reference source that Moulton’s editorial staff at the University of Nebraska Press were unable to identify, but which should be cited as *A New and Complete Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*.¹⁷ The entry Clark copied describes the workings of the senses. His reasons for choosing that particular definition are obscure, but it appears that he was looking up words at random rather than reading the dictionary from beginning to end, as “senses” is defined on page 2919 of the fourth volume of the set. Aware that Meriwether Lewis had the benefit of a better basic education, and knowing that Jefferson had in addition sent Lewis to Philadelphia for a crash course in applied science, perhaps William Clark was hoping to catch up by browsing in one of the few reference books at hand.

We know that Clark was researching one particular topic in this science text: human sexuality. On the same page of his journal on which he copied out the definition of the word “senses” he also jotted down the single word “Puberty” (it appears upside down at the top of the page).¹⁸ The *Dictionary’s* definition of puberty would be of particular interest to any man about to head into a wilderness in which white women would be few, and male-male sexuality would be a constant opportunity:

PUBERTY, *pubertas*, among civilians &c. the age wherein a person is capable of procreation, or begetting children. Boys arrive at puberty at fourteen, and girls at twelve: eighteen years of age is accounted full puberty. The natural state of mankind, after puberty, says M. Buffon, is that of marriage, wherein they may make use of the new faculties they have obtained, by arriving at puberty; a state which will become painful, and may even sometimes be fatal, if celibacy be obstinately persisted in. The too long continuance of the seminal liquor in the vessels, formed to contain it, may produce disorders in either sex, or at least irritations so violent, that the united force of reason and religion will scarcely be sufficient to enable him to resist those impetuous passions, which render man like the beasts, who are furious and head-strong, when they feel the force of these impressions.¹⁹

If William Clark accepted what he read in this dictionary, he would believe that abstinence is unnatural, that celibacy is dangerous to a man’s health (even “fatal”), and can provoke a violent reaction that cannot be controlled by either the powers of higher reason or religious scruples. Thus, excused by science for ungovernable passions triggered by a retention of seminal fluid, a man who would (naturally) prefer heterosexual relations might assume he had a special dispensation if no woman was available. The definition goes on to paint a dreary picture of what awaits a libidinous man in his marriage bed. “An opposite constitution of body is infinitely more common amongst women; the greatest part of them are naturally cold, or more or less tranquil under this passion...”²⁰

The scattered jottings and doodles in Clark’s journal continued throughout the journey. At Fort Clatsop on the Pacific Coast, in what appears to be almost a type of literary Tourette Syndrome, Clark scrawled the random words “Prostitution Carnally Sensuality Lustful Sensual”

across one of the pages.²¹ What did this sexual litany mean to him? “The exact purpose is unclear,” writes Moulton, “but Clark was presumably thinking about the behavior of the Chinook and Clatsop women and the men of the party.”²² Clark certainly held a negative view of his men’s sexual activity but he usually referred to it with wry humor, as something regrettable though unavoidable. The presence of the bawdy list in his official journal is odd and unexplained.

The deepening emotional connection between Lewis and Clark may be traced in a very objective, even quantifiable way by noting how they refer to one another in their respective journals. In one of the early journal entries before the commencement of the expedition Lewis writes, “[W]e made soome soup for my friend Capt. Clark who has been much indisposed since the 16th inst.”²⁶ Here the designation of “my friend” might be expected, both from a literary standpoint (he is in a sense introducing Clark to the journal’s reader) and from an emotional one (his friend is sick and he is worried about him). In succeeding references — and there are several hundred, in the weather diary, the natural history logs and in his surviving journals — he almost always refers to his partner simply as “Capt. Clark” or “Capt. C.” (just as Clark refers to him as “Capt. Lewis,” “Capt. L,” “Capt Lew” and even “C.L.” in his own journals). During the second summer of the trip, however, Clark was once again ill, and Lewis wrote in his journal, “My friend Capt. Clark was very sick all last night but feels himself somewhat better this morning since his medicine has operated.” Again, concern for Clark’s health drew them close.

For the next six months Clark is only “Capt Clark” or “Capt C” in the journal, but during their stay at Fort Clatsop and on the return journey eastward, Lewis uses the possessive designation “my friend” with greater and greater frequency. In describing their efforts to make salt from sea water, Lewis notes, “my friend Capt. Clark declares it to be a mear matter of indifference with him whether he uses [salt] or not.” The responsibility for directing the canoes around a stretch of rapids “was by mutual consent confided to my friend Capt. C....” The Indians they encounter “never ceased to extol the virtues of our medecines and the skill of my friend Capt C. as a phisician.” A river which the captains had named the Flathead River on their way westward was renamed Clark’s River as they passed it on the return journey. “I have thus named it in honour of my worthy friend and fellow traveller Capt. Clark.” When they gather in council with a group of Indians “the Chief met my friend Capt. C. who was in front...”²⁷ It is as though with every step closer to home Lewis felt a growing need to reassert his bond with Clark.

