



"Silence. 'You will stay the night?'"

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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 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

had saved her life with vinegar and her own blood; had known right away Mistress' state and what solvent to prescribe to lessen the scarring. Lina was simply wary of anyone who came between herself and Florens. Between tending Mistress' new requirements and scanning the path for Florens, Lina had little time or inclination for anything else. Sorrow herself, unable to bend down, lift anything weighty or even walk a hundred yards without heavy breathing was equally to blame for what was happening to the farm. Goats wandered from village yards and tore up both newly planted gardens. Layers of insects floated in the water barrel no one had remembered to cover. Damp laundry left too long in the basket began to mold and neither of them returned to the river to wash it again. Everything was in disarray. The weather was warming and as a result of the cancelled visit of a neighbor's bull, no cow foaled. Acres and acres needed turning; milk became clabber in the pan. A fox pawed the hen yard whenever she liked and rats ate the eggs. Mistress would not recover soon enough to catch the heap the farm was falling into. And without her pet, Lina, the silent workhorse, seemed to have lost in-

terest in everything, including feeding herself. Ten days' neglect and collapse was everywhere. So it was in the afternoon silence of a cool day in May, on an untended farm recently swathed in smallpox that Sorrow's water broke unleashing her panic. Mistress was not well enough to help her, and remembering the yawn, she did not trust Lina. Forbidden to enter the village she had no choice. Twin was absent, strangely silent or hostile when Sorrow tried to discuss what to do, where to go. With a frail hope that Will and Scully would be stationed as usual on their fishing raft, she took a knife and a blanket to the river bank the moment the first pain hit. She stayed there, alone, screeching when she had to, sleeping in between, until the next brute tear of body and breath. Hours, minutes, days—Sorrow could not tell how much time passed before the men heard her moans and poled their raft to the river's edge. They both understood Sorrow's plight as quickly as they would any creature about to foal. Clumsy a bit, their purpose confined to the survival of the newborn, they set to work. Kneeling in water as Sorrow pushed, they pulled, eased and turned the tiny form stuck between her legs. Blood and more

swirled down to the river attracting young cod. When the baby, a girl, whimpered, Scully knifed the cord then handed her to the mother who rinsed her, dabbing her mouth, ears and unfocussed eyes. The men congratulated themselves and offered to carry mother and child back to the farmhouse. Sorrow, repeating 'thank you' with every breath, declined. She wanted to rest and would make her own way. Willard slapped Scully on the back of his head, laughing.

"Right fine midwife I'd say."

"No question," answered Scully as they waded back to their raft.

Following the expulsion of afterbirth, Sorrow wrapped her infant in the blanket and dozed off and on for hours. At some point before sunset she roused to a cry and squeezed her breasts until one delivered. Although all her life she had been saved by men: Captain, the sawyers' sons, Sir and now Will and Scully, she was convinced that this time she had done something, something important, by herself. Twin's absence

was hardly noticed as she concentrated on her daughter. Instantly, she knew what to name her. Knew also what to name herself.

Two days came and went. Lina hid her disgust with Sorrow and her anxiety about Florens under mask of calm. Mistress said nothing about the baby, but sent for a Bible and forbade anyone to enter the new house. At one point, Sorrow, prompted by the legitimacy of her new status as a mother, was bold enough to remark to her Mistress, "It was good that the blacksmith came to help when you were dying." Mistress stared at her. "Ninny," she answered. "God alone cures. No man has such power."

There had always been tangled strings among them. Now they were cut. Each woman embargoed herself; spun her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else. It was as though, with or without Florens, they were falling away from one another.

Twin was gone, traceless and un-missed by the only person who knew her. Sorrow's wandering stopped too. Now she attended routine

duties, organizing them around her infant's needs, impervious to the complaints of others. She had looked into her daughter's eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea, and said " By-the-lee. I am your mother. My name is Complete."

