



A Cold, Hard Prayer

A Novel by

John Smolens

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Sister Superior
St. Ann's Orphanage / Youville House
12 Granite Avenue
Worcester, Massachusetts

Andrea V. Selinski
C/O Fr. John Nolan, S.J.
St. Mary's Church
St. Ignace, Michigan

Dear Sister Superior,

I was given your name as a result of inquiries conducted on my behalf by Father John Nolan, S. J., at the Church of St. Mary's, here in St. Ignace, Michigan. (Father Nolan is assisting me with the composition of this letter.)

My name is Andrea Magdalena du Casse Selinski, the sister of Louisa Mae du Casse. She gave birth to a baby girl, who, I believe, is currently in your care at St. Ann's in Worcester. The child would now be twelve years of age and I am given to understand that she goes by the name Mercy. I do not know what, if any, surname has been assigned to her.

Louisa and I were brought to the United States from Jamaica when we were quite young. I believe I was six or seven and she was two years younger. Our parents moved a great deal as our father sought employment, mostly as a laborer or in factories. When we were in our early teens he disappeared; he ran off and we never heard from him again. Our mother supported us working primarily as a seamstress. We lived in New York City, Providence, and then Boston, where she died of tuberculosis.

Louisa and I found employment in textile factories in several Massachusetts towns. We were living in Clinton, a mill town on the Nashua River, working the looms in the Bigelow Carpet Company, when Louisa became pregnant. She was about fifteen years of age. She would never reveal the exact circumstances, though I am certain it was not of her own volition. She never mentioned the father's name, but I am quite sure it was a man who worked as a laborer named Henri Boursard, who had come down to New England from Quebec Province.

During the last months of her pregnancy, Louisa resided in a home for unwed mothers in Framingham, which was sponsored by the Boston Archdiocese. As soon as she delivered her baby girl the child was taken and placed in St. Ann's Orphanage. Louisa recalled that the nuns commented on the child's mixed heritage.

Just before they left Louisa's bedside, they said they would call the child Mercy, as though such information would sufficiently assuage any doubts my sister might have about giving up the infant.

If at the time my sister had consented to giving the baby away, she was in retrospect plagued by deep regrets.

In subsequent years Louisa and I moved numerous times, looking for work and a tolerable place to live. We continued west, living for a time in Rochester, New York, and then eventually arriving in Detroit and then Lansing, Michigan. At this point we were in our twenties and we found work in one of the new Ford Motor Company manufacturing plants.

The rigors of factory work precipitated a decline in Louisa's health; and, like our mother, her constitution was susceptible to tuberculosis, complicated by other ailments. In 1914, I accepted the sacrament of holy matrimony and Louisa lived with my husband and me, until she passed away October 4 of that year. I nursed her during the final stages of her illness and, though she was prepared to enter into the care of our Lord, she was increasingly distraught over the fate of her child Mercy.

Louisa's last wish, her most pressing request, was that after her passing I would locate her daughter and make arrangements to take her into our home. My husband, Raymond Selenski, and I, who unfortunately have not yet been blessed with children of our own, were more than willing to fulfill Louisa's desires.

Father John Nolan has helped me discover that Mercy most likely had never been adopted and is currently residing in St. Ann's Orphanage. Raymond and I wish to begin whatever proceedings are necessary that would allow us to bring her to live with us here in Michigan. (We have since moved from Lansing to St. Ignace in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where Raymond is a cook in the kitchen of the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island during the summer season, and the rest of the year he works on fishing and transport vessels that operate on the Great Lakes.)

I wish to inquire after Mercy's health and trust that you might help us bring my sister's daughter home, where she will be loved and live in the presence of our Father.

Yours in Christ,

Andrea Magdalena du Casse Selinski

One

One morning in October 1924, the children boarded the train in Haverhill, a mill town on the Merrimack River, north of Boston. More children were put on the train in Worcester and Holyoke. There were dozens of them, orphans ranging in age from nine to their late teens, and for some it was the first time they'd ever ridden on a train.

