



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 lie quietly in the dark—weeping a bit or occasionally seeing the blood once more—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, sitting on a shelf is suddenly splayed in the corner of a room and it's clear why it is 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 peahen 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 need more time to understand. 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 door saddle to die . Let me start with what I know for certain.

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 madre, frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettified ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I'm dangerous, she says, but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway shoes from the master's house, pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn, a buckle on top. 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 Portugese lady. So when I set out to find you, she and Mistress give me Sir's boots that 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 sealing wax. I am lettered but I do not read what Mistress writes and Lila and Sorrow cannot, but I know what it means to say to anyone who stops me.

My head is light with the confusion of two things, hunger for you and fear

if I am lost. Nothing frightens me more than this errand and nothing is more temptation. From the day you disappear I dream and plot. To learn where you are and how to be there. I want to run across the trail through the maples and white pine but I am asking myself 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 mis read and give back fear and anger. There are giant birds nesting out there too, bigger than cows, Lila says, and not all natives, she says, are like her, so watch out. A praying savage neighbors call her, but she bathes herself everyday and Christians never do. Underneath she wears cheerful beads and dances in secret at first light when the moon is small. More than fearing loving bears or birds bigger than cows, I fear pathless night . How, I wonder, can I find you in the dark? Now at last there is a way. I have orders. It is arranged. I will see your mouth and trail my fingers down. You will rest your chin in my hair again while I breathe into your shoulder in and out

in and out. I am happy the world is breaking open for us, yet its newness alarms me. What more, besides bears and giant birds are out there? 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 seven or eight when I am brought here. We boil wild plums for jam eight times since then, so I must be sixteen. Before this place I spend my days picking okra and sweeping tobacco sheds, my nights I spend on the floor of the cook house with my madre. We are baptized and can have happiness when this life is done. The Reverend Father tells us that. Once every seven days we learn to read and write. We are forbidden to leave the place so the four of us hide near the marsh with the Reverend Father. He is forbidden to do this but he teaches us anyway watching out for Virginians and Protestants who want to catch him. If they do he will be in prison or pay money or both. He has two books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on flat smooth rock. When the letters are learned we make whole words. I am faster than madre and her baby boy is no good at all. Very quickly I can write from memory the nicene creed including all of the commas. Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. I forget almost all of it until you. I like talk. Lila talk, stone talk, even Sorrow talk. Best

of all is your talk. At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to my madre and me. Lila's words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress'. Slowly a little talk is in my mouth and not on stone. Lila says the place of my talking on stone is Mary's land where Sir does business. So that is where my madre my mother and her baby boy are buried. Or will be if they ever decide to rest. Sleeping on the floor with them 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 under pelts. We don't smell the cow flops because they are frozen and we are deep under fur. In summer if our hammocks are hit by mosquitoes Lila makes a cool place to sleep out of branches. In the house of Mistress and Sir there are no more children, yet Sorrow still sleeps by the fireplace. The men helping you, Will and Scully, never do because their own master does not allow it. They are exchange for land leased from Sir. Lila says Sir always has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it is so because I see it forever and ever—me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. The master 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. Madre, my mother,

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. As soon as the tobacco is hanging to dry Reverend Father takes me on a ferry, then a ketch, bundles me between his trunks of books. When I arrive here I believe it is the place Reverend Father warns against. The freezing that comes before the everlasting fire where sinners bubble and singe forever. But the ice comes first, he says. And when I see knives of it hanging from the houses and sheds and feel the white air burn my flesh I am certain the fire is coming. But Mistress smiles when she looks at me. So does Lila. Only Sorrow is not happy. She flaps her hand in front of her face as though bees are bothering her. She is ever strange and Lila says she is once more with child. Father still not known and Sorrow does not 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 greedy babies 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. Weeping. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand.