In early July 1806 the party split up to explore separate routes, agreeing to reassemble at the mouth of the Yellowstone. Lewis and Clark would separate for the longest period since their journey began. “I took leave of my worthy friend and companion Capt. Clark and the party that accompanied him,” Lewis wrote in his journal. “I could not avoid feeling much concerned on this occasion although I hoped this seperation was only momentary.”²⁸ On August 11, while hunting on the banks of the river, Lewis was accidentally shot by Pierre Cruzatte, one of the French *engagés*. The bullet enter Lewis’s left buttock and exited, scraping a deep three-inch-long gash in his right cheek. The wound was not life-threatening, but Lewis found it impossible to continue his journal keeping. “[A]s wrighting in my present situation is extreemly painfull to me I shall desist untill I recover and leave to my frind Capt. C. the continuation of our journal.”²⁹

Here, more than two years into the expedition and after literally hundreds of journal entries, Lewis is *still* explaining who Clark is. But explaining to whom, and for what purpose? The journals would be read by only a few people in preparation for publication, so the insistent designation of “my friend” would appear to be completely superfluous. I would argue that for Lewis the identification of Clark as his “friend and companion” — repeated again and again and again in the journals — was an attempt to label their relationship, a dogged effort to assert (if only to himself) the special nature of their connection.

The inevitable question is, was this intense emotional bond expressed sexually, and if it was, did they keep that information from the other men on the expedition? We may never know whether their intimacy included a physical component, but for most of the journey and for the period at Fort

Clatsop the two captains shared private sleeping accommodations, and certainly had the opportunity for sexual relations without the knowledge of their men. If Clark's assertions (repeated in private contexts in which he had no reason to dissemble) are true that he and Lewis did not engage in sexual relations with Native American women (though the other men in the Corps very definitely did), we must otherwise assume that Lewis and Clark remained celibate for a period of over two years.

The corps was certainly thrown together for most of the journey, but it would be wrong to assume that the social divide between the officers and the men necessarily broke down in the course of their two-year odyssey. Anyone who has read the Lewis and Clark journals in their entirety needs reminding that there were over thirty men (and one woman and one child) in the party. Only a handful of names appear with any regularity in the journals; the others fade into the background, and it is easy to forget the actual size of the entourage. It is clear that for the captains most of the members of the corps were just "the men" — strong bodies to help with the task of transporting the expedition to the Pacific and back. To a perhaps surprising extent Lewis and Clark were able to maintain the customary military separation that discourages fraternization or social intimacy between officers and enlisted men.

A few things *are* documented about sleeping arrangements. At Fort Mandan and again at Fort Clatsop, Lewis and Clark lived in their own separate hut within the barricades. At least for a brief time while on the trail they shared a tent with their primary hunter, George Drouillard, and with Charbonneau, Sacagawea and their baby son, but at other times the two captains insisted on a tent of their own. Accommodations within the captains' tent were evidently close. At one point Clark complains, "[O]ur Covering was so indifferant that Capt Lewis and my self was wet in our bed all the latter part of the night."³⁰

We also know that Lewis and Clark did not always remain in their tent (or "leather lodge") in the evenings, because of an incident that happened on 29 May 1805. Clark describes the confused tumult that occurred that night:

In the last night we were alarmed by a Buffalow which Swam from the opposit Shore landed opposit the Perogue in which Capt Lewis & my self were in he Crossed the perogue, and went with great force up to the fire where Several men were Sleeping and was 18 inches of their heads, when one man Sitting up allarmed him and he turned his course along the range of men as they lay, passing between 4 fires and within a fiew Inches of Some of the mens heads as they lay imediately in a direction to our lodge about which Several men were lying. our Dog flew out & he changed his course & passed without doing more damage than bend a rifle & brakeing hir Stock and injureying one of the blunder busts in the perogue as he passed through.³¹

For once Clark is here much more candid than Lewis. In Lewis's version of the events he omits any mention that he and his friend were together in the boat that night, saying only that the buffalo "coming along side of the white perogue, climbed over it to land, he then alarmed ran up the bank in full speed directly towards the fires." He even indicates that he and Clark were *not* in the boat, but were in their tent instead, saying that when the rampaging buffalo "came near the tent, my dog saved us by causing him to change his course a second time, which he did by turning a little to the right."³²

Sergeant John Ordway's account of the incident does little to clarify who was sleeping where:

[I]n the course of last night we were alarmed by a Buffalow Swimming across from the opposite Shore & landed opposite the white perogue in which our Captains Stay.

he crossed the perogue, & went with great force up the bank to the fire where the men were Sleeping & was within 18 inches of their heads when one man Setting up alarmed him and he turned his course along the range of men as they lay, passing between 4 fires & within a few Inches of Several mens heads, it was Supposed if he had trod on a man it would have killed him dead. the dog flew at him which turned him from running against the lodge, w[h]ere the officers lay.³³

Because of the ambiguous tense of the verbs “stay” and “lay” (were staying? usually lay?), it is unclear what Ordway is saying about the location of the captains on this evening, but it is clear that Lewis and Clark had a separate tent or lodge assigned to them, and that the majority of the men slept outside around campfires, some of them immediately outside the officers’ tent. It is also clear that Lewis and Clark were in the habit of spending a significant amount of time alone together in the white pirogue down by the water after the other men had gone to sleep. What were they doing there? Perhaps only plotting the next day’s course. But that explanation does not account for the discrepancy in the two officers’ stories. On this dramatic and memorable night, a night whose excitement they individually recorded in their journals soon after the events transpired, Lewis says that they were in danger of being killed in their tent while Clark says that they were in the pirogue down by the river. Clearly, one of the captains is not being truthful about where they were sleeping. It should be noted that the pirogue was a large craft capable of holding six men and a heavy load of supplies. It would certainly be of sufficient size to allow two men to engage quietly in the most common male-male sexual practices of the period: mutual masturbation and frottage.