As they headed west, the snowy Berkshires gave way to the gray landscape of New York. The children were in the charge of Mr. Trent, along with two women who saw to their personal needs. It was no secret among the orphans that Mr. Trent was a priest in a bowler and tweed wool suit, a ploy necessary to thwart distrust of Catholics. The elderly nurse Mrs. Yarborough lugged her valise through the carriages, dispensing pills, ointments, and elixirs, and often probing the children with a terrifying assortment of stainless-steel instruments. Her young assistant, Miss Irene Lansdowne, was considered kindly if a bit touched. Periodically the train would stop in a village and the children would be herded out on the station platform, where townspeople would look them over. "Like horses," a boy named Arnie whispered, "Or cows." He was taken by a widow in Herkimer, the first stop after Albany.

The strong ones went first, and the pretty ones. Those who hadn't been taken were too scrawny or physically defective. More than half the children had been taken by the time the train reached Ohio. "Claimed" was the word Mr. Trent often used, as though a child's selection was part of the Lord's design. Most of the children went eagerly, though tears were often shed as they were separated from friends on the station platform.

In a village outside Cleveland a Negro couple arrived in a wagon drawn by a mule. When they indicated that they wanted the girl known as Mercy, she sat down on the platform. The others looked down the line of

the children at the girl. Slight, undernourished, she wore a long wool coat with stitched sleeves and her russet hair was tied up in a tattered scarf. Her large green-yellow eyes seemed to possess a defiant light. From the beginning of the journey, she had been deemed contrary by Mrs. Yarborough, and the other children often ridiculed her. On the train, she kept to herself. She was the last one likely to be taken, but this tall man with a gentle smile, a farmer in what appeared to be his Sunday suit, took her by the arm to help her to her feet. She turned her head quickly and bit his hand, causing him to release her.

“She’s no good,” the farmer’s wife said. “You can see she’s mulatto.”

The boy standing next to Lincoln Hawser glanced up at him, as if to ask what the word meant. Lincoln shook his head, the smallest gesture. The boy understood and looked straight ahead, didn’t move, making himself inconspicuous. He took Lincoln’s hand, seeking his protection. The little ones often did.

The couple walked down the line of children and stopped in front of the only black boy in the group. “We’ll take this one instead,” the wife said to Mr. Trent.

When they were herded back on the train the children were quiet, as usual. It seemed providential, how they had been spared, though it was really a matter of being passed over, rejected repeatedly, village after village. There was, too, uncertainty and fear. Mr. Trent had declared that Chicago was their final destination, inciting a rumor that any children still on board were customarily deposited at the Union Stock Yard, where they were fed to the hogs.

Mercy’s behavior at the station incensed Mrs. Yarborough, who insisted that she would go without supper. She stared out at the passing countryside, while the children were ushered forward to the dining car. Lincoln ate quickly and returned, sitting across the aisle from Mercy. He wasn’t sure why, but he admired her refusal to be claimed.

“Why wouldn’t you go with them?” he asked. She continued to stare out the window, now streaked with rain. “Mr. Trent and the nurse,” he said. “They think you’re defying God’s will.”

She turned her head, her eyes hard on him now, as if to say *Why are you even speaking to me?*

“Devine providence, and all that.” He looked over his shoulder to be sure no one was coming in the carriage, and then took the napkin from the left pocket of his coat and held it out to her.

“What’s this?”

“Dinner.”

She stared at the folded napkin in his hand, then, reluctantly, reached across the aisle. “I know why you keep your other hand in your pocket. What happened?”

“An accident.”

“Devine providence.” No smile. Her eyes might even have been accusing, the way they bore into him.

“You could have gone with them.”

“Just because I’m not white?”

“They looked like good people.”

“No,” she said. “This is Ohio.”

“So?”

“Michigan. It’s where I’m going.”

“God’s will?”

“No.” For the briefest moment there was a hint of a smile. “Mine.”

She unfolded the napkin and examined the chicken leg, the slice of bread, and a small wedge of cheese. When she looked up at him again, her eyes seemed less guarded. “Do you dream?” she asked.

“I suppose so. Why?”

“What do you dream about?”

“I...I’m not sure. I usually forget them when I wake up. Don’t you?”