My journey to you is hard and long and the hurt of it is gone as soon as I see the yard, the forge, the little cabin where you are. I lose the fear that I may never again in this world know the sight of your welcoming smile or taste the sugar of your shoulder as you take me in your arms. The smell of fire and ash trembles me but it is the glee in your eyes that kicks my heart over. You are asking me how and how long and laughing at my clothes and the scratches everywhere. But when I answer your why, you frown. We settle, you do, and I agree because there is no other way. You will ride at once to Mistress but alone. I am to wait here you say. I can not join you because it is faster without me. And there is another reason, you say. You turn your head. My eyes follow where you look.

This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering around my mother's dress hoping for her hand that is only for her little boy. The second time it is a pointing screaming little girl hiding behind her mother

and clinging to her skirts. Both times are full of danger and I am expelled. Now I am seeing a little boy come in holding a corn husk doll. He is younger than everybody I know. You reach out your forefinger toward him and he takes hold of it. You say this is why I can not travel with you. The child you call Malaik is not to be left alone. He is a foundling and that his father is leaning over the reins and the horse is continuing until it stops and eats grass in the lane. People from the village come, learn he is dead and find the boy sitting quietly in the cart. No one knows who is the dead man and nothing in his belongings can tell. You accept him until a future when a townsman or magistrate places him which may be never because although the dead man's skin is rosy the boy's is not. So maybe he is not a son at all. My mouth goes dry as I wonder if you want him to be yours.

I worry as the boy steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. As if he is already your future. I am not liking how his eyes go when you send him to play in the yard. But then you bathe my journey from my face and arms and give me stew. It needs salt. Bits of

rabbit thick and tender. My hunger is sharp but my happiness is more. I can not eat much. We talk of many things and I don't say what I am thinking. That I will stay. That when you return from healing Mistress whether she is live or no I am here with you always. Never never without you. Here I am not the one to throw out. No one steals my warmth and shoes because I am small. No one handles my backside. No one whinies like sheep or goat because I drop in fear and weakness. No one screams at the sight of me. No one watches my body for how it is unseemly. With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me.

I am calm when you leave although you do not touch me close. Or put your mouth to mine. You saddle up and ask me to water the bean shoots and collect the eggs. I go there but the hens make nothing so I know a minha m~e is coming soon. The boy Malaik is near. He sleeps behind the door to where you do. I am calm, quiet knowing you are very soon here again. I take off Sir's boots and lie on your cot trying to catch the fire smell of you. Slices of starlight cut through the shutters. A

minha mãe leans at the door holding her little boy's hand, my shoes in her pocket. As always she is trying to tell me something. I tell her to go and when she fades I hear a small creaking. In the dark I know he is there. Eyes big, wondering and cold. I rise and come to him and ask what. What Malaik, what. He is silent but the hate in his eyes is loud. He wants my leaving. This can not happen. I feel the clutch inside. This expel can never happen again.

I dream a dream that dreams back at me. I am on my knees in soft grass with white clover breaking through. There is a sweet smell and I lean close to get it. But the perfume goes away. I notice I am at the edge of a lake. The blue of it is more than sky, more than any blue I know. More than Lina's beads or the heads of chicory. I am loving it so, I can't stop. I want to put my face deep there. I want to. What is making me hesitate, making me not get the beautiful blue of what I want? I make me go nearer, lean over, clutching the grass for balance. Grass that is glossy, long and wet. Right away I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing. I put a finger in and

watch the water circle. I put my mouth close enough to drink or kiss but I am not even a shadow there. Where is it hiding? Why is it? Sudden Daughter Jane is kneeling next to me. She too looks in the water. Oh, Precious don't fret she is saying, you will find it. Where I ask, where is my face, but she is no more beside me. When I wake my mother is standing by your cot and this time her baby boy is Malaik. He is holding her hand. She is moving her lips at me but she is holding Malaik's hand in her own. I hide my head in your blanket.

