

I stayed at the house of the General still away at war and of his wife, who was good to me, for longer than I would have thought, for the crops were up and it was deep on into summer when I started to think about setting back out on my road. I had stayed all that time in the big room that had been the General's brother's and as I began at least in my mind to step away from the house and make north and west for home, I thought considerably about his soft eiderdown and good feather bed. It had been the kind of bed you could bury yourself down into and let the warmth and softness smother your dreams. There was something about that bed had to do in my mind with the Indian mound and the chair in the madhouse and the General's brother's grave and my mother's grave and the one I had waiting for me soon or late whether I did or I didn't keep on. It was that trick of did or didn't got me slowed and looking slow one way and then the other and then no way at all. In the middle of that no way I found a bucket. Filled up with tears. The bucket was leaking. I wiped my cheeks with the pillowcase. There was some more leak came out. I had never cried beyond getting my eyes damp before. Or any good crying I had done was past my remembering of

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it: scrawny child in her mother's arms. I did not like that I was doing it now but couldn't see any way to stop it. My bucket was still leaking when the General's wife knocked on my door one warm late morning and told me to come down, someone needed my help.

"I fear I am indisposed, ma'am," I told her.

"Well, dispose of your upset and come on down," she said back.

It was a wagon with an old man looked an awful lot at first glance like my beau from the road. This man didn't have any chew dribble in his beard, though, and when I walked up with the General's wife, he took off his hat and gave a nice nod. He was soft and green of eye to the point that they watered what looked like tiny green leaves and after I had made my own head nod back at him I could see he was missing an arm.

"I can do it all but I can't shift boxes," he said.

"Glad to help you," I said.

The General's wife gave us each a good smile and we left, or that's how it seemed as I thought about it later as the old man's mare went trotting along. There had been the General's wife's smile and then there was us, me and the old man, his watery eyes and my leaky bucket, and the open road leading us out of town.

"You take snuff?" the old man said, reaching into his waist pocket, pulling out a turquoise bag, and fetching out a pinch.

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“No,” I said, then I said, “Yes,” thinking it might help wake me up away from my reveries.

“Those are strong-looking hands you’re wearing there,” the old man said after I had stopped my sneezing.

“My name is Constance,” I said.

“I know it,” he said. “We got introduced back there in town.”

I didn’t say anything to this and we rolled on a ways in silence, up a flower-topped hill and down its other side. The old man had been casting me quick glances with those watery green eyes and after another minute of rolling he said, “Weatherby. Weatherby is my name.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

“Meet you again, is what you mean.”

We rolled some more and hit a patch of crows working a deer carcass, and Weatherby said it looked like they were having a grand time. That there was few things happier than an animal had found its midday meal. He said the General’s wife had packed us sandwiches and after we had picked up our load we could have a picnic under a shade tree. There was nothing, he said, like a picnic under a shade tree, a picnic under a shade tree in the summertime couldn’t be beat if you worked at it a year. Then he said if he had a handkerchief he would offer it to me. I hadn’t realized it but my bucket was back at it, leaking tears out of my eyes, brown ones. Dead leaves. Creek mud. Falling down my face and off my jaw.

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“I understand you’ve had some scare out along the road and seen some things of the war,” Weatherby said.

“I am sorry,” I said. “I do not know myself, I do not know myself at all.”

“I lost this arm in a fight fifty years ago,” he said. “My son is gone and my grandson is still down there in the Shenandoah.”

“Then I pity you,” I said.

“Pity the whole wide world while you’re at it,” he said. “But what I meant by that remark was that I’ve done my share of letting it leak out too.”

I wiped my face on my shirtsleeve. It did not strike me until later that he had used the word *leak* in referring to his tears. I did not cry ever again after those days of care and comfort in Ohio, but forever after when I saw someone at it, large or small, I thought of buckets dripping their contents.

“I thought I was turning into a crybaby,” I said when we had got a little farther and I realized my face had stayed dry.

“You don’t look like any crybaby to me,” he said.

He had let the mare slow to a dull step but now he flicked the reins and we jollied on.

