



A Mercy Draft, as "Mercy"

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ony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world. There was no comfort or place for her in the village; Sir was there and not there. Solitude would have crushed her had she not fallen into hermit skills and become on^e more thing that moved in the natural world. She cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain. Wait^(over)ing for the arrival of a wife, Sir was a hurricane of activity laboring to bring nature under his control. More than once when Lina brought his dinner to whatever field or wood lot he was working in, she found him, head thrown back, staring at the sky as if in wondering despair 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

Memories of her village peopled by the
dead, ^{turned} slowly to ash and in their place
a single one rose. Fire. How ^{quick} ~~sure~~
How purposefully it ~~can~~ ate what had been
built, what had been life. Cleansing
somehow and beautiful. Even ~~as~~
before a simple hearth or lighting a fire
to boil water she felt a ^{strong} ~~a~~ twinge of
pleasant agitation. ¶

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 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 up a cowshed in one day. During all that time Lina must have said twenty words other than "Yes, Sir." Solitude, regret and fury would have broken her had she not ^{craved} ~~dwelt on~~ those six years ^{ing} ~~that~~ preceded the death of the world. The company of other children, industrious mothers in beautiful jewelry, the majestic plan of life: when to vacate, to ^h ~~h~~arvest, to burn, to

hunt; ceremonies of death, birth and worship. She sorted and stored
 what she ^{dared to} ~~could~~ recall and ^{eliminated} ~~invented~~ the rest. All of which ~~filled and~~
 shaped her inside and out. By the time Mistress came, ^{her self invention} ~~she~~ was almost
^{finished.} ~~complete.~~ Soon ^{it} ~~she~~ was irresistible.

Lina placed magic pebbles under Mistress' pillow; kept the room
 fresh with mint and forced angelica root in her patient's festering mouth
 to pull bad spirits from her body. She prepared the most powerful rem-
 edy she knew: devil's bit, mugwort, St. John's wort, maiden hair and
 periwinkle; boiled it, strained it and spooned it between Mistress' teeth.
 She considered repeating some of the prayers she learned among the
 Presbyterians, but since none had saved Sir, she thought not. He went
 quickly. Screaming at Mistress. Then whispering, begging to be taken to
 his third house. The big one, useless now that there were no children or
 children's children to live in it. No one to stand in awe at its size or to
 admire the wrought gate that the smithy took two months to make. tk
 But if the blacksmith's work was a frivolous waste of a grown man's time,
 his presence was not. He brought one girl to womanhood and saved the

life of another. Sorrow. Vixen-eyed Sorrow with black teeth and a head of never groomed wooly hair the color of a setting sun. Accepted, not bought, by Sir, she joined the household after Lina but before Florens and still had no memory of her past life except being dragged ashore by whales.

"Not whales," Mistress had said. "Of course not. She was treading water in the North River in Mohawk country, half drowned when two young sawyers trawled her in, threw a blanket over her and brought their father to the river bank where she lay. It's said she had been living alone on a foundered ship. They thought she was a boy."

Not then, not ever had she spoken of how she got there or where she had been. The sawyer's wife named her Sorrow, for good reason, thought Lina, and following a winter of feeding the daft girl who kept wandering off getting lost, who knew nothing and worked less, a strange melancholy girl to whom her sons were paying very close attention, the sawyer's wife asked her husband to get quit of her. He obliged and of-

ferred her to the care of a customer he trusted to do her no harm. Sir.

When Sorrow arrived, trailing Sir's horse, Mistress barely hid her annoyance but admitted the place could use the help. If Sir was bent on travel, two female farmers and a four year old daughter were not enough. Lina had been a tall fourteen year old when Sir bought her from the Presbyterians. He had searched the advertisements posted at the printer's in town. "A likely woman who has had small pox and measles....A likely Negro about 9 years....Girl or woman that is handy in the kitchen sensible, speaks good English, complexion between yellow and black....Five years time of a white woman that understands Country work, with a child upwards of two years old....Mulatto Fellow very much pitted with small pox, honest and sober....White lad fit to serve....Wanted a servant able to drive a carriage, white or black....Sober and prudent woman who....Likely wench, white, 29 years with child....Healthy Deutsch woman for rent....stout healthy, healthy strong, strong healthy likely sober sober sober...." until he got to "Hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie."

A bachelor expecting the arrival of a new wife, he required precisely that kind of female on his land. By then Lina's swollen eye had calmed and the lash cuts on her face, arm and legs had healed and were barely noticeable. The Presbyterians, recalling perhaps their own foresight in the name they had given her, never asked what had happened to her and there was no point in telling them. She had no standing in law, no surname and no one would take her word against a Europe. What they did was consult with the printer about the wording of an advertisement. "Hardy female..."