There is even some evidence that Lewis and Clark were somewhat open about their sexuality with at least one member of the Corps of Discovery. The captains were on very close terms with George Drouillard, who had been hired as an interpreter. Even at the encampment at Camp Dubois (before the actual commencement of the expedition) Clark referred to Drouillard in his journal as “George,” a familiarity unique in the thousands of pages of journal keeping over the next two and half years. Drouillard was the son of a French-Canadian father and a Shawnee mother, and his knowledge of Indian sign language proved invaluable. He was also the best hunter in the Corps, and on many occasions his skill alone put food in their stomachs. The captains both had the utmost respect for Drouillard (whose name is mangled as “Drewyer” throughout the journals), and he was accorded special privileges, including (as mentioned above) sharing a tent with them for part of the journey.

On 3 August 1804 Clark scribbled in his field journal a note about an exchange he and Lewis had with George Drouillard: “we had Some rough Convasation G. Dr. — about boys.” The other members of the Corps of Discovery are consistently referred to as men, not boys, so the reference here is almost certainly to the younger French *engagés* who accompanied the expedition as far as the Mandan villages. The rough conversation (course, vulgar, indelicate language — a meaning traced back by the OED to 1750) that Lewis and Clark shared with Drouillard was most likely bawdy observations concerning these teenagers. Clark records the exchange with Drouillard only as a cryptic note in his field guide; when he copied the day’s events from the field notebook into the official journal he thought better of it and omitted any mention of the crude conversation. (He did not hesitate, however, to write openly on numerous occasions about the heterosexual antics of his men, or to express his distaste for the uninhibited sexuality of Chinook and Clatsop women.) In any case, Lewis and Clark were apparently unguarded enough with George Drouillard to exchange crude sexual observations.

The boys were again on Clark’s mind only nine days later. His field notebook for 12 August 1804 includes a doodle in red crayon or pencil of the profile of a boy, his lips puckered as if he was whistling or blowing. Clark wrote his daily commentary over this rough sketch, but it is readily discernable beneath his notes.³⁴ Of this sketch Ernest Osgood writes, “The subject is obviously a boy. There are no Indian characteristics about the face. Perhaps it is one of the French *engagés*.”³⁵

The boys are not mentioned again after the party left Fort Mandan; they returned down the river in the spring of 1805.

In the months immediately after their return to “civilization” Lewis and Clark were drawn into a whirlwind of balls and parades given in their honor. They were also drawn apart. Clark returned to his home in Fincastle, Virginia; Lewis to his in Albemarle County. At a banquet given in his honor at the Stone Tavern in Charlottesville, Lewis effusively evoked his absent partner, assuring the assembled gentleman that the success of the mission was “equally due to my dear and interesting friend capt. Clark.”³⁶

Meanwhile Clark was in Fincastle, courting Julia Hancock. The young girl who had been only twelve years old when they left on the expedition was now of marriageable age. Clark proposed, was accepted, and wrote jokingly to Lewis as if the courtship had been a calculated military campaign instead of a tender romance. “I have made an attack most vigorously,” he assured his friend, “we have come to terms, and a delivery is to be made first of January.... I shall return at that time eagerly to be in possession of what I have never yet experienced.” Whether what he had never yet experienced was sex with Julia, or sex with any woman, is of course unclear.

Meriwether Lewis had evidently hinted that he, too, had someone in mind for marriage. “My F[riend?],” Clark wrote to him, “your choice is one I highly approve, but should the thing not take to your wish I have discovered a most lovely girl Butiful rich possessing those accomplishments which is calculated to make a man happy — inferior to you — but to few others...”³⁷ Clark was ready to move on to the next stage of his life, and he hoped Lewis could make the transition also. Just about any woman would serve the purpose.

Lewis visited Philadelphia to begin preparation for the publication of the expedition journal, but after leaving Philadelphia he simply drops off the map. There is no record of where he was or what he did for the next eight months. Stephen Ambrose refers to this as the “lost period” of Lewis’s life.

In January 1808 William Clark married Julia Hancock at her father’s home in Fincastle, Virginia. It is not known whether Meriwether Lewis was in attendance. Lewis resurfaces in St. Louis the following spring, where he had taken up his duties as Governor of the Louisiana Territory. He wrote eagerly to William Clark to congratulate him on his marriage, and to describe the house he had already rented for the three of them to share. The letter is playful and jocular — almost manic in its enthusiasm. Lewis was over the moon at the prospect of having Clark once again as a daily companion. Yet despite his excitement and his bubbling anticipation, Lewis must on some level have suspected that the *ménage à trois* was doomed to failure. He added a coda to his plan: “[S]hould we find on experiment that we have not sufficient room in this house, I can obtain an Office somewhere in the Neighborhood and still consider myself your mesmate.”³⁸

Again Lewis tried to find some acceptable term to describe their relationship. The good, solid military term “messmate” harkened back to their days in the Army together, and by avoiding any reference to home, hearth or family it effectively erased Julia Hancock Clark from the picture. Julia however would not allow herself to be erased. She quickly saw that Lewis was a rival for Clark’s attention, and she insisted that her husband make a choice. She was expecting their first child and her nesting instinct was strong, so (in Stephen Ambrose’s blunt assessment) “she kicked Lewis out of the house.”³⁹ William Clark’s affection for Meriwether Lewis never wavered, but with marriage his priorities had changed and he knew his wife should come first. For Meriwether Lewis, his expulsion from William Clark’s new household was the beginning of a rapid, relentless disintegration.