The man moved carefully over pebbles and sand to shore. Fog, Atlantic and reeking of plant life, blanketed the bay and slowed him. He could see his boots sloshing but not his satchel nor his hands. When the last bit of surf was gone and his soles sank in mud, he turned to wave to the sloopmen but, because the single mast had disappeared, he could not tell whether they remained anchored or risked sailing on—hugging the shore and approximating the location of wharves and docks. Unlike the English fogs he had known since he could walk or those way North where he lived now, this one was sun fired, turning the world into thick, hot gold. Penetrating it was like struggling through a dream. As mud became swamp grass, he turned left, stepping gingerly until

he stumbled against wooden planks leading up beach toward the village.

Other than his own breath and tread, the world was soundless. It was only after reaching trees that the fog wavered and split. He moved faster then, more in control but missing too the blinding gold he had come through.

Picking his way with increasing confidence, he arrived in the tacky village sleeping between two huge riverside plantations. There the hostler was persuaded to accept tk deposit if the man signed a note: Jacob Vaark. The saddle was poorly made, but the horse, Regina, was a fine one. Mounted he felt better and rode carefree along beach fronts until he entered an old Lenape trail. Here there was reason to be cautious. In this territory he could not be sure of friend or foe. Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—whether freedman, slaves or indentured—had waged war against local aristocracy led by members of that very class. When this “people’s army” lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done—which included the slaughter or opposing tribes, running the Carolinas off their land—reinforced a thicket of laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel, bearing arms for blacks only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners

for slave maimings or deaths, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. Any social ease forged before and during that rebellion by gentry and laborers crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry's profits. Lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause if not common sense.

In short, Virginia was a mess and even with the relative safety of his skin, solitary traveling required prudence. He knew he might ride for hours with no company but geese careening over inland waterways, and suddenly, from behind felled trees a starving escapee might emerge, or in a hollow a family of runaways might cower, or an armed felon might threaten. Carrying several kinds of specie and a single knife, he was a juicy target. Eager to be out of this colony into a less precarious but personally more repellant one, Jacob urged the mare to a faster pace. He dismounted twice, the second time to free the bloody hindleg of a young racoon stuck in a tree break. Regina munched trail side grass while he tried to be as gentle as possible, avoiding the claws and teeth of the frightened animal. Once he succeeded the racoon limped off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws.

Galloping along, he was sweating so heavily his eyes salted and his hair

matted on his shoulders. Already October and Regine was drenched and panting. No such thing as winter down here, he thought, and he might as well have been in Barbados—which he had seriously considered once—although its heat was rumored to be more lethal than this. But the decision was null before he made it. An uncle he had never met from a side of his family he had no contact with, died and left him 120 acres of a dormant patroonship in a climate he much preferred. One with four distinct seasons. Yet this mist, hot and rife with gnats, did not dampen his spirits.. Despite the long sail in three vessels down three different bodies of water, and now the hard ride over the Lenape trail, he took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, so modern, so open to possibilities never failed to invigorate him. The cloud of warm gold once gone, he could see clearly forests untouched since Noah; shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears. In spite of the Company's lies about the easy profit awaiting all comers, it was actually the hardship that attracted him. Confronting the unknown, defying it, placating it. Making a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life, he relished never knowing what precisely lay in his path, who might approach with what intention. He flushed with pleasure when a crisis, large or small, needed invention and

quick action. Rocking in the hostler's poorly made saddle, he faced forward while his eyes swept the surroundings. He knew the landscape intimately from years ago when it was still the old Swedish Nation, and he was an agent for its Company. For years he had traveled the South River into the bay, disembarked at Christiana, and negotiated native trails on horseback, mindful of their fields of maize, careful through their hunting grounds, politely asking permission to enter a small village here, a larger one there. He watered his horse at a particular stream and avoided threatening marshland fronting the pines. Recognizing the slope of certain hills, a copse of oak, an abandoned den, the sudden odor of pine sap—all of that was more than valuable; it was essential. During and after the contest between Sweden and the Netherlands, there had never been any point in knowing who claimed this or that terrain; this or another outpost. Other than the Lenape, to whom it all belonged, from one year to another any stretch might be claimed by a church, controlled by a Company or become the property of some royal's gift to a son, or a favorite. In such ad hoc geography Jacob simply knew that when he came out of that forest of pine skirting the marshes, he was, at last, in Maryland, which at the moment belonged to the king. Entirely. Upon entering this privately owned

