



## JChap6: Golden Gray

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True Belle moved from Baltimore back to Vesper County in 1888 when Violet was twelve years old. That was after the men had come for the stock, the pots and the chair her daughter Rose Dear was sitting in. When she arrived, all that was left, aside from some borrowed pallets and the clothes on their backs, was the paper Rose's husband had signed saying they could; that the men had the right to do it, and I suppose, the duty to do it, if the rain refused to rain, or if stones of ice fell from the sky instead and cut the crop down to its stalks. Nothing on the paper about joining a party tht favored niggers voting. Dispossessed of house and land, the sad little family True Belle found were living secretly in an abandoned shack some neighbors had located for them and eating what food these neighbors were able to share and the girls forage. Lots of okra and dried beans, and, since it was September, berries of every kind. Twice, however, the minister's son had brought them a young squirrel to feast on. Rose told people that her husband, fed up and stunned by the uselessness of his back and hands, tired of green fried tomatoes and grits, hungry beyond belief for the meat of some meat and not just its skin, furious at the price of coffee and the shape of his oldest girl's legs, had just quit. Got up and quit. Gone off somewhere to sit and think about it or sit and not think about it. It was better to make up talk than to let out what she knew. They might come looking for her next time, and



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not just her pots, her pans, her house. Lucky for her, True Belle was dying and willing to die in Vesper County, after giving her whole well life to Miss Vera Louise in Baltimore.

The death True Belle was dying took eleven years, long enough for her to rescue Rose, bury her, see the husband return four times, make six quilts, thirteen shifts and fill Violet's head with stories about her whitelady and the light of both their lives--a beautiful young man whose name, for obvious reasons, was Golden Gray. Gray because that was Vera Louise's last name (much, much later it was also the color of his eyes), and Golden because after the pink birth-skin disappeared along with the down on his head, his flesh was radiantly golden, and floppy yellow curls covered his head and the lobes of his ears. It was nowhere as blond as Vera Louise's hair once was, but its sunlight color, its determined curliness, endeared him to her. Not all at once. It took a while. But True Belle laughed out loud the minute she laid eyes on him and thereafter every day for eighteen years.

When the three of them moved into a fine sandstone house on [tk] Street in Baltimore, far away from Vesper county where both Vera Louise Gray and True Belle were born, what the whitelady told her neighbors and friends was partly true: that she could not bear the narrow little ways of her home county. And that she had brought her servant and an orphaned baby she fancied to Baltimore to experience a more sophisticated way of living.

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It was a renegade, almost suffragette/abolitionist thing to do, and the neighbors and would-be women friends surrounded Vera Louise with as polite a distance as they could manage. If they thought that would force her to alter her manner, admit she needed to look for a husband--they were wrong. The out-of-state newcomer, rich and headstrong, contented herself with luxury and even less of their company. Besides she seemed taken up completely with bookreading, pamphlet-writing and the adoration of the orphan.

From the beginning, he was like a lamp in that quiet, shaded house. Simply startled each morning by the look of him, they vied with each other for the light he shed on them. He was given a fussy spoiling by Vera Louise and complete indulgence by True Belle who, laughing, laughing, fed him test cakes and picked every single seed from the melon before she let him eat it. Vera Louise dressed him like the Prince of Wales and read him vivid stories.

True Belle, of course would have known everything right away because, first of all, nobody could hide much in Vernonsville and nothing at all could be hidden in the Big Houses of its landowners. Certainly nobody could help noticing how many times a week a Negro boy was called on to ride along with Miss Vera, and what part of the woods she preferred to ride in. True Belle knew what all the slaves knew, and she knew more since she was the one whose sole job it was to tend to whatever Miss Vera Louise wanted or needed, including doing her laundry, some of which had to be soaked



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overnight in vinegar once a month. So if it did not need it, if the personal garments could be washed along with the rest, True Belle knew why, and Vera Louise knew she knew. There was never any need to speak of it. The only people who didn't know were the fathers. The about-to-be father--the black boy--never found out, as far as True Belle could tell, because Vera Louise never mentioned his name or came near him ever again. The old father, Vera Louise's, didn't know a thing. Not one thing. It had to be his wife who finally did tell him. Finally. Although she never spoke about it to her daughter, or, after she found out, ever spoke to her daughter at all, she was the one who would have had to let the old man know and when he found out, he stood up then sat down and then stood up again. His left hand patted around the air searching for something: a shot of whiskey, his pipe, a whip, a shot gun, the Democratic platform, his heart--Vera Louise never knew. He looked hurt, deeply, deeply hurt for a few seconds. Then his rage seeped into the room clouding the crystal and softening the starched tablecloth. Realizing the terrible thing that had happened to his daughter made him sweat, for there were seven mulattoes on his land. Sweat poured from his temples and collected under his chin; soaked his armpits and the back of his shirt as his rage swamped and flooded the room. The ivy on the table had perked up and the silver was slippery to the hand by the time he mopped his brow and gathered himself together to do an appropriate thing:

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slap Vera Louise into the serving table. Her mother, however, had the final cut: her eyebrows were perfectly still but the look she gave Vera Louise as the girl struggled up from the floor was so full of repulsion the daughter could taste the sour saliva gathering under her mother's tongue, filling the insides of her cheeks. Only breeding, careful breeding did not allow her to spit. No word, then or ever, passed between them. And the lingerie case full of money that lay on Vera's pillow the following Wednesday was, in its generosity, heavy with contempt. More money than anybody in the world needed for seven months or so away from home. So much money the message was indisputable: die, or live if you like, elsewhere.

True Belle was the one she wanted and the one she took. I don't know how hard it was for that black woman to leave a husband that work and distance kept her from seeing much of anyhow, and to leave two daughters behind with an old aunt to take care of them. Rose Dear and May were eight and ten years old then. Good help at that age for anybody who owned them and no help at all to a mother who lived four miles away in a rich man's house taking care of his daughter day and night. Perhaps it wasn't so hard to ask an older sister to look out for a husband and the girls because she was bound for Baltimore with Miss Vera Louise for a while. True Belle was twenty-seven and when would she ever get to see a great big city otherwise? More important Miss Vera Louise might help her buy



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them all out with paper money, because she sure had a lot of it handed to her. Then again, maybe not. Maybe she frowned as she sat in the baggage car, rocking along with the boxes and trunks unable to see the land she was traveling through. Maybe she felt bad. Anyway, choiceless, she went, leaving husband, sister, Rose Dear and May behind, and if she worried, the blonde baby helped soothe her, and kept her entertained for eighteen years, until he left home. So in 1888, with twenty-two years of the wages Miss Vera initiated soon as the War was over (but held in trust lest her servant get ideas), True Belle convinced herself and her mistress she was dying, got the money --one hundred eagle dollars-- and was able to answer Rose Dear's pleas by coming back to Vesper with Baltimore tales for grandchildren she had never seen. She rented a small house, bought a cook stove for it and delighted the girls with descriptions of life with the wonderful Golden Gray. How they bathed him, three times a day, and how the G on his underwear was embroidered with blue thread. The shape of the tub and what they put in the water to make him smell like honeysuckle sometimes and sometimes of lavender. How clever he was and how perfect a gentleman. The hilarious grown-up comments he made when a child and the cavalier-like courage he showed when he was a young man and went to find, then kill, if he was lucky, his father.

True Belle never saw him again after he rode off and didn't know if Vera Louise had any better luck. Her memories of the boy

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were more than enough.

I've thought about him a lot and don't hate him anymore. Not to say I understand him. I mean to say I don't know how to judge him anymore. Was he what True loved and Violet too? Or the vain and hincty pinch-nose worrying about his coat and the ivory buttons on his waistcoat? Come all that way to insult not his father but his race.

Pretty hair can't be too long, Vera Louise once told him and because she seemed to know such things, he believed her. Almost every other thing she said was false, but that last bit of information he held to be graven truth. So the yellow curls covered his coat collar like a farmer's, although the rightness of its length in fastidious Baltimore came from the woman who lied to him about practically everything including the question of whether she was his owner, his mother or a kindly neighbor. The other thing she did not lie about (although it took her eighteen years to get around to it) was that his father was a black skinned nigger.

I see him in a closed two-seat carriage. His horse is a fine one--black. Strapped to the back of the carriage is his portmanteau: large and crammed with beautiful shirts, linen, and embroidered sheets and pillowslips; a cigar case and silver toilet articles. A long coat, vanilla colored with dark brown cuffs and collar is folded neatly beside him. He is a long way from home and



