



## "How long will it take..."

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self. Everyone including Daughter Jane who rises from her bed stares at the markings upside down and it is clear only the man is lettered. Holding the tip of his walking stick down on the paper he turns it right side up and holds it there as if the letter can fly away or turn into ashes without flame before his eyes. He leans low and examines it closely. Then he picks it up and reads aloud.

The signatory of this letter, Mistress Rebekka Vaark of Milton vouches for th female person into whose hands it has been placed. She is owned by me and can be knowne by a burne mark in th palm of her left hand. Allow her th courtesie of safe passage and witherall she may need to complete her errand. Our life, my life, on this earthe depends on her speedy return.

Signed Rebekka Vaark, Mistress, Milton 18 May 1690

Other than a small sound from Daughter Jane all is quiet. The man looks at me, looks again at the letter, back at me back at the letter. Again at me, once more at the letter. You see, says the Widow. He ig-

hill. High, very high. Climbing over it all, up up are scarlet flowers I never see before. Everywhere choking their own leaves. The scent is sweet. I put my hand in to gather a few blossoms. I hear something behind me and turn to see a stag moving up the rock side. He is great. And grand. Standing there between the beckoning wall of perfume and the stag I wonder what else the world may show me. It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don't like it. I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you. When I choose and say good morning the stag bounds away.

Now I am thinking of another thing. Another animal that shapes choice. Sir bathes every May. We pour buckets of hot water into the wash tub and gather wintergreen to sprinkle in. He sits a while. His knees poke up, his hair is flat and wet over the edge. Soon Mistress is there with first a rock of soap then a short broom. After he is rosy with scrubbing he stands. She wraps a cloth around to dry him. Later she steps in and splashes herself. He does not scrub her. He is in the house



with six buttons each. Mistress agrees but when she sees me in them she sudden sits down in the snow and cries. Sir comes and picks her up in his arms and carries her into the house.

I never cry. Even when the woman steals my cloak and shoes and I am freezing on the boat no tears come.

These thoughts are sad in me so I make me think of you instead. How you say your work in the world is strong and beautiful. I think you are also. No holy sprits are my need. No communion or prayer. You are my protection. Only you. You can be it because you say you are a free man from new Amsterdam and always are that. Not like Will or Scully but like Sir. I don't know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free. But I have a memory. When Sir's gate is done and you are away so long I walk sometimes to search you. Behind the new house, the rise, over the hill beyond. I see a path between rows of elm trees and enter it. Underfoot is weed and soil. In a while the path turns away from the elms and to my right is land dropping away in rocks. To my left is a

rusalem. They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a sliver of hope. Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft; that to eat corn mush with one's fingers was perverse. That God hated idleness most of all, so staring off into space to weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation. Covering oneself in the skin of beasts offended God so they burned her deerskin dress and gave her a good duffel cloth one. They clipped the beads from her arms and scissored inches from her hair. Although they would not permit her to accompany them to either of the Sunday services they attended, she was included in the daily prayers before breakfast, mid morning and evening. But none of the surrender, begging, imploring or praising on her knees took hold because, hard as she fought, the Messalina part erupted anyway and the Presbyterians abandoned her without so much as a murmur of fare well.



this snow will not last although it is heavy, wet and thick. I draw my feet under my skirt, not for warmth, but to protect the letter. The cloth of bread and dry cod I clutch on my lap.

Mistress makes me memorize the way to get to you. I am to board the Ney brothers' wagon in the morning as it travels north on the post road. After one stop at a tavern, the wagon will arrive at a place she calls Hartkill just after midday where I disembark. I am to walk left, westward on the Abenaki trail which I will know by the sapling bent into the earth with one sprout growing skyward. But the Ney brothers wagon is too much late. By the time I climb aboard and take a place at the tail behind the others it is already late afternoon. The others do not ask me where I am heading but after a while are pleasing themselves to whisper where they once are. By the sea, the women say, they cleaning ships, the men caulking them and repairing docks. They are certain their years of debt are over but the master says no He sends them away, north, to another place, a tannery for more years. I don't understand why they are sad. Everyone has to work. I ask are you leaving someone dear

strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires. Lina is correct.