There were fifteen crates to be carried and we found them stacked neat in the front of a shop had been owned by a man had earned some of his living making likenesses up into the war. The machine stood with its black shawl in the center of the shop opposite a red velvet curtain hung over a vanity screen. The likeness-maker’s sister, who was overseeing the

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affair, said we could take the machine in the bargain if we wanted it but I didn't say a word and Weatherby shook his head. There was a coal-black chicken in the shop with us while we worked. It was pecking at the cork on a jug under one of the benches and didn't let anything disturb it. It wasn't any work at all to shift the crates to the wagon but Weatherby fretted some over how I stacked them in.

There were shade trees aplenty on the dead likeness-maker's property but Weatherby said that if I could wait, there was a spot he liked back down the road. We pulled up some water was warmer than it ought to have been from a well with a mossy rope and slaked off our thirst. As I held the wet well bucket in my hands, I waited a minute to see if I would start back at it but I didn't. When we were set to go, the sister came out, took Weatherby's money without a word or sign, then disappeared into the dead likeness-maker's house again.

We had our picnic under a giant crab apple had once, said Weatherby, stood beside a house that had vanished along with all of its traces from the earth. He knew of this house because he had once worked its fields, or something to that effect. Some in the neighborhood believed a tornado had picked the house up and flung it, along with a family full of children, down into Kentucky or up over the Great Lakes.

"You ever see a tornado, Constance?" he asked me.

"I saw the war is all."

This kept him quiet a time although I hadn't meant it to

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when I had said it. In the middle of his quiet he swallowed down a pickled carrot and walked off into the bushes. I expected he was seeing to his business and shut my eyes but when he came back some good while later he was dripping and said he had been into a pond for a swim. We had to start heading back but there was time, if I wanted, for me to take a dip. He would sit under the crab apple and crunch on carrots and make sure no one—even though he was willing to bet one of his boxes that the road would remain empty—disturbed me.

“What’s in those boxes, anyway?” I said.

“Glass. For a greenhouse,” he said.

I walked through the bushes and down a twisting path that went right through the marshy middle of a stand of cat-tails to the edge of the water. The surface of the water was smooth except for the skaters on it. I took off my shoes and socks and hitched up my dress and stepped in, sent the skaters skittering off into the weeds. The cool from my feet and ankles rose straight up to my neck and I stepped out and wrestled off my clothes. It was when I was back in it up to my thighs, holding still and hoping the handsome skaters would return, that my mind turned a crank and I remembered my adventure in the creek. I remembered killing that rebel boy in the water after I had danced with him. Whether I had or I hadn’t. Danced or killed. Fiddle music bedeviled my ears. I shuddered so hard I fell over sideways. There were fish or snakes in the wet dark and one of them brushed by my shoul-

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der. Sleep was all I wanted. Get back to that bed at the General's house or drown. But I stayed in the water awhile longer and didn't drown. Lay there adrift on my back letting some little fish nibble at my toes.

All the ride over to Weatherby's and all the unloading and careful stacking and all the ride back to the General's house, the talk was about the war. Once Weatherby got started you couldn't get him stopped, didn't matter how long you didn't say anything, how long you swatted sweat bees away from your eyelashes or looked off into the yonder clouds.

"You were down there close up to some of those battles, if I understand it correctly," Weatherby said. "Don't you have an opinion?"

"I have an opinion," I said.

His war, as I heard him tell it, was the one you can read about now in books if you care to. I have some of those books near to hand. I've perused them carefully. From many of them, you would think it was just captains and colonels and generals leading each other in one after another handsome charge. There are dates this and battles that. Men were foot soldiers in heaven's war. Quite a healthy number of the women that did get described were saints, and some were angels, hallowed and unscarred. I with my own eyes saw Clara Barton working with the wounded after we fought at Antietam. She brought supplies to the sawbones, gave comfort everywhere she went, and wouldn't quit until she got the typhus and had to be carried away. But there wasn't any saint

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or angel to it. Just a woman in an apron and a sturdy dress. By the by, she would have looked fierce handsome holding a gun. But there aren't any women holding guns in this pile of books I have. In these stories women are saints and angels and men are courageous noble folk and everything they do gets done nice and quick and nothing smells like blood.

