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And Her Increase and Selected Stories

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Catherine Reese Hart  
Bachelor of Arts, English, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia,  
1998

Director: Susann Cokal  
Associate Professor of English

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
May, 2010

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## Abstract

### AND HER INCREASE AND SELECTED STORIES

By Catherine Reese Hart, B.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

Major Director: Susann Cokal, Associate Professor of English

A recently freed slave strives for her independence and renegotiates her relationship with the white father of her children in the aftermath of the Civil War. Foreclosed homeowners find a literally explosive artifact. Co-workers cope with layoffs and a suicide. A fugitive witch struggles against a fantasy theocracy. A revolutionary tries to save an innocent man and her conscience. A doctor chooses to resist an oppressive regime in a dystopian future. The historical novel And Her Increase and these widely varying stories coalesce around themes of freedom and oppression, choice and desire.

*And Her Increase*

I.

March, 1865

*So at last, they come. And freedom with them.*

The word spread through Scottsville, Virginia that the Union Army was coming. Maggie heard it whispered by her fellow slaves, but it was when she saw the white people seem to panic that she believed it.

Freedom. The word, the concept, changed everything. The bright sun on the wood-frame houses climbing the hillsides seemed crisper. The sky above Maggie's head at last looked infinite. Maggie was twenty-three years old, yet this was the first time she truly felt like a grown woman, knowing that her freedom was real and certain. She and her children had only hours left in slavery. When she thought on this those hours seemed too long to bear.

Her children. She would steal those last hours for them. She would free them on her own.

Jacob and Helen were still at John Moon's house, or at least his photography studio and the quarters above it. They had all lived there with him since the first winter of the war. The studio lay on the other side of this small city in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Maggie headed northwest, towards the mountains and away from the river. The soldiers were coming from the north, cavalry it was said, fresh from taking Charlottesville. She made her way through the streets almost unnoticed, a light brown woman with a basket in the midst of white people racing around like they were on fire. They carried suitcases full to bursting. They had to carry it all themselves. The slaves were disappearing, waiting for the army and freedom to come.

Going home for perhaps the last time meant she would have to say something to him. She wondered if John might already be fleeing with the rebels, but that was not his way. Some called him a coward for not serving in either of the armies, but he had his convictions and by now Maggie believed she understood them.

It was a two-story wooden house, painted pale yellow and trimmed in white. She remembered the first time she had come to it, four years ago. Right at the outbreak of the war. All of that uncertainty, and then a new master. That first day she stood under that small square portico, it didn't matter that John was just renting her from his brother-in-law. She and her brother Wallis held hands and their palms were sweating. Maggie had memorized the way of pleasing—or trying to please—the Price family all of her life and she did not know what kind of man this John Moon was. He had opened the paneled front door himself and had smiled at them. Maggie thought then that he was trying to trick them. Trying to get them to let their guard down so he could pounce. Now she knew every inch of that house. John's photography studio was on the first floor, and the tall front window closest to the door was crowded with sample pictures. Maggie's wood-stove kitchen was in the back, in a first-floor addition under a sloping saltbox roof. She had memorized the anatomy of the place like she had memorized John's body. And she would miss them. But she would be free.

Maggie entered and her children rushed into her arms. "Mama!" Jacob shouted in a high squeal as he ran towards her on his short legs. He was two years old. Somehow he looked and felt bigger than she expected, as if he had grown in the hour she had been gone. Of course this was impossible, and Maggie realized this must just be part of this remaking of the world. She was imagining his growth to get him closer to the free man he would become. Maggie realized that her boy would not remember being anything other than a free man, and that she did not

know yet how this would change how she raised him. Jacob was lighter-skinned than she was, but like her he would never be mistaken for white. Her daughter Helen, though, had John's green eyes and wavy dark hair. The four-year-old girl set down her doll and walked quietly over to her mother.

"It true we gonna be free?" Helen asked. The child seemed to be holding her breath in fear of disappointment.

"Yes, Helen, it's true, and it won't be long now." Maggie smiled and took her up into her arms and lifted her in a sweeping motion. Helen giggled, while grasping a handful of Maggie's sleeve to feel safe. "We're going along with the Union army and they will make sure we are free. This war's going to be over before you know it."

"Mister John coming too?" Jacob asked.

Maggie sighed and set her daughter down, and stayed crouched at her children's level. She placed her hands on their small shoulders. "No, I don't think your daddy will be coming." She saw the heartache in their eyes and tried to think of how she could explain it.

This was almost as painful as the day she had to explain to Helen that they were black and their father was white, and all that meant, and what it meant to be a slave. That they were owned, like dogs and horses. She had not meant to tell her child that they could be sold away from her if their master wanted. But Helen had figured this out and Maggie had caught her tormenting her brother, saying if he kept being bad Mister John would sell him away and he would never see his mother again. And his cries broke her heart. It was as if it were actually happening, as if he was being torn from her arms even as she held him.

"We are free to go where we choose, and so is your father. But I don't think he can go along with the army, or wherever it is that we go."



“Why not?” Helen asked.

“I might ask the same question.” John’s deep voice came from the stairs. He was at the landing halfway down, coming up from his studio. His boots were loud on the steps as he climbed them. Maggie wondered how she had not heard his footsteps or the creak of the studio door, and she realized that she had stopped listening for such things. Maggie stood to face him. He was tall, close to six feet, though at five and half feet Maggie herself was considered tall for a woman. They were both thin from the war and from giving the food to their children. This day John looked every bit of his thirty-nine years, perhaps more from the cares that lined his pale face. Dark stubble turned his chin and neck ashen, and in the sunlight Maggie noticed more gray in the deep brown of his hair and his side-whiskers. The circles under his eyes were almost purple and Maggie wondered if he was ill. She tried to sort out her feelings of love and fear and duty, and could not. The break must be clean.

“I...am doing what I have to. For our freedom.” Maggie said this softly, though with the full force of her will behind it. She looked John straight in the eye, until she saw the hurt there and looked down. She hated herself for looking down, like a slave. But that was instinct, and easier.

“But why? After everything...” There was a quaver in his voice. “I know what you’d said before. But that was before we had children.” He took a step towards her and his hands were out. She thought they would be on her again. Not angry or with force. Just the warmth of them, the strength of his bones. And then her will would leave her.

“I need to do this like I need to breathe, John.” Maggie looked into his eyes again and tried not to remember. All their nights together. All the time he had told her he had loved her. All the times she had believed him.

John sighed and turned his back to her. “Please tell me, at least, that it wasn’t a lie when you said you loved me.” He dug his fingers through his hair. His hand stayed on his head and Maggie knew he must feel one of his headaches coming on. She tried to make herself not care.

“John, please.” Maggie stood in front of the children as if she could hide his heartbreak from them. She choked off her own. She had prepared herself for this, but preparing was not enough.

John’s lips twitched like he would say something. Something he must have decided he would regret. A long moment passed and then he headed upstairs again, stopping halfway up. “Take what you need. There’s nothing to keep me here, either.”

Maggie followed him to the third, and top, floor. To their bedroom. “This isn’t about you, John. I hope you can see that.”

“Well then who the hell is it about?” he shouted. John had a leather suitcase open on the bed and was throwing clothes into it. Shirts she had ironed and mended, now crumpled in his violent haste. He turned to her—or on her. “Who else is there? At least give me his name.”

“There’s no one else, John.” Maggie laid her hand on his arm, but John snatched away from her. “I swear to you. It’s not...like that.”

“I just don’t understand. I guess I always thought freedom would...take away the barriers between us. But then I suppose I’m just the damned idealistic fool everyone’s said I am my entire life.” John took a small painting down from the wall. It was a portrait of Lucia, his Italian mistress who had been the love of his youth. It had been painted at her deathbed. She had been shot during the insurrection in Milan in 1848 and this, and her name and her evident beauty, were all that Maggie knew of her. Maggie noticed that John also packed the photograph of herself and their children.

“That’s not true,” Maggie said. She did not know what else to say to him. Somehow she had not expected this to hurt him so much, and for her to feel the hurt in him.

“The hell it isn’t,” John said. He wrenched open a drawer. The forbidden drawer, at the top left of his dresser. He pulled it out of its track and something heavy shifted in it. Maggie knew what the cloth-wrapped object was, though she had never seen it up close. John unwrapped the pistol. He stared at it in his hand in a way that frightened Maggie. She feared for him, for the wild, sad look on his face, far more than she did for herself. Suddenly he held the pistol out to her, handle first. “Take this,” he bellowed, like an order. Then more softly, “To protect yourself, and the children. Do you need me to show you how to use it?”

The pistol was heavy in Maggie’s hand. It was an old pepperbox, a revolver with a separate barrel for each of the six cylinders. It was gray steel with an oddly feminine scrollwork design etched into the metal and the curled ivory handle. The trigger was a ring and Maggie instinctively put her finger through it as she took it from him, careful to keep it pointed at the floor. At the floor, but her children were downstairs. She tipped the barrels up towards the ceiling. “Is it loaded?” she asked.

“Not yet,” John said. His breathing seemed to slow as he fished out the cartridges and loaded it. “It fires the one at the bottom, so there’s not much use in aiming. Just point it at whoever’s coming after you.” John’s hands were warm on hers as he passed the pistol back to her and guided her through the motion of pointing the gun at an invisible enemy. “Run once you have him down.”

“I hope that never has to happen.” Silent moments passed and Maggie said, “What will you do?”

“I’ve got the dark room in the wagon nearly finished. If I follow the army I should be able to find work. Take pictures of...what I see.”

Maggie did not want to think of what he would see. What she might see. War had not come close to them until now. They were behind the lines, and had mostly seen the wreckage it made of men as they came to the hospitals. And the wreckage it made of those the slain had left behind.

“You could join,” Maggie said. She did not wish this for him, but it had to be said. “I’ve heard that when Yankees come through, some men find their courage and see the lay of things.”

“Maggie, you know how I feel about war. I can’t kill my own countrymen.”

*Even for me?* Maggie thought, but dared not say. She did not want to know what John’s answer would be.

They said small things quickly forgotten, and kissed once before parting. They kissed slowly, drawing it out. Maggie tried to memorize the taste of him. The feel of his mouth and his tongue and his teeth. He tasted like whiskey and cigar smoke and Maggie was angry at him for polluting what could be her last taste of him like this. But he smelled like himself and Maggie tried to memorize this too, and the feel of the muscles tensing in his wiry arms as her hands trailed down his shirt as they parted. His hands were soft, like leather, the hands of a man who only worked at what he wanted to. She would always see his face in her children. The war had come to them—and between them—as Maggie had always expected it to.

“Maybe there’ll be a way we can...” John looked at Maggie and his gaze flicked down as he trailed off. “The world is changing. If freedom comes like you’re saying, like I hope it does, maybe there is a way.” He looked at her again before he walked away.

“Maybe,” Maggie said, softly. She couldn’t tell if he heard her.

John took his things to his wagon. Maggie packed clothes and food for her children and herself in an empty flour sack, to be less suspicious. She shoved the pistol into the pocket of her threadbare jacket and wondered how she would carry it in summer. If she would have to. Along with her own clothes she took one of John's shirts and a pair of his trousers. They were stained with oil paints and smelled of him. Maggie carried the sack over her right shoulder and held her boy Jacob with her left with his little bottom balanced on her hip. She walked out that door, down the porch steps and into the strangely empty street. Only once did she look back.

## II.

John felt himself undone. Almost unable to think. The past four years, ever since this goddamned war, his world had shifted as he came to know Maggie. He loved her. It came to him slowly at first. He had explained it away as lust and convenience at first. He would love—or pretend to love—a woman, and then move on and this is how he protected himself. Ever since Lucia had been taken from him. The few he allowed himself to love had left him.

The spot had appeared in front of his eyes. The migraine would come on soon and he would be useless. The dark of his photography wagon might calm the pain. He was nearly out of laudanum. But even that would do nothing for what he had lost.

He saw her leave. Maggie was loaded down but he wondered if it was enough to sustain her. The children, his children, looked so small. It was so strange seeing her walk away, without even her face turning back to him for him to memorize. But Helen kept looking back at him. Maggie pulled her along, leading her by the hand. Jacob spun his head back towards him too, but he was looking at everything. The thought came to John that his son was as alert as prey. The boy's gaze flicked about like a deer's ears, twitching. John hated this thought. They were walking out of his life, by her choice. They would be poor and hungry and free and strangers.

The children. How could she take them like that? Going off to be free was her decision, he could grant that. But how could she provide for them? Protect them? Now with them lost into the world he would always have that worry. Six weeks ago Jacob had wandered off by himself. It was cold but there were only patches of snow and not enough to track him. He and Maggie had searched the town for him, that evening and into the night. The scenarios ran

through his head: his boy had frozen to death, been trampled by a horse, drowned in the river. They found him in the neighbor's shed. Playing with a saw. Thankfully the only damage was what Maggie did with a switch once she got a hold of him. But it was three hours of panic and worry and hell.

John focused himself on preparing for the army. He did not know the proper protocol for invasion. Of course it had to be cavalry, like the hussars that had put down Lucia's uprising. John's back ached, muscles tensing around the old scar. *The clatter of shod hooves on cobblestones at full gallop, roaring above the shouts and the running footsteps.* He should not have given Maggie the gun. Lucia had gone from loading the rifles to firing them, and he saw what came of that. But he did not trust it in his own hands. *His own shaking, cowardly hands.*

The streets of Scottsville were oddly quiet, now that most of the townsfolk had left. This part of Page Street was paved with cobblestones and was wide enough for two wagons to pass each other easily. It became a dirt road into the mountains just two blocks north. His house caught the afternoon sun, though the corner of the five-story flour mill that headed the block across the street cast its sharp shadow across it.

John hung the American flag on the pole that jutted between the two front windows of his house. It was out of date. The states had been added so quickly in the West. John distracted himself by counting them. There were thirty-one, in unbalanced rows; this must have been right after California. There should be thirty-five, including West Virginia which had broken off from his home state. The stars of the South were not removed even when the states had torn themselves away from the Union.

Moments later, he set up his camera on the porch. It was difficult to find a point of focus in the unpeopled street. Viewed through the camera, everything was turned upside-down by the

array of lenses and mirrors. But it was still bright with color. He had to mentally turn these into darkness and light.

To keep up the distraction, John went the shop window and changed out the display of photographs. One by one, hopeful young Confederates fell into a sack. He imagined their corpses being similarly dumped into shallow battlefield graves, their sawed-off limbs being tossed into gory piles. John set out the few portraits he had taken of Union men. There were civilians too, no one could fault those. At the very last he placed a portrait he had taken that Christmas of Maggie, Helen and Jacob. Maggie looked lovely as always, her black hair in glossy curls and a smile on her lips that this time reached her large dark eyes. Jacob had turned from infant to boy before his eyes and already John could see how much he had grown in only the past three months. John tried to visualize the man he would grow into. What changes would come to their world in twenty years? And what changes would not come?

In the picture, Helen held a doll John had mended for her. He noticed the doll itself lying on the floor of the shop and picked it up. He traced the seam where he had glued the chipped porcelain head together. He had repainted the face until the crack was almost imperceptible. The face was bone white, of course, with round pink cheeks and a tiny bright-red mouth. The painted hair was jet black, and there the crack was thicker. It had been his sister's doll and had gone to waste when she bore only a son, not that her children would want anything so old and damaged. Maggie had sewn a new cloth body and clothes for it. The doll still smelled of her, and of his children. He pressed his face to it. The bristles of his beard snagged in the lace.

Long moments later, after he had collected himself, John stood in the doorway of his shop and waited. He wore a dark brown suit coat, white shirt and cobalt-blue vest with blue plaid trousers. They had been new just before the war and were slightly frayed and faded. He



hoped it was still evident that they had been tailored to his frame. John had lost some twenty pounds during the war and he hoped he did not look like some scarecrow of a deserter in stolen clothes. His head was bare. He leaned in the doorway casually, despite the drumming of his heart, and hoped he did not appear insolent. Minutes became over an hour as he paced the house. Checked the wagon and rearranged his things. Went back to porch again and waited.

The dust came before the army did, even in these roads of spring mud. Or perhaps it was smoke that came with them. The horses and men crowded the narrow streets like a herd of cattle at market. Their uniforms were dark and only a few of their wide hats sported a bedraggled feather. He wondered what hells these men had endured. Most were far younger than him, though it was hard to tell with their hard eyes and their beards. He thought over his nights with women in New York and Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore. He took precautions not to leave children. Not that that could always be trusted. He supposed that if any of the women had come to him in that condition, he would have married her. But none of them had come to him.

A ginger-bearded lieutenant rode up to the front of John's shop and home. John still leaned in the doorway with his hands in his pockets. "Show your hands," the officer barked, and John raised them above his head as if in surrender. The lieutenant squinted at the flag, the sign and the photographs in the window. "This is your shop?"

"Yes, sir," John replied, slow and mild. "I would be happy to take a picture of you and your men, if you have a moment to pose. Something to send home to your wife?" John nearly sobbed at the word 'wife'. He made himself think about anyone but Maggie. He doubted that the soldier's wife would want to see him looking so ragged as this, except that it meant he was still alive.

“We don’t have time for that and you won’t be taking our money. Is that what you are about? Putting out the flag just for business, whichever army comes?”

“I put out my flag to support the Union. But I suppose you will believe whatever you choose.”

“Do not get smart with me, Reb. I’ll bet you just quit the army because you know this war is over and you’re too attached to your life.”

“I never served the rebellion,” John said. His jaw tightened and his voice was firm.

“And you didn’t serve your country either.”

John considered lying. He tried to read the man’s eyes and those of the soldiers who flanked him. One already held a lit torch. “No, I did not.” The soldier with the torch smirked. “I could not fight my countrymen on either side. I don’t expect you to understand that. It was my personal understanding with the Almighty.” That, at least, was a lie. He had not truly believed in God for decades, though he had always had a slim hope. Lucia had believed that she would go to the saints and the angels. And Maggie’s faith, tested as it was, tempted him to believe again.

Parts of the town were already burning. Thick smoke billowed into the sky and blew into their faces. The tobacco warehouse scented the blaze into a thousand cigars. From his house on the hill above the river, John could see the flames leaping from the exchange house by the canal. Livelihoods were conflagrating in an instant, instead of just decaying as they had for years from being built on lies and cruelty. Maggie was out there, somewhere, maybe hiding in the forest, or following the old escape routes.

He would run to her and find her. He would wrap his arms around her and his children. He would guide them through this hell and guard them with his body. With his life, if it came to

it. It took everything he had not to bolt from that porch. He knew if he did, the soldiers might shoot him.

The lieutenant cleared his throat. His face was blank. He eyed John for a long silent moment. He reined in close. "If it's given you peace, then I envy you," he whispered, out of hearing of his men.

"It can be as much a burden to have done nothing," John replied, just as softly.

The lieutenant nodded. "Still, we have our orders. Your shop is not on the list but the flour mill is." The five-story brick building lay across the street a block down. He had grown accustomed to the wheatey smell of it, and the workers coming down the street when the shift changed. Lately they had been mostly slaves and white women, both changed into statues of themselves by the dust. *Graveyard angels*, Maggie had called them. Her father's master used to rent him out to the mill and it would take weeks for him to cough the flour from his lungs. Anywhere there was dust there were fires, explosions, the place could blow up like a coal mine and it would. John had always known as much, living fairly near to it. The house was cheaper because of that. He had just never expected a warning and this is what the lieutenant clearly gave. The cavalymen wheeled their horses around towards it, galloping past as the one man threw the torch in. They kept galloping, outrunning the danger. John gathered his burdens and ran to his wagon. He fled up towards the mountains and the edge of town, and whatever counted as safety.

### III.

The whites of Scottsville were still leaving when the soldiers came. Maggie's path had taken her by the river. The canal to Richmond ran alongside it and Maggie knew the soldiers would come for this. The last ferry across the flooded James River was just leaving. The boat was long and flat with low, knee-high sides that were no match for the river, roaring with snowmelt and churning with debris. White people were jammed across the deck as the boat rolled and bucked in the current. A chicken fluttered over the chaos. Maggie wondered if it trusted its frail wings more than the boat.

The boatman, Nathaniel, looked across the dock at her. He was an older black man, maybe in his fifties, who had been poling the ferryboat across the river for as long as she could remember. There was regret in his eyes. Maggie wondered how he could do this, ferry these white people across and go with them, staying at his post and in slavery. He looked to the deadly churning waters and to the road.

The soldiers came. Their horses churned up dust and mud. There were more of them than Maggie ever expected, more people than she had ever seen at once. They poured through several streets at once, a flood of their own.

There was a young blonde woman in widow's black on the very back of the boat. She had to raise her foot to the gunwale for balance as the crowd nearly pushed her out. Bright red and yellow hems peeked out beneath the mourning dress; she was wearing three dresses at once. Seeing the soldiers, this refined Southern lady started calling out above the river "You Yankee

sons of whores! You killed my William! Goddamn you all!” She made an obscene gesture with her forearm and her fist, smacking her arm to show that the giant pecker couldn’t go any further.

Maggie almost chuckled at this display. The war had broken down these people. She had seen white women claw at each other with their dirty broken fingernails over the last half-moldy bread at the market. They ripped fresh tears in their once-fine dresses that had worn to rags and patches. But this woman was going against armed men now and Maggie did not know what might come of it.

One of the soldiers raised his short-barreled rifle and aimed it towards the boat. He did not cock back the hammer. Maggie noticed this much as the soldiers did not seem to notice her. The widow kept taunting the Yankees from the boat, too far out in the river to be heard now. A fat old man pushed in front of the widow, forcing her farther back into the boat. The soldier who was aiming lowered his gun and moved on.

The soldiers were overflowing the streets now. The cavalymen rode six and eight abreast, keeping just enough away from the brick warehouses and frame storefronts to let her and the children pass. Maggie thought to call out to them, but her voice caught in her throat. She didn’t want to be noticed. So she just watched them, the wonder of them. Freedom embodied by unwashed men with scraggly beards and boy’s faces. They had old men’s eyes, except when some of them looked down at her. Maggie saw that hunger in them and by instinct she adjusted her jacket to better cover her breasts. The horses crowded the streets and the bulk of them pushed Maggie against the rough brick walls. One of the hooves caught the hem of Helen’s skirt and ripped it and the little girl shrieked.

Maggie backed into a filthy alley. It led to the Richardsons’ stable. She knew their help, who might hide her from their masters if it came to that. There were horses here and the soldiers

would take them, but her children were tired and afraid and needed this moment. They needed to go to the outhouse but Maggie had to explain to them that they couldn't use that one just across the way. And so they went in the straw like animals. Helen seemed to be humiliated by it, but Jake giggled as he practiced his aim.

Her son would be a free man. Have a business, maybe. Get married. Vote. But what would freedom mean for her, and her daughter? Maggie wondered if she herself could ever be a wife. Even to a free black man. She wondered how the men would make use of their freedom. If slavery could be abolished, what about all the rules and laws that kept even white women down? That was why mistresses were always more cruel than the masters. As things stood, marriage would make Maggie and her children a man's property just as surely as a slaveholder's will gave his son a fertile woman "and her increase, to his heirs forever." As though a people could be dealt out like the family silver.

There was movement behind her. The old dapple grey horse snorted and twitched its skin. Human footsteps rustled in straw. Maggie felt the pistol's handle smooth and heavy in her hand. "Who's there?" she called out. "I don't mean any trouble." She felt her pulse in her throat.

"Maggie, what you doing here?" said the woman. It took a few seconds before Maggie recognized Delilah. They'd been on the same plantation as girls but hadn't seen much of each other even then. Time and beatings had made their changes.

Maggie let the gun slip back into the bag. She wondered if Delilah had seen it.

"I left John," Maggie said. "Looking to see where I go from here."

"So you finally did," Delilah said. She shook her head and chuckled. After a moment she said, "As for where to go, I don't know any more than you." They scrounged what oats they

could from the horse's feed. Some of it was rancid. What was still good, they ate raw. The oats were dry and scraped down Maggie's throat. They all coughed. They scooped water out of the trough with their hands and drank it. It had a greasy slick on top. "Missus took everything that was in the house. Not that there was much of anything," Delilah said.

After a while, Helen said, "I want to go home."

Maggie sat down next to her on the musty bale of hay. The girl's feet kicked as they dangled above the ground. She had shoes. They were worn and coming apart at the seams, but she had them. Maggie had never had shoes at that age, and when she did, they had been castoffs, the soles nearly worn through. "Helen, baby, I told you. We can't go home now. We're going on with the army so we can be free."

"If we free, we do what we want."

"Sweetheart, sometimes we...have to do the things that we don't want to, so that we can get we need. So we can go on to what's better."

"How do we know it'll be better?"

Delilah interrupted. "Child, freedom'll be better than anything."

"Anything we can dream of." Maggie said, knowing this was too simple, too false. She stroked her daughter's hair. She wondered how many lies she'd told her children and how many more would be needed. *Have you lied to me all this time?* John's words echoed in her mind. Maybe she had. How could she say she loved him, when the laws of slavery made her fear him? How could there be any honesty in such a life?

The sound of hooves came into the street. The soldiers. "Go up to the hayloft," Delilah said. Maggie started to protest, but Delilah just said, "You too pretty, and you got the children."

So Maggie climbed the ladder behind Helen, while supporting Jacob on her hip. She let the children burrow in the hay and they giggled. She shushed them, harshly.

Two soldiers came into the stable. The cavalrymen were on foot. They carried their short carbine rifles and had swords at their sides. One of them, dark-haired and clean-shaven, went immediately over to the dapple gray horse and examined its hooves and its mouth. The other, a thickset man with a long mustache that went down both sides of his chin, sauntered right over to Delilah.

“Hello, beautiful. Bet you’re happy we’ve come to free you, aren’t you?”

Delilah backed away from him a step or two but he closed the distance. “Yes, sir,” she said, as she would have to a master. Something quivered in her voice.

“Well then, why don’t you show us just how glad you are.” He touched her hair and sniffed it.

The other soldier looked up from the horse’s hoof. “For the love of God, Josiah, just leave the poor mott alone. And leave me the fook out of this.” He turned and stood at the opening of the stall.

Maggie made sure her children were underneath the hay, and not seeing this. But they could hear it. She reached into the satchel and felt for the gun. Her every movement seemed to raise the noise of a windstorm and she watched every moment for that wicked soldier to look up at her.