country, his feelings fought one another to a draw. Unlike colonies up and down the coast—disputed, fought over and regularly re-named; their trade transferred only to the victor—the province of Maryland allowed trade to foreign markets, good for planters, better for merchants, best for brokers. But the palatinate was Romish to the core. Priests strode openly in its towns; their sinister missions cropped up on the edge of Lenape villages. Law, courts and trade were their exclusive domain and over-dressed women in raised heels rode in carts driven by twelve year old Negroes. He was offended by the lax, flashy, cunning of the papists. “Abhor that arrant whore of Rome.” His entire school had memorized those lines from their primer. “And all her blasphemies; Drink not of her cursed cup; Obey not her decrees.” Which did not mean you could not do business with them and he had out dealt them many times, especially here where tobacco and slaves were married, each currency clutching its partner’s elbow. Disdain, however difficult to cloak, must be put to sleep. His previous dealings with this estate had been with the owner’s clerk while sitting on ale house stools. Now, for some reason, he had been invited, summoned rather, to the planter’s house—a plantation called Bliss. A trader asked to dine with a gentleman? On a Sunday? So there must be trouble, he thought.

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. He had heard how grand it was, but was not prepared for what lay before him. The house, honey-colored stone, was in truth more like a place where one held court. Far away to the right, beyond the iron fences enclosing the property and almost hidden by the mist, he saw rows of quarters, quiet, empty. In the 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 ended at a small brick plaza, announcing a prideful entrance to the house. He stopped. A boy appeared and, dismounting gracefully, 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 brick steps, then retraced them to stand back from the house and appraise it. Two wide windows, at least two dozen panes in each, flanked the door. Five more windows above on a broad second story

resting on six pillars. He had never seen a house like it. The wealthiest men he knew built in wood, not brick, riven clapboards with no need for grand pillars suitable for a House of Parliament.

Grandiose, he thought, but easy, easy to build such a house in that climate. Soft wood, creamy brick, no caulking needed, everything designed for breeze, not freeze. Long hall, probably, parlors, chambers.... Easy living, but Lord, the heat.

He removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his hair line with his sleeve. Then, fingering his soaking collar, he re-mounted the steps and tested the boot scraper. Before he could knock, the door was opened by a small, contradictory man: aged and ageless, deferential and mocking, white hair black face.

"Afternoon, Sir."

"Mr. Ortega is expecting me." Jacob surveyed the room over the old man's head.

"Yes, Sir. Your hat, Sir? Thank you, Sir. This way, Sir."

Footfalls, loud and aggressive, were followed by Ortega's call.

"Well timed! Come, Jacob." He motioned toward the parlor.

"Thank you, sir," said Jacob, marveling at his host's coat, his stockings, the cunning wig. Elaborate and binding as those trappings must be in the heat, D'Ortega's skin was as dry as parchment, while Jacob continued to sweat. The condition of the handkerchief he pulled from his pocket embarrassed him as much as he need for it.

Seated at a small table surrounded by graven idols, the windows closed to the boiling air, he drank sassafras beer and studied his host, a Mr. Michael D'Ortega. Disaster had doubled, according to D'Ortega. Jacob knew all about it, but listened politely to the version this here 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 Lord proprietary's magistrate for throwing their bodies too close to 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 to burn or bury them. He had to pile them in two drays (sixteen s.), cart them out to low land where saltweed and alligators would finish the work.

Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No, thought Jacob. A sloven man, stubborn in his wrong headedness like all of the Roman faith, he waits 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 vessel, not only the original third, but all, except the crew who were unchained, of course, and four unsalable Africans red-eyed with anger. Now he wanted more credit and six additional months to pay what he had borrowed.

