



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 perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more—but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth. I explain. You can ^{think} ~~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 the wicked of how it got there is plain. Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read? If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see my mother standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the

pocket of her apron. Other signs need more time to understand. Even now it is difficult—too many signs, or a bright 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 ^{pretty} ~~pretified~~ ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, and wild but she relents and lets me wear the throw-away shoes from Senhora's house, pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn, and a buckle on top. As a result, Lina says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the 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 scares me more than this errant^d 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 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. Giant birds are nesting out there too bigger than cows, Lina says, and not all natives are like her, she says, so watch out. A praying savage neighbors

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 Lina makes a cool place to sleep out of branches. You never like a hammock and prefer the ground even in rain when Sir offers you the storehouse. Sorrow no more sleeps near the fireplace. The men helping you, Will and Scully, never live the night here because their master does not allow it. You remember them, how they would not take orders from you until Sir ^{makes} ~~made~~ them? He could do that since they are exchange for land ^{under} ~~leased~~ from Sir. Lina says Sir ~~always~~ has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it is true because I see it forever and ever. Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the 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, then a boat and bundles me between his boxes of books and food. The second day it becomes hurting cold and I am happy I have a warm shawl. Reverend Father excuses himself to go elsewhere on the boat and tell¹⁵_^ me to stay exact where I am. A woman comes to me and says stand up. I do and she takes my shawl from my shoulders. Then my wooden shoes. She walks away. Reverend Father turns a pale red color when he returns and learns what happens. He rushes all about asking where and who but can find no answer. Finally he takes rags, strips of sail cloth lying about and wraps my feet. Now I am knowing that unlike with Senhor priests are unlove here. A sailor spits into the sea when Reverend Father asks him for help. Reverend Father is the only kind man I ever see. When I arrive here I believe it is the place he warns against. The freezing in hell 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 trees and feel the white air burn my face I am certain the fire is coming. Then Lina smiles when she looks at me and wraps me for warmth. Mis-

tress looks away. Sorrow too is not happy to see me. She flaps her
 hand in front of her face as though bees are bothering her. She is ever
 strange and Lina says she is once more with child. Father still not ^{clear} known
 and Sorrow does not say. Will and Scully each deny. Lila believes it is
 Sir's. Says she has her reason for thinking that. Mistress ^{says nothing nice.} is ~~not pleased~~.
 Neither ^{do} am I. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nurs-
 ing 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. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's
 hand.