The burly soldier came closer and Delilah made her decision. Just before he could grab hold of her, she knelt down on the dirty straw. She began to unbutton his trousers. The soldier laughed. She took him into her mouth.



Maggie saw Helen peep out of the hay. She glared fury at the girl and after a moment her daughter noticed and ducked down. The hay rustled but Maggie guessed it could hardly be heard above the soldier's rhythmic moaning. But she was wrong.

The other man climbed the ladder and reached the hayloft. His revolver was drawn. "Who's the fook's here?" he bellowed. His face changed when he saw Maggie, and more so when he saw the small forms of her children.

"If there's some damn Reb you'd better kill 'em, Connelly. I'm still busy," said Josiah, with a laugh.

Maggie looked Connelly in the eye and mouthed *please*.

"There's no one," he said. He holstered his pistol. Before he climbed down, he tipped his forage cap slightly with a sad smile. Maggie smiled back at the odd gesture of gallantry as Josiah kept grunting below. His cries grew louder and then he gasped for breath, spent.

They left, taking the grey horse with them. It was only after they left that Delilah spat him out into the straw. She spat and it turned to retching. Then she looked up, and Maggie shrunk back further into the hayloft. Maggie let her think she had not seen, but there was no denying that she heard. And her children heard. They were not sheltered but Maggie prepared for yet another uncomfortable conversation.

Maggie realized that even before Delilah was sold a decade ago, the distance had grown between them. Their master's son had taught Maggie to read. It was a hard secret to keep and Maggie had tried her best. It had come not from telling, but reading a label in the busy kitchen. Waltham's Allspice. Maggie had found it immediately, even though the tin was new and unfamiliar. Delilah had looked at her with her mouth slightly open and knew and Maggie felt the

chill of it. The knowledge hung like the knives in that kitchen, which were chained to the counters so they could not be secreted away or turned on the masters.

And so this knowledge, of this moment, hung between them.

Delilah climbed up to the hayloft and peered in at them. “Thank God we’re free. Thank the Lord and Jesus.” She said this as if to herself, to convince herself.

“Yes, thank God,” Maggie said. She grasped Delilah’s hand. The pale of their palms blended together and the calluses scratched. Delilah’s hand was chapped with work, and stronger. Maggie squeezed and then let go. She hoped this could say what she did not have words for at this moment. Delilah left them and Maggie let her children rest as she watched over them.

Until she smelled smoke.

Maggie looked out and the town was on fire. It was uphill by the mountains—by John’s home. It was by the river, the warehouses beside the canal. This was only what she could see from the mouth of the alley. She could already feel the heat of it and it was blocks away. Maggie brought the children down and went out into the street. Most of the soldiers were gone and those who were here were leaving the fire behind them.

She pushed east, following the soldiers. Others were out now and saving what they could carry. Blacks and whites alike ran from the flames. The air grew hot and the smoke choked her. She leaned forward by instinct, crouching over her children and bearing the sack on her back. Cinders stung her face. Her eyes watered in the smoke. Her children were bawling now, panicking. She tried to comfort her but the smoke turned the streets dark and in the burning she did not know the way.

An explosion thundered across town. Maggie turned toward it to see a fireball rising from what had been the flour mill. The huge cloud engulfed the block where it lay. John's home would have been in that fireball. Maggie thought of the house, the walls and their bed and the artworks and the shop, all being gone. She could not bear to think of John being gone. Being killed. She was sure he had left not long after she had. He was in the wagon and heading away from this place and she had to believe that. But she wasn't sure, and she realized then maybe she was wrong to leave, but it was too late for that. Too late for the two of them, and what they'd had. She had sometimes thought of him as old because he was older than she was, but thirty-nine was terribly young to die and yet there were so many boys half his age out there dying. And children dying, young children like her own, taken not by war but by fever or accidents or hunger. And so Maggie held on to her children tighter because they were there for her to hold onto and it was all up to her now. Even if their father was not dead or burned he was away from their lives now and all that they needed was upon her. Maggie regretted leaving again but this was what freedom was, choices and mistakes and putting her feet forward one at a time through this way of danger. Squinting in the smoke and turning away from the heat of the fire and going on, always going on.

#### IV.

John had gathered what he could. He had tied a wet scarf around his face. He breathed through the wet wool and poured with sweat. Three days' clothes were in the wagon and a coat for the mountain chill and the nights that were still winter. Atop them were the pictures. The photograph of Maggie and the children. Sketches of Lucia when she was alive. Paintings and illustrations, though only those small enough to fit. The rest would burn. Those were mere fantasies: knights and Romans and ruins and love. At least he would know the fate of these, unlike those he had shipped to London through the blockade at the first outbreak of war. He still did not know if they had been captured or sunk. All of his life, creation and loss. But wasn't that any man's? He arranged color on canvas or light onto chemicals and silver to try to defy the fact that everything perishes from this earth. Now it was his home that was destroyed. Just like his state and his nation.

He'd driven the wagon three blocks past the flour mill when the mill exploded. And so did his skull. The headache was fierce and the sound of the blast, and the heat and the light, all were unbearable. The nausea overcame him and he vomited. Most of it spewed into the street. He closed his eyes and clung to the wooden seat with the harness reins looped in his fingers. Not driving, just holding on. Trusting the beasts' will to live would be enough to make them save him.

The mules bolted. The wagon teetered back and forth, threatening to tip over as they raced down the hill. Only the wooden traces kept the wagon from running them over. John yanked at the reins and called to them. He had been a pretentious fool to name them Scylla and

Charybdis. Mythology did not lend itself well to shouting as one raced hellbent down a burning street. He squinted in the smoke and his own shouts echoed in his head above the ringing in his ears. At last he calmed the mules and guided them towards the foot of the town at the river.

He could have died. If the wagon overturned. If he'd been closer to the mill when it exploded. He had not expected such a fierce blast; it was as if they were storing gunpowder in the mill, but the dust in the air could burst into flame. John realized Maggie must have seen, and heard, and felt the explosion. She might even think he was dead.

John wondered if this, at last, might liberate her. His death would free her of her obligations. Yet she would also be yet another widow woman in this world of the bereft and without even the benefit of marriage. Her only inheritance was now in ashes. John wished he could find her. Reach out to her. Let her at least know that he still lived, even if she no longer cared to share that life with him. But she was gone into the world and he did not know how to find her. Sometimes the contrabands stayed with the army, trailing behind them along with the caravans of sutlers and whores. Or they melted into the forest, living off the land. He did not know how Maggie would do this. But then he was used to her surprising him.

John came to the canal and found it raging, the locks upstream no doubt broken. The customs house was ablaze. The waters shone orange and yellow reflecting the flames in the canal and half out into the river, broken by the white rush of the current. The smoke was thick in the air and blew around in waves. Everything stank of the smoke and the things it was burning and wasting: tobacco, wood, dead hogs, coal. His eyes stung and watered. The headache was fading, faster than they usually did and John wondered if it was just his panic and heartbreak. But those had not faded.

John nodded to the sentries at the bridge across the canal and spoke his way through. The camera gave him reason to be here. He set it up with his back to the river. The roar of water and flame and his own blood rushed together in his ears. He knew that the picture would be ruined, for fire would not be still. It would be a blur of light and the cavalrymen would be blurs of dark. Only the buildings and wreckage and the trees and the backs of these sentries would be still and clear.

One of the blurs was coming towards him.

It was the redheaded lieutenant. He reined up close to John and there was a joy in his face that made him look even more boyish. "I heard I could find you here. The captain said he could make use of your services, to 'preserve our campaign for posterity & etc.'"

"I am obliged," John said. He tried not to think of what it meant to travel with fighting men. But at least the lens would not lie.

Following the army, he could at least believe he would see her. He would be in the caravan of those who made their living off of the troops. John wondered what would happen if he caught a glimpse of her, walking along with the rest. Helen or Jake crying out "Daddy!" and the joy of the reunion. Or the awkward heartache of Maggie shushing them and going on down the road. Ignoring him and remaining with her people. Maybe there would be another man by then. A man who shared her skin and who she would let into her body and her heart and her mind far more intimately than she had ever allowed him. The body was the least of it. Animals had the body. John wondered if the last he would know of her would be an array of light and shadow on glass. The blur of a child like Jake who was too young to hold still. John wondered if all this talk of color was mere foolishness. If the reality was the negative that his camera captured, the whites dark and the slaves light. The shadows of the cheekbones reversed to turn

their faces inside out, like they were the concave interiors of masks that they all put on. A world in negative, and inverted. He had once believed in a world of paint; that everything was skill and mixing and the stroke of the brush. The way the brush's hairs sometimes moved as if with their own will and sometimes the stroke was ruined. But other times it showed him what he had not seen. And all was fluid and fixable. John hoped the world was still this and he let himself pray.

## V.

Maggie took her children and fled. The smoke turned the streets strange, day into night and in a town she no longer knew. She turned against the smoke and the fires again and again, making for the river. The soldiers were moving on, their work done before sunset.

The town was burning and it was transforming. The flames and the scattered gunfire lit the world anew. She made herself remember being thirteen and new to reading and seeing the town alive with signs. Anderson Bros. Tobacco became no longer just the scent and sight of the curing crop but the tall block letters painted into the brick. Now it was burning.

The evening was fading to dusk with the fires lighting the night. Maggie carried her boy child close at her breast and lifted her daughter with her other arm. She tried to gather her wool cloak around her. It was heavy for early spring and the heat was an oven but wool did not burn. It was Helen that pulled it tighter, maybe to stop seeing the fire. Maggie broke into a run, coughing. All of their eyes were watering in the smoke. Her children were crying. They were hungry and tired and focused on these things because they were afraid. And Maggie focused on them because soon she could fix these things.

Maggie did not know where she would sleep tonight. The only warm body beside her would be her children. She had protected them when John could not. Tonight they would sleep beneath the sky. If they were far enough from the smoke they might see the stars. Maggie had looked out on the North Star for so many nights all her life but had never quite been bold enough to follow it. Always something held her back—what they would do to her parents, her lover. The slave-catchers' dogs with their vicious teeth. She had almost run when the war came, John's slaves had and that is how she came to him. She had waited because his guard must be up and



then they were naked flesh together and he had made her a fool the way men did. She had eaten well instead of seeing and smelling the food while going hungry. She had had a white woman's life, or the closest she could come to it. *Now it is time to start my life, if I live.*

They got ahead of the flames. They joined the path east. The road was filthy and torn from the three thousand horsemen riding away towards conquest in Richmond and here they were walking. At times there were whole families but most were the women, men and children scattered apart by slavery, walking together now. Marching. They were an army of freedom, without rifles or cannon, with only their belief and work-earned strength, and the power of their defiance.

## VI.

April, 1865

The army moved slowly. John wondered as his wagon followed them, what it must feel like walking to a place they'd wanted to charge into. Of course other units had gone ahead of these. John had heard that the black 5<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry had been the first to enter Richmond. He had wished he had been there with them, to capture the moment in all its irony and redemption. A photograph would not be adequate because everyone would have been moving. He would have had to sketch what he could, and fill in the remainder with his mind. He pictured a vast, wall-filling canvas bursting with vivid colors. The black cavaliers would have uniforms full of tassels and braid worthy of generals: a thousand Toussaints. All the better to contrast with the squalor of the defeated South.

He was not prepared for the real look of that squalor.

As they crested a hill, John at last had a view of the city. He had visited Richmond many times and carried a vision of it. And hearing of the evacuation fire had not completely banished that vision. But seeing it did. A low-hanging smoke and fog lay over the ruins. The only things jutting through it were chimneys. Rows and rows of chimneys, by the thousands. Gravestones of houses and shops that no longer stood.

John was so transfixed that he almost didn't notice when his mules halted. He whipped them, trying to get them to pull his wagon once more along the muddy, rutted road. Soldiers marched past him. Finally, John got down from the seat and went to lead them by the bridle. But what had caught their attention stopped him.

It was a man. Hardly more than a boy. He lay just off the side of the road, beneath the low branch of a tree. A dead Confederate soldier. He wore a ragged butternut uniform that seemed made more of patches than its original cloth. He might have been in his late teens, despite his scruffy black beard and skeletal face.

John took his camera out of the wagon and set it up on the tripod. He had taken plenty of pictures of the dead, but this one was perfectly posed. John tried never to falsely stage his photographs. Paintings could show whatever he wanted, but photographs were the truth. He'd heard rumors that Brady and Gardner posed their battlefield pictures. John considered doing this, whenever he was most jealous of their wealth and fame. Still, this one had come to him fully formed.

He was adjusting the angle of the shot to fully capture the corpse and have a glimpse of the marching Federals at the corner—the blur could not be helped—when he thought he saw the corpse move. John came up from beneath the cloth and looked at it straight on. The boy's shoulders shifted and a loud, low snore bubbled up from him. John glanced back to the marching column. None of the soldiers seemed to notice a suddenly living enemy in their midst. The rebel's rifle lay in the brush about a yard from him. John stepped over and grabbed it before the boy could open his bleary eyes.

The boy blinked at him. Not knowing what to do, John pointed the rifle at his chest. "Your war's over, son."

"Guess so." The young man eased himself up onto his elbows and John kept the gun on him. The rifle did not seem to be loaded. John felt relieved by this, but also by the fact that the soldier did not seem in any condition to notice. But the rebel did look to the side to see hundreds of bluecoats marching and whispered, "Oh shit...."

“Mr. Moon, it looks like you have a prisoner.” A sergeant stepped out of the column and up to them. A wry smile twisted beneath long mutton-chop whiskers that joined to his mustache.

“It seems that I do. Though I suppose the army has him now.” John passed the rifle to the sergeant, glad to have it out of his hands. He stepped closer to the sergeant and said to him, “He made no attempt to resist. I’d say it’s obvious that he is...indisposed.” On top of the odor of an unwashed body, there was a strong smell of whiskey on the boy. As if to confirm their conclusion, the rebel started heaving up his empty stomach, managing to vomit only bile.

“Get up, Reb,” the sergeant bellowed. He jabbed at him with the butt of the rifle.

The boy rose. And as he did, wobbling and unsteady, something gleamed at his neck.

“Goddamn it, what do we have here?” the sergeant said, searching him. John stood back, turning numb as the sergeant unsheathed his bayonet and aimed it at the boy’s chest.

“My God, man, you can’t mean to—” John said. His outrage was cut off when he saw the sergeant was not using the blade for murder, but stripping. The sergeant cut open the boy’s jacket and threadbare shirt. There on his skinny, nearly hairless chest, over ribs that were plainly visible, were a half-dozen ladies’ necklaces. They were gold and silver, some with diamonds and others with pearls. There was an emerald and a sapphire. This starving wretch was wearing a king’s ransom around his neck.

John considered that once again, a perfect photo had presented itself. But it was not to be. The sergeant plucked the jewels from the boy’s throat and stared at them glittering in the light. “W-where did you get these?”

“We was all busting into the shops. During the fire.” The rebel looked down at his toes, which poked out of the holes in his boots.

The sergeant called over more troops to guard the prisoner—and the loot.

Perhaps a half hour later, John saw the boy again. He was sitting on the ground with a small group of prisoners. The Union troops had fed them, perhaps the first food they'd had in days. Weeks, maybe. The boy was shoveling porridge into his mouth with his hands, smearing his face and beard with food like an infant. The boy looked up at him and there was rage in his cold blue eyes.

John kept his hand on the brake lever of the wagon as the two mules pulled it down the steep slope into Shockoe Valley. The beasts seemed even more hesitant than usual as they went down from the burned ruins into the part of Richmond that had strangely been spared—because it was already Hell. The deep valley, floored by a foul muddy creek, had been the center of the city's slave-trading empire. Here as the ground sunk beneath the city's hills the burned-out hulks and lone chimneys gave way to structures that were filthy but whole. The creek was an open sewer. Slave jails stood next to slaughterhouses.

He had been here before. When he had been fifteen, his father had taken him in an attempt to teach the boy his business. John had never wanted to be a planter and the visit made his decision final. They had ridden a wagon through a tall archway into a brick warehouse. On one side were piles of grain, ears of corn, sheaves of cured tobacco. On the other side were men. John watched his father inspect them, feeling their muscles and checking their teeth like they were horses. His father even pulled down their ragged trousers to look at their genitals, while the coarse-mouthed slave trader assured him that they were good breeders. "Never buy a boy wearing a shirt," his father had advised him, "that just means they've had to whip him and he's not worth your trouble." John knew that his father had had to order men—white men—whipped when he was an officer during the War of 1812 and discouraged such methods on his plantations.

But his father rarely involved himself in the details of slave management other than “acquisitions and divestitures” as he termed them. “It is not a business for gentlemen,” he had said. John had felt strange in his crisp new suit among these men. The traders wore bright, cheap clothes that were stained with their sweat and at times smeared with excrement and blood. But among them walked other men, the plantation elite in impeccable fashions, wading through the filth in their tall boots.

Now John wandered this filth in his boots.

Union soldiers were in the streets, loitering around as if dazed. Some of the people who cheered them hardly looked human in their present condition. Of the slaves who had been held here, those still healthy had already left this foul place. Food in this starving city was not wasted on those being punished. One young man had been bound and beaten for so long he could barely stand, yet he pleaded with an officer to be allowed to enlist. In an alley a child gnawed on a rancid pig’s ear. John thought about how to frame these displays for a photograph, but everyone was moving. Even if it was slowly. Faces would blur. Bodies would become ghosts of motion.

John found himself at the gate to a stockade. A sign identified Lumpkin’s Jail. Even John knew the place by its other name, Hell’s Half Acre. Inside was a building that could have once been a boarding house or tavern. The porch was barred by long boards, set horizontally with small gaps between them. In the yard stood posts with empty shackles swinging from them. There were arrays of sawhorses and logs, again with ropes or chains. John walked among them. It felt more like seconds than days since the screams here had faded. Several of the posts and sawhorses had human feces on the ground beneath them, or even on the wood itself. Rough boards drilled with holes and cut with handles leaned against a wall. One of boards lay on the ground, broken on someone’s body, and all of them were stained with blood and shit.

Union soldiers led the torturer out in handcuffs. Robert Lumpkin looked like an ordinary old man. He was about sixty with his sparse hair fully gone to gray and his thick shoulders stooped, though that could have been with defeat. John guessed that Lumpkin no longer did the work of the beatings himself, if he ever had. The younger men, maybe boys at this point in the war, would have fled during the fall of the city. John wondered why the old fool was still here to be caught and then he perhaps had his answer. A middle-aged black woman followed Lumpkin, pleading with the soldiers: "Please, don't take my husband."

John was stunned. They walked across the yard, among the posts and the chains. The paraphernalia of the tortures they could do in public. Was this what he had been to Maggie? This woman had an even lighter complexion. John expected to see bruises on her face, but he saw none. She kept up with the soldiers, asking for their mercy.

The sergeant turned to face her, blocking her as the other two soldiers led Lumpkin away. "Miss, if we leave him here, those boys are going to kill him. Do you understand?"

"No, they won't. They know me and the way of things. Please."

"That's enough, Mary," Lumpkin said, quietly. "You best go up to Philadelphia with the girls when you can. Don't you worry about me."

John had to turn away when Lumpkin kissed Mary before the soldiers dragged him away.

He walked out into Birch Alley then across Franklin Street and onto 15<sup>th</sup>. Some of the buildings on the west side of 15<sup>th</sup> Street had burned. The ground sloped upwards here and the flames had come down. The valley was thick with smoke, but it was more the smoke of coal fires, not conflagration. There was no breeze this low and the air hung wet and thick, with no break in the human stench.

John stood before an auction house. “Walker & Kent” proclaimed the painted letters above the tall arched doorway. It was a three-story brick building. The roof had burned and the top floor was charred. John composed the image: the plate would be vertical, the camera angled sharply upwards at the half-ruined building. Behind and above it lay ruins, a forest of naked chimneys. John retrieved his camera and took the shot. As always, he felt disappointed.

As he looked at the building upside-down through the camera, John thought he saw a face appear in the window. It was just for a moment, then was gone. Enough to cause a blur, or perhaps not even leave a trace.

John entered the building, calling out. There was no answer. Rats scattered to the corners. The ground floor was bare, with only a few scraps of crops rotted black and nearly unidentifiable. Smoke hung in the empty air beneath the fifteen-foot ceiling. John went upstairs. Part of the ceiling had caved in, and light spilled down from the burned-out roof. Some of the steps between the second and third floors were broken. John walked out onto the third floor and a plank collapsed beneath him. He tumbled forward, falling hard against a foot-thick beam. He turned his head at the last second before impact and the beam slammed into his shoulder. His arm went numb. He shook it and tried catch his breath. There was a strange shadow in the light from the broken ceiling above him. John looked up and lost his breath again when he saw a charred human arm hanging from a chain.

His first instinct was to run downstairs. Leave this horror to the men whose job it was to dealt with it. He did not know whose job it was. He was here and there were human obligations, even to the dead. John swallowed bile and approached the stairs. He crawled up the steps, using his hands to test the strength of the flame-seared wood before trusting his weight to it. At the top, he came to a trapdoor sealed with a padlock. John shoved hard against it, then pounded.



Finally his fist broke through the charred wood and he broke the pieces away enough to climb through. The corpse lay beside the massive hole in the floor. The corpse was burned black as charcoal. It was only the size that led John to think it was a man.

Iron chains had held the body—the man—down, as the roof burned above him and then collapsed. The shackles were bolted into the bricks, which rose into stepped gables. This had been an attic. John wondered why the man had been chained here. And left here. There was nothing short of murder he could see deserving such a death. Maybe not even murder.

John stared at the body until it became merely an array of light. Image and shadow. Shapes for the camera to capture in stark black and white. He could not, now, stand for it to be anything else. He began to feel dizzy and sat down on the charred boards. Thoughts began to flood in him. John felt enraged, but there was nothing he could strike against. If he found the man who had done this, he imagined he might beat him to death. But his true hatred was for himself.

Even a worthless wretch who made his living running a slave jail, torturing his wife's people, had done right by her and married the woman. John did not know how this was possible, as far as he knew it was explicitly forbidden by law, but those were the laws of a defeated nation. Who knew what was possible now. Yet he had thrown it all away. Of course Maggie had been the one to leave him. But whatever he had done, or not done, must have compelled her to. He had not stood by her. He had been too much of a damned coward to acknowledge her or his children. Certainly this was the way of most men—but he did not judge himself by the standards of ordinary men. And so now this torturer outdoes him. And it is too late.

He deserved this. Maggie might not have known, but he had come into a fortune as a young man by selling off the slaves he had inherited. True, he had not sent them off to be sold at

auction. He had sold them to his friends and relatives. A few to mere acquaintances that he took to be of good character. He tried to keep families together, at least when he knew of them. But he had washed his hands of them and did not know what became of them, for the most part. Some he had still seen on visits to those friends, before the war. But they had aged into strangers. Others could just as easily ended up here, corralled like animals. Sold off whenever their masters needed to convert human beings into capital.

He wanted to write to Maggie. Plead for her forgiveness. Swear he would honor her. Support the children, if she still wouldn't have her. But John realized he had no way to reach out to her. She could have stayed in Albemarle, or she could have followed the army. Even if she were here in Richmond, among the thousands, he would not find her. She could have gone north, to Washington. To Philadelphia. To Boston. To New York. There was no way for him to know. And he was a moving target himself. He would follow the battles until there were no battles, and that would be soon. What would he do? He had never really supported himself in his life. His art and business ventures never paid for themselves. He'd lived his life on the backs of others.

"What should I have done?" he asked the corpse, as if the man could answer. "I loved her. How did she not know that?"

There was a creak and a groan. A chill crept up John's back and he almost laughed at himself. He did not believe in such foolish things as ghosts. The sound was the groaning of wood, and it came from the stairs. Another footstep. These were flesh. They were men, in boots. Even in this conquered city there was reason to fear.

John looked up to see the barrel of a Springfield rifle pointed straight at him. "Hands up!" the black soldier shouted. He was a big man, very dark, with a thick neck and a square jaw.

There was another man with him, thinner and medium-skinned with some gray in his side-whiskers.

John's hands flew into the air in the universal sign of surrender. His spine tensed when the big man cocked the rifle. He realized how this must look. "I didn't have anything to do with this. I swear. I swear to God."

"Ain't that a likely story," the older man said. He had his gun on him too, pointing it from the hip instead of the shoulder.

"Please. I just came here to see...I didn't expect this. I have no idea how this happened."

"Somebody fucking burnt the man is how it happened," the big man said, spitting on the floor. "You think we're slow?"

John still knelt on the charred planks with his hands up. His hands were cold and the chill was going down his back. He could almost feel the shock-cold of the sword across his shoulder blades again. Sweat beaded on his forehead and his temples pounded. He could hear the blood in his ears. It occurred to him these men could kill him. He was a Southern man in a captured city. Sneaking around, maybe looting. And there was a body. A slave, murdered. It was clear he had not done this. It had to be clear. But they could kill him. No one else would see it. They could have their revenge for whatever white men had done to them.

John loved the idea of freedom. But revolutions never went well for those who had been the oppressors.

"Please. My name is John Moon. I am a photographer. I came here, from the mountains, with Sheridan's division." He dared to turn slightly to better look up at the men.

"Please. Let me bring my camera up here. I can show the world what they did to him."

“I believe him,” a hoarse female voice said quietly. A young black woman stood behind the soldiers. She stepped forward and the men lowered their guns, though only slightly. She was gaunt and had a rag tied about her head, covering her right eye. What he could see of her hair was cropped short. Her clothes were in rags and there were sores on her wrists, as if from being bound.

“Girl, you brought us here. Saying he might be one of them traders come back.” The big man spat on the ground again and shifted a wad of tobacco into his cheek.

“Well he ain’t. But I think I know this man. I’ve heard of him, at least.” The one-eyed woman stared at John. “Are you the John Moon that Wallis Reed worked for?”

A hope stirred in John’s breast. Maggie’s brother. “I am.”

“He’s a friend of mine. Always said you were good to him. Considering.”

John’s guilt flooded back with the ‘considering.’

“Still, no way you’re bringing that camera up here,” the older man said, “This dead man here ain’t nothing for you to put on display. Like he’s one of Barnum’s freaks or something.”

“So you’ve been to New York, then, to his museum of curiosities, I take it?” John said. The soldier stepped past him, ignoring his feeble attempt at small talk.