Dinner was a tedious affair made intolerable by the awkwardness Jacob felt. No offer to wash up after his journey or before the meal; his rough clothes in stark contrast to embroidered silk and lace collar. There was even a trace of racoon blood on his hands. Why such a show on a sleepy afternoon for one guest below their station? Intentional, he decided; a stage performance to humiliate him into a groveling acceptance of D'Ortega's wishes. The meal began with a prayer whispered in a language he could not decipher and cross signing before and after. In spite of his dirty hands and sweat limp hair, Jacob pressed down his rising annoyance and focused on the food. But his

considerable hunger shrank when confronted with the heavily seasoned dishes: everything, except pickles and radishes, was fried or over-cooked. The wine, watered and too sweet for his taste, disappointed him and the company got worse. D'Ortega's wife was a chattering magpie, asking pointless questions—How do you manage living in snow?—and making sense-defying observations, as though her political judgment was equal to a man's. Nothing transpired in the conversation that had footing in the real world. They spoke of the unique responsibility this untamed world offered them; its unbreakable connection to God's work and the difficulties they endured on His behalf. Caring for ill or recalcitrant labor was enough, they said, for canonization.

"Are they often ill, sir?" asked Jacob.

"Not as often as they pretend. In Portugal they would never get away with such trickery."

"They come from Portugal?" Jacob wondered if the serving woman spoke English.

"Well, the Angola part of Portugal," said D'Ortega. "The most extraordinary, beautiful land."

"Portugal?"

"Angola. But, of course, Portugal is without peer."

"We were there for four years," added Mrs. D'Ortega.

"Portugal?"

"Angola. But, mind you, our children were not born there."

"Portugal?"

"No, Maryland."

"Ah, England."

As it turned out, D'Ortega was the son of a cattleman, in line for nothing. He'd gone to Angola to ~~manage a ranch~~, but found promises of wealth more generously met further abroad. The kick up from one kind of herding to another was swift—on the surface anyway, thought Jacob. D'Ortega did not seem to be making a go of his relatively new station, but he had no doubt he would prevail somehow, as this invitation to dinner was designed to prove.

They had six children, two of whom were old enough to sit at table. Silent boys, thirteen and fourteen, wearing peri wigs as though they were at a ball or a court of law. His bitterness, Jacob understood, was unworthy, the result of having himself no survivors—male or otherwise. Now that Patrician had followed her dead brothers, there was no one yet to reap the modest but

Angola, Portugal's slave pool,

shipments to Brazil
manage ~~the slave pool~~

respectable inheritance he hoped to accumulate. Thus, restraining envy as best he could, Jacob entertained himself by imagining the couple's relationship. They seemed well suited to each other—vain, voluptuous, prouder of their pewter and porcelain than their sons. It was abundantly clear why D'Ortega was in serious debt. Turning profit into useless baubles, unembarrassed by sumptuary, silk stockings and an over-dressed wife, wasting candles in mid day, he would remain in debt, unable to ride out any set back, whether it be lost ship or ruined crop, and thereby honor his debts. Watching the couple, he noticed that neither husband nor wife looked at each other—except for a stolen glance when the other looked away. He could not tell what was in those surreptitious peeks, but it amused him to divine their meaning while he endured the foolish talk and the inedible food. And if that wasn't enough, the woman who brought to table smelled of cloves. His initial embarrassment about the unabated, unavoidable consequences of his long journey: muddy boots, soiled hands, perspiration and its odor, was dimmed by Mrs. D'Ortega's loud perfume and heavily powdered face.

His own Rebekka seemed ever more valuable to him the rare times he was in the company of these rich men's wives. From the moment he saw her

struggling down the gang plank with two boxes and a heavy satchel, he knew his good fortune. ^{He had been willing to accept an ugly maiden—in fact expected one. But the young woman who answered his shout was} Plump, comely and capable, ^{every day of} ~~she had been~~ [^] worth the long search made necessary because taking over the patroonship required a wife and because he wanted a certain kind of mate—an unchurched woman of child bearing age, obedient but not groveling, literate but not proud, independent but nurturing. And he would accept no less. Rebekka was ideal. There was not a shrewish bone in her body. She never raised her voice in anger. Saw to his needs, made the tenderest dumplings, took to chores in a land completely strange to her with enthusiasm and invention, cheerful as a canary. Or used to be. Three dead infants in a row, followed by the accidental death of Patrician, their eight year old, had un-leavened her. A kind of invisible ash had settled over her which vigils at the small graves in the meadow did nothing to wipe away. Yet she neither complained nor shirked her duties. If anything, she threw herself more vigorously into the farm work and when he traveled, as now, on business, trading, collecting, lending, he had no doubts about how his home was being managed. Rebekka and her two helpers were as reliable as sunrise and strong as posts. Besides, time and health were on their side. She would bear more children and at least one—a boy— would live to thrive.