Who in 1690 has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese 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 oily 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 Lina and

Sorrow cannot. But I know what it means to say to any who stop me.

My head is light with the confusion of two things, hunger for you and scare if I am lost. Nothing frights 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 me 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



Silence.

"You will stay the night?"

"Part of it. Much obliged for the meal."

With that he left. Passing by Sorrow, he answered her smile with another and strode up the rise to the new house. Slowly he stroked the ironwork, a curve here, a join there, tested the gilt for flakes. Then he went to Sir's grave and stood hatless before it. After a while he went inside the empty house and shut its door behind him.

He did not wait for sunrise. Sleepless and uncomfortable, Sorrow stood in the doorway and watched him ride off in pre-dawn darkness as serenely cheerful as a colt. It was soon clear, however, that Lina remained in despair. The questions plaguing her lodged in her eyes: What was really happening to Florens? Was she coming back? Was the blacksmith truthful? For all his kindness and healing powers, Sorrow wondered if she had been wrong about him and Lina right all along. Suffused with the deep insight new mothers claim, Sorrow doubted it. He



some encircling outside thing was needed. Pride, she thought. Pride alone made them think that they needed only themselves, could shape life that way, like Adam and Eve, like gods from nowhere beholden to nothing except their own creations. She should have warned them but her devotion cautioned against impertinence. As long as Sir was alive it was easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family—not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all.

Lina gazed through the wavy pane of the tiny window where a flirtatious sun poured soft yellow light toward the foot of Mistress' bed. Beyond on the far side of the trail stood a forest of beech. As was often the case, she spoke to them.

"You and I, this land is our home," she whispered, "but unlike you I am exile here."

Lina's mistress is mumbling now, telling Lina or herself some tale, some matter of grave importance as the dart of her eyes showed. What was so vital, Lina wondered, that she uses an unworkable tongue in a

tiable. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples. Lina was not so sure. Based on the way Sir and Mistress tried to run their farm, she knew there were exceptions to the sachem's revised prophecy. They seemed mindful of a distinction between earth and property, fenced their cattle though their neighbors did not and although legal to do so, they were hesitant to kill foraging swine. They hoped to live by tillage rather than eat up the land with herds, measures that kept their profit low. So while Lina trusted more or less Sir's and Mistress' judgment, she did not trust their instincts. Had they true insight they would never have kept Sorrow so close.

Hard company she was, needing constant attention, as at this very day break when, out of necessity, she had been trusted with the milking. Since being pregnant hampered her on the stool, she mis-handled the udder and the cow, Sorrow reported, had kicked. Lina left the sickroom to mind the heifer—talk to her first, hum a little then slowly cradle the tender teats with a palm of cream. The spurts were sporadic, worthless, except for the cow's relief, and after she had oiled her into comfort, Lina



very class. When that "people's war" lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done—which included the slaughter of opposing tribes and running the Carolinas off their land—spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for slave <sup>a</sup> <sup>'s</sup> maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. Any social ease between gentry and laborers, forged before and during that rebellion, crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry's profits. In Jacob Varrk's view, these were lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue.

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 deserter with a pistol might emerge, or in a hollow a family of runaways might cower, or an armed

Upon entering this privately owned country, <sup>his</sup> ~~he~~ feelings fought one another to a draw. Unlike colonies up and down the coast—disputed, fought over and regularly re-named; their trade limited to whatever nation was 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 native villages; their <sup>menacing</sup> vulgar temples <sup>had</sup> ~~took~~ center place in <sup>the</sup> ~~its~~ squares. Law, courts and trade were their exclusive domain and over-dressed women in raised heels rode in carts driven by ten year old Negroes. He was offended by the lax, flashy, cunning of the papists. "Abhor that arrant whore of Rome." The entire class in the children's quarter of the poor house 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 often enough, especially here where tobacco and slaves were married, each currency clutching its partner's elbow. By sustained violence or sudden disease,



either one was subject to collapse, inconveniencing everybody but the lender.