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it begins to rain furiously, but since it is August, he is not cold. The left wheel strikes a stone and he hears, or thinks he does, a bump that may be the dislocation of his trunk. He reins in the horse and climbs down to see if any damage has been done to his things. He discovers that the trunk is loose--the rope has slipped and it is leaning. He unties everything and re-secures the rope more strongly. Satisfied with his efforts, but annoyed at the heavy rain, the spoiling it is doing to his clothes and the speed of his journey, he looks around him. In the trees to his left, he sees a naked berry black woman. She is covered with mud and leaves are in her hair. Her eyes are large and terrible. As soon as she sees him, she starts then turns suddenly to run, but in turning before she looks away, she knocks her head against the tree she has been leaning against. Her terror is so great, her body flees before her eyes are ready to find the route of escape. The blow knocks her out and down. He looks at her and, holding on to the brim of his hat, moves quickly to get back into the carriage. He wants nothing to do with what he has seen--in fact he is certain that what he is running from is not a real woman but a 'vision'. When he picks up the reins he cannot help noticing that his horse is also black, naked and shiney wet, and his feelings about the horse are of security and affection. It occurs to him that there is something odd about that: the pride he takes in his horse; the nausea the woman provoked. He is a touch ashamed and decides to

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make sure it was a vision, that there is no naked black woman lying in the weeds. He ties his horse to a sapling and sloshes back in driving rain to the place where the woman fell. She is still sprawled there. Her mouth and legs open. A small hickey is forming on her head. Her stomach is big and tight. He leans down, holding his breath against infection or odor or something. Something that might touch or penetrate him. She looks dead or deeply unconscious. And she is young. There is nothing he can do for her and for that he is relieved. Then he notices a rippling movement in her stomach. Something inside her is moving. He does not see himself touching her, but the picture he does imagine is himself walking away from her a second time, climbing into his carriage and leaving her a second time. He is uneasy with this picture of himself, and does not want to spend any part of the time to come remembering having done that. Also there is something about where he has come from and why, where he is going and why that encourages in him an insistent, deliberate recklessness. The scene becomes an anecdote, an action that would unnerve Vera Louise and defend him against the harsh judgment of patricide. [fix] Maybe. He unfolds his long coat that has been tucked in the seat beside him and throws it over the woman. Then he gathers her up in his arms and carries her, stumbling, since she is heavier than he supposed, to the carriage. With great difficulty, he gets her into a sitting position in the carriage. Her head is leaning away



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from him and her feet are touching his splendid but muddy boots. He is hoping her lean will not shift, although there is nothing he can do about the dirty bare feet against his boot, for if he shifts her again, she may swerve over to his and not her side of the carriage. As he urges the horse on, he is gentle for fear the ruts and the muddy road will cause her to fall forward or brush him in some way.

He is heading toward a house a little ways out from a town named Vernonsville. It is the house where his father lives. And now he thinks it is an interesting, even funny idea to meet this nigger whom he has never seen (and who has never tried to see him) with an armful of black, liquid female. Provided, of course, she does not wake and the rippling in her stomach remains light. That bothers him--that she might regain consciousness and become something more than his own dark purpose. He has not looked at her for some time. Now he does and notices a trickle of blood down her jaw onto her neck. The hickey that rose when she smashed into the tree is not the cause of her faint; she must have struck her head on a rock or something when she fell. But she is breathing still. Now he hopes she will not die--not yet, not until he gets to the house described and mapped out for him in clear, childish pictures by True Belle.

The rain seems to be following him; whenever he thinks it is about to stop, a few yards on it gets worse. He has been traveling

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for six hours, at least, and has been assured by the innkeeper that the journey would end before dark. Now he is not so sure. He doesn't relish night coming on with that passenger. He is calmed by the valley opening before him--the one it should take an hour to get through before he reaches the house just this side of Vernonsille. Quite suddenly, the rain stops. It is the longest hour, filled with recollections of luxury and pain. When he gets to the house, he pulls into the yard and finds a shed with two stalls in back. Both stalls are empty. He takes his horse into one and wipes her down carefully. Then he throws a blanket over her and looks about for water and feed. He takes a long time over this. It is important to him, and he is not sure he is not being watched by someone in the house. In fact, he hopes he is; hopes the nigger is watching open-mouthed from a crack in the planks that serve as wall.

But no one comes out to speak to him, so perhaps there is no one. After the horse is seen to (and he has noticed that one shoe needs repair), he returns to the carriage for his trunk. He unlashes it and hoists it to his shoulder. It makes a further mess of his waistcoat and silk shirt as he carries it into the house. On the little porch, he makes no attempt to knock and the door is closed but not latched. He enters and looks about for a suitable place for his trunk. He sets it down on the dirt floor and examines the house. It has two rooms: a cot in each, table, chair



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fireplace, cookstove in one. Modest, lived in, male, but otherwise no indication of the personality of its owner. The cookstove is cold, but the fireplace has a heap of ash that is warm, though there are no embers. The occupant has been gone perhaps a day, maybe two.