Dessert, fruit and pecans, was an improvement and when he accompanied D'Ortega on the impossible-to-refuse tour of the place, his mood had lifted slightly, enough to admire the estate honestly. The tobacco sheds, wagons, row after row of barrels—orderly and nicely kept—the well made meat house, milk house, laundry, cook house. All but the latter white washed plaster, a jot smaller than the slave quarters but, unlike them, in excellent repair. The subject, the purpose, of the meeting had not been resolved. D'Ortega had described with great attention to detail the accidents beyond his control that made him unable to pay what he owed. But how Jacob would be re-imbursed had not been broached. Examining the spotted, bug ridden leaves of tobacco, it became clear to him what D'Ortega had left to offer. Jacob refused. His farm was modest, his trade needed only himself. Besides having no place to put_them, there was nothing to occupy them.

“But you can sell them, easily.” said D'Ortega.

Jacpb winced. Flesh was not his commodity.

Still, at his host's insistence, he accompanied him to the little sheds where, their half day's rest interrupted, some two dozen or more had been assembled to stand in a line, including the boy who had watered Regina. The

two men walked the row, inspecting. D'Ortega identifying virtues, weaknesses and possibilities, but silent about the scars, the wounds like misplaced veins tracing their skin. One even had the facial brand required by local law when a slave assaulted a white man a second time. The women's eyes looked shot-proof, gazing beyond place and time as though they were not actually there. The men looked at the ground. Except, every now and then, when possible, when they thought they were not being evaluated, Vaark could see their quick glances, sideways, wary but, most of all, judging the men who judged them.

Suddenly Jacob felt his stomach seize. The tobacco odor, so welcoming when he arrived, now nauseated him. Or was it the sugared rice, the hog cuts fried and dripping with molasses, the cocoa Mrs. D'Ortega was giddy about? In any case, he couldn't stay there surrounded by a passel of slaves whose silence made him imagine an avalanche seen from a great distance. No sound just the knowledge of a roar he could not hear. He begged off, saying the exchange was not acceptable—too much trouble to transport, auction; his solitary, unencumbered proficiency was what he liked about trade. Specie, bills of credit, quit claims were portable. One satchel carried all he needed. They walked back toward the house and through the side gate in the ornate fence,

D'Ortega pontificating all the while: he would do the selling, ten pounds? Spanish sovereigns? arrange transportation, hire the handler .

Stomach turning, nostrils assailed, Jacob grew angry. This is a calamity, he thought, that will lead to years in a law suit in a province ruled by the king's judges disinclined to favor a tradesman over a Catholic gentleman. The loss, while not unmanageable, struck him as unforgivable. And to such a man.

D'Ortega's strut as they had walked the property offended him. Moreover, he believed the set of that jaw, the drooping lids hid something soft, like his hands that, accustomed to reins, whips and silver plate, had never held a plow or felled a tree. There was something beyond Catholic in him, something sordid and overripe. He felt the shame of his weakened position in status and power. No wonder they had been excluded from parliament back home and, although he did not believe they should be hunted down like vermin, other than on business he would never choose to mingle or socialize with them. Barely listening to Ortega's patter, sly, indirect instead of straight and manly, they neared the cook house where Jacob saw a woman standing in the doorway with two children. One on her hip, one hiding behind her skirts. She looked healthy enough, better fed than the others. On a whim, mostly to silence him,

knowing D'Ortega would refuse, he said, "Her. That one. I'll take her."