One book talked about Petersburg made it sound like it was a five-minute affair. Like a few officers had set down their cards and whiskey a minute and strolled over out of their mansions and used their officer power to batter down Petersburg's doors. There weren't any Fort Hells or bloody redoubts or gabions or trenches cut for miles in this fellow's telling of it; there weren't any twelve-pounders, no howitzers, no Dictator to smash what bellowed like burning bulls and elephants through the night sky. You would have almost wanted to be there, the way it was told. Let yourself get killed by a bullet to the bosom, let yourself get shot straight up out of your indescribables just to enter the tale. I read it and felt myself mounted up on a charger holding a jousting lance and getting ready to do battle. God and country. Damsels. Shield the children. Mine eyes have seen the glory. Save the poor black brethren. Bathe each night in the light of the stars.

The way Weatherby told it, or the way I heard it, his grandson's fighting for one of the grander Ohio regiments was an awful lot like these books. I hadn't read them yet then, nor had they been written, but they might as well have been. Didn't mean he didn't have his reasons. Maybe they all have

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their reasons. For telling it like poetry, I mean. I learned this that day when I finally roused myself and spoke.

“You’re a nice fellow and you have been kind to me, but it wasn’t pretty like the way you’re saying it,” I said.

He stopped the wagon when I said this. Pulled on the reins and made the mare snort. A hummingbird buzzed by us and Weatherby gave it a laugh then flicked his stump up sideways in the air. He left his stump pointing straight at the side of my head a minute. The knobby end of it was browner than any other part of him that I could see.

“They burned that shut with an officer’s hand iron,” he said. “Fifty years ago and I can still feel it. I mentioned earlier I had been to war. It took them four tries, and they had to heat up the iron again between each time. But that’s the gentle part of my tale. I know something other than knights in armor about this war we got now. My grandson I’m building this greenhouse for is getting sent home to me next month without half his face and missing both his eyes. You say something one way instead of the other often enough and maybe the thing quits crawling into your bed with you and stroking its claws at your cheek.”

Weatherby said this and then dropped his stump and gave the reins a hard flick. The mare hopped once to the side, then started up again. Weatherby pointed at the air over the road with his chin. The hummingbird was seeing us off. Green shrub. Ruby bloom. We had stopped in its territory. Weatherby had spoken without anything sounded angry in his

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voice. Only his stump had looked angry. Maybe a fleck or two of the green echoed the hummingbird swimming in his eyes.

“I beg your pardon for misunderstanding you,” I said.

“Isn’t any need for begging or pardoning either,” he said.

When we got back to the General’s house it was into dusk time and the General’s wife was sitting on the front step smoking one of the General’s pipes. When I had made my farewells to Weatherby and walked up the front path, she produced a second pipe and we sat a time together there and smoked.

“The General likes to take a walk in the evening with Mr. Weatherby,” she said. “He finds him fine company.”

“Weatherby likes to talk,” I said.

“When he gets it going.”

“But in a kind way. No argument to it.”

“He is always kind.”

We sat quiet then. If you can call it quiet when the air is getting killed by an army of crickets.

“When will the General come home?” I said.

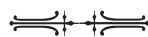
“When will the war end?” she said. “In his letters he writes that the fight goes badly. Then he writes that it goes well. Lately, more often it is the latter. Will that bring him home sooner or later? I do not know.”

She said not another word. Our smoke walked out together into the night. After a time I took my pipe up to bed with me. The tobacco was stale but still filled the room with the

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smell of whiskey and cherry and the fields on which I had fought.

During his speech, Weatherby said his ruined grandson had been at Antietam and I thought about this as I laid my head against the pillows and smoked. Maybe we had both been in the cornfield. Charged nobly forward through the powder smoke. Or maybe his fear had found him and he had turned around and run. Maybe he had been in my madhouse with me before the war had grabbed him back and found a way to steal his face and rip out his eyes.



There must have been some spell to that tobacco I carried up to my room for I spent days entire afterward, didn't matter how hot it was, back down under the covers in the dim, my eye, tearless as it was, sometimes eating at the dust whirling the light planks come in through cracks in the curtains, sometimes the dark of the pillows, sometimes just the back of its own lid. Other days I rose and worked in the garden or saw to the yard or cleaned windows or washed floors from dusk until dawn, smelling the fresh airs of the world all the length of the day, only to crawl at its end back into that room and under those covers where I stopped remembering battles and madhouses and husbands and stories and the soft breath of small babies and mothers who broke their own commands. I did my eating at night, standing in the cool of the pantry. Sometimes the General's wife would come down in her nightgown and stand alongside me and eat her meal that way too. We almost never talked as we ate. Just let our fingers go out and open jars and cut slices and spread spreads. It was one of these nights, as we were eating hoecakes and honey, that she put her hand on my hand and asked me if I was awake or asleep.