“No, though I wish I could.” She picked up the chicken leg from the napkin. “Maybe it’s because there is no difference between dreams and being awake?” She looked up the aisle toward the front of the carriage. “This train. I have dreamed about *this* train. Before we even boarded it, I knew this train.” Her slender fingers raised the chicken leg to her mouth.

While she ate, he turned his head away, a matter of decency, and watched night fall on the land.

•

By the time they departed Toledo, five children were left on the train as it made its way along the Michigan-Ohio border. Smaller crowds gathered at the railroad depots, as though instinctively they knew that what children remained would not be worth the effort of a trip to town. Rather than a horse or a cow, Lincoln felt like a turnip or an onion. Too ripe, too bruised to be edible. They stopped at Adrian, then at Cold Water, but there were no takers. In a village called Otter Creek the children lined up on the platform, facing just one couple. Mr. Trent addressed them cordially as Mr. and Mrs. Harlan Nau.

Harlan Nau held his wife's arm in courtly fashion as they walked down the row of five children. His crushed fedora hat that seemed to mimic his sunken cheeks and his jaw didn't line up properly with the rest of his face. She was a good foot shorter, and much heavier, than her husband.

Mrs. Nau inspected each child with a severe, dismissive eye. They stopped in front of Mercy. The woman seemed to be holding her breath as though she feared contagion. "Will you look at that skin?" she muttered in disgust. "And those eyes?"

"Mixed blood, no doubt," her husband said. "How old is she?"

"We figure seventeen," Mr. Trent said.

"You got a name?"

At the orphanage in Worcester, the nuns often gave the children their names. There were boys named Peter, Paul, and Ignatius. Girls were named for Joan of Arc and Saint Chiara, and too many were named Mary. The nuns' thoughts gravitated toward virtues, which led to girls named Prudence, Felicity, and Submit. Many had no last name. She knew her mother's last name, but she couldn't let on that she knew. It was her secret. "My name is Mercy."

"Mercy, indeed," his wife said. "Awful scrawny. Underfed, and probably sickly from that foul air back in them cities with all those factories." She shook her head as she turned to study Lincoln. "This one looks strong. Where you from?"

“Haverhill, Massachusetts.”

“Never heard of it,” Mrs. Nau said. “What’s wrong with him? How come he ain’t been taken already?”

Though she didn’t look around, her question was directed toward Mr. Trent, who had followed behind the couple like an usher.

Mr. Trent nodded but Lincoln didn’t move. Nurse Yarborough hissed, “Show them.” When he still didn’t move, she said, “This is the last stop before Chicago, Rope.”

Lincoln removed his right hand from the pocket of his corduroy jacket.

The woman gasped.

“What happened to your fingers?” her husband said.

“I worked in a shoe factory in Haverhill. A machine that stamps out leather took them.”

“You can see he’s strong,” Mr. Trent offered. “Going on seventeen and he’s got the might of these three other boys.”

“Ain’t got nothing but a thumb and stubby things on that hand,” the woman said. She considered the other three boys. “I don’t know, Harlan, these others are all the runts of the litter.”

“Right you are, dearest. Best we wait till another train comes through.”

“That likely won’t be till spring,” Mr. Trent advised.

“Sure could use some help before winter sets in,” Harlan Nau said. “Come, Estelle.”

He began to steer his wife away, until Miss Landsdowne stepped out from behind Mrs. Yarborough.

“Pardon, but might you reconsider if you knew that Mercy here can sew real good? And cook? She has a real way with a pie crust. And Rope, like Mr. Trent said, he’s strong. But mild in nature.”

Mrs. Yarborough took this imposition as an affront, which was nothing new. She often reprimanded Miss Landsdowne for speaking out of turn.

“Both of them?” Harlan said.

Mr. Trent cleared his throat. Lincoln knew what was coming. He had heard it in all its variations since leaving Massachusetts. “We do understand that to feed, clothe, and house a child is a not insignificant

financial burden, but it should be deemed an investment in the future, that is the future of your farm and household, and, indeed, in the future of this great God-fearing country of ours.” The God-fearing part always led to the pitch. “We only ask that you contribute what you can, which helps defray the costs incurred during our long and arduous train ride, not to mention the medical attention we have provided, and then too some documents must needs to be processed, for we are only interested in a transaction that is right and legal. We recommend a minimum contribution of five dollars.”