When the girl wife stepped down from the cart, hostility between them was instant. The health and beauty of a young female already in charge annoyed the new wife; while the assumption of authority from the awkward Europe girl infuriated Lina. Yet the animosity, utterly useless in the wild, died in the womb. Even before Lina mid-wifed Mistress' first child, neither one could keep the coolness; the fraudulent competition was worth nothing on land that demanding. Besides they were company for each other and by and by discovered something much more interest-

ing than status. Rebekka laughed out loud at her own mistakes; was unembarrassed to ask for help. Lina slapped her own forehead when she forgot the berries rotting in the straw. They became friends. Not only because somebody had to pull the wasp sting from the other's arm. Not only because it took two to push the cow away from the fence. Mostly because neither knew precisely what they were doing or how. Together by trial and error they learned: what kept the foxes away; how and when to handle and spread manure; the difference between lethal and edible and the sweet taste of timothy grass; the features of measled swine; what turned the baby's stool liquid and what hardened it into pain. For her Mistress farm work was more adventure than drudgery. Then again, thought Lina, she had Sir who pleased her more and more and soon a daughter, Patrician, both of whom dulled the regret of the short-lived infants Lina delivered and buried each subsequent year. By the time the second house was finished and Sir brought Sorrow home, the resident women were a united front in dismay. To Mistress she was useless. To Lina she was bad luck in the flesh. Red hair, black teeth, recur-

ring neck boils and a look in those over-lashed silver-gray eyes that raised Lina's nape hair.

She watched while Mistress trained Sorrow to sewing, the one task she liked and was good at, and said nothing when, to stop her roaming, he said, Sir made the girl sleep by the fireplace all seasons. A comfort Lina was suspicious of but did not envy even in bad weather. Her people had built sheltering cities for a thousand years and, except for the death-feet of the Europes, might have built them for a thousand more. As it turned out the sachem had been dead wrong. The Europes neither fled nor died out. In fact, said the old women in charge of the children, he had apologized for his error in prophecy and admitted that however many collapsed from ignorance or disease more would always come. They would come with languages that sounded like dog bark; with a childish hunger for animal fur. They would forever fence land, ship whole trees to far away countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god. They let their hogs browse the ocean shore turning it into dunes of sand where

nothing green can ever grow again. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out horribleness. 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. The cow, Sorrow reported, had kicked when she touched her. 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 rushed back into the house. No good could come of leav-

ing Mistress alone with Sorrow and now that her stomach was low with child, she was even less reliable. In the best of times the girl dragged misery like a tail. There was a man in Lina's village like that. His name she had forgotten along with the rest of her language, but it meant "trees fall behind him," suggesting his influence on the surroundings. In Sorrow's presence eggs would not allow themselves to be beaten into foam, nor did butter lighten cake batter. Lina was sure the early deaths of Mistress' sons could be placed at the feet of the natural curse that was Sorrow. After the death of the second infant Lina felt obliged to inform her mistress of the danger. They were making mince meat to be ready for Sir's return. The neets' feet which had been simmering since morning were cool now. Their severed bones lay on the table waiting for the addition of fat and gristle for boiling.

"Some people do evil purposefully," said Lina. "Others can't help the evil they make."

Mistress looked up. "What are you talking about?"

"Your son, John Jacob. He died after Sorrow came."

"Please Lina. Don't add to misery. My baby died of scarlet fever."

"But Patrician sickened too and did not...."

"I said stop. That he died in my arms is enough without adding savage nonsense." Her voice was stern as she chopped the meat and stirred in raisins, apple slices, ginger, sugar and salt. Lina pushed a large jar closer and the two of them spooned the mixture into it. Then Lina filled the jar to the top with brandy and sealed it. Four weeks or more outside and it would be ready for a crust at Christmas. Meantime, she dropped the brain and heart of a calf into a pot of boiling seasoned water. Such a supper, fried in butter and garnished with egg slices, would be a treat.

Now, more than unreliable, more than wandering off to talk to grass and grapevines, she was pregnant and soon there would be another virgin birth and, perhaps, unfortunately, this one would not die. But if Mistress died, what then? To whom could they turn? Although the Baptists

once freely helped Sir build the second house, the out houses, and happily joined him in felling white pine for the post fence, a cooling had risen between them and his family. Partly because Mistress hated them for shutting her children out of heaven, but also, thought Lina, because Sorrow's lurking frightened them. Years past, the Baptists might bring a brace of salmon or offer a no-longer needed cradle for Mistress' baby. And the deacon could be counted on for baskets of straw berries and blue, all manner of nuts and once a whole side of venison. Now, of course, nobody, Baptist or any other would come to a poxed house. Neither Willard nor Scully came, which should not have disappointed her, but did. Both were Europes after all. Willard was getting on in years and was still working off his passage. The original seven years stretched to twenty some, he said, and he had long ago forgotten most of the mischief that kept extending his bondage. The ones he remembered with a smile involved rum; the others were attempts to run away. Scully, younger, had plans. He was finishing his mother's contract. True, he didn't know how long it would take but, he boasted, unlike Willard's or