Disdain, however difficult to cloak, must be put aside. 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 could not have been 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 softened by 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

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? Senhor D'Ortega is expecting you. Thank you, sir. This way, sir."

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

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

"Thank you, sir," said Jacob, marveling at his host's coat, his stockings, the <sup>fanciful</sup> cunning wig. Elaborate and binding as those trappings must be



chores in a land completely strange to her with enthusiasm and invention, cheerful as a <sup>bluebird</sup> canary. Or used to be. Three dead infants in a row, followed by the accidental death of Patrician, their five 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, apples <sup>and</sup> and pecans, was an improvement and when he accompanied D'Ortega on the impossible-to-refuse tour of <sup>Bliss</sup> the place, his mood had lifted slightly, enough to admire the estate honestly. The mist had cleared and he was able to see in detail the workmanship and care of 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 last, 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 approached. D'Ortega had described with minute attention to detail the accidents beyond his control that made him unable to pay what he owed. But how Jacob would be re-embursed had not been broached. Examining the spotted, bug ridden leaves of tobacco, it became clear 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.

"Ridiculous," said D'Ortega. "You sell them. Do you know the prices they garner?"

Jacob winced. Flesh was not his commodity.

Still, at his host's insistence, he trailed him to the little sheds where, D'Ortega interrupted their half day's rest and ordered some two dozen



couple and once again, in spite of himself, envied the house, the gate, the fence. For the first time he had not tricked, not flattered, not manipulated, but gone head to head with rich gentry. 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 and the valley between them. Not as ornate as D'Ortega's.

None of that pagan excess, of course, but fair. Nor would it be compromised as Bliss was. Access to a fleet of free labor made D'Ortega's leisurely life possible. Without a ship load of enslaved Angolans he would not be merely in debt; he would be eating from his palm instead of porcelain and sleeping in the <sup>bush</sup> ~~wilds~~ of Africa rather than a four post bed.

Jacob 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 not the brutal Mather—recoiled at whips, chains and armed overseers. He was determined to prove that his own

kill-devil, the simple mechanics of its production, its outrageous prices and beneficial effects was holding forth with the authority of a mayor.

Burley, pock-faced, he had the aura of a man who had been in exotic places and the eyes of someone unaccustomed to looking at things close to his face. Downes was his name. Peter Downes. A negro boy had been summoned and now brought six tankards, the handles of three in each hand, and set them on the table. Five men reached for them and quickly swallowed. Downes also, but spit his first swallow on the floor, telling the company that the gesture was both an offering and a protection from poison.

"How so?" someone asked. "Poison may lurk at the bottom."

"Never," said Downes. "Poison is like the drowned; it always floats."

Amid the laughter, Jacob joined the men at the table and listened to Downes' mesmerizing tales ending with a hilarious description of the size of the women's breasts in Barbados.



"Why would it dwindle?" Downes opened his hands as if carrying the hull of a ship. "Africans are as interested in providing slaves as a planter is in acquiring them. Rum rules no matter who does the trading. Laws? What laws? Look," he went on, "Massachusetts has already tried laws against rum selling and failed to stop one dram. The sale of molasses to northern colonies is brisker than ever. More steady profit in it than fur, tobacco, lumber anything—except gold I reckon. As long as the fuel <sup>is</sup> replenished, vats simmer and money heaps. Kill devil, sugar—there will never be enough. A trade for lifetimes to come."

"Still," Jacob said, "it's a degraded business. And hard."

"Think of it this way. Fur you need to hunt it, kill it, skin it, carry it and probably fight some natives for the rights. Tobacco needs nurture, harvest, drying, packing, toting but mostly time and ever fresh soil. Sugar? Rum? Cane grows. You can't stop it; its soil never dies out. You just cut it, cook it, ship it." Downes slapped his palms together.

"That simple, eh?"