After he has seen to the placement of his trunk, he goes back to the carriage to get the woman. The removal of the trunk has displaced the weight, and the carriage is tipping a little on its axis. He opens the door and pulls her out. Her skin is almost too hot to handle. The long coat around her drags in the mud as he carries her into the house. He lays her down on a cot, and then curses himself for not having pulled its blanket back first. Now she is on top of it and the coat is all there seems to be to cover her. Its ruin may be permanent. He goes into the second room, and examining a wooden box there, finds a woman's dress. Gingerly he retrieves his coat and covers the woman with the strange smelling dress. Now he opens his own trunk and selects a white cotton shirt and flannel waist coat. He drapes his wet shirt on the single chair rather than risk damaging it on a nail hammered in the walls. Carefully he puts on the dry things. Then he sets about trying to make a fire. There is wood in the wood box and the fireplace, and in the darkest corner of the room a can of kerosene which he sprinkles on the wood. But no matches. For a long time he looks for matches and finally finds some in a can, wrapped in a bit of

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ticking. Five matches, to be exact. The kerosene has evaporated from the wood by the time he locates the matches. He is not adept at this. Other people have always lit the fires in his life. But he persists and at last has a good roaring flame. Now he can sit down, smoke a cigar and prepare himself for the return of the man who lives there. A man he assumes is named Henry LesTroy, although from the way True Belle pronounced it could be something else. A man of no consequence, except a tiny reputation as a tracker based on one or two escapades signalling his expertise in reading trails. A long time ago, according to True Belle, who gave him all the details--since Vera Louise shut herself in the bedroom or turned her head whenever he tried to pull information from her. Henry Lestory or LesTroy or something like that, but who cares what the nigger's name is. Except the woman who regretted ever knowing him at all and locked her door rather than say it out loud. And would have regretted the baby he gave her too, given it away, except it was golden and she had never seen that color except in the sky and in bottles of champagne. True Belle told him Vera Louise had smiled and said "But he's golden. Completely golden!" so they named him that and didn't take him to the Catholic Foundling Hospital where whitegirls deposited their mortification.

He has known all that for seven days, eight now. And he has known his father's name and the location of the house he once lived in for two. Information that came from the woman who cooked and



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cleaned for Vera Louise; who sent baskets of plum preserves, ham and loaves bread every week while he was in boarding school; who gave his frayed shirts to rag and bone men rather than let him wear them; the woman who smiled and shook her head every time she looked at him. Even when he was a tiny boy with a head swollen with fat champagne colored curls, and ate the pieces of cake she held out to him, her smile was more amusement than pleasure. When the two of them, the whitewoman and the cook, bathed him they sometimes passed anxious looks at the palms of his hand, the texture of his drying hair. Well, Vera Louise was anxious; True Belle just smiled, and now he knew what she was smiling about, the nigger. But so was he. He had always thought there was only one kind--True Belle's kind. Black and nothing. Like Henry Lestroy. Like the filthy woman snoring on the cot. But there was another kind--like himself.

The rain has stopped for good, apparently. He looks about for something to eat that doesn't need to be cooked--ready made. He has found nothing but a jug of liquor. He continues to sample it and sits back down before the fire. In the silence left by the rain that has stopped, he hears hoofbeats. Beyond the door he sees a rider staring at his carriage. He approaches. Hello. Might you be related to Lestroy? Henry Lestroy or whatever his name is? The rider doesn't blink. "No, sir. Vienna. Be back direcklin." He doesn't understand any of it. And he is drunk now anyway. Happily. Perhaps he can sleep now. But he shouldn't. The owner

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of the house might return, or the liquid black woman might wake or die or give birth or....

I don't hate him anymore. I see him more clearly now. When he stopped the buggy, got out to tie the horse and walk back through the rain, perhaps it was because the figure on the wet grass was everything he was not as well as a proper protection against and anodyne to what he believed his father to be, and therefore [if it could just be contained, identified], himself. Or was the figure, the vision as he thought of it, a thing that touched him before its fall? The thing he saw in the averted glance of the servants at his boarding school; the boot black who tap danced for a penny. A vision that, at the moment when his scare was sharpest, looked also like home comfortable enough to wallow in? That could be it. But who could live in that leafy hair? that unfathomable skin? But he already had lived in and with it: True Belle had been his first and major love which may be why two gallops beyond that hair, that skin, their absence was unthinkable. And if he shuddered at the possibility of her leaning on him, of her sliding a bit to the left and actually resting while she slept on his shoulder, it is also true that he overcame the shudder. Swallowed, maybe, and clicked the horse.