I know you will come but morning does and you do not. All day. Malaik and me wait. He stays as far from me as he can. I am inside, sometimes in the garden but never in the lane where he is. I am making me quiet but I am loose inside not knowing how to be. Horses move in someone's pasture beyond. The colts are tippy toe and never still. Never still. I watch until it is too black to see. No dream comes that night. Neither does a minha m~e. I lie where you sleep. Along with the sound of blowing wind there is the thump of my heart. It is louder than

the wind. The fire smell of you is leaving the pallet. Where does it go I wonder. The wind dies down. My heartbeat joins the sound of mice feet.

In the morning the boy is not here but I prepare porridge for us two. Again he is standing in the lane holding tight the corn husk doll and looking toward where you ride away. Sudden looking at him I am remembering the dog's profile rising from Widow Ealing's kettle. Then I can not read its full meaning. Now I know how. I am guarding. Otherwise I am missing all understanding of how to protect myself. First I notice Sir's boots are gone. I look all around, stepping through the cabin, the forge, in cinder and in pain of my tender feet. Bits of metal score and bite them. I look and see the curl of a garden snake edging toward the threshold. I watch its slow crawl until it is dead in the sunlight. I touch your anvil. It is cool and scraped smooth but it sings the heat it lives for. I never find Sir's boots. Carefully, on my toes I go back into the cabin and wait.

The boy quits the lane. He comes in but will neither eat nor talk. We stare at each other across the table. He does not blink. Nor me. I know he steals Sir's boots that belong to me. His fingers cling the doll. I think that must be where his power is. I take it away and place it on a shelf too high for him to reach. He screams screams. Tears falling. On bleeding feet I run outside to keep from hearing. He is not stopping. Is not. A cart goes by. The couple in it glance but do not greet or pause. Finally the boy is silent and I go back in. The doll is not on the shelf. It is flung to a corner like a precious child no person wants. Or no. Maybe the doll is sitting there hiding. Hiding from me. Afraid. Which? Which is the true reading? Porridge drips from the table. The stool is on its side. Seeing me the boy returns to screaming and that is when I clutch him. I am trying to stop him not hurt him. That is why I pull his arm. To make him stop. Stop it. And yes I do hear the shoulder crack but the sound is small, no more than the crack a wing of roast grouse makes when you tear it, warm and tender, from its breast. He screams screams then faints. A little blood comes from his mouth hitting the table corner.

Only a little. He drops into fainting just as I hear you shout. I don't hear your horse only your shout and know I am lost because your shout is not my name. Not me. Him. Malaik you shout. Malaik.

Seeing him still and limp on the floor with that trickle of red from his mouth your face breaks down. You knock me away shouting what are you doing? shouting where is your ruth? With such tenderness you lift him, the boy. When you see the angle of his arm you cry out. The boy opens his eyes then faints once more when you twist it back into its proper place. Yes, there is blood. A little. But you are not there when it comes, so how do you know I am the reason? Why do you knock me away without certainty of what is true? You see the boy down and believe bad about me without question. You are correct but why no question of it? I am first to get the knocking away. The back of your hand strikes my face. I fall and curl up on the floor. Tight. No question. You choose the boy. You call his name first. You take him to lie down with the doll and return to me your broken face, eyes without glee, rope pumps in your neck. I am lost. No word of sorrow for knocking me off

my feet. No tender fingers to touch where you hurt me. I cower. I hold down the feathers lifting.

Your Mistress recovers you say. You say you will hire someone to take me to her. Away from you. Each word that follows cuts.

Why are you killing me I ask you.

I want you to go.

Let me explain.

No. Now.

Why? Why?

Because you are a slave.

What?

You heard me.

Sir makes me that.

I don't mean him.

Then who?

You.

What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

No. You have become one.

How?

Your head is empty and your body is wild.

I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too.

You alone own me.

Own yourself, woman and leave us be. You could have killed this child.

No. Wait. You put me in misery.

You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind.

You shout the word, mind, mind over and over and then you laugh
saying as I live and breathe, a slave by choice.

On my knees I reach for you. You step back saying get away from
me.