“*Five* dollars?” Harlan Nau said.

“But of course,” Mr. Trent added, “As regards your contribution to our worthy cause—why yes, I believe we’d accept a special accommodation.”

“Two for the price of one.” Harlan spoke slowly, a man who appreciated a bargain. He said to Lincoln, “What he call you, Rope?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why?”

“My name is Lincoln Hawser.”

“Hawser.” The man’s crooked jaw worked sideways in a fashion that seemed painful but unavoidable. “I see, like a ship’s rope.”

“We’d have to fed ‘em both,” Estelle said.

“I reckon.” Harlan nodded. “Where’d your name come from, Lincoln Hawser? You be an orphan. How do you know?”

Rope glanced at Mr. Trent, as though requesting permission to speak. “I don’t know, sir. It’s just the name I was given, I guess. It’s on my official papers.”

“Well, dear,” Harlan said to his wife, looking at Rope’s right hand. “That mule kicked my jaw and I’ve gotten by all these years. I suppose this boy will do with what he’s got.”

“But a *mulatto*,” Estelle said, spitting the word as if it were a curse. “Under our roof?”

“She’s but a child. The girl will mind, you’ll see.” When his wife’s objection was not forthcoming, Harlan Nau turned to Mr. Trent, who had removed his bowler. “Two for the price of one. Mister, you and your worthy cause got yourself a deal.”

Two

Harlan and Estelle Nau's farm was a half-hour's drive by wagon south of the village of Otter Creek. Sixty acres, bordered on one side by the Michigan Central tracks and on the other by the woods that lined the Little Otter Creek, which fed Otter Creek farther west. Mercy was confined to a room in the attic, while Lincoln slept in the shed attached to the back of the house. Chores began at five. Meals were plentiful but bland.

Mercy's cot was next to a window that looked out on pasture that ran to a line of trees that bordered the creek. At night the panes often rattled in the wind and branches scratched the roof. Days she cleaned the house, scrubbed clothes, assisted in the preparation of meals. She'd sometimes go an entire day without getting outdoors, while Rope spent most of his time splitting and stacking wood or tending to the animals.

One afternoon she went outside the house to hang the laundry on the line. Rope had been mucking out stalls and stood just outside the barn door, rake in hand, and watched her hang clothes on the line.

"What you looking at?" she said.

"Nothing."

"No?"

"Didn't mean nothing by it."

"Good."

Harlan's union suits looked like flat white men on the line, headless, dancing in the breeze.

"This is not what I expected," he said.

She finished pinning a large pair of bloomers on the line. "What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Not this."

“Why don’t you run away? They lock me in the attic but you’re out in the shed off the kitchen. You could just walk away at night.”

“I’ve considered it. But Harlan talks about the woods.”

“What about them.”

“There’s bears and wolves. And what he calls big cats. Says you want them to kill you clean before they start gnawing on your innards. And then, where would I go?”

“You could look at a map,” she said. “I’d go north.”

“North?” Like he’d never heard of it. “What’s up there?”

“St. Ignace.”

“What’s that, a place?”

Her laundry basket was empty. She picked it up, adjusting it against her hip.

“On the train you said you wanted Michigan. Why here?”

“That’s my business, isn’t it?”

She walked back toward the house.

•

“You ain’t naturally left-handed, are you?” Estelle observed at dinner toward the end of the first week.

“But I can see you figured out how to use that one ‘cause you don’t look about to starve to death.”

“He does all right with it in the field and the barn,” Harlan said. “Going to take some getting use to being around so many animals, though.”

“We got to place a limit on how much he eats,” Estelle said. “They said he was quiet, but that’s because he usually has his mouth full. Two helpings, hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What about the girl?” Harlan asked. “She don’t eat much.”

Estelle glanced at Mercy. “She could use some fattenin’ up. Have another potato.”