I like to think of him that way. Sitting straight in the carriage. Rain matting the hair over his collar, forming a little pool in the space between his boots. His gray-eyed squint as he



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tries to see through sheets of water. Then without warning as the road enters a valley the rain stops and there is a white grease pat of a sun cooking up there in its sky. Now he can hear things outside himself. Soaked leaves disentangling themselves one from another. The plop of nuts and the flutter of partridge removing their beaks from their hearts. Squirrels, having raced to limb tips, poise there to assess danger. The horse tosses her head to scatter a hovering cloud of gnats. So carefully is he listening he does not see the one mile marker with 'Vernonsville' carved vertically in the stone. He passes it by and then sees the roof of a cabin not fifty furlongs ahead. It could belong to anyone, anyone at all. But maybe, along with the pity of its fence enclosing a dirt yard in which a rocker without arms lay on its side, the door fastened with a bit of rope for a lock but gaping at its hinges, maybe it sheltered his father.

Golden Gray reins his horse. This is a thing he does well. The other is play the piano. Dismounting, he leads the horse close enough to look. Animals are somewhere; he can smell them, but the little house looks empty, if not cast off completely. Certainly the owner never expected a horse and carriage to arrive--the fence gate is wide enough for a stout woman but no more. He unties the horse and walks it a way to the right and discovers, behind the cabin and under a wrinkled tree he does not know the name of, two open stalls, one of which is full of shapes. Leading the horse he hears

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behind him a groan from the woman, but doesn't stop to see whether she is waking or dying or falling off the seat. Close up on the stalls he sees that the shapes are tubs, sacks, lumber, wheels, a broken plow, a butter press and a metal trunk. There is a stake too, and he ties the horse to it. Water, he thinks. Water for the horse. What he thinks is a pump in the distance, is an ax handle still lodged in a stump. There was the downpour though, and a good bit of it has collected in a washtub near the chopping stump. So his horse can be watered, but where are the other animals he smells but does not see or hear? Out of the shaft, the horse drinks greedily and the carriage tips dangerously with the unequal distribution of his trunk and the woman. Golden Gray examines the fastenings before going to the rope-locked door of the little house. That is what makes me worry about him. How he thinks first of his clothes, and not the woman. How he checks the fastenings, but not her breath. It's hard to get past that, but then he scrapes the mud from his Baltimore soles before he enters a cabin with a dirt floor and I don't hate him much anymore.

Inside light comes slowly, and, tired after forcing its way through oiled paper tacked around a window set into the back wall, rests on the dirt floor unable to reach higher than Golden Gray's waist. The grandest thing in the room is the fireplace. Clean, set for a new fire, braced with scoured stones, from which two iron arms for holding kettles extend. As for the rest: a cot, wooden,



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a rust colored wool blanket fitted neatly over a thin and bumpy mattress. Not cobs, certainly not feathers or leaves. Rags. Bits of truly unusable fabric shoved into a ticking shroud. It reminds Golden Gray of the pillow True Bell made for King to sleep on at her feet. She had been given the name of a powerful male dog, but she was a cat without personality, which is why True Belle liked her and wanted her close by. Two beds and one chair, as it turned out. The person who lived here sat alone at the table, but had two beds; one in a second room entered by a door stronger and better made than the one to the house itself. And in that room, the second one, is a box and a woman's green frock folded on top of its contents. He looked, just as casual as you please. Lifted up the lid and saw the dress and would have dug deeper, but the dress reminded him of what should have been in the front of his mind. The woman slumped out in the yard in his carriage. Did he think she would wake up and run off, relieving him of his choice if he left her alone? Or that she would be dead which was the same thing. He was avoiding her I know. Having done the big thing, the hard thing, by going back and lifting the girl up from weeds that clung to his trousers, by not looking to see what he could see of her private parts, the shock of knowing the hair there, once it was dry, was thick enough to part with a fingernail. He tried not look at the hair on her head either, or at her face, turned away into blades of grass. Already he had seen the deer eyes that fixed on

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him through the rain, fixed on him as she backed away, fixed on him as her body began to turn for flight. Too bad she didn't have the sense of a deer and had looked in the direction she was going soon enough to see the giant maple in time. In time. When he went back for her he did not know if she was still there--she could have gotten up and run away--but he believed, hoped, the deer eyes would be closed. Suddenly he was not sure of himself. They might be open. His gratitude that they were not gave him the strength he needed to lift her.