PART TWO

In one of his early letters to William Clark, Meriwether Lewis wrote, “I could neither hope, wish, or expect from a union with any man on earth, more perfect support ... than that, which I am confident I shall derive from being associated with yourself.”⁴⁰ Now that that union with another man was at an end — signaled by Clark’s marriage and Lewis’s forced departure from the household — Meriwether Lewis’s life began to collapse around him. The responsibility of administering the fractious Louisiana Territory began to overwhelm him. His assistant Frederick Bates plotted behind his back, undercutting his authority and making sure that his best-laid plans went astray. Lewis’s land speculation schemes and investments in fur trading operations were questionably legal and financially ruinous, a house of cards destined to tumble. Thomas Jefferson was replaced in the President’s House by James Madison, and with his mentor’s retirement to Monticello the federal government began to question Lewis’s expenses and to withhold reimbursement. Assaulted on all sides and feeling abandoned by Clark, Lewis began to drink heavily, and to take doses of opium three times a day.⁴¹

St. Louis in the years following its annexation by the United States was a rambunctious, violent town periodically invaded by rough rivermen and untamed trappers come to blow off steam after their months of isolation. Most of the rowdy taverns and sordid brothels were clustered near the riverfront, and it was to this dangerous, louche neighborhood that Meriwether Lewis, Governor of the Territory, was irresistibly drawn to find solace.

The person most intimate with Lewis during this last period of dissolution was a young man named John Pernier (or Pirney or Pernia or Pernea), variously described as a Creole, Frenchman, Spaniard, mulatto or “furiner.” Pernier was an odd companion for the Governor, with little to recommend himself but his youth and his dark, feral looks. In 1934 Charles Morrow Wilson asserted that Lewis had picked up Pernier on one of his nocturnal sorties to the red-light district. With a profound naiveté typical of historians of his generation, Wilson describes the encounter with “a half-starved and wandering Creole named Pernea, whom Meriwether Lewis had found homeless and hungry along the river front.”

Pernea was a gaunt, sad ne’er-do-well who had followed the muddy Mississippi since birth. He gave his trade as “voyageur or waterman,” and in years past he had floated raft-loads of fur down river for the Choteaus. He had been shot in a saloon brawl, and flogged half to death at Natchez, by a band of Spanish vigilantes who had accused him of stealing a colt. The torture had left him a bit deranged of mind, and so he had taken to wandering from port to port, from saloon to saloon, hoping for the best and never finding it.

He had begged from Meriwether Lewis, never dreaming that so plainly dressed a gentleman could possibly be the great Governor. But the Virginian formed an instant interest in the wistful, beseeching fellow, this son of humanity that was downtrodden and outcast, and gave him a room in which to sleep and a steady allowance for food and drink.⁴²

Unfortunately, Wilson gave no source for his information about this encounter, so subsequent researchers have not been able to evaluate its accuracy. Donald Jackson documented that Pernier

was a servant in Thomas Jefferson's household in 1804 and 1805, and that he accompanied Lewis to the Louisiana Territory in 1807, so the dockside encounter either did not happen at all or it happened to someone else whom Wilson mistook for Pernier. It is instructive, in any case, to observe the potency of the heterosexual presumption for historical figures. Without a hint of sexual impropriety implied by the biographer (or, apparently, taken by his contemporary readers) Wilson was able to assert that a major political figure (a lifelong bachelor) had picked up a mentally unstable young man from the streets of a seedy part of town, had brought him into his home and had provided him with regular pocket money. One wonders if Wilson could have written with such obtuseness if Lewis had taken in instead a young *girl* of the streets.

Though John Pernier was at first employed merely as a servant or valet, he eventually took on personal custodial responsibility for the Governor, as Lewis seemed bent on self-destruction and became increasingly incapable of taking care of himself. In one of his happier moments at Fort Clatsop, Lewis had written of his indifference to the type of meat available to him — elk, horse, dog, wolf — as long as there was something to nourish and sustain him he was content. "I have learned," he wrote, "to think that if the chord be sufficiently strong, which binds the soul and body together, it dose not so much matter about the materials which compose it."⁴³ As his troubles mounted in St. Louis and as the chance of happiness with Clark receded, Lewis began to feel that vital cord weaken. He entered into a punishing downward spiral of work, drink and drugs. Always disdainful of his own body, he began an inexorable campaign to destroy it, to cut the cord and set his soul free.