At night Rope lay on his cot, surrounded by farm implements. The wind swept the fields that ran toward the creek, and in the night there came the howling and cries and shrieks of animals. The shed possessed an odor he could not identify, until he found the remains of a dead rodent that had chewed its way into a burlap sack of some sort of grain.

A daily routine had been established and occasionally Mercy was allowed to set foot outside the house in daylight. She would hang laundry, feed the chickens. She usually ignored him. Her face had a tawny hue with a saddle of freckles bridging her nose. Harlan once called her scrawny, but then he grinned crookedly as though he meant something else. "But she does her work."

One day an automobile arrived in the yard. A man in a long wool coat and a fedora entered the house, toting a black leather satchel. Rope was splitting and stacking firewood next to the barn. He watched the house, expecting something, a sound, a cry, but there was nothing until after perhaps a half hour Mercy came out toting the laundry basket on her hip.

Rope continued to split and stack wood but finally looked over toward the clothesline. She was facing him, her arms raised to hang a bedsheet. "She sickly."

She'd never spoken to him first before.

"He a doctor?"

"Hm-hm." Her lips were wrapped around a clothespin, like she was smoking a cigar. She removed it from her mouth and nudged it down to fasten the sheet to the line. "Talking about female ailments and an operation in a hospital in some place called Lansing."

"It's the state capital of Michigan, I think."

She picked up the empty laundry basket. "Never seen someone split logs one-handed before."

"Takes a sharp blade and an eye for the grain."

"I suppose." She headed back across the yard toward the house.

Two days later a Ford truck arrived. Estelle had a valise packed and was waiting by the kitchen door. All she'd said at breakfast was, "Harlan don't like his chicken undercooked."

Harlan stood in the yard watching the truck take her out to the road. When the vehicle was out of sight, he went into the barn.

Rope knew what he was up to—he'd smelled it sometimes, usually in the late afternoon. He kept splitting and stacking wood. After about a half hour, he went into the barn to sharpen his axe on the whetstone. He tucked the axe under his right arm and cranked the handle till the wheel got up some speed, and then with his left hand he held the blade at an angle to the spinning rim. The sparks reminded him of fireworks he'd once seen above the Merrimack River. It was the Fourth of July and the streets and riverbanks in Haverhill were crowded. American flags everywhere. The fireworks reflected off the river, doubling the light. There was a way that the embers descended in the sky and hissed in the water that resembled the sparks coming off the point of contact between the axe blade and the spinning stone.

Harlan came out from behind the partition that supported his workbench, bottle in hand. "You always lived in an orphanage before taking that train out here?"

"Yes, sir. Several of them, all north of Boston. When I was twelve then I got work at the factory."

"Until you lost your hand."

Rope turned the axe handle over and began to grind the other edge. Nothing shone new and pure like freshly honed steel. He was drawn to, and afraid of, such sharp edges. The moment when the machine's cutting edge came down on his fingers never seemed far off. A moment swift and decisive, his bloodied fingers lying helpless on the polished metal plate.

"Know anything about your family, who your people were?"

"Nothing much," Rope said.

"Irish. You look like you could be Irish. Catholic?"

"I was in orphanages run by nuns. Many of them are."

"I hear they're taking over the cities back east. Irish, Italian. All them Catholics."

"They come into Boston on ships." Rope took the axe away from the wheel. The rotation of the stone slowed, droning until it stopped. "They were starving, wherever they come from."

“Everyone around here’s near starving and we don’t pack up and go elsewhere.” Harlan took a swig from his bottle. He went back around the partition, dragging one foot slightly the way he did. When he tried to sit on the stool by the workbench, he fell over on to the packed earth floor. He seemed to find it funny. But then, angrily, he said, “You come here and help me up.”

Rope went around the partition and looked at the man, lying on his back. He had managed not to spill too much, holding the bottle up in a gesture of victory. Rope held the axe handle across his right forearm for a moment, and then he leaned it against the workbench. He reached down with his good hand and took hold of Harlan’s shoulder and pulled him up.

Harlan offered the bottle. “Want a touch?”

“No thank you, sir.”

“Well then. Back to work. This house requires a lot of wood to keep warm.”

Rope took up the axe and went back out to the woodpile. It was beginning to snow.