Lina's, his enslavement would end before death. He was the son of a woman sent off to the colonies for 'lewdness and disobedience,' neither of which according to him was quelled. Her death transferred her contract to a man claiming to be Scully's father and who recuperated certain expenses by leasing the boy to his current master for a span of time soon to end, although Scully was not privy to exactly when. There was a legal paper, he had told Lina, that said it. Lina guessed he had not seen it and could not cipher it if he had. All he knew for certain was that the freedom fee would be generous enough to set him up in a trade. What trade, wondered Lina. If that glorious day of freedom fees did not arrive soon, he too, she thought, will run away, and maybe have the good fortune denied Willard. She doubted it; thought his dreams of self-employment were only that. She knew he did not object to lying with Willard when sleep was not the point. No wonder Sir, without kin or sons to count on, had no males on his property. It made good sense, except when it didn't. As now with two lamenting women, one confined to

bed the other heavily pregnant; a love-broken girl on the loose and herself unsure of everything including moon rise.

Don't die, Miss. Don't. Herself, Sorrow, a new born and maybe Florens—three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal they would be interlopers, squatters if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile. The farm could be claimed by or auctioned off to the Baptists. Lina had relished her place in this small, tight family but now saw its folly. Sir and Mistress believed they could have honest free-thinking lives, yet without heirs, all their work meant less than a swallow's nest. Their drift away from others produced a self-centered privacy and they had lost the refuge and the consolation of a clan. Baptists, Presbyterians, tribe, army, family, 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. [~~dreams of loss~~]

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 mouth lined with sores? Her wrapped hands lift and wave. Lina turned to look where the eyes focused. A trunk where Mistress kept pretty things, treasured unused gifts from Sir. A lace collar, a hat no decent woman would be seen in, its peacock feather already broken in the press. On top of a few lengths of silk lay a small mirror set in an elaborate frame, its silver tarnished to soot.

"Gi' me," said Mistress.

Lina picked up the mirror thinking, No, please. Don't look. Never seek out your own face even when well, lest the reflection drink your soul.

"Hur-ee," moaned Mistress, her tone pleading like a child's.

Helpless to disobey, Lina brought it to the lady. She placed it between the mittened hands, certain now that her mistress will die. And the certainty was a kind of death for herself as well since her own life, everything, depended on Mistress' survival which depended on Florens' success

Lina had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow. A frightened child who did not speak for a long time but when she did her light, sing song voice was lovely to hear. Some how, some way, the child assuaged the tiny yet eternal yearning for the home Lina once knew where everyone had anything and no one had everything. Perhaps her own barrenness sharpened her devotion. In any case she wanted to protect her, keep her away from the corruption so natural to someone like Sorrow, and, most recently, she was determined to build a wall between her and the blacksmith. Since his coming there was an appetite in Florens that Lina recognized as once her own. A bleating desire beyond sense, without conscience. The young body speaking in its only language its sole reason for life on earth.

When he arrived—too shiny, way too tall, both arrogant and skilled—Lina alone saw the peril but there was no one to complain to. Mistress was silly with happiness because her husband was home and Sir behaved as though the blacksmith was his brother. Lina had seen them bending their heads over lines drawn in dirt. Another time she saw Sir slice a green apple, his left boot raised on a rock, his mouth working along with his hands; the smithy nodding, looking intently at his employer. Then Sir, as nonchalantly as you please, tipped a slice of apple on his knife and offered it to the blacksmith who, just as nonchalantly, took it and put it in his mouth. So Lina knew she was the only one alert to the breakdown stealing toward them.

Florens had been a quiet, timid version of her self at the time of her own displacement. Before destruction. Before sin. Before men. Lina had hovered over Patrician, competing with Mistress for the little girl's affection, but this one, coming on the heels of Patrician's death could be, would be, her own. And she would be the opposite of incorrigible Sorrow. Already Florens could read, write. Already she did not have to be

told repeatedly how to complete a chore. Not only was she consistently trustworthy, she was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head any smile of approval. They had memorable nights, lying together, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina's stories. Stories of wicked men who chopped off the heads of devoted wives; of cardinals who carried the souls of good children to a place where time itself was a baby. Especially called for were stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters. Close to tears, Lina recalled a favorite and the whispered conversation that always followed it. One day, ran the story, an eagle laid her eggs in a nest far above and far beyond the snakes and paws that hunted them. Her eyes are midnight black and shiny as she watches over them. At the tremble of a leaf, the scent of any other life, her frown deepens, her head jerks and her feathers quietly lift. Her talons are sharpened on rock, her beak is like the scythe of a war god. She is fierce protecting her borning young. But one thing she can not defend against: the evil thoughts of man. One day a traveler climbs a mountain nearby. He stands at its summit admiring all