He leaves the second room, and steps into the yard. The sunlight bangs his own eyes shut and he holds his hand over them, peeking through his fingers until it is safe. The sigh he makes is deep, a hungry air-take for the strength and preserverance all life, but especially his requires. Can you see the fields beyond, crackling and drying in the wind? The blade of blackbirds rising out of nowhere, brandishing and then gone? The odor of the invisible animals accentuated in the heat mixing now with out of control mint and something fruity needing to be picked. No one is looking at him, but he behaves as though there is. That's the way. To carry yourself the way you would if you were always under the reviewing gaze of an impressionable but casual acquaintance.

She is still there. Hardly distinguishable from the shadow of the carriage hood under which she sleeps. Everything about her is violent, or seems so, but that is because she is exposed under that



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long coat, and there is nothing to prevent Golden Gray from believing that an exposed woman will explode in his arms, or worse, that he will. She should be stuffed into the ticking along with the bits of rag, stitched shut to hide her visable lumps and moving parts. But she is there and he looks into the shadow to find her face, and her deer eyes too, if he has to. The deer eyes are closed, and thank God will not open easily for they are sealed with blood. A lip of skin hangs from her forehead and the blood from it has covered her eyes, her nose and one cheek before it jelled. Darker than the blood though are her lips, thick enough to laugh at and to break his heart.

I know he is a hypocrite; that he is shaping a story for himself to tell somebody, to tell his father, naturally. How he was driving along, saw and saved this wild black girl. No qualms. No qualms. See look, here, how it ruined my coat and soiled beyond repair a shirt you will never see another one of. I have gloves made from the hide of a very young cow, but I did not use them to hoist her, carry her. From the weeds to the carriage; from the carriage into this cabin that could belong to anyone. Anyone at all. I lay her on the wooden cot first thing because she was heavier than she looked, and in my haste forgot to lift the blanket first to cover her. I thought of the blood, I think, dirtying the mattress. But who could tell if it was already dirty or not? I didn't want to lift her again, so I went into the other room and

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got the dress I'd seen there and draped it best I could over her. She looked more naked then than before I covered her, but there was nothing else I could do.

He is lying, the hypocrite. He could have opened his big fat trunk; removed one of the two hand embroidered sheets, or even his dressing gown and covered the girl. He's young. So young. He thinks his story is wonderful, and that if spoken right, will impress his father with his willingness, his honor. But I know better. He wants to brag about this encounter, like a knight errant bragging about his coolness as he unscrews the spike from the monster's heart and breathes life back into the fiery nostrils. Except this monster without scales or flaming breath is more dangerous for she is a bloody-faced girl of moving parts, of beautiful hands and lips to break your heart. Why doesn't he wipe her face, I wonder. She is more savage, perhaps this way. More graphically rescued. If she should rise up and bite him it would satisfy him even more and confirm True Belle's warning about the man who saved the rattler, nursed the rattler, fed the rattler only to discover that the last piece of information he would have on earth was the irrevocable nature of the rattler. Aw, but he is young, young and he is hurting, so I forgive him his self-deception and his grand, fake, gestures, and when I watch him sipping too quickly the cane liquor he has found, worrying about his coat and not tending to the girl, I don't hate him at all. He has a pistol



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in his trunk and a silver cigar case, but he is a boy after all, and he sat at the table in the single chair after changing into fresh clothes, for the ones he is wearing, still wet at the seams and cuffs, were filthy with sweat, blood and soil. Should he retrieve the broken rocker from the front yard? Go check on the horse? He was thinking about that, his next move, when he heard slow, muffled hoof clops. Glancing at the girl to make sure the dress and the blood were intact, he opened the door and peered into the yard. Floating toward him parallel to the fence was a black boy astride a mule.

He would have said, "Morning," although it wasn't, but he thought the man lurching down the steps was white and not to be spoken to without leave. Drunk, too, he thought, because his clothes were those of a gent who sleeps in his own yard after a big party rather than in his wife's bed, and wakes when his dogs come to lick his face. He thought this whiteman, this drunken gent, was looking for Mr. Henry, waiting for him, needing the wild turkeys now, now, goddamn it--or the pelts, or whatever it was Mr. Henry promised, owed or sold.

"Hello," said the drunken gent, and if the black boy doubted for a minute whether he was white, the smileless smile that came with the greeting convinced him.