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“I don’t know,” I said, so she told me to follow her and we went out to the pump where she had me fill a bowl and give it to her. Then she lifted up that bowl and poured it over my head.

For a minute I was far away. I was back in the heat of Virginia. I was standing at the General’s side. He was asking me to be a sharpshooter; I was hiding in a well; whole days went by as I waited to take my shot, and then I was in a tree, swaying with its branches, leaning with its leaves, aiming my gun. “I know you didn’t steal out of any of your own comrades’ haversacks, I know it, you are my sharpshooter, you are my best soldier,” the General said. The bowl came back up off my head before I could answer.

The General’s wife told me then as I dripped out there in the yard in Ohio and not on the fighting fields of Virginia that I could stay at her house for as long as I wanted but that it was time to wake now, that I had slept long enough, that there would be sufficient time in the hereafter for the variety of sleeping I had been doing those past weeks.

“Your husband, my General, left me behind to rot in that madhouse,” I said.

“Are you sure that’s the way it happened? Are you sure that is what he did?” she said.

I was silent a long time.

“I’m not sure,” I said.

It was the next day I put an end to my thinking and got myself roused up to go. After she had filled my sack with jars

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and sandwiches, the General's wife walked me to the edge of town. We had a plan to stop by Weatherby's on my way out, for he had built his greenhouse. She said as we walked it was a wide world had new greenhouses go up on one of its ends and black powder to blow a man apart on its other. I said she wasn't wrong. That the world was wide. I had seen some of it. Weatherby had too. We all had. Chasms never greater and miles just as long. She whistled as we walked. It was a handsome tune, happy and mournful both, and I realized I had been hearing it every day the past weeks without listening to it.

"What is that you are whistling?" I asked her.

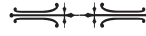
She looked at me long and a little strange, then laughed. It was just something she had heard from the General when he had last been home on leave, a song his men and lieutenants and captains liked to sing or whistle when they played cards or washed dishes or dressed wounds or cleaned rifles or wrote letters or chopped wood or raised tents or lay in their sickbeds or stood firm by their cannon or mounted their horses or ran into battle for a war wouldn't ever end or wandered the fresh fields of the dead.

"The General sang this song?" I asked.

"Oh, he loved to sing it," she answered.

"Say its name," I whispered.

She put her hand on my arm and leaned close to my ear and whispered back.



When we arrived, Weatherby gave us a ceremonial bow and asked after the General. We talked on the General some but it got to sound almost like we were making speeches, one after the other, and we left off. The General's wife had brought Weatherby a few jars of pickled carrots, one of which she opened for him.

"Nothing in the world quite like a pickled comestible to my way of looking at it," Weatherby said.

"They are choice morsels," I said.

"You can say it and then you can say it again and not use it up," he said.

"Show us what you have built," the General's wife said.

I was ready for the road but found my curiosity for this new thing too strong. Weatherby led us past a wide square of peach trees were now loaded and not above a week away from producing and past the silvery curve of a little stream.

"You got sold smudged glass," I said when we came to it. It was a pretty thing, planted off by itself in the middle of a fresh-scythed lawn, with the glass neat set, but all the panes I could see from where we stood held marks.

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“I got sold what I paid for.” Weatherby smiled strangely. “Just exactly what I paid for.”

“That’s picture glass,” the General’s wife said. “A greenhouse made out of picture ghosts.”

We went inside. Stood among the empty benches. As we watched, the sun tore off its cloud and lit up a hundred likeness images. It was the happy faces of fifty men gone off to war and fifty women didn’t. Or maybe they didn’t. Maybe there were some standing up there straight in their Sunday dresses were out right that minute on the field holding rifles, getting their arms sawed off, dying over their slops, singing it out with all the rest of them about watch fires and fateful lightning and the coming of the Lord. Away off somewhere in that other country knowing they would never get home. There was ghost pictures too of countryside and farm buildings, a town square, a trail, flowering bushes, a tree in the sunlight, a brook in the breeze. There was even three or four windows full of boys had got left behind in their bones at the Second Bull Run, which the photographer, Weatherby told us, had visited the weeks before he died.