D'Ortega stopped short, a startled look on his face. "Ah, no. It is impossible. My wife won't allow it. She can't live without her. She is our main cook."

Jacob drew closer, recognizing the clove-laced sweat. "You said 'any.' I could choose any. If your word is worthless, there is only the law."

He could see how D'Ortega lifted ^{an} his eyebrows ^{Just one, convinced that on its curve an empire rested.} at this threat from an ^{Jacob knew he was struggling with} inferior, but he must have thought better of returning the insult with another. He wanted this business over quickly and he wanted his way.

"Well, yes," said D'Ortega, "but there are other women here. You've seen them and this one here is nursing."

"Then the law it is."

D'Ortega smiled. A law suit would certainly be decided in his favor, and the time wasted in pursuing it would be to his advantage.

"You astound me," said D'Ortega.

Jacob refused to back down. "Perhaps another lender would be more to your liking," he said and enjoyed seeing the nostril flare that meant he had struck home. D'Ortega was notorious for unpaid debts and had to search far outside

Maryland for a broker, since local ones refused what they knew would be certain default. The air between them tightened.

"You don't seem to comprehend my offer. I am not forfeiting my debt. I am honoring it. The value of a seasoned slave is beyond adequate."

"Not if I can't use her."

"Use her? Sell her!"

"My trade is goods and gold," said Jacob Vaark, landowner. And he could not resist adding "But it may be hard for a papist to understand moral restraint."

D'Ortega's hand moved to his hip. Jacob's eyes followed the movement as the ringed fingers curled around a scabbard. Would he, wondered? Would this curdled, arrogant fop really assault his creditor, murder him and claiming self defense, prerogative, rid himself of both debt and social insult even though it would mean a complete financial disaster considering his coffers were as empty as his scabbard? The soft fingers fumbled for the absent haft. Jacob raised his eyes to D'Ortega's, noticing the cowardice of unarmed aristocracy in the company of a commoner. Out here in wilderness dependent on paid guards nowhere in sight this Sunday. Where else but in this disorganized world

would such an encounter be possible? Where else could class tremble before courage? Jacob turned away, letting his exposed back convey his scorn. It was a curious moment. Along with his contempt, he felt a wave of exhilaration. Potent. Steady. An inside shift from careful negotiator to a raw boyhood he had not felt in twenty-five years. He did not even try to mute his chuckling as he passed the cook house and glanced again at the woman standing in its door.

Just then the little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet were a pair of way too big woman's shoes. Perhaps it was that feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness and the sight of those little legs, rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes that made him laugh. A loud, chest-heaving laugh that confirmed his victory. His laughter had not subsided when the woman cradling a small boy on her hip, came forward. Her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency.

"Please, sir. Not me. I am still breast feeding. Take her. Take my daughter."

Jacob looked up at her, away from the child's feet, his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. His laughter creaking to

a close, he shook his head, thinking God help me if this is not the most wretched business.

"Why yes. Of course," said D'Ortega, trying to shake his earlier embarrassment and re-establish his dignity. "I'll send her to you. Immediately."

His eyes widened as did his condescending smile, yet he seemed agitated.

"My answer is firm," said Jacob, thinking, I've got to get away from this substitute for a man; but thinking also, maybe Rebekka would welcome a child around the place. This one, here, swimming in shoes, appeared to be about the same age as Patrician, and if she got kicked in the head by a mare as Patrician had, the loss would not rock Rebekka so.

"There is a priest here," D'Ortega went on. "He can bring her to you. I'll have him board a sloop to any port on the coast you desire...."

"I said, no."

Suddenly the woman smelling of cloves knelt and closed her eyes.

They wrote new papers. Agreeing the girl was worth twenty pieces of eight considering the number of years ahead of her and reducing the balance by three hogshead of tobacco or fifteen English pounds—the latter preferred.