In 1994 Reimart Ravenholt published an article in the medical journal *Epidemiology* which theorized that Meriwether Lewis during this period suffered from neurosyphilis paresis.⁴⁴ The case he makes is a persuasive one. The disease, an advanced stage of syphilis in which the brain is affected, is of comparatively modern origin (it is not mentioned in medical writings before the nineteenth century), but until the widespread use of penicillin in the 1940s it accounted for twenty percent of admissions to psychiatric hospitals. Writing in 1928, Charles Dennie provided a detailed analysis that is almost a road map to Lewis's mental and physical deterioration:

The most noticeable change is in [the patient's] character. We will take for instance, a man who is known for his acuity in business, who is a pillar of the church, foremost in all activities to better the civic conditions, somewhat austere and full of pride so that most people, excepting intimate friends, stand just a little in awe of him. The banker, lawyer, doctor, merchant — a man with an irreproachable reputation, the finest in his dealings with other people — suddenly begins to develop carelessness of dress, allows grease spots to show on his waistcoat, leaves his trousers unbuttoned, becomes fond of loose jokes (especially a man who has not been very fond of this kind of joke before), will make immodest remarks in mixed company, is not averse to flirting with his best friend's wife, and would even allow that flirtation to develop into other things.⁴⁵

Among the most common victims of neurosyphilis paresis are "the depressed or introspective type" who pose no danger to society, but who are "quite often successful in doing damage to themselves."⁴⁶ Lewis, of course, had been described as withdrawn and introspective at least from his teenage years, but other symptoms listed by Dennie — erratic behavior, lapses in judgment, vulgar humor, uninhibited sexual responses, and suicidal impulses — all describe Lewis's behavior with amazing exactness.

Ravenholt badly undercuts his case, though, by asserting that Lewis contracted syphilis from a Native American woman while on his trip to the Pacific. He even goes so far as to identify the exact night that Lewis was infected: 13 August 1805. Ravenholt quotes extensively from the many journal passages that describe the practice of loaning Indian wives, as well as those that mention the venereal diseases acquired by some of the members of the Corps as a result of this exchange. He

then jumps to a description of Lewis's extended period of illness in September 1805, and implies that it too was venereal in origin. It definitely was not.

At that point in the journey William Clark had gone on ahead scouting for food, and when he rejoined Lewis and the others he found them "much fatigued & hungry." He supplied them with roots and dried fish but (since he had himself just recovered from a bad bout of gastrointestinal distress), "cautioned them of the Consequences of eateing too much &c." His warning went unheeded, and the starving men gorged themselves. Two days later Clark wrote, "several 8 or 9 men Sick, Capt Lewis Sick all Complain of a *Lax* [diarrhea] & heaviness at the Stomack." For over a week the men suffered from the effects of the unfamiliar and possibly tainted food. "Several men bad, Capt Lewis Sick I gave Pukes Salts &c to Several, I am a little unwell. hot day."⁴⁷ Meriwether Lewis's vomiting, diarrhea and bloating were certainly serious, but they had nothing at all to do with sexual contact.

The night Ravenholt suggests that Lewis was infected with syphilis was certainly a pleasant one for the captain. On 13 August 1805 he finally made contact with the Shoshones (including Sacagawea's brother, Cameahwait) and the prospect of acquiring horses to carry them over the Rockies brightened considerably. He and a few of the men had gone ahead on a scouting party, and Ravenholt argues that this separation from Clark and the rest of the Corps gave Lewis license to let down his reserve and actually accept an Indian woman as his bed partner — though he had resisted the temptation up to that point.

Lewis himself writes that the Shoshones entertained them that evening with songs and dancing, but at midnight he grew sleepy and withdrew, leaving the other men to amuse themselves with their hosts. "I was several times awoke in the course of the night by their yells," Lewis writes, "but was too much fortieged to be deprived of a tolerable sound night's repose."⁴⁸ Lewis stayed in the Shoshone camp until Clark and the others arrived, and he took the opportunity presented by this respite to write several long descriptive entries in his journal. To Ravenholt those entries are proof that a guilt-stricken Lewis felt the need to account for his activities and to conceal that (after months of enforced celibacy) he had yielded to "a compelling need for sexual intercourse."⁴⁹ Ravenholt implies that intercourse with a Native American woman was by this point in the journey an irresistible temptation for Lewis.

In a subsequent issue of *Epidemiology* two physicians, Joseph P. Pollard and Donald W. MacCorquodale, each published letters challenging Ravenholt's article. Both men doubted the accuracy of the diagnosis, suggesting that the four years between Lewis's infection by a Shoshone woman and his death in Tennessee was simply too short a time to developed the symptoms that were described. "As a rule," writes MacCorquodale, "general paresis has its onset about 10-20 years after the initial infection."⁵⁰ Their primary objection to Ravenholt can be waived, of course, if we assume that Lewis did not contract syphilis during the trip to the Pacific, but rather much earlier. Using MacCorquodale's time scale, this would place the time of infection during Lewis's tenure in the Army, or perhaps even during the White House years. Given the undeniable presence of strong contributing factors — alcoholism, mental exertion and emotional stress — Lewis's symptoms would have presented themselves towards the early end of the time line. The actual source of Lewis's alleged venereal disease cannot be pinpointed, but it almost certainly was not an Indian woman on 13 August 1805.

Upon his return from the expedition, Lewis may have sought treatment from a discreet physician such as Benjamin Rush. As has been noted above, during the months between reporting to Jefferson at the President's House in December of 1806 and taking up his post in St. Louis as Governor of the Louisiana Territory in March of 1808, Lewis disappears from the historical record for long periods of time (Stephen Ambrose's "lost period"). He may have been in Philadelphia being treated for the disease, or he may have withdrawn to self-medicate. An amateur physician, Lewis may have chosen to give himself a course of mercury treatments, a regimen similar to those he had administered to his men while on the expedition. His opium addiction also may have started as a treatment for venereal disease, as opium was recommended in many contemporary medical texts.

Whether or not Lewis suffered from venereal disease, he was certainly an alcoholic and a drug addict, and by 1809 his troubles were becoming insurmountable. He had made no progress in editing the expedition journals. His investments in land and trading schemes soured. Even Jefferson began to question his policies in treating the Indians in the Louisiana Territory. The State Department refused to pay some of the bills he submitted for reimbursement, causing his personal finances to collapse. Finally in September he set off for Washington, DC to try to straighten out the mess.

On a boat on the Mississippi heading for New Orleans he twice tried to kill himself; both times he was restrained by the crew. He wrote his last will and testament, leaving all his possessions to his mother. He decided not to go to New Orleans, but to ride overland through Tennessee. At Chickasaw Bluffs (Memphis) his host Captain Gilbert Russell of Fort Pickering found him in a state of “mental derangement” and resolved “to take possession of him and his papers, and detain them there until he recovered, or some friend might arrive in whose hands he could depart in safety.”⁵¹ Russell maintained a twenty-four hour suicide watch, but when after a week Lewis seemed to regain his senses completely, the captain felt he could no longer detain him.

Lewis set out once again, accompanied by Major James Neelly, the U.S. agent to the Chickasaw Nation. Lewis brought Pernier with him, and Neelly brought an enslaved African American named Tom. Pernier later said that on the journey Lewis suffered hallucinations, hearing William Clark's horse on the trail behind them. Clark, Lewis assured them, was coming to find him; Clark would come to his relief. On the evening of October 9th, two of their horses strayed and Neelly volunteered to go after them. Lewis and the two servants would continue on and meet up with Neelly at the first house on the Natchez Trace inhabited by white people. That house turned out to be Grinder's Stand.

There is no way of knowing for sure what transpired during Meriwether Lewis's last hours. None of the people present at Grinder's Stand that evening left a written description of the events, so our knowledge is based solely on second- and third-hand accounts, mostly from what Mrs. Grinder is reported to have said. Unfortunately the various reports are contradictory, either because she changed her story over time or because the men who later put the story in print elaborated or censored it. Historians have sifted over the varying accounts, trying to apply a complex algorithm that calculates the reliability of the story-teller while factoring in how far removed he or she was from the actual events. Vardis Fisher (and others) weighed the evidence and definitely resolved that Lewis was murdered. Dawson A. Phelps (and others) weighed the very same evidence and definitely resolved that Lewis committed suicide.⁵²

Almost without exception, the writers who maintain that Lewis was murdered begin their argument with the assertion that he was not the type of person who would ever take his own life. ("If there is such a person as the anti-suicide type, it was Meriwether Lewis."⁵³) He was rugged, fearless, tough, a survivor. An annoying disagreement with some minor government accountants would not have driven him to such a desperate act. If he did not commit suicide, he must have been murdered — and so they set off to find a likely suspect. But of course Lewis *was* the type of person who would commit suicide. He was a loner, subject to crippling bouts of depression, in poor health, and addicted to alcohol and opium. He had for a brief period found a cherished companion in William Clark, but Clark had moved on with his life leaving Lewis alone and achingly unhappy. That he forged on by himself as long as he did is a tribute to his strength of character and to his belief that happiness might once again be his. But in October 1809 in a desolate cabin off the Natchez Trace, the enormity of his loss simply overwhelmed him and he could not go on.

Anyone writing about the death of Meriwether Lewis is forced either to choose what to believe among the differing accounts, or to become hopelessly entangled trying to present a balanced and complete description of all the numerous contradictions. Anyone familiar with the details of Lewis's death has, no doubt, already sifted and weighed the evidence and has come to some conclusion. The following account will describe the events as they are generally agreed upon by those who believe he committed suicide, but will factor in the theory that Lewis was intimately, emotionally attached to William Clark, and that the loss of the one person he loved was the event that weighed heaviest is his decision to end his life.⁵⁴

On the evening of October 10th Lewis arrived at a clearing called Grinder's Stand, where there were cabins that provided rough accommodations for travelers. Mr. Grinder was away from the compound, but his wife greeted Lewis and asked him if he was traveling alone. He replied that two servants would be arriving shortly. The

innkeeper prepared dinner for him, but he ate little and drank sparingly. Mrs. Grinder later reported that she was frightened by his moods shifts: he glowered in silence, sullen and withdrawn and then raved incoherently (“as if it had come on him in a fit” as she described it), alternately fiercely manic and eerily calm.

Lewis lit his pipe and sat on the front porch gazing wistfully towards the west. “Madam,” he said to Mrs. Grinder, “this is a very pleasant evening,” then he lapsed into a sad silence. He seemed to be lost in thought, and profoundly alone. At one point Lewis asked Pernier to bring him some gunpowder but, afraid that he might be contemplating another suicide attempt, Pernier protectively put him off and changed the subject. When Mrs. Grinder, concerned about Lewis’s erratic behavior, asked Pernier to take the Governor’s pistols away from him, Pernier replied, “He has no ammunition, and if he does any mischief it will be to himself, and not to you or anybody else.”