"Sir."

"You live around here?"

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"No, sir."

"No? Where from then?"

"Out Vienna way."

"Is that right? Where you on your way to?"

It was better when they asked questions most times. If they said anything flat out it was something nobody wanted to hear. The boy picked at the burlap of his sack. "See about the stock. Mr. Henry he say I'm to see about it."

See that? The smile was gone. "Henry?" the man asked. His face was another color now. More blood in it. "You said Henry?"

"Yes, sir." and again. Mr. Henry he say I'm to look see

they get "Where is he? Is he close?"

"Don't know, Sir. Gone off."

"Where does he live. What house?"

O, thought the boy, he doesn't know Hunter but he's looking for him. "This here one."

"What?"

"This here place his."

"This? This is his? He lives here?"

The blood left him and showed up his eyes better. "Yes, sir. When he home. Ain't home now."

Golden Gray frowned. He thought he would know it right away, without being told and, surprised that he had, he turned around to look at it. "You sure? You sure this is where he lives? Henry



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Lestroy?"

"Yes, Sir."

"When's he coming back?"

"Any day now."

Golden Gray ran his thumb across his bottom lip. He lifted his eyes from the boy's face and stared out across the fields still cracking in the wind. "What you say you come by here for?"

"See about his stock."

"What stock? There's nothing here but my horse."

"Out back." He pointed with his eyes and a gesture of his hand. "They roam now and again. Mr. Henry he say I'm to look see they get back if they break out."

Golden Gray didn't hear the pride in the boy's voice: "Mr. Henry say I'm ..." because he was so terrified he laughed. This was it, then. The place he meant to come to and any day now the blackest man in the world would be there too. "Okay, then. Go on about it then."

The boy tsched his mule --for nothing, apparently because he had to kick his sides with creamy heels before the animal obeyed.

"Say!" Golden Gray held up his hand. "When you're done, come back here. I want you to help me with something. Hear?"

"Yes, sir. I be back."

[mtk]

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Golden Gray went back into the second room to change his clothes again--this time into something formal, elegant. It was the right time to do it. To select a very fine cambric shirt; to unfold the dark blue trousers that fit just so. The right time and the only time for as long as anyone in Vernonsville knew him, he wore the clothes he put on at that moment. When he took them out and lay them carefully on the cot--the pale shirt, the trousers with buttons of bone in the fly, the butter colored waistcoat--the arrangement, lying on the bed, looked like an empty man with one arm folded under. He sat down on the rough mattress near the trouser cuffs and when dark spots formed on the cloth, he saw that he was crying.

Only now, he thought, now that I know I have a father do I feel his absence. The place where he should have been and was not. Before I thought everybody was one-armed, like me. Now I feel the surgery. The crunch of bone when it is sundered, the sliced flesh and the tubes of blood cut through, shocking the bloodrun and distrubing the nerves. They dangle and writhe. Singing pain. Waking me with the sound of itself, thrumming it when I sleep so deeply it strangles my dreams away. There is nothing for it but to go away from where he is not to where he used to be and might be still. Let the dangle and the writhe see what it is missing; let the pain sing to the dirt where he stepped in the place where he used to be and might be still. I am not going to be healed, or



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to find the arm removed from me. I am going to freshen the pain, point it, so we both know what it is for.

And no, I am not angry. I don't need the arm. But I do need to know what it could have been like to have had it. It's a phantom I have to behold and be held by, in whatever crevices it lies, under whatever branch. Or maybe it stalks treeless and open places, lit with an oily sun. This part of me that does not know me, has never touched me or lingered at my side. This gone-away hand that never helped me over the stile, or guided me past the dragons, pulled me up from the ditch into which I stumbled. Stroked my hair, fed me food; took the far end of the load to make it easier for me to carry. This arm that never held itself out, extended from my body, to give me balance as I walked thin rails or logs, round and slippery with danger. When I find it, will it wave to me? Gesture, beckon to me to come along? Or will it even know who or what I am? It doesn't matter. I will locate it so the severed part can remember the snatch, the slice of its disfigurement. Perhaps then, the arm will no longer be a phantom, but will take its own shape, grow its own muscle and bone, and its blood will pump from the loud singing that has found the purpose of its serenade. Amen.

Who will take my part? Soap away the shame? Suds it till it falls away muck at my feet to be stepped out of? Will he? Redeem me like a pawn ticket worth little on the marketplace, but

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priceless in retrieving real value? What do I care what the color of his skin is, or his contact with my mother? When I see him, or what is left of him, I will tell him all about the missing part of me and listen for his crying shame. I will exchange then; let him have mine as well as his own and we will both be free, arm-tangled and whole.