Since your leaving with no goodbye, summer passes then autumn and with the waning of winter the sickness comes back. Not like before with Sorrow but now with Sir. When he returns this time he is different, slow and hard to please. He is short with Mistress. He sweats and wants cider all the time and no one believes the blisters are going to be Sorrow's old sickness. He vomits at night and curses in the day. Then he is too weak to do either. He reminds us that he has chosen only seasoned help, including me, who are survivors of measles so how is this happening to him? He can not help envying ~~us~~ our health and feeling <sup>the</sup> cheat of <sub>^</sub>



wants you here as 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. The first time I see it you are shaping fire. The shine of water runs down your spine and I have shock at myself for wanting to lick there. I run away into the cowshed to stop this thing from happening inside me. Nothing stops it. There is only you. Nothing outside of you. My eyes not my stomach are the hungry parts of me. There will never be enough time to look how you move. Your arm goes up to strike iron. You drop to one knee. You bend. You stop to pour water first on the iron then down your throat. Before you know I am in the world I am <sup>already a</sup> ~~killed~~ <sup>by your</sup> ~~back~~. My mouth is open, my legs go softly and the heart is stretching to break. I think if you turn and see me seeing you I will die. But when I see your face again I am not dead. For the first time I am live.

Night comes and I steal a candle. I carry an ember in a pot to light it. To see more of you. When it is lit I shield the flame with my hand. I watch you sleeping. I watch too long. Am careless. The flame burns my palm. I run away not knowing then you are seeing me seeing you.

Lina twitchy as fresh hook salmon waits with me in the village. The wagon of the Ney brothers does not come. Hours we stand then sit roadside. A boy and a dog drive goats past us. He raises his hat. That is the first time any male does it to me. I like it. A good sign I am thinking but Lina is warning me of many things, saying if you are not in your place I must not tarry. I must return at once. I can not handle a horse so I must seek return on the next day's horse cart the one that hauls fresh milk and eggs to markets. Some people go by and look but do not speak. We are female so they have no fright. They <sup>Know who is</sup> have seen Lina before yet look as if we are strange to them. We wait more and so long that I do not save my bread and codfish. I eat almost all of it. Lina holds her forehead in her hand her elbow on her knee. She gives off a bad feeling so I keep my thoughts on the goatherd's hat.



this snow will not last although it is heavy, wet and thick. I draw my feet under my skirt, not for warmth, but to protect the letter. The cloth of bread and dry cod I clutch on my lap.

Mistress makes me memorize the way to get to you. I am to board the Ney brothers' wagon in the morning as it travels north on the post road. After one stop at a tavern, the wagon will arrive at a place she calls Hartkill just after midday where I disembark. I am to walk left, westward on the Abenaki trail which I will know by the sapling bent into the earth with one sprout growing skyward. But the Ney's wagon is too much late. By the time I climb aboard and take a place at the tail behind the others it is already late afternoon. The others do not ask me where I am headed but after a while are pleasing themselves to whisper where they once are. By the sea, the women say, they cleaning ships, the men repairing docks. They are certain their years <sup>of debt</sup> are <sup>over</sup> paid-up but hear the master say <sup>s</sup>no, more time is necessary. He sends them away, north, to another place, a tannery for more years. I don't understand why they are sad. Everyone has to work. I ask are you leaving someone dear

spair at the land's refusal to obey his will. Together they minded the fowl and starter stock; planted corn and vegetables. But it was she who taught him how to dry the fish they caught; to anticipate spawning and how to protect corn from night creatures. Yet neither of them knew what to do about fourteen days of rain or fifty-five of none. They were helpless when black flies descended in scarves, disabling cattle and forcing them to take refuge indoors. Lina didn't know too much herself, but she did know what a poor farmer he was. At least she was able to distinguish weed from seedling. Without patience, the life blood of farming, reluctant to seek advice from villagers nearby, he was forever unprepared for violent, mocking changes in weather and for the fact that common predators neither knew nor cared to whom their prey belonged. He ignored her warning of using alewives as fertilizer only to see his maize plots torn up by wild foragers attracted by the smell. Yet he was good with animals and building things.