As it grew dark Mrs. Grinder began to prepare his bed in one of the cabins, but Lewis told her he would rather rough it on the floor, the way he used to sleep when traveling out West. Pernier brought out bear skins and a buffalo robe and spread them out for him, and when he expressed concern for Lewis’s state of mind the explorer assured him there was nothing to worry about — Captain Clark had heard of his troubles and was coming to help him. (William Clark on that evening was climbing into bed with Julia in a wayside inn outside of Louisville described as “a good little house”; they were on a pleasure trip to see family and friends in Virginia.⁵⁵) Still concerned for her safety, Mrs. Grinder retired to her kitchen to sleep; Pernier and Tom found a place in the stable loft.

But Lewis could not sleep. Mrs. Grinder could hear him pacing back and forth, talking loudly to himself “like a lawyer.” Sometime in the night Pernier came over to check up on him, and for unknown reasons the servant undressed and put on the clothes that Lewis himself had been wearing during the day. When Pernier approached in the darkness did Lewis think it was at last his dear friend Clark come to rescue him? Did Lewis ask Pernier to put on his own discarded clothes so that he looked less like a servant and more like Clark? The young man found that he could not comfort Lewis that evening, and returned to the stable. The next morning Mrs. Grinder told Pernier she had overheard him talking with Lewis during the night, and asked him what they had been talking about. He abruptly denied having gone to Lewis’s cabin at all. She asked him how then he could now be wearing his master’s clothes, but all he would say was, “He gave them to me.”

After Pernier’s departure that night, Lewis continued to pace and rant. He could not sleep and panic began to wash over him. He began to harm himself. All accounts of Lewis’s injuries say that he first shot himself twice, and when the gun shots failed to kill him he tried to finish the job using a knife or a razor. There were, however, no eye-witnesses to the actual events, and it is much more likely that the gun shots represent not a failed attempt, but instead an escalation. Throughout his life Lewis had put his body through a punishing regimen of painful trials. As a boy he would roam barefoot in the dead of winter until his feet cracked and bled, leaving crimson footprints in the snow. Given his history of self-inflicted pain, there is a good possibility that Lewis was what today would be called a “cutter” — a person who intentionally mutilates himself, using physical pain to relieve emotional distress. One contemporary report says that Pernier found Lewis sitting up in bed “busily engaged in cutting himself from head to foot.”⁵⁶

Benjamin Rush, who had tutored Lewis in the fundamentals of medicine during his preparatory visit to Philadelphia, described the cutter phenomenon in his 1812 pioneering treatise on mental illness. “Where counteracting pains of the body are not induced by nature or accident, to relieve anguish of mind, patients often inflict it upon themselves.... The same degree of pain, and for the same purpose, is often inflicted upon the body, by cutting and mangling its parts not intimately connected with life.”⁵⁷ While he does not mention Meriwether Lewis by name, Rush would no doubt have been aware of the circumstances surrounding Lewis’s death only three years earlier.

Another (perhaps related) impulse may have prompted the self-mutilation. Lewis might also have been subjecting himself to a Native American ritual of expiation. In the notes that Clark sent back from Fort Mandan he recorded the means through which an Indian accused of a crime might earn readmittance to the tribe: “The man so treated proves his deturmination to reform by penance, runing arrows through the flesh, Cutting themselves in Different places, going into the Plains necked & Starveing maney Days, and returns, this being a prooffe of his determination to reform, they after much Serimony take him into favour.”⁵⁸ This is nearly an exact catalogue of the abuse Lewis inflicted upon himself. Unfortunately for Lewis, there was no “serimony” through which he could be readmitted to his tribe.

Alone, ill, chronically drunk, addicted to opium, harassed by the government and feeling abandoned by both Clark and Jefferson, Lewis that evening took up his knife in an attempt to ease his mental suffering. When cutting himself did not bring release, he reached for his gun. Even if he was profoundly drunk, he would not need to be an expert marksman in order to put a bullet through his brain at close range, if that was his intention. That he shot himself twice, with neither shot being immediately fatal, is a strong indication that he did not intend to end his life at once; he was instead gradually ratcheting up his suffering until he reached a point where his body could no longer recover. In his last moments he surprised even himself with his capacity to endure pain, and his tenacious will to live brought to mind something he had seen on his journey to the Pacific. He and Clark were among the first white men to shoot a grizzly bear, and they were amazed at how many direct hits a grizzly could take and still continue to charge forward, snarling and determined to fight to the very end. In his journal at the time Lewis wrote that “these bear being so hard to die reather intimatedates us all.”⁵⁹ Meriwether Lewis’s final words are reported to have been, “I am no coward, but I am so strong — so hard to die.”

Pernier, Tom and Mrs. Grinder heard two gun shots around three o’clock in the morning and ran to the cabin where Lewis lay bleeding, near death. He begged Pernier to take his rifle and “blow out his brains.” They asked him why he had shot himself, and he replied that such an ending was to be expected: “If I had not done it, some one else would.” He lingered for a few hours, and then finally died just as the sun was coming over the trees. They buried him in a shallow grave, without a marker of any kind.

Pernier told Neelly that he wanted to continue on to see Lewis’s mother and President Jefferson, so Neelly gave him fifteen dollars to defray expenses. It has been suggested that Pernier came to Locust Hill in order to confront the grieving Lucy Marks and demand that she repay the money Lewis owed him. It is more likely that he viewed himself as a member of the Lewis/Marks family and was seeking to join them in their time of mourning. Perhaps he felt he could bring comfort to the grieving

mother by bringing her more information about her son's last moments. He was stunned when Lucy Marks met him on the steps of Locust Hill and instead of welcoming him as Meriwether's bereaved companion, turned him away. Jefferson agreed to meet with him and gave him money and a letter to President Madison, but declined to allow him even to spend the night at Monticello. Desolate, Pernier continued on to Washington, DC where he, too, killed himself.