Weatherby and the General’s wife stayed inside that greenhouse awhile longer but my face and neck had grown hot, so I stepped outside into the cool and thought I would walk a minute among the peach trees. They were old and intergrown so I had to work and crouch a little to pass between them and after a minute gave it up and sat down near the middle of the orchard against a trunk. There were sweat bees and butter-

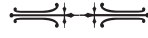
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flies at their work and one of them, with green and gold and turquoise to its wing, took my eye over to the back of Weatherby's house, where, sitting on the bench in the sunlight, I saw his grandson. He was wearing pants and undershirt and had his hands in his lap. The hands were big and the fingers skeletal. His bare feet, planted firm in front of him, were flat and narrow and long. There was a clean bandage wrapped around his ears. Over his face he wore a purple veil. There was a little bit of a breeze playing with the under-end of it. Otherwise there wasn't a thing on or around him outside flying insects that moved. He might have been graven. Image of hurt for the ages. Hurt come home. I stood after a minute and started to crouch my way out of the orchard to give him a good morning, but my feet found out other ideas and before I knew it I was off and away, without any farewells, let alone good mornings, on my road.

I thought as I put Yellow Springs behind me and walked fast away that it was seeing those dead soldiers and that whole world being lit to vanishing that made me want even harder than I had to get home before it was too late and Bartholomew and I and the wide world got turned to just some jelly dried to a cracked glass sheet. Cracked for the wind to whistle through. I thought too it might be the picture that bloomed up of Weatherby's blind grandson tending sprouts in his purple veil under all those fading faces he couldn't see, all those eyes fading off away until they were all as blind as he was that had put the snap in my step and made me move. Or maybe it was just

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the smell I still had in my nose of pickled carrots and the sound in my ears of them being crunched by Weatherby with his old teeth in that quiet place. Or the after-hum I had in my head of the General's wife whistling "The Ballad of Gallant Ash."



Whatever it was, I walked away and didn't stop any longer than I had to over those last miles. So much so that it wasn't much more than a week after I'd left them at their floating room and its ghosts that I walked back up into Randolph County where I'd left from better than two years before. It was late. Raining, or I would have pushed on for home that evening. Instead, I spent a night with some boys had a fire going under a rubber sheet rigged up high next to a field near Winchester. They had three women with them who all looked happy enough. The boys were back from the war, is what they said, and the women had come out to meet them. They were having a party out of the homecoming and there were jugs of corn whiskey involved.

I took my drink and shared out what I had left of the jars and sandwiches from the General's wife and we had a fine old time. They had some impressive firearms they'd brought back with them, including a pair of Sharps and a Henry breech-loader made me give out a whistle. That whistle led to a firing demonstration once the rain had stopped. The Henry looked like it had come straight out of the crate and into their hungry arms. It could hit any size object you liked at any distance

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if you knew how to shoot it. Which I knew I could and which the fellow who said he owned it could not. After he had made the dirt around the can do some high kicks, I took my turn and showed how it was done. I had my suspicions about whether or not those boys had done much soldiering when they couldn't answer straight about where they had been and had fought and just which line they had stood in to fire off fine fresh weapons like the ones they were toting, but my mind was mostly elsewhere up the road. It was elsewhere enough that when later the boy that claimed to own the Henry left off trying on his snoring woman and climbed on top of me, I let him go with a kick and a elbow to his jaw.

He crawled back over to his woman and set in to snoring next to her and I thought I'd try to join the party but I couldn't fall asleep. I lay there under the Indiana stars and thought my thoughts. Couldn't quit thinking them. Not too far off dawn, my paramour let off a loud fart, woke himself up with it, and came back over at me. I was agitated and hit him down harder than I probably would otherwise have done.

This got the whole band of them roused and before I knew it I was getting chased a hundred yards down the road. Later that same morning, just ahead of noontime, I stepped my foot back down on the dirt of my farm.