The soldier took off his forage cap. The gray in his hair extended up into his temples and the crown of his head was bald. He bent over the corpse and set the cap atop its head. “You’ve done your duty for freedom, too, son,” he said. He stood and saluted the body. Suddenly, he pointed his rifle down at the chains that still bound its right wrist. He fired, close to the shackle. The chain burst and a link of it flew out. John had to duck away from it. The soldier reloaded and fired again. John and big man and the young woman all flinched. John’s ears rang.

“His name was Elijah,” the girl said, nodding towards the corpse. “Or at least that is what the traders called him, when they bothered with names.”

“Elijah,” the older soldier repeated.

“Poor bastard,” the big man said.

“Don’t you be calling him that. Shake your hams and come back here with a stretcher.”

The older man wore a corporal’s chevrons on his sleeves. The big private complied.

They all stared at the corpse again. It was the girl who broke the sudden silence. “They left all of us. Most of us were just in ropes, or penned up. Helped each other get away. But nobody could get to Elijah.” The girl’s single eye fixed on John. She spoke matter-of-factly, like there was nothing at all shocking about this tale.

“Sweet Jesus,” the corporal said.

John looked down at Elijah. He tried to picture how the man would have looked in life. As an artist he had studied anatomy, had drawn skulls. Learned how the bones fit beneath the skin. “It’s incomprehensible. To leave a man to burn to death—”

“You’re a Southerner,” the corporal interrupted. “You know damn well they don’t think of him as no man.”

John sighed and nodded. He turned back to the girl. “Do you have any idea where the traders went?”

“They just lit out, South I guess.” She shrugged. “I already said my piece to the captain.”

The private returned, carrying a folded stretcher. He unfolded it on the floor next to the body. The cloth between the poles was almost entirely stained with blood. There were holes in fabric. He and the corporal very gently lifted the corpse onto it. Bits of the charred body flaked off in a shower of ashes. The soldiers bore the body between them gently, almost reverently.

They held it level even as they carried it down the damaged stairs. The sergeant, at the head, carefully stepped down the stairs backwards.

John and the girl followed them together. After a moment, she whispered, “We heard him scream. Even when we were out in the street.” The girl’s voice was calm and low. As if she was speaking about something perfectly ordinary. Maybe all that had befallen her made this seem ordinary. Or maybe she just had to pretend that it was to blunt the hurt.

And there was absolutely nothing John could say to that. His words stuck in the thickness that came into his throat.

It was later that the girl came to his wagon. He had been inside developing pictures and when he blinked out into the daylight he found her staring at it, at his name painted on its side, as if the tale he told the soldiers was finally made true.

“So how did you know Wallis?” John said. He wondered if she would find it insulting for him to put himself on a first name basis with the man. Too much still a master than a friend.

“I knew him in the army,” she said.

“Oh. I suppose you...travelled with them.” John came out of the back of the wagon, fully distracted now from his glass plates and chemicals. He did not want to say more. She could have a laundress, or just one of the contrabands. Or a prostitute. He had seen plenty of them trailing along. Even some so young as this. Many men preferred those and used them up.

“I served with him.”

“What?” John looked at her. Of course that might explain the eye. Still, a woman.

“You disguised yourself?” John had not fully realized that this staple of adventure stories and Shakespeare happened in life. He had seen some soldiers who seemed too beardless and too slight, but he thought they were just young boys. There’d been rumors in Scottsville that one of

the Baker girls had run off with the Confederates. John tried to imagine trying to keep such secrets in the crude world of soldiers.

“Yes. Lost my eye at the Crater and got left for dead. Been trying to catch up with him ever since.”

“And you think I can help you find him.” John sighed. It was true that he could use some help. And the girl could be his way back to Maggie. But to convince her, he would have to give her more hope than he could honestly provide. “I did know Wallis and his sister very well.”

“So I heard.” There was a tinge of judgment in this and John wondered how much Wallis had told her.

“I’ve lost touch with them,” John admitted. “But I would like to see them again.” He tried to keep his words as neutral as hers had been, when she had described the horrors she had seen. But some hurts did not give themselves over to such numbing. Since Maggie had left him, with the children, he knew that well. So he turned his attention back to her. “What name did he know you by?”

“Adam Brown. But my real name is Jenny.” She crossed her arms and looked at him again, appraisingly. “Have to say, I’d like to get hold of some men’s clothes again and go on that way. Just...feels more right, now. After everything,” she said. John did not want to think what, in the slave jail, ‘everything’ meant.

“Well, I could use an assistant. I’ll teach you what I can of the trade.” John knew it would be weeks, at least—if ever—that she would trust him in the dark confines of the wagon. And he wondered what advantage she might have in framing the shots, already seeing the world in flat of things.

Later that afternoon, the president came to the ruins.

Lincoln was standing in the flat bed of a wagon. He was two blocks away. John ducked back into his darkened wagon and felt the pool of the nitrate and dipped one of the glass plates in. It was chipped on one corner but otherwise intact, the sticky collodion still coating it. He cursed as the chipped edge nicked his finger as he fitted it into the plate holder. He emerged, blinking in the light, nervous hands shaking as he fitted the readied plate into the camera. One block now. He adjusted the tripod. He crouched in wait.

Lincoln looked old and weary. He waved to the crowd. He stepped down from the wagon and walked among them, towering over most. Everyone was moving too much. People cried out like it was Christ come again. John adjusted the camera and removed the lens cap only briefly, hoping it was enough.

John gently carried the plate to his wagon. Jenny had stood on the wagon's seat to see and was waving her new workman's cap at the president as he left. John bathed the plate in developer and then in the fixer, careful as the fixer was full of cyanide. He washed the negative in water and laid it to dry. When it had, John exposed it to the sun. He let it lay on the paper for hours, hoping to offset the short exposure. The print when it came was a disappointment. "Sometimes this happens," he said to Jenny as they looked over the image.

The blur of a tall pale man amid the joyous masses. The blur of waving arms, silent shouts of Hallelujah. Ruins behind him, the tumbled bricks stark. The blur of a moment and movement. Destruction and joy. John sat staring at it for a long time a week and a half later, when word came of the assassination.



## VII.

Night was coming on when Maggie saw the house.

She had left the contraband camp with her children that morning. There had been a vicious fight between two of the freedmen. One of them had been stabbed to death and the other had been hanged by the few soldiers left there to keep order. It was a coarse place. Maggie loved her people but she wondered if it was more the idea of them. Most of the contrabands were field slaves and she saw how they looked at her, and at her children. Always there were divisions. Maggie tried her best to make friends but many of the women were cold to her and the men were a little too friendly.

The house wasn't much: a cabin made of split logs—cedar, from the scent of them. No light shown from its small windows and no smoke came from the stone chimney. Part of the low-sloping roof seemed to have caved in. It had been empty for a long time. Night was coming on. Jacob was asleep and heavy in her arms and Helen was lagging behind and whining.

"Come along, child," Maggie said to her, taking her small hand. "This place will do for now." The girl pulled against her and cried out when Maggie hauled her along. Maggie was not rough enough to hurt her, but still. The child had a will but she was a child and Maggie was her mother. That was one of the few things that was still clear. Maggie wondered about the choices she made as she took her children through the threshold. There could be animals here. Or people who had become like animals, living in abandoned places and scrounging what they could. *Is that what we've become?*

Birds had taken over through the collapsed part of the roof. The hole was jagged and roughly a yard square. The rain had come in and rank mildew overlaid the sweet cedar. That half of the cabin was a mess, but Maggie guessed it could be repaired, though she did not have the muscle or the means. In the good half, there was a plain square table with four ladderback chairs around it. An empty tin plate sat off-center. Dust was everywhere and mouse and squirrel tracks ran through it. The ladder to the sleeping loft seemed sound, and Maggie settled her children on the ground floor before climbing it. Her lantern swung as she climbed, making the shadows sway like drunk, violent men. There were rough mattresses here, stuffed with horsehair. The slanting roof was too low for Maggie to stand. She crouched and touched the ceiling, testing it. The rafters looked steady. The hole was at the far end, and a draft blew in from it. Maggie shook out the mattress and beat at the lumps. It reminded her of the canvas-covered straw pallet she had slept on beneath the Price's stairs for most of her life. The soft sound of the other women breathing, the smell of them. Maggie missed it for a moment, the tiny comfort of it, though she remembered how she hated it. It was a closet, a horse's stall, not a place for human beings. She had been a slave and had been put away where it was convenient, where they could wake her whenever they needed. Too many nights she had marched bleary-eyed and barefoot on the oak floors that her back and knees still ached from polishing. The porcelain chamber pot was cool in her hands and the human stink of their shit had filled her nostrils.

Maggie bedded down her children and sang them to sleep. She laid her arm over them and tried to shelter them with her body, from the draft and from the roof if the worst came.

She awoke to the sun pouring through the broken roof. Jacob and Helen were still asleep, stirring in their dreams. Maggie climbed down and went outside, towards a storage shed. It was

there that she saw them. Wooden crosses, set in a clearing only about ten yards away. One was large and the four others were smaller. They stood all in a row, next to three field stones that marked other graves. Maggie came over to them. They were made of narrow boards and the names were roughly carved. “Kitty Crawford - 1864,” read the largest one. The others were “Ben,” “Emily,” “Anna,” and the last, “Baby Boy.” All had died the same year as their mother. The wood of the crosses was rotting and they would soon fall apart.

Maggie shivered. They had come to a house of death. She wondered what ill air they had breathed in the cabin, what sickness might lurk on her children’s bed.

Jacob was running towards her. There was a wild, defiant grin on his face. “Mama!” he cackled as he grabbed hold of Maggie’s skirt.

“Jacob, how did you get down from that loft?” Maggie imagined her clumsy toddler trying to negotiate the steps, spaced half as far apart as he was tall. “Helen, what did you do?”

Helen grinned at her from the doorway. “Just helped him down. Went down first and held his bottom the whole time. He’s pretty damn heavy.” She giggled.

“Don’t you say damn. And both of you could have cracked your heads. Don’t try these things when I’m not around. At least til we get more used to this place.” Maggie realized she was admitting they would stay. She did not know where else they could go. This place was theirs, at least until the bereaved father showed up. She wondered if he would. Most likely he was a soldier. Had he even heard? Maggie did not care to think of that day. Somehow it felt better to think that he had been killed, and rejoined his family that way.

Maggie found an axe and wedge in the shed. There were rusty saws and a cracked leather mule harness. There was home-canned stew and preserves and salt pork. There were whole logs for the fire, and Maggie spent much of the afternoon learning how to split them.

Twice the axe bit into the ground less than an inch from her foot. Her palms blistered, and the blisters broke. But that evening they had a fire in the hearth and stew in the pot. Maggie stirred Kitty Crawford's chicken stew as it simmered slowly, and life returned the broken cabin of ghosts.

## VIII.

April and May, 1865

John found out the fate of his paintings a month after news of the surrender at Appomattox came.

He was ecstatic about the peace. There were parties among the Northerners in Richmond. Jenny's mood brightened and she seemed to be standing tall. The freed slaves had a dance and John saw her there, in her Adam Brown disguise, twirling around a girl about her age. John watched from the mouth of a tavern as they danced in the street. Many girls seemed interested in this boy with the dashing eyepatch who acted like a gentleman. Some of the Union soldiers had joined the dancing, and some of these were white. The fiddler was sawing the strings off his bow with his enthusiasm and most of the notes were true. John walked closer, pulled in by the music and the happiness. A beautiful black woman approached him and he let himself dance with her. Find the rhythm with her body and smell her sweat. Maybe that was what he needed. Hair of the dog. But she was not Maggie and every moment blasted this to him. Dancing was all they did.

When the first burst of joy faded, John wondered just what the hell he would do with himself. He could no longer follow along, documenting war. He didn't know when the Southerners would have the money to support such luxuries as pictures of themselves. John's heart was drawing him west. To the mountains and Maggie. And if he couldn't have her, he would move beyond. Lose himself in the frontier. He imagined deserts, stretching off to infinity in the mirage-waves of the blazing sun. But he hated even the summer's heat in Virginia. And

the rattlesnakes that lurked even in the settled Appalachians. He was a soft city man. A tenderfoot. But at least he knew that.

And so John found himself walking along the docks at the Deep Bottom landing in Richmond. Most of the docks were destroyed. There should be a forest of ships' masts in the river. The ships were few, and most were steamers. There was an ironclad gunboat moored alongside them. John thought the riveted metal ship with its round gun turret and its hull that barely rose above the waterline looked both sinister and absurd. It seemed impossible that it could float. But he had grown used to the impossible becoming real.

He did not book passage to New York or Boston. He could not afford to. When he returned the boarding house in Church Hill—the only residential part of the city that was mostly undamaged—he almost ignored the letter. But Miss Bradshaw who ran the house said it had come by courier. The envelope had his name, but no address, and had British postage.

John's mouth gaped open as he read it. His paintings had sold in London for 7,200 pounds. That would be about \$35,000. He could live on that for years. He could buy his own shop, or rebuild the one in Scottsville. Or he could travel. Make a new start. Go back to Europe and see how far civilization had come. Leave this war and its wreckage behind.

John walked through the streets, practically skipping. He had a future, at last. Again. He made his way through the ruins. It was still a city of blackened foundations and forlorn chimneys standing like tombstones. Empty windows in the roofless brick buildings were like the holes in a skull. People begged him for change. For food. A veteran in ragged Confederate butternut and an empty sleeve held out his remaining hand. John, feeling flush and generous even before his money had actually arrived, placed a silver dollar in the maimed man's palm. The ex-soldier offered him God's blessings in what sounded like a Georgia drawl and smiled

wide, showing that he was missing half his front teeth. The man might have been twenty-five. John kept walking. There were only two more of those silver dollars in his pocket, but they might have been infinite. They would be.

His thoughts turned from decorating the elegant townhouse in his head to just how much he might be able to help people. That soldier had no way to support himself except begging. Perhaps he could get the man back to his family, if he had one. John could also help fund the freedman's schools. Buy Jenny a glass eye, if she wanted one. He had the thought of offering food relief to the blacks and whites together. Letting the poor mingle together and discover each other's suffering and how they had both been exploited by the plantation elite.

And there was no guilt with this money. Yes, it was his and so many had nothing. That had always torn at his heart. But he had earned this fortune. Granted, he knew at least half of it was not for his art itself, but by the speculation that the war would kill him. He wondered how many collectors might be unloading his cherished works to take their loss. But this windfall well exceeded what he had earned from selling the slaves from his father's estate. There was no more blood money and the guilt of it to chase him into revolutions. Instead, he would do what he could to change this world, here. He could make a world where his children would be equal. Where he and Maggie could love each other, openly, as man and wife. If she would have him. There was a future and it was as infinite as humanity's imagination. John felt, at forty, that he had finally come of age.

IX.

August, 1865

The school had been a hospital during the war. Maggie could only imagine the horrors that had been there. She had seen the men brought in through town, and smelled them. But she could imagine the suffering even more clearly from the letter that her brother Wallis had written to her last year, after he had been wounded in Petersburg.

*You won't believe this place, Maggie. I feel like I shouldn't tell you. They keep sawdust on the floor to soak up the blood but it's not enough. I been feeling sorry for myself but I don't so much now. They had me feed a man soup today. I know that don't sound like much. But Maggie he didn't have no arms. Young fellow from up in New York. Name of Stratton. Handsome for a white man. Sounds wrong to say because it has 'hands' and he don't. Both arms off at the shoulder. I don't know how it don't kill him right off. He said he didn't want the soup, said he wanted to starve.*

*I said I couldn't blame him because it was damn awful soup, all water and bones. But I told him he didn't want to starve. It was slow. You know how them damn Prices didn't feed us and how that hurt so all you could think on was your belly tying itself all up in knots. I said he should go on and live, even though it would be hard. So he cussed me. Said he would've taken it in the face, easy. Wouldn't be so damn helpless then.*

*So I told him if he would trade his arms for my black face. He didn't have no answer to that. No surprise, that.*

*I will be well soon and back with the 23<sup>rd</sup> and we will whip them goddamn Rebels and good. Still I can't help thinking about that poor man. I had to feed him like a little baby. I'll bet*



*little Jacob can do more for hisself now than man ever will, now. I hope he's got a wife or somebody to take care of him but Lord help that woman.*

*Still, even that better than being dead. Maggie, I lost so many friends here. Some like brothers to me, or more, maybe. I don't think I will ever get over that hurt.*

Maggie had this letter folded in the bottom of her handbag, almost forgotten. Until the teacher asked her to read something aloud to her, so that she could measure her ability. It seemed to fit, somehow. The building was surrounded with a red stucco wall that had earned it the name “Mudwall.” The house itself looked like some kind of castle, as if it was from one of John’s paintings of knights. There was a creepiness that made Maggie imagine it having a dungeon, but it was a school and the air smelled sharp and clean with lye soap and fresh paint.

The teacher smiled at her. Miss Anna Gardner—she was emphatic on the Miss—was an older lady, with shallow lines radiating from her blue eyes and making parentheses around her thin lips. Her hair was an even blend of light brown and gray, and it was tied up in a braided bun. “Very good, Maggie. You not only read clearly, but with expression. While I’m sure this letter is very meaningful to you—and I’ll be happy to welcome your brother as a student, too, when he comes home—I would be interested to hear what your thoughts are. Do you have something that you’ve composed? Maybe a letter to him that you’re working on?”

“I...I haven’t really had much time. For that, I mean. With the children and all.” Maggie’s mind raced. She had not expected this. “I could try something now if you need me to.”

“Of course. I’ll be back in just a moment.” Miss Gardner smiled. Sunlight from the window glared from her spectacles for a moment as she rose from her seat.

Maggie took a sheet of paper and a pen and ink from the supply laid out at the front of the room. She went back to the rough table where she had been sitting. In the back of the room there were children and adults reciting the alphabet. They made a song of it. Tiny high voices mingled with deep. Her daughter Helen was with them and Maggie kept glancing back at her. Proud smiles flashed between them. Next to Helen was Delilah. They had seen each other in town in the past several months and become friends again. It was Delilah who helped her fix up the cabin and who looked after the children half the time. Any awkwardness about that time with the soldier was forgotten. Or at least Delilah had seemed to forget. Maggie put it out of her mind. She wanted to think it was something the woman had chosen.

The paper was blank before her. Maggie dipped the steel pen in the inkwell. Her hand hovered over the page. How to begin. She had overfilled the pen and a drop of the ink spilled out. Miss Gardner would not like that. Maggie had spent most of her life getting out spots of one kind or the other. Cleaning away all that was soiled or imperfect. The paper was ruined before she had even begun. But that cleared the way for her. Maggie's pen scratched quickly across the paper. She could not make her letters flow together like they should, except for her signature that she had practiced over and over again. So she printed, like a book. Like her childhood friend Alonzo had, when he was a little boy reading nursery rhymes and she was a girl, almost a woman, following along with him. Who could be beaten or killed for reading even Mother Goose with him.

Maggie was so absorbed in the passions of her words, feelings that she had thought she had long since buried, that she did not realize Miss Gardner hovered over her until the woman cleared her throat. "Maggie, may I see what you have so far?"

Maggie's hand quivered as she passed the page to her. It was not meant for her. But the teacher was the one here to read it. Maggie knew of no way for it to ever reach John. Perhaps that was why she could let loose her feelings.

She had addressed it only to his name. She had no place she could send it. She did not open with the usual pleasantries but launched right in:

*John I hope if you ever get this that you understand. I did love you. I'm starting to see that now. I am on my own and it is so hard. I see what I can do. I put a house back together with my own hands. It is not much of a house, not like we had. But the children are safe and thank God, they're happy. For maybe the first time, at least really. Jacob is getting to look like you. He will be a fine-looking man. I hope you don't think I only loved you because you are handsome and the things you gave me. What you gave me was a way of thinking about myself. Or maybe you didn't give it to me but the way things were with you, I could start to see it. I feel like maybe I was half free before freedom came. I miss you. More than I knew. Maybe years from now it will be good for us. It will take a long time. People is hard in they hate. But we will see our children grow up together. We will make them brave and strong and smart. I need you. But I need myself too. I*

"This is very interesting," Miss Gardner said, peering at the letter through spectacles set low on her nose. Maggie trembled. It was just too raw. Things she had made herself not think about for so long. And here she was giving the voice of her heart to a stranger. To be judged, picked apart, graded. Maggie realized the pen was still in her hand and she set it down on the table. More ink splattered out. The table was full of scratches and cuts. They pulled at the lines of her letters, made them bend. The ink blot was a little splash like a drop of blood. Maggie did not want to think of what might have happened on that table.

Miss Gardner set the letter down and removed her spectacles and folded them on top of it. She sighed, and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I don't know who this man John is, but at least I know who he is to you. I suppose he is one of those Southerners, isn't he? Did he own you?"

"He's from here. And, yes, he's a white man." Maggie said this softly and with hesitation. She knew that people knew. She had seen how some of the grown students had looked at her when she came in. Seen the judgment in their eyes. "But he never owned me, ma'am." Maggie did not want to get into the whole issue of the renting. She did not think Miss Gardner would see any difference and, really, what was there?

"From what I see here I don't think you would like what I'd have to say to him. But clearly, he is not here. And it is you who are, and are here to learn and develop yourself and your abilities." Miss Gardner put her spectacles back on and looked at Maggie through them. She reached out and put her hand atop Maggie's ink-stained hand on the table. Her hand was dry and cool. "Maggie, I come from Nantucket. It's an island where most of the men are sailors, as you may have heard. Many of them are whalers. They go on voyages around the world hunting the poor, mighty whales, for years at time. And so the women who are married go for years without them. Much like so many women have had to, now, with this war. And like the war, many of the men do not come home."

"I think John will, sometime. Though I don't know if he'll be coming to back to me. Besides, I'm the one that left him."

"Good," Miss Gardner said with a smile. She had crowded, yellow teeth, but she had all of them. Rare for a woman her age. Maggie wondered if that showed the kind of strength in her, or if it was just from not having children. "Because I'm not just here to teach slaves, Maggie.

I'm here to teach citizens. I'm here to teach women, like you, who are bright and strong-minded, to be teachers. And to be independent. You can earn your own living. I've made it to be fifty without ever having to rely on a man. You don't *need* him. Let it be a choice you make when you can stand as his equal."

"Amen to that," Maggie said, "but I don't know if I can wait."

[From this point, the excerpts are no longer sequential. The chapter numbers reflect their relative position in the novel, which has twenty-one chapters.]

## XI.

September 1865

Maggie knew the soldier who had owned the cabin would return. But summer was fading into autumn. The broken Rebels limped home and stewed in their bitterness. Once when Maggie was walking to school, she'd passed a legless man sitting on a barrel out in front of his shack. It was in worse shape than her cabin had been in when she'd first found it. He'd shouted out at her, "Nigger whore!" She almost felt sorry for him. Almost. A hateful son of a bitch was a hateful son of a bitch, despite what pieces he might have been missing. There was laundry hanging from the crooked porch with baby clothes on it. A little toddler girl around Jacob's age waddled after Maggie chanting "Nigger nigger nigger."

Maggie found another route to school that avoided that dirty little shack. It added at least a quarter of a mile to her walk, if not longer. And more blisters on her feet.

Now that the days had shortened, it was late dusk when she came home. The sun was setting gold in a smeared purpled sky. The door to her cabin was closed. Her children did not run out into the yard to welcome her. There was an eerie silence, like there was no one here at all.

"Maggie," came Delilah's whisper from the grove of young pines and dogwoods that grew close by the left side of the cabin. "Get over here and watch out. He come back."

“Who?” Maggie whispered as she joined her. Delilah had hidden Helen and Jacob behind the trunk of a thick, gnarled oak. Helen stretched her hands out on each side of the tree and Maggie pressed them down. Gently. She could not risk a sound.

“Him. Mr. Crawford.” Delilah’s head angled towards the row of crosses.

A man was bent over them, weeping. Maggie could hear his sobs and with the fading gold of the sun on him she saw that his back jerked almost as much as a man being whipped. A broad-brimmed slouch hat with a dented crown hid his face in shadow, which blended into his long dark beard. He dug his fingers into the ground like he could pierce them in deep enough to again touch his wife and his children.

Maggie waited. The man swayed back and forth. The light was fading. He was here at her home and he would claim it if she let him. She knew it was still his by law. By law, she might as well have stolen it. But it was hers now. And she would fight for what was hers.

Maggie stepped out of the trees. Delilah pulled back at her dress but Maggie had chosen.

“Mr. Crawford,” Maggie said, perhaps too softly. Then after a moment, “Henry.” She had figured out his first name from scraps of letters she’d found in the house. His wife had loved him very much. “I’m so sorry.”

Henry was a big-boned man but he was thin and it looked strange. Like a starving horse did. He did not look up at her. “It was the only thing that got me through it. Gettysburg and that goddamn Yankee prison. Just to see her again. Hold them and see how they’d grown.” He touched the crosses, caressing them like he would a woman.

Maggie looked at him. His large hands were calloused and strong. She looked at them so as not to have to look into his eyes. If it were her own children who lay buried there, she did not know if she could go on. If she had the means, in the shock of it she could see killing

herself. Or someone else, if she saw them somehow responsible. As he might, somehow, see her as responsible. She could not know what he was thinking. Because a hurt like that goes beyond all thinking; it would be a pain like a baby's wordless wail with no answer to its need.

"I've been using this house, Mr. Crawford, and I understand if you want me to move along now." Maggie said this low and slow. She kept her eyes down, perhaps overly respectful. She could not live with this man here, with his pain. What it might make him do. But she spoke as though if she spoke slowly enough, he would still be able to reason. "But just let me get my things. Maybe stay the night. If you'd rather me and my children stay in the shed, well then I understand that."

"Why would I want you stay in the shed—" he said as he looked up at her. The glare came over his face then. "You goddamn nigger."

He might as well have hit her. She had heard that word all of her days. She could avoid the shack of the legless soldier and his family, but not the word and the bitter hate that it meant. Maggie knew that some part of these people hated themselves for being defeated, for losing the power that some of them had never even had, but of course they couldn't admit this to themselves and so they took it out her race. During the war, Maggie had thought that come freedom, that word would go away, just like the word slave. It would become just a word in the dictionary, a word of the past without any force behind it. Of course she did not really believe this. But there was a rawness to the word now, it being lashed at a free woman.

Maggie had the pistol behind her back and kept it there. For now. She trembled. The shaking fear crept up from her knees and through her bones, to her hands holding the cold metal of the gun. She worried that it could go off. "I know you're speaking out of your hurt, mister. I can't even know what you must be going through, now."