It was an unrewarding life. Unless the weather was dangerous, she nested with the chickens until, just before the wife arrived, he threw



amazingly

own face this time. Now she was praying. For what, to what Lina did not know. She was both startled and embarrassed since she had always thought Mistress polite to the Christian god, but indifferent, if not hostile, to religion. Well, Lina mused, deathbreath was a prime creator, a great changer of minds and collector of hearts. Any decision made while inhaling it was as unreliable as it was fierce. Reason in moments of crisis were rare. Yet, what about Florens? Look what she did when things changed abruptly: chose to go her own way once the others had sneaked off. Correctly. Bravely. But could she manage? Alone? She had Sir's boots, the letter, food and a desperate need to see the blacksmith. But will she return, with him, after him, without him or not at all.

of wet ground. But it is summer then and the damp is from dew not snow. You are telling me about the making of iron things. Your father doing it and his father before him. And you know they approve when two owls appear at the very instant you say their names so you understand they are showing themselves to bless you. See, you say, see how they swivel their heads. They approve you also you tell me. Do they bless me too I ask. Wait you say. Wait and see. I think they do because I am coming now. I am coming to you.

~~I am without my main protection. Mistress' letter is gone from me~~  
 now. Lina says there are some spirits who look after warriors and hunters and there are others who guard virgins and mothers. I am none of those. Reverend Father says communion is the best hope, prayer the next. There is no communion hereabouts and I feel shame to speak to the Virgin when all I am asking for is not to her liking. I think Mistress <sup>s</sup>had nothing to say on the matter. She avoids the Baptists and the ~~the~~ village women who go to the meeting house. They annoy her as when we three, Mistress, Sorrow and me go to sell two calves. They are trotting



behind us on rope to the cart we ride in. We wait while Mistress does  
 the selling talk. Sorrow jumps down and goes behind the trader's post  
 where a village woman slaps her face many times and screams at hr.<sup>e</sup>  
 When Mistress discovers what is happening both her face and the village  
 woman's burn in anger. Sorrow is relieving herself in the yard without  
 care for the eyes of others. The argue is done and Mistress drives us  
 away. After a while she pulls the horse to a stop. She turns to Sorrow  
 and slaps her face more saying fool. I am shock. Mistress never strikes  
 us. Sorrow does not cry or answer. I think Mistress says other words to  
 her but I am only seeing how her eyes go. Their look is close to the way  
 village stare as we wait for the Ney brothers.  
 of the women who examine me in the Widow's house. Neither look  
 scares but it is a <sup>hunting</sup> worse thing.

These thoughts are sad in me so I make me think of you instead.  
 How you say your work in the world in strong and beautiful. I think you  
 are also. No sprits are my need. No communion or prayer. You are my  
 protection. Only you. You can be it because you say you are a free  
 man from new Amsterdam and always are that. Not like Will or Scully

but like Sir. I don't know how it happens, free and not free. In only  
know I am live with you.



At first when she settled on Jacob's land, she visited the local church some seven miles away and met a few vaguely suspicious villagers. They had removed themselves from a larger sect in order to practice a purer form of their Separatist religion, one truer and more acceptable to Him. Among them she was deliberately soft spoken. In their meeting house she was accommodating and when they explained their beliefs she did not roll her eyes. It was when they refused to baptize her first born, her exquisite daughter, that Rebekka turned away. Weak as her Church of England faith was, there was no excuse for not protecting the soul of an infant from eternal perdition.

More and more it was in Lina's company that she let the misery seep out.

"I chastised <sup>her</sup> for a torn shift, Lina, and the next thing I know she is lying in the snow. Her little head cracked like an egg."

It would have embarrassed her to mention personal sorrow in prayer; to be other than stalwart in grief; to let God know she was less

the eyes of the crew but made the sea walkers cry. Soothed by Twin's voice and the animal fat Lina had spread on her lower parts, Sorrow fell into the first sweet sleep she had had in months.

Still, that first morning, she threw up her breakfast as soon as she swallowed. Mistress gave her yarrow tea and put her to work in the vegetable garden. Prying late turnips from the ground she could hear Sir breaking rocks in a far off field. Patrician squatted at the edge of the garden eating a yellow apple and watching her. Sorrow waved. Patrician waved back. Lina appeared and hurried the little girl away. From then on it was clear to Twin, if not to Sorrow, that Lina ruled and decided everything Sir and Mistress did not. Her eye was everywhere even when she was nowhere. She rose before cock crow, entered the house in

darkness, touched a sleeping Sorrow with the toe of her moccasin and

*lingered while*  
A refreshed the *embers.* coals. She examined baskets, looked under the lids of jars.

Checking the stores, thought Sorrow. No, said Twin, checking you for food theft.



graves in the meadow. We clean where Sir dies but are forbidden to be  
 anywhere else in this house. Spiders reign in comfort and sparrows make  
 nests. Mistress has cure but she is not well. All smiles and laughter<sup>ing</sup> are  
 gone. Each time she returns from the village meeting house her eyes are  
 nowhere and have no inside. Like the eyes of the women who examine  
 me behind the closet door, Mistress' eyes only look out and what she is  
 seeing is not to her liking. Her clothes are different. She prays much.  
 We all Lina, Sorrow, her daughter and me are ordered to sleep either in  
 the cowshed or the store room where bricks rope tools all manner of  
 building waste are. No more hammocks under trees for Lina and me.  
 No more fireplace for Sorrow and her baby girl. Mistress does not like  
 the baby. One night in heavy rain Sorrow shelters herself and the baby  
 here, downstairs behind the door in the room where Sir dies. Mistress  
 slaps her face. Many times. She does not know I am here every night  
 else she would whip me too as her piety demands. She is not the same.  
 Neither is Sorrow. She is a mother now. Nothing more,<sup>or</sup> nothing less and  
 I like her devotion to her baby girl. She will not be called Sorrow. She

lamp light is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I can not tell it to any one but you. I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do with my nights when the telling stops? Sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn. If so, come to this farm again, open the gate you made, enter this big, awing house, climb the stairs and come inside this talking room in daylight. If you never read this no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room. Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow to lodge finally in the heart of the land. Lina will help. She finds horror in this house and much as she needs to be Mistress' need I know she loves fire more.



knew my mind and did not disagree. She watched over her son like a hawk as I did over you. But it never does any lasting good, my love. There was no protection. None. Certainly not with your vice for shoes. It was as though you were hurrying up your breasts and hurrying also the lips of an old married couple.

Understand me. There was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no. I tried to tell Reverend Father. I hoped if we could learn letters somehow some day you could make your way. Reverend Father was full of kindness and bravery and said it was what God wanted no matter if they fined him, imprisoned him or hunted him down with gunfire for it as they did other priests who taught we to read. He believed we would love God more if we knew the letters to read by. I don't know that. What I know is there is magic in learning.

When the tall man with yellow hair came to dine, I saw he hated the food and I saw things in his eyes that said he did not trust Senhor, Senhora or their sons. His way, I thought, is another way. His country

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Silence.

"You will stay the night?"

"Part of it. Much obliged for the meal."

With that he left. Passing by Sorrow, he answered her smile with another and strode up the rise to the new house. Slowly he traced the ironwork, stroking every bit of it, a curve here, a join there. Then he went to Sir's grave and stood hatless before it. After a while he went inside the empty house and shut its door behind him.

He did not wait for sunrise. Sleepless and uncomfortable, Sorrow stood in the doorway and watched him ride off in pre-dawn darkness as serenely cheerful as a colt. It was soon clear, however, that Lina remained in despair. The questions plaguing her lodged in her eyes: What was really happening to Florens? Was she coming back? Was the blacksmith truthful? For all his kindness and healing powers, Sorrow wondered if she had been wrong about him and Lina right all along. Suffused with the deep insight new mothers claim, Sorrow doubted it. He

tiable. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out horrible-  
 ness. <sup>that will destroy all primary peoples.</sup> Lina was not so sure. Based on the way Sir and Mistress tried to  
 run their farm, she knew there were exceptions to the sachem's revised  
 prophecy. They seemed mindful of a distinction between earth and  
 property, fenced their cattle though their neighbors did not and although  
 legal to do so, they were hesitant to kill foraging swine. They hoped to  
 live by tillage rather than eat up the land with herds, measures that kept  
 their profit low. So while Lina trusted more or less Sir's and Mistress'  
 judgment, she did not trust their instincts. Had they true insight they  
 would never have kept Sorrow so close.

Hard company she was, needing constant attention, as at this very  
 day break when, out of necessity, she had been trusted with the milking.  
 Since being pregnant hampered her on the stool, she mis-handled the  
 udder and the cow, Sorrow reported, had kicked. Lina left the sickroom  
 to mind the heifer-talk to her first, hum a little then slowly cradle the ten-  
 der teats with a palm of cream. The spurts were sporadic, worthless, ex-  
 cept for the cow's relief, and after she had oiled her into comfort, Lina



self. Everyone including Daughter Jane who rises from her bed stares at the markings upside down and it is clear only the man is lettered. Holding the tip of his walking stick down on the paper he turns it right side up and holds it there as if the letter can fly away or turn into ashes without flame before his eyes. He leans low and examines it closely. Then he picks it up and reads aloud.

The signatory of this letter, Mistress Rebekka Vaark of Milton vouches for th female person into whose hands it has been placed. She is owned by me and can be knowne by a burn mark in th palm of her left hand. Allow her th courtesie of safe passage and witherall she may need to complete her errand. Our life, my life, on this earthe depends on her speedy return:

Signed Rebekka Vaark, Mistress, Milton

Other than a small sound from Daughter Jane all is quiet. The man looks at me, looks again at the letter, back at me back at the letter. Again at me, once more at the letter. You see, says the Widow. He ig-

with six buttons each. Mistress agrees but when she sees me in them she sudden sits down in the snow and cries. Sir comes and picks her up in his arms and carries her into the house.

I never cry. Even when the woman steals my cloak and shoes and I am freezing on the boat no tears come.

These thoughts are sad in me so I make me think of you instead. How you say your work in the world is strong and beautiful. I think you are also. No holy sprits are my need. No communion or prayer. You are my protection. Only you. You can be it because you say you are a free man from new Amsterdam and always are that. Not like Will or Scully but like Sir. I don't know how it happens, what it means, free and not free. But I have a memory. When Sir's gate is done and you are away so long I walk sometimes to search you. Behind the new house, the rise, over the hill beyond. I see a path between rows of elm trees and enter it. Underfoot is weed and soil. In a while the path turns away from the elms and to my right is land dropping away in rocks. To my left is a



hill. High, very high. Climbing over it all, up up are scarlet flowers I never see before. Everywhere choking their own leaves. The scent is sweet. I put my hand in to gather a few blossoms. I hear something behind me and turn to see a stag moving up the rock side. He is great. And grand. Standing there between the beckoning wall of perfume and the stag I wonder what else the world may show me. It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that what free means? I don't like it. I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you. When I choose and say good morning the stag bounds away.

Now I am thinking of another thing. Another animal that shapes choice. Sir bathes every May. We pour buckets of hot water into the wash tub and gather wintergreen to sprinkle in. He sits a while. His knees poke up, his hair is flat and wet over the edge. Soon Mistress is there with first a rock of soap then a short broom. After he is rosy with scrubbing he stands. She wraps a cloth around to dry him. Later she steps in and splashes herself. He does not scrub her. He is in the house

rusalem. They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a sliver of hope. Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft; that to eat with one's fingers was perverse. That God hated idleness most of all, so staring off into space to weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation. Covering oneself in the skin of beasts offended God so they burned her deerskin dress and gave her a good duffel cloth one. They clipped the beads from her arms and scissored inches from her hair. Although they would not permit her to accompany them to either of the Sunday services they attended, she was included in the daily prayers before breakfast, mid morning and evening. But none of the surrender, begging, imploring or praising on her knees took hold because, hard as she fought, the Messalina part erupted anyway and the Presbyterians abandoned her without so much as a murmur of fare well.



this snow will not last although it is heavy, wet and thick. I draw my feet under my skirt, not for warmth, but to protect the letter. The cloth of bread and dry cod I clutch on my lap.