It had rocked him when he heard who and what his father was. Made him loose, lost. He had first fingered then torn some of his mother's clothes and sat in the grass looking at the things scattered on the lawn as well as in his mind. Little lights moving like worms frolicked before his eyes, and the breath of despair had a nasty smell. It was True Belle who helped him up from the grass, soaped his tangled hair and told him what he had to do.

"Go on," she said. "I'll tell you how to find him, or what's left of him. It don't matter if you do find him or not; it's the going that counts."

So he collected what she said he should collect, packed it all and set out. During the journey he worried a lot about what he looked like, what armor he could call on. There was nothing but his trunk and the set of his jaw. But he was ready, ready to meet the black and savage man who bothered him and abused his arm.

Instead he met, ran into, a wild black girl smashing herself in the head with fright, who lay now in the other room while a black boy was rounding up stock outside. He thought she would be



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his lance and shield; now he would have to be his own. Look into the deer eyes with the dawning gray of his own. He needs courage for that, but he has it. He has the courage to do what Dutchess of Marlborough do all the time: relinquish being an adored bud clasping its future, and dare to open wide, to let the layers of its petals go flat, show the cluster of stamen dead center for all to see.

What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin, or the blood that beat beneath it. But to some other thing that longed for authenticity, for a right to be in this place, effortlessly without needing to acquire a false-face, a laughless grin, a talking posture. I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am. Even his horse had understood and bore Golden Gray along with just a touch or two of the whip. Steadily it had plodded, through valleys without trails, through streams without bridges or ferries for crossing. Eye gaze just above the road, undistracted by the small life that darted toward its hooves, heaving its great chest forward, pacing to hold on to its strength and gather more. It did not know where it was going and it knew nothing of the way, but it did know the nature of its work. Get there, said its hooves. If we can just get there. Now I have to think this through, carefully, even though I may be doomed to another misunderstanding. I have

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to do it and not break down. Not hating him is not enough; liking, loving him is not useful. I have to alter things. I have to be a shadow who wishes him well, like the smiles of the dead left over from their lives. I want to dream a nice dream for him, and another of him. Lie down next to him, a wrinkle in the sheet and contemplate his pain and by doing so ease it, diminish it. I want to be the language that wishes him well, speaks his name, wakes him when his eyes need to be open. I want him to stand next to a well dug quite clear from trees so twigs and leaves will not fall into the deep water, and while standing there in shapely light, his fingertips on the rim of stone, his gaze at no one thing, his mind soaked and sodden with sorrow, or dry and brittle with the hopelessness that comes from knowing too little and feeling too much ( so brittle, so dry he is in danger of the reverse: feeling nothing and knowing everything). There then, with nothing available but the soaking or the brittleness, not even looking toward the well, not aware of its mossey, unpleasant odor, or the little life that hovers at its rim, but to stand there next to it and from down in it where the light does not reach, a collection of left over smiles stirs, some brief benevolent love rises from the darkness and there is nothing for him to see or hear, and there is no reason to stay but he does. For the safety at first, then for the company. Then for himself--with a kind of confident, enabling, serene power that flicks like a razor and then hides.



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But he has felt it now, and it may come again. No doubt a lot of other things will come again: doubt will come, and things may seem unclear from time to time. But once the razorblade has flicked-- he will remember it, and if he remembers it he can recall it. That is to say, he has it at his disposal.

The boy was thirteen and had seen enough people slumped over a plow, or stilled after childbirth, and enough drowned children to know the difference between the quick and the dead. What he believed he saw lying on the cot under a shiney green dress was alive. The boy never raised his eyes from the girl's face (except when Golden Gay said "I found that dress in there and covered her with it.") He glanced toward the second room and back at the man he believed was white. The boy lifted the sleeve of the dress and patted the slash on the girl's forehead. Her face was fire hot. The blood was dry as skin.

"Water," he said and left the cabin. Golden Gray started to follow him but stood in the doorway unable to go forward or back. The boy returned with a bucket of well water and an empty burlap sack. He dipped a cup into the water, dribbled some into her mouth. She neither swallowed nor stirred.

"How long she been out?"

"Less than an hour," said Golden Gray.

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The boy knelt down to clean her face, slowly lifting whole patches of blood from her cheek, her nose, one eye, then the other. Golden Gray watched and he thought he was ready for those deer eyes to open.