



A Mercy Draft

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Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to stay quietly ^{in dark} ~~on the page~~—weeping a bit or occasionally revealing a shimmer of fear—but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth. I only want to explain. You can call what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle. Or when a corn husk doll, splayed in the corner of a room at first sight is sitting on a shelf when you turn your head and it's not clear how it got there. Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read? If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see my mother standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron. Other signs take time. Even now it is difficult—too many signs, or a clear omen clouding up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much like not reading the garden snake crawling up to the sleigh blade to die. Let me start

with what I do know.

The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child, I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody's shoes, even on the hottest days. My mother, frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettified ways. I'm dangerous, she says, but she relents and lets me wear them. As a result, Lila says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires. It's true. Lila is right. I have the hands of a slave and the feet of a well born lady. So when I set out to find you, she and Mistress give me boots to fit a man, not a girl. They stuff them with hay and oiled corn husks and tell me to hide the letter inside my stocking—no matter the itch of the seal. I don't read what Mistress writes and Lila and Soledad cannot, but I know what it means to say to anyone who stops me.

My head is light. Nothing frightens and tempts me more than this assignment. From the day you disappear I dream and plot escape, a run—alone, with no one, out beyond the maples and butternut, over the hills, but which way? Who will tell me? Who lives in the wilderness between this farm and you and will they help or harm me? What about the boneless bears in the

valley? Remember? How when they move, their pelts sway as though there is nothing underneath? Their smell belying their beauty, their eyes knowing us from when we are beasts also. You telling me that is why it is fatal to look them in the eye. They will approach, run to us to love and play, which we misread and give back fear and anger. There are giant birds nesting out there too, bigger than cows, Lila says, and not all Indians, she says, are like her, so watch out. "A praying Indian" they call her, but she bathes herself everyday and Christians never do. She wears cheerful beads on her arm and dances in secret at first light when the moon is small. More than fearing loving bears or birds bigger than cows, I fear the pathless night. How, I wonder, can I find you in the dark? Now at last there is a way. I am under orders. It is arranged. And although I am happy the world is breaking open for us, its newness alarms me. To get to you I must leave the only home, the only people I know. Lila says, from the state of my teeth, I am maybe six when I am brought here. We cook cherries for jam ten times since then, so I must be sixteen. Before this place I spend my days picking okra and sweeping the yard; my nights on the floor of the cook house with my mother. Saturdays we learn to read and write. Four of us hidden near the marsh with the Reverend Father. He is forbidden to do it so

we hide in case they catch him. He has two books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand; pebbles to mark words on flat smooth rocks. I forget almost all of it until you. I like talk. Lila talk, Soledad talk, stone talk. Best of all is your talk. At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of it is different from what they mean to my mother and me. Lila's words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress. Slowly a little talk is in my mouth and not only on stone. Lila says the place of my talking on stone is in the colony where Sir does business. So that is where my mother and her baby boy are buried. Or will be if they ever decide to rest. Sleeping on the floor with my mother and her baby boy is not as nice as sleeping in the broken sleigh with Lila. In cold weather we put planks around our part of the cowshed and wrap our arms together. We don't smell the cow flops because they are frozen and we are deep under blankets. In summer Lila makes a cool place to sleep out of branch and hides protecting us from mosquitoes. Soledad sleeps in the house with Mistress and Sir. The men helping you, Will and Scully, never do because their own master won't have it. They are exchange for land leased from Sir. Soledad says Sir always has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it because I see it forever and ever—me watching, my mother listening, her baby

boy on her hip, the big man is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and girl , not the baby boy, and the debt is gone. My mother, the woman, begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, the daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due. Soledad tells me she likes Sir's cleverness. She is with child. Father not known and she won't say. Will and Scully each deny. Lila believes it is Sir's. Says she has her reason for thinking so. Mistress is not pleased. Neither am I. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing walking children scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I can not hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand.

[tr to ms. P10 ff. Ital.]

Since your leaving with no goodbye, summer passes, then autumn and with the waning of winter the sickness comes back. When Sir returns no one believes those little sores are going to be Soledad's old sickness. He screams at night and cries in the day. Then he is too weak to do either. He has bought only seasoned slaves, including me who survived measles, and could not help

envying us our health and feeling cheated of his new house. I can tell you it is still not finished. The gate of course is beautiful; your ironwork wondrous to see. The house is grand, just waiting for its glass windows. Sir wants to be taken there, although there is no furniture. He tells Mistress to hurry hurry never mind the spring rain. The sickness alters his mind as well as his face. Will and Scully are gone and when we women carry him into the house without windows he is sleeping and never wakes. Neither Mistress nor we know if he is alive for even one minute to smell the new cherrywood floors he lies on. We are alone. No one to dig Sir's grave but us. Will and Scully stay away. I don't think they want to. I think their master makes them because of the sickness. Still we do not say the word aloud until we bury him and Mistress notices six blisters on her chin. Now she has twenty-nine. She wants you here much as I do. For her it is to save her life; for me it is to have one.