The tension lifted, visibly so on D'Ortega's face. Eager to get away and re-nourish his good opinion of himself, he said hurried goodbyes to Mrs. D'Ortega, the two boys and their father. On his way to the narrow track, he turned Regina around, waved at the couple and once again, in spite of himself, envied the house, the gate, the fence. For the first time he had bested—face to face—a nobleman. Out-nobled him in fact and realized, not for the first time, that only things, not bloodlines or character, separated them. So mighten it be nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones in his own meadow? And one day, not too far away, to build a house that size on his own property? On that rise, in back with a better prospect of the hills. Not as ornate, as D'Ortega's. None of that pagan excess, of course. But fair. Nor would it be compromised as was Bliss. Access to free labor made D'Ortega's leisurely life possible. Without a shipload of enslaved Angolans he would not be merely in debt; he would be eating from his palm instead of silver plate and sleeping in the wilds of Africa rather than a four post bed. Jacob Vaark sneered at wealth dependent on a captured work force that required more force to maintain. Thin as they were, the dregs of his kind of Protestantism—church of England rather than the brutal Mather—recoiled at whips, metal, and armed overseers. He was

determined to prove that his own industry and skill could amass the fortune, the station D'Ortega claimed without trading his conscience for coin.

He tapped Regina to a faster pace. The sun was low; the air cooler. He was in a hurry to get back in to Virginia, its shore and to Pursey's tavern before night, sleep in a bed if they weren't all packed three or four abreast, otherwise he would join the other patrons and curl on any surface. But first he would have one, perhaps two, drafts of ale, its bitter, clear taste critical to eliminating the sweetish rot of vice and ruined tobacco that seemed to coat his tongue. Jacob returned Regina to the hostler, paid him and strolled to the wharf and Pursey's Tavern. On the way he saw a man beating a horse to its knees. Before he could open his mouth to shout, disgusted sailors pulled the man away and let him feel his own knees in mud. Pursey's Tavern was closed, as he should have known, so he went to the one always open on Sunday. Rough, illegal and catering to hard boys, it nevertheless offered good and plentiful food.

Tk

Seated at a table cluttered with the remains of earlier meals, he listened to the talk around him, which was all sugar—which was to say rum—its price and

demand becoming greater than tobacco's. The man who seemed to know most about kill-devil [tk]

Jacob decided he would look into it.

A fiddler entered for their merriment and their money and, having played less well than himself, raised Vaark's spirits enough for him to join in the singing. [tk the song]

After a leisurely meal of oysters, veal, pigeon, parsnips and suet pudding, he reserved bed space with just one man in it and, strolling outside, thought about the disappointing day and the disgust of having accepted the girl as part payment. One day, maybe soon, the Stuarts would lose the throne to everyone's relief, and a protestant rule. Then, he thought, a suit against D'Ortega would succeed and he would not be forced to settle for a child as a percentage of what was due him. He knew he had rationalized the bargain by thinking Rebekka would be eager to have her, but what was truer than that was another thing. From his own childhood, he knew there was no good place in the world for waifs and whelps other than the generosity of strangers. Even if bartered, given, apprenticed, sold, swapped, tricked for food, labored for shelter or stolen, they were less doomed under adult control. He refused to be

sentimental about his own orphan status, the years spent with children of all shades stealing food and cadging gratuities for errands, the luck of being taken on as a runner for a law firm. The job required literacy and led to his being signed up by the Company. So he felt a disturbing pulse of pity for orphans and strays remembering well their and his own sad teeming in the markets, lanes, alleyways and ports of every region he traveled. Once before he found it hard to refuse when called on to rescue an unmoored, unwanted child. A decade ago a sawyer asked him to take off his hands a sullen, curly headed girl he found half dead on a river bank. Jacob agreed to do it provided the sawyer would forgive the cost of the lumber he was buying. Unlike now, at that time his farm needed more help. It was sixty cultivated acres out of one hundred and twenty, after all, and belonged to a traveling man who knew very well that it was not wise to have male labor all over the place during his long absences. His preference for steadfast female labor over dodgy males was based on his own experience as a youth. A frequently absent master was invitation and temptation: to escape, rape or thievery. In the right environment women were naturally reliable. He believed it now with this ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away, just as he believed it a decade earlier with the curly haired,