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“Whatcha put in it?” Harlan’s face was inches above his plate, the result of several hours of drinking out in the barn. “Tastes different. Smells...strong.” He picked up the leg and bit into it. With his mouth full, he said, “Or is this *black* chicken.”

Mercy had a way of looking off as a form of self-defense. “I found some thyme in the pantry.” Her russet hair was tied up in the kerchief she wore when cooking, making her jaw and cheek bones sharp angles in the failing light.

Harlan put the leg on his plate as though it were diseased. “Estelle never used no thyme.”

The chicken was, to Rope’s taste, far more tender than anything Estelle had put before him.

Mercy looked at him briefly, acknowledging that Harlan’s drunk may have reached the point where it could take him any which way—he could turn belligerent, gleeful, morose, or he might just fall asleep at the table.

This required some kind of a distraction. Rope said, “Ever eat moussaka?”

“Say what?” Harlan asked.

“Or spanakopita?”

“The hell’re you talkin’ about?”

“Greek cooking.”

“Never heard of it.”

“You’d like the lemon chicken soup.” Rope said to Mercy, keeping it easy, conversational. “Usually with rice, sometimes orzo.”

“Orzo.” Her lips formed the syllables as though she were tasting something for the first time.

“It’s Greek,” Rope said. “Where I came from, the Merrimack Valley, there’s a lot of Greek families.”

She appeared willing to play along. “Sure. Immigrants. Up and down the East Coast. You hear all sorts of languages and accents.”

Harlan raised his head, alert as though he smelled something from afar, fire or perhaps manure. “You’re an orphan,” he said pointing his fork at her. “Know where your people come from?”

“Momma was from Jamaica.” Mercy’s slender fingers stripped meat from the bone.

Keenly interested now, Harlan asked, “How do you know that?”

“I found some information at the orphanage in Worcester. I wasn’t supposed to see it.”

“And your daddy?” When Harlan sneered it was as though an invisible hand were pushing his jaw over to align with his right ear. “A white man who took a fancy to her, eh?”

“Fancy,” she said. “That’s an interesting way to put it.”

“Pro’bly some damn immigrant just off the boat.” Harlan glanced at Rope. “Some Harp. Or maybe one of these Greeks that puts lemons in their soup.”

“My father...he wasn’t Greek, and he wasn’t Irish,” she said. “I know that much.”

Harlan slapped the table and laughed. “He was hot for your momma is what he was!”

For the first time anger surfaced in Mercy’s pale green eyes. “No, he was...”

Leaning forward, Harlan said, “He was *what?*”

“French-Canadian. He was from Quebec.”

Harlan sat back, stopped cold. “If you’re an orphan, how do you know *that?*” When she didn’t answer, he looked about ready to slap her. “Asked you a question.”

“Because...because I just do.”

“An orphan ain’t got no family. Till now. *We* are your family. *We* took you in. *We* tell you what to do, when to do it, and you don’t put no thyme in the damn chicken.” Harlan pushed off the table with both hands and stood up, the chair scraping on the wood floor. “Trouble with children is they ain’t grown up.” He was unsteady on his feet as he left the kitchen and climbed the stairs to the second floor. They could hear the bedsprings thwacking and singing when he collapsed in the bedroom.

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Midmorning the truck came into the yard, the same couple that had taken Estelle to the hospital in Lansing. The woman had to be Estelle’s sister.

Rope was emptying buckets of slop over the fence into the hog pen. Despite the grunting pigs, he could hear some of the conversation as Harlan stood with one foot on the running board of the truck.

“The doctor called.” The woman’s voice was high and shrill, much like Estelle’s. “She’s...” The wind tore away whatever she said but it was clear she was distressed.

“So how long they gonna keep her up there, Lyle?” Harlan asked.

Rope could not hear his response. Until Lyle said, “You ought to get yourself one of these telephones.”

“Don’t need no telephone,” Harlan said. “Got something to say, you just say it to my face.”

The wind shifted, bringing the sound of an approaching train across the fields. When Harlan took his foot off the running board, Lyle turned the truck in a circle and headed out toward the road.

Rope returned to the barn with the slop pails, listening to Harlan’s footsteps as he came into the barn. He went to the workbench, emerging a few minutes later with the bottle in his fist. Rope was hanging the pails on the wall hooks and Harlan leaned a shoulder against the nearest stall gate. He’d been hungover at breakfast, but after nipping from the bottle during morning chores he seemed much revived.

“Mason liked the hogs. Merle took to the cows and milking, and she had a pony, but it got sick and we had to put it down. Near broke that little girl’s heart.”

Reluctantly, Rope said, “Your children?”

“Both lost to the influenza. Took a lot of folks around here. Ours were twins.” Harlan raised the bottle to his mouth. “Mason and Merle were going on fourteen when they took ill. Them pigs is smarter than both of them, but they did what they were told.” He sounded reasonable, determinedly so, as though relating an age-old argument. He saw something in Rope’s face that caused him to say, “It’s important to recognize a thing for what it is. There ain’t no good or bad, there’s just what is. That’s what separates us from pigs—they know it and we don’t.” Another pull on the bottle. “Estelle’s not been the same since we lost them kids. They cut the woman all out of her but they just don’t know how she’ll fare. And now they don’t know when she’ll get out of that hospital.”

“Why don’t you pay a visit?”

Harlan peered at him through raw suspicion. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Me to going up to Lansing so you—” he nodded toward the house.

“What?” Rope said.

He smiled, moving his jaw to one side. “I ain’t going nowhere. Staying right here.” As though it were a curse, or maybe a sacred oath, Harlan gazed toward the house again and whispered, “Women.”

•

Harlan’s drinking continued into the third day. Sometimes it made him talk, often near tears, but by evening he turned contrary. Mercy was plenty busy tending to the house, knowing Estelle would inspect everything upon her return. She tried to keep clear of Harlan. The following day, Lyle and Hannah stopped by to tell him that Estelle was going to be released from the hospital the next day. They would drive up to Lansing to collect her.

Harlan drank through the afternoon, spending most of the time in the barn. He didn't come in for supper. Twice Mercy sent Rope out to tell him that she was putting their plates on the table, but Harlan stayed in the barn.

"He just sits there, muttering to himself," Rope said as he sat down at the table and looked at his dinner. "You used thyme again."

"Once more before she returns. It's my *black* chicken recipe." She glanced out the window toward the barn.

"What is it?" Rope asked.

"Nothing." She leaned over her food. "Don't like being alone in the house with him is all."

"He bother you?"

"Suppose he'd like to. The liquor fuels the urge, then more liquor kills it. I found him at the foot of the attic stairs this morning, curled up like one of the barn cats."

"Can you lock your door?"

"Flimsy latch is all. No lock. He'll likely sober up once she returns."

"I suppose."

"She don't allow drink. She told me that. She told me lots of things. You know about their children?"

"The influenza took them both," Rope said. "Mason and Merle."

"Merle, hm."

"What about her?"

She shook her head slowly. "It was Estelle's idea to see what came through on the orphan train."

"He wasn't for it?" He had a steady gaze.

"Not at first. She said she had to pester him about it." She touched her forehead, tucking strands of hair beneath her kerchief. "But then we were a bargain. Two for one."

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After supper Rope went out to the shed and lay on the cot beneath two blankets. He's been mending fence all day in a raw wind spitting sleet, and he fell asleep immediately.

The voices were part of his dream.

No. They were pressing down on him, pulling him up out of sleep. Voices, muffled by the blankets covering his head. Sitting up, he realized it came from above, in the house.

He got up and went outside—he'd only managed to pull his boots off before lying on the cot—the frozen ground slippery beneath his wool socks. His axe leaned against the kitchen door frame. He picked it up and entered the house, went through the parlor, and took the stairs two at a time. He'd never been on the second floor of the house. Two rooms off a hall, and at the end was an open door and a set of narrow stairs, steep as a ladder. At the foot of the stairs, he stood listening, axe in his left hand, the head cradled in the crook of his right arm. They were gasping for air, desperate, urgent.

Rope climbed the stairs, rising into a familiar smell. Thyme. The attic was illuminated only by two candles. He could barely see them on the cot.