I have shock. Are you meaning I am nothing to you? That I have
no consequence in your world? My face absent in blue water you find
only to crush it. Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not
ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the
hammer is in my hand.

Jacob Vaark climbed out of his grave to visit his beautiful house.

"As well he should," said Willard.

"I sure would," answered Scully.

It was still the grandest house in the whole region and why not spend eternity there? When they first noticed the shadow, Scully, not sure it was truly Vaark, thought they should creep closer. Willard, on the other hand, knowledgeable about spirits, warned him of the consequences of disturbing the risen dead. Night after night they watched, until they convinced themselves that no one other than Jacob Vaark would spend haunting time there: it had no previous tenants and the Mistress forbade anyone to enter. Both men respected—if not understood—her reasoning.

For years the neighboring farm population made up the closest either man would know of family. A good-hearted couple (parents), and three female servants (sisters, say) and them helpful sons. Each member dependent on them, none cruel, all kind. Especially the master who, unlike their more-or-less absent owner, never cursed or threatened them. He

even gave them gifts of rum during Christmastide and once he and Willard shared a tippie straight from the bottle. His death had saddened them enough to disobey their owner's command to avoid the poxed place; they volunteered to dig the last, if not the final, grave his widow would need. In dousing rain they removed five feet of mud and hurried to get the body down before the hole filled with water. Now, thirteen days later, the dead man had left it, escaped his own grave. Very like the way he used to re-appear following weeks of traveling. They did not see him—his definitive shape or face—but they did see his ghostly blaze. His glow began near midnight, floated for a while on the second story, disappeared, then moved ever so slowly from window to window. With Master Vaark content to roam his house and not appear anywhere else, scaring or rattling anybody, Willard felt it safe and appropriate for him and Scully to stay loyal and help the Mistress repair the farm; prepare it also for nothing much had been tended to after she fell ill. June on its way and not a furrow plowed. The shillings she offered was the first

money they had ever been paid, raising their work ethic from duty to dedication, from pity to profit.

There was much to be done because, hardy as the women had always been, they seemed distracted, slower, now. Before and after the blacksmith healed Mistress and the girl, Florens, was back where she belonged, a pall had descended. Still, Willard said, Lina continued to do her work carefully, calmly, but Scully disagreed, said she was simmering. Like green apples trembling in boiling water too long, the skin near to breaking, needing quick removal, cooling before mashed into sauce. And Scully should know since he had wasted hours over the years secretly watching her river baths. Unfettered glimpses of her buttocks , that waist, those syrup-colored breasts were no longer available. Mainly he missed what he never saw elsewhere: uncovered female hair, aggressive, seductive, black as witchcraft. Seeing its wet cling and sway on her back was a quiet joy. Now, no more. Wherever, if ever, she bathed he was convinced she was about to burst.

Mistress had changed as well. The mourning, said Willard, the illness—the effects of all of that was plain as daylight. Her hair, the brassy strands that once refused her cap had become pale strings drifting at her temples, adding melancholy to her newly stern features. Rising from her sickbed, she had taken control, in a manner of speaking, but avoided as too tiring tasks she used to undertake with gusto. She laundered nothing, planted nothing, weeded never. She cooked and mended. Otherwise her time was spent reading a bible or entertaining one or two people from the village.

"She'll marry again, I reckon," said Willard. "Soon."

"Why soon?"

"She's a woman. How else keep the farm?"

"Who to?"

Willard closed one eye. "The village will provide." He coughed up a laugh recalling the friendliness of the deacon.

Sorrow's change alone seemed to them an improvement; she was less addle-headed, more capable of handling chores. But her baby came first and she would postpone egg-gathering, delay milking, interrupt any field chore if she heard a whimper from the infant always somewhere nearby. Having helped with her delivery, they assumed godfather status, even offering to mind the baby if Sorrow needed them to. She declined, not because she did not trust them; she did, but out of a need to trust herself.