Mistress makes me memorize the way to get to you. I am to board the Ney brothers' wagon in the morning as it travels north on the post road. After one stop at a tavern, the wagon will arrive at a place she calls Hartkill just after midday where I disembark. I am to walk left, westward on the Abenaki trail which I will know by the sapling bent into the earth with one sprout growing skyward. But the Ney's wagon is too much late. By the time I climb aboard and take a place at the tail behind the others it is already late afternoon. The others do not ask me where I am heading but after a while are pleasing themselves to whisper where they once are. By the sea, the women say, they cleaning ships, the men repairing docks. They are certain their years of debt are over but the master says no, more time is necessary. He sends them away, north, to another place, a tannery for more years. I don't understand why they are sad. Everyone has to work. I ask are you leaving someone dear

strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires. True. Lina is correct. I have the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese 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 oily 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 Lina 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 scare if I am lost. Nothing frights 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 me 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



both afraid she would return. Convinced finally that she would not, cautiously sniffing for the smell of fur, listening for a grunt, the movement of the other, or a return of birdcall, they emerged. Slowly, slowly. Then raced. It was when they shot from the wood onto the road that they saw the female-looking shape marching toward them. Upon closer inspection, Scully decided she looked less like a visitation than a wounded redcoat, barefoot but proud.

Only a few years older than Florens, Scully was bewildered by her demeanor. He thought of himself as an astute judge of character, felt he, unlike Willard, had a wily, sure-shot instinct for the true core of others. Willard judged people from their outside; Scully looked deeper. Although he relished Lina's nakedness, he saw a purity in her, some unsullied impenetrable virtue. Her loyalty, he believed, was not submission to Mistress or Florens; it was dedication to her own self-worth—a sort of keeping one's word. Honor, perhaps. And while Willard laughed at Sorrow, Scully preferred her over the two other servants. If he had been interested in seduction that's who he would have chosen: the look of her

was daunting, complex, distant. The unblinking eyes, smoke-gray, were not blank, but waiting. It was that lying-in-wait look that troubled Lina. It was tempting to think her daft because she talked to herself, but who didn't? To dismiss her as 'the odd one' ignored her quick and knowing sense of her position. Her privacy protected her; her easy sex a present to herself. When pregnant, she glowed and when her time was due she sought help in exactly the right place from the right people.

If he had been interested in rape, Florens would have been his prey. It was easy to spot that combination of defenselessness, eagerness to please and, most of all, a willingness to blame herself for the meanness of others. Apparently, from the look of her now, that was no longer true. She was so clearly untouchable. His assessment of her unavailability, however, was just that. Impersonal. Other than a voyeur's obsession with Lina's body, Scully had no carnal interest in females. Long ago the world of men and men only had stamped him.



Unlike Willard's, Scully's opinion of Mistress was less generous. He did not dislike her, but looked on her behavior after the master's death and her own recovery not simply as the effects of ill health and mourning. Underneath her taking charge was something cold if not downright cruel. Refusing to enter the grand new house, the one in whose construction she had delighted, seemed to him a punishment not only of herself, but everyone, particularly her dead husband. What both husband and wife had enjoyed even celebrated she now despised as signs of both the third and seventh sins. However well she loved him in life, his death must have made her hate him. In his twenty-two years he had witnessed far more human perversity than Willard.

Sold for seven years to a Virginia planter, young Willard Bond expected to be freed at age 21. But x years were added onto his term for infractions—theft and assault—and he was re-leased to a wheat farmer far

In Progress

# M E R C Y

Toni  
Morrison