We can trace Pernier's last moments through the letters of John Christopher Sueverman, the former servant in the Jefferson White House who took Pernier under his care following his return to Washington. On 5 May 1810 Sueverman wrote to Jefferson seeking reimbursement for his expenses:

Respectfully I wish to inform you of the Unhappy exit of Mr. Pirny. He boarded, and lodged, with us ever since his return from the Western Country. The principal part of the time he has been confined by Sickness, I believe ariseing from uneasyness of mind, not having recd. anything for his late services to Govr. Lewis. He was wretchedly poor and destitute. Every service in our power was rendered him to make him comfortable, not doubting but the moment he had it in his power he would thankfully and honestly pay us.

Last Week the poor Man appeared considerably better, I believe in some respects contrary to his wishes, for unfortunately on Saturday last he procured himself a quantity of Laudenam. On Sunday Morning under the pretence of not being so well went upstairs to lay on the bed, in which situation he was found dead, with the bottle by his Side that had contained the Laudanem.⁶⁰

Sueverman explained that he made sure Pernier was buried "neat and decent" but the expense of the funeral and of the servant's final illness "fall very heavy on us, whose circumstances you are well acquainted with, cannot bear it without suffering considerably, and hope you will be so oblidging as [to] assist us as Soon as it is possible to recover anything on behalf of the poor Man."

Jefferson was well aware of the severe financial burden Sueverman had taken on. He wrote of him, "Suverman was a servant of mine, a very honest man. He has since become blind, and gets his living by keeping a few groceries which he buys and sells from hand to mouth. He is miserably poor."⁶¹ Despite his awareness of the dire circumstances, Jefferson chose not to acknowledge Sueverman's plea for help. Three months later Sueverman wrote to Jefferson again, this time enclosing a copy of an invoice Pernier had prepared detailing the money owed to him by Lewis, a total of \$271.50. Sueverman again pleaded, "Our situation at present is so pressing that anything you can possibly do for us, will always be gratefully and thankfully Acknowledged."⁶²

Jefferson responded only by forwarding both of Sueverman's letters to William D. Meriwether, one of the executors of Lewis's estate. It was September before Jefferson received a response from the executor and finally responded to Sueverman's plea for help. He explained that William Meriwether declined to

“meddle” in Lewis’s estate, and had therefore forwarded the request to William Clark in St. Louis. Clark denied that Pernier had any claim on Lewis’s money and refused to make any reimbursement for the illness or burial. Jefferson then washed his hands of the entire matter, suggesting that Sueverman write to Clark directly. He closed the letter to his elderly, blind, miserably poor former servant with a jaunty, “My best wishes attend you in this and every other pursuit.”⁶³

Jefferson’s and Clark’s cold refusal to pay for Pernier’s final expenses is unconscionable — and uncharacteristic. While they might well refuse to acknowledge the full debt of \$271.50, they certainly could have (together or singly) offered Sueverman *something* for his kindness and care, particularly since they fully believed that the blind man had in fact incurred inordinate expenses in nursing Pernier and they knew that he could ill afford them. Their lack of compassion can be explained only by assuming that they had an overwhelming distaste for Pernier himself, or that they were reluctant to add to the paper trail linking Pernier to Meriwether Lewis.

William Clark heard of Lewis’s suicide by reading an article in the Frankfort, Kentucky *Argus of Western America*. He immediately wrote to his brother Jonathan, “I fear O! I fear the waight of his mind has over come him, what will be the consequence?” Clark had little doubt that Lewis had died by his own hand, explaining to his brother, “my reasons for thinking it [suicide] possible is founded on the letter which I recved from him at your house...”⁶⁴

Lewis had evidently written a letter to Clark pouring out his unhappiness, and perhaps threatening to kill himself. Whatever Lewis said in that letter — whatever he revealed about his desperation, whatever he may have said to his former companion — the letter weighed heavily on Clark’s mind. Two days later he wrote to Jonathan again, eager to have the letter back under his control. “I wish much to get the letter I receved of Govr. Lewis from N[ew] madrid, which you Saw it will be of great Service to me. prey send it to Fincastle as Soon as possible.”⁶⁵ Clark had by then received independent confirmation of Lewis’s death, and he told his brother that the news “givs us much uneasiness.”⁶⁶

What Lewis had written to Clark may never be known, but the fate of the letter is uncertain. The packet of William Clark’s letters to his brother Jonathan was not discovered until 1988 (among some family papers stored in an attic), so there is a possibility that this critical letter may have survived and may yet surface. It could tell us much about Lewis and Clark’s emotional bond.

It appears that in the end Clark too struggled to understand the relationship, to label it, to give it a name, and to explain his own status. A week after hearing of Lewis’s suicide he wrote to Jonathan helplessly, “I am at a loss to know what to be at his death [it] is a turble Stroke to me, in every respect.”⁶⁷

After much difficulty Clark succeeded where Lewis had failed, and shepherded their journals into print so that the world could read the story of their shared journey. He out-lived his partner by nearly thirty years, dying at the age of sixty-eight. William Clark’s niece recalled that every time he talked about Meriwether Lewis he cried.

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