Strangest was Florens. The docile creature they knew had turned feral. When they saw her stomping down the road two days after the smithy had visited Mistress' sickbed and gone, they were slow to recognize her as a living person. First because she was so blood-spattered and bedraggled and, second, because she passed right by them. Surely a sudden burst of sweating men out of roadside trees would have startled a human, any human, especially a female. But this one neither glanced their way nor altered her pace. Both men, breathless and still spooked from a narrow escape, leaped out of her path. In their frightened minds

anything could be anything. Both were running as fast as they could back to the livestock under their care before the hogs ate their litter. Much of the morning they had spent hiding from an insulted bear, a harrowing incident they agreed was primarily Willard's fault. The netted partridge hanging from the older man's waist was supplement enough for two meals each so it was reckless to press their good fortune and linger just so he could rest beneath a beech and puff his pipe. Both knew what a whiff of smoke could do in woods where odor was decisive: to flee, attack, hide or, as in the case of a sow bear, investigate. When the laurel hell that had yielded the partridges suddenly crackled, Willard stood up, holding his hand out to Scully for silence. Scully touched his knife and stood also. After a moment of uncanny quiet—no birdcalls or squirrel chatter—the smell washed over them at the same moment the sow crashed through the laurel clicking her teeth. Not knowing which of them she would select, they separated, each running man hoping he had made the correct choice, since play possum was not an option. Willard ducked behind an outcropping, thumb tamped his pipe and prayed the ledge of

slate would disable the wind's direction. Scully, certain he felt hot breath on his nape, leaped for the lowest branch and swung up onto it. Unwise. Herself a tree climber, the bear had merely to stand up to clamp his foot in her jaws. Scully's fear was not craven, however, so he determined to make at least one powerful gesture of defense however hopeless. He snatched out his knife, turned and without even aiming, rammed it at the head of the agile black hulk below. For once desperation was a gift. The blade hit, slid like a needle into the bear's eye. The roar was terrible as, clawing bark, she tumbled to the ground on her haunches. A ring of baying dogs could not have enraged her more. Snarling, standing straight up, she slapped at the stuck blade until it fell out. Then down on all fours she rolled her shoulders and wagged her head from side to side. It seemed to Scully a very long time before the grunt of a cub got her attention and, off balance by the blinding that diminished her naturally poor sight, she lumbered away to locate her young. Scully and Willard waited, one treed like a caught bear himself, the other hugging rock, both afraid she would return. Convinced finally that she would not, cau-

tiously 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. Later, when they discussed it, Scully decided she looked less like a visitation than a wounded redcoat, barefoot, bloody, but proud.

Sold for seven years to a Virginia planter, young Willard Bond expected to be freed at age 21. But three years were added onto his term for infractions—theft and assault—and he was re-leased to a wheat farmer far up north. Following two harvests, the wheat succumbed to blast and the owner turned his property over to mixed livestock. Eventually, as over-grazing demanded more and more pasture, the owner made a land-for-toil trade with his neighbor, Jacob Vaark. Still, one man could not handle all that stock. The addition of a boy helped.

Before Scully's arrival, Willard had suffered hard and lonesome days watching cattle munch and mate, his only solace in remembering harder but more satisfying ones in Virginia. Brutal though that work was, the days were not flat and he had company. There he was one of twenty-three men working tobacco fields. Six English, one native, twelve from Africa by way of Barbados. No women anywhere. The comradery among them was sealed by their shared hatred of the overseer and the master's odious sons. It was upon the latter that the assault was made. Theft of a shoat was invented and thrown in just to increase Willard's indebtedness. He had trouble getting used to the rougher, colder region he was moved into. At night in his hammock, trapped in wide, animated darkness, he braced himself against the living and the dead. The glittering eyes of an elk could easily be a demon, just as the howls of tortured souls might be the call of happy wolves. The dread of those solitary nights gripped his days. Swine, sheep and cattle were his sole companions, until the owner returned and carted away the best for slaughter. Scully's arrival was met with welcome and relief. And when their duties

expanded to occasional help on the Vaark place, and they developed an easy relationship with its people, there were just a few times Willard overdrunk and misbehaved. Early on in his post, he had run away twice, only to be caught in a tavern yard and given a further extension of his term.