You probably don't know anything at all about what your back looks like whatever the sky holds: sunlight, moon rise. I rest there. My hand, my eyes, my mouth. When I first see it.....

Tr tk

Jacob Vaark galloped along, sweat so heavy it salted his eyes. His rented horse, Regine, was drenched and panting for water. Moisture, hot and rife with mosquitoes, could have dampened hi spirit, but didn't. As usual, the ride from Annapolis was hard, but he always took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, so modern, so open to life never failed to invigorate him. Forests untouched since Noah; shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears. As he left Virginia and entered Maryland, his feelings fought one another like tk. Unlike the colony, the province could trade to foreign markets, a good thing, but it was popish to the core, a bad thing. His sensibilities as a protestant were offended by the lax, flashy, cunning of the infidels. No matter, he could out deal them anytime, anywhere, especially here where tobacco and slaves were married, each currency clutching the elbow of the other. Finally, swatting mosquitoes and on the watch for mud snakes that startled the horse, he glimpsed the wide iron gates of Bliss and guided Regina through them. Far to the right, almost hidden by the mist, he saw rows of quarters, quiet, empty all of them appeared. In the tobacco fields, he reckoned, trying to limit the damage sopping weather had wrought on the crop. The comfortable smell of tobacco

leaves, like fireplaces and good women serving ale, cloaked Bliss like balm.

The path he rode ended at a small brick plaza, announcing a prideful entrance to the house. He stopped. A boy appeared and, dismounting in some pain, Jacob Vaark handed over the reins, cautioning the boy.

"Water. No feed."

"Yes, sir," said the boy and turned the horse around, murmuring, "nice lady, nice lady," as he led her away.

Jacob Vaark climbed three wide steps, then retraced them to stand back from the house and appraise it. Imposing, he thought, and very impressive. Two long windows, at least twenty-five hands tall, flanked the door. Five more windows above on a wide second story resting on six pillars. Tk

Easy, he thought. How easy to build such a house in that climate. Soft wood, creamy brick, no caulking needed, everything designed for breeze, not freeze. Long dining room, parlor, no kitchen to speak of with a cook house out back. Easy living, but the heat...

He removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his hair line with his sleeve. Then, fingering his soaking collar, he scraped his boots and mounted the steps.

Seated at a small table in the parlor, windows closed to the boiling air,

Jacob Vaark drank sassafras beer and studied his host, a Mr. Michael D'Ortega. Disaster had doubled, according to D'Ortega. Jacob Vaark knew all about it, but listened politely to the version this client/debtor recounted. D'Ortega's ship had been anchored two hundred feet from shore for a month waiting for a vessel, due any day, to replenish what he had lost. A third of his cargo had died of ship fever. Fined five thousand pounds of tobacco by the palatinate council for throwing their bodies into the Bay; forced to scoop up the corpses—what they could find—(they used pikes and nets, D'Ortega said, a purchase which itself cost two pounds, six.) and ordered by the Lord proprietary to burn or bury them. He had to pile them in two drays (sixteen s.), cart them out to low land where saltweed and crocodiles would finish the work.

Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No. A sloven man, stubborn in his wrong headedness like all of the Roman faith, he waited in port for a month for a phantom ship from Portugal carrying enough cargo to replenish the heads he has lost. While waiting to fill his ship's hold to capacity, it sinks and he has lost not only the ship, not only a third, but all, except the crew, who were unchained, of course, and four unsalable Africans red-eyed with anger.

Tk

We are seven, excluding the Brothers Ney, and the horses are not the only ones made nervous by snowflakes in springtime. Their haunches tremble; they shake their manes. We are nervous too, but we sit still as the flakes come down and stick to our shawls and hats; sugaring our eyelashes and flouring the men's wooly beards. Two women face into the wind that whips their hair like corn silk; their eyes slits of shine. The others cover their mouths with their cloaks and lean against one another.

Sudden snowfall on tender leaves is pretty. Perhaps it will last long enough on the ground to make animal tracking easy. Men are always pleased in the snow where killing is best. No one can starve if there is snow. And in spring, the river is full of spawn and the air of fowl. Although this snow will not last, it is heavy, wet and cold. I draw my feet under my skirts, not for warmth, but to protect the letter. The satchel I clutch on my lap.

Mistress makes me memorize the way to get to you. I am to board the Brothers Ney wagon in the morning as it travels north on x road. After one stop at a tavern, the wagon will arrive at Hartkill just after midday where I disembark.