he sees below him. The turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks, the starlings sailing into clouds cut by rainbow. The traveler laughs at the beauty saying, "This is perfect. This is mine." And the word swells, booming like thunder into valleys, over acres of primrose and mallow. Creatures come out of caves wondering what it means. Mine. Mine. Mine. The shells of the eagle's eggs quiver and one even cracks. The eagle swivels her head to find the source of the strange, meaningless thunder, the incomprehensible sound. Spotting the traveler, she swoops down to claw away his laugh and his unnatural sound. But the traveler, under attack, raises his stick and strikes her wing with all his strength. Screaming she falls and falls. Over the turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, down through the clouds cut by rainbow. Screaming, screaming she is carried away by wind instead of wing. Then Florens would whisper, "Where is she now?" "Still falling," Lina would answer, "she is falling forever." Florens barely breathes. "And the eggs?" she asks. "They hatch alone," says Lina. "Do they live?" Florens is whispering. "We have," says Lina. Florens would smile then sleep, her head on Lina's shoulder. Mother

hunger—to be one or have one—both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive traveling the bone. As Florens grew she learned quickly, was eager to know more and would have been the perfect one to find the blacksmith if only she had not been sickened with love of him.

When Mistress insisted on unhinging herself by staring at her face in the mirror, Lina closed her eyes against that reckless solicitation of bad luck and left the room. A heap of chores beckoned and, as always, Sorrow was not to be found. Pregnant or not, she could at least have mucked out the stalls. Lina entered the cowshed and glanced at the broken sleigh where, in cold weather, she and Florens slept. At the sight of cobwebs strung from blade to bed, Lina sighed, then caught her breath. Florens shoes, the rabbit skin ones she had made for her ten years ago lay under the sleigh—lonely, empty like two patient coffins. Shaken, she left the shed and stood still at the door. Where to go? She couldn't endure the self-pity that drove Mistress to tempt harmful spirits, so she de-

cided to look for Sorrow down by the river where she often went to mourn her dead baby.

The river gleamed under a sun dropping slowly like a departing visitor reluctant to leave a feast. No Sorrow anywhere, but Lina smelled fire. Cautiously she moved toward the odor of smoke. Soon she heard voices, several, carefully, deliberately low. Creeping a hundred yards or so toward the sound she saw figures lit by a small fire dug deep in the ground. A boy and several adults camped in wintergreen beneath two hawthorns. One man was asleep, another whittling. Three women, two of whom were Europes, seemed to be clearing away signs of a meal, nut shells, corn husks and repacking other items. Unarmed, probably peaceful, thought Lina as she came closer. As soon as she let herself be seen, they scrambled up—all but the sleeping man. Lina recognized them from the wagon Florens had boarded. Her heart seized. What happened?

"Evening," said the man.

"Evening," replied Lina.

"Is this your land, Mam?" he asked.

"No. You are welcome to it."

"Well, thank you. We won't tarry." He relaxed as did the others.

"I remember you," said Lina. "From the wagon. To Hartkill."

There was a long silence as they considered an answer.

Lina went on, "There was a girl with you. I put her aboard."

"There was," said the man.

"What happened to her?"

The women shook their heads and shrugged. "She left the wagon," said one.

Lina frowned, "She got off? Why?"

"Couldn't say. She went off in the woods."

"By herself?"

"We offered her to join us. She chose not to. Seemed in a hurry."

"Where? Where did she get off?"

"Same as us. The tavern."

"I see," said Lina. She didn't, but thought it best not to press.

"Can I bring you anything? The farm is nearby."

"Appreciate it, but no thank you. We journey at night."

The sleeping man was awake now, looking carefully at Lina while the other one seemed intent on the river. Finished collecting their few supplies, one of the Europe woman said to the others

"We'd better be down there. He won't wait."

They agreed without saying so, and started toward the river.

"Fare well," said Lina.

"Good bye, Bless you."

Then the first man turned back. "You never saw us, did you Mam?"

"No. I never did."

"Much obliged," he said and tipped his hat.

Walking back toward the house, taking pains to avoid even looking at the new one, Lina was relieved that so far nothing bad had happened to Florens, and more frightened than ever that something would. The runaways had one purpose; Florens had another. Back in the sick room, she heard Mistress mumbling. More self-pity, but not an apology to her 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.