An even greater improvement in his social life began when Vaark decided to build a great house. Again, he was part of a crew of laborers, skilled and not, and when the blacksmith came, things got more and more interesting. Not only was the house grand, but its enclosure was to be spectacular.

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Immediately he admired the smith and his craft. A view that lasted until the day he saw money pass from Vaark's hand to the blacksmith's. The clink of silver was as unmistakable as its gleam. He knew Vaark was getting rich from rum investments, but learning the blacksmith was being paid for his work, like the men who delivered building materials, unlike

the men he worked with in Virginia, roiled Willard, and he, encouraging Scully, refused any request the black man made. Refused to chop chestnut, haul charcoal or work bellows for his fires and 'forgot' to shield green lumber from rain. Vaark chastised them both into sullen accommodation, but it was the smithy himself who calmed Willard down. Willard had two shirts, one with a collar, the other more of a rag. On the morning he slipped in fresh dung and split the shirt all the way down its back, he changed into the good collared one. Arriving at the site, he caught the blacksmith's eye, then his nod, then his thumb pointing straight up as if to signal approval. Willard never knew whether he was being made fun of or complimented. But when the smithy said, "Mr. Bond. Good morning," it tickled him. Virginia bailiffs, constables, small children, preachers—none had ever considered calling him 'mister'—nor did he expect them to. He knew his rank, but did not know the lift that small courtesy allowed him. Joke or not, that first time was not the last because the smithy never failed to address him so. Chuckling to himself, Willard understood why the girl, Florens, was struck silly by the man. He proba-

bly called her 'miss' or 'lady' when they met in the wood for supper-time foolery. That would excite her, he thought, if she needed any more than just the black man's grin.

"In all my born days," he told Scully, "I never saw anything like it. He takes her when and where he wants and she hunts him like a she-wolf if he's not in her eye. If he's off at his bloomery for a day or two, she sulks till he comes back hauling the blooms. Makes Sorrow look like a Quaker."

Only a few years older than Florens, Scully was less bewildered by the sharp change in her demeanor than Willard was. 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 clean, impenetrable virtue. Her loyalty, he believed, was was not submission to Mistress or Florens; it was a sign of her own self-worth— a sort of keeping one's word. Honor, per-

haps. And while he joined Willard in making fun of Sorrow, Scully preferred her over the other two servants. If he had been interested in seduction, that's who he would have chosen: the look of her was daunting, complicated, distant. The un-blinking eyes, smoke-gray, were not blank, but waiting. It was that lying-in-wait look that troubled Lina. Everyone but himself thought she was daft because she talked out loud when alone, but who didn't? Willard issued greetings to ewes regularly and Mistress always chatted directions to herself while at some solitary task. And Lina—she answered birds as if they were asking her advice on how to fly. To dismiss Sorrow as 'the odd one' ignored her quick and knowing sense of her position. Her privacy protected her; her easy coupling a present to herself. When pregnant, she glowed and when her time came she sought help in exactly the right place from the right people.

On the other hand, 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. Clearly, from the look of her now, that was

no longer true. The instant he saw her marching down the road—whether ghost or soldier—he knew she had become untouchable. His assessment of her un-rape-ability, however, was 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 only men had stamped him and from the first moment he saw him he never had any doubt what the effect the blacksmith would have on Florens. Thus her change from "have me always" to "don't touch me ever" seemed to him as predictable as it was marked.

Also, 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. Mistress passed her days with the joy of a clock. She was a penitent, pure and simple. Which to him meant that underneath her piety was something cold if not cruel. Refusing to enter the grand house, the one in whose construction she had delighted, seemed to him a punishment not only of herself, but everyone, her dead husband in particular.

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 the man in life, his leaving her behind blasted her. How could she not look for some way to wreak a bit of vengeance, show him how bad she felt and how angry?