I am to walk left, westward on another road called x which I will know by the arrows carved into the bark of a cedar. But the Brothers Ney are late. When I climb aboard and find a place among the others, it is already late afternoon and the tavern needs lamplight when we reach it. At first I don't see it, but one of us, a boy with his hair in a pigtail, points and then we all do. Winking through the trees is a light. The Neys go in. We wait. They return to water the horses and us. After that it is silent. The snow ends and the sun is gone. Six drop down, the men catching the women in their arms. The boy jumps alone. The three women with skin like mine motion to me and I drop down too. They move off back down where we are coming from, stepping as best they can figure in tree shelter at roadside, places where the snow is small. I don't follow. Neither can I stay in the wagon. I can't be alone with strange men when, drunk and annoyed, they discover their cargo is lost. I go west into the trees. Everything I want is west. You. Your talk. The medicine you know that will make Mistress well. You will read the letter and come back with me. I have only to go ten miles west. Two days. Three nights.

[insert F] [moving into the trees parallel to road. Land slopes down; she loses sight of road. Lost. Night. Has lila's calf skin pouch around neck and

satchel of food on her shoulder.]

Tk [Algonquin girls bathing in stream]

I walk down the path and over a narrow bridge past a mill wheel turning in a stream. The creaking wheel and rushing water are what shape the quiet. Hens sleep and dogs forbidden. I am so thirsty I climb down the bank and lap from the stream. It tastes like candle wax. Heavy with water I make my way back to the path. I need shelter. The sun is setting itself. Two cottages have windows but no lamp shines through. The others resemble small barns that can accept the day's light only through open doors. None is open. There is no cooksmoke in the air. I am thinking everybody has gone away. Then I see a steeple on a hill beyond the village and am certain the people are at evening prayer. Rather than go there, I decide to knock on the door of the largest house, the one most likely to have a servant on watch. Moving toward it, I look over my shoulder and see a light further away. The single lit house in the village. I go to it. Rocks interfere at each step rubbing the sealing wax hard on my sole. Rain starts. Soft. It should smell sweet with the flavor of the pines and sycamores it has crossed, but it has a burn smell, like pin feathers singed

before the boiling.

Before I can knock, a woman opens the door. She has green eyes. The rest of her is a black frock and a white cap. Red hair edges it.

"Who hath sent you?" She is suspicious and holds up her hand, palm out, as though I might force my way in.

"I am alone, please. Shelter sends me here."

She says words as written in the bible.

"Hast thou no protection, no companion"?

"No, mam."

"Art thou from this earth or elsewhere?"

"This earth, mam. I know no other."

"Art thou Christian or heathen?"

"Never heathen, mam, although I am told my father was."

"Where doth he abide.?"

The rain is getting bigger. Hunger wobbles me.

"I never knew him. My mother is dead."

"Orphan. Step in."

I try to eat slowly and fail. Sopping hard bread into lovely, warm barley porridge, I don't lift my head except to say "thank you" when she ladles more into my bowl. She places a handful of raisins next to it.

I notice a girl lying in a narrow box of straw. Under her head is a blanket roll. One of her eyes looks away; the other is as straight and unwavering as a she wolf. I don't think I should initiate anything so I wait for the girl or the woman to say something. When I finish the food down to the last raisin, the woman asks what is my purpose traveling alone.

"My Mistress has sent me on an errand."

"It must be vital to risk a child's life in these parts."

"Yes, mam. Mistress is dying. My errand can save her."

"Not from the first death. Perhaps from the second."

I don't understand her meaning. I know there is only one death, but many lives beyond it. Remember the owls in daylight? We know right away who they were.

The girl lying in straw raises up on her elbow. "This be the death we have come here to die." Her voice is deep, like a man's though she looks to be younger than me. The woman doesn't reply and I do not want to look at those

eyes again. "No thrashing can change it though my flesh is cut to ribbons."

She stand then and limps toward the lamp. Holding it waist high, she lifts her skirts. I see dark blood beetling down her legs. In the light pouring over her pale skin her wounds look like living jewelry.

The woman speaks. "Those lashes may save thy life."

Tk

The woman closes the lamp and stretches on a pallet; the girl returns to her straw. I lie down on the floor. Their voices slide over me.

"I am not a demon. I am not."

"We will know comes the morning."

"They will allow that I am."

"The knowing is theirs."

"Truth is mine."

"Be still lest He hear you."

"He will not abandon me."

"Nor will I."

"Yet you bloodied my flesh. Why?"

"How many times do you have to hear it? Demons do not bleed."

You never told me that and it's a good thing to know. If my mother is still alive she can be teaching me such things.

The story of a life is not a life. Life is much better, or worse, than its rendition.

So, trust me.

All will end well, and if not, the cost will be deferred.