



A Mercy Revised Pages

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In Progress

M E R C Y

Toni
Morrison

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 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 ^{soon splaying} ~~sudden-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 a minha mae standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron. Other signs need more time to understand. Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds 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. A minha mãe, my mother, is frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettify ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, and wild but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway 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

was years ago and the decision was null before he could act on it. An uncle he had never met from the side of his family that had abandoned him, died and left him one hundred and twenty acres of a dormant patroonship in a climate he much preferred. One with four distinct seasons. Yet this mist, hot and rife with gnats, did not dampen his spirits. Despite the long sail in three vessels down three different bodies of water, and now the hard ride over the Lenape trail, he took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, ^{almost alarming} ~~so modern in its openness to possibilities~~ ^{in raw temptation} ✓, never failed to invigorate him. Once out of the warm gold of the bay, he saw forests untouched since Noah; shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking. The lies of the Company about the easy profit awaiting all comers did not surprise or discourage him. In fact it was hardship, adventure that attracted him. His whole life had been a mix of confrontation, risk and placating. Now here he was, a ratty orphan become landowner, making a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life. He relished never knowing what precisely lay in his path, who might approach with what intention. A quick thinker, he

✓ in rawness
and temptation

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 ^{Jublio.} 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 ^{Jublio}

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 ^{Jublio} Bliss like balm. The path ended at a small brick plaza, announcing a prideful entrance to a veranda. Jacob stopped. A boy appeared and, dismounting a bit stiffly, he handed over the reins, cautioning the boy.

"Water. No feed."

"Yes, sir." said the boy and turned the horse around, murmuring, "Nice lady. Nice lady," as he led her away.

Jacob Vaark climbed three brick steps, then retraced them to stand back from the house and appraise it. Two wide windows, at least two

Jublio

because it would not be compromised as Bliss was. Access to a fleet of free labor made D'Ortega's leisurely life possible. Without a shipload of enslaved Angolans he would not be merely in debt; he would be eating from his palm instead of porcelain and sleeping in the bush 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 industry could amass the fortune, the station D'Ortega claimed without trading his conscience for coin.

He tapped Regina to a faster pace. The sun was low; the air cooler. He was in a hurry to get back into Virginia, its shore, and to Pursey's tavern before night, sleep in a bed if they weren't all packed three or four abreast. Otherwise he would join the other patrons and curl on any surface. But first he would have one, perhaps two, drafts of ale, its bitter, clear taste critical to eliminating the sweetish rot of vice and ruined tobacco that seemed to coat his tongue. Jacob returned Regina to

houses kept by wives of sailors at sea. The boyish recklessness that flooded him at ^{Jublie} Bliss did not extend to the sweet debauchery he had sought as a youth.

Seated at a table cluttered with the remains of earlier meals, he listened to the talk around him, which was mostly sugar, which was to say, rum. Its price and demand becoming greater than tobacco's now that glut was ruining that market. The man who seemed to know most about kill-devil, the simple mechanics of its production, its outrageous prices and beneficial effects was holding forth with the authority of a mayor.

Burly, 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,

was as sweet as the sugar on which it was based. And there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at ^{Jubilo}~~Bliss~~ and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right, he thought, looking at a sky vulgar with stars. Clear and right. The silver that glittered there was not at all unreachable. And that wide swath of cream pouring through the stars was his for the licking.

The heat was still pressing; his bed partner over-active, yet he slept well enough. Probably because his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog.

not after nine at night, with cause and not anger—were for wives and only wives. Had he been a native, Lina's lover? Probably not. A rich man? Or a common soldier or sailor? Rebekka suspected the former since she had known kind sailors but, based on her short employment as a kitchen maid, had only seen the underside of gentry. Other than her mother, no one had ever struck her. Fourteen years and she still didn't know if her Mum was alive. She once received a message from a captain Jacob knew who moored at Swansea. Eighteen months after he was charged to make inquiries, he reported that her family had moved. Where, no one could say. Rising from the brook, laying her son in the warm grass while she dressed, Rebekka had wondered what her mother might look like now. Gray, stooped, wrinkled? Would the sharp pale eyes still radiate the shrewdness, the suspicion Rebekka hated? Or maybe age, illness had softened her to benign, toothless malice.

Confined to bed now, her question was re-directed. "And me? How do I look? What lies in my eyes now? Skull and crossbones? Rage? Surrender?" All at once she wanted it—the mirror Jacob had

turn and look up at her. Are you a demon I ask her. Her wayward eye is steady. She smiles. Yes, she says. Oh, yes. Go now.

I walk alone except for the eyes that join me on my journey. Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man's whip between my legs. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the foreleg of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake's if my teeth ^{ing} are filed to points to ^{chew} eat them with. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite. Inside I am shrinking. I climb ^{up} out of the stream bed under watching trees and know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no tell-tale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. Is that what my mother knows? Why she chooses me to live without? Not the outside dark we share, a minha mãe and me, but the inside one we

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 ~~abandon in~~ ^{the} ~~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

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 ^{Jewelry}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

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 ^{of ice cold} ~~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