In his twenty-two years, Scully had witnessed far more human folly than Willard. By the time he was twelve he had been schooled, loved and betrayed by an Anglican curate. He had been leased to the Synod by his so-called father following his mother's death on the floor of the tavern she worked in. The bar keep claimed three years of Scully's labor to work off her indebtedness, but the 'father' appeared, paid the balance due and sold his son's services, along with two casks of Spanish wine, to the Synod.

Scully never blamed the curate for betrayal nor for the flogging that followed, since the curate had to turn the circumstances of their being caught into the boy's lasciviousness, otherwise he would be not just

defrocked but executed. Agreeing that Scully was too young to be permanently incorrigible, the elders passed him along to a landowner who needed a hand to work with a herdsman far away. A rural area, barely populated, where, they hoped, the boy might at best mend his ways or at worst have no opportunity to corrupt others. Scully anticipated running away as soon as he arrived in the region. But on the third day a violent winter storm froze and covered the land in three feet of snow. Cows died standing. Ice-coated starlings clung to branches drooping with snow. Willard and he slept in the barn among the sheep and cattle housed there, leaving the ones they could not rescue on their own. There in the warmth of animals, their own bodies clinging together, Scully altered his plans and Willard didn't mind at all. Although the older man liked drink, Scully, having slept beneath the bar of a tavern his whole childhood and seen its effects on his mother, avoided it. He decided to bide his time until, given the freedom fee, he was able to buy a horse. The carriage-cart- and wagon-drawn were not superior to the mounted. Anyone limited to walking everywhere never seemed to get anywhere.

As the years slid by he remained mentally feisty while practicing patience, even as his hopes were beginning to dim. Then Jacob Vaark died and his widow relied on himself and Willard so much, she paid them. In four months he had already accumulated sixteen shillings. Four pounds, maybe less, would secure a horse. And when the freedom fee—goods or crop or coin equalling twenty-five pounds (or was it ten?)—was added on, the years of peonage would have been worth it. He did not want to spend his life just searching for something to eat and love. Meanwhile he did nothing to disturb Mistress Vaark or give her any cause to dismiss him. He was un-nerved when Willard prophesied quick marriage for her. A new husband handling the farm could make very different arrangements, arrangements that did not include him. The opportunity to work for and among women gave both him and Willard advantage. However many females there were, however diligent, they did not fell sixty foot trees, build pens, repair saddles, slaughter or butcher beef, shoe a horse, or hunt. So while he watched the disaffection Mistress spread, he did all he could to please her. When she beat Sorrow, had Lina's hammock

taken down, advertised the sale of Florens he cringed inside but said nothing. Not only because it was not his place, but also because he was determined to be quit of servitude for ever and for that money was a guarantee. Yet, when possible and in secret, he tried to soften or erase the hurt Mistress inflicted. He prepared a box for Sorrow's baby, lined it with sheepskin. He even tore down the advertisement posted in the village (but missed the one in the meeting house). Lina, however, was unapproachable, asking nothing and reluctant to accept whatever was offered. The hogshead cheese he and Willard had made was still wrapped in cloth in the tool shed where she now slept.

Such were the ravages of Vaark's death. And the consequences of women in thrall to men or pointedly without them. Or so he concluded. He had no proof of what was in their minds, but based on his own experience he was certain betrayal was the poison of the day.

Sad.

They were once a kind of family. Together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But whatever they once loved, sought or escaped their separate future was anyone's guess. One thing was certain, courage alone would not be enough. Nevertheless, remembering how the curate described what existed before Creation, Scully saw dark matter out there, thick, unintelligible, aching to be made into a world.

Perhaps their wages were not as much as the blacksmith's but, for Scully and Mr. Bond, it was enough to imagine a future.