“Fuck you!” he shouted. He made as if he’d charge at her. But he didn’t. “Took everything from me!” he bellowed as he suddenly kicked at the crosses. In his rage he tore them down. Ripped the names of his wife and his children from the earth. Kitty. Emily. Ben. Anna. Baby boy. All were strewn in the dirt where they were buried. Henry broke the wooden boards into splinters and they became letters instead of names. Then he picked up one of the pieces and he did charge at her.

He was fast and he was strong. Maggie barely had time to bring around the pistol. He struck her in the head with the board. But the strength of his blow just made the dry wood split apart. Splinters flew at her face and tangled in her hair. Still, Maggie flinched, and as she did, the pistol fired. It thundered in her ears and they rang. Everything else was silent except his cry, which felt distant and muffled. He was still on his feet. Her shot must have struck the air beside him. But he still cried out. He screamed to sky. Even in Maggie’s scorched hearing it was a deep, animal roar. His fury and despair. His fear. He ran away like an animal into the forest, becoming a beast, a wild cry and a rustle of leaves in the dark wood.

### XIII.

November 1865

It was glooming to dusk. Things rustled in the woods and Maggie kept a tighter grip on her knapsack of books. John's old pistol was in there too, wrapped up in a cloth. She could not have its grease spoiling her schoolbooks. The creature moving through the trees seemed the size of a man up to no good. She thought of Henry Crawford again and wondered if he'd returned. Armed, to take his vengeance. "Who's there?" Maggie found herself shouting to winter-bare trees and dead logs. Footsteps crumpled the frost and rustled the dead leaves beneath it.

The man stood before her, a shadow in the night. His breath clouded the air. "Maggie, it's me. Wallis." Her brother stepped into a patch of moonlight.

They embraced and Maggie let herself cry.

Of course he had changed. There was a scar on his right cheek, almost straight down it. It was pale as his palms and stood up a bit from his skin. Maggie could feel that he'd grown stronger. Wallis's bones stood out more in his face. He'd grown a beard. It was rough stubble along his jaw and longer on his lip and chin. He still wore his uniform pants, infantry sky-blue and patched at the knees. He had on a threadbare, dusty black wool coat that looked like it might be older than he was. And while he still carried a soldier's backpack and bedroll, Maggie saw no sign of a gun.

Wallis stepped back, breaking the embrace. The warmth of him faded quickly in the cold air. "It's good to come home, Maggie. Lord, it's been too long." There was a new depth and rasp to his voice. It was strange for Maggie to see him as a grown man like this. She always carried the image of him as a boy in her mind.

“It has.” Maggie had so many words that could have burst out of her, but the distance she felt between them stilled her tongue. They walked along the forest road, long silent moments passing between them. “You stopped writing. I was worried...”

“I was tired of needing help with the letters. And, well, I was tired,” he said, with a shrug.

“I was tired of never hearing from you.” Maggie tried not to nag with this, but it could not come out any other way.

“I couldn’t write about some things. Can’t hardly think about them, now,” Wallis said, softly. “But I can’t not think about them.”

“Tell me,” Maggie said. “If you can’t tell your sister—”

“No. It’s not something a woman has any business with.” Wallis’s sigh cut the edge of Maggie’s anger at this, though barely. “What I wrote you was already too much.”

“You think I’ve gotten weak now since you’ve been gone? I’ve had to do for myself ever since I left John.”

“Must say I’m happy you finally left Moon. He was decent to us sometimes but I swear, there is no trusting the whites.”

“Miss Gardner who runs the school is good to us.”

“Yankees don’t count.” Wallis smirked, and for a while the light she knew was in his eyes. It was a boy’s smile.

“And this coming from a Yankee soldier,” Maggie teased.

“Hell, in some of the battles, the white boys didn’t count for nothing. We could’ve whipped the Rebs ourselves if they’d have let us.” Wallis stopped for a moment and set down his pack. He fished out a lantern.

“Next you’ll say you could have beaten them all by yourself,” Maggie said, “not that I doubt you.”

Wallis laughed. He lit the lantern and then took out a clay pipe and lit this too. “I’m not that full of myself yet, sister.” He exhaled the smoke through his nose. He never used to smoke before. At least the pipe smelled better than John’s cigars. “Still, it’s going to be hard coming back here. They made me a sergeant when they sent us to Texas after the surrender. Man can get used to giving orders.” He shrugged, then hefted his pack on again and moved along.

“I suppose he does,” Maggie said. She knew that was the way of most men, not just soldiers.

“So you say you’re in school? Wouldn’t think you’d need it, as good as you got with reading and all.” The lantern swung with his steps. He carried it low, over the trail. Maggie knew how its light must carry over the mountain. But even if they were seen, they could see what, or who, might be coming at them.

“It’s a school for teachers. Miss Gardner says she’s going to set up something official soon, get real diplomas and such for us.” Maggie walked faster to keep up with Wallis’s long, quick strides. He walked like he knew the way, like men always did. “Wallis, I mean to do something for the race. For my children. All our children.”

Wallis looked at her. He pulled on his pipe and its glow surged, then faded. “That’s good, Maggie. You know, I’m proud of you. Though, I’d say you’re too damn pretty to be a schoolmarm.” He smiled.

“And just what do you mean by that?”

“Well, you know how it is. Your Miss Gardner, I’ll bet she’s a dried up old hag, ain’t she?”

“I wouldn’t say that. She is...older. Wiser. Fine to live without a man.”

“True, a woman *can* get along just fine without a man. And I suppose between the two, I’d rather—”

“Don’t you go off on John again. Despite everything he was a good man, and good to us.”

“All right, he was better than most. For a master.” He said this like he was complimenting the manners of a mad dog.

They came to a rough spot in the trail. It sloped up sharply for about ten feet and was covered in loose stones. Maggie usually managed it by holding onto the trees beside it. Wallis climbed halfway up and extended his arm out to help her. Maggie took his hand. His grip was like iron and his hand was rougher than she remembered, the calluses different from those of his work. He pulled her up but too quickly and she lost her balance. Her bookbag fell from her shoulder as she caught herself on her hands and knees. The books and the wrapped pistol spilled out.

Wallis helped her gather them. He took the pistol before she could and took it out of the cloth. “Lord, Maggie, when did you get this?”

“I got it from John when the army came.”

“Damn, girl, you got sand enough for both of us.” Wallis pointed the old pepperbox pistol out at the forest and rotated the barrels. He snapped it back like a recoil.

“It’s loaded, stop playing with it.”

“I just got out of the war. You think I’m some fool that don’t know guns?” He handed it back to her, handle first, and she packed it in with the books. After a moment, he said, “Are things really so bad around here you’ve got to carry that back and forth to school?”

Maggie rose and they negotiated the climb before she answered. "I don't know, Wallis. Things are getting rough with the whites. They say the Klan's around here but I haven't seen sign of them. Yet."

"Gonna be another war before we know it." Wallis sighed. His pipe was out and he picked at it with his pocketknife.

"Doesn't need to be," Maggie said. She saw her children in the doorway, hesitating at the sight of this stranger. Though they knew he was loved.

Maggie knelt down at them and took them in her arms. "This is your uncle Wallis. Helen, don't you remember him?" Helen smiled shyly. She had been three when Wallis left. Jake had been a baby and had never known him, but ran up and hugged his leg. Wallis laughed. For a moment they could just be a family. Maggie realized this was the first time she felt like the war was really over. And for at least this night, she could think their war was.

## XVII.

November 1866

There was a thin crust of snow on the ground. Maggie watched the children run off into it. The adults trudged out. They gossiped and laughed and smoked. She wanted to join them, but she was the teacher.

She had set up the room so that the adults could sit at the back, at a long plain dinner table. It was too much to ask them to squeeze into the children's desks, knees folded double. Some wealthy Northerner had donated the desks and the McGuffey readers without a thought that there were blacks older than six who needed to learn how to read. And it was the adults who struggled the most.

Maggie's supervisor from the Freedman's Bureau had arrived just before class had been dismissed. In fact Maggie let her students go a bit early so she could deal with what Miss Rebecca Pirofsky had to say. The young white woman was stiff and distant in her manner and did not take any care with her words for other's feelings, something that to Maggie felt utterly alien from a life of always having to please. Freedom did not make those ways easy to shed, especially for a woman, and yet here was one.

"I hear that you've been having difficulties," Miss Pirofsky said. She regarded Maggie through her pinch-nez spectacles. Behind them were close-set blue eyes.

"It's been two months and only half of them are reading. Most of those who are grown can't even scratch out their own names." Maggie looked out over the empty tables and desks, populated with the ghosts of each face. "They want to so badly, but their hands are too knotted

up by work and even the children do nothing but talk and carry on. Maybe I can't do this. Just because I know how doesn't mean I can teach them."

"So. Give up. Leave your people ignorant. I'm sure the Klan will be pleased."

Maggie cut a glance at Rebecca. "This isn't about them. I'm not afraid."

"You should be. They lynched a man in Ivy, just a few miles down the road. Just last Tuesday. Threats arrive in my mail every day. But we go on."

"You could always go back up to New York."

"Of course I could. What do I have there? Yet another year of trying to teach children who can barely speak English to at least write their own names before the factories take them away? At least here I can change something. And you can to. I thought you believed in this."

"I don't know what I believe any more. Look, I can't believe I'm telling you this, but what I am so afraid of is that we can't. Maybe it was easier for me that I learned in secret, because there's no shame involved. I could struggle and it would not be out in the open and I think that's just what they can't get past, now."

"You don't have to tell me about shame. Do you think I don't know what is in those books?" Rebecca picked up one of the McGuffey readers and made a show of flipping through pages before slamming it down again. More of her thick dark hair escaped from its bun. "What kind of shame do you think I feel when I see my people described as ruthless and greedy, unworthy of so-called salvation? And yet I had to teach from these readers in Brooklyn where over half of my students were Jewish and had to hear this about themselves? And yet they rose above the shame."

"Being told you're evil and being told you're stupid are two different things." Maggie thought she had said this under her breath. She had not.



“And what about being told you are weak, and foolish, and in need of a man’s benevolent tyranny?” Rebecca stepped over towards her. The hems of their skirts touched. Maggie felt uneasy about the way the white woman was looking her straight in the eyes. Few since John had done so. Maggie found herself respecting the distances more, trying to measure them as the Reconstruction redrew the lines. “I know something of how you must feel. Not all of it, I know.”

“You can’t know.” Maggie took a step back. Rebecca looked disappointed. Maggie turned away from her. “We’ve been broken to it from birth. Two months of school and eight months of freedom ain’t going to scrub that away.”

“Aren’t going to.”

“Damn it I know. But that’s just it, you acting all superior like this—it’s like we’re trading one master for another and I won’t make that trade.”

Rebecca stood silent for a moment. “It’s a process.” She sighed when she said this. She gave Maggie a shy, hesitant smile as she took up her bag to leave. “In the meantime, with all that’s against us, I assume you have arranged for your own defense?” She opened the satchel to show the black and brass of a Colt Navy revolver.

“I have,” Maggie said. That time confronting the bereaved Confederate had been the only time she had fired it. Did that count? Its flash and thunder and the way it jumped back in her hand made her not want to use it again. She did not want to have to.

## XVIII.

Spring 1866

John was building a home for himself. It was far larger than a bachelor needed. John knew it would feel empty and he would feel alone. In the time since Maggie had left him he'd tried to court women. Nothing had lasted. The widows had called him by dead men's names. Perhaps that made it easier, for them to love him and for him to leave.

The blueprints came from Boston early in the new year. The house would be in the Second Empire style; ironic, considering how he felt about empires. It would have a mansard roof and a tower, flanked by asymmetrical wings that were still balanced. Wide porches would surround it. He was building it on rural land he had inherited from his father and had let go to waste, except for his wartime failures at farming. His father's old house had burned and John let the brick foundation and chimneys stand. They would be visible from the house's east windows. The front looked out on the valley. He would have nature and ruins both.

John tried to bring the people together by offering work. Both freedman and whites were going hungry. He should have known better. Sweat gleamed on the marks of the whip and of battle and the men worked through their rages with each hammer blow. Always there were matters of pay. One of the freedmen had been a noted carpenter before the war, often hired out for his expertise. It boiled out to the whites what John was paying him. John stood firm.

They challenged him. "How do you rob your own to pay that to a nigger?" "My family's half-starved." "I could do better than him any day."

"Fine. You can make his wage—but only for today."

“Then I won’t be coming back.” And some of them didn’t.

Later, one of them crushed the carpenter’s right hand with a sledgehammer. The doctor had to take the arm off at the elbow as the infection spread. And still it spread. It took five days for the man to die.

John did not see the act itself. He came when it was already done, when there was the blood and the screaming. All the whites claimed that it was an accident and the law believed them.

“There’s nothing to be done,” said the sheriff’s deputy. It was Alonzo Price, John’s nephew. His paid substitute in the war, when the draft came. The blond young man had grown tall and a sandy mustache drooped from his lip. When he interviewed John and the workmen he seemed to carefully watch their mouths. He had been in the artillery. John wondered if the cannon fire had damaged his hearing, but if so, the man hid it well. He had otherwise come through the war without a scratch.

John paid the dead man’s family one hundred dollars and the cost of his burial. Nothing to be done, indeed.

## XIX.

December, 1866

Maggie had been at school when Jenny returned to a home that had not yet been her own.

Wallis and the one-eyed boy had been kissing when Maggie arrived. She hung back in the doorway and wondered if this was something the war had done to him. Or had it been their old master? Edmund Price had been known to make use of his young slave men the way most masters did with women. Wallis had never spoken of anything that had been done to him. But then he was not a man who would speak of it.

It had been Jenny that first caught her staring. Wallis must have felt her shift and stiffen and so then he also turned. "It isn't what you think," was of course what he said.

"What else could it be?"

"I'm a woman," the 'boy' Adam had said, in a rough voice used to disguising itself. Jenny was nineteen and getting too old for such a boyish disguise, and it showed.

"We met during the war. She was in the 23<sup>rd</sup>. I thought she'd died." These words, like signaling drumbeats, were perhaps the most Wallis had said to her in person about his time with the army. Or at least they were the first time he let the sorrow leak out.

"You fought too?" Maggie sat on the rough bench at their dining table and the couple sat down opposite. Maggie could hardly imagine how it must have been. Living with all those men, being as crude as they were. Running out into battle, into death. Of course for Maggie herself it would have been impossible, she was too clearly a woman and she was a mother besides. Just firing her pistol that one time had frightened her.

Maggie realized it would not have been dying that she feared. It would be having to kill another person. Even someone hellbent on keeping her a slave. It was still pointing a gun at a man and seeing him die and knowing that you did it. She could hardly believe she had pointed that gun at the bereaved soldier even when he had attacked her.

“So how did you come back to us?” Maggie asked Jenny.

“With John Moon,” she said. The words rang out in the cabin. The fire crackled and everyone seemed to hold their breath.

“How is he?” Maggie said at last.

“He’s doing well. Building a house out near Scottsville and setting up another photography shop.”

“So I heard,” Maggie said. It had been almost more than she could stand, these months. Knowing he was only some dozen miles away. It was a long journey but one either of them could make. He would have horses. He would not know where this cabin was but he must have heard that she taught at the school. If he wanted to, he could see her.

And of course, she could do the same.

She still did not know what she felt for John. There was everything she had tried to put in the letter. And more. She might be able to say it more eloquently now but the words still ran together as her pulse quickened. *I need you. But I need myself too. I need my freedom. And I need...us.*

## XX.

John's house was finished, in its lavish emptiness.

He tried to fill it with guests as much as he could. He hosted a party for the Federal troops that occupied the town and cheering the homesick men helped for a time. He had servants, free blacks he overpaid, but they still deferred when he tried to engage them in conversation. There were the occasional widows but most despised him as a traitor, preferring to cherish their dead Confederacy and empty bed. For a time he tried to court the woman from the Freedman's Bureau, Rebecca Pirofsky. She proved sharp-witted company enough, but it soon became clear to him that she did not fancy him, that she might not even care for any man.

And her presence did nothing but remind him of Maggie. Rebecca would speak of her at times. John never mentioned what there had been between them, but Rebecca had to know. But then again she would not have been privy to the local gossip. And he had hidden away the photograph of Maggie and the children.

He took it out, now. It had been in the top drawer of his dresser. It lay with a dress he had bought for Maggie, in vain hope. He wiped a thin film of dust from the frame.

It was Christmas Eve and he had a lot of vain hopes.

He knew where the cottage was, of course. He'd asked his maid and she had only answered after he gave her two extra days' pay.

He saddled his bay mare Marakesh. She did not have quite enough Arab blood to earn the name but he had made a life of preferring romance to fact. He balanced the load of the saddlebags and secured them. He mounted and rode out into the night and the darkness closed

around him. He knew he was being a fool, but it was only in being foolish that he had ever been happy.

It was early evening, about six but already full dark in winter. Snow had fallen earlier that week but the plank road was mostly clear. Marakesh's hooves rang out on the wood and soon so did the sound of others, distant behind him but gaining. John turned, half expecting to see a squadron of troops and half dreading to see what he saw—masked horseman with torches.

The Klansmen had seen him. John slowed his horse and hoped they would rush past. They didn't. They halted and circled around him. Some wore burlap feed sacks with holes roughly cut out for their eyes and mouth. Others wore the bedsheets that would soon become their uniform. All of them were armed. John was not. He had a knife in his boot but there would be no reaching for it. Those that weren't holding the torches had rifles in hand and most had pistols in their belts.

*I will die tonight*, John realized. The fear came to him, as cold as when he'd run from the cavalrymen all those years ago in Italy. The fear sliced cold in his spine like their blades in his flesh. He would die, without seeing Maggie again. Without winning back her love, and his redemption. He would die, and face his sins, alone and unforgiven. His neighbors, who may have once even been his friends, would kill him. Perhaps someday they would kill Maggie, and his children. They would consider Jacob and Helen, even so young and innocent, to be an abomination. Tainted blood, fit only to be spilled. As his would be spilled this night. John wondered how they would do it. Would they hang him? Burn him? He could hope they would have the mercy just to shoot him, but there was no mercy in their hate. Not even for a white man, when they considered him a traitor.

“What are you doing out here?” said the one that seemed to be their leader. He spat the words at John.

“Going to Charlottesville.” What a bland thing to be among his last words. John tried to will himself to be a poet. But there was no one among them to remember his words, at least not fondly. They would twist whatever he said. They would create the tale of his murder. Or make sure he was forgotten.

“Going to see your nigger whore, Moon?”

John tried not to react, but he knew his disgust was plain on his face. So he tied his lies around it. “No. And you insult my honor to even suggest it.”

“What honor do you have? Yankee-loving, nigger-fucking son of a bitch.”

“Again I won’t tolerate lies,” John said as he looked into the pitch-black holes where the man’s eyes should be. “At least be a man enough to show me who you are.”

“You want us to show you, huh?” The klansman laughed.

John knew they would laugh when they killed him. One of them brandished his gun. They were a blur of movement and he had only this moment. This moment of things happening too fast for him to understand. Only to react, and try.

There was a gap between their horses and John spurred Marakesh forward. They left the road and tore off into the forest. The horse lurched from side to side avoiding the trees and their branches lashed at John. They were running down the mountain. It was not steep but there were rocks and cliffs and John did not know where those were at night. The klansmen followed close at his back. Shots burst out into the night. There were fewer than John expected. The klansmen rode in a loose pack and into each other’s line of fire. Marakesh leaped a wide stream, barely catching herself at the far bank and John fought to keep his seat. He was only a few yards past it



when one of the klansmen tried the jump. His horse splashed into the water and horse and man both screamed as the animal's leg shattered and the rider fell into the fast current. John heard the man cry out that he could not swim and then later a shot as they put down the horse. At least he had deprived them of that. He reined Marakesh to a halt as she panted from the race and they stayed still and hidden. This time no pursuit came. This time.

If he feared these men, what must it be for Maggie? For his children?

John took a winding path to the cabin, just to make sure he was not followed. He saw no one else on the road. The cabin was smaller than he pictured it. Somehow he thought it would be more like the peasant cottages in Europe than like the slave cabins had been. It was fairly new and sturdy and firelight glowed from the windows. John tied his horse to a tree and unfastened the saddlebags, bearing them over his shoulder. His knuckles rapped on the rough door. It was wood with a coating of tar, and barred shut from inside.

It was Maggie's brother Wallis who opened the door. He scowled out at John with his scarred face. "Moon. What the hell do you want?"

John coughed. Somehow he had not expected this reception. "And a merry Christmas to you too, Wallis." He forced a smile. He had forgotten that the young man had returned home and had not brought anything for him. But he did have a full flask of whiskey in his coat.

"Let him inside, Wallis," Maggie said, dispassionately.

"Thank you, Maggie," John said softly. He shook the snow from his coat. Maggie sat near the fire. The children were bigger. They cried out "Daddy!" and rushed into his arms. He was surprised when Helen actually kissed his cheek. His heart had not yet slowed from his deadly race and as he held the children he could feel his hands shaking.

He said his Merry Christmases and set down the saddlebags. There was a spindly tree that looked like a large fallen branch. Homemade cloth dolls and whittled wooden horses and men lay on the floor. The family had eaten already and the table bore the picked remains of a wild turkey. Jenny carved a slice for him. John could smell from the herbs that it was Maggie's cooking, though. He ate as they stiffly passed small talk. It felt unreal. As if the klansmen had slain him and now he dreamt.

The gifts delighted his children. Helen's new doll was a perfect replica of the one that had burned with John's old house. A cast iron locomotive fascinated Jacob as he rolled it back and forth on the floor. John and Maggie watched them play for a lovely, calm moment. It felt as if they were home again.

After a while Maggie asked her family to watch the children and ushered John into a bedroom. "This isn't for what you think," she said. His hands hung empty in the air, arrested by her words and the look she shot at him. "We have to talk."

"I love you, Maggie. I still do. You can't know how much I miss you." The words spilled out of him before he could contain them. He could tell her what he had faced on the road, but he did not want her to fear, for herself or for him. He could protect her. He would protect her.

Maggie took her time to reply. "I'm sure you think you do. I believed it, too. But the world is different now."

"Different in that we can love one another, if we dare to."

Maggie didn't ask if he dared to, but might as well with the set of her mouth. "John, you were white as a ghost when you showed up at my door. What is wrong?"

“There were men on the road at night. Klansmen. Look, it’s not safe for you here. I could protect you—”

“John, you can hardly protect yourself. You’ve got the whole world to go to but you sunk all that money on that big house here. Why?”

“I don’t want to be anywhere else. And that house is so empty—”

“So maybe you shouldn’t have built it.”

“Maggie, why are you being so cold?”

“Because...I guess it’s over but I haven’t even had a chance to figure myself out yet.”

Maggie crossed her arms. She tightened in on herself, building barriers.

“You’re not sure, are you?” John stepped closer to her.

“I’m learning to be.” She stepped back, the bed stopping her.

“Would this convince you?” John reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and withdrew a wide velvet box. He opened it. An emerald pendant gleamed on a slender gold chain.

Maggie gasped. She stared at the deep green stone as it glistened. It was not large but was nearly flawless. Small diamonds surrounded it and also caught the candlelight. “John...”

“Let me put it on you.” He unfastened the clasp and took the chain in both hands. His fingers brushed against her neck and her hair slipped over his skin. He felt the warmth of her body and even that slight touch was enough to stir his desire. He fastened the gold clasp and the emerald hung just above the cleft between her breasts. It lay on the fabric of her modest winter dress but his memory undressed her.

He kissed her. His mouth pushed against hers and his tongue slipped between her teeth. John’s hands were on her arms and her back and her ass and then she was pushing away from

him. She had returned the kiss but perhaps that was all. Something had grown cold in her and John wondered what it was he had done.

“We can’t get this started again. I’m glad for what you did with the children, but John. Really. Where am I supposed to wear something like this?” Maggie unclasped the necklace and handed it back to him. John took it and it dangled in his hand and for a moment he stared at its brightness as if he didn’t know what it was. Or what this meant. “It’ll just bring thieves here or worse. We’re in different worlds now. We always were. Guess we just had the war and loneliness to trick us.”

## XXI.

It took John some time to respond to her words. “Maggie, we could change things. Those worlds are being remade. In a few years’ time we could just be women and men. That simple. All it takes is the courage...”

“John, you know it’s not like that. Besides, you already say it’s not safe for me here. Do you think I would be safer at your house in these damn jewels, shoving it in their faces like that? They already came after you in the road. And that’s when we’re apart and who knows what they really know except that we had kids.” Maggie took John’s hand. The necklace slithered to the ground. It really had been beautiful, the emerald the size of the tip of her little finger, but it was too much like he was trying to buy her.

“We could fight them. Somebody has to.” The muscles in his jaw tensed and that fool’s courage shone in his eyes. Maggie imagined what he been like as that young man in the uprising.

“They’ll just kill us, John.”

“Is it so bad to die? It’s the fear of it that enslaves everyone.”

“Who are you to say that?” Maggie cut her words at him and John flinched. She eased her tone. “And what’s making you turn all Patrick Henry on this?”

“I can’t go on.” John sighed deeply and Maggie thought for a moment, he wants to die. But she could not see that desperation in him. “I thought bringing these things would convince you. But you’re not that sort of woman. I’m sorry. I should go.” He turned towards the door.

“No, wait.” Maggie followed him and put her hand on his shoulder. She could feel his warmth and strength beneath the slick fabric of his vest. He turned towards her and looked down at her for a moment and this time she kissed him.

There wasn't much room for words. Maggie kept questioning herself the whole time, wondering why she was letting herself do this. But maybe being free meant letting herself make bad decisions, based on the moment and fickle wants. Their clothes peeled onto the rough boards of the floor. His crimson brocade vest and crisp white shirt mingled with her calico dress with its tiny faded flowers and many mended rips. But there was the same mud on their boots and on the hem of her dress and his trousers, the same earth from the mountains.

He smelled the same. Every man has a different tinge to his sweat and his body. John still had the lingering whiff of his oil paints and he must have been working as there was a dried smear of yellow on the edge of his hand. He was eating better but had not gone soft. He was still strong for one who wasn't a working man. He kissed her breasts and Maggie pushed them against his mouth. They were naked on her mama's quilt and Maggie pulled it up over them in the cold, letting them work by feel. John got on top of her and the hairs on his chest rubbed against her skin. Maggie wrapped her legs around him. She squeezed her crossed calves across his backside and the muscles tensed together. He thrust faster and Maggie whispered to slow him so he did. Slow and deep. He did not race towards his own pleasure like most men did.

The bed was creaking and Maggie knew that everyone must know what was going on between them. She could not think of what they thought. There was a thrill in defiance of everyone, the thrill of the moment without considering its cost. She let herself just feel for this time and she boiled in the heat of it and when John did thrust faster she came and soon he did and there was seed and maybe another child. They lay catching their breath and she could not

think of another child now. Could barely think of her own and what world they would struggle out their lives in.

Maggie held John as he panted and her hand traced over the scar across his shoulders. He shivered. Maggie had first seen it when he had been in the bath and she realized here was a white man who had known pain and fear and something to run from. It looked just enough like the backs of slave men who had been whipped, but it was carved into his pale skin instead of puffed out angrily from theirs. It was something in the way their flesh was made. Maggie wondered about all the differences there were and there weren't. She had her own smell and masters had said it was sweet enough to be in their house but she couldn't tell what the difference was except for who sweated and did not bathe, because the field hands were too weary in the nights to haul water. She had as quick a mind as any, even men, and some would say it was from having the blood of a white man but also that opened doors. If she had been in the fields she would have no books to sneak glances at and there would have only been work and survival. Maybe it was the coming together of the differences, the way that mongrel dogs aren't loved but are stronger. She knew these were not questions she could answer. John was already asleep beside her. She could not send him out into the night, not this night. Tomorrow would be Christmas and the world could pretend for a day that they were at peace. Her people would sing "Go tell it on the mountain" and the whites, at least in the North, might sing that "in His name all oppression shall cease." People could pretend and maybe that was a start.

## Unearthed

“Jess, come out here. I found something.” Dave popped his head in before vanishing once more into the back yard, screen door whacking shut in his wake.

I took my time, scanning again over the cold screen of too-few want ads. I didn’t have the right experience for the postings, but my résumé strategy had turned to carpet bombing.

I stepped out into the backyard of our small brick rancher. The world was fuzzed with the ghosts of the computer screen. The static of colors shifted like it does behind closed eyelids. Dave was kneeling on the ground, scraping something with a garden trowel.

I’d been against the garden at first. I was officially ‘delinquent’ on the mortgage and had the house up for sale, so either way, someone else would harvest what we planted. At least Dave still had the hope in sunlight and photosynthesis, the natural world’s oblivious need to grow.

Delinquent. A word that conjured up visions of kitschy black-and-white movies about guys with greasy hair and hot rods and cigarette packs rolled up in t-shirt sleeves. Maybe somebody like that had lived in my house when it was first built. It was a plain box in a row of plain boxes, built cheap in the early days of the Cold War. It had been what I’d thought I could afford.

Whatever this thing in the ground was, it was metal. It pinged against a light tap of Dave’s trowel and practically shrieked when he scratched it, nails-on-the-chalkboard style, as he dug more of the earth from around it. “Be careful. Is that our pipes?”



“I don’t think so. Hmm, it’s cut off here at the ends,” he said. I watched Dave dig around its bluntly amputated ends. The object was a rusty cylinder, a little less than a foot long. Dave picked it up, cradling it with his meaty hands with a gentle touch I knew and at this moment, envied.

“It sure looks old. Almost like something from a shipwreck, the way it’s crusted over.” I looked closer. An artifact, here in my yard.

It made me remember back twenty years to fifth-grade TAG: Talented And Gifted, elevated above the masses by our percentiles on the standardized tests. We had a unit on archeology, where we had to make up civilizations and bury our fake artifacts in a little patch of ground next to the kickball blacktop. I vaguely remember my group’s civilization revolved around boogie-boarding as some kind of religious experience. They had elaborate archaic costumes involving bell bottoms. Anyway, when the time came for us to dig up the other group’s leavings, after a long hour of searching (and damn, hours were long when I was ten), I struck gold. Actually, coiled paper. The scroll held the secrets of their culture. A great find, maybe even cursed.

It might as well have been cursed. I wonder sometimes if that childhood tipping point might have been the closest thing to the high point of my life. Sad as that was. But at least this mysterious doodad in our yard was maybe making me believe there might still be wonder left in the world.

Dave set it down carefully. He tended to handle everything like it might electrocute him, which was pretty necessary for an electrician. Apprentice electrician, actually; he wasn’t even fully in the union yet. Of course I worried about him. It was like dating a firefighter without all the glamour of saving lives.

“Yeah, Jess, it does look freakin ancient.”

“Just say fuck.”

“You know I wasn’t raised that way.” Dave looked up at me. Dirt smudged his stubbled chin.

“Yeah but when you guys are out on a job I bet you don’t say ‘freakin’.”

“Yes, but those are the guys, Jess. I...I guess I just respect you more than that.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, and in the silence he kissed me. I returned it. He smelled like his sweat, and freshly turned earth. I played one hand through his damp brown hair and let the other slip up the back of his t-shirt. He wasn’t much taller than me. I found this comforting somehow. He was muscular in that way that some guys on the short end of average are, like they are sausages stuffed to burst.

We left our find for the moment.

We regarded it, set on end on the kitchen table. We were drinking our morning coffee. It was strange to stare at this thing, which we had nearly forgotten. It was a cylinder of iron, rusted to the same red as clay. Its surface was pitted and stained. “It’s like a manmade asteroid,” Dave said, slowly turning it on its base.

Something about it made me uneasy.

“It won’t get me a job.” This had become my yardstick for the purpose of anything. Breakfast was one of first casualties of my futile quest. Maybe because skipping it made eating cereal for dinner seem somehow less pathetic.

Dave looked at me. I was sick of seeing sympathy in anyone’s eyes, much less his. They were brown: melted chocolate chips pulled apart. “Jess, that will come. You know that.”

At this point, a sigh was my only answer. There were no jobs. Or at least there were a few, awful jobs. Jobs usually reserved for dropouts and felons. I felt like I was competing for them against PhD's. It was a crowd mobbing the lifeboats. A moldy green orange fought over by the starving. And Virginia was doing better than most of the country, even if Petersburg was a fading industrial city that might as well have been in the Rust Bowl.

"Jessica, you have to stay positive," everyone always said. Dave, my mother, my father, my sister, friends. The few ex-co-workers I still spoke to, who also hadn't landed yet. Landing – that's what we all called it, finding a job. No longer circling through the endless air, waiting for the fuel to run out. At least if it did, you would get to crash, with fire. It would be exciting and memorable, and quick.

I was just thinking *damn I'm morbid* when the object tipped over and crashed. It rolled towards me. I caught it, almost not hearing Dave apologize as I stopped its weight, at the very edge of the table. I rolled it back.

The end that was towards me was dished in. There were markings, and I realized it was writing, half worn away with rust. A ring of lettering, at the bottom "U.S. PATENT" and in the center a year, 1862.

"Oh my God," I said.

Anywhere near Richmond, Virginia, you walk on graves every day. It is not something I really like to think about, especially because there are still so many loonies who seem to believe that "Tha Wa'ah" is not over, brandishing their Stars 'n Bars in futile protest against their defeat in the Sixties of two different centuries. Or maybe it is because, melodramatic musings aside, no one wants to think that all of us will be dust, the roots of the trees sipping life from our bones.

Damn, I needed to find a job. Let some meaningless spreadsheet or snotty customer get my mind off the meaning of life and the freaking human condition.

Of course, we checked it online. The bomb, of course, not the human condition. We found weird collector's sites which informed us that this was an artillery shell. Highly explosive in its time, and possibly still live.

"Holy shit, it's a bomb." What else could I say? "Do you think Homeland Security could come after us for having this?" Just what I needed, an arrest record in addition to the pending foreclosure. I wondered if I would be the only woman held in Guantanamo.

"I don't think so. It's history and all. Besides, we just found it. It's not like we made it or something." Dave had a way of being logical when I was starting to panic that made me panic more.

"Is it even legal to have this?" I looked at the website, and saw similar items listed, openly for sale. For hundreds of dollars, depending on the condition. "We should sell it," I decided. I started imagining how I would spend this windfall. Pay into the abyss of debt? Or a little something to start over?

It was Dave who listed it on Craigslist. We cleaned more of the dirt off and took pictures of it from all angles. It reminded me of the pictures of my house, capturing that one moment in time that it had been completely clean. Our possessions had been pulled out of the frame, making it look like we had never existed.

I think maybe I wasn't upset enough about the idea of losing the house because of what the house itself represented. It was what I could afford at the time, at the height of the bubble: a tiny 50's rancher in a neighborhood where I stood out by being white and not going to work in

some kind of uniform. There I was in a cheap suit and ballet flats, off to the bank to deny loans to people just like my neighbors. I would hear their stories and want to force the computer to approve them. I just couldn't fudge the numbers like some people did. In some weird way it was a relief to get canned, back when the severance felt like an overdue vacation and I was sure I'd find something better and quick. So here I was falling out of the lower-middle class. My family could probably still help me but that meant leaving the state—and Dave. And there was just something absurd about the idea of being thirty and sleeping in a room that, in your mind, is forever painted pink and strewn with toy ponies. And the red light of the smoke alarm in the hall is the glaring eye of Bigfoot coming to eat you.

At least we hadn't had kids. I had to stop the pill when my insurance ran out. So far we've been lucky with the condoms. So far.

I actually met Dave turning him down for credit. The snob in me would have said that was a sign. But he asked me out and since he wasn't officially a customer I said why not. Our second date was bowling. After a few frames of gutter balls and beer, I started officially going for the world's lowest score. And it was at the very point that I'd completely given up that I got two strikes in a row and I started to see it as some kind of metaphor. That at the moment I gave up and said *fuck it*, everything would magically turn around. So for the past few months I had tried to say *fuck it* to everything in my life. But maybe I just wasn't giving up desperately enough.

So now I had explosives on the kitchen table. I don't think there can be a more resounding *fuck it* than that.

It was a few hours later that the realtor called. I finally had an interested buyer. And bomb in my filthy, filthy house.

Dave was at work, so I went on my frantic cleaning frenzy alone. There was no instant undoing of years of bad housekeeping and neglect. I attacked the shower mildew, my arm blurring at propeller-speed and threatening to fly off. I swept every cluttered surface clear and crammed all of our accumulated crap into the closets. But of course they'd want to look in the closets. Well, at least they would see they were spacious and able to accommodate an amazing amount of crap, such as everyone had. Of course most people's crap did not include antique live ordinance.

I froze, holding the bomb. It was cold in my hands and felt impossibly heavy for something that, though metal, was relatively small. It was as if the danger itself weighed it down. The sun shined on the far corner of the living room and I very gently set the bomb down, standing it vertically on the patent-marked base. Of course it looked strange. I glanced back at the window and saw my dried-up, half-dead basil plant. The artillery shell became a plant stand. It was as if the explosive death inside the bomb had risen up through the pot and the roots and killed the poor basil, instead of me forgetting to water and pinch it.

I cleared out with only minutes to spare. Half a block from the house, I passed the realtor's car as she drove the buyer to my house. Soon to be her house, or the bank's. The buyer was about my age and had a boy with her who looked about twelve. I had lived in this neighborhood long enough to be used to thirty-year-olds having teenagers, but not long enough for it not to seem weird. I imagined the realtor telling her I was a "motivated seller." I hoped she hadn't seen me pull out of the driveway in my mid-90s Cavalier with its faded red paint and crumpled fender. Then she might lowball the offer.

I drove around what would soon no longer be my neighborhood. There were guys hanging around on the corner. They didn't live here; it was business. I had to stop and wait as a van pulled over in the narrow street, double-parked while they completed their little drug deal. I thought I understood that life from rap and *The Wire* but I was a tourist here, still. At least I knew not to make eye contact. Or to honk the damn horn, no matter how impatient I got.

God, the kid. As if there wasn't enough stupid danger for him to get into. I had to sell him a houseful of explosives. I imagined him digging up the whole yard and having a whole middle-school arsenal. Even without having had the whole child-spawning experience, I knew boys that age were evil geniuses. Or at least the evil part. And maybe I was evil myself, picturing him showing up with an artillery shell for his history project. I would hope he'd get an A, instead of expelled.

As I meandered through the blocks, as much as the street grid could let me meander, I wondered how far away I could hear the explosion, when it inevitably happened. Would it be a huge Hollywood fireball? I pictured the realtor, the buyer and her son leaping forward in slow motion, just out of the way as the flames burst dramatically behind them. In film there are conveniently no shockwaves. The brain doesn't slosh around precariously in your skull. I imagine the boy thinking this is the best thing ever. Sick, or whatever it is they're calling it now. Damn, he was making me feel old.

I burned up gas and tried to feel in control. I hadn't driven much lately and the car seemed creakier than ever. It had developed new and discordant annoying squeaks. I thought about how excited I'd been when I bought this car, used, right out of college. The buyer was going through my house with the same thrill, maybe. At least it was full of potential. She could rip out the ancient linoleum countertops and put in granite, someday. I look at all the small

boxes on either side of the street. Some had barred windows. Some were shaded by old aluminum awnings, like heavy-lidded eyes. Some were painted garish colors like lime green, others have tacky fake stonework. Mine just had bricks; plain, honest bricks. All had been somebody's dream. The fulfillment of somebody's effort. There are other sale signs and I'm sure the buyer will go visit them, too. Then there are foreclosure signs. Dave and I had seen more than one family with their things all dumped out in the street, almost blocking it as they shouted at the sheriff's deputies.

About half an hour had passed, without explosions.

I came back down my street and saw that the realtor was still parked in front of my house. I parked farther down and waited. I watched them leave through the rear-view mirror. The realtor was smiling her huge fake smile, which of course matched her over-styled dyed blonde hair. The buyer looked the kind of overjoyed we are when we are trying to ignore our concerns about something we want badly enough. Or at least that is how I read her. The boy was pacing around in the yard, a bounce in his step, looking bored and agitated. He was thin, unlike the usual fat-ass kids I saw everywhere. So his mom was doing something right. The buyer had on the kind of skirt-suit I used to wear to work. She was still wearing some kind of corporate id badge around her neck. I always found it ironic how those looked like backstage passes for a concert, yet also how people were supposed to dress so well and then had to put on this tacky thing. I had the sense that maybe she could do better than this house, here. Maybe she was trading down because she got divorced or something. But I needed her, damn it. Even if it was a mistake for her, I needed her to rescue me from my mistake. Wasn't that how the world was supposed to work?



The way it wasn't supposed to work, though, was when an old van came up the street and pulled up directly behind the realtor. What's worse, he blocked her in. Even before he got out, I could tell he had no good business in this neighborhood. The Confederate flag sticker on the rear window was a dead giveaway, even if it did say "Heritage Not Hate." The van was a patchwork of dingy white paint and dull gray primer. The creature that eventually climbed out was a tall, heavysset guy in maybe his late fifties. His hair and beard were identical gray stubble, except for a bushy mustache that trailed down either side of his mouth. His jacket was hunter's tree-leaf camouflage. He wore it with jeans. I imagined a deer's final moments puzzling over a pair of disembodied pants stalking through the forest. I felt like that deer as I pulled my car past him, parked crooked across the street and ran to intercept.

"Hi, sir, can I help you with anything?" I said, defaulting to customer service mode as I sometimes did when facing crazy people. There had been a boatload of crazy people at the bank, and at the various other shit jobs in my experience. I noticed that the pitch of my voice went higher as I did this, especially with men.

"I'm here about the shell," said mustache man. Great, in addition to being some racist militia nut, he was also Captain Obvious.

The buyer, her kid and the realtor just stared. Finally the realtor said, "Excuse me? This house does need some...updating, but it is fully functional. We do have some that are, essentially, exterior shells in this area. I'm guessing you're a contractor?" She glanced nervously at the van.

The buyer looked at the van, too, and its various right-wing stickers. She had her arms around her son and they were backing away slowly. I hadn't noticed how the guy looked at them. So far, he wasn't.

“I think this gentleman and I need to talk about this privately,” I said, as fake-cheerfully as I could. I was sure it even sounded fake to the realtor, who was the pageant queen of fakery.

We walked to the narrow side yard. The houses were only about ten feet apart. It felt like this stranger and I were going into an alley. Nothing good ever happens in an alley. “So do you have it or not?” the guy said. He reeked of cigarettes. I did not know guys like this trolled Craigslist. I did not want to think about him going into the Adult categories, but the red alerts going off in my head this was starting to feel about as sleazy.

“It’s inside. Look, that woman is about to buy my house. Let’s let them go and then we can talk business. Okay?”

“They can go now,” he said, as if six inches of clearance were enough for the realtor to nudge her Lexus out without thousands of dollars in bumper work. I wondered how much she might be upside down on the car, but then wasn’t that motivation to get my damn house sold?

“I don’t think so. You’ve blocked them in. Just back up a little.” I looked at his van again. The side window was plastered with a large American flag sticker that said “These colors don’t run.”

“Not until I see it.” He folded his beefy arms across his chest. There was a Marine Corps tattoo on his forearm, blurry and faded the way tattoos got after too many decades in the sun. The Celtic cross on Dave’s shoulder would probably do that eventually, the intricate knotwork melting inside his skin. But I couldn’t think about any future right now but getting through the next few minutes. “Look, if it’s real I’ll know. I brought cash. I’ve been handling these things for years now. You kids, you just don’t know what you have.”

I thought I heard regret in his voice and knew he wasn’t just talking about the bomb.

I let him in through the back door. I had to fight with the deadbolt, lifting the door as I turned the key to make the lock exactly align. The seconds ticked off, like a bomb's countdown in the movies. A real terrorist wouldn't tell you how long you had. I could hear the buyer and the realtor talking in the front yard, but couldn't make out what they were saying. Sweat trickled from the back of my neck down my spine.

We walked through the house, clean enough that I hardly recognized it. He followed me to the so-called plant stand and immediately crouched down. He set the pot of basil down gently, as if it wasn't dead, and picked up the shell like it was a baby. Dave had actually named the bomb. He called it Uriah. He thought it was the kind of name a Civil War soldier might have. I told him it sound more Amish or something. It was a little argument we had over beer. The fun kind we used to have more often.

The man turned the shell over and over in his big rough hands. They had dirt in the creases, like Dave's did. Suddenly the guy's eyes went wide and even his mustache seemed astounded. "This...is still live. It could blow at any moment." He set it down and, despite his care, it clunked loudly. He backed away and so did I.

"We kind of figured that," I said. God that sounded dumb. "What do we do?"

"Call the police," he said.

I pictured the bomb squad robot making its way through my living room. I would be standing in the street, waiting. My last look at the house would be in the flashing blue lights of the police cruisers that would block off the street. Then what?

"I can't do that," I said. "Look, can you take it? Do you know what to do with it?"

"I don't handle shit that old. Unstable. Never know what it will do."

Everything was falling apart right there. I felt the panic building up. “Okay, I’ll call the police,” I lied. “Maybe you should go. Let me get everyone out of here. Please, just go.”

The old guy glared down at me. “Ten-four,” he said. It was perfunctory, a kiss-off with a shrug. He was the first person I’d heard say that, besides truckers in movies. “You really should get that thing taken care of. You kids...” He shrugged again and slammed the door as he left. The bomb, Uriah, shuddered. I set the dead basil atop it again and the leaves shook a little, like the thing had a heartbeat.

I heard his van’s engine clunk to life and a screech as he drove off. The realtor said, “Oh shit,” not cheerful at all. He must have scratched her Lexus. Even her ebullient bloneness was no defense against the world, or at least the frailties of clear-coat.

The buyer’s son laughed and she shushed him, but then laughed too. I couldn’t make out their shared joke. But I knew, as I heard them leave, that I had to defend them. They might have just been the last normal people on earth.

I kept up the plant stand disguise. I tried to avoid looking at it. The minutes and hours stretched by. Dave was due home from work. Dave was late, with no call. All the things I had always told myself I would do if I only had time, I wasn’t doing. Mostly I was online. I looked for non-existent jobs. I followed frivolous interests, link after link after tangent. There was a collector’s market for those toy ponies and I wondered if my mother still had them in the attic. I almost called.

The camouflaged collector did not come back. Every moment I wondered if he might have called the police himself. I expected sirens, the door kicked in. I didn’t like the fact that he knew about the bomb and where I lived, but I wouldn’t be living there for long.

I dug in the garden. I sank the trowel and the shovel into the earth like I was drilling for oil. It felt good to smell the dirt and have something in my hands. There were worms. I wasn't disgusted by them. They were necessary. I thought about collecting them in a can and going fishing for our dinner. I hadn't been fishing since I was a kid. I remembered the guys who would catch dozens of bluegills and have them piled up dead in plastic paint buckets. They stank and attracted flies. I realized that I would be one of them, except that I didn't have a big enough bucket and didn't know where Dave's fishing gear was.

I didn't find any more bombs.

The one that was here seemed to be mocking me. I began to see it as an emblem of both failure and success. Success, because it belonged to the winning army. But everything else about it was a failure. It didn't explode. From the pictures we'd seen online of others, and emails from our Craigslist ad, the collectors seemed to think that it hadn't even been fired. I pictured a soldier dropping it. There they were in the middle of a battle, and he dropped the shell. Maybe even on his foot. The rest of the cannon crew just stood there looking at it, wondering if it would explode. A few seconds passed and it didn't. They go on fighting the war. The soldier limped around, wondering if he would lose his foot or the toe it landed on. I wonder if he dropped another shell or spent the whole rest of the battle being so careful not to drop another. Maybe even so careful that he didn't see the Rebels coming at him until it was too late, here were the crazy rednecks screaming and bam he was dead. And he had a few seconds to think about his wife or his sweetheart back in Connecticut or Illinois or Ireland. Or maybe what he thought about is, *if only I hadn't dropped that shell that one time...!* Or, maybe they got him in the head and he didn't think about anything at all.

And here it is, now, in my house. Almost a century and a half underground and the chemicals were still waiting. Frustrated. Dave and I had seen X-rays online of similar bombs. They looked like jars of marbles. The marbles were round lead bullets and inside were chemicals designed to ignite at the shell's impact with the ground. The most dangerous kind had the chemicals in glass vials. If this was what we had, it would've gone off by now. Probably.

Dave was late. I imagined disasters. Current arcing through his body. Burned flesh. Having to go visit him in some sickening disinfectant-reeking hospital. I hated hospitals. Having to pretend that nothing had changed when I saw him in a bed with various indicator machines and whatever horrifying condition he was in. Having to pretend to be stronger than I was.

It was night by the time he came home. All the disasters were forgotten. "What happened? Where were you?" I hated sounding as desperate and bitter as it came out. I had psyched myself into being his widow before we were even married and here I was, biting his head off. But damn it, I had a right to feel bitter. About everything.

"There were trees down. You heard the storm. Didn't you?" Dave crouched beside me, with that look of kind concern I resented so much.

"Why didn't you call? Or least text me."

"My battery died. Sorry, Jess. I didn't realize until I was almost home."

Great, I thought. The man worked on power lines all day and he couldn't even keep his cell phone charged. "Dave, we have a problem with...this." I swept my hand to indicate the bomb, keeping at least a foot away from it as if even the movement of air might ignite it.

"What's wrong? Uriah does make kind of a nice plant stand, actually. Very industrial. That was smart."

“No, it wasn’t. Look, some guy came by, answering the ad. He looked like he was in one some kind of terrorist militia or something. He said the bomb is live.”

Dave just stared as I breathed out the words of our possible impending demise. With fire. He seemed to freeze for a moment. I hated seeing him look dumbstruck but I guessed there was nothing else for a reasonable person to be. “So...what do we do?”

“He said to call the police. Get the bomb squad. What do you think?” My question hung in silence for a very long time. It felt almost like the shell was listening to us.

“Maybe,” was all he said.

“Oh and I’ve got a buyer for the house. Or at least I think so.” This seemed so freaking unimportant.

“Good,” Dave said. “But if we get the bomb squad out here...well of course that’ll fall through.”

“I know.”

“So what do we do now?” Dave looked at me again. He sat on the floor beside me and draped his warm, strong arm across my shoulders. As though that would help. But it did.

“Maybe we should take care of things ourselves.” The idea had been stewing in my mind all afternoon. It was stupid. It was suicidal. But it was a plan and we needed plans. We needed action. Anything except this endless stalemate.

“Okay,” he said, surprised. “But at least let me be the one to ‘take care’ of it. I’m the one who found it and got us into this, after all.”

When he was putting everything together, I told Dave I didn't care about the house anymore. I wanted to sell, sure, but there was some perverse wish I had to just blow the whole thing up and be done with it. Let the fucking bank try to repossess a pile of ashes. It was their fault, after all. My branch had been 'underperforming' and so I was let go. They sold the branch, too. It was still closed and empty. A sign outside said bids were due about six months ago. I had the thought, too, of blowing the shell there. A symbolic protest. Of course there was no one there to get hurt, which was important. But the building would survive, or at least the big empty vault would. A solid-steel fortress defending nothing.

But Dave decided to do it out in the yard. Where he'd originally found it. He rigged up a hoist, and soon the bomb dangled from a lower branch of the neighborhood's tree. It was maybe twelve feet off the ground. It was four o'clock in the morning by this point. Dave flicked a switch and yelled at me to run.

I ran. I kept looking back at it and tripped on a bump in the yard. For a second I thought it might be another bomb, but it was just dirt. I crab-crawled away as a fuse ignited next to the bomb. Dave yelled, "Fire in the hole!" and then admitted to me that he'd always wanted to say that.

"There are a lot of things I always wanted to say." I looked at him. This could be the last moment of our lives and I couldn't think of what all those things were.

"Can't hear ya, babe," Dave said. He was crouched with his hands over his ears. I did the same, only I was still staring at the bomb

Finally the fuse burned down. It burned away the strings that held the bomb in place and it fell to earth, on fire. I waited for the explosion. I waited to find out what happens when you die. Whether there was a bright light, and then you saw your dead relatives and God. Or maybe



it was Buddha, and then wham you were a baby wildebeest running across the Serengeti and away from the lions. A few more seconds. We weren't dead yet. It occurred to me that maiming was also a possibility. Neither of us had insurance so I tried not to think about that. More seconds. The bomb just lay there. As it always had.

The neighbor's tree was on fire. So was some of our grass. I screamed and, without thinking, tried to stomp it out. Dave broke off some of the branches and tried to stomp them out. The tree was still on fire. It was Dave that finally got the hose. I was standing in the way and got soaked. Once the fire was out I grabbed the hose from him and we had a water fight, like kids, slipping and sliding in the mud.

*Lightning strike* is what we'd tell the neighbor if he asked. We lay on the wet ground and the bomb was between us. For a little while there was no future and there were no decisions. A freight train by the river whistled. We looked up at the stars and heard each other breathing. Maybe listened for the first time.

## Those the Art Chooses

Nara's delight at watching the children play faded on hearing her own name spring from the girl's lips. She had tried to train herself, in these past three months since the Queen's defeat, to ignore her name and all that it had meant.

"I'll be Nara Darlath!" the girl squealed. "I'll blast you with fire!" The child, a round-faced blonde perhaps seven years old, waved her arms and prattled nonsense words in what she must think were the incantations of a battle-witch. Nara smiled bitterly, stroking the false beard of her male disguise. *Oh, to be so innocent*, she thought, *of what spells, cannon and sword do to our mere and fragile flesh.....*

"Ha, so you'll lose!" The boy was a bit older, perhaps ten, and too rough for his playmates already. Nara realized he was about the age of their new boy king, Lorenz, nearly a prisoner of his regent the Archbishop. "We'll be the Dark Guards, then. Will you cry, like your stupid queen, when we torch you at the stake?" He shoved the girl, who nearly fell but held her ground.

"She wouldn't have lost if she still had my daddy."

Nara fought back a surge of despair and looked away from the girl, lest she see in her face the ghost of a lost comrade. And of course she needed no child's game to see once more Queen Rozalia, resolute even at the last. Nara had been in disguise among the crowd that day. She forced her pretended "manly" resolve to choke down her grief. The shadow cast by the wide brim of her cavalier's hat had hidden her quivering eyelids, and the silent tears when they came.

Ever since, Nara had felt herself fading into her disguise. This man she pretended to be, Tavis Wiltshire, was only a little thinner than Nara had been in her heyday as a war-witch. He was short for a man; she had been tall for a woman. Her hawkish nose and sharp jawline made Tavis look something close to handsome, while Nara had been plain. They had the same auburn hair, now cut short and threaded with gray. Nara was nearly forty, an age common-born women were lucky to attain. She looked young, if a bit weathered, with creases forming around her pale blue eyes. But not worn down as most women became, drained after bearing child after child and burying far too many of them. Her powers had saved her from that ordinary life, if only to have a life of killing. Now her magic had abandoned her. She was alone on this road with a sword she had only just learned how to use.

Nara drained the overpriced pint of weak ale and picked at the capon's bones on her plate. She wished to avoid The Rose and Lion's crowded tavern, and Nara found it a small pleasure to have her meal here outside. The inn surrounded her on three sides: half-timbered stucco walls with open galleries facing the central courtyard. Nara did not mind the odor of the stable just across the yard or the bustle of a mail-coach arriving to swap its team of horses. When the children came out, afterwards, it was an unexpected joy. It had been many years since Nara had been much around children. At least, other than the children of army-camp followers. Those were the offspring of laundresses, nurses, or whores, or soldiers who brought their families with them to war, and whatever their age, they were no longer children.

Hooves rang on the cobblestones as two riders passed through the old stone archway into the courtyard. The setting sun blazed behind them and stretched the shadows of the men and their horses long before them. Nara tensed at the unmistakable high-crowned, flat-brimmed hats of the Dark Guards. This was confirmed when their emblems, a spiky seven-pointed star, glared

silver from their hat-fronts and their chests. Officially, they were the Justicants. The Archbishop's constables and, when 'necessary', inquisitors. Her sword felt heavy at her side, and even if she still had her gift, to use the Art in such a place was...unthinkable.

The battle of Corrick's Ridge, five years ago. The Queen's army still held these rocky bluffs, amid the ruins of an ancient castle. They were outnumbered three to one. Before them lay a field of parched barley, scattered with corpses. Thick, fetid smoke of the guns—cannons killed Nara's comrades by the dozen at each blast, and still the blasts went on.

The enemy advanced, sending their gunners first: hundreds, if not thousands of them. The long cord matches sparked to ignite their matchlock muskets. And ignite them, Nara did. Standing atop the last of the ruined towers, she called to the fire's hunger and the wind's rage. The matches caught their sleeves and raced into their padded jerkins, seeking the powder flasks at their belts. Futile screams, frantic slaps at the flames, the inhuman dance of panic and pain. And then, conflagration....

The little girl froze, gaping up at the riders even as the other children quickly ran inside. A woman rushed from the tavern's main room and pulled the child by hand. "Rhea, please, come inside, let's not bother these good soldiers of the Lord." The woman was young, full in the hips and chest as Nara was not. Wavy strands of dark brown hair spilled loose from the plain bonnet she wore in obedience to the Church's modesty laws. Nara saw her glance at the younger Guard then look away quickly, in a fear that seemed more of this man himself than merely the authority of his office.

After a moment, the girl Rhea complied, still staring at the Dark Guards with open-mouthed awe. When the men's backs turned as they dismounted, Nara saw the young mother's look change from fear to a pure hatred that she herself would no longer dare.

The Guards strode across the courtyard, glancing from face to face at the drunken wastrels and curious travelers peering out from the inn's windows and doorways. Beneath the shadows cast by their hats and above the gloom of their black greatcoats were the faces of ordinary men. One was older, heavy in the jowls and Nara guessed bald beneath his hat, which bore a badge of rank. The other was young, fresh from the battlefield by the restless darting of his eyes and the jerky limp of a man either still wounded or unused to his disability.

The older one unrolled parchments and held them against a beam of the inn's half-timbered wall while the younger guard nailed them down. The hammer blows seemed impossibly loud in Nara's ears. Of course, the first poster was for Julian Abehko, the Queen's greatest general. The printer's ink had blurred his ebony features into a blot of shadow. His bounty—now higher than most workmen might earn in a decade's labor—seemed almost to defy the common knowledge that he had long since fled. Some said he had already sailed west to his homeland of Aedar, but those who Nara trusted held that he led the last holdouts on the fortress isle of Cadarlion. Among those last who still fought, if she had not already fallen, was the second of Guards' fugitives: the great war-witch Toreth Varon. Nara's command of the Old Art had always seemed weak next to such power as Lady Varon's, whose calls to wind and fire breathed fury greater than entire companies of cannon.

Of course, the third and last poster was for Nara herself.

The guards turned back, their gazes sweeping out once more. Nara stiffened her spine and clenched her jaw, hoping they would see only her present guise. The man Tavis Wiltshire absently twisted the longer tuft of his goatee between his fingertips, until Nara stopped this, realizing it could weaken the glue that held the false beard. Tavis's sharp-featured face was caked with the dust of the road. That he had been a soldier of the Crown was unmistakable. His

worn and mended leather doublet still showed the queen's green, though it had been dyed darker. The dye stained his once-white shirt where sweat had leached it out under the arms. The basket-hilted broadsword at his belt had the queen's face worked into the hilt as a token of mourning. The man's slightly crooked nose and the small scars on his face might speak of battle, or merely a taste for brawling. Nara hoped that Tavis's blue eyes showed courage. Not fear.

The younger guard limped towards Nara. He stood uncomfortably close. Fierce contempt marred a boyish face that Nara might have once found handsome. A fuzz of pale blonde hair spilled down his neck. His thin face was shaven. There was a pistol in his belt and his hand hovered near it. The so-called apple of sin bobbed large in his skinny throat as he said, "Have you your papers?"

"Of course," Nara said, in a low, flat rasp. As the guard unfolded the forged passport, she continued, "Tavis Wiltshire of Jarnbrook. I swore the oath. No need for trouble, my brothers." Nara glanced towards the older guard and then back to the younger. It hurt her throat to speak in this voice. Sir Tavis was becoming known as a man of few words.

"Why are you still armed?" The young guard clenched the papers in one fist, the other resting on the grip of his pistol. It was one of the new flintlocks, Nara noticed. Even her powers had been little use against them.

"Now that we are at peace," Nara said, more towards the older, steadier-seeming guard, who had now approached, "I am sure you will clear the brigands from the Holy Regent's roads, in due time. But until then...." Nara shrugged her padded shoulders.

"Who says you're not among them? Plenty of the queen's troops have turned highwayman." The blonde guard sneered and gripped Tavis's papers tighter. He seemed about

to rip them to pieces. Then Tavis would no longer exist. And it would not matter what became of him.

The older guard touched the young one's arm. "We'll have time for brigands once the realm is cleansed of witches. Tell me, brother, you've not seen any of these vile temptresses, have you?" The older man gestured at the wanted posters.

Nara forced herself not to laugh or even smile at the thought of being a 'temptress'. "No, can't say I have," Tavis croaked out. She stared at her own poster. It was a wood-block print, a skillful copy of a portrait she'd sat for some five years ago. That had been the work of Queen Rozalia's own court painter. It was just after the battle of Corrick's Ridge had won Nara Darlanth her fame. She looked young and beautiful, but enough herself that the portrait was dangerous. Nara tried to gage whether a stranger could recognize her from it. Not as she did with the sweat beginning to drip cold down her neck. The reward was up to five hundred silver, now; twice that, if alive.

The older guard stared hard at Nara. At first she feared he saw through her disguise, but after a long moment he turned back to their horses. "There's nothing more here, Paloc," he said to his companion. The young man tossed Tavis Wiltshire's papers back to Nara, but the wind took them. They landed with one edge grazing a dungpile. Paloc saw this and smiled coldly before limping to his mount and spurring it away.

As evening drew to night, what passed for ordinary life returned to the inn's courtyard. The drunken revelry was subdued only by the few who still partook of it, though their doomed enthusiasm seemed an attempt to make up for that. Nara knew that Tavis's quiet ways and slow

pace of drinking made him stand out, but she would retire to her room before the brawling began. Usually.

Tonight, she drew other attention.

At first she did not recognize the girl's young mother, now missing the modest cap and with her bodice opened low. She was entertaining a table of other ex-soldiers. They were ugly roughnecks with leering eyes. They were swatting her backside and groping at her breasts. Soon one grew too forceful and her playful laughter stopped. That fierce look she'd aimed at the Dark Guards came to her eyes again.

"Only man I'd let do that was my husband," she said as she pulled away from the brute, "and I'll say he's got reason enough, now, to haunt you." Her smile was cold.

"Aye but his ghost can't fuck, and I'm bloody well alive," the drunk said, pushing himself against her as he tried to pull up her skirt. The men nearby laughed as they leered at her. As if they awaited their turn.

The woman backed away from him, but he pinned her against the wall. Instead of calling forth a ghost to defend her, she punched him quick and hard in the nose.

"Fucking whore!" he wailed. Blood splattered from his nostrils. "You've got to be a fucking witch to hit like that, don't she, boys?"

His comrades joined in: "You heard her, she called up spirits—devils even, I'd swear it!" "Oh, you'll burn, bitch!" The man staggered out into the street with his two friends at his side. A mob of three, hoping to grow their numbers.

Nara realized she was touching the bridge of her nose, the bump of an old break, in at least physical sympathy. A vision came of her husband, raging. "Another ale, please," she said, in Tavis's rasp, as the tavern girl passed.



The young woman seemed startled by the normality of the request. "Right up. Just...give me a moment." She returned quickly with not a pint, but a pitcher of ale. And an extra tankard. "I'm done for the night," she said to the innkeeper's wife.

"Then you're done here, aye. Get out."

"I'm a paying customer," the woman shouted, throwing some coin at her former employer. "Besides, who else you going to get in this rat-hole?"

"Plenty—that don't brings trouble with them." The older woman stooped to pick up the coins.

The young woman sat herself down at Nara's table and filled both of the pewter tankards. Her fist was already swelling and the two middle knuckles were split. She blotted at the blood with her apron. She took a great gulp of hers before Nara could even bring her own ale to her lips. The woman's eyes were red-rimmed. Nara could not think of what to say, so she asked for her name. Her voice was more gentle, tone and pitch almost slipping.

"Aislynn," she said. Aislynn set down her tankard and clawed at her hair, the dark waves spilling wild. "You're...Sir Tavis Wiltshire, aren't you. Made good work of those Dark Guards, you did. Though running them through with your sword would have been better."

"Not Sir anymore," Nara said, back to the low rasp but smiling kindly. "Had to give it up with my oath to the Regent. But that's the price of peace I suppose." She drank more ale, hoping the pause would end that line of conversation. "And what could I get from killing them, except hanged or worse?"

Aislynn scooted her chair closer and laid a hand on Nara's shoulder. "My husband was in the Ninth Horse," she said, fingering the insignia embossed into the leather. "Perhaps you knew him? Carlan Brant, fell at Wickham Bridge. Two years ago."

Nara nodded, lying. "A good man." She had not been with the Ninth Horse. Tavis's uniform said that he had. Nara's midnight cloak of a battle witch would mean death. She had buried under a lightning-struck tree after the defeat. According to the Old Art, that meant when the time came to reclaim it, it would have absorbed some of the lightning's power.

Aislynn's hand moved to Nara's—Tavis's—chest and Nara felt a moment of panic. She had never had much of a bosom, but still bound it down to approximate Tavis's hard muscle. And beneath doublet and shirt and the cloth bindings, she still felt that hand.

Aislynn smiled. "That he was. And I do miss him. But, as you say, we're at peace now, and the nights are long." She leaned her own ample breasts forward. Nara stopped her hand when it tried to stroke lower.

"I...am sure that they do. I mean, are." Nara coughed. "That little girl who was out playing before the Guards came. Is she your daughter?"

"Yes. My dearest, little Rhea."

"I might rather spend time with her, if you'd let me."

To Nara's shock, Aislynn's face contorted with fury. "You vile creature!"

"No, no! Not like that!" Nara ducked the punch and pleaded, hands raised and open. Even with her own strange longings, and the horrors of war, she could hardly imagine such depravity. "I only meant...I had a family once. And I still miss them. I would love to pretend that there's still innocence."

Aislynn looked into Nara's eyes for a long moment, without speaking. Nara feared she saw through her, saw who she was. "Yes, yes of course. But, you'd be surprised." Aislynn sniffed, the tears threatening to spill. "The Guards..."

"Nothing surprises, in the wake of war." Nara held Aislynn's hand. It was calloused from hard work, the split knuckles only the latest of the damage. "It must be hard, on your own with her. And having to...shame yourself." Nara shook her head. She did not want to think about all that Aislynn must have endured in her 'profession'.

"I'm not ashamed of what I do." Aislynn stroked her other hand up Nara's arm, beneath the loose billow of sleeve. The flesh was sinewy from the sword-training, and from farm work in Nara's youth, but Nara wondered if Aislynn noticed the arm's relative hairlessness. "For you, it would be only four silver." Aislynn brought Nara's hand to her exposed cleavage. Nara closed her eyes and envied the smooth, soft skin.

"I will...give you all that you are due." Nara brought Aislynn's hand to her mouth, the false beard grazing the split knuckles as she kissed the tavern strumpet's hand as one would a noblewoman's. Or a queen's, if only the cold jewel of her ring.

Paloc knelt in the darkened chapel. A thin ray of light pierced down from the ceiling, even though it was nearly night. Once, he would have wondered how they accomplished this without flame, and more often than he cared to admit the doubt still gnawed at his heart.

He'd been ill at ease all day, ever since he and Mardon had gone to the Rose and Lion. He had known the inn well, as a youth riding beside his father as he drove a mail coach all along the Royal Highway. Paloc could hardly believe that Aislynn, sweet Aislynn still plied her accursed trade there. He remembered his first night in her embrace. He was a lad of barely seventeen. She had not been much older but already a woman, and a soldier's bride at that. And yet, for all her sin, it was not she who had been punished.

Paloc rose, and once more his wound pulled at him. Three years now since the battle of Corrick's Ridge and the witch-fire that had been both his ruin and his salvation. They had said it had been a miracle that the flames had spared his face—"the face of a pure and stalwart angel," the bishop had said as he prayed over Paloc's ravaged body—and his brothers in faith said that the damage was a blessing as well. They said it freed him from sin and temptation. He did not feel freed. The thick scars covered him from chest to knee. The worst cruelly bound him at his groin. He would never again pleasure a woman.

The creak of the heavy oaken door and a spill of firelight broke the peace of the chapel. Paloc turned to find Mardon and a trio of rough-looking strangers. One had both hands clamped over his nose. Blood covered his face and had dripped all over the front of his jerkin.

"These men asked to speak with you," Mardon said, his voice and scowl making his contempt for the bloodied drunkards quite plain. "Some sort of...disturbance at the Rose and Lion."

"Ay, brother Paloc. That serving wench there, name of Aislynn, she's a witch. We were merely...eating our supper when, for no reason at all, she struck him," said one of the uninjured men.

"Broke me nose, she did," said the wounded man.

"She had all the strength of a man, nay a warrior. Tis not natural," the other man said. The bloodied drunk bent, coughing. Mardon caught him by the arm to steady him.

Paloc tried to keep his face blank at the mention of her name. "I see," he said. "I would agree that it seems unnatural, perhaps hints of sorcery. What other evidence do you have? Was there a cat? That might have been her familiar. Or was there some scent of the devil's sulfur?"

"I can't right say there was a cat, sir...but yes, there might've been a smell. Like rotten eggs, isn't it?"

"Garbage, most likely," Mardon said. "Good brother, need I remind you that we, the Regent's Justicants, are charged with guarding the realm from the foul threat of witchcraft and devilry? And not, dare I say, the wicked conspiracies of...a common tavern brawl?" Mardon let go of the drunk's arm, letting him stumble. His companions caught him.

"Captain, with all due respect," Paloc said, locking eyes with his superior. He'd always thought the man weak in his devotion, as he had once been. "I would not be so hasty to make light of this...incident. Who knows what this woman Aislynn might be to the traitors? Remember how our brother Justicants caught the queen herself at the Black Whale in Garanbrook?"

Mardon paused to consider, the creases deepening in his weathered face. "Perhaps. There could be something with that arrogant Wiltshire fellow as well. He's a bad sort, that one. Gather the second watch. This might actually be worth our while."

The drunkard leaned against the wall, snuffling blood and watching them. "She was...she was calling to the dead, she was. Calling forth spirits."

Even coming from such a fool as this, Paloc felt a chill pierce his spine. Necromancy, the foulest form of witchcraft, was worse even than those who threw flames. Some nights he could still see the slain, friend and foe, rising from their rest on the battleground, lurching on broken limbs, dragging their entrails behind them, their blind onion-skin eyes staring.

"Then we must protect our countrymen from such horrors." Ignoring the pain he knelt once more in that impossible shaft of light, willing the Almighty's purity to flow through him, to guide his judgment and his weapons, and to someday cleanse the anger from his heart.

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*You have gone mad*, Nara's mind shouted as she followed Aislynn's swaying hips to her room, or rather Tavis's.

The two sputtering tapers they lit might as well be bright as day for all of Nara's fear. Sweat ran chill down her back. Aislynn undressed. Nara fumbled to help her unlace her stays. Strange how the knots were so difficult when they were not one's own.

*Secret conclaves in darkest forest, bonfires and ancient stones. Naked bodies, male and female, writhing in ecstatic dance. The lost thoughts of the wind, of fire, of storm. Of natural desire, and strange. Of freedom.*

*Of calling fire to her will, guiding its billowing maw. All-consuming.*

*Queen Rozalia, on her throne. Smooth bronze skin young and radiant. Eyes dark as a cannon's death-mouth. The sword light on Nara's cloaked shoulders, tapping each and then the metal cool atop her bowed head. Warm hand, cold ring. She had spoken, in her voice of warm seas and fallen empires, about a new age for humanity, which the Old Art would now defend. They, her witches and sisters of battle, would prove to man and God that this was no evil, their power no secret and no shame....*

Aislynn plucked open the buttons of Tavis's doublet and shirt. Nara stopped her before she reached the bindings. "You don't want to see me," Nara said, hoarsely. "I've seen many soldiers," Aislynn said. She unbuckled Nara's sword belt and set the weapon aside, then stroked Nara's thigh through her rough wool breeches. Her hand moved to the false padding at the crotch. "Few were as kind or as handsome as you."

"No, I—" Nara's breath caught as Aislynn's fingertip reached behind the fake scrotum and touched her where she could feel. Nara glanced down, the shamed pain behind the lie too real. "I was wounded, there. I...I can't. Do you understand?"

The pity in Aislynn's green eyes flooded Nara's own vision. "Well, you can... You can kiss me. All you want. Even on the mouth."

So she did.

Aislynn's flesh was soft beneath her. Nara closed her eyes and on the blood-dark lids were those naked forest dances, chill night air on her skin. Secrets and sin. Flesh in firelight as there was now. Her flesh that had known battle; Aislynn's that was also marked, but by the life that had grown inside her. This belly, these breasts that had nourished a child as Nara's own had not. She kissed as she would want to be kissed—as she remembered—and took Aislynn's moans and cries as her guide. Her heart racing, fingers trembling, she parted her depths, touched her tongue to an equal moistness.

*Stolen nights when the army camped, men long lost to cannon or sword or wife. The queen, her gaze imperious and undaunted, even as the flames bloomed beneath her. Even her husband. William. She had loved him once.*

After, Aislynn had brought Nara back up to her mouth. They kissed long, tongues entwining, Aislynn caressing her back, her shoulders, her neck. Then her cheek.

They wrenched apart as the beard dangled from Nara's chin. The glue had failed. Such was her life without magic.

"I can explain." Nara realized too late that she spoke in her own voice.

"What means this?" Aislynn cried. She ripped the beard and moustache away. This tore at Nara's skin, stinging it raw. "Who are you? *What* are you?" Aislynn bent into the pile of her clothes and emerged brandishing a dagger.

"Aislynn, sister, I mean you no harm." Nara backed away, hands raised head-high in a gesture of both surrender and defense. The candles flickered. The fire whispered its hunger, calling out to her in its thoughtless breath. As if it were still within Nara's power to awaken it into an inferno.

*No.* It was a small blade. If meant, she could withstand it. And Nara could at least tell herself that she did not fear death.

Small fists pounded at the doorway. "Momma! They're-, they're here!" Rhea's voice drew Aislynn to immediately unbar the door. The girl burst inside, almost before Aislynn could cover herself with Nara's own cloak. The child buried herself in her mother's embrace, even as Nara saw that Aislynn still held the dagger.

Nara would give anything to feel so safe again. To feel that others' power could still guard her from danger. Or to still have the Art and believe that her magic could overcome any threat that rose against her.

Nara took up her sword, but did not yet draw it from its sheath as she stepped towards the doorway. Down in the inn's courtyard, she could see the Dark Guards. There were five this time, bearing blades, torches, and the ranting of the drunk that Aislynn had beaten.

"She grew to some nine foot high, she did, else she could never've bested us. Some cursed sorcery, that. And I'm a praying man, mind you. And...there was some three more of 'em, I swear it, turned into spotted cats and even a bird I think. You best be well guarded against



these devils, I tell you." The man's nose must not have actually been broken for him to be so talkative, Nara thought. Her lips twitched into a grin, but only for a moment.

Then she saw a shadowed figure, given away by his halting gait. Paloc. Something over his shoulder reflected the torchlight with a metallic gleam. He hefted it as he mounted the stairs towards them. It was a war hammer, heavy as a sledge but concentrated on a narrow head, and backed with a vicious spike. It was meant to pierce armor. The Dark Guards used it to shatter bone.

Nara slammed the door and barred it fast, for whatever little good it would do. Turning to Aislynn, she said, "You may need that knife, indeed, and not against me. But let's not let it come to that." Nara's glance fell to Rhea, whose sobbing quieted. The child's eyes were blank fear. On the battlefield, she had too often seen such fear even in grown men.

"Open in the name of His Reverend Majesty the Archbishop!" Paloc's rough young voice shouted through the door. Booted feet clamored outside to join him. The war hammer broke open the door at the latch in a burst of splinters.

Nara drew her sword, feeling its heavy weight. It felt like her arm sloshed through water. Everything slowed. Except the whispers of the Art on her lips, the ancient language of winds and of fire, of its hunger, of destruction.

This was pure desperation. Nara knew she would fail. But she could not die without trying. She would fight for her life. Every breath of it. Love and suffering. What else was there? She closed her eyes to focus on the unseen world and tried to have faith in it. So close to the innocent faith she had had once. When she had prayed to the saints and the Virgin to save her mother, her father; to save herself from William's fists when he had been drinking. But their stone faces had been silent. Only the candle flames had stirred. She did not know then of her

powers. She would not have believed, then. But all there was in the world was belief. Hope against that long darkness.

A rush of wind, and the candles in the room were quenched. The small lick of flame jumped to Paloc's cloak as he heaved back for another blow. The fabric caught. He screamed as if the flames already burnt his flesh, not merely the thick black wool. The hammer crashed to the floor.

"Vile witchcraft!" his companion shouted, frantically beating at the flames.

"Yes." Nara stepped forward. Her sword was still in her sweat-damp grasp. She felt the pulse in her fist and flowing through her body. The world was alive with spirits and whatever ruled the things of nature. Her powers' return made her bold. Bold and foolish. "I am Nara Darlath. War-witch of Queen Rozalia's own guard. It is I that you have come for. Leave this woman and the girl alone."

*Tonight I die*, Nara thought. The thought was cold and somehow comforting. She was not so much afraid as she had been when William had tried to choke her and she had nothing against his strength. When she had thrashed like a caught fish and her kicking legs had merely tangled in her skirt. This would be a battle again. She remembered staring at the golden sunrise before battle and only hoping she would see another. She stood and blinked and felt the damp hot tears again.

Paloc ripped the cloak from his shoulders and drew the pistol from his belt. Shouts rose up from the Guards behind him, but Nara could only focus on the young man's face. Sweat ran from his forehead and his boyish features twisted into a mask of hate. "You burned me at Corrick's Ridge, but as you see you cannot again. I will see you blaze at the stake. I will see justice." His hand, with the pistol, was trembling.

*Justice.* She wished she still believed in such things. Nara could almost see again that line of soldiers writhing in the agony of her flames. But she focused on this man before her. She knew at once that the Art had once again left her. And even as her heart raced, she felt at peace.

Other Guards tried to push past Paloc as he froze in the doorway. But it was Aislynn who broke the impasse. "You bastards!" Aislynn raised the dagger high, the point stabbing downwards. Nara pulled Rhea away towards the window as the girl's mother lunged at the guard. "For Carlan, my love and my life!"

The blast was deafening. Nara's ringing ears were almost spared Aislynn's scream. Almost. Nara held Rhea close, shielding the child as other Guards fired. A bullet splintered the wooden shutters of the window open. The shutters banged against the outside wall and swung closed again.

Rhea screamed for her mother, her keening cries becoming that of some nameless beast, terrified and grieved. Nara had let herself cry like that, but only in the forest. Only when there was no one but the wolves or the spirits to see and hear her.

Outside, the wind raced with the growing storm. Nara gathered the child into her arms and rushed towards the window. The cobblestones loomed a dizzying three floors down. Mouthing prayers to saints and nature, Nara jumped.

The wind caught them just enough to break their fall. Nara felt the running landing hard in her knees. Bone scraped against bone. The point of her sword grated across the stones, raising sparks. The sparks were too sudden to be of use to her and they faded just as quickly. Nara's boots slapped at the cobblestones as they ran through the dark, narrow streets.

Paloc nearly wept with rage. The witch who had been the ruin of his life had been before him, and had escaped him. He reloaded his pistol, clumsy in his haste, and fired at Nara's fleeing shadow, not caring now if he hit the child.

"What shall we do with her, brother sergeant?" His comrade's words made Paloc at last turn from staring into the night and his failure.

The wench Aislynn lay at his feet, bleeding and gasping for breath. "Paloc, please...you remember me, don't you? You were...a sweet boy once. Please, forgive me, have mercy...." She coughed, blood spilling from her lips.

He knelt beside her. Memory and desire tore at his mutilated body. "Aislynn, of course I remember." He stroked her hair, wrapped a curl around his finger. He supposed it was his shot that struck her, high in the chest on the right side. It was stealing her breath. It might be minutes, or hours, as he'd known from too many brothers in arms he had buried. "Aislynn, don't fear death. There is still time to repent of your sins...."

"Aye, she'll confess them all on the rack, or under the rippers. Her sins, and how she came to be in company of the fugitive witch." The torturer, Garav, sounded as always too eager for his work. "Where's that cursed healer? Let's not let the bitch go to waste."

Paloc realized he had only a moment to save her from this. His strong hands wrapped around her throat. "Aislynn, forgive me...." Her eyes widened with fear, and she struggled, with more strength than he thought she could still possess. Perhaps it was true, she was also a witch, drawing strength from the spirits of the dead.

"Paloc, what are you doing?" The healer, Roderic, crouched at his side and firmly grasped his wrists. Paloc's hands went numb. The feeling returning in prickles after he'd released his grip on Ainslynn's throat. Roderic stared at him, open in his contempt.

The healer. Long had Paloc despised the man and all his ilk. If their gift was true, why had they not been able to help him? It was easier to question these men than the gods who had cursed him.

Paloc stood and limped away. He could hear the gasp as Aislynn's breath returned. He knew this was not the last cry he would hear from her, once Garav set to his vicious work. But for now, the night was still. He stepped outside and the night stretched before him, the fathomless dark lit only by licks of flame and a sickle of moon.

Hooves rang on stone. The Dark Guard bore down on them, sword at ready. The storm clouds darkened. Lightning lashed across the sky.

*"Alvay nafarium salvast, locor fadvel soltaric..."* Nara's words became a whispered breath, conserving her energy for the Art's power. She crouched low, shielding Rhea with her body as the swordsman bore down on them.

The lightning did not obey her. Nara unsheathed her sword and raised it and only just parried his blade as he bore down on her. Rhea screamed as the blades clanged and Nara felt the impact in her bones. The swords met blade on blade, gouging both. Nara thought that her sword came close to breaking. Nara twisted her blade as he rose past her. She shuddered as her sword cut into his belly and he fell.

The sword slipped from his fingers and landed at Nara's feet. The horse screamed and reared, dumping its rider into the street. He lay gasping, clutching his wound. "Dear God...have mercy...." His blood poured across the cobblestones and into the gutter.

More by voice, Nara recognized him as the older guard who had accosted her earlier. He was the first person she had ever killed without using magic. That made it feel more like murder.

And he had seemed a reasonable man. But then, Aislynn had been a kind and spirited woman. A good mother to this child. Nara stepped between Rhea and the body. The girl still stared, open-mouthed. She no longer screamed.

Nara caught and calmed the black horse. As she hoisted Rhea into the saddle and then swung up behind her, she realized the child had stopped crying.

*Like the camp followers' children*, she thought. She'd seen more than one not even cry at the death of their mother before them, their young eyes more blank and hardened than veterans who'd battled for years.

Nara spurred the horse eastward towards a town still in ruins. Houses lay crumbled from the cannonade, though some of their dark forms bristled with scaffolding. Ancient walls cast long shadows in the moonlight. The narrow breech almost glowed in the dim night. Nara had to ride towards it three times before horse leaped through.

"Is my mum...dead?" Rhea's was almost faint as breath as they galloped across the crisp moonlight fields.

"Yes," Nara lied. She hated to snuff out the girl's hope, but she meant to spare her the thought of what her mother might be going through. Everyone knew the Dark Guards used torture. The queen's magistrates had reserved it for traitors and murderers. But the Archbishop's 'Justicants' used it against anyone they cared to. Even the families of those who earned their wrath. If Nara hadn't rescued Rhea, they might have gone at her first and forced her mother to watch.

"She's with my father, then." Rhea sniffed. "And the queen, and all those soldiers. And that man you..." She absently petted the horse's neck. "Do you think she's happy?"

"Yes," Nara said. "It's all peace, they say."

The girl fell silent for many long moments as they raced through the night.

They pretended to be father and daughter, with Rhea trying to seem a normal if very shy child. Private conversation had become limited to naming the horse and their false selves. Rhea named the horse Shadow and decided to stay Rhea, “because that is who I am and I haven’t done anything wrong,” but would take whatever last name Nara chose for her new alias “like when you get married.” And so Nara named herself for her husband. William Magnus. A dead man’s name.

It was a week later when they truly spoke again. They were on the road towards the last outpost, Caraldon. Each town had more whispers that former general Julian Abeko still held the fortress against the Dark Guards. The countryside was growing more remote and they camped in a forest clearing. Nara kept watch in the night. Rhea twitched in a nightmare. It became more violent and the girl cried out and then woke. She came over to Nara and just let her hold her. Nara wrapped the girl in her cloak and listened to the crackle of the dying fire, the girl’s fast and then calming breaths, the sounds of the animals in the night.

"Will you...teach me? To be a witch, like you?" Rhea said at last.

*The Art chooses its vessels, the old woman had said. And Nara, still trembling from what she had done: the look of terror on William's face as breath swept out of his lungs, the choking panic. His fists, red with her blood, unclenching at last. His face asleep in innocence, handsome and so young. His eyelids still warm when she kissed them closed. And now the forest green above, the blowing spatters of gleaming sunlight, this bent-backed crone leading her through pathless tracks and into secrets.*

Nara sighed, long and deep. Of course it would come to this. Her teacher had first become her second mother, though she was a grown woman then. But she had been pulled from

her life and her world like Rhea had been. Nara knew what it was love, and to grieve. The Art's power was life, and death.

"There's few the Art chooses, Rhea. And...you will wish it does not choose you."



## Powder and Blood

The mob was taking the head to the wigmaker. The actress, Yvette, watched from her small apartment and decided to follow them. She wanted to see what would come of it, and if things did not go well she hoped she could hold some kind of sway over them. She could work a crowd, yes, but this was not her usual stage.

The head belonged to a woman. But whatever they did to her now did not matter. Or at least Yvette told herself this. The adolescent boy who carried the head claimed it was a duchess who had been a close companion of Marie-Antoinette. The actress had heard the perverted rumors about just how close they had been. “We’re dressing her up for a little visit,” one of the women said, “taking her to the prison to see that bitch of a queen.” For once the actress kept her mouth shut and crowded with them into the small shop.

It was past midnight and the wigmaker had clearly been roused from sleep. “What is this?” he said when confronted with the head. His bleary eyes blinked and he flinched when he saw. Though to Yvette his question seemed one less of fact than what the People meant by bringing this thing to him.

She knew this man, the wigmaker. He had lived and worked in her neighborhood for years, perhaps decades, long before she had come to Paris. But he too had come as stranger. His name was Giovanni and he was from Naples, and had never lost his accent though he had told Yvette he’d come to France before she was even born. Close-cropped gray hair sprouted from his head, not much longer than what had been shaven from his chin. He invited the mob in with some ceremony—the actress, at least, grinned his exaggerated bow and the graceful sweep of his

arm. She gauged most of mob too drunk to see this as insulting. Good, for his sake. After all he had made his living powdering hair in the style of the aristocrats, though in this neighborhood his clients were never aristocrats. The duchess, if that was who she truly was, would be the first. Yvette herself had sat in his chair a very few times, years ago. When she was being kept by the chevalier and he would invite her out. She felt strange thinking about this now. There was dried blood on her jacket. But she would think about anything not to think about the blood.

The wigmaker was apparently trying to summon as much dignity as possible while wearing only a nightshirt with his bare legs sticking out. There were about two dozen people in the shop and he nudged his way through them. The actress made her way through, to see, even if she really did not want to see. But she felt she had to stay close to him and the head and try, if it came to it, to control the way things went. If they could be controlled.

The head was as ghastly as she had expected. The jaw hung open. The duchess seemed near forty and her teeth were not good. Yvette had always found it somewhat amusing that it was the aristocrats whose teeth went first, or so said the chevalier. Too many bonbons. He had been young and had a kind smile and very little money, at least by the standards of the bejeweled ghosts they had danced among. The severed head's features were too twisted for Yvette to recognize her, to know if she had ever seen the woman then, alive. The head's eyes were open. They were blue.

The blood she did not want to think about was not her own. That had come earlier, in the attack on the palace. The past several nights there had been the attacks on the jails. Even Yvette found it ironic that a revolution begun only three years ago with an attack on the nearly empty Bastille with slaughters at ordinary prisons with mostly ordinary criminals in them. But she had no wit for this blood only last night. The crowd had been killing the prisoners because the

rumors said that the aristocrats had bribed them to attack the People. Yvette had not really believed this. But they were all under threat of destruction. The royalist Austrian army was marching on their homeland and the duke who commanded them said he would kill every man, woman and child in Paris. So they lashed out at the enemies that were here within reach.

When the crowd came, the prisoners only fought back for their lives.

In everything she had done before, the actress had felt brave. There was the surging in her heart. The feeling of being invincible. The People stood together and they could not be stopped. With them, she felt like she was a giant. Like they all were. They would never be afraid of anyone ever again. Never bow to anyone. They would get what they were owed. They would work and their work would earn them enough to live like human beings. There would be bread, and roofs that did not leak. Of course these things had not come, but there was the hope of them. The dream of them. And this was almost enough. So they fought harder.

But not this. At the jail, the actress saw a man she knew among the prisoners. He was a thief. She had slept with him one night perhaps a year ago and had seen the brands on his shoulders from the old regime. His sergeant's bars, he called them. Yvette did not remember his name. But he had recognized her and called out to her when they were killing him. She froze and did nothing. When his throat was cut and they had gone on to the next person, she went over to him. She knelt next to him and pretended to search through his clothes for something to take from him. To steal from the thief. His hand was quivering and covered with blood and he grabbed hold of her hand tightly and held on while he died. His gasps came choking out of his slashed throat. She let him hold on to her, so he would not be alone.

She would sell her skirt had been soaked in his blood. It was worn out anyway. But the jacket was, for her, too expensive to get rid of for this reason. And winter was coming on. The jacket was red and the blood would not show much. But she would know it was there.

The wigmaker Giovanni held the head reverently. Yvette did not want to tell him that she was almost certain the head was not that of the duchess. True, the head was blonde, and might have been the proper age. It was hard to tell from the creases in the ghost-white skin around the staring eyes. The head was dead as a fish and stank worse than one. The death-locked jaw seemed frozen in a scream. “I am humbled to work on...something of such great importance,” the wigmaker said. “Only my finest creation will suit. Would you...fine citizens please excuse me while I retrieve it from my storage room?”

Murmurs ran through the crowd. “Don’t you run off on us, you greasy fag,” said the boy who had carried in the head. It was ironic, him calling anyone else greasy. His hair hung in strings beneath his liberty cap. He was skinny and his hands looked too big for his body. At least his hands were full of the severed head and he could not strike out with the punch that was tensing in his arms. Yvette knew the look of this. She had learned long ago how to be wary of men.

She nudged her way through the crowd to follow the wigmaker. The storeroom was dusty. There were crates packed with straw and the straw had strewn all over the plain plank floor. The wigmaker turned to confront her. “What are you doing here?” He blinked at her in the dim light, as if trying to place her name.

“They’re going to kill you. Once you’re done.”

A moment passed. Then Giovanni laughed. It was not with mirth. “I am an old man. If my death comes...I am not so sorry.”

“Please. I can’t let that happen. Listen to me.”

The wigmaker reached into a crate and took out a huge swell of curled horsehair. The wig was formed in an imitation of a hot-air balloon, such as had first been flown above Paris almost a decade earlier. It was made for the wearer’s head to resemble the basket, with the wig seeming to float above. There was a vast array of ribbons and ornamentation throughout. The balloon was a patchwork of garlands and rosettes. A dyed-red lock flickered upward as the flame that would allow its flight. “This was my masterpiece. Sadly out of date, now. But at last it will be worn.”

“I am telling you, get out of here. They can put it on her for you. Run out the back way while you can.” Yvette glared at him. He did not flinch from her night-dark eyes, like some men. She had a pistol in her jacket and she considered taking it out, to force him. It was not loaded. She liked to point it at people, knowing she could not kill them. But they did not know that. She enjoyed making people beg her for their lives. There was the pure joy of that moment when they backed down. When they gave in to her power, and then she could be gracious and let them think they owed her every day they breathed thereafter.

Unlike those she made beg, this man was innocent.

She was convinced of this. She knew him, if not well. His only crime was to be a wigmaker and to be foolish enough to answer when the mob pounded on his door.

“My wife is upstairs. I can’t abandon her. That I am sure you understand.”

“Take her with you. You don’t want to know...what some of these men will do. Even to an old woman.” Yvette was still a young woman and well aware of what some men could do.

He was silent for a moment. He looked over the crates, the things of his life they contained. “I do not believe she cares, now. We lost our son, did you know that? He was

conscripted. Died for the Republic, from pneumonia, before he could even fire a shot.” He carried the wig on its blank wooden head towards the shop and the mob.

“So tell them. They will respect you.” Yvette hoped this would be true. The People should be impressed with his sacrifice. “Though maybe you should say that he died in battle.”

“Why should I dishonor him with lies?” Giovanni’s voice was soft as he moved towards the main room of the shop. He stepped into it, back into the crowd. There was a forced smile on his face and he carried the wig with an exaggerated grandeur. Like a servant presenting some splendid dish to his lord. Or at least an unskilled actor playing such a servant.

The boy who had carried the head was now holding it—her—at waist level, facing him. He was making the duchess appear to be sucking his cock. He moaned and cried out and the mob cheered him. Yvette did not look closely at him, did not want to know how much of this he was actually doing.

She looked over the mob. Many faces, both old and young, were blighted by disease or bore the marks of violent misfortune. Backs were stooped by years of labor. Fingers, teeth and limbs were twisted or missing. Yvette thought of how much of her life had been luck. Sickesses she had not caught or had got mildly. Bullets and swords that had struck someone else in front of or beside her. Men she knew to avoid, especially when they were drinking. Wits that had not been beaten out of her, yet. Children she had not borne, and had not had to bury. The one baby that had died inside her, very early, and did not take Yvette to the grave with him. He would have been the chevalier’s first son.

“I believe this will suit her, in her audience with the queen.” Giovanni held high his creation. The boy stopped abusing the head, and in his clumsy stopping, he dropped it. It rolled across the floor. It stopped at Yvette’s feet. Face up.

Her heart in her throat, she picked it up. The skin was cold. The head was heavy and felt like stone. She tried to pretend that was what it was. A head from a statue.

“Yes, we’ll make her ready.” Yvette made herself cackle. She thought it sounded unconvincing. A bad line at a rehearsal. But for this there were no rehearsal. She felt their eyes on her. She handed the head to the wigmaker and for a moment their hands touched. There was coarse hair on the backs of his hands. Giovanni’s fingers were strong, a workman’s, despite his delicate trade.

He set the head down in the seat of a chair, leaning the face towards the back. He combed out the corpse’s natural hair and patiently worked through the places where the dirt and blood had matted it. His patience reminded Yvette of her father, dead all these years. But despite how strangely gentle he was, the wigmaker worked quickly. He pinned the pale blonde wig to the head and arranged the curls around it. The balloon floated up towards the sky. Yvette had seen a real hot air balloon fly once. She had been a girl then and believed that if people could float up into the sky then anything was possible. Humankind could fly, or at least rise up to the heavens. Even if they were at the whim of the wind. It was not such a stretch to believe that people could make themselves equal. That people could raise themselves up and put an end to all the suffering.

She rubbed her hands on her jacket and tried to get the chill feel of the head to leave her. The dried blood on the fabric made it stiff.

“There, she is finished,” the wigmaker said. The mob cheered. Giovanni held the head aloft. “A wig befitting a lady of her station.”

*Merde*, the actress said under her breath. She knew the crowd would turn on him, and they did.

The boy held a long knife to his throat and another man cocked a pistol, saying “Are you saying this goddamn aristo is better than us?”

Giovanni shook his head and the boy’s knife drew blood.

Yvette’s pulse raced. This was the thief, over again. Only Giovanni had spoken foolishly, he had chosen to say this and must have known they would kill him. She wondered if it was his grief. If he was still a Catholic he could not take his own life, but he could make them take it for him. Maybe he was still superstitious enough to believe he would see his son again in paradise. One innocent man. She could do nothing about whatever had happened to this boy to make him cruel. Maybe his parents had died when he was young, as hers had. Leaving him abandoned to the world. Maybe the man with the pistol had buried a wife and a stillborn child when he could not afford to have a midwife at her labor. Maybe the woman who was leering at him and drawing out a rusty meat cleaver had buried three of her children. But now there was just this moment, the moment before they became killers. Or at least before they became killers again.

She had not lost her chevalier to the mob. He had supported the Revolution, despite it costing him what little remained of his wealth. He was from a military family and they had gained their lowest of noble titles from generations of service, and so he continued to serve France in the army of the Republic. As far as Yvette knew, he was still alive. She had not seen him in nearly a year. There were letters, without love. She had been with his body that last time.



But he was no longer the man he was. He had warned her that this would happen. It had with his father in the American war. But of course she did not listen.

“Enough,” Yvette said. At first too softly to be heard about the shouts of the mob. The boy punched Giovanni and the old man went down. The crowd swarmed above him, punching and kicking. The man with the pistol used it to push his way through the crowd towards him. Pointing it into the mob, at his own people. Yvette was sure that it was loaded. Her own pistol was not. She pointed it in the air and pushed her way towards the fallen wigmaker. “Enough! He was joking. Can’t you tell he was joking? Look at him! Look at this shop! He is poor. He is one of us. Goddamn it, stop this.”

Yvette bent over him and someone punched at her. A fist grazed her head and knocked off her cap. She grabbed hold of Giovanni’s sleeve. A punch to her ear connected and her head rang. She got hold of his arm and the kicks drove into her arms and legs. Half the mob was wearing wooden shoes with pointed toes. Some of them were not wearing shoes. All their feet were filthy from the shit in the streets. “Stop it!” she said again. Somebody shoved her and she lost her grip on him. “Please. He lost his son in our army. Fighting for the Republic. What can he say that outweighs that?”

At least some of them heard. The blows did not fall so thick. One of the women also told them to stop. One by one they backed away. Yvette stood and pulled Giovanni away from them. Her nose was bleeding. She let go of him to wipe it and he did not fall. There was another woman holding on to him. An older woman, in a now-torn nightgown. Giovanni rose to his knees and then his wife helped him to stand.

“It’s true,” his wife said. Her accent was heavier than his. Giovanni crouched down and held his head for a moment. He bled and wept. He reached down and picked up the head, which had been forgotten.

“Take her,” he said, passing the head to the scruffy boy who had brought her in. “Take the lady to her engagement.” He sighed. “Our son, he was not so much older than you.”

The crowd made their way out of the wig shop and carried the head into the street. Yvette watched them, hanging back for a moment. Giovanni’s wife dabbed at Yvette’s nose, causing her to flinch. “Thank you,” his wife said. “Stay here if you want. We will...take care of you. You always were a—”

Yvette left with the last of the mob, before Giovanni’s wife could find her words. She did not want to hear herself praised. Her head ached and she felt dizzy. There was something strange, off-balance to the world.

She looked back at Giovanni and he smiled weakly at her through his split lips. “Wait, there is something more. Won’t you tell them to wait?” So she told them.

His wife must have helped him up the stairs. They came to the second floor window. The head was set atop a pike now, high above all their heads. Floating with the hot air balloon atop it. Yvette watched him lean out of the window with a bellows in his hands, as his wife held him. He sprayed the white powder over the wig. It was a glistening cloud in the light of their torches and the moon and the stars. “Now it is perfect,” he said.

The crowd laughed as they bore the head towards the prison that held the queen. Yvette looked back up at the wigmaker and his work. “It is,” she said to herself. She started to follow the mob but then turned into an alley. She made her way through the streets of her neighborhood, avoiding those most likely to have robbers and keeping a close hold on her

unloaded pistol in case they appeared. Still somewhat dizzy, she made her way up the rickety steps to her tiny apartment. Yvette tried to sleep. There seemed no part of her body she could lie on that did not ache. It would be at least a week before she could be on stage again. And she needed that week's pay.

But she felt proud and brave again. The next morning she would wash her face in cold water, and her dark eyes would be bruised and swollen but there would still be life in them. And perhaps still some trace of innocence.

## Only for Fire

I imagine this is always how it happens: weapons and certainty bring out the worst in the human heart, or soul if you still think we have them. Many turned to God for their answers. I understood this—not all scientists are atheists, and I admit sometimes I was frightened by what we had learned to do. We were able to grow almost any part of our human machinery—eyes, ears, livers, hearts, just not quite the mysteries of the brain—from the infinite possibilities of embryos. At least we could during my graduate studies, when this was still allowed. We were creating life, and sometimes I was humbled by the responsibility, though I learned never to mention this to the men if I wanted their respect.

If you need a name from me, use Megan, but of course names are the first things you lose, the first of the chain of lies it's too easy to lose track of. Nobody's name here is their own. Joshua says you have to forget everyone you have ever known, or loved; Consuela says that it's just what fucking happens. I think I've finally stopped regretting that I never had children.

I was born in an age of hope—across the world, walls were falling and students stood against tanks—and came of age in another. When I cast my first vote, after almost a year volunteering for the campaign, I really believed we were finally defeating all the oppression of the past and launching a new age of opportunity. And we were, but it was so hard to hold onto. We laughed at absurd plots by shaved-headed idiots and the old men with their tea bags, but there was a cruelty, ancient and yet alive, within American and it was seething.

They came together when the world was supposed to be ending. Even as a student then I found it ironic that fundamentalist Christians were timing their Apocalypse with the end of the

Mayan calendar. Of course nothing happened, except 'end of the world' parties. The Incident was later. They rallied their followers with more talk of the End Times while we blinked at the news on our cell phone screens. Enough of the military went with the Holy Dominion. The South fell and then the Plains. They overtook the boarded-up towns of the countryside that they called "the Real America." They turned the abandoned factories into fortresses. Then the Christian Soldiers marched onward—against us.

We stopped them, for a while at least. The government held them off for a dozen years. Raids and counter-attacks. There were enough accidents and atrocities to give both sides enough martyrs. Then, we kept falling behind. We didn't know at first. Only foreigners get to call a place a 'failed state'. So we put up our best fights in the 'worst' neighborhoods. For a while, the gangs stood together against the hatred. But it was ignorance against ignorance. People hardly counted each other as human, much less countrymen.

I don't feel right saying 'we' fought like that. I had never fought for my beliefs. Instead I picked up the pieces, tried to put flesh and bone together. We treated our enemies and I became used to spit flying in my face between muttered prayers, and having to keep scalpels out of patients' reach to keep the battles out of our hospital. I tried to stay rational and distant from all the fighting. There was more than enough passion everywhere and I saw what it was causing. And my mother had cancer and that was the one fight I could let myself focus on. I know pulling back from her when I realized she was dying was what made me pull back from everything. I couldn't love anyone anymore. Because eventually I would lose them.

Joshua had been one of those enemies, then. He had been blinded by a gunshot. The bullet passed laterally through both orbits. It only just missed his brain. He was my patient for three weeks. I justified an experiment with my superiors, claiming it was too dangerous to

attempt on our own troops. So this was how I gave him his eyes back. Or at least a pair that we had created. The eyes were a liquid brown that was almost black. They were stark against his pale, freckled face. He told me later than his own eyes had been green and sometimes, still, he expects to see them in the mirror. I suppose that with his new sight, when he first saw my ordinary face he must have thought me beautiful. He still says I am. I'm almost forty and he is not yet thirty and at his age, at least, those years gape wide.

"Thank you," he said to me, the day he let his new eyes meet mine. They seemed unfocused. He must still have been getting accustomed to them. I bent closer to examine them and he did not blink. "I hope I don't have to... You know. After I get out of here, I guess I hope we never see each other again." His voice was rough, parched-sounding and I could tell he regretted how those words came out. I knew he meant, never see each other as enemies.

"You don't have to do anything." His pupils contracted in the light I shined in them. Pure reflex, the only time we don't have choices. I kept my voice clinical, professional. "You are a prisoner of war, and my patient. Your only duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to heal." I pictured seeing him in some imaginary ambush. An enemy, and I would have to make that choice.

He swallowed, his adam's apple jumping beneath the prickled stubble of his throat. He rubbed his hands together. His wrists were bound together with plastic restraints. I realized as I leaned over him that this was a mistake. He should have been secured to the bed. I had certainly noticed the strength of his body. I tried not to think of what those hands may have done, whose lives he may have taken. If they had been anyone I had known.

And then his hands were around my neck.

When I froze, he was suddenly gentle. His eyes widened as mine must have and then he rose towards me. His lips were dry and he tasted of hospital food and there was utterly no reason

for us, for this. Maybe tongues speak most when they are silent. I knew this was madness but there was nothing but madness in this world we had made.

We measured our time in minutes. I would make my rounds and we could have our moments then. We hardly ever got to even close the door, so we spoke instead. Talked about our lives. He had been a musician. He sang some of his songs for me. I told him it was the first so-called Christian rock I had ever heard that wasn't completely lame. We laughed over that, then he said there were a lot of things I should have heard and I knew he wasn't talking about music. He was recovering and I started to visit him less. It had gotten to be more than I could bear, touching his skin without being able to really embrace him. To do what I knew he must think was sin.

Of course, the time came that there was a prisoner exchange. I felt ashamed for resenting such a return to such civilized things. There was a stalemate and it was coming to almost as much of a lull as it had in the war's first December. The only difference, then, between the sides seemed to be which of us were singing hymns and which were singing carols. The two melded together eventually. Joshua told me about how the songs had flowed. Peace on earth, good will towards men. Solitary figures stood dark against the snow with makeshift flags that matched its white. Bear hugs and shared cups, candy and whiskey and laughter.

"My friend Rob made our truce flag out of his underwear," Joshua said, as I joined him in laughing. It was almost Christmas again, the third since. We were in a supply closet, sharing a bottle of very cheap wine. I had no idea how he'd gotten it. He took a long swig. "Rob bought it in an air strike a couple months later."

The silence hung between us. What do you say to a man who's lost a friend, when your own friends killed him? "You're not what I thought the Crossers—sorry, the Holy Dominion,

were like. We thought you were all killjoys. Thinking everything fun was a sin. And of course, there was the racism.”

Joshua stated at me with his deep brown eyes. They rarely blinked. "Rob was black. Just thought you should know that." He shrugged, tipped the bottle back again. It was almost empty. "We were just trying to save you, and our country. I mean, really, things just went too far. Nobody really caring about anyone—"

"I care. Why do you think I helped you? I could have—"

"Pride's a sin too, you know." His eyes that always seemed sad, the ghosts of the depthless holes they had once been. "But then so's wrath. And lust." He smiled, wickedly. It was be later that we gave in to that. It was easier than letting the words on our breath come between us. Better just the breath, the warmth of living.

For him, the prisoner exchange failed.

"They wouldn't take me," Joshua said, his voice flat as it had first been, though without the hostility that had surged behind it. But there was still pain, not physical now of course, but more raw somehow. "They say I've been tainted."

I thought at first that someone had betrayed us. Then I realized what he must have meant. "How? Your eyes? What kind of sick fools are they?"

"They were my friends." He stood in doorway. I realized this was the first time I had seen him in civilian clothes. They draped loosely on his lean frame. His sandy hair had begun to grow out. "You grew them from...the unborn. Aborted babies." Before I could correct him about the embryos, he shrugged and said, "Who really wants to be born into this goddamn world anyway?"



I nodded. I tried to hold him but he tensed. I saw a nurse cut a cruel glance at me and realized this was the first time I'd touched him with obvious tenderness when others could see. We'd been so careful. "There's still hope. There's the negotiations, it could all be over soon."

And it was, but of course not as I had expected. The terms of the cease-fire ceded most of Virginia to the Holy Dominion—it was their leader's home state and a matter of pride. Of course this put an end to my research, but word of my kindness to the prisoners (despite how my "methods were blasphemously misguided") kept me free for the moment. But it was mostly because I was needed. The cease-fire only last three months and then casualties flowed in.

Somehow, I learned to keep my hands steady even as the soldiers marched the halls, patrolling with their shock rifles. These were a horror born of mercy, shooting jolts of electricity that could merely stun the victim with agonizing pain like the old Tasers. Or they could immediately stop the heart no matter where the shot hit.

There was no such mercy for those who stood against their reign. They made me treat their prisoners—"terrorists" they called them—and put back together what they had torn apart for the sake of pain, so it could be repeated until my comrades broke, confessed and gave names. I tried to save Consuela from this, but she gripped my wrist so hard I dropped the needle with the neurotoxin.

"No, *hermana*," she said, locking me in her fierce gaze.

"It will be quick. You won't betray anyone."

"I never will."

That anger never left her, but I guess it was the source of her determination. Her captors hadn't been as Christian as they claimed. More than one had raped her. She didn't mention it, and I guessed it might not have been the first time she'd survived such things from men. She was

around my own age, but worn harder. Her body was a map of faded tattoos and old and new battle scars. The regime made much of the fact that many of the "terrorists" had been criminals. I figured they were just the first bold enough to resist. I clung to my job and what was left of my life. I met with friends to discuss meaningless things as we all did. All I wanted was to just stop being afraid of all of this.

The Crossers hung plaques everywhere with verses of scripture. Some, of course, were those of peace and love. But they were fondest of apocalyptic prophecy, and these at least seemed less ironic as they patrolled before them with shock rifles or old M-4's from the Afghanistan War. In the hallway of my ward there was one inscribed with the last verses of Jeremiah 51. It was in King James as they always used—they believed its archaic words were 'literally true'—and spoke of fire raining down on Babylon, and that after its walls and gates were broken and ablaze, "the people shall labor in vain, and the folk in the fire, and they shall be weary." Sometimes when I passed it I wanted to quip, "no, they won't be weary, they'll be fucking burning to death." At least whoever had hung the plaque there must have had a sense of humor: it was right next to a glassed-in fire ax.

On my last day at the hospital, one of the Crossers stomped in with his guards when I was with a patient. I tried not to flinch from the footsteps or the shadows of their guns, and looked up from the man's chart as slowly as I dared. "May I help you, officer?"

"Yes. We need you to keep this...man stable while we question him."

The young male nurse looked at me in panic and I forced a calm facade for his and my patient's sake. I addressed the officer, forcing myself to meet his cold eyes for a moment before glancing back down at the chart. "He is recovering from major cardiac surgery and it is too soon

to bring him out of sedation. If he stabilizes, you should be able to question him in about three days."

"We need to question him now." The officer stepped forward, along with both guards. One had a shock rifle and the other had a machine gun. I could feel the wind of his breath on my face. "He is a sexual deviant and the safety of our children is at stake."

Suddenly my patient's pasty, soft face, even in unconsciousness, took on a sinister air. I could not avoid picturing him, alive, smiling as he tempted some innocent. The nurse glanced at me again and I waved him away. I myself turned the valve that shut off the sedation, to awaken him into pain.

After the long minutes for him to come around, then for him to stop incoherently screaming, the Crosser leaned down at his face. "How many boys were there? We must have their names."

I stood motionless, chilled by my guilt. Why would they need his victim's names?

"They weren't...boys," my patient wheezed. "They were grown men. They chose..."

"Did they now?" The Crosser smiled. "All the more reason we need names." He stretched out his hand and the guard with the shock rifle handed it to him. He dialed it back to the lowest setting. As my patient babbled vainly for mercy, he shot a crackling bolt into him. I had turned away, but I knew where the Crosser would have aimed it. From the sound of his body lurching on the bed I knew the "deviant" jerked as if being defibrillated. I was sure it was having the opposite effect. I hoped the shock would stop his wounded heart and his screams. And when his screams flowed into choking sobs, names began to spill from his lips.

The Crosser flicked only the slightest glance at me as I left the room. The names, at least, meant that I was no longer needed.

I walked the halls. My colleagues went about their business as if it were any ordinary day. The armed soldiers patrolling the hospital were obstacles: a surgeon I had known for years smiled with the same arrogance as he hurried stepped around one of the guards, more mindful of the hot coffee that almost sloshed out of his cup. I had almost loved the doctor, once.

What had I done? I had broken every cardinal law of medical ethics. I had slept with a patient. An enemy, no less. I had helped them torture a man. A man who was guilty of nothing. The Crossers had gone against the gays first. Before they went after us. But the torturer had told me he was a molester and I let my disgust make me believe him.

I went home to my mother's house. She had died two years ago and I had still not finished going through her things. I had essentially shoveled the main rooms clear of the clutter—kitchen, living room, the master bedroom I never quite felt master of—and piled it everywhere else, including what had been my bedroom growing up. It was strange to go back in there, my embarrassing teenaged possessions crowding the closet. The old cd player was on what had been my dresser. I barely remembered how to work the thing. The Crossers had deleted most of the music and books they thought were morally wrong. Just poof, one day all the files were corrupted. But the physical things, obsolete and deteriorating, they didn't bother with, except for some of the books. Music was too ephemeral for them to hunt. I'd started going through my mother's old cds; she had been cooler than I'd thought. Recently I'd been playing one a lot that came out just before I was born. I'd picked it on a whim because the band's name was The Church. The first track was the one I kept repeating, called 'Destination.' I didn't so much listen to the lyrics as wonder what my own destination was.

It was maybe a week later that I came to Consuela's room. She had healed to the point that they would soon come to interrogate her again. The guard standing outside her door was

young, barely twenty. More boyishly innocent even than Joshua. I scanned the identity chip in my wrist and he stepped aside so I could enter.

I tried to gauge where the cameras were hidden, and stood over her with my back to them. Her startling green eyes fixed on me as I made a show of checking the machines and her vitals. I loosened the plastic restraints just enough that her thin hands could slip out.

"¿Qué?" she blurted, before slipping to a dry whisper I couldn't first understand. I leaned closer and she said, "First you try to kill me, then you..." Her eyes flicked to where the cameras might be, then returned to staring me in the face, though somewhat more softly. "Who are you with?"

Besides the Crossers and what was left of the government, there were different groups of rebels. The Crossers believed she was with the People's United Militia, who were said to have support from China. Another major group was former General David Jackson's Freedom Strike, which despite their labor-sounding name were almost as far Right as the Holy Dominion. But they were secular at least. I'd thought Consuela might be with the Strikers from her tattoo of a rattlesnake, as they'd taken the colonial "Don't Tread on Me" snake flag as their symbol. But the tattoo was old and besides it would be fatally indiscrete. The snake stared at me from her neck, the tongue almost seeming to flicker with her pulse.

I whispered low, hardly more than mouthing the words. "I'm...not with anyone."

Consuela nodded. "You can't do this alone. For long, anyway."

Cold steel was slick in my trembling fingers as I slipped a scalpel from the pocket of my scrubs and tucked it into a fold in the sheets below her loosely-bound wrist. She allowed herself the slightest smile, then turned away from me towards the door.

I left, wondering how long it might be before my access chip was revoked. My heart pounded as I imagined facing the Crossers. The young soldier guarding my new comrade smiled at one of the young female nurses. Glancing back I caught him looking at my ass as I walked away.

I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

My shift ended, without alarm. I didn't know where to go. I had compromised my ethics to the point I didn't recognize them anymore. I walked in the harsh, still new autumn cold. An old military surplus Hemitt took over the street, clearing the way with that wedged front like a beast made to eat you. I hardly looked up as it groaned along on its dozen wheels, the truck bed weighed down by something hulking and mysterious. hidden beneath fluttering blue tarps. Machine-gun cops in their usual armor rode on top. We were used to them and besides, we knew better than to look.

I realized I had nowhere to go. There's home, to be greeted by a cat arching against my shins. Perhaps Pepper's silence would be best. At least the cat was alive in that house. It was loud with my mother, with never hearing that voice again. I missed her even when she was annoying. Of course the rest of my family was still in free territory, in the Northeast and West Coast. It's only been in the past few months that the Crossers cut off communications. After the first few of your comrades disappear, this madness was no longer new. You began to protect yourself by growing distant. Or at least by keeping things shallow enough to feel safe.

I kept walking. The Hemitt 'Dragon Wagon' passed. The street itself seeming to exhale in its wake.

“Megan?” A man’s voice, rough, young. I realized it was Joshua just before he steps out of the shadows. He looked different, stronger, his hair cropped close again. I smiled. We hung back but then approached each other at the same moment. We passed the time with meaningless things while I wondered why he’s here, who he’s working for.

After five or ten minutes he conceded that his friend wasn’t going to show. I suggested going out for coffee before I realized it. We sat, the cups steaming between us. I tried to figure out where the cameras and the microphones were.

“I’ve missed you,” he said.

“You missed the attention, I think,” I said, with a smile to say I’m just kidding.

Later, I saw that the walls of his apartment were leak-stained and peeling. The clothes strewn on the floor and furniture seemed an almost intention disarray that we only added to. I didn’t see many books, there’s no art to speak of. Nothing that would give me insight into this man I let into my body. But somehow, in this madness, the mystery was enough.

“Stay,” he asked me in the morning.

“You know I can’t. My patients...” I still hadn’t figured out what I would do when I returned to the hospital. I just realized I must. It would be too suspicious not to.

“I can protect you,” he said.

“You shouldn’t.” I didn’t know why I said this, instead of asking him why or how he would protect me. I didn’t want to know. I focused on the concrete things: the people in my ward, the test results I was expecting. The few things that were still my decisions.

I walked home in the cold, pale morning. Frost crusted the leaves. Not all the leaves had fallen yet. Some trees still had their bursts of red or gold. I noticed everything. Just like Mom

had, in her final months. She'd told me to think of it all as beautiful, "well except when you're throwing up." She'd laughed, a gaunt, bald stranger. I didn't visit enough. It almost made me vomit, myself, every time someone said how brave she or I was.

I heard the old van coming, fast. The brakes squealed. The hard hands, the sudden darkness, were shocking but not a surprise.

A light shined in my face. My eyes adjusted to the darkness—pupils, responsive—and saw the strangers and the one who was not a stranger.

"Consuela?! What the hell..."

"Sorry *chica*. The Crossers already got somebody at your house."

"Who are you with?" I repeated back to her. My voice was almost as gasping as hers had been.

Consuela looked at one of the men. They shared the slightest nod. "I thought you knew. The People United--"

"—will never be defeated." I smiled as I remembered the old chant from before I was in high school, even. Marches against the Iraq War. I couldn't help but smile as the memories flooded back. Those carnivals of hope and innocence and believing that you were making a difference. That this time they would listen. This time...

Consuela grinned, a bit hesitantly. I'd said the chant, not shouted it. We were the underground, or whatever people called it. I realized I was including myself in this. I was an outlaw. A terrorist. There was a Crosser at my house.

"Somebody needs to take care of Pepper," I said, feeling foolish for worrying about the cat at this of all times. I imagined her cowering as they ransacked the house. She would climb



inside the mattress boxspring through the hole she had torn in the thin underside. “I’m sorry. Of course I can’t go back.”

I was there to be their medic. I didn’t need to learn many names—certainly not their real ones. To win more of their trust, I’d told them that when the war started I had volunteered for the government army. But I’d failed the fitness tests. I didn’t tell them it was the one where you have to run across a field carrying another person. I wasn’t even halfway across when I just couldn’t carry him any more.

“It doesn’t matter, hermana,” she said. “All of us, we just do whatever we can.”

My first raid came on a Wednesday morning. A truck was transporting prisoners. It’s another goddamn Hemitt again, that dragon face, the massive wheels. There was an almost rusted-out Humvee in front, mounted with a heavy machine gun. I tried not to breath, so they wouldn’t see the steam of our breath rising despite the branches of makeshift camouflage. The trees stood bare. We were in the leaves and brush at a bend in the narrow road.

A woman, little more than a girl, who I had never met was the one that set off the explosion. The Humvee burst. A soldier leaped out, his sleeve flaming. Gunfire erupts. It was louder than I had ever imagined.

Joshua, in uniform, leaped from the back of the truck. He looked confused as he fired. I only froze for a moment and then I grabbed Consuela’s arm. I tried to pull her gun to the ground. I hoped whatever poured from my mouth was “Stop! No!”

At first I couldn’t hear the screams, the shouts, more shouting—“Stop! Stop! Hold fire, we’re Strikers!” The rattle of the last bursts, and then silence, ringing. We were fighting each other instead of the Crossers. What had happened to us?

We stood. Leaves rustled underfoot as we stared at each other. We counted casualties. Five wounded, three dead. No one I'd known. But Joshua was unhurt and he helped me care for her and for his comrades. Our comrades. And in the madness somebody laughed. It was horrible but then we all did, and cried. It felt good, at last, too break down.

I think I cried the whole walk home. Yes, home. Joshua came with me. He still knew enough of the Crossers. He still said he could protect me, but I told him he didn't have to. I chose to go home. "I can't let them take it from me," I said to him. We held each other as we stumbled like drunks. It wasn't a disguise so much as I felt impaired by the crying, as if my bones were turning into liquid from letting everything go.

We didn't see any sign of surveillance. I guessed they didn't want us to see. To make us think we were safe. We slept in my old bed that I had slept on in high school. The bed where I had had my first time. Laying there, in the danger, it felt like that again, but with the knowledge of everything I had seen since.

We lay naked on the bed and let the banned songs play. Most of them he had never heard, or even heard of. We cranked the volume, daring them to come get us. "Sing" by the Dresden Dolls started with its quiet acoustic swelling into punk-cabaret and we sang along, singing for all the contradictory things, making up our own words as we went along. Sirens wailed in the distance in the silence between songs, and there were the mechanical groans of the armed caravans passing us. They did not stop.

We went through the books, stacked in a pile in the corner. I even found my old Bible: there were two, actually, a tiny leather-bound one my great-aunt gave me as a child, and then a paperback of a 'liberal' modern translation that had now been banned. This one was underlined and highlighted as it was left over from a class I'd taken in undergrad for a humanities

requirement. I remembered the verse that hung on the hospital wall, and looked it up. My younger self had highlighted it, but I'd forgotten why. In this translation one it went something like, "and the peoples exhaust themselves for nothing, and the nations weary themselves only for fire." And last I understood. It didn't matter that no other nations were with us. That we even fought each other. That all of us will fall alone. There was the fire and even if there was no way to stop it, you still had to. Even all you had were little pails of water to pass from one hand to another.

I was going to tell this to Joshua as we waited. But I touched his warm hand and that was enough.

## Our Positions

Because disasters seemed to strike on holidays, we started calling it the St. Patrick's Day Massacre. Like it was done by old-time gangsters in chalk-striped suits and fedoras, with the ack-ack-ack anti-grace of submachine guns. Not emails and conference calls. Panic laced the reply-all chains. We writhed in a cold sweat as we waited on hold, listening to ads for our own company and its irritating theme song.

We were six months into the Crisis, waiting for the proverbial shoe to proverbially drop. For everything to fall. Brightly colored Ethernet cords snaked from our desks like vines of the jungle. Like interconnectedness was already turning us into the lost cities of legend. We wanted to be the explorers of those cities, those ruins. We wanted the adventure that we used to believe that adult life was when we were children. Not this helpless kind of danger.

They laid off half of us. Half of our department, maybe a little less. We had the names and it felt cold to break it down into numbers, like corporate had so obviously done.

Our boss went first. After twenty-five years, they gave him fifteen minutes. A security guard stood over him as he packed. Fifteen minutes. He was the sort who went to the symphony to be seen there and he used his time well: he cued up *Boléro* on his executive stereo. We didn't hear it at first or recognize the slow build up. The snare drum leant a weird military air to the proceedings. It felt overdramatic and absurd, but some of us cried because he was seizing his dignity and with it, ours. We found ourselves wandering through a movie and we didn't have the script. So we just stood there in silence or went on with business as he walked out, the crescendo muted and tinny as it came from his iPhone. He marched out like some South American dictator

boarding an airplane into exile. We almost expected him to salute or something but his hands were full as he carried the box of his belongings. One of his awards from the company fell out of the box and he started to bend down to pick it up, but then he rose again and just left it there. The little plexiglass statue did not break.

For the next two weeks, the rest of the dead walked among us. This was odd, and awkward. At least the degrading perp-walks like they made the boss do would have settled it quickly and let us mourn.

Of course we were being melodramatic, calling them dead. But their faces were blank as zombies. Somehow it might have felt easier if they, say, had an arm drop off in the copy room and shuffled around moaning “brains....brains....braaaaaains.”

Some of us wondered if this is what squads go through in war. It’s those of us who don’t know vets who dared think like this, at least without being ashamed.

Some of us still would still engage them. One of the dead had three kids under five. Two boys and a girl, all cute as little kids tend to be when they're not having screaming fits or rubbing their boogers on their sleeves. Or your sleeve. All of them will probably be freakishly tall like she is. She stalks between her office and the fax machine, spamming out résumés—a stilt-walker whose circus has left her behind. The family photo that's still, defiantly, on her desk is out of date. The youngest child is missing, unless her uterus counts. Conversations that used to be about sales goals or potty training or *men* now consist of, "Hey, sorry to hear. How are you holding up?"

She mutters something friendly, and not at all bitter. We know what she wants to say is, *Fuck you, you still have a job.*

We knew we should feel grateful. Instead we feel trapped. We become afraid of being a person things happen to, even before they actually happen. We used to make things happen. It's like the economic crisis was making everyone have a midlife crisis, regardless of our actual ages. We expressed this by arguing about the President or sports or with our spouses and lovers. By hoarding food in our cellars or going all in on a diamond flush draw that the river card didn't hit. Or just wishing we did.

We knew we were not the ones losing our homes or our cars or our marriages or our self-worth. Yet.

We thought that Keith was taking it well. But the Wednesday of his last week there, he didn't come in. The word started to spread around ten that morning. It went from desk to desk like news of a disaster and we almost wished we could gather around a television for live coverage of something horrible happening to people we didn't know. But we did know him. We'd seen him alive yesterday, normal, ordinary. And now he was dead.

We wondered, who the hell commits suicide on a Tuesday?

Yesterday he'd joked with some of us, but now we couldn't remember the punchlines.

He did it with a pistol. We thought about what could have happened, to us. But he was not the type to do that. But we hadn't thought he was the type to kill himself either.

He was young. Twenty-seven, according to the obituary the next day. We realized that none of us remembered when his birthday was. What we do remember: he was a big, almost handsome guy with trendy glasses. Strong, but carrying around the fat kid in his mind like all of us did who had been fat kids. He was always eager to help us. If we'd known, maybe we could have helped him.

The receptionist spent over an hour composing the card that went with the funeral flowers. Some of us had hugged him when the layoff news came. We'd anticipated the other hugs when he finally left with the rest. Now there was just empty air in our arms.

Some of us had to clean off his desk, pack up his things. Gather his personal effects for the family. Sort through the clues that weren't there. There was a girlfriend. Not quite pretty, but cute. Strawberry blonde, with freckles. Keith had freckles too. We wondered if they compared the patterns of them, how long it would take her to forget the specific array of his. How long to forget the three-dimensional details of his face and his body, all the things that weren't frozen in photographs.

We finished his work and tried too hard to make it perfect. His dad came on Thursday to pick up his things. We recognized him immediately, he looked like an older version of Keith. He accepted our condolences, the clichés we breathed because we didn't know what else to say. His eyes were dry but he walked stiffly, like he was dazed. We felt better when he left, except for hating ourselves for feeling better.

The Friday that the half of us finally left, there's a party. It's supposed to be for our boss's quote-unquote Retirement. Strange how they turned so quickly to calling it that, and letting him come back for it. But everyone knew that the party was really a wake for Keith. There was wine on ice on the table and two coolers full of beer. We made beelines for it.

It was weird, drinking at work, something that hadn't been allowed for years. The last time, some jerk most of us don't remember got drunk and got fired for grabbing somebody's ass. It's passed into legend enough that we disagree about the age, gender and organizational hierarchy of the ass, the owner of said ass also having moved on.

Once we're all tipsy enough, the speeches began. At first no one talked about Keith. People talked about our ex-boss, his early days when he was just another one of us. He would tip off his friends when management was coming so they could make things look good. We wondered if deception might be an integral part of any managerial career. When the lame jokes and anecdotes started, we checked our text-message screens.

It's the tall girl who finally toasted to Keith. Then it just broke out. We said our awkward phrases, because there was nothing to say. The booze flowed in and the tears flowed out and we fought to preserve this fragile equilibrium.

Our former boss gathered us together for a picture. We crowded together and tried not to think of who was missing. We thought about the old grade-school class pictures our parents might still have somewhere in their houses, or those pictures of our own children caught in that moment. We thought about the black-and-white photos of high school state champions growing dusty in the trophy case, which we stared at from the bench in front of the principal's office and passed time thinking about how many of them might be dead. Or we thought about mysterious pictures in our late parents' houses, relatives no one could identify any more and pictures of the strangers our parents had been when they were young like us.

The tall girl's family was there. Her husband was a few inches shorter, so it must be love. Her baby girl was almost a year old. She's bigger than we remember, and as the party wound down they let her crawl around on the floor. We were mesmerized. She had puppy-brown hair that wisped up around her head like feathers. Drool glittered on her lips. She followed her parents and, for once, her brothers ignored her. A dropped, crumbled napkin was an object of endless fascination, and she cackled with triumph as she ripped it apart.



Looking back on that haze of memory, those forgotten classmates and playgrounds, we realized we never remembered being little. Young, yes, but never small. We had always been the same size, while the world shrank around us and got complicated and dangerous. We've heard it's the same thing to be old, that we'll still be the same teenagers inside. We thought we were the only ones who still carried those teenagers inside, that everyone else knew they were Real Adults now. But no one ever gets to think they're wise. And this scares us shitless.

The party continued to dissolve. We rode the elevator down together, we and our dead. Their eyes were blank or sad-shiny and we met them awkwardly before flicking our gazes away. We watched the numbers tick down. The elevator shuddered and groaned. This ugly concrete high-rise was built the year of Watergate and everything takes turns breaking. The elevator stopped and some lawyers got on, leaving early by their standards. They seemed surprised as they crowded in among us, their hands clutching briefcase handles in front of their crotches. The elevator bounced ominously as it reached the ground floor. We filtered out onto the wide marble tiles, almost surprised to see night in the windows. We waved, to those we will see again and those we will not.

The streets were busy, full of those who can still afford the trendy restaurants and bars that line the block. Some of us joined them for the tail end of happy hour. Others congregated at the coffee shop, sobering up for the drive and letting ourselves think that quiver in our hands or our nerves or our hearts was just the latté. The ugly high-rises here gave way to old brick tobacco warehouses and Victorian cast-iron storefronts. Half the store windows were dark, displaying only "For Lease" signs.

The rain poured down and we hardly noticed it.

It felt good, the rain, soaking our hair. For the moment we forgot that the rain might be ruining our clothes. Clothes we wished we could rip off right now, despite the chill. Then we'd run screaming naked down this street, in front of everyone.

What do you do when you've tried to do everything right and you've seen where it gets you?

But we don't. Windshield wipers beat time along the highway, following the red glow of the taillights in front of us. The headlights across the median are winking and distorted in the beads of water. We drive, our minds blanking in the muscle-memory of the way, following the trails of our migrations. And then, home.

### Vita

Catherine Reese Hart was born on June 26, 1976 in Chesterfield County, Virginia, and is an American citizen. She graduated from Mills Godwin High School, Henrico County, Virginia in 1994. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia in 1998 and has subsequently worked in publishing for two years and finance for nine years.