I walk the night through. Alone. It is hard without Sir's boots.
Wearing them I could cross a stony river bed. Move quickly through forests and down hills of nettles. What I read or cipher is useless now.
Heads of dogs, garden snakes, all that is pointless. But my way is clear after losing you who I am thinking always as my life and my security from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me away. From all those who believe they have claim and rule over me. I am nothing to you. You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eye? Are you afraid? You should be. The hammer strikes air many

times before it gets to you where it dies in weakness. You wrestle it from me and toss it away. Our clashing is long. I bare my teeth to bite you, to tear you open. Malaik is screaming. You pull my arms behind me. I twist away and escape you. The tongs are there, close by. Close by. I am swinging and swinging hard. Seeing you stagger and bleed I run. Then walk. Then float. An ice floe cut away from the riverbank in deep winter. I have no shoes. I have no kicking heart no home no tomorrow. I walk the day. I walk the night. The feathers close. For now.

It is three months since I run from you and I never before see leaves make this much blood and brass. Color so loud it hurts the eye and for relief I must stare at the heavens high above the tree line. At night when daybright gives way to stars jingling the cold black sky, I leave Lina sleeping and come to this room.

If you are live or ever you heal you will have to bend down to read my telling, crawl perhaps in a few places. I apologize for the discomfort. Sometimes the tip of the nail skates away and the forming of

words is disorderly. Reverend Father never likes that. He raps our fingers and makes us do it over. In the beginning when I come to this room I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. I am wrong. Eyes dry I stop telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. The telling goes on without dream and when I wake it takes time to pull away, leave this room and do chores. Chores that are making no sense. We clean the chamber pot but are never to use it. We build tall crosses for the graves in the meadow then remove them, cut them shorter and put them back. We clean where Sir dies but cannot be anywhere else in this house. Spiders reign in comfort here and robins make nests in peace. All manner of small life enters the windows along with cutting wind. I shelter lamp flame with my body and bear the wind's cold teeth biting as though winter can not wait to bury us. Mistress is not mindful of how cold the out houses are nor is she remembering what night chill does to an infant. Mistress has cure but she is not well. Her heart is infidel. All smiles are gone. Each time she returns from the 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 dress is dark and quiet. She prays much. She makes us all, Lina, Sorrow, Sorrow's daughter and me, no matter the weather sleep either in the cowshed or the store room where bricks rope tools all manner of building waste are. Outside sleeping is for savages she says so no more hammocks under trees for Lina and me even in fine weather. And no more fireplace for Sorrow and her baby girl because 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 will whip me too as she believes her piety demands. Her churchgoing alters her but I don't believe they tell her to behave that way. These rules are her own and she is not the same. Scully and Willard say she is putting me up for sale. But not Lina. Sorrow she wants to give away but no one offers to take her. Sorrow is a mother. Nothing more nothing less. I like her devotion to her baby girl. She will not be

called Sorrow. She has changed her name and is planning escape. She wants me to go with her but I have a thing to finish here. Worse is how Mistress is to Lina. She requires her company on the way to church but sits her by the road in all weather because she cannot enter. Lina can no longer bathe in the river and must cultivate alone. I am never hearing how they once talk and laugh together while tending garden. Lina is wanting to tell me, remind me that she early warns me about you. But her reasons for the warning make the warning itself wrong. I am remembering what you tell me from long ago when Sir is not dead. You say you see slaves freer than free men. One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion. That it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild. I know my withering is born in the Widow's closet. I know the claws of the feathered thing did break out on you because I can not stop them wanting to tear you open the way you tear me. Still, there is another thing. A lion who thinks his mane is all. A she-lion who does not. I learn this from Daughter Jane.

Her bloody legs do not stop her. She risks. Risks all to save the slave
you throw out.

There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor.
From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because
lamp light is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carv-
ing 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? Dreaming will
not come again. 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, part the
snakes in 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 them-
selves. 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 and flavor the soil of the earth. Lina will help. She finds horror in this house and much as she needs to be Mistress' need I know she loves fire more.

See? You are correct. A minha mãe too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last.

I will keep one sadness. That all this time I can not know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. A minha mãe you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress.