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Circuit Rider

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CIRCUIT RIDER

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Department of English
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ABSTRACT

Circuit Rider:

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An historical novel set at the end of the American Civil War focusing on the week between President Lincoln's assassination and John Wilkes Booth's death. The backdrop of the story is comprised of the historical events and political figures that shaped this period in time in America. The plot is also configured around the fictional histories of three young souls, the spirit of a murdered Chinese immigrant girl, and a brother and sister who's home in the Appalachians was destroyed during the war. All three are escaping the devastating consequences of the war and seeking a new start in the Western states. They become personally entangled in the plot to assassinate the president on the way west.

The story focuses on the American underclass, the distinctive experiences of the runaways, the impoverished, immigrants, newly freed slaves and those in the criminal class who were also active participants in shaping the recorded history of the United States and as noteworthy as the heroes and villains Americans know by heart. The novel posits that the small dramas have as powerful an effect on the course of American history as do the renowned conflagrations and disasters that become headline news.

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Circuit rider is an American term for an individual who travels a regular circuit of locations to provide services and judgment. The term first came into widespread application for judges, particularly in the sparsely populated American West, who would hold court in each town in their circuit on a regular basis.

Preachers who did this would ride on horseback and were called circuit riders or saddlebag preachers. They traveled with few possessions, carrying only what could fit in their saddlebags. They traveled through wilderness and villages, they preached every day at any place available and they were always on the move

Prologue

There are people who don't do you any good and people you can't help but hurt. You shouldn't travel with these companions even if they strike your fancy. At fourteen years Cable Gaines was already a bad stick when I first saw him, a dirty cracker with an ugly core, and at thirteen I was already a twisted soul. We were young, but even children can make decisions that set their fates in stone.

I am Mei and the first time I saw Cable properly was in a field bursting with grape shot and cannon fire. Then we suffered a string of days following the troops, then we took a train ride and then we trailed together more or less, until Cable finally cut me loose. Drifters tend to take the same trails through big territories. The world is huge but there are few beaten paths, so you can't help but run into one another from time to time, particularly if you are heading west. I lost track of him from time to time but we always met up again.

I liked Cable from the start. I liked that he could harbor as much spite as I could. I liked the way he could take a beating, tolerate betrayal and return the same and I loved lying to a boy who never spoke the truth. It was Cable who taught me to read, though he did it mostly to shut me up. I could only read in English but I could read and write in the end. I might have made a fine grown woman, had I lived.

I am Mei. Born in wartime while my parents were soldiering in the eastern Guangxi Zhuang region, bonfires and screaming are my first memories. My people lived in the mountains and hid in the mud. I think my birthplace deformed me. My living shape would

have fooled you. When you looked at me you would have seen a girl but inside I was a panther with a festering scratch in its side.

My family and I fled China when I was too young to wear pigtails. I remember that I wore a rough weave my grandmother gave me the day my parents, my brother and I, crept away. I remember that I lost my shoes on a beach because it was dark and I tripped. And when I tried to retrieve them my mother slapped me.

"My shoes," I whispered.

"Shoes are for walking Mei. Now is the time to swim." Then she forced me into the water and followed, with my brother strapped to her back. My parents sold me into the life soon after we landed. They probably comforted themselves with the long view; one that extended backwards through generations and affected futures they would never see. But I always saw life in smaller bits, only each day at a time mattered; this was my way until I died. And I have never forgiven them for casting me adrift. If they sold me in order to survive, I am not certain they deserved it.

I never knew my birthday, or my exact age. Those details evaporate into the high wide sky when you cross oceans. Numbers matter to the Chinese. Good or bad ones can conserve or destroy one's destiny. But I never knew my dates, so I never knew my numbers. But in numerology terms, Mei is 3, a strong number.

As the Chinese sell their daughters, Americans squander their sons. Cable was a half-breed hillbilly dredged out of the Appalachian soil by army scouts and fitted with fatigues. He didn't have his sisters with him when we met, digging in behind a failing line of shooters, on a blasted battlefield. He called me a whore and I pitched a rock at him. You could tell straight off that he liked being smarter than the next fellow. I think he

learned letters just out of spite. It was a skill that made him better than his origins. He hated his father, his mother, and just about everybody else. And he loved his sisters. I think he let me be because even bad boys get lonely and the fact that I would have dropped him down a well just because it was Tuesday made him smile. If the world is a base place, then being meaner than it is makes you a lion instead of a mouse. Cable and I were mousers of the first order. Cable is 5, a number that literally means nothing in Chinese but a number we like nonetheless because it sounds strong. He was my match. I never met another like him.

I hear people now say that April 1865, was a hopeful time. I say that it was only good for a few. Life was stony roads and quicksand for most of us. But people like me don't write the books and even if we can read and write, chits like me don't like to say how it was, nor do we like to say that we lived like pigs. Wars leave people, places and things in pieces. The roads in America were flooded with wandering kids, bits of driftwood. If our parents lived, most of them couldn't keep up, so they set us on street corners and sold us as labor, a second society of losers tumbling through the undergrowth. We scrambled for the edges of the wild world seeking purchase. If you could get there first, maybe you could build a place, kill for it and keep it, then maybe you prospered.

The Chinese look backwards into the future. Honoring the past signifies the present. But I was a Chinese child without history, a girl without a soul. When I try to follow my ancestors, they turned their backs to me and deny me a place in their eternal procession. I cannot move from the twilight space that exists between the living and the dead because I never mattered. I cannot join the line of my family's history because I struck off so separately. If my soul was barren like Cable's then maybe the fact that I did not matter

would not offend, but the hints of Chinese visions that taint my spirit hold me fast in space. I had duties to attend as a Chinese girl and I ignored them. So now I float and there is no one here to answer my questions. If I were to guess, I would say that because I was never anchored to anything or anyone except Cable I don't belong with anyone else, and so I have to stay here until Cable comes to fruition.

When Cable and I finally separated, we didn't break good. Now I haunt the skies overhead and, unlike those left behind, I remember exactly the way it happened. I only know a little of what happened to Cable after the fire, I still take the smaller view, but now that I am dead, I can review all of the events that happened when I was alive though I cannot control either the direction or scope of my view. For example I can only tell you what happened to Cable in between Gettysburg and the day I died.

Cable always said his story started when he lost his arm, but I say his story started in the aftermath of Gettysburg, America's bloodiest battle. The war was over after Gettysburg from then on the South moved into constant retreat. It was a place of transformation for Cable. He became a murderer there and became more desperate.

He had escaped from the hospital and made it home while the war still raged. The staggered survivor of too many casualties, he returned home to find less than he had left, and he had not left much. The house was empty and his mother long dead and his father doubtless alive and coming for them. Underneath the rotted porch he found the last of his family hiding from soldiers, the blue or the grey. Grubbed in dirt were Alice, the sister he knew, and a baby he had never seen until he dragged them to the surface the way you dig up mushrooms. To my misfortune he took them and ran.

Alice was an idiot, a half-wit with a quickening temper and an icy heart except when it came to Cable or the baby, Sugar. She clawed at Cable when he first laid hands on her, and it took him nearly an hour to flush her from her lair. As I see it, he rescued her from the dark and she did for him what he would never let me do. Together, I admit they were a working unit, almost whole. I no longer blame Cable for bringing his sisters along but I always loathed those girls. Like stones tied to his ankles they kept him from me and I still hate them for that.

They were only running away in the beginning; plans came later. They lived like wintering cranes, seeking heat and stealing food. Carving a ragged way through the wilderness, they only entered towns for supplies they had to buy. Alice was a poor mother; rail thin, she couldn't nurse the child good enough to keep it fit, and often the baby needed things the wilderness would not provide. Traveling for weeks, avoiding soldiers and bounty hunters who scooped up drifters and branded them deserters or spies, they arrived in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania late in the summer of '63, just after Lee lost and the armies had moved on.

Pennsylvania had a history long before the battle, long before settlers carved out plots and stripped the woods bare, long before that bloody summer that turned it into a graveyard. Cable came from a Fitter's Creek a dump set in the mountains just inside Virginian boundaries and though I never saw his home it sounded much like mine as did much of the south.

The history books say that my parents were mountain farmers in the eastern Guangxi Zhuang region. Then Hong came and started a war with the Qing dynasty that lasted fourteen years. Sometime during our war, yours started. I have spent my life moving in between battle zones. Once Hong gave up and killed himself my people became the hunted. My family escaped to the coast where we froze and starved until my father bartered passage on a ship with room for the four of us in its hold. Local storytellers say that the Zhuang were fierce warriors. My mother, though a young girl, crossed the

mountains barefoot in search of her enemies once and my father gutted his foes and cut off their heads.

I come from strong stock but losing the war turned my parents' hearts to pudding. In addition the boat ride to America was a rotten dream from which they did not recover. They were bent swaying monkeys chattering in a language I soon forgot by the time we arrived. My parents also dragged an ancient drowning view of the world with them wherever they walked. I did not miss them after we parted ways in New York.

Gettysburg was Cable's new shore, the true beginning of his journey. He and his sisters arrived, in the misty dawning of a muggy summer day. He stowed the girls high in the hills, made Alice promise to stay put and headed down to the field to scrounge.

Cable like his privacy now and again and after he'd hidden his sisters he took a moment, stood at the top of Round Hill where the Union troops had turned the tide of battle and surveyed the damage.

Bisected by a broken railbed, the battlefield they faced was a mottled expanse of grassy basins and low dark ridges, and the ground was never completely still. Raptors foraged and rats scurried over corpses. Bluebottle flies clustered in scattered columns over makeshift graves. Hogs and hog-nosed skunks unearthed hands, feet and arms while stony-eyed boys squatted at the tree line, shooting down crows and vultures. Relatives picked through the field, seeking their own, and thieves pilfered the remains no one claimed. Once the gravediggers arrived the luckier boys would be hired to help haul bodies away, negotiating enough for their services to buy what necessities were still for sale in the scorched remains of the run-down towns that still existed.

I can see him as he moved downwards to pause at the edge of the clearing, hidden by a stubborn stand of charred oak. A scarecrow boy with slate grey eyes, perched in the shadows watching a group of diggers pass by. Then when it was safe he stepped out from the trees, dropped to the ground, stuffed his good arm under a body and rolled it. Then he stopped, sickened -- Cable's father was Christian and his mother a Cherokee. God infected every twig for Cable and searching bodies was a sin. But need absolves sin; the remains of a threadbare family waited in the brush, and Cable could not have afforded to cater to his parents' superstitions so he dried his hand on his pants, smoothed blond strands underneath a faded blue cap and dug in. After the third body he became less squeamish and more efficient. He focused on the details, collected shiny bits, worried Union dollars out of pockets and searched for quality jackets that might contain pocket watches and hand-tooled wallets.

As he rolled the bodies, instead of reminding himself to be grateful that he was alive Cable was haunted by the fact that he'd come so close to dying. He remembered being shot and falling and then someone said, "Sorry son," and chloroformed him before he could say that he'd rather die. The doctors cut off his arm against his will, then they dropped him into a ditch when he didn't wake up. He came to much later, screaming, and climbed out of a mass grave his view fracturing into a startling sense of human beings as just pieces of flesh and bits of sound. Blistered landscapes should have been easier to take after that day, but I suspect Cable still softness in him then and it didn't serve his purposes.

Militia guarded the field as well as they could, but the blue uniform camouflaged him and he kept to the dark as much as possible. Stumbling in the semi-darkness, he knelt by

a body to thumb through a wad of cash spilling from a torn pocket. He had to hurry; he had a train to catch and mouths to feed. The B & O Eastern would take them into Washington and there were many ways west from there.

“Script,” he hissed casting the bills to the wind. The bits of paper danced along the ground amid the dusty dead until they got hooked in the brush.

He worked his way through the woods, stripping bodies of trinkets, until he came upon a crush of Union dead. Union uniforms, unlike those of the greybacks, were still in good repair since the only textile factories still up and running were Northern. By the summer of '63 Confederate soldiers stripped Union bodies and donned blue suits as a regular practice.

A pair of new brogans drew Cable in. He wriggled them free and forced his feet inside, then, instead of tying the laces he began tugging at the dead man's jacket. The body sighed -- expanding gases sometimes made them move. He froze, but only for a moment. When coins he held fell to the ground he remembered his task. Collecting them again he spoke aloud without realizing it. “Alice, my girl, you better had stayed put.” The words steadied him. His hands stopped shaking and he rolled another body.

After checking the dead soldier's pockets, Cable knelt, thrusting his good arm and his stump underneath the torso. He forced his weight against the bulk and shifted it into a better position. A soiled haversack was hooked over one arm and it nearly slipped free once the body was moved. Flattened but full, the pack contained possibilities. Cable wrestled it free, then fought with the strap when the leather hooked on a rock.

“Give it,” he lost his temper and wrenched at the prize. He forced the cinch open and shook the contents onto the ground: a bull's eye canteen, an empty box of percussion

caps, and a greasy rag tumbled free. “Don’t know how. Don’t know when,” he sang to himself, softly, as he worked. “Don’t know ever if I’ll see you again.” Tossing the canteen and the box aside, he tore into the bag, unearthing two pieces of hard tack, a potato and dried vegetable cakes.

“They’re more over here,” someone said just beyond his view. “You two. Start moving through the trees.”

Hunching down, Cable discarded the tack and crammed all of one vegetable cake into his mouth, overstuffing it, chewing and breathing around his mouthful as he tried to swallow.

“Man owned more than the two of us put together,” he said aloud, as if Alice could hear.

He used to tell me that keeping Alice in his head was a way to control the wraiths that haunted him. His sister did the same. You never dealt with one Gaines without being touched by the presence of the other. He picked up a rock and pounded the potato into bits which he swallowed whole. The act of eating tired him, but while he ate, his boney frame settled a little, and the muscles in his old man face relaxed, making him seem the boy he might have been once, for a very short time. Sunken eyes, set off by high, sharp cheekbones, gave him a ruthless look countered by rounded features not yet hardened to maturity.

His freckled face was shadowed by the brim of his hat. Glancing up, he surveyed the field. While he had been eating his potato, two teams had arrived and begun dragging bodies from the trees to the carts. He stopped chewing and held his breath once or twice when diggers passed near and held his breath. These men would drag his body behind the

back of a horse cart if they found him, and I think he would have understood. He stood stock still and no one noticed him except for one who was fast falling into forever shadows.

“Behind you, by your knee, boya,” came a whisper from a parched throat. Cable dropped the food, raised a rock and scanned the brush. In his shadowed spot it was hard to discern shape from shade.

“Boya,” came the whisper again. It was a word shaped by the soft hush of a weakened southern lilt. Clutching the rock and still not finding a face to match the voice, Cable collected the remaining potato and stuffed it into a pocket before he edged towards a copse at the end of a trench. Someone fired a shot behind him, but not at him, so he kept looking for the source of the voice.

A grey clad soldier, resting against a spindly tree, tracked his progress. The dying man, caked with mud and streaked with the slight light of the rising sun, was camouflaged among the birch and the white walnut clumped on this side of the field. His jacket was streaked with blood, soaking through at his waist. Scattered nearby were the bodies of others positioned so that they all faced away. He pointed a cocked pistol at Cable but it lay sideways on his leg, as if it were too heavy to hold.

“You,” the soldier said. Cable stopped when he saw the gun staying out of arm’s reach. He doubted the man could squeeze the trigger, but wanted the space to run if he was wrong. Also, the shot would draw attention. “You found water yourn,” he said, pointing back to the way Cable had come. Nodding, Cable retrieved the canteen he’d found earlier. He dropped his rock so that he could thread the strap of the canteen onto

the opposite shoulder, and then he picked up another rock. Then he handed the canteen to the soldier without getting closer than necessary.

“Thankee,” the soldier said. He spilled water on his collar instead of into his mouth. Then his hand started to shake, so he cradled the container in his lap, knocking his pistol to the ground in the process. “Thought I’d got away with it,” he said to the sky.

“Danny, Corporal Daniel Hadden,” he said and shrugged his shoulders to indicate the double chevrons sewn into a black patch on his jacket. “Army of Northern Virginia, wherever the hell they are. Pardon the language.” A breeze whisked some leaves aside and allowed a sunray to brighten the ground next to Hadden. He followed the light to its source. But staring into the heart of the new day he would not live to see end, distracted him. He had to concentrate to remember the thread of his thoughts. “Do you know where they went, boy?” he asked.

“N’omm,” Cable said shaking his head.

After taking a swig, he offered the water to Cable who refused it. “We lost but we didn’t crawl. We marched out of here, proud after Lee. By the time it was over couldn’t see a soul I knew alive. I barely could see through the smoke and the screaming.”

“Wanna get out of here, Mister? A man with money might still git home.”

Hadden patted the breast pocket that housed his wallet but he didn’t pull it out. “‘Let them go without me,’ I said to myself. ‘Let them leave,’ and I could hide here. Hard to be anything good when you was as scared as I was. But I got hit.” He closed his eyes.

“Running away.”

“Run off myself,” Cable said. “No one cares.”

Diggers called to one another from the other side of the field. Cable stood his ground, because he would not abandon the money. I wonder if Cable ever stepped aside for another.

“Back off some,” Hadden said. He dropped his hand to the pistol and fingered its trigger. Cable obeyed. Unable to maintain his grip for long, Haddon let the gun barrel rest on the ground. “My daddy would have said this was fitting.”

“I don’t know, Mister,” Cable said. “You’re a sorry sight.”

“It’s good you come,” Hadden laughed. “Realized I was lonely. Don’t remember passing out, but I must’ve. They was gone when I came to, and this place was smoking. Thought I was dead, first, cause all...” he waved the gun at the killing fields. “Got a little crazed.” He pointed at the bodies with their backs turned to him now. “Didn’t want them staring at me. Scared me silly.

“Hey,” he said, looking down at his wet coat. “Now that you’re here, I guess I might get home. You’ll help a Reb, won’t ya, boy? A Union boy who’ll give water to a Reb won’t mind calling for help either. What do ya say?”

“Only thing Union about me is the duds,” Cable said.

“Clean clothes?”

“When I can find them.”

“You could help me, maybe.” Hadden was drifting so Cable closed in on him. Although he would rather be given the wallet than take it, the field around them was filling with people. If someone found them before he got the money, he might lose this chance.

“See you’ve been through the mill,” Hadden said, referring to Cable’s stump.

Cable flinched. Not every soldier is proud of his scars.

“Don’t try to hide it, boy. Lots like you around. It’s a mark of pride.”

Cable lifted the end up, so Hadden could see.

“Nasty,” said Hadden. “Them balls, if they don’t blast it off, they make a hole that festers,” he said. “Though,” he looked down at his gut, “this seems awful bad.”

“Hey now,” Cable said thinking Hadden was weak enough, “maybe I could stand for a swallow.” He reached closer as if to grab the canteen. When he did Hadden pulled him to his knees.

“Easy Mister,” he said. Cable pushed off Hadden’s thigh with his stump. The beat up end slipped and hit the ground more than once as he tried to pull away. Something about the way the bone bit into the dirt seem to rock the boy, not the pain, but the sound of it.

“Gonna save me, boy?” Corporal Hadden asked softly. His voice was no more than the whisper of a breeze rolling across his vocal chords. “I promised my daddy that I’d come home. No, that’s not right. I promised Maggie I’d come home. I promised Daddy I’d make him proud.”

People surprise you, and desperation restores strength, sometimes. Cable, forced to a praying position by the hand that held him, waited. When Hadden, exhausted by his efforts, started to fade, he closed his eyes. Cable realized that he was staring at the light shimmering off a gold chain around Hadden’s neck. It was the kind of trinket that women who lived fine lives treasured. It was too pretty to be hanging on a dead man’s neck. Cable was reaching for it when Hadden opened his eyes again.

“Take it,” Hadden said softly. “Do it, boya.” He lifted his hand to try to yank it off. “Married her before I left. Nothing I could do would save anyone, she said. But I said,” he stopped.

Cable leaned closer and slid his fingers under the links.

“Do you hear people?” Hadden asked. Panicking, Cable wrenched the necklace off so roughly that he pulled Hadden sideways.

“Geezus,” Hadden said, breathing through the pain while Cable admired his new possession, a chain threaded through an oblong locket.

“Open it,” Hadden said to Cable.

“Got pictures like that of yourn?”

“Don’t come from pretty people,” Cable replied.

A small square daguerreotype of a serious long haired belle had been forced inside a round small space. The corners of the picture folded up around the edges of the locket where they had been crimped flat.

“I think I hear people,” Corporal Hadden said. “Call out.” He started to raise a hand to wave.

“You left this pretty thing on her own?” Cable said accusingly, dangling the necklace near Hadden’s face.

“I said, ‘you have to do the right thing.’” The soldier’s voice trailed off.

Taking advantage of Hadden’s failing moment Cable hit him on the head with his rock as hard as he could. The first blow started a rain of other until Cable was banging on the man’s head as if to unmake the face. He stopped when his arm began to shake and

realized that he was hissing. Then he let the weapon roll free. It was the first time Cable had killed a man who couldn't fight back.

He extracted his loot, the money, necklace and identification that would make him a new man. He dropped the necklace twice and his shaking fingers slowed his progress with the money clip.

Why is it worse to roll bodies and steal from the dead than to betray live souls? Because the dead are vulnerable to desecration. But the living can still fight back. It is a Chinese notion and as to matters concerning life and death, I am still more Chinese than I want to be. Maybe I will pay the price for neglecting these obligations. As for Cable, veneration is in his background as well. As is standing your ground, when you have a good enough reason. I never saw Cable step aside for another.

"Soldier, show yourself," someone called. The voice came from the field beyond the trees.

"Sir." Cable shoved the necklace and the wallet into his pocket.

"Show yourself."

"Nother time maybe," Cable replied. He knew they would have to shoot through the trees and his odds improved if he just ran. Then, a bullet screamed near and another clipped a green stem by his head. "Bye-bye, boya," he whispered to the dead man.

"Hold up!" someone screamed as Cable stooped under a branch and scurried into the brush. He bet that none of the shooters were good enough to trail him where he would go, which improved his odds even more. Hadden, finally eclipsed, vanished the way the trees, the settlers and the soldiers had – like a puff of smoke.

Hadden passes me by on his way up. "They'll never find me," he says. Who he means by they is unclear, and I am barely paying attention anyway.

"Does it matter?" I ask.

"No longer," he replies, becoming a mournful figure I can barely see. He drifts out of view towards his destination, and, for a moment, I hate this man who fit in time the way I never did. Cable hated him for different reasons. Then my envy melds with all my other hatreds, and I have a view of the world as a swirling flow that drowns out my voice so that all that is left of me are the shoes my mother had made me abandon on the beach.

Hadden is gone but I can feel the hum of spite surrounding me. I am a ghost haunted by ghosts headed for greener pastures. As on earth, no one else notices me and as hundreds of souls spring free from the battlefield below none see me as they pass by.

Hadden saw me at the moment he bade his life good-bye because I am trapped in that moment. This moment. But as he released his misgivings, he passed on. My regrets are like planets circling an angry sun. I am a gatekeeper for no one, and I am certain that my ancestors are unaware of my absence in their ranks.

This sadness becomes another satellite, falling into orbit around me, centering me more strongly in my bad space.

Now I can see Cable hurrying up out of the dell that is Gettysburg into the low lying hillsides that mark his progress into the rising dank wilderness where he has stashed his sisters. The hills out of Gettysburg are dotted with rock fall, clumps of granite combining into shallow caverns where small animals hide out. Alice and Sugar are there, if they stayed put. He always complained that they never did.

As it turned out, Cable's sisters were not where he had left them. Once he discovered this, he tried to catch his breath and keep his head while he scanned the field at the base of the hill he had just climbed. He could hear his pursuers calling out as they organized in a line and spread out so that he could not double back. Echoes of "Here," drifted upward. The men had seen him run and followed without knowing exactly what he had done. With nowhere to hide, all he could do was run faster. If only he and his sisters could make the train then they would be safe. He focused on this goal and kept pushing forward.

He blew through a stand of holly that clawed at his sleeves, tripped over felled beech branches and stumbled passed a group of negroes trudging on the side of a road. Before he could regain his balance, he tripped over his shoelaces. The new boots were too big and still unstrung. He tucked the laces into the shoes and scuttled away into the thickest brush he could find ducking the rising sun which thwarted him by lighting his path.

Sweat dribbled down his chest and back, and his wet shirt, and the pants bunched up, constricting his movements.

Earlier that morning in the wet dark, he had stowed Alice and the baby, Sugar, in a rocky niche.

“You comin’ back Cable?” she had asked when he left, as if a promise given by a boy who could not be trusted would have any weight.

“Les I don’t,” he replied.

She always asked, and Cable never said yes.

“Don’t make fun,” she insisted.

“Then don’t ask me what I don’t know,” Cable said. He knelt at the cave entrance before he left and tried to shelve his fears. The cave imparted a feeling of safety, a sense that no one could see them because no one would look for them in this filthy place. Dried moss covered the walls and in spots flaked to the floor where it mixed with undergrowth that had been clawed from the forest and dragged inside by nesting foxes. The space smelled like shit and wet dog. Two kits that hadn’t survived the Spring lay in boney remains curled around one another in a partially crushed state. The rats that had moved in after the foxes had gone scattered upon the Gaines’s arrival. Alice scurried after them, and caught and killed what she could. She saw a look in her brother’s eyes, distance more than disgust.

“Don’t make fun,” she had asked him.

He’d shook his head as she piled the bodies out of sight. “Nothing funny to it, Alice.” Cable had replied. “But stop h’it.”

Her hands and arms were black with soil and shit when she was done with the rats. Lilith, came to his mind, the woman made before Eve, it seemed to Cable she would have had to come up from the mud looking much like his sister.

The only explanation of Alice's ways that Cable ever offered was that whenever their father would take Alice to town, he'd tie a rope to her waist and drag her behind, and he'd tie her to posts when he entered buildings. She learned to creep soon after she learned to walk. A slumping stance haunted her, and in the downward spiral which shaped her life, the worse she looked, the worse she behaved.

Cable had seen others eat rats, but seeing his sister crawl after them made his insides buckle. Her dress had crept up her thigh, so he could see she had tied a knife to her leg. It wouldn't do to let a girl like Alice carry a blade while tending a child.

"Give it over," he said.

She laid it on the ground. "I need it."

He had not brought it. Its presence meant she'd been wandering when he left her alone. Things happened when he left her alone.

He slapped her. "Leave here before I come back and I'll knock you."

"Like Daddy, once't he catches us," she replied while she curled the rags of her dress around skinny legs and bare feet. She had not spoken sadly. In Alice's mind the men who owned her had the right to hurt her as long as they did not cast her out.

"I told you, Daddy's dead," Cable said, hoping this was true. The odds were good. One thing he had learned from his time spent dressed him in blues and shoved to the front was that most men died in battle. However, Cable reasoned that what he could survive his father would, too. What seemed catastrophic to other men was status quo to the Gaines

family; Tom Gaines had probably survived. When he returned home and discovered his wife's grave and his children gone, he would go looking for them. He would come get his things – because they were his things.

“You seen him die?” Alice chewed her fingernails. She also cut her legs with sticks when the mood took her. Like a nightmare that you couldn't quite shake upon waking, Tom Gaines always lurked in the back of their minds. Tom Gaines broke spirits because that's how he knew himself to be of consequence. His children were, pieces of people, results of their father's misuse and shadows of their mother's will to survive.

“I did,” Cable replied, hoping she wouldn't ask for details.

Alice shivered. It had rained overnight, and they were all still wet. She reached for the baby and held it close as much to warm herself as to protect it.

“Don't believe you,” she said. “Not Daddy.”

After Cable left, Alice fussed with the baby for a while then laid it down in the dirt, and ants and small red spiders blossomed in trails across its soft skin and it began to cry. Alice crushed the bugs against its skin and brushed the others away, and the baby cried until it dropped off to sleep. Alice ignored the crying. And once Sugar quieted, she curled up on the ground, disregarding the bugs that trailed across her own body. She liked the idea of motherhood but lacked the capacity to nurture anything as complex as a human baby. Hatchlings and kittens were all she could handle, really. Soft and small for a little while and gone shortly thereafter. Cable had never asked who fathered Sugar and I'm sure that if she never told him another bad night would be sucked off into a forgiving void.

When the cave and the ground around the cave failed to offer clues as to where Alice might have gone, Cable scanned the horizon as if he might catch a glimpse of the girls. The fact of the men after him and the girls gone lent urgency to his situation and narrowed his options. “Christ, Alice,” he sighed.

Looking down through the dusty haze that drifted over the battlefield that now surrounded Gettysburg, Cable could track the movements of the men below. The searchers couldn’t see him, but he could hear their voices reverberating as they arranged themselves in groups and began to scale the slopes where he might hide. This was their home, not his. They would not need to guess at the best places to find cover.

But Cable had been raised to hunt big and small game, and he took those skills to war. He knew that predators and prey abided by patterns. He had not been gone long enough to frighten Alice. She would have to have been forced away. He looked to the creek below. She might track a stream. Every mountain is the same; everything runs downhill, and drainages are the safest down climbs. Living things growing from the rock and dirt hold a trail together. Aside from that paths beaten into shape by animals are the best trails. Alice would keep to those trails and follow the water where it ran. Living creatures follow settled paths. Cable could find her if he kept his focus.

But he struggled with a sense of impending doom that kept scattering his thoughts. He now had Hadden’s money to help pay for their escape but was tethered in place by his sisters’ absence. The cave was empty as many times as he had looked. Sitting at the entrance he slowed his mind, blocked the sounds of those hunting him and tried to think. While the voices of the trackers drifted ever closer, he inspected the ground. The wind stirred the trees dragging shadows across the unmarked soil. No tracks, no trails, no

blood. But then, a strap once tied tightly around his sister's thigh appeared. Only visible when the three leaves over it lifted in the breeze, it was rolled in a strip of material torn from a pocket on Alice's dress.

He could have left them behind here. With money in hand, he could have freed himself from his burdens, caught the train and caught up to me. I was waiting for him after a fashion, and we were bound to find each other again.

“Jig is up, son.” Shiny black boots, the kind town folk wore, stepped into view and a big boned man dressed in a long green coat knelt down. He peered at the brush where the strap lay. “What do you see, boya?” he asked. His face looked like a chunk of rock broken away with a sledgehammer. The cheeks were pitted with pox scars that remembered yellow fever season. The face was sheltered by a flat brown gaze that reminded Cable of soil that only supports half-starved foliage. The man palmed the strap. Then he shrugged, saw the boy watching and tossed the strap into the brush.

“Maybe I needed that,” Cable said. Did Alice drop it so he would know where she had gone or did she lose it as she was dragged away? Did she know it was gone? Would it have been better for him to have left the knife with her?

“What are you doing here, mudsill?” The man brushed the dust his hands and stood.

He had bad knees that Cable could hear grind as the man straightened up. He rose slowly and winced revealing brown, gapped teeth. Then he cocked his head; the trackers were now crashing up the slope. They would have moved faster but in an effort to trap Cable they moved slowly, staying within view of one another in order to keep him netted in.

“They know where I am, nearly,” Cable said. For a moment he suffered an image of all the things that were coming for him and felt very small.

“Looking for something?” asked the man.

“I got a pocket full of rocks, want to trade?”

“Hard times tokens?” the man listened to the sounds of breaking brush. “They’re almost on you, and I wouldn’t give a Bungtown copper for the safety of your skin if I did let you go.” He wrapped a big hand around the boy’s arm and turned him to face downhill. “Whatever you have in your wallet is mine already anyway.”

The man shoved Cable so that he fell to his knees. Then pressed on Cables’ head, neck and shoulders inspecting him the way you search stock for flaws.

“What is a queer boy like you worth?” the man asked.

“Don’t matter what I am worth to you if you won’t name a price,” Cable replied.

“Boys from Fitter’s Creek don’t amount to much that I know of.”

“Fitter’s?”

“Downside of the Appalachias.”

A flash of movement in the creek where the water vanished underground to become a spring caught his eye.

“Nothing pays enough after a while. But the mill down the way compensates nicely for healthy lads.” He continued to manhandle Cable, hauling him to his feet and shoving him down the slope towards a rickety cart. The man and the boy moved quickly. In the rush Cable almost stepped out of his boots.

“I ain’t yours to sell. I ain’t been sold to you.”

The man foisted him inside a cart where a dozen other boys waited. He slapped Cable in the head and said, "You got nowhere else in the world to go to better. God sold you to me when he made you cheap and threw you away. Stop dreaming and life'll go easier on you." He gestured to one of the boys who moved a coil of rope nearer.

"Hold up," Cable heard someone cry.

"Hold up for no one," the big man said as he concentrated on tying the boy to the cart. The other boys hunched together and watched. They all had rough faces streaked with grit, dried hands and were skinny as withered corn stalks. Some were black, some white, but all were part of a bowed down species.

"It is a fugitive you've got there." Cable had an impression of many men.

"Morning gentleman," he said. Unable to finish his knots, the man rolled Cable onto his stomach and knelt on him.

"No, boys, this'uns one of mine." He lifted his knee and gripping a hank of hair, pulled Cable's head up. "Say so, boy so these fine soldiers can get on with their business."

The man's weight bore down on Cable. He fought for breath and tried not to struggle until he could tell where to best use his strength.

His last memory of home flashed through his mind as the overseer bargained with the posse. When the armies came to Fitter's Creek, they inducted every man old enough to fight. Federals dragged Cable out of the chicken coop under the porch and dug Tom out of a bush in the back. Grace and Alice Gaines had cowered while the soldiers stole their last chickens and only pig and then the women screamed when the soldiers dragged their men away. Cable and his father were separated, and afterwards Cable was stolen from

one army by another and then another. Kidnapping was a common method of recruitment. The experience taught him that nothing was permanent, but he was getting tired of being shoved around.

“He – he’s ourn,” a boy in the back of the cart ventured. The rest nodded in unison.

The head of the posse mock saluted the overseer and gestured to the others that it was time to go. Once they had gone, the big man again began tying Cable down. When he bent near, the boy let him have it. A kick in the face with a boot, then another which dropped the man. He lay in the dirt barely moving, not unconscious, but stunned long enough that Cable was able to leap out of the cart.

None of the other children stirred except for one; he looked after Cable’s back and whispered to himself, “Run boy. Jus’ run.”

Cable headed uphill towards the darkest part of the thickets where he had seen the water flow. He and Alice grew up on the side of a mountain where sunshine hit the treetops but never warmed the ground. If she had been running for her life, she would seek darkness and she would have followed the stream that dropped out of view. Worried that the overseer might follow, he rushed ahead without looking where he was going, leaves and thin branches whipped his face.

I see him. From this distance I can even hear his thoughts. His mother would not have approved of his fear and an old conversation he never shared with me roiled in his head as he ran. She was no more content with her son than my mother was with me.

“I wish you were something to be proud of,” Grace had said.

“Don’t hold your breath, Momma.”

“You need something sweeter than what grows in you now.” She squeezed dirty water from a dirty rag into a bucket. The water, mopped from the floor where he and his family slept was rank like spoiled dairy.

“I have to kill the pig today,” he said. The blade was nearer to her and he tried to reach past her for it.

“Isn’t it too soon. Doesn’t seem it’s as grow’d as it might get.”

He had taken stock of his mother’s bruised lip and the finger marks on her forearms. Without being entirely aware, he matched her condition to the way the front door didn’t close tightly, to the way they slept on soil and straw, with the way gristle from their last meal rose in his gut – all of it food that could not be digested.

“The pig ain’t thriving no more Momma. Best to kill it before it sickens.” He had worked the knife free from where it had been dug into the floor. The blade had no edge, and it would serve him poorly. “Is there a place you’d go Momma? If you could leave here?”

“Ain’t my choice.”

Cable and his mother looked more like kin than any other members of their family. He was a white boy, but if he stood near his mother you could see the shape of her face on him, you could see the shape of her family in his body and in the way he moved. Knowing the similarities made Cable feel trapped by his mother’s bad energy, by her sad, trapped life.

“If you could choose.” He spoke slowly.

She leaned over the bucket again. Her crucifix, a rude wooden thing, dipped into the water and dripped down his mother's dress when she straightened up.

"Don't waste my time, son." She began to scrub the dirty floor with the dirty rag. "Go kill the pig."

Cable said it was the way no amount of cleaning or praying changed facts that made him hate his mother more than his father. His mother was a ruined spirit. She never raised her voice, never called him a bad name and never fought back. She won her victories by refusing to engage. Rather than be a warrior, she was a consistent resister, and it did not escape her only son's notice that maybe she would, in the end, leave behind a stronger footprint than any other player in his life. Drifting to the destiny arranged by those who controlled her, she hid her will and so saved it from total destruction.

Grace Gaines capitalized on her otherness, on the fact that she was an alien to the people around her. They had no way to enter her soul and do damage because they did not bother to decode the way this Indian girl organized her thoughts. She could wallow in the muck and not be touched. His mother might look filthy, smell rotten, and act like something beaten, but she had a cosseted soul. What anyone did to her body was unimportant. If the townsfolk never let her inside a church, she was the best human testament to faith that Cable guessed he would ever know, for whatever good it did her.

He left her to her task. He hefted the bad blade, went out to kill the pig and promised himself, as he strung up the body, that he would never be like his mother.

Another branch slapped him in the face and stung. He ducked the next and kept running. He needed a destination, rushing through the stippling sunlight created by the fecund, forest-born canopy was wearing him thin.

Not one of the refugees in the cart had tried to escape. Little versions of his mother. Cable imagined that they would all eventually take sick and die the way his Momma had. But he still intended to make his train west.

However mean it looks, if you don't join the world, become a part of the parade moving forward, the world will come seeking you just to make you obsolete. You have to join the flow in order to remain of value. You must keep changing in order to keep living. And this is true for people as well as societies. You cannot hide in a corner and hope to survive; you have to risk exposure, court destruction. You have to join the fray.

In life, I had a hard time adapting to Cable. Some nights, when he would stay, I could smell rotting teeth and animal piss. Then he would snore, and I had to crawl to the floor to keep from strangling him. He learned to bathe when we moved to the city because he wanted to be admired, but he picked his nose and spat.

He was hard to know. People roiled around him and he changed only when necessary, like a rock in midstream. You could drown if you held on, but you might also stay put when the current tried to take you to sea when the floods came. There are so few solid people in the world. He shined.

Boot heels clicked on granite and a smatter of voices buttered the sky. There were probably easier ways into the dell than the route Cable had taken, but they would be hard to find. Cable suspected that strangers avoided this place, once two or three of them dropped over the edge.

The creek he had seen before was the dwindling remainder of a river that had been diverted up stream. It flowed into a black fissure at the edge of a cliff. Tracking its

progress Cable had seen a long green canopy capping a ravine. The edges crumbled when he started to make his way down and he could have easily taken sliding steps into a bad fall. So he made careful choices and descended; it was a hundred foot drop from the top of the walls to the bottom.

Feeling sheltered in the aging glen, Cable relished the solitude, though the temperature was wintry. He buttoned up his soaking wet jacket and tried to think like his sister. Out of habit he looked the way he had come, as if he were still being chased.

“No one comes here no more, boy. Not on purpose.” The voice came from within the gloom Cable began to discern shapes as his eyes adjusted. He had nowhere to run, he could only take stock.

The old woman was like a tree stump, a squat mass slumping with its fellows in a wet wasteland. Grey strands forced into a bun fuzzed around a face that reminded Cable of an eagle after it had been rammed, head first, into a rock. She wiped mashed features with a dirty fist and sniffed while she examined Cable. “They killed the river. Now no one even comes down here to hunt. Who the hell are you?” the old woman demanded.

“Looking for my sister.” He replied. “Just looking for my kin.”

“Lyin’ boy.” She leaned against the tree. Her sons, two ratty men, cradled shotguns and stood behind her. Their silhouettes melded with the background when they held still. Cable thought he saw another, but it flitted out of sight and he took it to be a trick of the mind.

Then Alice stepped out from between the old lady and the men. “They drug me off Cable. They drug me.”

“Took a chunk out of Eddie and Clay, too,” the woman grunted. The men edged forward wearing outfits that were cobbled together from scraps of blue and grey uniforms. The old woman had sliced her pants along the sides because she was fat where the original owner had been thin, but her sons could barely fill their suits. This was as much a matter of size as spirit. The men were dead planets trailing in the wake of a dying sun.

“Pulling Alice from a hidey hole can be a mean affair.” Cable said. “She sees every fight as her last one.”

“Got ‘em both.” Alice said. She had a bald patch where a hank of hair had been pulled free and one eye was puffed shut. “Told ‘em you would come.”

If there were times Cable hated his sister, there were also times when he loved her more than air. The soldiers and the overseer had reminded him that he could be erased, but his sister’s presence refuted them. She would make sure that he didn’t vanish.

The old woman, whose given name was Ginny, pulled Alice close then turned and nudged Alice ahead of her. The shuffle bums stepped back so the women could pass and they waited for Cable. When he came near they stripped him of his jacket, emptied his pockets and took his gun, the knife and Hadden’s locket. Then they shoved him forward. The group traipsed single file through the strangling brush. Traces of honeysuckle, June-berry, blooming dogwood and wild ginger hung heavily in the air and tangled with the rotting scent of the dell.

The trail they followed tracked the creek bed to a narrow where the slouching collective squeezed into a space defined by beefy ferns and tule grass. Rock piles created small, grey pools where long legged bugs skittered across the water’s surface and worms

wavered in the silted basins. Black skinks and blue-bellied lizards lingered in the mud and licked up bite sized bugs. Small movements and small sounds rustled through the undergrowth.

As they neared their destination, they skirted mounds of dirt. It didn't take much to think of graves. One mound was freshly turned and stuck out in the middle of a struggling garden. Trash piles collected in ditches like an incoming tide. A windowless shack, pieced together with wire and warped wood stood in the middle of it all.

"We built up when we found this place," the old woman said. A year in sunlight would not have dried it out nor driven away its grey, greasy smell. When its time came and its owners left, this structure would fold up and sink into the hell pit over which it was stationed.

Basalt chunks were arranged at the base of a u-shaped porch. When Cable resisted stepping up, Eddie, the oldest son, shoved him. Then, Eddie put his shoulder to the door to force it open and the group entered into a single room that housed an immense fireplace, a Franklin stove and blocks of wood that served as furniture. After the children were forced into a corner, Ed put his shoulder to the door again and forced it shut. Clay, his brother, stoked the fire in the fireplace with wet chunks of wood causing more smoke than heat.

On a pallet in the corner where the floor was driest, the drooling baby dozed on a thick piece of flannel. Alice moved towards Sugar but a wave of Clay's gun made her stay put. There were no windows and the door was fixed; escape would probably have to be negotiated.

Brandishing pieces of rope, the men advanced on Alice. But they had allowed her to get too near the fire, and she plucked a burning stick from the flames. The men shifted trying to get an edge on the girl but she was frightened and out of options so she kept her place.

“Being tied up and killed is worse than just dying. She’ll kill us all to keep you off her,” Cable warned.

“Everyone’s got nothing to lose in here, boy.” But Ginny waved her sons back and settled at the slanting table.

Cable had Alice on his right and the baby behind him. “We got nothing you want. We’re just running.”

Ginny adjusted herself in her chair, a hacked out block of wood. Then she stretched gnarled hands over the table and lay them flat. Meanwhile, Alice handed Cable the pistol which had been set by the fireplace and dropped her burning stick back into the fire. Cable raised the gun and pointed it at the old woman. “Ah,” she laughed. “Think you can?”

“I’m scairt enough,” Cable said.

“Talk first. No one’s got to hurry.” The woman gestured to Clay who handed her a can from which she extracted tobacco and papers and began to roll a cheroot.

Alice moved away from Cable and began to drift around the room. And soon her pockets started to bulge, and Cable realized that she was collecting. Searching the room for useless nuggets because she often could not tell the difference between chaff and wheat.

“What you got?” The old woman stalled the girl and pried a rock loose from her fingers. One of the men stepped close but their mother shook her head. A piece of soap stone embedded with pyrite bits lay in her palm. The girl and the woman studied it. The blond girl with shoulder length hair and the old woman with grey strands tucked behind her ears – reflections of two sides of a roughed up coin. The old woman rolled the stone in her leathery palm but held it out of reach when Alice tried to grab it back. So Alice waited.

“Had a husband I loved like that. Grabbed him and held on tight. But men don’t last. You drag them until they drop and then you have to bury them and you need another.” Her sons, men who should outlive her, stopped stoking the fire and froze like birds just noticing a cat in their midst. Both glanced up at Cable’s gun, which could be used on anybody there.

“I’ve had more than one husband in my time,” Ginny continued. “They wear down.”

In the time they had talked, the room had changed from dank to muggy, and they were all sweating – sulking spirits in a rotting sweat lodge. Alice tried to grab the stone again. This time the old woman caught her hand and gripped it tightly to the rock, and she held on until after Alice stopped struggling.

“Bobby, my first husband got milk fever,” the old woman said. The effort to hold Alice tight was taking its toll on her, “Second had a pain and then he died. Third.” She released Alice and the girl came away empty handed. “Drank, fell off the porch, landed bad. Fourth, wanted to run.”

“You got a lotta husbands dead and buried.” Cable said. “She saw you all up top didn’t she, and you thought she would tell. She never will.”

“I see my first, Bobby, around here now and again. The boys never do,” the old woman said. Her boys were stymied. Whatever their initial plan, it seemed to be changing, and they didn’t know how to adjust. The old woman touched her forehead as if it hurt. “Maybe only girls see sech things,” she said. “

“Cable says ain’t no ghosts, ain’t no sech,” Alice said, eyes still beaded on the rock.

“Girl keeps saying, he’s here,” said Ginny, addressing Cable.

“Jesse,” Alice said. “He come to me. He smelled like white petals.”

“So who is this Jesse?” she said. The question hung in the air.

“Preacher’s son,” Cable said at last. “Drowned in the Rappahannock, at Fredericksburg. I was there when he died.”

Ginny now offered the rock up to Alice without looking away from Cable.

“You keep hold of your ghosts girl, they suit you.”

“Last husband wanted to run when the boys come back from the war. Took ‘em six months to get back after the soldiers stole ‘em. If we go, they’ll get caught, hung as deserters. I’ll have no one,” she said to Cable.

“We won’t tell,” Cable said. “We don’t care.”

“They’ll come anyway one day,” the old woman said, slowly retrieving a gun from under the table. She cocked it, then released the hammer as if the gun was a plaything and not a weapon. Then she trained it on Cable. If she was worried about the weapon he pointed back, she didn’t show it.

“My boys are slow,” she said, checking the breech for bullets and finding just one.

“Bobby and was all I ever really had, then the boys. And now we cain’t leave. Bad dirt, too much wet and not enough light, best to fix it here before someone comes to set us in a sack at the bottom of a river, like a bag of cats.

She snapped her fingers at Clay. “Gimme,” she said, indicating his blade. He lay it on the table. She thumbed its edge. “Your girl didn’t try to run. She knew you’d come. Too bad it’s the way it has to be. But you seem like a boy that understands.”

Looking at her, Cable was reminded of a story his mother had told him about a monster made of stone who hunted men. As he remembered it, the Indians tricked the monster and staked it to the ground where they burned it to death. The woman in front of him seemed cast from hard rock and he wondered – just for a moment – if bullets would pierce her hide.

“Where you two headed?” she asked.

“West.”

“You seem like a tough lick,” she said. “Bobby wanted to go once, but I said no.”

“We won’t say nothin’, we’ll just go,” Cable said one more time.

Ignoring him, she continued, “Then Bobby caught fever and died. We never did get a doctor.”

She shook off the memory. “How far you heading?”

“Missouri breaks,” Cable said.

“Badlands. I’ve never been more than five miles from here. Should’ve took Bobby up on it when he said we should go. He was a planner.

“I like your idea. Heading West.” She’d been leaning against the table with the gun loosely pointed at Cable. The weapon, in fact, seemed less of a threat than it might have been, but now she sat back in her chair and took proper aim.

The click of the breech and the smell of the shot seemed to precede the sound. Alice shouted something, and raised her hands to ward off the bullet, but the first one broadsided Eddie and dropped him. Then the knife flew, and Clay was down. “I’ll say the boys kept us here and we can head –” Ginnie said. But by then Cable was already pulling the trigger.

His one arm aim was true. The impression of rolling into a ditch staggered him and he suddenly felt guilty, which made no sense. He held the gun straight even after it was empty and it wasn’t until he felt Alice pounding his back that Cable realized he was holding his breath and that the baby was howling.

“We gotta go,” Alice said and she kept hitting him and screaming. The baby kept screaming; all he heard was screaming. Then she grabbed his wrist. “They’re dead, Cable.” He heard her say, “They’re dead.”

They prodded embers out of the fireplace and left as the cabin began to smolder. The flames seeped through the wood in running yellow rivulets. Then the fire crawled outside and bloomed, lighting up the yard so that the children clearly saw the graves as they ran past. Wisps of smoke hit the cold and drifted low like a misty sea.

Once they climbed free of the depths, they hit miles of high, wild grass that cut at their legs as they stumbled on. They stopped only when they had to and ran once they caught their breaths until finally they were so far away that the rising smoke was a thing

in the disconnected distance. Then they stopped running altogether. Cable crouched in the dirt while Alice cradled her baby. Then she brought the baby closer and sat near Cable so that their knees touched. For some time no one said a word.

“Why’d she do that?” she asked.

“Let us live?”

“Trade her children off, like one set was another.” She felt for her pouch of nuggets and extracted the knife which she strapped to her leg once more. It took Cable a few minutes to reply.

“Would you have wanted her to come?” he asked. “Have a grown up with us?”

Alice laughed instead of answering as a train rumbled in the distance. It didn’t matter. The train that would carry them away was coming.

The old woman and her sons pass by, heading towards a cleaner place. The boys are more faded than their mother, as in life. I suppose dying doesn't change a whole lot.

They don't see me at all. Unstressed shapes making their way forward, for all I know. When I pay attention, I see an endless stream of people passing by. But like the first ones, they will vanish once they pass through the pain.

"How can you just go," I demand.

I think she doesn't hear me. She turns.

"Don't let her keep us here, Momma. It's a trick." She smiles and comes to me anyway.

"They think I'm a demon," I say, referring to her sons.

"He isn't worth it, you know."

"You killed your sons."

"Thought I'd hitch to the boy; he has an air of success about him."

"Success? He will be washed away at the first good flood. Can't even dog paddle with his one arm." This is a lie. He's a strong swimmer. He just needs help climbing back onto the boat.

Her soundless sons are pulling on her. I can see that she has to go. "I was saved when he killed me," Ginny says. "Given the chance, I would be like you, but he killed me too fast. So I was saved."

So, sin isn't the reason I am trapped. Not selfishness, greed, or lovelessness. If she can pass through then it must not be something I've done. I still think it's the boy.

"My mother would have said that I deserve this," I say.

The old woman snaps her fingers in front of my face. I try to hit her. "Boy's your anchor, but not your problem," she says and then she leaves.

3-1/2

The Chinese word for "family" is Jia, and it includes those related by blood, marriage or adoption. Jia means endless sacrifice: You honor your dead and remain loyal to the living. It also means that men matter, and women are good for tending them.

My mother had a name for disloyal girls. Like many things she told me, I have forgotten it and could not now pronounce it even if I could remember. Had Cable looked closely at Ginny's wasted old soul and compared it to his sister's, he would have seen in their eyes the same heartless clarity, and he would have left all of them behind in that shack. But Cable never listened to me.

I always told him that his sister could not be trusted. He said that she loved him, but I knew she loved no one. You give a child a stick, the boy will use it to beat the ground and the girl will draw pictures in the dirt. If you give Alice a stick, she'll stab toads.

“He come to me and sat by me,” Alice said. “He smelled like white petals. Said he was sent for me.”

She had been talking about Jesse for the past half hour. Cable had to resist the urge to remove another a hank of hair from his sister's head. The grassland had turned to mudflats, the ground torn up by passing troops and they'd been walking for some time in the early morning hours. Sugar's head was lolling against Alice's back and Cable was bone tired, but Alice didn't seem to be running out of breath.

“He was only a preacher's boy. He ministered you 'cause he wanted to follow his

daddy's footsteps," he said. Jesse was one of Alice's favorite subjects. She couldn't release it; it like one of her treasured nuggets.

But Cable needed her to stop talking about it. Knowing that to continue the conversation was to lose the battle, he walked faster, moving ahead of her so that she would be talking to his back. He hoped she would tire of that. But the subject of Jesse was also a safety valve to Alice, a way of slipping her skin. When events were too harsh to face, she retreated to her fairy tale of a prince charming named Jesse. It didn't really matter to her if that was the boy, or his ghost.

"I seen him," Alice said. "I seen him here. He followed us." She was angry with Cable now and part of her intention to repeat herself was to annoy her brother.

Cable shook his head but did not look back. "I was there when he died."

"I seen him. He come to me," Alice said. "Sat by me. He smelled like white petals. He said he was sent for me." Angry and tired, Cable turned and shook her.

"You seen him at home. Not after we went to war."

She tried to scratch him, and he slapped her. "I can see him. He would marry me."

"Shut up." Cable said, and he shook her again. "He wouldn't marry you. Not a half-wit like you who eats rats."

"He'd a made sure my no good brother never touched me again." She had a red patch where he'd slapped her. "You're a foul boy. Jus' like Daddy. And one arm – what good are you to anyone."

Cable almost slapped her again, but he was done.

"Stay here then," he said turning away and walking off.

"Cable," she called, scrambling to her feet and following after him. "Wait!"

He ignored her screaming and started running. When he realized that he no longer heard her voice, he turned around and saw that he had indeed left her behind. Because it was still dark, she'd vanished from his view entirely. He looked towards the train station that was now in sight and considered his options. A life unencumbered by the girl and the baby lifted a weight from his heart. He sat with the notion for a few moments, then the thought of how they needed him intruded. He couldn't shake her yet.

He tromped back through the grass toward his sister who had planted herself into the ground. She was cradling the baby and singing a song. Cable sat cross-legged in front of her while she cooed at Sugar.

"Look what's come back," she said to the baby. "An ugly one-armed orphan." She didn't mean it this time, but the insult had worked so well before that she was prompted to test its enduring effectiveness.

He put his hand on her shoulder and she looked up at him.

"You don't think anyone would marry me, Cable? Wouldn't stay with me?" She was whining.

"Sure, Alice. Sure," he said, nodding. "We all gotta have someone. I got a girl, meaner'n you. She's hard as nails, never looks away from bad stuff. And she can't lie about who she is, neither."

"She's a good girl then."

"No. Heartless and hard, but she's easy to see through. And she's known the things I've known. I don't have to explain to her."

He is going too far. Explaining me to her like that. We spent eight months together

traveling with a troop that was one-third its size at the end. And we survived it – together. It should buy me more than this. Why can't I stop him? If I have to watch, why can't I change what I see? If I put my hands to my eyes, can I unmake the past?

But the boy keeps speaking, and I can't shut him up. They're still sitting in the darkness, but the sunrise is coming and I no longer like sunrises. They mean nothing to me now. Then he takes her hand and I can't stop this either.

“It's gone, Alice,” he said. “No one else knows what home looked like, about Daddy and Momma. We got no one but each other. If I let you have Jesse, you have to stop talking about him. You didn't see him die, and I cain't take it.”

“I'll be nicer to you, Cable,” Alice promised.

“You'll try,” he said, and started walking back to the train with her and the baby.

Alice and Cable were waiting for me, although they did not know it.

Alice had found a crack at the edge of the train platform and walked it like it was a beam stretched across an expanse. Holding her arms out for balance, she carefully placed one poorly shod foot in front of the other. Cable stretched out on a bench and watched her pace the imaginary catwalk. Sugar lay on the ground. She reached around trying to touch things and Cable let her tug at his fingers.

When I see Alice from this height, I see how fragile she was then and how the slight sway and bobble in her carriage lent her a certain grace and made her irresistible. She looked like a foundling princess who belonged in corsets and lace; the one who was placed in the basket but never pulled out of the sea in royal coincidence.

She ambled from one self-proscribed end to another and back again, raising up on tiptoe and turning each time.

“Set, girl,” Cable finally snapped. He was staring down the tracks and also keeping an eye on the strangers grouped at the opposite end of the platform.

“Naw,” she replied. “I need to go.”

“You’re like one of them circus bears in a cage, turning from side to side.”

“You never been to the circus.” She kept her eyes to her line.

“Daddy used to say he kep’ you with the chickens under the porch ‘cause you too dumb to let loose.”

“My brother is as mean as my Daddy.”

Cable hoped that wasn't possible.

No matter what their father said, Alice had fascinated Tom Gaines. Even when she was little, he would come to the coop and tease her with trinkets, but he'd never hold her. Sometimes he'd beat her and then, to even things out, let her run away. She'd come back a day or two later, hungry and covered in cheatgrass. Over time she learned more than one way of being absent. Cable had seen his father pin her, but her eyes would get a distant focus; you could hold her down but she'd still escape, slipping her skin like a snake when it grows.

I know that Cable had only insulted her out of habit. The fool actually admired her. To him, she could be battered and broken but she could not be changed. He thought he needed that strength in his life.

Alice completed another circuit on her balancing beam. "They'll find those bodies," she said, referring to the family in the dell. The stink of fire rushed through Cable's mind. He rubbed the end of his stump, then raised it to look at it. The way the flesh had healed in whorls fascinated him.

"So what," he said.

"Nothing."

"Thought so."

As the train's arrival time drew close, the platform began to fill up. A dozen or so travelers drifted near but did not join them. Two blacks crouched in the dirt and shared a smoke while further away three men in ragged uniforms slouched against the station wall.

Stowaways, they would fade to the back of the crowd when the train arrived and then hop into the freight cars in the back. Better dressed travelers in corsets, skirts and suits approached. The women, seeing the Gaines children, hesitated at the steps of the platform and turned for advice to their male chaperones.

Two children, capped and coddled figures, accompanied this fancy group. Their mother had each by a hand and kept them by her side. They tugged at her grip pestering her to let them run free. But she stilled them both with a few hushed words. She spoke to her husband and then looked at Cable and Alice and the baby lying on the ground.

“What we gonna do when Daddy catches us,” Alice asked, shifting from one direction to another.

“He’s never gonna get us.”

“Daddy will.”

“Yes, okay, Daddy will.”

They could hear a rumbling, not close enough to sound like a train but too regular to be anything else. Soon they saw an iron horse belching black smoke into the sky. When the train arrived the pampered crowd embarked first. Porters folded down steps and offered their arms to the ladies who lagged behind the children. Then they collected a stack of luggage and stowed it.

A big man, the size of the Gadsden’s Purchase, with a scarred face walked from behind the station house at the last minute. He was accompanied by a tall man with a shock of black hair that framed his narrow features. The giant started gathering the almshouse orphans who had been lingering around the edges of the platform, and then he

marshaled them towards the back of the train. As they began to move, whores hiding from the conductors mixed in with them.

I know there was a moment when Cable thought he saw me. I know because I was looking right at him. But he didn't even stand up to confirm, and so I walked on.

He had bought first class seats with Hadden's money as a declaration of intent. He was determined not to be the boy he started out as. He knew himself to be smarter than his family; he could read and by God he could leave home if he wanted. What I resent is that he thought that he was smarter than me. But he wasn't. He was just like me, and he belonged in the back with the rest of us. Time would prove me right.

Cable and the girls waited their turn and then followed the good people on board. He had to coax Alice up the steps. Then he tried to settle her into the seat. He could make her stay, but he could not make her sit still. She set her feet to the floor and straightened her skirt, then she shifted in the seat. She forced Sugar in between her and Cable, then she wedged the baby in between her and the window. When it became agitated, Alice laced its lips with a tincture. It sucked on the syrup and reached for Alice's hand but instead found a handful of dress. The threadbare dress tore. When the baby pulled at the dress again Alice slapped it. Then it started to cry and Alice covered its face until it stopped.

"Baby's a dead weight." Cable had an itch to slap someone himself. In a fit of meanness he thought that if they left the baby in the seat, if he could ever convince his sister to leave it behind, a porter would pick it up and sell it or hand it over to his boss who would find a place for the thing. It didn't speak yet and only vaguely looked like

family. If they rid themselves of it before it became a person, it would only be a memory of bad times, cast into a well where it belonged.

“I don’t like it here,” Alice said. “Can’t curl up.” She tried to pull her skirt over her knees and popped a small seam. Then she put her feet to the floor and tried to tuck the dress around her legs. When Alice attempted to slip to the floor, Cable forced her to sit straight. Then she tried to swing free, but Cable held tight, and she let him win.

“These are ritzy seats,” he said. “Don’t make it worse. We already look like we’re here by mistake.”

They stood out in a gentile crowd. Three dirty moppets in seats attracted attention.

“Can’t we go somewhere else?” Alice asked. The two prim maids sitting across the aisle looking at Sugar bothered her. She started to pick up the baby as if to claim ownership and then stopped and instead played with its fingers.

“Stay in the seat. You look like you’ve been raised by wolves.” She obeyed, but then took to staring around the room like a lizard trapped in a jar. A girl left to herself most of her life, Alice did not like company and certainly did not like crowds.

Although steerage carried more soldiers and catered to the poor trade, traveling in the first class cars had its own disadvantages. Full blown day had expanded across the landscape and it assaulted the senses with flat white light and rising heat. In the premiere cars where the refined classes traveled, people sat and sweated in fully buttoned up clothing and dabbed at their faces with handkerchiefs. The children just let the sweat run.

In the cars that carried steerage, travelers slumped to the floor. Men unbuttoned or took off their shirts. Women rolled up their skirts so breezes could breach the heat that welled up in layered Victorian skirts. Half the passengers closed their windows in order

to fend off the dusty breeze, while the other half forced windows open because the circulating air cooled the cars and combated the smell. All the cars but especially steerage smelled like spoiled cabbage in the heat.

Cable slapped Alice's hand when it seemed as if she was about to unbutton her dress. She snapped at the brim of his hat and tried to pull it off. He grabbed a hank of her hair and pulled her close. "Gonna stop now?"

Feeling around in his pockets he found a thing Ginnie's sons had not taken, probably because they hadn't known what it was. He waved it in front of his sister the way you tease a cat with string. She grabbed at it and missed. She held out her hand and he offered her a pencil. She took it, rescued a crumpled train schedule from the floor and flattened it against her leg. Before Cable could stop her, she slipped to the floor where she could more comfortably draw. The pencil slipped from her grasp and rolled under the next seat. She scrambled after it sliding underneath the seats and stopping just short of a pair of pale stockings. She froze like a squirrel in the road until the pencil rolled to a corner, then she caged it. Cable suppressed an urge to kick her, kick her away and make a clean break. The urge quickly passed.

He watched the landscape slide by in a bumping fashion without seeing anything in particular. It was speed he was experiencing, the way it carried him away without any effort on his part. He was not attending to particulars, he was just watching things pass. He pulled the locket out and fingered the filigreed engraving. He liked the feel of it. It had a heft and warmed in his hands.

"What were you looking for when they found you wandering outside the cave," he asked.

“Little chicks.”

Cable glanced down. Alice was drawing a horse in a barn that seemed to be conversing with chickens. A stick figure woman sat on a barrel. Inside the barrel was a smaller stick figure.

“I can’t fix everything,” he said. She had begun to scribble with a fierceness that presaged the snap of a pencil tip. When the tip broke she began shading in broad strokes.

“Had to cut one before they backed off,” Alice said. “Then they were like little chicks and I wasn’t afraid no more.” The scribbling was fill in. the barn apparently needed density. The thing in the barrel looked human although it was hard to tell because Alice had made a tangled figure in order to fit it inside. She was drawing a silhouette of sunshine and had to wipe her hands clean so they would not smudge the rest of her picture. The horse and the chickens wore bows. The figure at the bottom of the barrel was a boy. The barn was pitch black and every outline was a thickly exaggerated aspect.

The orphans had given Cable an idea. His family would need somewhere to stay once they reached Washington, and he knew nothing about the city. He would need a guide, one who wouldn’t lock him up again. He would need to make friends.

“Don’t go nowhere,” he said to Alice. “Hear me? I’m always hunting you down.”

He passed through an unoccupied dining car and several public cars on the way to steerage. No one looked up as he passed. Moving fast, he was focused on the doors that lay ahead, since the people he wanted to meet were in the back. He had to cross from one to the other car at his own peril and it took nerve. Distances between boxcars were not always bridged with walkways, and sometimes only couplers spanned the spaces between

the two doors. When that was the case, Cable had to step over the couplers as they gapped and gnashed while the train rattled on through the indecent heat.

At the third passage he stood with one foot planted on either side of a connector, risking a fall. The nearness of disaster offered a kind of peace, a respite from the past because only the moment mattered.

He balanced himself and broke down the blending sounds that characterized the train and figuring out what each sound meant. The train rocketed forward in a thousand jarring increments. The cars rocked sideways and each board, stay, nail and strap that made the vehicle a thing snapped, squealed and slapped against another piece. The axels rumbled as they turned, and the wind created by the train smelled like char. Once he had all the pieces named, he brought his mind back to the task at hand.

By the time he reached the back cars, he was wearing down. He stopped in a freight car and leaned against a pile of boxes, filled with boots and blankets. The boxes bounced against their straps and knocked him about a little, but from his position he could stare out an open door and count trees, or watch mule-deer grazing .

A door bounced open to his left revealing a car filled with a sea of kids. The large man from the train station saw Cable and slammed the door shut. It opened again and three boys, scarecrows, with eyes like flattened pennies, scurried through, flowing in the big man's wake.

The boys, angled, condensed shapes wore battered hats with slouching brims. Lean fingered creatures, they nested on the floor in a triangulated cluster and began to play cards. The man stuffed a chubby paw into a pocket and withdrew a pack of cigarettes which he tossed to the boys after he plucked two for himself.

“Boya?” He lipped one, lit it and offered it to Cable who took it with a nod. And in the constant movement and unbroken roll of grating sound, this crew sat in silence and waited for a time to come when they could speak to one another. The fat man had offered a quality smoke, it was a brand name and filled with good strong tobacco and Cable enjoyed it.

“Going to Washington?” he asked, not knowing how to get help from the stranger.

“Don’t need more boys than I got, but you can talk to Lewis.” He pointed to the back corner of the car. There Cable saw someone sitting in the darkness partially obscured by luggage.

Cable tossed his finished his cigarette out the door and signaled the big man for another. The man produced a box. Cable took two, thanked the man and crossed through the card play towards the figure by the boxes. The stranger had a skewed and jutted jaw. The deformity created stress in the balance of his face. A second good mule kick and he’d look normal but as things stood, he looked more stubborn than the donkey that must have done the deed in the first.

Like Cable he was dressed in rags – missing buttons, torn sleeves, and the hems of his pants were shredded because they were too long. Military patches were sewn on to create makeshift pockets and he wore an officer’s belt buckle with the CSA inscription. Since the pants were too big, the belt was a must. Cable suspected the buckle was an affect and, in truth, the man had never been an officer. He also wore a pouch around his neck. Tied with a strip of rawhide it jingled when it fell forward.

“Don’t stink like a Yank.” Lewis Payne gestured at Cable’s duds. They moved closer together in order to hear one another. Nearly a foot taller, the man towered over him even in a sitting position.

“War between the states don’t have to do with me, and I got to stay dressed,” Cable retorted.

“Piss people off with that tone.”

“I’m used to that.”

Although he seemed insulted, the man smiled. “I enlisted straight off. Like to get the hell out of my daddy’s parish, ‘fore he made me into a minister. What’s your story,” he asked.

“The Indians enlisted. The rest of us were drafted,” Cable said.

“Billy Yank’ll take just about any manner of fice dog,” Payne replied.

It was an inclusive insult meant to mock Indians, hillbillies and Yanks, but Cable was looking for an opportunity, not a fight.

“He owns the kids,” Cable said nodding towards the big man. “What do you have to do with it?”

“Whatsat?” He tipped his ash onto the floor.

Cable pointed towards the kiddy car. “Street rats for factories, circus work. Kids for sale and hire. Grifters. Pick pockets. “Hook and stall” stuff for the little ones.” What Cable hadn’t learned about graft from his father he had picked up from the troops. A network of thieves like this would provide information he needed to get around Washington, work for him and maybe even Alice.

“I kin run dogs, cock fights, cards, dice, do a touch for the “hook and stall,” some fighting. But making things mind is my best skill.”

Payne stubbed out his cigarette and flicked it away. “Mr. Appo calls ‘em arabs.” They grow like lice on a battlefield.” The man tried to grab him, but Cable was out of his reach and had his knife out before Payne could fully extend his arm. Seeing the knife Payne retreated. “Just testin’ you boy. You kin put that toothpick back.”

It took Cable a moment. Shakes took him over and made it hard to fit the tip back into the sheath opening. Too many tests piled too close together had worn out his reserves. He sat for what seemed like a long time until he realized that the man had been repeating himself.

“Take it,” he said. Cable looked up and saw the bottle.

“Mother’s best homemade tar water.” When Cable hesitated, Payne took another swig before handing it over. When Cable tried to drink, he spilled as much down his shirt as he swallowed.

“Hold it, son,” Said Payne and he steadied the bottle until Cable could drink. “Ever been to the tombs?”

“Never been nabbed.” Cable said.

“Lewis Payne,” the man said, stowing the bottle between his legs so he could shake Cable’s hand.

“Danny,” Cable said, capitalizing on Hadden’s stolen documents. He stumbled over the name, not yet the southern gentleman he wanted to be.

“You been to school?” Payne put the bottle back into play.

Cable shook his head.

“I got a better use for you than Appo might know. These’uns just gonna get dealt away. Fast, been around, seen action – you could replace me in his set-up. As for me, Colonel Mosby’s Rangers needs men, and I’m gonna get back in the game ‘fore it’s all over.”

“Yanks gonna string Mosby up one day. You really wanna be there when the rope comes down?” Cable tipped the bottle towards Lewis’ scarred wrist. “You’ve already got stung by the bumble bee once.”

“Nothing much I’m good at except fighting. Good with knives and guns. I like hard case stuff.” Lewis took the bottle back. “Good with animals, too. My sisters called me Doc ‘cause of it. Hooked up with Appo ‘cause he got a circus. Let me ride with him all the way to D.C. if I helped out.”

“Animals don’t love me, but they do what I say. And I need to earn,” said Cable.

Payne emptied the bottle and tossed it towards the door. It bounced off the corner of a box and ricocheted to the floor where it spun by Appo’s feet until Appo kicked it out.

Payne wiped his lips with the back of his sleeve, “I’ll introduce you, proper,” he said. “But you really oughta come with me. I’m taking a load to the fairy fleet ‘fore I hit Mosby up for a job. There’s money there.”

“Smuggling’ll get you hurt, then kilt,” Cable said. He crossed his legs and straightened his back as if to relieve a strain. Payne pulled another bottle from a stash and Cable wondered briefly whether getting drunk was a bad idea.

“Living gets you kilt,” Payne replied.

“My Daddy used to say that, too.”

“Mine says things you hear in ever’ little church ‘tween here and the next sea. I never need to step in a church again,” he tapped his skull. “Could make my own church I had a mind.” He took a hit off the bottle and wiped his mouth.

“Sundays, my daddy used to drag me to a place where the Indians and trappers mixed,” Cable said. “Oil pots and dirty lanterns. No rules. Man got knifed, they just rolled him away from the table.”

“Where’s your daddy now?”

“They made him join, too. He got the lay of the land down in his head better than any man in the hills. Knows every waterway, every path ‘tween here and Missouri. But I bet they didn’t hang onto him long.”

Worn low with constant traveling the pair simply stopped talking and let the silence stand between them. Cable sat across from Payne and thought about another cigarette. The boys tired of the card game, stretched out and dozed. Someone didn’t put all the cards away. A couple skittered across the floor until they were driven into a corner where they flapped, and Cable could see they were both the Ace of Spades.

He must have dozed. A chilly breeze woke him. Early morning damp had infiltrated the car. The metal flooring and ceilings were wet. The boys and the fat man were gone but the cards in the corner stayed. No doubt those grifters had more than one crooked deck.

Payne was awake. He had rolled up his sleeves. Boney arms and crooked fingers stuck out. He had been counting his money and now returned it to his pouch and the pouch to its place. The rawhide strap had become frayed and he had to fiddle with it.

Resting made Cable realize that it had been too long since he had slept well. If he didn't get going, he'd never get up, and he'd left Alice alone too long. He stepped closer to the door but kept out of the wind. Outside was less rural but not quite city. The land had been plowed. Fallow fields with destroyed rows ringed abandoned farms. Vines and weeds poked through cracks in the outbuildings.

"Most of 'em don't make it and never did." Payne said joining Cable by the door. War and regular luck killed most. This is railroad land now. What the government boys didn't take the troops stole and burnt."

"Happen to us if we don't fight back," Payne said.

"Happen to us anyway," Cable said but he said it mildly because he didn't care to argue and hoped Payne didn't either.

"Not a loyal son?"

"My sister's wearing a dress that a baby can tear and when the war's done we'll still be poor as hind-tit calves."

Payne seemed to have more to say on the subject but held his tongue. "I'll introduce you to Appo," he finally said. "Then I got a get off and get some money to a friend with a bad temper. It won't do to be late."

"Keep your back to the walls." Cable shook his hand, startling them both.

"Come back here later," Payne said. "I gotta rest." And with that he returned to his spot on the floor, rolled to his side and fell asleep.

Cable stayed a little longer. He realized he did not want to find his sister, didn't want to yet know what she was into. He watched Payne rocking from side to side as the train shook its way north. When he was certain Payne slept deeply, he pulled out his knife and

crept close. Then he cut the pouch free from Payne's neck. Holding the bag tight so its contents wouldn't rattle, he tucked it away. There were a lot of pickpockets on the train; a group of them slept just past the sliding door. Payne would never be certain enough to accuse him.

Leaving Payne behind to wake up and be pissed, he grudgingly headed back to Alice, who for all the trouble she was worth was, after all, the reason he bothered.

The strength he saw in Alice, I could have given him that. Alice was his north star, but I could have been that. I was thrown away and orphaned, but I survived. I was twelve years old and tied to a bedpost to serve men's pleasures but I still kept my wits, which is more than could ever have been said for her. Given that, how am I so different from Alice that he would choose her over me?

In the end, it was the fact that I worked so hard to leave my Chinese ways behind that made me a girl, he loved but didn't trust. A girl who could leave China behind, he said, could leave him anytime she wanted to.

It's easy to kill someone you love: One act. Short term. But it's harder to say the right things to bind them to you forever, and what Cable really wanted was a sense of home. I had never been home in my life. I didn't know what to say.

During our crossing to America, my family and I caught fever. The sailors locked the hatch and the fever began killing us. We died in numbers. They allowed us to carry up our dead and toss them overboard. No purification, no gifts, no flowers, no way to keep their spirits near. We just tossed them into the sea and then crawled back to the hold. In my mind I see a string of bodies, nameless souls who can neither protect the living nor join those who have gone before. The dropping of bodies in the current was an abomination. Those souls would never be near us again and so we were without guidance, and still are.

Cable kept his dead at bay. He never wanted what I was denied, what I needed. No wonder Alice's ghost frightened him.

I think I should say he had killed before Gettysburg, as a favor to me. Maybe it is wrong to say it was Gettysburg and killing Hadden that changed Cable.

On his way back to the first class cars, Cable crossed two freight cars and a Pullman sleeper without incident. But the train staggered when he entered a dining car; he grabbed the corner of a table, swiveled, and sat down hard on the floor.

“Sometimes the axles lock up,” a man said.

“Henson, the door was meant to be locked,” said someone else.

Cable had intruded into a private car. When he had passed through earlier he had barely noticed the wealthy décor. It was furnished in deep reds and browns and velveteen

chairs with ornate ironwork spanned the car. Solid brass luggage racks coddled soft leather bags. Drop away tables had been set in place between the rows and on each, silver and crystal was laid out. Porters in white shirts and black pants monitored serving trays.

The rocking of the train made the dishes slide slightly, and part of the porters' job seemed to be holding onto pitchers and platters so they did not shimmy to the floor. Some of the items in the room were new to Cable. He had never seen handmade luggage except in pictures, and he did not recognize all of the silverware pieces. The food smelled odd to Cable, but the four men eating seemed to relish their meal. They ate in a two-fisted fashion, forcing food onto forks with knives and taking huge swallows of wine from etched crystal. In between each man was a girl. Women dressed in flowers and frills, but not high fashion. Four women sat at the table. One stood outside another door, just out of full view. He saw a flash of pink satin.

The diners were well into their meal. They looked up when Cable entered, and immediately dismissed the intrusion. A porter rushed forward and put his hand on Cable's shoulder as if to push him back.

"Private," he said in hushed, accented tones. Cable heard something south of Texas in the man's voice.

"Pull in your horns." Cable forced the watchman to step back. "I need to get to my sister," he said.

A girl at the table chuckled. "You'll have to find another way," she said. Her food lay untouched, but her glass was empty. She reached for a wine bottle which her partner slid out of reach. She shrugged and sat back.

“No other way from one side of the train to the other, and I left my wings in my other waistcoat.”

“I thought you were all locked up in the back,” the man at the head of the table pointed a greasy knife at Cable. “Keep drifting north.”

“He looks skinny. Wanna plate,” one of the girls asked. She had a dress with drop shoulders. Both sides were pulled down too low and her bustier was too tight.

“Go boil your shirt,” Cable replied.

“Get rid of him.” The oldest man said.

The porter tried to force Cable backwards. Stumbling over the chairs Cable bumped an oil lantern and they all heard the glass break. Flames spread across the floor and the men then stood to fight the fire already eating at the carpet. The cars lurched again as Cable neared the door, and he slid all the way into the passage.

He would have hit me had I not moved aside.

He failed to find purchase and continued to slide about the platform. It open ended on both sides and its thin railing was too high to reach. I was now standing at the rail, and just watched him. I did not reach out.

We could both smell the smoke coming from the car he had just left.

“Always a trouble, little man,” I said.

Unable to stand, he tried to stop slipping, but his hand and the soft-bottomed soles of his shoes, failed him.

The train lurched again and Cable looked to me for help, and that was when he finally recognized me.

“How come they let Coolies into this country anyway,” he asked reaching for holds that did not exist.

“Train’s getting’ onto a bridge, soon” I said. “And if I remember you can’t swim.” Then before he could recover, I kicked him down the steps. He bounced off metal, then his body lost touch with the train.

He dropped down the stairs and suffered bruising blows as he tumbled towards the tracks and the river below. It was spring, high tide in terms of rivers, Cable could hear the furious rush of water as it slapped against the rocks below. He hooked the last step with his good arm. Then he tried to swing his feet up and almost lost his grip. Metal edges shredded his shirt and poked into the crook of his arm.

“Mei.” A cry for help and a high-pitched greeting in one. I wasn’t impressed. He had taken off and left me behind. If he could play games like that then so could I.

Standing overhead I dug the heel of my sharp-toed shoe into his arm. It was more of a sign of affection than hostility. Cable knew that if I wanted him dead I’d’ve kicked him in the face. The games we played were hard ones.

“Leave me behind in with soldiers. You think you deserve to live?” I knelt. “They say you’re dead and I say, good.”

“Pay you,” he said as the wind brushed his hair into his eyes. His strength was almost spent. Beneath the ties he saw the river and calculated a very bad fall.

“Pay me with what?” Black smoke billowed out of the door behind me. His bad arm flailed as he swung like a barn door. His head was tucked into the steps so when the train bounced, he hit his jaw.

“Bag in my pocket. It’s all yours,” he said.

“Okay, little man,” I said at last. I kept a firm grip on the railing and reached down to rummage through his shirt pockets. I located the Payne’s coin purse and stuffed it in my

underclothes. Then I grabbed two handfuls of Cable's hair and pulled hard. I had to lean back so that he could shift his weight onto the step. When I pulled again he came up, knocking me backwards.

"I hate it when you call me little man," he said looking up from my lap.

"No use talking to you if I can't make you mad." Cable always like the way I phrased things, not quite Chinese but not home spun either. "You left me," I said. The wind had unbound my thick, black hair from a complicated uptwist.

"Say it," I demanded. Glass exploded outward from the dining car.

"I died," Cable said. He crawled towards the center of the platform. The fire inside the car was out and the people inside wanted revenge.

"Get rid of him," someone said, rushing the door.

The man needed to wait until I was done greeting Cable. I pointed a two shot derringer at him, a silver gun with a scrimshaw handle. Cable tried to cover his ears as much as possible and turned his face away from the gun.

"Stay," I said and fired a warning shot near his head. Then there was a pause and then the door was slammed shut. "So," I tapped Cable's back with the side of the barrel. "How you doing, little man?" He hated his father's name for him. Both Alice and I used it to get under his skin.

"You ain't no older than me."

"I come from an older people."

"Doesn't matter." He rolled over and sat up. He took a moment before he stood and inspected me. Truth be told, I had fared well. At just five foot tall, I was too short for my

dress and my hem dragged, but the rest of me was well tended. I lit a cigarette then because it was my only one, shared it with Cable.

I met Cable on the front lines. He plowed into me while hauling water buckets that were too heavy for him to carry. He bruised my shin then he grinned at me instead of apologizing and I blacked his eye for it. By then I had joined the petticoat core following the troops. Some ladies did laundry, some did more. I had my trade, and I don't wash other people's dirty clothes.

When my parents boarded that crowded scow with a daughter and a newborn son, they didn't have to tell me that my brother mattered more. I knew. Payment for passage was due on arrival; someone would have to make a sacrifice, and my mother hadn't even bothered to replace the shoes I'd lost in the sand.

While my parents hid and covered my brother's eyes, I helped rolled bodies into the ocean when people died. While Thomas waited to be fed, I fought for food. Mei, an old name. Thomas, an American one. I knew. Given the chance, I would have drowned the little pig in a puddle of sick. When I could, I would whisper into his ear that if we had had more boys he would be buried alive because he was such a bother.

So they traded me off and away I went and was passed from hand to hand for many months afterwards. Like a rolling seed, I was pushed along the ground until I met Cable who blacked my shin and stole my stash one night in Cold Harbor when I wasn't looking.

When he wouldn't return my goods I smiled and offered him a beer. But he survived the dose; some have a tolerance for arsenic. When he lived I told him what I had done just to see his reaction.

"All's fair," he'd said.

You can't buy that kind of love.

I went to the hospital after he lost his arm, but I never sat by his bed. They said he had died, so I left. And the world was so hollow afterwards that I barely remember moving on.

"I'm gonna kill you one day," I said staunching the blood on his arm where the steps had cut him. He had a scar on his good shoulder from the first time I shot him with the gun he had given me for my twelfth birthday. The gun was new to me then, and shooting him was almost a mistake. He had a beautiful smile, a scar on his chin and more on his back from his father's belt. He was freckled all over and his hair was so blond it almost looked grey. He didn't get hurt but once in the war.

"Train coppers will be looking for us, at least heading towards the gunshot. We should split up." I said.

"Guess so."

"How's little miss," I asked, tucking my gun back into my dress. Alice would be around; Cable always said he'd go get her if he could.

"How'd a flat faced whore like you get here," Cable asked.

"I meet the right people," I said. "A lady with a bible tried to save me and brought me this far with a group."

"Lotta money in that bag," Cable said and rode his hand up my skirt.

I slapped his hand away. "Lucky you had it."

“Got Alice around somewhere,” he said, standing. “And the baby’s probably stuffed in a laundry bag by now for all I know.”

“Baby?” I asked.

“She’s new.”

“Little sisters are no good for a growing boy.”

He stood. “Every one of you’s a handful. Catch up to us, later,” he said. “After they finish searching the train for a coolie and a hill billy boy.” Then he slipped past me and disappeared into the car beyond.

I knew they were liars when they told me he was dead.

Water closets were spaced in each car so a fellow could stop and piss if he had to. Cable availed himself of the privilege before he returned to his seats. When he got back, Alice was gone and a stranger was rocking Sugar. The car now smelled like boiled ham and the heat was pervasive. Where there had been activity now there was a dreary dozing sense haunting the car. Men had unbuttoned their shirts as far as decorum would allow and women were fanning themselves. Two old ladies who had spied Alice early on now leaned against one another and slept.

“Who are you, biddy,” Cable asked. She was an old woman who looked to be more aged than the grandfather trees in the hills. A shrunken apple dressed in crinoline and a striped traveling jacket, she rocked the child with arms that looked too thin to support a baby’s weight.

“Don’t know who you are child, but keep it low and keep your tone polite.” Resting against the old woman’s chest with softly curled fists, the baby slept and blew bubbles when it breathed.

“Where’d the girl go?” A boy too small to handle the weight tried to remove a bag from an overhead rack and toppled three bags to the floor. The young girl next to him giggled and ducked when the smallest of the bags rolled onto the seat beside her. Cable hadn’t gotten enough rest. The existence of the boy and the girl angered him. He sat down and leaned back in his seat and stared at the floor until he could speak civilly. “Do you know where the girl went?” he finally asked.

“She got a note, written on green paper and she just left,” the old woman replied. “A girl brought a note. Your girl went after she read it.”

“What did the girl with the note look like?”

“A girl, boy. I didn’t look closely.” He realized that Alice could have passed by while he was in the water closet. Instead of running after her, he sank further into his seat and leaned against the window sill. “It doesn't do to leave Alice alone very long,” he said. “She wanders. He smeared sweat drops with his hand and wiped them on his shirt. “Swear to God, it’s hot in here.”

The train was passing through a work camp. Rows of rotted buildings drifting slowly downhill. The boggy ground offered slippery purchase. Men stood rather than sit in the mud. Mules stomped and shook their heads to rid themselves of flies. They waited for wagons that would soon come to cart everyone uphill to the logging camps. The men grouped in the sunny spots stopped what they were saying or doing to watch the train pass. The passengers leaned against the windows and stared at the mud people. Cable wondered if it would be easier to be a logger without family. He tried to remember the last time he liked where he was and what he was doing, then shook off the girlish thought. Then he realized that he had been daydreaming and that the old woman was repeating herself.

“Rag tag girl, carried the note,” she was saying.

Then he stared at the baby so long that the woman started to offer it up.

“Don’t want it.” He waved her off.

“Give it time,” the old woman whispered.

“Time for what,” he said. The child had a speckled flush and it stared at him with no sense of recognition.

“Not every man loves his baby, at first look.”

Railway security entered through the door ahead. Just in case Payne had reported the missing money, Cable quickly took the baby to hide his arm.

Security passed and he handed Sugar back. “Baby belongs to the girl, less than it does to me,” he said.

“You all share the same features.” The woman rocked the baby in the crook of her arm and Sugar relaxed the way she never did with Alice or Cable unless she was bone tired. Cable knew Alice might never forgive him if he gave the baby away, but the idea of lightening the load, caring what happened to only one instead of three seemed a gracious notion for a moment.

“Keep her a little longer. I need to find my sister,” he said.

“She headed back the way you came.” The woman rubbed the baby’s brown skin with a fragile veined hand. “Shall I keep the baby?”

“Just ‘till I find my sister,” Cable said. Shuffling up from his seat, he began the journey back towards the rich folks’ dining car.

Cable’s job as he saw it, was keeping Alice contained; saving the good in her and repairing damage done when he could not, no matter what kind of trouble she caused. And trouble, as he saw it, fit into four levels: everyday, worse, horrible and unbelievable.

“Everyday is just waking up because you always want to sleep longer,” he said.

“Worse is Alice and it always leads to one of the other ones. Horrible is waking up in a ditch filled with bodies and unbelievable is waking up the second time in the dark seeing

shovels lying so the handles poked over the edge of the grave and knowing I gotta move or die.”

He tried not to think too hard while he worked his way back.

The door to the diner’s car was locked now. He rattled the handle. He could hear low laughter from inside and thought his sister’s voice was mixed in.

“Alice.” He knocked on the door gently at first. When no one replied, he knocked again. “Alice.”

“What you want, little man?” I said.

“Let me in, Mei.”

“Sure, come on in.” I turned the lock and he pressed in. The fire had done very little damage. One of the drapes was gone and a wall was scarred, but nothing was burned to the ground. The lamps had been dimmed and the windows covered. The tables and some of the chairs had been folded away and someone had placed pillows on the floor. In the remaining chairs two men leaned back, while the hookers worked them. On the floor another girl was being mounted from behind. A final man sat on a bench and stroked himself while he watched and stretched out to pour wine over the pair on the floor. Cable recognized the sweet smell of opiate mixing with cigar smoke and saw pipes set in trays by Alice who would have crawled through the floor boards to escape if she could. She was crouching in a corner as far from the action as she could get.

“Alice.” He worked his way towards her stopping when she winced. Anger was for another time, now he needed to convince her to stand and leave.

“Come on, Alice,” Cable said. His sister tried to stand but kept falling back to her hands and knees. Cable finally grabbed her and tried to pull her up but she resisted his

efforts. "Sugar needs you." The fried out eyes reflecting the half broke mind did not take in the words.

"I can't cross," she said. "Momma'll do it." Then she brushed away a lock of hair that had dropped across her face back or she tried to but failed. Cable stopped her from trying again and gently brushed it back.

"Not Momma. Alice, we have to do it on our own."

"Let her stay and learn," I said. Cable turned and shoved me off my feet. I went down and laughed at him from the floor. Then Cable knelt and tried to put his arm around his sister's waist. "Stand up. Just stand up," he said.

Alice looked at the room they would need to cross and shook her head. "She said she was your friend. She told me it was a party and I could come." She fended off his efforts to make her rise and he fell backwards once in the struggle.

"Leave her here, little man. I can make her useful," I said.

Suddenly Alice stood.

Before she could change her mind Cable grabbed her arm and dragged away, returning her to the car where the old lady and Sugar slept.

"Sit baby." He tried to reseat her but she refused to stay put. She crawled underneath their chairs. He let her go and there she curled up and hid with Cable sitting above her.

"Sweet child." The old woman who had fallen asleep, woke up and shifted the baby. She seemed to accept that a girl would sleep beneath the seat. "She looks tired, though."

"She has nightmares," Cable said. "She doesn't sleep through the night."

“Poor girl.” The woman reached towards Alice who pulled back out of reach. The woman took her hand back and looked at the boy as if he had hurt the girl. “You must help her.”

Cresting a hill the train started down a drop and began to pick up speed and Cable lowered his window all the way in order to catch the breeze and looked outside. Alice had torn buttons off his shirt when they struggled. He clutched the fabric closed across some scratches she had also inflicted. He could no longer see much outside but the remembered notion of big muddy men being driven up hill to work and back to sleep comforted him. “What do you think about being a logger,” he asked the landscape.

“She scared me, Cable” Alice said. She reached for his hand but he pulled it out of reach. He was too angry to help her and her touch would have set his rage free. “There’s a city ahead of us and after the war, no telling,” he said. “You’ll forget.”

“Why’d she call for me,” Alice said in a voice strangled by weariness.

“She thinks if you break I’ll leave you,” he said. “And she forgets that there are things she shouldn’t do, even to me.” In response Alice curled up more tightly on the floor and closed her eyes. And Cable curled up on the chair and tried to sleep hoping that he was too tired to dream.

But of course he did. And in the dream he saw himself standing knee deep in river water holding another boy under. His dream-self thought that hometown boys shouldn’t kill each other even during wartime. But still he killed the boy and took the boy’s money while I watched. He would awaken feeling evil and unable to remember the dream clearly and angrier with me than he had been in months.

I used to believe that time only runs forward and backward. But now I think that it spreads like water and rolls in many directions at once. When I was little my mother told me the story of the universe because I would pester her with questions. She said that the world was made before men and not for the purposes of men. She also said that we lived in a universe made of earth and sky, all of it separated by Pangu who died so that his body could become the mountains, islands and valleys and also the space between the earth and the sky.

I should never have made her tell me. The knowledge wasn't sacred, but I'm sure my mother believed that I should never have dared ask. And I still have questions. If there is earth and sky and the space Pangu makes in between, then where am I? Maybe I am in a space that no longer exists? That cannot be, but maybe it is.

"You have it wrong." A lady who hides her eyes approaches. It seems as if she just appears.

"Was I speaking?" I ask.

"Mothers know what their children are thinking." She has dirty feet, wears a torn dress and her hair is bound in a long braid that drapes down her back.

She sits next to me

"You are not my mother," I say.

"I am his and you can't think a thing that I don't know."

"Is it his fault we are here, like small birds tied to trees by string?"

"You have it wrong." She has the brown fingertips of a smoker or maybe it is berry stain or just ground in dirt. "The world floats in water. Kept from drowning by long strings that tie it to the sky." She points upwards, because old habits die hard. "One day the earth will become heavy with too many living creatures. Then the cords will break and earth will sink."

"Does your son think this?"

"My son never cared what I thought." She keeps touching her lips as if she itches for a cigarette. "He thinks he is smarter than he is and you should have killed him when you had the chance. It is your fault that you are here."

"There he is," she says, watching our boy sleep, so she must see him too. "Still out of reach." She leans close but keeps her head down so I still can't see her face well. "Don't you want to just stop? Just fall asleep?" she asks.

"I like hearing my thoughts," I reply. "I like the sound of my own voice."

"Maybe you are nothing, can be nowhere because you can't let go."

"You are liar," I said. "You don't know why we are here either. Maybe this place is the center of existence, God's eye. Maybe this place exists because of me. Because I am unique."

"I too would like to be that special," she says then she raises her hand to smooth back strands of hair that have strayed from her braid. She has heavy hands, scarred and calloused. Any well-bred woman would have hidden them in shame.

Cable, Alice and Sugar debarked in Baltimore. Keeping low and staying close, they quickly wound through the slow moving crowd that became denser as they moved from the station into the heart of the city.

“What about Mei?” Alice asked Cable who was pulling her along. She was moving slower than he liked. He had waited until the train stopped before he woke her, as she was usually more pliable when she was dozy but she had come to in a stubborn mood. If he wanted to move faster, then she wanted to resist.

“We’ll see her again,” he said.

“I don’t want to.” She tried to pull away but he gripped her hand too tightly for her to get free.

“She’s got a fix on us, Alice. If we wanted we couldn’t get free of that but I swear I’ll keep her off you.”

“Tell her to go, tell to go for good,” Alice said.

“Shut it,” Cable replied, making a fast turn. In his haste he dragged Alice across a pothole and she had to skip to keep from falling.

“Cable, I cain’t keep my wits up when you run me.”

“Just ‘till we get free of the crowd.” The variety and press of the crowd they moved through was more than Alice had ever seen. She wanted to stop and look around but Cable was worried about being late. He had agreed to meet Payne at the docks and they were late. They were also out of money again and could not miss a chance to make more.

He tried to head towards the bay and ended up in a dead end more than once, had to ask directions more than once from strangers who were not easy to understand when they did slow down to answer. Rushing carriages and walkers seemed to send him spinning in the wrong directions and the buildings all looked the same. Fighting a rising panic, Cable dragged his sister through the heady throng and tried to remember he could not panic nor allow Alice to wallow in hers. When she tried to stop, he yanked her forward. When she complained, he kicked her in the shins. When they finally reached the bay Cable found a position behind a stack of marine pilings that seemed safe. Primarily he wanted his back to the water and a place to hide the girls.

“You cain’t swim. How’s this safe?” Alice stared down into the moldy depths of the bay and traced the trails of barnacle clusters thickening at the base of the dock. Weaving in and out of these were seaweed fronds marking time and tide in slow rhythm.

“Shush,” he said. “I’m gettin’ a headache.” It was a product of a hangover and his nightmares and would only be resolved by real rest and a decent meal. He looked around. Baltimore might have been a good place for them to settle and find work if they hadn’t already been making plans. In ’65 it was the stepping off point for new lives. If Baltimore didn’t suit the port offered hundreds of ways to go somewhere better. Despite his headache and his hurry, Cable took a moment to look around and be impressed.

The Chesapeake opened behind the children, a vast yawning through which cargo and men trekked. Barges slid into places near docks piled high with grain and tobacco stores. Crates of uniforms lay in sodden boxes next to ropes as thick as tree trunks that were coiled in tidy piles. Grey crabs, sidled across the planks then scuttled away whenever

someone moved. Dark eyed gulls fluttered behind the ship stacks drawn by the garbage that trailed the trawlers.

Black men loaded cargo. White men told them where to go. Germans, Russian and Irish newcomers clustered tightly together, stepped off gangplanks and were hurried out of the way by dock masters keeping to their schedules. A line of men flowed in between family groups, bulky, dirty types, seeking work. Uniformed men stopped the sturdier ones and tried to convince them to enlist. Signs strewn about the docks referred to a strike of which there were no signs. Broken glass and plaster was being swept up by a team of men and brushed into the bay.

“Boy.” A man with sagging cheeks gestured to a group of black men that had been stacking metal sheets by a wide ramp. A food cart had arrived and the workers were lining up to get their share.

“Get that,” the man pointed to a cart filled with bales and boxes. He made a “hurry up” gesture at the men at the head of the line and when three reluctantly complied Cable stepped into the gap, took the loaves and a jar of milk that would have been offered to those next in line and moved quickly away from the crowd before someone could stop him.

Then he cut the loaf into pieces with his pocket blade, as it was too stale to tear by hand and shared the bits.

“Ever seen something like this?” Alice asked. The bay clearly amazed her and Cable realized that every place they’d been to since leaving home was new to her.

“Old hat to me,” he said.

Grimacing as she gnawed on her stale chunk, Alice tracked the boats as they passed. “Bet even you ain’t seen boats this high,” she said. She took the milk jar from Cable and tried to steep her bread and lost the whole chunk. Then she stuck her hand in the jar to retrieve the bread and it dissolved between her fingers. Then she gave up and drank the mix, sharing some with the baby.

A boat horn sounded and several tugs, pulling blasted steamers, paraded past.

“The ones I saw was all blowed to hell,” Cable said. He was looking at the boats but referring to a long list of things he considered blasted to hell. When he looked closely he could see where smoke from canon blasts must have driven the steamer crews into the water.

Everyone wasn’t working. Off to the side, a dirty, pocked field stretched to the street. On it, a dozen men stripped to the waist, were playing baseball. They played badly. Their bat was a bent piece of wood and sent balls off at odd angles. No one ran for long shots and everyone applauded straight hits. The play was slow. The men were playing around more than they were playing the game. They catcalled to one another, sharing banter in between strikes. A box of balls was tucked behind first base. Nearby street urchins hovered over bottles of pop. The boys had been delivering papers that were lying in piles on the ground dusting away when the wind blew. Sheets in a spreading hatch drifted wide across the water. They game had been going on for a while. Some of the sheets had blown to the core of the harbor where they were being sucked into intakes or run down by the hulks making way.

Alice saw Payne and his companions first. “There they come,” she said. She had her back to the game. She blinked at the men as if she were staring into a bright light and

Cable felt her fear but assumed it was fear of strangers and blocked out the unspoken warning sign.

“Not here,” she said, recognizing one of the men but failing to name her fear.

Payne remained outside and the two other men stepped into the shadows as Cable stood so he missed the face of their father. He took stock of himself, brushed crumbs off his hands and milk from his mouth and touched a folding knife in his pocket for reassurance then met Payne halfway. Payne extended a hand marred by three splinted fingers and waved.

“Shit, the devil lives,” Cable said to Payne

“Bad day?” Cable asked referring to the fingers.

“Bad loan,” Payne replied and Cable briefly remembered that Payne had said that he had owed money.

“Not here,” Alice said again.

Cable was on his way as she spoke and would probably have ignored her anyway. If he had turned around he would have seen that she had completely disappeared by the time he had taken but a few steps.

“It’s an odd job. You need to keep your yap shut,” Payne said, stepping close. “But they’ll take you and they’ll pay you more than Appo.”

“I cain’t be choosey.” Cable said. He followed Payne to the door but stopped when Payne passed through. Pausing, Cable watched the men who talked low and inspected the warehouse to see if there was more than one exit. The men’s voices came to him crystal clear because they were standing inside a natural echo chamber.

“...already here.” He heard the last of Payne’s entreaty to his bosses.

If you think I cain't smell when you're near, little man, you're sorely misunderstanding," Tom Gaines said. Other boys had fathers who shrunk as they aged, but this was not Cable's experience. Until the day he died he suspected his father would seem massive. He fought an urge to leave, but knew running was a useless ploy.

"Hey, Daddy," he said, coming close enough to be seen but not touched. His ham-fisted father was not the leader of the pack. Payne and Tom Gaines worked for the third man, a thin figure darkly dressed.

"Come closer," this one said.

Gaines mashed a cigar stub between his lips and inspected his son. "How's it, boy?" he asked. Even bad fathers command their sons' respect. Cable knew he fell short of his father's expectations and could not suppress the urge to impress. He didn't reply but he stepped closer for inspection. "You made it through, mostly," Gaines said, referring to the missing arm.

"Yes, Daddy."

"Yes Daddy," Gaines said making fun of his son's respectful tone. He snorted smoke and tossed his cigar. Life was steadily compressing Tom Gaines to a bullish essence that was fraying at the edges. He was tall and wide but he slouched and he had a sturdy stare, but ages of anger had left a grinding trail across his features. He was too pale and his skin pouched around his eyes and lips. Red hair retreated to patches on a freckled scalp and a boozy existence had etched a red path down his face and given him a gut. He clenched his fists when he talked, but he also had a habit of twisting his wrists as if they ached.

He stepped forward as if to inspect the boy and the boy automatically took two steps back. "Skittery as you ever were, though," Gaines said. He looked over at Payne. "Lewis

said someone named Cable must a took his poke. I guessed that jobber'd be you. You tend to take things that ain't yours. Fer instance, where are my girls, little man?"

"Safely hid," Cable replied now knowing what Alice had seen and had not said. Out of place, he remembered a good day with his father. They had gotten lost heading through the woods and stopped to catch their bearings and had enjoyed finding their way home.

The thin man pulled a watch from his waistcoat and checked the time. A willowy figure, he reminded Cable of a tree grown too thin to stand in the wind. Spindly shoulders were draped in a thick cloak and a big brush moustache overwhelmed pinched features. He wore a grey uniform adorned with a passel of medals, a high fur shako and earrings. He also had a scar on his neck and he reeked of menthol rub. "Give it to him, Gaines," he said.

Gaines took out a wallet, handed it towards Cable's bad arm and let it fall.

"Lewis says you're capable," the thin man said. He had the spreading vowels of a New England man. "You'll run messages into the northern capital, where I say. Be where I say, when I say." He talked very softly. "You'll work at Tultavul's Saloon and in ushering in the theatre next door. Take any job they offer. You'll run messages between people. I'll never tell you why and I'll burn you if you ever fail." He pulled out his handkerchief and coughed into it. He crumpled the cloth and threw it away. "You get paid in gold."

"This is a waste, Mister." Gaines spoke up. "My daddy used to drown bad stock ever' season to keep from wasting food. I'da done that, with this one, but I was gone 'til he was

too big to hold under water.” It was an old insult. Cable stacked it away with the others in an idea of a room busting at the seams with bad memories.

“Leave him alone.” The thin man pointed at the wallet Gaines had dropped. “And pick it up.” He smoothed gloved fingers while Gaines bent down and Cable noticed impossibly straight, seams. Someone at home loved this man.

Gaines picked the wallet up and handed it over to the boy. “You’re barkin’ at a knot,” he said. “This one’s a squaw horse. He’ll hobble us.” A bat connected with a ball, not with a hollow sound, but with a flat thump.

“Git it,” someone yelled. The ball rolled past the door followed by three little boys. It hit a bump and angled away, a rabbit one step ahead of the foxes. The boy who caught it tripped and almost fell but his friend caught him and dragged him upright just before he hit the ground. They were both laughing.

“Young man,” the thin man said, “I am a doctor by trade. You’ll see my plaque by the door.” He thumbed a piece of paper from the wallet and extended it towards Cable. “Get to this address. I don’t care how, within the week.” Then he retrieved an ebony-tipped cane from a place in the dark and headed for the door.

Gaines stepped into his path. “You said I could get my girls.”

Outside the warehouse men were yelling, calling each other names they did not mean, in languages not everyone understood. Children roiled this way and that, their mother’s voices following them in futile circles. The squeal and crackle of the slip and slide of rope, wood and metal being strained played treble to the voice tones as loads were moved up and off ships that gently rubbed against their moorings while water slapped up the docksides and made everything moist.

“I said maybe you could to go get them when we were done,” the thin man said.

Gaines raised a hand as if to keep him from passing.

“There’s no end of ways for you to end up dead,” Gaines said.

“They’ll find your body floating in the canal and they won’t recognize the pieces,” the thin man replied. After a split second, Gaines stepped out of his way.

Another crack of the bat resounded outside and another “Git it,” followed. Then the man walked out and Cable eager to keep close to the stranger, followed.

The sunshine was warming, but too bright. A crowd had gathered around the game. Families now picnicked at the edges of the field. The boys had split or sold sodas to the laborers who were taking a break. It looked as if there were now enough players for teams and someone was keeping score.

“If I don’t show up at his address?” Cable asked his new benefactor. He watched a runner sliding into base and tried to focus.

“I’ll set your father loose. He has certain fixations.”

“I’ll take your deal, Mister. But you better be sure about the lock you have on my daddy. He never gives up.”

The thin man smiled. Then he too watched the runner reach home plate. After the next batter struck out he touched Cable lightly on the shoulder. “Dinner tonight,” he said.

“Find me. Building across the street. Cable nodded and started to walk off.

“Cable Gaines.” He called.

“Yeah.”

“There are two doors close together. Ask for Dr. Francis Tumblety.”

Cable was an odd boy and he had a way with strangers in particular. He was too smart for his background, his age and too proud for a low class hustler. Hook and stall is a pickpocket's gamble. The stall distracts the victim while the hook steals the goods. Cable was good at both. Dr. Tumblety was currently missing his fine gold watch. I think Cable and Alice stole out of habit as well as for need. Maybe it made them feel smarter than the next man. Maybe it was just a mean thing to do.

Francis Tumblety M.D. "Indian Herbal Remedies," the brass plate was nailed on the wall to the left of a heavy brown door. Two well-dressed gentlemen were exiting the premises as Cable began to climb the steps to the door. They ignored him and he had to back out of the way in order to avoid being run down. He stared at their backs as they then climbed into a waiting hansom and went bouncing down the jostling highway that was Baltimore proper.

The warm breeze washing off the bay was heavy with saltwater tang and off in the distance horns from the harbor sounded. Cable stopped to listen. The riverboats fascinated Cable. He liked their statuesque shapes and the lively sound of the parties they constantly hosted. He wondered if riverboats could cross oceans. He felt that he would make a fine gambler, with the right clothes. The horns blew again and he the dream dissipated as he remembered the thousand other things that would keep him from boarding a riverboat today.

He turned and saw a second hansom at the curb, then recognized the doctor at his front door with his hand on the handle. Dr. Tumblety had taken his coat off and rolled up his sleeves. There were two other passengers in the cab, Just behind him stood two other men. One a dark haired fashion plate who liked his looks and the other a narrowing figure with hair on his face and none on his head. They shook hands with Tumblety.

“I thank you for the introduction,” the bald man said.

“I am delighted, Dr. Mudd, to be of service. Please commend to Mrs. Surratt.” Tumblety said. Then he nodded to the other man. “John, in two weeks.” The dandy tipped his hat and then the two guests stepped down to their waiting carriage. The dandy then said something to the other stranger about the price of property in Maryland and the two climbed inside. Once the carriage turned a corner and disappeared Tumblety turned away.

“Close it,” he said to Cable as retreated down a narrow corridor lined with portraits and divided by a stairway with a curling handrail. Just underneath the stairs was a wardrobe. Tumblety took a uniform jacket from it before he passed into the room beyond. He did not notice that he had left the wardrobe door slightly ajar. The lock was stiff. When Cable tried to push it close the latch refused to catch and the door rebounded. Inside were several officer jackets, not all the same and each was covered with a variety of military insignia that a boy who had served both armies, did not recognize.

The doctor led the way into a den. “Sit,” he said. He set his book down and walked into an examination room where he turned on a faucet and began to soap up to his elbows.

This part of the house was dim, clean and cool. Cable could neither hear street sounds nor see daylight and was grateful for the peace. The city made him feel like a small, skipping stone. The floors were tiled with white, the walls paneled with dark wood and the windows covered with thick tapestries. It was a silent tank. A heavy slab of wood formed the desk and a leather chair with brass trim stood behind it. An issue of "New Planets," lay open on the desk as the did the book the doctor had held, "Origin of Species."

To the left of the desk was a large armoire. When Cable tipped it open he saw tusks, horns, turtle shells and objects he could not name that all seem to be biological. The cabinet had a bad smell. Cable backed away.

Portraits of Generals Lee, Jackson and other soldiers Cable did not know lined the wall behind the desk. Military paraphernalia, hats, coats, swords and insignia were arranged in a case alongside them. Books lined a third wall. The bookcase had a wide, low shelf on which periodicals and larger books which would not fit into conventional shelves lay on their sides. Copies of *Atlantic Monthly*, *Annual of Scientific Discovery* and *Ladies' Companion* lay neatly piled. One section of the bookcase, separated by the rest by two shiny bullfrog statues, was filled with romance novels. The covers were decorated with women being bent backward by men in frilly shirts and sashes. Next to this collection was a book of naturalists' sketches. The rest of the books seemed to be stored in alphabetical order according to author names. Cable recognized Dickens, and nothing else and pulled one of these off the shelf. Dickens sold in dime store packages and a boy who wanted to read could easily recover them from trashcans. I'd almost say Cable was ashamed of his ability to read, he guarded the secret so closely. His mother taught him

because she wanted him to be able to read from the bible on his own, thought she might save his soul in this way. Whether he knew it or not the skill rescued him from real life but it also clashed with his notion of himself as a boy not taken to flights of fancy so he always lied if someone asked and would not be caught in a bookstore by anyone he knew.

“It’s good to have a variety of interests,” Tumblety said. He took the book Cable had selected and put it back, nudging it so that it’s binding lined up exactly with its fellows. “That one is too much for your untutored mind. Try this.” He handed Cable a book which the boy dropped to his side without examining. “Not at all curious?” He had pulled on the officer’s coat and located a white pair of gloves. He offered the boy a seat opposite him at the desk. The chair was less exalted than the one the doctor used. It was the only castoff piece of furniture in a carefully arranged room. On the desk facing Cable were a stuffed lizard, a dried fish and a stork. In between these was a heavy silver frame that Cable moved in order to see the doctor better. He stopped to look at the picture closely.

“My mother,” Tumblety said. A thin lipped hag with pale hair sat stiffly and hugged two stiffed backed children to her sides.

“And you and your sister too, I guess.”

“She hoped to hang it in the front parlor but the results were inappropriate.”

The old woman clutched the children and the children resisted her tug. When the snap was taken the girl had been turning, her features were blurred. The shot was bathed in a dull glow that seemed to take the edges off everything but the matriarch’s stare.

“Francis.” A shrill soft sound followed by an insistent knock. “Francis.” She entered before the doctor could answer.

“Yes mother.” She was a fat tub with a gut and an ass that even a bustle and yards of Victorian dress could not screen. The fact that she was about five feet tall made her girth more amazing. She had short arms, stubby hands and crossed the room very fast, the way a chicken hurries after fresh grain. Cable thought he saw her head bob when she paused by the doctor’s side. While her son’s features were thin, hers were knife-like. She touched his arm. He seemed to stop himself from moving it away.

“Did you get my tickets? I want to be in the capital for the president’s inaugural speech.” It was a question tinged with regret. She did not expect him to have done as she asked.

He pulled a magazine in front of him and paged open to an advertisement for a new and improved sewing machine. “*Every Little Mother’s Timesaver!*” “They’re on hold at the station, just ask for them.”

“Did you tell Estelle to pack for my trip?” She looked around the room. Seeing items she felt were out of place, she went to rearrange them.

Her son raised his eyes to her back and lowered them when she faced him again. “Of course.”

“And did you arrange for a cab to come early?” She stopped rearranging his things and examined his clothing.

“As always.”

“It’s a tear,” she said. She meant in his shirt. A piece of the cuff was shredded.

“I caught it on something.” He put his arm in his lap so that the flaw was hidden. “I will give it to you later.” She held her hand out as if she had expected him to take his

shirt off at that moment then clasped her hands together and when she did Cable saw the same white gloves her son wore.

“I wish that you would agree to accompany me.” In Cable’s mind there were drawers upstairs filled with gloves, next to a brand new sewing machine where the old woman made the uniforms the doctor wore when he was at home.

“I am not persuaded that this president is a blessing and I am never interested in speeches.”

“You don't like new things. You and all your new ideas and scientific things but you don't really like new ideas.” She pointed around the room at nothing in particular. He would not look at her and she would not stop trying too get his attention. “Well, I will enjoy the time with Mary and Agnes. They promise to take me to dinner at a very fine restaurant.” The doctor had flipped the page and was now considering a Brady portrait. “Is this arab staying for dinner?” She did not look at Cable.

“Yes, he will.”

“See that he’s dressed,” she said, turning to leave. “Oh, Mr. Booth and Dr. Mudd seem to have left some items in the drawing room. Take them out of the public rooms please.” The doctor’s hate was cast in her wake.

“I heard,” Cable said, “that you can pay to have poison gas capsules broken into the caskets before they seal ‘er shut. In case your relatives are just sleeping deep and not really dead.”

The doctor was having a naked moment. “I expect better manners from my guests in what is, in fact, my mother’s home.”

“Sorry, Mister. City like this takes the tar off you fast. Didn’t know so much could stand in one place and roll by so fast, so many times.”

“Many stragglers fail here. It’s not a place for the weak.” Without thinking Tumblety pulled at one of his earrings, an adornment Cable had never seen a man wear. “Do you read?”

Cable realized that he still held the book. He opened it to the first page and was dismayed to find small text. “Not a one for too much standing still.” He rubbed the flattened parchment with his fingers. Dime store novels did not have pages and bindings as fine as the one he held in his hand. He very much liked the feel and the smell of the doctor’s book.

“Books themselves are comforting,” the doctor said. Cable snapped his shut and laid it on the desk, then pushed it away.

“If you keep it I’ll pay you. If you read it, I’ll pay you more,” the doctor said.

“What the hell for?”

The doctor crumpled the magazine he had been using to avoid his mother’s eyes and tossed it into a bin. “I read everything,” he said. “I read about neurotic pathologies because they interest me. I read people because they interest me, particularly the odd ones. You do not seem as you should be. You are too certain, too silent and far too sharp for a dirty boy borne of a grunting troll. Read the book because it is an interesting notion, you reading at all.” He slid it back towards Cable but kept his finger on it like a chess player not ready to commit. “Take the book.” Cable did. Worse came to worse he could sell it. It had a good leather cover and was well bound. “Like you, I suspect, I earn my keep anew everyday.” Tumblety shuddered. Outside in the hallway they could hear hard

heels tapping across hard tiled floors. The heels were busy and Cable had the impression of a lonely chicken. He had no sympathy for fowl but he recognize the sound of a circling bird that wanted in and yet did not dare get too close. She would continue to circulate outside until she found a reason to settle or return.

“Sometimes,” the doctor said. Then he stopped and Cable realized that he could smell his breath which reeked like sour wine. Close up Cable could also hear a congestive hollow when the man breathed. His pupils were wide. The flesh around his face was baby soft and his eyes were bloodshot. He rubbed an earring between two fingers and Cable thought about cutting it off altogether just to stop him. It was a flash of anger that quickly died. A symptom of being tired. He had seen a map in a book once. The man selling it said that it was a picture of the whole world. There were pictures of dragons and a sentence about monsters at the edges this world. If it had been his map Cable would have drawn more monsters. He would in fact have populated all the places men knew with monsters and all the monsters would have looked less like dragons and more like men.

The doctor was drifting off the edges of Cable’s map. With no way to guess this strange man’s motives all Cable could do was keep him at bay. Tumblety plucked at his earring with white fingers and Cable could see that he had begun to sweat in the cool room.

“Worked for a doctor in the army for a time. Had a flu that kept coming back,” Cable said. “Take your medicine, old man. I won’t tell.”

Tumblety hesitated. “I wanted to see you up close,” he said. “What will you do when that ape comes for you?” Then he paused and he leaned back against a wall. Then he reached under the desk and fumbled out a bag. Extracted a rolled felt, he fixed himself a

shot. "Boys are easier to work with than men oftentimes," he said. He tied rubber around his arm and clutched the felt to raise a vein. "If you work out then we can sail to sea, you and me." He could not seem to stop himself from speaking as if he were comforting himself with the sound of his own voice. "I also garden," he said. There was no sense to that so Cable let it go. The doctor filled a vein with juice and sat back. It worked fast, his eyes focused and suddenly he seemed to clearly see the boy. He coughed before he could grab a handkerchief, spit up into his hand which he cleaned with a handkerchief.

"No one pays attention to children. They make the best kinds of spies." There was a knock on the door in the library and Cable could barely hear the old woman call out.

The doctor ignored her. She knocked several more minutes. "Stay out!" he yelled and she stopped knocking but did not walk away.

"Mister. I got to go." The house was separated from the street and the doctor was separated from reality. He had a closet filled with uniforms that belonged to no known army. He was a grown man mad at a little old woman he could stuff into a trunk if he wanted. All of it made the room airless and Cable itched to get back outside where he could smell the bay again and know for certain if the sun was setting as it always did.

The doctor reached across the desk and stayed his bad arm. "I am a great man, a unique individual," he said. "I knew once I met you, you'd do fine. You'll have to rid yourself of your father on your own, a right of passage I think, for all great men." The shot had steadied him, he was almost as composed as he had been in the warehouse but still buzzing around odd corners.

Cable gingerly freed his arm and let the old woman in. She steadied her son to his feet and helped him up the stairs. Cable dressed for dinner faster than doctor and his mother.

Standing in front of the mirror he saw the clothes weren't meant for him and saw items on a dresser that he could not name. He almost left, but running was all they had and it would do no good unless he made friends, even odd ones. The boy in the mirror might reach heights. He wandered back through the den where he felt compelled to find the names of the creatures on the doctor's desk. It took time. He could read, but he had an unschooled mind and the volumes in front of him used many words he had never seen. The bird on the desk was not a stork. The doctor and his mother took two full hours to prepare. In the interim Cable met Estelle, an Irish maid who eyed him suspiciously and then moved some whiskey bottles out of sight before she left him alone again. "Origin of Species," had the answers Cable sought in a series of sketches. The lizard and the fish were an iguana and a piranha and neither lived in places Cable could pronounce. Bored Cable opened another book that had sketches of a woman's insides. When he pulled it from the shelves, naked pictures of girls fell from the pages. The doctor had drawn on them. Finally, he stopped being curious. So he took his place in a corner on the floor where he was most comfortable and tried to puzzle out "Oliver Twist," until someone called him to dinner.

I never saw the doctor while I was alive. He was another secret Cable never shared. Cable always had more secrets than I could count, though I tried. I know he was less taken with me the next time I saw him and I thought this was Alice's fault. Maybe I was mistaken in this. Maybe my imprisonment in this soft hell is Cable's revenge. There are many aspects that I still don't know about the people I knew well. But I always thought that I had a sense of people that was better than knowing all the facts. I always know better. Even now Cable sits firmly in my heart and no matter what he belongs there and I know this is as it should be. And even now my hatred for anyone who wants to change that burns so hot that I forget myself. I never had a thing of my own until Cable and although I know a Chinese girl never owns anyone, I do. My ancestors disagree. They hang to the left, almost out of eyesight. They won't speak to me but I hear them whispering. Pale hens trying to shame me. We had no squabbles in China about slavery. My parents were within their rights to sell their oldest child. And if I can be owned, why can't I own Cable? Why can't I have my revenge for all the slights?

I say someone still has a debt to pay. I tried to find my brother after I had settled. It would have hurt my parents beyond repair to lose their son, but they had all vanished into the flow by the time I started searching. They probably headed west. It seemed like we all did. I say Cable is owed to me because of an unfavorable life. I say Alice should have died long before me. I lied to Cable about Jesse and I would do it again. Cable thought he was protecting me.

I've had no guests today and the loneliness makes me feel as if my insides are thinning, spreading outwards like clouds dissipating under a hot sun. Then I look down at myself and see that I am solid as ever, the ebbing sensation is only in my mind. I need to get out of here. I should have killed Alice when I had the chance. I should have killed Cable when I had the chance. I should have taken them all with me.

Where Cable went I followed. I found Appo on my own and he took me on so I traveled the rest of the way to D.C. with the circus. Because the troupe did not travel in a straight line it took months to reach Washington. Time for Cable to learn his duties for the doctor and time for Alice to learn how to wander the city streets on her own.

The war ended while I was en route. We learned that the South had surrendered from a peddler who thought we already knew. Settled troops with no war to fight, city dwellers seeking strange sights and travelers looking for a break from their journeys provided a constant supply of pigeons at each of our stops and there was a Hooker's Row in every city.

Once I found Cable in Washington I convinced him that working for two masters was better than relying on one and I convinced Appo to hire both Cable and Alice, well he hired Cable, Alice was more like an adoption. She could be so useless. She and my brother were of the same type.

She liked me in the company of others well enough but kept out of the shadows whenever I came near and wouldn't let me touch her. Cable said he'd kill me if I hurt her again. He could try, but I knew that he wouldn't know how to make it in a world without me. Fitted pieces are only broken when they are separated. If he really hated me he would have turned me away and he never did.

Alice and I worked the grease joints, handed out ducats, pasted the bills and rat sheets and tumbled. Cable managed the beasts. The lion had a temper and was hard to rouse. It

ate one of the juggler's goats and hated the monkeys who screamed whenever it came near. The elephant was a big bull that knocked over carts when it was bored and the parrots bit. Cable tended them and in between he set and pulled tents and obeyed Appo. Cable liked living in the melee, it was a noisy life that kept him busy. He rose before anyone else during the week and on the weekends when there were two shows he slept late. He did not warm to the troupe easily but did what he was asked, when asked. Even Appo who would sell his firstborn for a buck came to rely on Cable, maybe even trust him a little.

"I used have my own farm once," Appo once admitted to Cable during one of these sessions. "None of this kind of shit to tend."

"Why dja leave?" Cable asked.

"Bunch of freaks farmers are."

Appo often used Cable to help with the slackers because he had a talent for moving messy situations along and keeping quiet about it.

"Howard's sauced up," one of the riggers would say. "Go see the boss man." And Cable would go help out.

"Bunch of freaks." Appo would greet Cable, his hands full with another drunk probably one the Borneo tumblers who had many bad habits. "You gammy deadbeat, damn," Appo would say then he'd slap the offender to consciousness if he could. "To your feet. Show's on."

Without being told, Cable would serve up coffee and they would fix or fire the performer. Mostly if he couldn't go on they would just send them back to bed. A circus is a family of sorts.

Appo was the one who told him about the tents. "Tent'll burn faster than we can run," he'd said.

"It burns that quick?" Cable had asked.

"It's coated in paraffin to protect from the wet." Appo rubbed his scarred face. "Last burning I was in took my good looks. Once a tent lights no one gets out, mostly." Appo warned everyone about the tents because some of us smoked and all of us used oil lamps.

Alice learned to juggle and she learned to like pleasing crowds. With the baby tucked in its pack she would prowl the tents and make people forget they were waiting for the shows to start. I part-timed at the circus and rented a room on Hooker's Row. And so we spent our days near one another but not constantly in touch. I also worked on Alice. Alice needed a sister and like her brother she had needs that made her stupid.

Cable always had friends, pleasures and plans that neither Alice nor I were privy to. Even now I only see part of what I missed then. Washington changed us all, but it welcomed Cable. He was sucked into the city life and learned to look different than the boy he'd been when he started out. He would slip away in the early mornings, dressed in his new duster. Alice usually vanished a little later. They were a pair of alley cats at heart, two creeping critters who never fully left the forest behind.

Cable usually snuck off while it was still dark. Walking for hours without direction crossing into the heart of the city he hustled ahead of thoughts he was always trying to banish. Sometimes one or two escaped and stopped him on the street in tangible form. A boy with a rich imagination sometimes thinks he sees ghosts. I always presumed his visions were signs of remorse except I found it hard to believe a boy like Cable could ever feel guilty.

On one early morning walk Cable strolled to the Old Capital Prison. He'd heard its bell toll and was drawn to the sound. The prison yard had been opened up to the public and civilians had come to witness a hanging.

Cable, afraid and fascinated, circled the fence until he came to a spot where slats were broken. The sky was brightening softly and it was starting to drizzle and Cable realized that the men had been sentenced to die at dawn. He didn't want to get closer but he couldn't make himself leave. Through the break in the fence he saw five men and a boy being marched to the gallows and spectators gathering below in a mist that circled at everyone's feet. Washington was a tightly packed place. Standing in the yard meant you could smell the early morning aromas of butter, bread and coffee wafting from nearby shops and the odors of dirt, shit and sweat emanating from the crowd.

"Come on, move in." A pedestrian on his way towards an open gate, slapped Cable on the back. When Cable hesitated, he stopped.

"You'll miss it," he said. He had a ratty beard, worsted skin and a matted flock of bursting hair. When he stopped to talk to Cable those stepping behind him stumbled. So he offered apologies and then wiggled through the crush. Cable followed him, drafting in the old man's wake.

“but for the grace of God...” the priest began.

“What for?” a woman asked her companion.

“Murder. It catches up with you.”

The prisoners were led to their ropes. The boy was terrified and several of the men were crying.

“...sentenced to be hanged by the neck until dead.” The prisoners hands had already been tied but someone decided that it would be best if their feet were tied as well. One of the men started to shake when they covered his eyes and Cable had the idea that maybe it was better to look into someone’s eyes when you died. Then the priest stepped forward and Cable felt compelled by a great fear that reached out from the scaffold. It would be alright if he could escape before they pulled the lever. He backed up. Then he turned and ran. The boards dropped before he reached the street and the sound kicked him to his knees. Since he couldn’t plug his ears, he closed his eyes. It was not until a soft toed shoe kicked him that he stood again. He got to his feet, felt himself walking, then rushing, then running. Instinctively seeking cover, he turned into a dark alley and there the shadow accosted him. It spoke to him as he was about to pass back into the light and its presence nailed his feet to the ground.

“Got the jim-jams?” it asked. Smoke drifted from it, a thick maple taste of home reminding Cable of early Spring in the Appalachians.

“What?”

The figure stood so that all Cable could see was an outline and the shine of the bottle rolling in between dirty boots. “Fraid of shadows?” it asked.

“She lied to me,” Cable said. He pulled his collar high and tight about his neck. If the shadow stepped forward he was prepared to start running again.

“Oh, just catching up with my pleasures, don’t mind me.” Long slim fingers plucked a piece of tobacco from dark lips and flicked it away. “Got cut short in the river just before you held me under.” Then the figure vanished leaving smoke that turned out to be morning mist and not smoke from the cigars Jesse had treasured.

Cable stepped to where it had stood and touched the wall that had been at its back. “Might be a touch mad,” he said. The wet wall and the mist hinted of nothing dangerous but Cable no longer felt safe. And he thought could detect the chill of the Rappahannock rolling in on the wet winds.

After a time Cable steadied himself and rejoined the crowd, threading his way in between walking rows of spectators. He was to meet some men in the White House lawn. The doctor and Payne had friends and plans, and they all circled around an actor who seemed as bitter as the rest of us at the way the world worked. Although a minor player, Cable was connecting with destiny and a set of events in which his name would never be listed.

By the time he reached Pennsylvania Avenue Cable had slowed his pace to match that of the rallying current. Well dressed shapes streamed towards the inevitable clog in the middle of the block and Cable followed until he recognized both his destination and the men he came to meet.

Payne and two men stood at the edge of the simmering school of on-lookers who had come to hear Lincoln. Because there were three when there should have been four Cable

maintained his distance and waited for the last man. Payne and his friends were arguing and did not notice when the crippled boy drew near.

It was a dripping, day. The breeze was light but cutting and the crowd closed in on itself. People pressed and pushed. Those standing further forward were forced onto the driveway where they were rebuffed by soldiers stationed at the balustrade. Close enough to hear the men talk Cable caught names. Lewis' friends were Davey and George. Davey was a spindly hulk and George was shorter man who made up for height with meanness. The smallest of the lot, George had a narrow slanted face stuffed into a wilting brim. His jacket flapped open to reveal his signature Bowie knife. He had traded a decent pair of boots for it. He loved the knife slightly better than the hat that looked like it had been stepped on by a herd of donkeys. Davey and Payne had gotten swept up in the forces shaping the gathering mob. While wrestling for a better view, they backed into George. Davey shoved Payne backwards and inadvertently smacked George in the head.

"Knock it off," George said. He punched Payne and reached for Davey who ducked. "Knock it off."

"Sorry George," Davey rasped. Then he stepped on someone's toes and stumbled against his friend again when the crowd pressed in from the back. He tried to regain his composure by fiddling with his bowtie and straightening his vest. Pretend men attempting to make themselves matter.

"You're a poor example of manhood Davey," George replied. He felt fingers at his waistcoat and swatted away a pickpocket. "Shitty gutter rats." The boy was one of a dozen filtering through the crowd. Working in teams, the rag tag mob sifted through the ranks jobbing as many marks as possible until they vanished into the street behind the

adults with handfuls of cash, stickpins, bracelets, gold pieces and cufflinks. I wouldn't have been surprised if Alice hadn't of been in the crowd.

"Oughta be a law," Davey said.

"Go get 'em boya," George said.

The crowd shuffled forward again. Elbows were used to make space. A long roll of thunder hummed in the distance. It was accompanied by powder blasts. Bored soldiers playing with soldier's toys. I hadn't joined the crowd that day having lived most of my life in the real thing I had no time for pomp and I will always wonder why Cable kept this part of his life from me.

"Hey boys," Cable edged closer and shook Payne's hand. Then he nodded to the others.

"It's up," Davey said.

A flash of a confederate flag, rushing by the lower portion of a second story window, presaged the president's son and his friends. The boys scurried past the drapes and were shooed away by a bearded man who then drew back the curtains, and stepped aside for the President. There was so little ceremony that it took a moment for the crowd members to realize the speech had begun. More portentous than the event was the weather. It promised to soak.

"We meet this evening, not in sorrow, but in gladness of heart," Lincoln began.

The speech invoked a forward movement but people in front were again repelled by the soldiers. The effect rippled backwards. Pedestrians forced into the street, stopped traffic while carriages, struggling through the mire, stalled. Paperboys stood on the curbs,

calling out headlines and waving newspaper packets. When men gestured, the newsies raced one another towards their customers slipping in the wet and skirting the pigs that roamed the streets. "Lee Surrenders!!!" one boy yelled. "Glory! Glory!" yelled another. "Victory!" They read off the headlines and past the sheets into gloved fingers. Calling in a kind of rhythm, like the ringing of coarse bells, they sang out and sold.

"He lies." Payne turned away. Confronted by the crowing newsies, he became angrier. "I used to have this dog once," he said, hunching against the rain. He looked at Cable and hesitated. Then he nudged Davey.

Davey, tried to ignore Payne without seeming to.

"Ugly beat up thing," Payne said. "Kep it because being beat up all the time made it mean. Good hunting dog. Cain't remember its name. Small and skinny, but my daddy said to be careful of it, that I should watch things all beat to hell."

"What the hell fer, Lewis?" Davey asked, splitting his attention.

"Things with nothing left got nothing to lose. Cain't be pushed back no further."

"...that I should drop the suggestion about apprenticeship for freed-people, and that I should omit the protest against my own power."

"More lies," Payne said. He had rejoined the fight after the train but only in time to watch his heroes fall.

Davey tried to appease his friend before someone heard him. "They cain't find Forrest. They cain't find Davis. We're not done," he said.

"They got Mosby, in the prison a mile from here," Payne said. "He'll hang."

"You just escaped that one on time," Davey said.

"Shut it," George, begged. "I cain't hear."

“What the hell is he saying?” Davey whispered to Payne. He was unable to see through the crowd and too far from the President to hear well.

George listening harder than the rest was shifted aside by a threesome forcing its way forward. He jostled Davey trying to keep his balance. “What’s he mean, reconstruction?” he asked.

“..., is pressed much more closely upon our attention.”

“He means letting Louisiana back in the Union,” Payne said. “Can we leave? I don’t want to listen no more.” He crossed his arms and sneered at the paperboys until the speech ended and the crowd dissipated. It was a calm lecture no one was pacified, nor stirred. Some drifted off and some clustered together on order to ward off the whistling wet. Then the darkening sky began to drain into the gathering, turning mud into mire. Women lifted their wet skirts or dredged them through the mud. The men, standing in the brown stew, resigned themselves to messy shoes.

Cable saw him first. A figure he had first seen standing on Dr. Tumblety’s stoop. Standing in the back, a black haired man wearing a long coat and a top hat, listened. A scowling man in gentleman’s dress, he stood in the crowd but separate from it, as if he were a visiting dignitary. He waved to the group with his cane.

“Crap,” Davey said. “We’re gonna hang.”

When the three men failed to respond, the man signaled again. “Let’s get it done,” Payne said. Shouldering his way in front of George, he led the way.

“We’re gonna be dead,” Davey said. “Look at hisself all dressed up like to be presented in the White House.”

“Stop wetting yourself over it already,” Payne said.

“Think he’ll die with us,” Davey said. “No sir, he thinks he’ll...”

“That man ain’t gonna get caught. But there’s somewhere a bush ya kin hide under, with the other squirrels and mealy bugs, if you’ve a mind,” Payne said.

“Leave off, now.”

“Then shut up.”

The big man lumbered ahead.

The black haired gentleman made eye contact with the girls and but dropped his glance if he caught the eye of a grown man. He carried a play book with the name John Wilkes Booth underlined. “I have a schedule to keep,” he said. On cue, the rain came down harder and everyone hid under hat brims and umbrellas.

“No one gives a shit,” Cable said, his fear of the dark killing his fear of men for a moment. Up ahead the path between them and the White House had cleared. If they wanted, they could all have strolled to the front door. The Lincoln children were still playing hide and seek in the curtains.

“I demand respect from errand boys,” Booth said. He blinked to keep the weather out but would not duck his head as the others did.

“Give me the list,” Cable said.

“Not until I’m done,” Booth replied.

“Theatre’s that way. I don’t give a shit about the performance,” Cable said.

“Mind your tongue, mongrel,” Booth said.

Payne shoved Cable back and stepped between the two. “Call him names another time,” he said to Booth. “What’s the message,” he said to Cable. Nearby a pig and a dog snarled at one another. A shopkeeper pulled a gun from underneath his counter in order to

clear them from his porch. The pig wheeled away and brushed by the men. The dog curled its tail under and ducked down an alley. Water was building up into a strong flow and began washing trash down the street. Trees stripped of leaves were rattling in the rain. Rats escaped the burgeoning flood by climbing high. Both Davey and George anxiously searched the crowd. They were an obvious cluster in the middle of the open street.

“The guard will let you into the box. Once he does, say good-bye to him cause he’ll be in Atlanta by the time you close the door,” Booth said. Now that everything was wet Cable could see that Booth had used eyeliner. It ran as freely as the dirt on Payne’s face. The group found shelter under a tree. The troops that had kept the driveway clear were now dispersing through the street in small groups and were drifting towards the area known as Hooker’s row. Lights went on in the White House and figures could be seen behind lacey shades.

“I’ll put a gun to the orangutan’s head, force him through the hallway and into a cab in the back. We’ll take him to the river where Gaines will have a boat and we will be on our way home. We will be free once we get past Maryland,” Booth said. “Lewis will kill Stewart. Davey will show him out of D.C. by the road north and George will kill Johnson. Although we should kill them all.”

“Kill Lincoln and every trooper ‘tween here and New York will burn the Confederate states to the bones,” Lewis said.

“Tumblety has his money in this and he’s got investors who mean to make money on this,” Davey said. “You queer it and they’ll find you floating in clear water by the back end of some bay, the bits they find.”

“The Doctor said for you to gimme the damn list.” Cable said. A flash of rage for the way grown men complicated every piece of business filled him.

George pulled a wad from a pocket and handed it to Cable.

“Think you can be expected to leave these supplies at Surrat’s,” Booth asked. “Your father was never able to do what he said. We can still cut you loose too.”

“You don’t have any say in who stays or no,” Cable replied. Before Booth could answer he turned away and cut across the street. The rest of the party separated the way sparks snap from a dying fire and the rain tracked them all.

In Cable's wake a horse drawn cart rushed passed the men and sprayed their shoes with muck. The cart shimmied, sliding sideways before the wheels found tenuous purchase on slick surfaces. Pigs standing in the street forced the cart to veer after which it shot through the crowd and skidded to a sloppy stop in front of the Star Saloon where it lost its load. Boxes of groceries, cleaning supplies and crates of liquor toppled onto the dark street. Cable stopped to watch the disaster.

"Fessacchione," someone shrieked as the driver and his companion tumbled off their seats to rescue the goods. Broken bottles and smashed crates splayed across the ground, items that could be pocketed were plucked by kids and bums. The driver and his sidekick chased off the bums who ran them in circles and the kids dispersed before the police appeared. Though Washington was rife with men in uniform, their presence did not stop crime, it only sped up the pace with which petty offenses were effected. Two fistfuls and broken runs into any of the nearest alleys sufficed.

Men in aprons and dirty white shirts exited the saloon and formed a line passing whole cartons and crates hand to hand down the alley towards the back doors. Well dressed traffic from Ford's Theatre transversed the line. From time to time the workers had to balance boxes in place while ladies in frills gingerly stepped by. There was a huge crew. The new play had returned from a successful European tour and was drawing record crowds in America. Business in the saloon next to the theatre was booming and the Ford brothers, owners of both the saloon and the theatre, had begun bolstering ticket

sales with matinees which meant they had begun hiring en masse. Cable had found it easy to wrangle a job. He had found more than one job in fact. City life allowed him to take many forms. It was going to take a lot of money for two kids to buy a place of their own. In a bid for privacy he and Alice had in fact rented a room above the saloon. They were young but Alice took a job downstairs waiting tables and in exchange the owner let the children stay. With Tom Gaines in the city both Alice and Cable felt the need for boltholes, places no one else knew existed.

The pigs that had stood in the street were unharmed and drifted away. Cable walked ahead of them and ducked into an alley. One pig wandered near the alley entrance and paused, but was driven off by the smells and the sounds of the place. Down in the back, past a dark brick corridor, dogs, rangy, ribbed beasts, strained at their leads while screaming gamblers placed bets. Cheers, barking, growling and guttural caterwauling reached out of the passage. Even a pig knew when to steer clear.

“Cable, Cable, which one?” a bettor yelled. A crumpled English accent mangled the words. The man pulled at a feathery moustache with spaded fingertips. “Jack?”

Jack, the dog’s owner and another of Cable’s employers, was taking bets and ignored the question.

“Ask your God,” Cable replied as he headed for the dog pit.

“Mine’s still in Slovenia.”

“Supposed to be with you wherever you go, isn’t he?”

“Krauts done run us out too fast, only had time to pull up my pants.”

“Jew betting or what?” This from the crowd of laborers bunched in a corner. They were trying to make it to Jack’s side of the alley. “No need to hurry. I want all your

dollars, lads,” Jack said. The pit splashed with wet from the last fights, had a flat, dank smell. When Jack noticed his employee taking his place on the opposite side of the pit. He called out. “Quite the dandy today, Cable.” In this incarnation as a ratter Cable had hustled enough money to rent the room for his family to use now and then, to buy decent clothes and put away his scrubby look. Today underneath his duster, he wore a fitted suit with a collared shirt and an embroidered vest. Hadden’s locket gleamed behind the shirt. The clasp had broken more than once because of hard wear but Cable always repaired it and finally replaced the necklace with a hardier version. Instead of a hillbilly he had become a grey-eyed city boy with long blond hair, who was cleaner and better dressed than everyone else in the alley. The cold hills were still in his eyes and there was no mistaking the accent, but he had stepped into the 19th century and he could play to any gallery with the best of him. He always carried a blade with a fancy handle tucked in his waistcoat and the knife was always new because Cable bought and lost knives on a regular basis. His bad arm was always covered in a sewn up sleeve. No one he knew mentioned it. As he moved further into the future he became angrier about the loss. It was the one thing about himself that he could not make prettier.

He crossed past the dogs on his way to the pit. They followed him with their eyes. When he stepped forward they retreated, after he passed they lunged to the ends of their leashes again. The handlers were a crew of boys borrowed from Appo. They were barely bigger than the dogs, but were of similar stock. Sullen forms with no expectations. Unsentimental street fighters with nothing to lose.

He squatted at the edge of the crowd and smoked a cigar while he waited for his boss’s signal. Jack took money and stuffed the bills into several pockets for some time. It

was the last fight of the day, he wanted every last dollar. Bettors kept a civil distance. No one wanted to be accused of stealing. Ratters did not call the cops in the pits, they fixed their problems on their own. The crowd was composed of Slavs ejected from farms by Austrians, Greeks chased away by Turks, Irish hounded by English and Italian and Japanese laborers running from someone else. Everyone here counted on bullies to enforce the rules. The games themselves were against the rules but in the hunkering pack surrounding the killing pit there was freedom to be found in the brutal way, the violence here was not personal.

When Jack judged that there had been enough betting he waved to Cable. By then the boys had stuffed the dogs back into their cage and backed off. Being penned up aggravated the beasts and braced their desire to shred things. The two bitches wagged their tails and whined at the gate. Males had better size, but the females tended to endure. Both of these were bullie dogs composed of wide, thick heads and barrel chests. One had a black scar over her right eye and the other had three white streaks down its side from another fight when a bigger dog had gotten the better of her. Certain she had died, Cable had collected her and dumped her body in a corner. When she lived he brought her back to the rat pits where she continued to thrive.

Cable freed the dogs and held them while he gestured to the boys who then wrestled a basket through the press of men circling the pit. The fighting zone was defined by a makeshift wall made of wire and brick which would not hold a concentrated charge but kept the combatants contained until the fighting was done. Cable nodded and the boys dumped the rats out. They scattered and headed for the walls, causing the men to yell for the dogs.

“Let’s see them bitches.”

“Let ‘em run.”

Jack raised his hand and dropped it. Cable loosed the two dogs. They cleared the barrier and set to work. The rats were good sized. When the dogs came for them they confronted them, spilled over the big bodies as the dogs attacked. Shit and piss flowed as things died. The fulminating stench of sweat and blood wrapped around the sharper scents and the rising temperature of living things at bay made the whole alley seem to tense up. Wound up by the blood and the killing there were moments when the one dog snapped at the other in a fast swinging motion completely thoughtless in nature.

“A dollar, the small one kills more.” A bent backed man broke the rules and stepped too close to Cable. Caught up in the excitement, he pummeled the boy from behind. Cable turned his head and saw the man flash a wad of cash that would belong to him before the afternoon was gone. Then he turned back to the fighting, which was all but finished, as the bigger mongrel bit into the last rat.

Jack again became the center of attention as the victors clustered around and demanded their winnings. They called out numbers and Jack complied. Only responsible for the dogs and never the money, Cable stepped out of the crush. He pulled a tangle of leather straps from a deep pocket. He was rushing the process. He could not move the dogs until the crowd had cleared because the dogs were not done killing until they had been caged, but he was bored and wanted to leave, so he moved too fast and dropped the straps. Leaning forward to retrieve them, he felt the pewter locket containing a picture of a pretty girl he had never met, bob against his chest. He paused to collect it and drop it back into his shirt before he gathered the mucky end of the leatherettes from the ground.

“Cable,” Jack shouted. The voice of Kilkenny looking for his boy. A barrel chested man with a big belly Jack looked like Santa Claus but he lacked Saint Nick’s heart. He also had a pile driver punch that would destroy from below because he was barely five feet high.

Cable ignored him. As the money was dispensed, the crowd began to disperse. The narrow alley forced a bottleneck and men pressed against one another and stepped on toes as they tried to leave. Those near Cable gave him space. He remained unmoved until the alley had cleared.

Jack shouted again, catching his eye. “Cable, Goddammit, you can hear me.”

“Louder than wild geese in flight” Cable said. He kept his eyes on the crowd. He had his pigeon in his sights. The man with the wad had a bigger one now. He was stalling, talking to other men and showing off his winnings. That he was not wise enough to keep the fact of his winnings to himself probably meant that he was new to the pits.

Gesturing at the growling animals backed against each another in the pit, Jack waved Cable over. “Take ‘em,” he said. When Cable approached, the dogs dropped their heads and allowed him to attach their leads and drag them towards a shed. The smaller dog resisted when Cable ordered them inside, but only until Cable kicked her. Then yelping, she hurried into the open crate behind the other. They were a yellow-eyed brindle pair bred in a gutter and taught to kill. Cable never locked them up without thinking of Alice crouched in a chicken coop or himself hiding from soldiers in a ditch. Pressing toward a back corner with their tails bowed, the dogs watched Cable secure the cage with a gnarled length of hemp that he held in place with his stump while he formed a knot with his hand. He banged the cage once he had finished just to see the dogs cringe.

Jack offered him a crumpled wad of bills. "Feed 'em before you go, boya."

"Sure," Cable said, curling his hand around the money.

"You've been hit," Jack said. Cable was bleeding from his lip

"Must have bit myself." He wiped the blood away on a piece of cloth and tossed the fabric away.

The dogs inside the crate growled in a deep bad tone. Curious, Jack leaned closer, until a wet snarl and the weight of a body hitting the slats rushed him back several steps. "They're only afraid of you." Staring at the cage from a safe distance, he watched the boy speculatively.

"Cain't be raised on a farm and not know about making things mind," Cable said.

"Only need them to mind me anyway."

"If something happens to you, I'll have to kill 'em."

"Or find another boy," Cable laughed.

"No sentiment to you at all is there?"

"If it'd make me a better man, I'd have some," the boy replied tossing scraps from a bin into the dog cage.

"Your mother teach you that?"

"My mother died before she taught me much."

"What killed her?"

"Fever."

"You never say much about where you're from. It's a good quality."

"Where I come from is gone, who cares."

"My sweet mother would have said the past gives you soul."

“You feel soulful? Godly and free of sin?”

“Not that,” he laughed, “but I like to tell tales of my past, gives me color, makes the ladies curious.”

“You like to lie. I haven’t believed a word you’ve said since the fall. Not sure Ireland is a country for sure. Nor the famine nor that story you tell about a boat trip all alone.”

“Sadly, tis truth,” Jack said. He pulled out a pocket watch and checked the time. “Don’t like that barback left alone too long, He drinks as much as he pours. I gotta get back. Be on the floor tonight.”

Rather than reply, the boy nodded, knowing further conversation would only detain his boss. Even so, it took a while for Jack to go. He liked to talk. Rather, he liked to hear himself talk. Cable took his time shutting up the shed. Then he headed into the group of men crowding towards the street. His mark was nearer the street than he had hoped, he moved faster, catching up with the man and shouldering him off balance.

“Watch it,” Cable snarled.

“Hey,” the man said, dropping to one knee in surprise. So fast it was hard to see, Cable dug his good hand into the man’s pocket and transferred its contents to his own. Weakness, as far as Cable was concerned, ought to have a cost. Stupidity too. He stepped out into the street and disappeared before the man, had time to catch his balance or realize that he had been robbed.

Cable rounded the corner and bumped into Payne. Lazing against a brick wall, Payne sucked on a cigar. The mud on his shoes had crusted and because the sun was now beating back the clouds, his clothing and his hair had started to dry. They were stood by a

general merchants' store next to a wet wood deck on which several good old boys were sunning themselves. Two bays and a paint snorted and shuffled their feet. One scratched his leg with his nose. The rising heat also brought out the flies, they circled faces and settled on horses haunches. Payne waved some away with the cigar and held out his hand. He had been belted hard, the bruises were deep and dark.

"Let's see some," he said.

"Daddy has his bad moods," Cable replied. But he did not reach for his pocket for cash, not yet. The hollow stomp of heels on wood echoed around them, The boards flexed as they took on and lost weight. The stogie was a good one. It had to have been a gift.

"I'm in a good mood," Payne said. "I'll do what I want for the rest of the day and once you give me what you stole I'll have the money to do it." He tossed the cigar away, walked over to Cable and decked him. Cable dropped. No one stopped to watch and no one offered to help. "Now, settle up," Payne said.

Now that he was at eye level with the street Cable noticed Payne's new boots. Except for the mud, they shone. "Seems like you've already come into money," Cable said.

"Doc doesn't want us getting into trouble for cash. He beefed up my funds."

"Where is Daddy?" Cable said. He pulled out some money and without counting the bills handed them up to Payne who tucked them away. He knelt by the boy and then saw to his dissatisfaction the dirtied boots.

Payne put his hand out. "Drunk somewhere and he got boat schedules to arrange. You're not on his mind tonight." He helped Cable rise then stepped away just in case the boy wanted to retaliate.

"Worried about little me?"

“Even mosquitoes got a stinger,” Payne replied. He patted his pockets and searched the street. “Booth doesn’t much like it that the Doc has all the say now,” Payne said with his back to the boy. “And he doesn’t harness well. The president will let the star into his box but this was all Booth’s plan a year ago.” A burst of light shot through the clouds and then several more making white shiny spots in the puddling water. Payne blinked and faced the street again and it came to Cable that he was looking for companions. Not wanting to be publicly connected to Payne any more than he could help he backed into the shade. This April seemed more like winter than spring to Cable’s mind. The scent of melting snow was heavy like a visitor come to stay not like a drifter passing through and too much disaster seemed to be tempering his sense of seasons.

“And Booth don’t like you,” Payne said. “He don’t like the doctor and he don’t like doing what he’s told.”

“But he will.”

“I played poker with him weeks ago. He made a scene when he won.” A carriage dragging a pallet behind it passed by. The pallet filled in holes and flattened places where water pooled. Laborers standing in its wake spread something from shovels in wide swathes. It was a temporary measure but it seemed a sign of spring somehow. Payne rubbed his jaw. “The losers had friends in the room. We barely got out of there. He does things because he likes the show and if you get in the way well, I don’t like your chances.”

“I just do what I’m told.”

“You don’t know your place. That always catches up to you,” Payne said. Then he stepped off the deck into the mud. He strode away towards a group of men who were

warming themselves by a fire in a trashcan. Cable remained in the shadows and waited for them to go.

Beneath the withering tone of his thoughts Cable sensed disaster. He was playing in a big league and felt cold and small like an apricot pit rolling along dried ground waiting to be crushed. In his mind he counted his cash and estimated that he could afford a good bottle of booze that might quell the fear or make it worse. Then he decided to seek stronger stuff. He needed a distraction that would make other dangers seem small and he knew exactly where to find the girl who could dish that out. I was right where he could find me. Hookers Division was within walking distance.

He stepped into the street, then stepped back because a cart with chipped wheels was making its rickety way down the street. Six plain coffins were stacked in the back. Those about to step in the street at the same time as Cable, lined up and waited.

“Who are they?” A woman with a silk parasol twirled it over her shoulder.

“Somebody’s darlings,” someone said. Someone else laughed in fact, several men laughed. The cart kicked up a startling scent of dogwood, garbage fires, tobacco, cinnamon and sweat. The drafting trail made Cable remember pieces of his past in no particular order and the memories melded like the scents, becoming one thing. The men in the boxes reminded him of many things not all of them dark.

“Disgusting,” the woman said.

“No ma’am, just permanent,” the man said.

“You have no shame,” she said.

“Left it behind in a ashtray,” he replied. Then Cable laughed and before she could become annoying, he crossed the street without looking.

The trek down Pennsylvania Avenue was a journey from the high life to the skids. Majestic architecture shaped the skyline, but the big buildings were nestled in sorry streets. Cable walked from the White House to Hooker's Row in ten minutes. Locals and soldiers called it The Row and old timers called it Murder Bay. It was a reeking series of back alleys filled with saloons, makeshift shacks and high toned bordellos where rag boys lounged in groups on stoops and steps, talking trash and bumming cigarettes from soldiers. Bored orderlies tended horses and waited for their officers to emerge. Pimps, killers, dealers, Negroes and kids warmed themselves by bonfires and passed bottles around. Servicemen, tossing dice and dealing cards, crouched in tight groups. Some milled outside gambling halls that were filled to the brim and broadcast tuneless music. Couples argued. Buskers played in covered hallways, while streetwalkers and traveling preachers plied their trades side by side. Pedestrians skirted the buildings and prostitutes stood in the doorways of lean-tos and waited.

Chinese prostitutes like me were singsong girls or mui jai, sold by our parents to auctioneers, to service debt. The last time I looked into my parents' faces was on the docks, the day they turned their backs on me and walked away. I don't miss them.

The lucky girls became gentlemen's mistresses. The one with wretched luck were sent to cribs, small rooms where they were forced to hawk their trade to laborers, teenage boys, sailors, and drunkards until they got sick and were then left to die. The tongs ran the whole game.

I had mixed luck. They sold me to a tong to service the street trade but I bought my way out, then I made a deal. I signed a contract and agreed to split my earnings if the tongs would leave me alone. A girl you don't have to manage but who still brings in money is a good thing. I returned to The Row while we were here because there was power in what I did and always money to be made.

My crib a battered shack that looked like all the others. I stood outside to make certain Cable wouldn't miss me and so I was watching when he cleared a thick clump of soldiers and headed my way.

"Hey, sonny." An old hag called. She was slumping against the shredded surface of a doorway leading to a dark space the size of a wardrobe.

"Here, Cracker." I stood across the street from the old witch. I was in my trade costume, my hair tied in long braids so they draped down the back of a shiny green dress that I had owned as long as Cable had known me. "This way, little man," I called. Once inside Cable handed me a wad of bills. I gave these to the next little boy who knocked as I had instructed. The child then hurried through the bustling alley until he found someone hawking, "Quaker's Bitters." He bought two bottles and then crossed several city blocks to collect two small birds from a particular old lady who was roasting several over a makeshift grill. When he returned to the shack, the noise in the alley was so loud that he had to set the items down and bang on the door with both fists to make his presence known.

"Too damn slow." I took the purchases and let him keep the change. It took him a moment to believe his luck. Afraid to leave with the money he tried to give it to me again.

“Go,” I said pointing down the alley. “Okay, go!” It was an extra meal for him. He shoved the money into his pocket and lured by the sound of cart vendors hawking hot food, ran off.

Cable had made himself comfortable as possible. I only had a chair, a pallet and a few blankets. He had dropped his jacket to the floor and seated himself.

“These are cooked special.” I said, peeling the paper from the birds without breaking the crackling skin. I spread the food on the floor. “Better than a pipe or a needle.”

“You know what you’re doing.” Leaning down Cable selected one of the birds and inspected it while I poured a drink that he declined.

“I’ll pour my own.” He tapped his flask.

“Too heavy a dose is poisonous, light enough dulls the senses, sends you to a deep sleep. You’ll forget everything for a while. Maybe no dreams even.”

Cable broke one apart, picked bones from his mouth as he ate and dropped the remains on the ground. The birds were quickly consumed. He ate. I watched. Whenever someone rattled the door, as clients will do I banged back and shouted Chinese insults.

Cable then lay on the pallet and rolled onto his back trying to get comfortable. “They won’t understand you,” he said.

“Everyone understands the tone of an angry whore,” I crawled to the pallet next to him. The shack was composed of corrugated metal. A constant chill permeated within. When the sun set, heat dropped like leaves in Fall. The bed was the warmest place to be, “Did you know that goats can eat hemlock and not be poisoned?” I asked.

“I hardly think about goats at all.” He touched the tips of his fingers with his thumb. “Too fucking cold in here I cain’t feel my fingers or my feet.” He tried to wriggle his toes, they obeyed slowly and he frowned.

“The birds eat the poison and are immune and cooking the birds turns the poison into a drug.”

Someone banged the door again and would not go away. I barged outside to find an old Chinese man hanging bible pages on my door. He began chanting at me so I screamed at him until he left. By the time I was done with him Cable was shivering and had wrapped himself up in all the blankets.

“Old boy is just crazy,” Cable said. “Cain’t blame him.”

“Everybody is some kind of crazy.” I kicked the closed door for good measure. Cable’s eyes were closing but he kept resisting the effects of the drug. Even if he had asked for this he still wasn’t going to just drift off.

“My momma was crazy.” He said then he shook his head. “They said that my momma was crazy.” “She had spells maybe, but not crazy,” he said. Sometimes the drug led the user to ideas that didn’t make sense.

“What happen to your momma?” I cleaned up brushing food bits away with my hands by forcing dirt and twigs in between the bones so that I did not touch the carcasses.

Cable yawned. “She had dark days. Sometime I found her crying and she was afraid to go outside, sometime.”

“You said your people hated her. I’d be afraid to go outside too.”

“This was something else. She was afraid of outside, not the people, the outside. Took a dose of nightshade, once.” He touched his fingers again. The chill had worked its way into his bones and he was pinching the skin on his legs now as if to test for numbness.

“You saved her,” I said. I now sat on the ground before him with my arms wrapped around my knees.

“Hemlock in the birds?” he said. “Must be a Chinese trick.”

I bunched up his jacket for a pillow and made him take it.

“Couldn't let my mother die,” he said. “Carted her to town where they cured her.” I worked some of the blankets free so that we could share. Then I rested my head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat slowing down.

“I like you,” I whispered in his ear. He could still hear me. “They say cooking the birds weakens the poison so it makes you sleep without dreaming.”

“Know why I keep coming back to you,” he said. His energies were fading. Laughter across the way drifted overhead and melded with other sounds.

“You love me.” I said.

“Not me.”

“You trust me,” I said snuggling closer.

“Not a chance.” He was letting go the poison would take him under soon. Better than an opiate high, hemlock would bring him to the edge while I kept him from tipping over. A spasm of panic hit him and he tried to sit up. I forced him down and soothed his temples.

“What happened to your mother in the end?” I asked.

“She drank another dose when no one was home and died. I wasn’t there. Was in the war by then. Only Alice saw.”

I pulled his arm over me it felt as heavy as a bag of wet sand.

“You’re as crazy as she was,” he said and the words came slow.

I snuggled closer still. “You’re helpless to me, little man,” I said. “You only know how to love traitors, liars and thieves. It’s what you know.”

Then he was helpless and too tired to be afraid so he let go and dozed. I untied my braids so that my hair spread across his chest and I wrapped my body around his warming us both. Someone banged the door again. A fight had broken out and people were shoving one another against the structures in the alley. I wished Cable sweet dreams and let the sounds lull me to sleep.

The Hemlock gives Cable nightmares. Rain dripping down a drain pipe leaks into these dreams, disrupting them with a jarred rhythm until he wakes to the startling sound of himself saying something to someone.

He takes a deep breath, the hemlock had made him dream of swamp monsters and slogging through waist high water just ahead of large alligators. Cable once said that when he lived at home, he liked listening to rainfall, but the sound is a heartless one when the roof leaks. Our bed was wet and Cable's face was cold. In the Appalachians, the rain drafted hints of sage and honeysuckle. In Washington wet sidewalks just smelled industrial and now remind Cable of mud. He listens to the leaves in trees rattling against one another then he breathes in deeply, rests his hand on his chest and lets the rising tension spread his fingers across a scar. He had fallen out of a tree when he was little and hooked a branch on the way down. He remembers how fall had knocked his breath away.

I see that I sleep on. Sometime during the night, I had kicked free of the winding sheets so he can see damage done that I have not revealed on my own. He fingers raised red wheals spread across my back, hot cups applied to fight infection. He fingers them but stops when I stir. I can see me, an slight all grey figure in the dampening dark. A scarecrow's daughter carved from steel with crooked fingers. Cable thinks of me in pieces, small knobbed wrists, a dimpled back, a heart shaped ass, flat feet with big toes and small breasts. I roll my wrists in my sleep, because when it is cold they ache.

Footsteps slosh in the mud outside. Indistinct conversation drifts down the alley. One of the speakers pronounces "can't" like "kaynt" the way Alice does. Cable thinks that he can book a longer passage if he only buys one ticket and sheds the weight of a girl and a baby. Alice should be at the saloon or at the circus and instead is probably out with other urchins who have adopted her sharpened her pick pocketing skills.

He can also let Alice slip away and take the baby with her. He can let their father have them. He can book a longer passage if he only purchases one ticket, he can travel to Australia maybe and pan for gold, shuffle nuggets from the grit, one handed. Raising his stump, he closes his eyes and imagines touching each of the tips of his fingers with his thumb. The vision quickly corrupts, separating into unrecognizable bits leaving a blank spot in his mind and he forgets what he was thinking about. It is too bad for him that he needs Alice. She anchors him into a hard existence, but one in which there is less maddening darkness. His mother's moods run in him and he knows this. Alice forces him to bother with the details and gives him less time to drift. He will buy two tickets and claim the baby as luggage. The after effects of the drugging drag at him so he lies back and drifts, listening to the splashing footsteps, low toned conversation and the water running down metal while he thinks about leaves in trees, leaves falling from trees and wet leaves matting at the base of trees until he falls asleep again.

And seeing the moments I slept through I see that I might have wasted chances just by not paying attention but tell me how was I to know when I only have the perspective I need now when it does me no good.

Hindsight is worse than a curse. Because now I see that the story was always completely out of my hands. My story is all about Cable and I still can't tell you why. I see me then as I was as another entity entirely. What that Mei did is not what I might have considered doing now, given another chance. As I said in the beginning, three is a good number while five means nothing. So why is Mei of a three, winnowing away like a bird hatched too soon while Cable of a five, is becoming more solid as time passes? Does it have to do with good and evil? Was I supposed to save someone? Was I supposed to go to church? Is my heart too black? Is it not what I did, but what I felt? As we progress, my heart gets heavier and I get more annoyed. If I could shoot thunder and lightning I would set the world below on fire. Fire hurts before it kills, it burns in the lungs and stings your eyeballs.

"Your turn." I look to see my mother dealing cards. Grace sits by her side and collects her hand. Jesse has taken a chair to my left.

"I never learned to play." Still I collect my cards the way I have seen cardsharps do.

"There is much you never learned to do." My mother gestures to Grace who antes up as does Jesse who plays his cards backwards so that I can see them. When I fail to contribute Jesse does it for me. He is wet and I don't think I need to guess why.

"This place is nice," Grace says. "When the world drowns we'll still be above water level." Jesse glares at her.

"I hate it," I say.

"You built it," my mother replies. Chinese don't play poker. We have other games so I have no idea where my mother developed this facility. She is wearing white silk and her hair is pinned with red pins and peacock feathers.

"I remember you telling me that I had no such powers, Mother. And if all of you are here to remind me of my mistakes, well, I regret none of them."

Grace put two down and waited for me to choose. "When he was born I knew that I could have floated him away into the river and he would have found a way to live. That boy belongs in his life, he thrives in it, like a seed in good soil."

"I will not let him go," I say.

"But don't you see that he threw you away. You can not hang onto a thing that is gone and that boy is gone." My mother takes my cards from me and plays my hand after showing the other two what I hold. Even after death I hate my mother.

"He couldn't leave me. He tried," I say

"But he did leave you," Grace says.

"Never."

"Then it's your turn to deal," my mother says and nudges my hand.

"I tell you I can't play."

"No one asked you if you knew what you were doing," she says.

The midmorning sun filtered through the cracks in the roof and woke Cable. Opening the door to let in a draft, he draped his shirt over his shoulders and sat on the bed and smoked a stogie. Then he dressed, pulled a flask of Quaker's Bitters from a pants pocket and walked outside to start breakfast.

I wasn't ready to face the cold. Still drowsing, I covered myself more completely with the blankets and groaned. "They say there's turpentine in that."

"They say that bed bugs carry the pox. How long since you've been sick?" He offered me a swig.

I grimaced and declined. "Don't know," I said.

"Bully." I could tell that his teeth ached. He tested the front two with his tongue. "Anyway, it's good for what ails you." He took another swallow and stared out at the street. "Piss it," he said. "Now I have take a cure and have teeth pulled. Piss it."

The tenements behind the Row were dead still, laundry and worn curtains billowed in the wind. Factory workers were already on the line. With a loud belch Cable vomited up his meal. Then he took another sip and fought it down and took another until he stopped heaving. Then I could see the booze began to warm him and make him feel better.

This early on most of the residents in the alley were asleep, some lay on the ground and some were slouched against walls. Foot traffic was picking up on the street outside the alley, but it was mostly businessmen in long coats and top hats. The women and

children would come later, and in preparation for that trade, shopkeepers were sweeping the decks and setting out merchandise.

“Burning festers won’t cure the clap,” Cable said. “Chinese doc would have told you so.”

“Hell with you,” I replied.

“Mouthy for a Chinese girl aint’cha?”

“Only Chinese in the face.”

He laughed and then choked. Smoke from dying fires littering the row and polluted the air in the bottled up street and the breeze coming off the Potomac smelled of outhouses and unwashed bodies.

“Place stinks, you know?” Cable said.

“Hookers don’t live in the White House,” I said.

“Not good enough?” He reached to the floor for his jacket and saw the street from my point of view.

“No railroads running through the White House,” I replied. “Traveling men are my customers...and trashy boys who run rat pits. And Appo’s gonna let me start riding horses in the show.”

“From whore to circus rider. You’re moving up in the world.” He was in a filthy mood and I wished he would go but wasn’t going to be the one to tell him to leave.

“He killed another girl last night,” I said.

“Who?” Cable asked.

“Man who does it now and again. They don’t know. Think I might stop this for a while and just ride horses,” I said.

“Didn’t know you could ride,” Cable said.

“They taught children to make bombs where I grew up,” I replied. “I can do lots of things, Cracker.”

“First find a doctor that’ll give you a shot before it rots off and then just be a horse rider,” he said, stepping out into the street. He headed towards the far end where carriages and carts moved apace; civilians were keeping their appointments. “A whore too stupid to know better isn’t even worth the money.”

“To hell with you, Cracker.”

Focused on another girl, I think he barely heard me. Straight ahead, in the middle of the well dressed throng, Alice was forcing a baby carriage through the mire.

Moving through the muck with difficulty, she leaned all of her weight into the bar of the carriage. Too pale and bone thin, she reminded me of a fawn forced out of hiding too young. She had tried to dress up and failed. Her hair twisted into a sloppy coil hung precariously at the nape of her neck. Her dress a faded yellow scrap was twisted around her legs and her shoes were worn through at the toes.

Stuck fast in a spot, she asked for help from a soldier who lifted the carriage free and waved her along. The man trailing her did not see Cable who ran after them until the man doubled back forcing Cable to hide. It seemed that Tom Gaines had lost sight of his daughter in the throng. He stood on the sidewalk and searched but the girl was gone. Cable waited for his father to pass out of sight and then headed out. I knew he’d be heading back to the dockyard.

Alice was probably safe as long as she headed to the saloon and chasing her ghost would only expose Cable to their father. Then too they were still arresting deserters. Tom Gaines still qualified so his search for the children would be hampered by his need to stay low. And as long as the doctor was their boss Cable thought they had a little breathing room.

I overcome. I refuse to wash away. Mei is a three. Threes are smart. They invent. After I was sold they locked me up, brought old men who smelled like rotted cabbage, chained me to a bed. I only grew stronger. My parents shriveled up on the boat ride over. My mother took to seeing snowfall where none existed and my father became a bitter wisp. But I kept near the stairs below deck where the air was freshest and breathed through my mouth. I learned to pay attention and I knew that Cable was going to try to leave me behind again.

He had been planning on buying the boat tickets for some time. The work for the doctor was dangerous and Cable had no faith in conspirators and in this I would agree with him. Zealots are of no good use. The plot he was involved in was too big Cable figured to get out of the way before it blew up. He and Alice would run, larger plan or no. Problem was that he could leave me behind all he wanted but he always failed to say good-bye, to finally cut the tie.

He was first in line at the ticket office when it opened. Horn blasts signaled office hours.

“Where to?” the ticket clerk asked.

“Down river for two, as far as this will go,” Cable said emptying the contents of one pocket onto the counter between them.

“When?” the clerk asked.

“Soonest.”

“Two tickets for day after tomorrow, April 14th. Leaves late. Patrols throw the schedule off. War’s over but the federals still don’t trust the Maryland boys. Be on board by 10 p.m.”

Separating the money into paper and coin, the clerk pushed his glasses closer to his face and began to count with thin white fingers. Cable kept his head down. The clerk made movements beyond his view and left momentarily returning with two stiff pieces of pink paper.

“These,” he said, palming them onto the counter and sliding them towards Cable, “cannot be replaced. They’re like money. Your parents should hold them for you.”

“Yeah,” Cable said taking them. The snooty clerk reminded him of a rooster they had owned once that he liked to rile with a peashooter.

“Williamsport.” The clerk said. “Boat leaves at 10:30 p.m. and if you miss it, then you can not bring these back for refund.”

Cable’s next appointment was scheduled in a small grill tucked just outside the dockyards. On his way towards the counter, he pulled a coffee cup from a stack and turned it upright in front of his stool. The restaurant was a dingy wearing a coat of grease on every surface, was a six seat affair that smelled of something burned a thousand times over.

“I don’t like crackers in here,” said the waitress, a white girl with a round face and bad skin. She took her time pouring the coffee.

“I ain’t opened my mouth and you calling me a cracker already,” said Cable. “Can the coolie cook?” The cook, a broad featured, bald man blew a breath of smoke over the counter while he sweated over breakfast.

The lady brushed back a strand of iron grey hair and crossed her arms. "He'll come out and carve you up, if I say so."

"I believe you. He looks like he could of dragged the boat rather than rode it from Shanghai to here."

"He cooks. He don't steal and he don't cause me no trouble," she replied.

"I look like trouble?" Cable asked. He nudged his empty cup forward. He was feeling good. The tickets in his pocket felt like freedom. He took off his jacket and hung it on his chair revealing his arm and the sewn sleeve tucked up around where his elbow used to be.

The waitress smiled. "You gotta look like my last husband," she replied, then filled the cup. "When they buried him, I didn't stop smiling for days." Laughing, Cable choked and had to cough himself back to normalcy.

"You got no sign on the front," Cable said. "You got no customers in here but me, and you gonna kick a little mite like me through the front door first thing in the morning without taking my money?"

The waitress shrugged.

"I just want chicken fixins, eggs, slapjacks or anyway you can get close to something like that. Promise to eat and go as fast as I can."

"You got the time to waste," she said. Then she nodded to the cook, who had heard the order and had already begun cracking eggshells.

"My last two days in the city," Cable said. "Waiting for the boat."

"Going home or heading north?" she asked.

"West." He gestured to a newspaper, folded to the city section. A hooker's death was third page news next to the theatre items.

“Dining down by the docks when you work in a perfectly good restaurant?” A squeal of a chair and the soft rush of air introduced the doctor. He flipped back his coattails and settled on the chair next to Cable. Without waiting for a cue the waitress dropped a sloppy cup on the counter in front of him. He looked at it distastefully and pushed it away with gloved hands.

“Here as ordered,” Cable said.

He took the paper from Cable and inspected the theatre notice. “I’d like to hear the times and places again,” he said. He did not like the coffee but drank it holding it in two hands and settling it gently back in place as if it were a precious thing.

“Day after tomorrow, I let them in during the first act, Ole Abe gets ferried out the back on a horse and then off to a boat down here.”

“You won’t need to buy your own tickets for that, son.” He pushed an envelope over to the boy. Cable took it without looking inside.

“I wasn’t going to board your boat,” Cable said. “My part is done once we get to the gangplank.”

“You’ll have to rearrange your schedule then. They will remember the boy that led the assassins to the door.” The doctor finished the cup and pushed it away. “And I have a bull by the horns who is looking for his son so I know you’d rather be on a boat than on the same streets as he is.”

“He’s out there now and you ain’t got control over him.”

“He is seriously fixed on you.”

“It’ll stop your plan in its tracks if Tom Gaines gets to me before I get Booth to the president.”

“I will throw another lead on the dumb beast. Unlike you he seems to need reminders. But just in case, I’ll leave you with one. I am not dumb like your father. Whatever you’re doing, I have already done. Whatever you’re thinking, I have already considered. Don’t disappoint me. And you owe a book.” He left without paying for the coffee. The waitress who hadn’t liked the look of the doctor in the first place threw his mug into the trash. It was the closest she could get to spitting in a rich man’s eye.

They wouldn't have let someone like me in Tultavul's saloon. It catered to a particular type of clientele. The new owners had bought both it and Ford's theatre together. They encouraged patrons to eat at the bar before and after attending the plays. To this end they had installed a covered walk between the two buildings to facilitate foot traffic and plastered the neighborhood with advertisements. Bannered sandwich boards blocked Alice's progress through the alley. When she tried to pass, the baby carriage jammed. So she shoved again and again shoving harder each time, until she had wedged the wheels so tightly in between the board and a brick wall that they held fast.

"Maybe we'll leave it," she said. Scared she'd been seen, worried she'd make the baby cry, and anxious about being caught she began to panic. Her brother had inherited their father's temper and he had warned her about walking the streets particularly with the baby. But she had wanted to buy a carriage and stroll the streets. "Yes, we'll leave it. It'll say," she said. Collecting Sugar and her blanket, Alice scuttled past the signs and hurried into the saloon's back door where two pudgy waitresses and three fat men filled a small greasy kitchen.

"Alice," said a cook. He scraped food off the grill and cast the dribble into a pail at his feet.

"Max," she said, her eyes cast down.

"How's the pretty girl?" He reached towards baby but instead caressed Alice's face with the back of his hairy hand.

“She’s cold,” Alice replied, brushing past him.

“Can’t we close that door, it’s goddamn cold in these dresses,” One of the women slouched on a stool. She puffed a cigarette and knocked ash onto a meal just set out to serve. “Oops.” She blew on it to remove what she could before the cook tapped the residue with a fork to make it disappear into the juice of the steak on the plate.

Alice halted at the door to the bar and stared out the back as if expecting company. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she muttered. She’d caught the waitresses’ attention. She had a habit of being the center of attention. You either pitied or despised her depending on your view of street trash.

“What’d you say Hon?” a second waitress asked Alice.

“Stupid, I’m always stupid,” Alice said, angry to the point of tears.

“No one will argue that with you,” said the first woman.

“Leave off, Ann.” The second waitress lifted the fag end from her friend’s fingers.

“Always amazed when she finds her way back,” Ann said.

“Not her fault. You can see she’s been beat up. Had a dog got kicked in the head once...”

“Sadie, you never in your life had a dog,” Ann said.

“I had a dog on a goddamn farm once when I was a goddamn little girl,” Sadie said.

“Anyway.”

“Yes, don’t leave off about the dog, Sadie, it’s fascinating,” Max said. An edge of his spatula hooked on a burned piece and he had to work to force it free. Sadie started to flick her cigarette at him but Ann stopped her and retrieved the butt working it to its absolute last possible puff.

“You should leave me alone,” Alice said, still near tears.

“Dog walked funny forever after like it couldn’t see straight no more. Like her. Look at her and you know that baby is blind?”

“How the hell can you tell?” Ann asked. Alice was peering through the door to the main salon. She held the baby at her hip so that it faced the kitchen and scanned the crowd. Sugar turned her head towards the loudest sound which at the moment was Max working the grill.

“Throw something at it,” Sadie said, referring to the baby.

“Throw something at you, you ugly twist.” The cigarette butt was flicked into the grease bucket.

A fight in the alley caught the attention of the maids and the man.

While the staff rushed to see the fight, Alice hurried through the door to the bar.

“It’s that other one, the boy,” one of the women said.

The main salon was filled with customers, most of them wearing uniforms. Alice tried to skirt between the bar and the furniture, but was eventually forced to worm between tables in order to keep the path clear for staff and customers as they danced back and forth through the room, on the way to and from, the tables, the bar, the kitchen and the stairs. Artillery, now the sound of celebration instead of war, boomed in the distance. The blasts barely penetrated the noise of voices in the room, but the sound frightened Alice who knew things blowing up meant soldiers coming and further that she could not trust soldiers. She also worried that she had seen her father outside. Whoever had Cable in the alley was a danger to her as well. As her primary instinct was a burrowing one she concentrated on making it to their rooms.

“Hush Sugar,” she whispered although the baby was quiet. She climbed the stairs and escaped to the end of hallway where the room she, the baby and her brother shared, squatted behind a scarred green door. Opening the door occasioned a rush of fetid air. When Alice had complained about the smell, Cable had explained that there were dead rats in the walls, and so she stopped sleeping on the floor. It wasn’t the rats that scared her, it was the memories they stirred that kept her awake and they could hurt the baby. Sometimes she thought the smell reminded her of living under the porch in the chicken coop until Cable found her, scaring her with his half arm.

“Where you been, Cable?” she had asked.

“The soldiers took me. Don’t you remember,” he’d said.

“You left. Momma died and I hid ‘til all the soldiers got gone.” She had returned to the coop where she felt safest and lived there with the baby. She had refused to come when Cable called her. She’d thought him to be a trick of her mind at first, something the mist made to fool her.

So he had crouched down and reached for her. “I was with the soldiers, honey,” he whispered. “Come on out. We gotta go.”

“It’s safest here,” she said. “No one looks for us ‘neath the floorboards.” Then she felt for the baby lying in the dirt next to her, touched its dirty wet fingers. It occurred to her that if Cable had survived so would their father. “Daddy will find us if we run. He won’t let you keep us, Cable,” she said. “He’ll come and get us. He’ll need me now that Momma’s dead.” Then she retreated and Cable went from his knees to his belly to get to her.

“We’re gonna run so far he cain’t find us,” he replied. “And we got to go. Come on, girl. I’m worn and I got food, but you got to come closer.”

In the end, he had had to drag her from the underneath where she’d eaten mushrooms that grew in the muck and drunk puddled water that smelled like gunpowder and tasted like rotted fruit. She wouldn’t leave the baby behind. Jesse might have claimed it, had he lived whether it belonged to him or not. Preachers’ sons are compelled by compassion. If he’d returned home he would have married the raggedy girl saving her from her father and Cable would have returned to a family rescued from the notion of an inbred bastard. But Alice didn’t deserve saving and I needed Cable with me. He had no plans to return to the shack on the hill filled with broken crackers. The baby might have changed his mind. Jesse dead before he told Cable about the baby and what had happened to Alice on one bad night was what I wanted. Then Cable nearly died and I guess afterwards all he wanted was a taste of home. I should have stayed by the grave and certified his passing but I still do not regret what happened to Jesse.

I think that Cable’s idea was to find a place in the world where no one knew them. Washington was on the way to a better place. The room in Tultavul’s was a pit stop. It contained the cot they shared, bleached floorboards and a dresser with three warped drawers that curled at the corners. There wasn’t much room to move about. Alice always hit her hip on one of those corners when she wasn’t careful and she was in a hurry now. She hoped to be back downstairs and ferrying drinks before Cable returned. Then she could lie and whatever happened next would not be her fault. “Stupid, stupid,” she said,

setting the baby on the bed. Colicky and cranky, it tried to cry and instead began to cough, a deep rasping wheeze.

Thinking to muffle the sound she put the baby in one of the drawers and closed it inside but then it screamed. “No, sush,” she said to the child. “Sush,” she said, holding her hand over its mouth. But Sugar, tired and now scared, continued to fuss. “We could be in the bathroom. I could be washing you in the bathroom,” Alice said.

The bathroom was empty this time of day. Boarders only remained upstairs if they were either unconscious or truly had no place to go.

“When we do this. Well, it takes so long that I was here all day,” Alice said to the baby. “I can say we never went out because I had to wash you.” She locked the door once they were inside and tested the lock. Red-faced and slightly dopey from both the journey and her crying, Sugar curled her hands into fists, but offered no resistance as Alice washed her and then used her skirt to pat her dry. Her sleeves, flattened and filthy, matted to her skin. She forced them above her elbows, revealing indentations around her wrists and cigarette burns on her forearms. The old cuts were scarred, the burns were new. Normally she’d scratch them when she was anxious but the urgency of her task made her forget. She listened as she worked, worrying about footsteps, worrying about her brother, but not willing to help him. If it were her father in the alley with Cable, then Cable would have to fend for himself.

Worrying a small cinch bag from her waistband, she extracted a bottle of whiskey. The baby had taste for it and was easily dosed. While Sugar dozed, Alice tried to remove the worst of the grime from her body, but the bath water was dirty, her dress was soaked and she had no towels. She only smeared herself, then when she tried to re-pin her hair so

rocked the basin, spilling its contents on the baby who no longer cared. “Oh baby,” she said, sopping the wet with her skirt, while her hair matted to her face and neck. “I’ll just say I couldn’t go out. I’ll go downstairs and Cable, he won’t know, except for money. And the stroller’s outside. He won’t know I bought it.”

The dirty white bag that held the whiskey also contained the rest of the money Alice had promised not to spend. Supposedly it remained tucked under the bedroom floorboards along with everything they owned in the world. Back their room she withdrew the ditty-box from its niche. It took her a few moments to decide to return the money. Also inside the box was a newspaper article, an obituary and a cracked, stained photograph of their father, a younger Cable Gaines in a poor man’s suit with slicked back hair and her, dressed in frills. She was seated in a high backed settee. The men stood stiffly on either side, each with an arm placed on the faux gold spirals adorning the back of the chair. She liked the picture, in it she and her family all looked like proper people. Grace Gaines hadn’t liked her daughter much and Alice, who had watched her mother die, hadn’t mourned. The picture was a special treasure though. In it the Gaines’ looked like proper people. Her mother was absent, Alice remembered, because she could not be persuaded to pose.

The doctor had scared him with his knowledge of the tickets and Cable was not used to being outguessed. He was not used to being so well watched and would need another escape plan. So he returned to the hotel without taking his usual precautions where his father grabbed from behind as he entered the alley.

“Found you, boy.” The words drafted on a sour breathe. Then Cable was tugged off his feet. His father turned him around and belted him across the face after which he stopped thinking about anything but the fact that it had been silly to try to run.

“Where is my girl, boy? I seen Alice today. Watched her strut down the street. I was gone, and you took care. But I’m home now, and I want my girl. With a dead momma, I’m gonna need my little girl. That baby was supposed to be gone, but I’ll fix that. Where are they, boy? You done messed it all up.”

“Tomorrow, Papa,” Cable said. “I found ‘em Daddy. I’ll bring them to ya.”

“I’m not stupid. Found you,” his father said. Then he dragged Cable to a trashcan and forced him into it head first so that he could not breathe for the smell and the gook. “A boy with a wasted arm is barely worth feeding, but I can see you’re still good for some things.”

Cable tried to find purchase but only sunk deeper as his father increased the pressure.

“Time to go home, boy,” Tom finally said, pulling Cable up.

He wrapped one big boned arm around the boy’s chest and dragged him towards the street, but a cop stepped out into the alley from the theatre, forcing Tom to retreat into the

shadows. "Seen Alice," he said, whispering into the boy's ear. "seen that baby. And you gotta all come home now."

"Where you been, Papa? Thought the doctor told you to go," Cable asked sinking into his father's grasp and sniffing some of the blood running freely down his face.

"Got pinched for sharpening so they locked me in the cooler. But I got free and I come to find you gone. Some of it's okay, though." He paused to watch the cop. "I seen how bad it gotten once I got home. But you shouldn'ta run."

"Bummers come through, burned what they couldn't take. We ran every which way, Papa. Run for our lives."

"Was you fixen to bring them home if I didn't come getcha?" Gaines asked. "Don't think so. I know you, boy. You'd take a man's last thing if you thought it'd git you free of the farm."

"Never steal from you though, Papa." Cable thought briefly of the kinds of things he might do to his father instead, might do to him still if the moment ever came.

"Daddy. I cain't go back," he said. "There's nothing there."

"We need to be home. Only things I own are up on that mountain, where we belong. You get me?"

"Okay, Daddy?"

"Time you do what I say. Something your mamma knew before she died. Knew how to mind me. Knew." He shook the boy and leaning close to breathe into his ear. "She knew how to stay put. I'll grind a fice dog like you into flesh and bones before I'll lose my girl. I'll paste you 'cross the floorboards."

"Hey," someone shouted. "Take it to the street."

“Mind your own,” Tom yelled back.

Two cops standing in at end of the alley seeing Tom and his son pulled their clubs from holsters and advanced.

Two hits brought the bullish man to his knees and those that followed beat against his back and brought him down further. Cable took his chance when it came, got himself clear and crawled away.

I should pay more attention to the family story this time. I am seeing it for a reason. But what do I care about Cable and his father, how could the state of affairs between a dumb cracker and his boy matter to me? The men who were hanged stopped by on their way out. I am suspecting a kind of joke. Everyone I see die passes by just to let me know I am not allowed. Criminals passing on while I am trapped with Cable the boy who kept leaving me behind. I hate this boy now more than I loved him I think. Maybe had I known about the day in the alley I would have also known how desperate Cable was to vanish but I am not a god so why should I pay for lack of understanding? And then there's Alice hiding upstairs waiting to see, not running to his side, little bitch isn't worth a bowl of dirty bath water.

Changing her mind again Alice had buttoned up her coat and bundled the baby for travel by the time Cable returned to their room. She had packed, and was ready to run, but was afraid to leave Cable. Clutching the crying baby so that it screamed more loudly, she screamed at her brother. “He wasn’t ‘posed to find us,” she said. “He wasn’t.”

“Shush,” Cable said. That Alice had seen him dragged him off his feet and had not gotten help made Cable feel like he had been dropped down a well.

Hugging the baby to her chest with one hand, she tugged his arm with the other. “Let’s go, now. You said he’d never come. You promised. Never come. We have to go. We have to go now.”

“Leave off,” he said wrenching free. She could not hold him and hug the baby at the same time. When it slipped in her arms, it screamed. The boarder next door pounded on the wall. Then the baby screeched and the warped boards rattled again, reminding Cable of wind rustling through bushes in a dry field.

Sugar did not want to be held and would not settle.

“You said he was dead when you found us. You said he’d never come.” Alice’s voice rose to match the baby’s pitch.

“I hoped he was dead. He’d been gone so long,” Cable replied. Swallowing a mouthful of booze, he spit bloody liquid into the basin and then used what was left in the flask to wash his face. “God, stop that sound,” he said, handing her the Scotch.

The baby knew the bottle and reached for it. “Can we go?” Alice asked.

“Alice.” The joke, on us all, was that he forgave her every failing even as he didn’t. “If we leave that baby here, we can get away sure.”

“You promised, Cable.”

“You don’t forget that part about my promising, but you cain’t remember to stay inside,” he said, drying his face with a rag. “Jesus, I look like I been on the bad end of a gander pull. Is it that you cain’t or won’t remember?”

“Hi, Baby, hi,” Alice said. The flask had a big neck. Alice tilted it at a low angle in order to keep from dousing Sugar who started to cough and spit when too much liquid spilled across her face.

“We got some time. They took Daddy away. Probably locked him up,” Cable said, crumpling his rag and throwing it into a corner.

“My baby,” Alice crooned. “This is my own baby.”

“Give her over, Alice.”

“She’s mine.”

“Yeah, something you dug up out of the soil before you ran away from a burnt down life. I’m not taking her from you,” he said. He scooped up the child and settled it into an open drawer.

Alice followed him and when he turned, she slipped her arms around his waist. “I’m sorry, Cable, I’ll be better.” She would not get better, not even a little. Cable had to have known this as he hugged her back. How could she have fixed what she couldn’t see was wrong? Time and again he would ask her to change and time and again unable to grasp her brother’s reasoning, she would simply absorb but disobey this command.

He hugged her again and then pushed her back so he could see her face.

“Alice, that baby have anything to be ashamed of besides you ain’t married to its daddy?”

She dug her head into his chest and shook her head. He could feel rather than hear her repeat the word “no.” She continued to press into him in a fit of denial.

“Stop. Stop. Stop,” he finally said. “Just stop. We’ll go Alice but you have to do what I say. And we cain’t stay here much longer. Daddy’ll wake up tomorrow, and he’ll tell them I took you and that we’re running. And he won’t care that it’s stupid.”

“Will they cage you up?” she asked.

“I don’t know enough to say. But running’s better than waiting. Need to find a way to that boat without being seen is all”

“It’s all bad Cable,” she said speaking the core of a truth that made him feel like what his mother used to call a flat-sided boy. It is an universal fact that somewhere in between horrible and sad there is common ground where all betrayals ring the same tone. Cracked bells being scored with weathered bell claps. That the idiot girl could speak this truth reaffirmed its presence as a constant.

“Daddy is going to get us,” Alice said. “And they’ll all help him. Everyone else will help.”

Cable looked down at his sister and tilted her head so that he could see her eyes.

“Do you remember Momma’s cornbread?” he asked.

“Momma made good bread.” A muffled sentence.

“Momma’s cornbread made Old Man Winter stay outdoors.”

She frowned and shook her head putting too much thought into making sense of the sentence. “Sometime, you’re harder to follow than a snake through a swamp,” she said.

“I know it,” he said kissing a scar on her scalp where the hair had never grown back. “She taught you to make it. One day we’ll be in a kitchen where you’re making it. Don’t matter how hard they all try. I got us tickets on a boat. It leaves tomorrow night and I’ll come getcha.” She stared to complain but he stopped her. “If you stay here, the others

won't think I bolted. I know the doctor's got someone on you and me both. We gotta go through with this thing as far as we have to so they won't get us. The world's big. I seen it myself."

"When you were with the soldiers?"

"Yes, with the soldiers." Before he woke up in a sweltering tent where tired strangers stanchied his blood with dirty sponges. "We'll vanish in it, you and me."

"And Sugar," she said. He pushed her away and walked to the window.

"Pepperpot! Right hot! All hot! Pepperpot." A barefoot black girl hauled her stew cart across the street.

He leaned against the pane, cool to the touch and watched the pepperpot girl ply her trade.

"You should let loose of Sugar, Alice," he said. "You should let her die. She ain't got nowhere good to go. Baby wasn't born blind it turned blind, means its terrible sick."

"Cable, I'm sorry," Alice said. "I went outside and he saw me. I forget. But I'll stop forgetting."

"Don't say what ain't ever gonna be."

"He saw me," she murmured.

"Shush. Maybe they'll lock him up a day or two. He was drunk. They don't like that shit by the theatre."

"I won't do it again," she started to cry. "Never. I won't never."

"Doesn't matter. We'll pull foot and disappear again."

"Cable."

"We'll take the river," he said.

“With Sugar?” she asked.

“Course,” he said.

“Hey--Cable,” Alice said. She glanced at the baby and moved towards it, keeping her eyes off Cable’s face.

“What is it, Alice?” he asked. The pepperpot girl had found buyers. Her cart was swarmed with workers on lunch break.

“Nuthin’,” Alice nodded. “Baby’s better.”

“I ask you if everything was right with the world, and you know I don’t mean that,” he said. Rather than answer, she held her hand over the baby’s mouth to see if it still breathed. Cable sat down on the bed and massaged his bad arm because it often ached.

“Stump looks like a patch of road that had got wet and been driven through before it dries,” Alice said. She joined him on the bed and they sat in silence while the pepperpot girl traded away her wares. Then Max called Alice’s name from the bottom of the stairs.

“They probably want you working,” Cable said. He withdrew a sugar cube from his pocket and sucked on it. He hadn’t attended the bad tooth and it was getting hard to chew. The fresh bruises around his eye had begun to spread to his cheek. But they made him look tired more than hurt. Hurt required a hint of sadness, and that kind of expression had gone the way of his childhood, before the war. Alice didn’t budge and Max called her name again.

“He’ll keep calling until you go,” Cable said. He gave her a shove and she reluctantly stood.

“Don’t go outside anymore, less we’re heading to Appo,” he said. “I told you.”

“I didn’t...” she started to say, “I never...”

“I seen ya on the street.” He stood and grabbed her wrist. “Followed you from Hooker’s Row to here.”

“It was pretty,” she said.

“It was raining last night,” he said. “Streets are messed up. Soldiers everywhere. Cops. Daddy.”

“We only walked a little,” she said.

“Don’t go outside again, and stop spending money,” he said. She nodded, not listening to him, because she was intent on pulling free. “Does it do any good?” he asked turning her wrist to expose the cigarette burns.

“I forget,” she replied waiting for him to release her.

“Alice!” Max yelled again.

“Get,” Cable said shoving her not hard enough to make her stumble, but hard enough to make her work to keep her balance.

“Mean,” she said the way a child would, not addressing anyone in particular, just speaking to God about the nature of the world in which she lived. “Daddy hates you Cable, not me,” she said.

“Daddy wants you and that baby,” Cable replied. “One day when I git smart enough, I guess I’ll know why.”

“Alice,” screamed Max again from below, and she finally left with only the fact that she’d left Sugar behind to guarantee her return.

After Alice left Cable unearthed the box. As his sister had, he looked at the photograph. He remembered that the clothes he and his father had worn were leant to him by the photographer and that Alice had been scared of the flash. He put it away and then shook the box so that the money within collected in one corroded corner.

“Not enough,” he said. They might be impossible to find on the river but the tickets had tapped their funds and without money they would have few options. Getting caught in the alley was powerful prompt. Cable had become complacent while their father had not. He assumed that there would come a time when he would need to confront the old man but in his mind’s eye his father was the size of a mountain and boys cannot kill mountains. Fighting seemed like a failing gambit. So they would keep running.

He put the money in his pocket and stowed the box. The baby coughed wetly behind him, so he walked over to it. Its eyes fluttered open. “Not enough,” he said holding two fingers over the child’s eyes and wiggling them. Hearing but not seeing him, the baby closed its mouth and listened. Cable walked away without touching it.

Cable had an appointment. Any attempt to escape was going to be predicated on his ability to continue to fulfill his promise to men waiting for him downstairs. The president would attend the play tonight and this meeting would be the last one for the conspirators. I still wonder what Cable thought he was doing. I was working on my own play by then, a way to keep him with me. He waited a few minutes before leaving. Watched the peppercorn girl a little longer. Then he headed to the stairs. The Ford brothers, dressed for the theatre themselves descended behind him but because they were walking side by side he had to stop midway to let them pass. Then had to wait as two children scuttled across his path.

“It means paying them past the contract length,” one said to the other.

“The play sells. The long run will pay for itself,” the second man replied. “The house is filled every showing.

Below Alice crossed the floor and loaded a tray with glasses. She worked in shadow. Cigar smoke emanating from the tables cast the room in a wisping veil and only half the lamps were lit because they did not burn clean and smelled bad.

A drunk reached out from his seat and yanked on the back of Alice’s skirt when she circled near. Because the tables were tightly packed and because she was balancing a tray, she did not notice the first tug, or even the second. Primed with whiskey and frustrated when the girl ignored him, the young tough tugged hard enough the third time to make her stumble. The tray rocked, but she held it true.

“Aye,” she said, confused. She waved an arm behind her as if she to swat a fly. The man grabbed her wrist when she did, but before he could pull her towards him, and before Cable, hurrying downstairs, could stop him, one of men sitting at the next table took a cane and rapped the tough on the arm hard enough to make skin blanch. The stunned young man reached around to grab the cane but released it and turned away once he saw that the cane was attached to a man with three friends.

“You won’t do that again, will you?” Booth said.

By the time Cable arrived, the issue was resolved.

“All right, Alice?” Cable asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I won’t cry.”

“Thankee,” Cable said to Booth, simultaneously sliding a small blade back into a side draw.

“Everybody needs to be taught manners, now and again,” Booth said noticing, but not speaking of the knife. “Should she be in here? Your little sister?”

“Excuse me, sir.” A woman in a bright blue pelisse approached. She was young and the coat was new. “But you are Mr. Booth, are you not?”

Standing, he took her hand and kissed it. “Yes, I am.”

“Well,” she said blushing. “I only wanted to remark. Well, I, we saw you last season. It was wonderful.”

“I am honored that you thought so, Madam. If you are so inclined, I would be pleased.” He delved into the pocket of the coat he had hung on the back of his chair.

“Take this.” He extended a card pinched in between two fingers. “Take this and the next

time you come to the theatre give this to the man at the door, and he will insist that you sit up front.”

“Oh,” she said blushing harder. “I...”

“Have a fine evening tonight as well,” he said, taking in her clothes.

“Yes, Yes, I, I should go. Thank, thank you.” She retreated, clutching the card.

“Jesus, John, stand on the table naked why don’t you?” Payne said. He wiped foam off his chin with a dirty sleeve before setting down his mug. In the process he elbowed, Davey who in turn leaned away and bumped George, who looked annoyed.

“We brighten common lives,” John said careful not to crush his coat collar as he settled into the chair. “She will remember this moment forever, boy.” He motioned to Cable, “serve us the rest of the night. Whiskey, water and glasses.” He placed a rolled wad into Cable’s hand.

“If it’s too much?” Cable asked not looking at the cash and not closing his hand around it. Booth tended to hand out the money like a lord but he reminded Cable of a high blown cock who didn’t know when to watch where he stepped.

“What’s left is yours. We don’t want to have to ask for service again.”

“What if I lie?” Cable asked.

A spark of anger flitted and extinguished as fast as a spark. “That’s considered a mark of honor,” Booth said pointing at Cable’s deformity. “We’ll trust your word.”

“There was a war,” Cable replied. “It got blow’d off while my back was turned and my pants were down, not because I was a good boy.”

“Still, it’s a soldier’s wound,” Booth said.

“I guess so.” Cable stuffed it into his pants pocket so that the subject might change.

“You need manners.”

“Still got my blow’d up arm though. My soldier’s arm,” Cable said and turned away before the conversation could continue.

“Lippy boy,” George remarked.

“His father will remedy that,” Booth replied.

“You should have let them lock him up. We got time for the thing with this boy?” Davey asked. “Doc didn’t want us to use Gaines.”

“Gaines’ll behave now. Just needed a reminder. He gets us our boat, gets you to the docks guaranteed if we give him the children. Want to get farther than the dockyard before they catch us? If we don’t get the orangutan below decks before this city lights up, it’s all over.”

People filtered into the bar filling the spaces in between the tables and between the bar and the walkway as the evening proceeded. Those without chairs were forced into corners where they circled around mugs placed on the ground to hold the stub ends of cigars and match sticks.

In one corner of the room a card dealer passed cards across a greasy Faro cloth. Across from him tucked just next to the stairs, a quiet poker game was running while restroom traffic tromped up and down the stairs. Players, deaf to the rest of the room, rearranged cards, chips and dollar bills according to the draw. Only Alice approached their table now and again, to replace beer mugs and carry away empties. The noise, raucous pieces of sound: voices, clinking glasses, the pounding of footsteps across the wood floor beat against the walls. When the original owner sold the tavern to the Fords, it was furnished with stools, a bar and the tables. The Fords had added mirrored cabinets

and mahogany shelves. They also tried to eject the painting of Gladys, a pale brunette dressed in locks of hair, but the barkeeps (and some of the regular patrons) revolted. So Gladys stayed, albeit she was removed to a darker corner of the bar.

Cable reached the bar, checked the room and the door, seeking someone he did not find, then he stepped to his place where the barkeeps were being inundated by customers. A flood of dank smelling men retreating from the rain spilled through the front door and clustered at the bar.

“Step up, boy.” A bartender wielding a bottle and several shot glasses made space. He filled mugs and set them on the bar without looking to see who took the glasses or who paid. “Pay for ‘em,” a beefy moke ordered a young soldier who was caging four beers. Releasing the mugs, the soldier pulled out a wad of bills that he dropped on the bar. “Wait,” The bartender stalled the man’s progress with a hand on his arm. “No Reb bucks, Fed notes or coin.” Shrugging, he turned and tapped a broad backed figure standing behind him.

“Two bucks,” he said.

Tom Gaines shoved bruised knuckles into a pocket. “For the next time, too.” He slammed bills onto the bar and waded his way to a table he and the soldier were sharing with two others. Cable, searching for a bottle of rum under the bar, had missed the big man with skin burned dark from a thousand days spent outside. But he heard his father’s voice. When he stood again, he saw Tom, but he could not find Alice.

“His Highness’ Table,” he said to the barkeep. He opened another bottle and left his position.

Booth was still talking. And Payne's seat was empty. "It needs to happen all at once," he was saying to David Herold and George. "If all three men die tonight the Union will fall. I'll be in and out and back down the hallway with our charge before anyone else can act. Davey you take Lewis to the river once he's dealt with Seward." Davey reached for a bottle that Booth had pulled out of reach. "Surrattsville is closer than you think once you cross the river."

"Might as well as be as far as the moon once they start chasing us," George said.

"You will be there," Booth said.

"I said so," George replied, reaching for the bottle.

"The guard will be gone. Once the boy unlocks the passage down to the alley I'll leave his body by the door."

"Now you're going to kill the boy too," Davey said. "Think you could just stop there?"

"A dead president causes more trouble to the Union than a kidnapped one. It is a more splendid display."

"The doctor will skin us alive. You run this game wrong John and you'll mess us all up," Davey said. He leaned forward and took Booth's glass and emptied it before returning it to its owner.

"What do you think?" Booth asked. He pushed the glass away and looked for a clean one. Cable approached them with another setup.

"I don't think much," Cable shifting so that he stood with his back to Gaines' group of drinkers, he looked for Alice again. She was nowhere. He set the replacement bottle down.

Booth placed a hand on his arm, stalling his retreat. "You'll be following me into the booth tonight. I will need your help."

"I won't. I work for the doctor. I work for Jack. I do every odd job I can find but I don't work for you."

"The man at the table behind us is insurance that you will help me. You think that rube found this place on his own? If you do what I say I won't give your sister to him."

The boy's face darkened as Alice's absence took on meaning. "Last time someone took Alice they needed stitches and you'll die before I do if Daddy gets her."

Booth didn't believe him or misunderstood who would do the killing. He squeezed Cable's arm more tightly and pulled him closer. "I run the plan now. Doctor Tumblety can't help you. He's already on a boat." he said.

"I guess you think you have enough stuff to do that, all on your own then," Cable said. He stopped fighting Booth's grip and again Booth misjudged his motives. He smiled at his friends as if he'd won the argument.

"You will wait for me and take us to the docks." he said. "You will go with us all the way." He twisted Cable's arm, but the boy ignored his efforts. Rage is the best anesthetic.

"I'm the one gets you passed ole Charlie at the door," Cable said. "If I don't know Alice is free and safe and I'll have every blue jacket after you when you run. I know the same things about the river that my daddy does. And when they catch you, they will gut like a Spring squealer."

"Not exactly a hero, are you?" Booth said.

Cable pulled himself loose. Booth had torn his sleeve. "You go wrong and I'll have us all hanging by the end of ropes. But we currently got a deal."

Payne had dragged Alice out through the kitchen but like Mr. Booth he misjudged the capacity and the will of the child in front of him. He and two others had taken her to a storage room where they had Alice trapped but not controlled. They didn't think to check for weapons and in the end she backed into a space underneath a set of stairs and fended them all off with a jagged wedge that was eventually tipped in someone's blood.

"No you cain't," she screamed. The men could see her but not reach her without risking further injury.

"No," she screamed again. "No, you cain't. Not never."

"Little girl." One man with a bloodied hand reached for Alice. "What did I say about making a fuss?"

"Jus' grab the girl," the man standing behind him said.

"Jesus, I hate you all," Payne said. "Just take care of her. I'm on my way." Then he left.

"Let's just kill her now for Christ's sake. The injured man squatted and cradled his injured hand with the other.

"One, I don't think that's as easy as you say," he said, "Two, not before the boy is done."

"Hell with that. Take her."

“Can’t let you hurt Cable or Sugar,” the sturdy survivor underneath the stairs mumbled and before they could think she crawled out faster than they could get to their feet. Another thing men tend to do is mistake size for strength.

If I remember correctly, now that I know everything, the Lincolns had asked several friends to come with them to the theatre and all had bowed out. The end of the war had enhanced a need to nest not one to party in some but Lincoln faced what he knew to be a hard journey. This war had been stopped but not the rage that had started it. Very soon he would again be engaged in another struggle to keep men from resorting to bloodshed. He had plans for reconciliation that would anger many as much as emancipation had angered others. Maybe he alone knew though it's hard to believe that what one man can assume others couldn't figure out as well. He should have been more careful. I have no compassion for victims but soon his wife would be screaming and the sound of loss is a grinding one. Did Cable know what he was doing, or was he too engrossed in his own plans to pay attention? Maybe like me, he didn't think the plan would succeed. Maybe I'm here because of this thing we didn't try to stop. Maybe God's eye isn't on me at all but on the man about to die.

The conspirators had time. The men returned to their rooms to make final preparations and Cable finished his shift. Stowing empties he marked the time and headed into the alley where he was to meet Booth. It was busy with stagehands and Cable made his way to the street unnoticed. Then he waited and watched the theatre patrons force their way inside. Theatre nights lately were extravaganzas. Shiny, carriages coursed in a line up the sidewalk, pausing while footmen helped the women step out. Scanning the crowd, Cable picked out the uniforms. Policemen and soldiers were stationed in the

front but not in the alley and Cable saw no sign of the carriage Booth said he had intended to use to carry the president away. It occurred to him that Booth had been lying again but he hadn't the energy nor the time to try to figure out what new gambit was in play.

The crowd quickly thinned. And Cable could tell that the play had begun because he could hear the announcements. Soon after this, Booth rode by astride a black horse.

"Boy." He dismounted and handed his reins to one of the children standing near. Cable caught up with him. "Inside." Booth shoved him forward. With the exception of one or two ushers, the aisles were empty. The ushers gossiped while laughter hummed on the other side of the walls. The pair entered the theatre and climbed the stairs without being noticed.

"Charlie," Cable said to the footman by the door to Lincoln's box seats. "Want to meet a star?"

Charlie had been dozing. He leaped to his feet to prove that he was on the alert. "Mr. Booth sir? Come to see the president?"

"As a guest." Booth handed him a card much like the one he had handed the girl in the saloon earlier. Then Cable whispered to Charlie who hurried away and turned to find that Booth was leveling a gun at his head.

A kick in the shins works as well as anything sometimes. Two kicks gives you time to open a door and shove a stumbling man inside and turn the lock. How two kicks and a key changes history is always anyone's guess. I am of the mind that history always turns out the same way even if you alter the details. But Chinese have a sense of history that is almost as eternal as time itself. We feel that it is never changing and ever repeating. Some

men are not meant to live and some are not meant to win and never would even if you removed every obstacle. Now there is a man who will never get back through the exit door and another who won't see another day. Even one with a god's eye view can make no sense of the things that happen or why. My boy it turns out was a winner who no one will ever write about. Cable was raised in a place where they believed a man died and came back to life stronger than ever. Maybe I put too much hemlock in the birds that night and so my boy died and was reborn with better luck. One can change their fortunes. Sometimes the numbers for no reason, roll another way.

Something in him made him stay to hear the shot. Then he ran and stumbled into Alice, who had Sugar and was scurrying towards him. There was blood down her dress and some still on her hands but now wasn't the time to ask.

"Cable," she squealed.

"Get her," a man shouted from somewhere in the building.

"Shush," Cable said, grabbing her hand.

She resisted. "They say you gonna die."

"Heard that more than once before." He grabbed her hand.

"They never let up on bad boys and girls, do they Cable?" She refused to budge.

"Christ," he said pulling her into a patch of sheltering darkness. "You're stupid. I'm mean. Don't mean we can't get lucky." He could hear, if not see, the collecting movements that would soon find them. "Let's move."

He grabbed her hand and pulled again. This time she followed but not until a man, rounded the corner and beckoned to his companion behind him. Followed by silence and then a scream, and then screams, the shot had changed everyone's course. Another time

the police stationed outside the theatre might have chased the children. But once someone cried that the president had been killed the policemen vanished and the children raced back to the alley where crossed paths with Booth one last time. He stumbled and fell to his knees.

“You changed plans on us again,” Cable said. “Made us assassins without our say so.”

“I changed history,” Booth replied standing with difficulty.

“That door was locked the minute you touched my sister,” Cable said. “You’d taken him they’d have hated you now you’re just another dead man.”

“Now I am a hero. They’ll not survive without him.” Booth staggered to his horse and mounted. Then racing past the children, he disappeared down the main road, while Cable and Alice angled towards the river.

The bad news spread after the children like the wake behind a boat. Counsel and cant filtered through the city while four men carried Lincoln from the theatre to a bed. They say that the wife was so hysterical that the men eventually barred her from the sickroom and that it took the president lived through the night stretched out diagonally on a bed too short for his stature. They may not have all loved the man, but they all seemed to cry for him. It may have one more death than anyone could stomach after four years of war. Cable grabbed Alice by the sleeve as she had her arms around the baby, and pulled her through the tide of bodies. His bad arm became an advantage because people shied from it when he reached out and touched them to make them move. Overhead they heard the comments as they struggled forward.

“Rebs,” one old woman said to her neighbor, who grabbed the sleeve of a young man and whispered that Washington was being invaded.

“Shot,” a newsie said. A soldier, forcing his way through the crowd, muttered the news to the rest of the paperboys, who repeated what they knew to anyone who would listen.

“He’ll head for the bridges,” Someone said.

“He’s going nowhere lest he can get across the Potomac,” someone else replied.

Streams of uniformed riders and infantry flooded the streets forcing carriages to veer. Some vehicles bogged in the mire, became stones in the stream. Carriages, slogged onto the sidewalks, dousing pedestrians with muck and infusing the moist April air with the

essence of dung. Buffeted by a long tailed bay sidestepping in its braces, children coursed through the clog of people and stood on benches, railings and barrelheads so that they could improve their view. Sirens sounding from soldiers' quarters were quickly quelled, but not before inciting a mild panic in crowds inured to the sound of cannon blast, but settled to the notion of armistice.

Cable, a boy with a mind towards disaster kept to the center of the street hiding in the densest traffic. Son of a disaster maker, he had identified his father forcing his winding way through the crowd. Alice stood behind him.

Gaines moved slowly through the crowd looking between people for small heads but the mass blocked both his view and his progress.

"They told on us," Alice said. "They told."

"I don't think anyone's running Daddy Alice. I think he just doing what he wants no matter what he's been told. He should be with the boats. Someone is going to need another way out."

"Can he see us?" Alice asked.

"Be still a minute. He's looking for us to stand out to him."

"He been beat," Alice said. "His eye's closed."

"Good. Slow him down maybe."

Gaines climbed onto the side step of a hansom, stuck in place. Taller than normal, he stood higher than the cab and was able to rest an arm on it while he scanned the street.

Cable stared back and in so doing, caught his eye.

"Little man," Gaines yelled. "Here, damn boy. Alice," he called. The children traded cover for easier passage and ducked into the nearest alley.

Alice stumbled. "Cable," she called. Only her desire to protect the baby stopped her from tumbling into the trash blocking the alley before her.

"Keep moving." Cable forced her forward.

Unlike Cable Alice was unable to disobey her father without falling victim to a persistent feeling that children who run deserve to be caught. Cable knew that if he could not keep his hold on her, he would lose her to fear.

"Get going," he said even as she began picking her way through the sodden mess. She reached a grocer's cart resting cock-eyed against a wall. Its bashed body, an assembly of cracked wooden spars, squatted in the midst of a river of flowing rats scurrying to safer places within the rank structure. Cable passed her and clambered aboard stepping through as it caved under his weight. Unharmd but angry, he grabbed hold of a spar for leverage and felt his hand slide down its slick surface, driving splinters and the tip of a thick, separated chunk into his palm.

"Shhst," he hissed. A shimmering fear wrestled for control in him as he forged ahead, leaving bloody prints on whatever he touched next. A boy with no hands might as well be dead.

Alice picked her way through the pile with more care, nicking her legs on glass and wood pieces just the same. Hooking her dress on a corner of the cart, she pulled up short.

"Cable," she whispered, straining against the impediment. He leaned back and tore it free leaving a red stain on the ragged, yellow trim. "Cable," she said again.

"Hesh up, now," he muttered.

"Here boy, here boy," Tom Gaines grumbled. Slowed by the crowd, he entered the alley after the children had crossed onto the street beyond.

“Faster,” Cable said.

“If he ketches us,” Alice said.

“Hesh up.”

More averse than the children to cross the debris field, Gaines halted. Shifting his coat back so that it would not tangle his legs, he kicked a piece of paper aside and considered his options. “Don’t have to follow you to get to the dockyard first,” he yelled. “You figure if you can make it to Harper’s Ferry, you get to the trains. You figure you’ll loose me across the ‘ghenies. I can see the inside of your mind, boy and I’ll be where ever you run.” Cable once told me that he could feel his father’s voice stab him when it reached a certain pitch.

The congestion on the streets lessened as the children neared the harbor. Once they saw the pier, they began running flat out down the center of the boulevard.

“We’re at it. But we ain’t getting in,” Cable said. He leaned against a wall and held his arm out to stop his sister from passing him. Both policemen and soldiers patrolled the harbor ahead. All passengers were having their identification examined. “I swear, Alice. Just one time. Any luck at all would suit me fine.”

“Heavy,” Alice whispered so that Cable would not hear. Her hair, burst free of its ties, was plastered to her face and her neck. The baby either used to the running or too tired to care, clung to her like a heavy, fat loaf. But Alice knew better than to complain. Cable might not take it out on her now, but he would remember. Reaching down to tear off a strip of dress trailing to her knees, she saw she had already lost the most of a ruffled hem. “What are you scart of,” she asked. “Momma used to say that you could always whip your weight in wildcats,”

“Didn’t mean it nice when she said it,” Cable replied.

“I always like the way she said things,” Alice said. “Kinda like she was always telling a story,” she said, shaking the scrap that now stuck to her palm and would not drop.

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, I was just wondering if you’ve ever been beat,” she said. Absorbed with her task, she stepped away from the wall that hid them both from view.

“Did Momma ever just puff up in the face that you remember, Alice?” Cable asked, grabbing her. His timing failed him for all his care. Gaines appeared, drew a bead and began to run towards them. The children retreated down side streets, testing doors as they ran. Heading back towards the city meant heading towards a crowd. Cable wanted off the streets.

“Here,” he said turning a handle that moved freely. He shoved Alice inside. The door had opened easily, but when he tried to shut it he felt resistance as it caught along the floor. “Some damn luck just once.” He put his shoulder to the task.

“Takes more ‘n one,” said a voice behind him. Two skinny boys his age took places on either side, and together they forced the door shut. They all ducked when Gaines banged by and they sat with their backs to the door waiting for him to stop testing the lock. Alice, cognizant of the baby, moved further into the room and squatted in a dark corner.

“Other side,” Gaines said to himself.

“He’ll come in around the front next,” a dark boy with cropped hair said as he and his companion, a Dresden doll with old man eyes, scuttled away past rows of machinery backed against cinder block walls.

Because cotton plantations meant cotton mills which meant gins and giant looms, Cable recognized a familiar factory smell. Everyone in his part of the country had worked the gins or the fields at one time or another. He canvassed the room catching glimpses of the dozen or so blank-faced boys and hard-eyed girls huddled in the corners of the room and around the base of the machines. Awakened but unmoved by the melodrama, no one stirred except the two who had helped Cable; but everyone watched.

“If you want to get out, go through the stairs to the show floor. They’s steps back down to the ground outside,” the boy said as he returned to his pallet on the floor. “The front doors downstairs don’t lock. So he can get in downstairs.”

Squealing hinges confirmed this as someone entered from below. The showroom door worked easily and opened to a platform and a long slender set of white washed steps.

“I don’t hear him,” Cable said. Not happy with not knowing whether hiding or running was the better move, Cable acted without thinking and stepped out without looking and shoved Alice ahead. She grabbed the stair rail but feeling the baby slip, released the railing to hug it. Then she stumbled down several steps before catching her balance. Disoriented she then stepped forward to the walk without looking and was grabbed so forcefully that she dropped the baby. It plopped into a bag of trash while Alice was whisked away.

She was shoved forward into a wall, an act meant to make her cower. But she’d been hit before and failed to submit. When Gaines tried to repeat the stunt, she grabbed an edge of step and swung underneath the stairs breaking his hold with the momentum.

“Come here, girl,” he muttered, reaching for her.

“Aint cha hear me calling, boy?” Gaines said turning to knock Cable off his feet and kicking him in the chest. “Don’t you know I cain’t take never take no shit from you?” he said.

“No you cain’t,” Alice screamed from her dark space under the stairs. She attacked with her bare hands.

Cable pressed against the ground silently wrestled against his father, ineffectually twisting against his grip.

“Whip you to dead, boy,” Gaines grumbled, tightening his strangle hold.

“Don’t kill him, Daddy.”

“Whip you.”

“Just once,” Cable muttered before two gun blasts sprayed grapeshot down the alley blistering Gaines’ jacket.

“Gotcha, boya,” Cable heard someone say before he passed out.

"Is this your doing," I asked Grace. She had stopped by again and we watched.

"Sometimes you infect your children with power no one knows you have." She smiled when Gaines screamed at the boy. "He can only bellow. He can't hit them unless they stop running."

"You gave up. You don't think your children were broken by that?"

"What do you know? Maybe if I hadn't died my children would not have had the strength to run because alive I kept them chained to him."

"Cable never said you were stubborn."

"Cable has trouble talking about people who matter to him." She raised her head and I saw for the first time that she was grey eyed like her son. "And you," she said.

"What did you do to change him to something worse?"

"He made his choices."

"You lied to him. You took away his choices. You got what you deserve."

"I couldn't lose him."

"He was never yours to begin with."

"Why are you here?" I looked at her.

"Not here for long," she said. She was fading the way a bad picture loses color. She displayed less detail than she had earlier. She is passing, little by little. Even here everyone but me changes and I now wonder if I am only having conversations with myself.

"Nonetheless. No one stays here unless they are guilty."

She looked down at her children and watched them run. "Malice aforethought," she said.

"I don't understand."

"I knew who the baby's father was long before you did and I never said a word."

Appo raised the wick on a lamp set on a sideboard. The rising light revealed his monster mask. A battered scattergun sat on a table next to the sideboard. "I think your Da' is dumber than a dead chicken, b'hoy," Appo said. "Sure you're one of his?" Then he winked. The one lamp cast a low glow the rest of the room was a dark as a pit but the darkness comforted Cable. He had been injured but was not ready to see for himself how badly he had been hurt. Lying in the dark on a hard cool floor seemed just right.

"Daddy's strength is a will of rock plus a long, mean streak," Cable said. "If he were smart too, I'd be long gone by now."

Appo pulled the lamp closer to the edge of the table and reached around for a seat. "If he'd been dumber," he said, "I could switch him out for my monkeys and still make money."

"You'd have to keep teaching him how to toss hoops. The monkeys catch on after you show them once," Cable said.

Appo wore a bright blue uniform that draped over the tops of a pair of shabby brogans. Squatting down on a stool built for a child he reminded Cable of a tree that had spit him to the ground when he was little. He pinned Cable to the floor with the tip of one shoe and reached for Cable's injured hand. Just out of sight the hiss of soft soles shifting against the gritty floor revealed the presence of the children grouping at the edge of the lamp's dulling fire. The lamplight cast such a weak bloom that their shapes shifted as the flame flickered. Cable closed his eyes. The day of the tree had been one of his dumb days

much like the day he was enduring. He remembered feeling just as beat up then as now and he wondered if giving up would suit him just as well as running away.

“Why don’t we have company?” Cable asked. The floor was damp against his skin. The boys had torn the back of his shirt when they had dragged him into the building and he could feel cold patches where the fabric would need to be re-sewn.

“The police wouldn’t come in here unless blood was streaming from the windows,” Appo said. “And they’re after the shooters. And your Da’ done run so there’s no body in the alley to draw notice. Are you hurt anywhere else, besides the hand?”

“Think a rib’s cracked,” Cable held his hand up and stared away down the rows of machines set in stalemate and shaped like large H’s. Spools, thread and spindles lay scattered about the floor. Following the trails of these to bare feet clustered together, Cable’s view expanded as his eyesight adjusted and he recognized the inner workings of a mill. Strands of thread had attached to his skin and clothes in little balls.

“Alice,” he asked.

“She’s with Mei trying to keep that baby alive. It looks poor as a Killdee. You’re supposed to feed them once in a while.”

“Alice ain’t gonna like Mei touching the baby, ain’t gonna like being alone with Mei neither.”

“Alice doesn’t have a choice. You two were scarpering.” The tip of the boot pressured Cable.

“You hit anyone when you fired or did you just waste shot?” Cable gestured that he wished to sit.

“He walked away, bleeding though.” Appo removed his foot. Sitting up hurt and Cable’s hand throbbled up to his elbow. He knew the wound was dirty and that he was going to need help. The last thing he wanted. Rather than confirm his suspicions, he looked away and incidentally saw his things; a knife, the locket, a pocket watch and a small pair of pliers, grouped on the sideboard next to the lamp. He wondered how long he had been out. He’d been unconscious before and he always came to his senses feeling as if a friend had died. This time he didn’t seem to feel anything.

“A fool shot Lincoln tonight.” Appo picked up the pliers and turned them in his hand. “Lucky for you we ducked in here. Ole’ Tom looked ready to bust.”

“They kill him?” Cable referred to Booth. The rider and horse raced by him and Alice in his memory followed by an understanding of how the doctor was keeping track of him. Spies in the circus, two boys he recognized from the saloon and probably Mei.

“They say Lincoln lives, but the criminals are running. Every buck with a gun is out. Bottom dollar they’re done to a turn.” Appo slapped the pliers on the sideboard. Unsteady on its feet, the cabinet rocked. The cracked mirror in its high board reflected a visage cut through with black lines that made damaged skin easier on the eyes.

“Let me see Alice,” Cable said. The sight of her would settle his nerves. When he was wounded, she was the calm one. He steeled himself and inspected his hand. Wood splinters speared through the palm raised white streaks and the split across his palm was outlined in black. “I need to tend to my hand. We got to git.”

“Who will clean that even if I let you go?” Appo took it in his own. Close up Cable could smell sweat borne of weeks of work mingling with the combined rank of manure,

beer and stale tobacco. The hands holding his were stained at the fingertips and the skin roughened and scarred with dozens of thick nicks.

“You didn’t kill Daddy,” he said.

“I mostly missed,” Appo replied. “I scattered some shot in the air, aired out your Daddy’s clothing a little. A shot president, a sick baby, and a ruint hand, you think you’re up to it all, boya?”

“Must be a handkerchief around here somewhere,” Cable replied. He would have sworn he smelled mud and a backward view of a ditch piled high with dead soldiers was rising like a high wave of water in his head. Standing under the wet barrel of a curling disaster made it hard to follow what Appo was saying. A boy with no hands might as well be dead and he wondered. If the police caught the men, would the shooters tell his name?

“Mind, now.” Appo squeezed Cable’s hand until he shuddered and tried to pull away. He stopped squeezing when Cable stopped fighting. “Mandy,” Appo said. “Where are the needles?”

“In the drawer.” A dirty girl with boney shoulders answered. She did not rise to the occasion but nodded towards the furniture. Thin as a whisper she could only be seen when Appo leaned to the left. Someone jostled her so she threw an elbow.

“Move it, cracker” someone snapped.

“Stop stalling me gal-boy. I ain’t int’rested.”

“Not what your sister said.”

“Before she threw up?” The rest giggled. Approximately a dozen children, eased forward to watch Appo treat Cable. The idea of losing a second hand sent another stiffening shock through him. He tried to prepare for the loss and could not and therefore

began to obsess on insignificant details, the kids and the room, to draw his attention from his plight. The children all looked the same, more or less and the room was like any other. Still Cable took note of the how many wore shoes and how many had all their fingers. Millwork occasionally took tokens.

“Make it pretty now,” Cable said. Appo reached into a low drawer and extracted a needle. The drawer itself was speckled with spider balls that were wrapped around round web casings. Out of habit, Appo crushed several with spaded fingertips. Then he dropped the needle which skittered away across the floor. A child with better eyesight had to find it and Cable flinched when he picked up his hand. “Sit still.” Without thinking about it the boy was trying to stand.

“Think they won’t come in here looking for those men who kilt Abe,” Cable said.

“No one comes here. It’s why we use it. Set.” Appo twisted Cable’s arm so that he was forced to drop down in order to relieve the pressure on his shoulder.

“Don’t tell me your momma sent you out dressed like that,” Cable said. A cigarette would be good just now if he could roll it with his other hand.

“I have noticed that you’re not much of a circus fan.” Appo stabbed deep enough to draw blood.

“Circus is for freaks,” Cable replied.

“It’s a clown suit, boya. I am a clown like everybody else when needs be.” The children, a skinny, gritted lot were fascinated although some drifted off quite quickly. Cable grimaced as Appo dug for splinters.

“If you die, can I have your boots?” someone asked Cable.

“Be nice,” the girl behind Appo said.

“What for?”

“You know why they don’t sell niggers but still sell kids?” Cable asked.

“Learn me, Mr. Fice.”

“Cause no one gives a shit.”

The children were pretend people. Spent figures, they leaned close to one another for warmth rather than companionship and barely registered one another’s existence. The banter was habit, not conversation, a trick to keep the silences from becoming overwhelming.

“Not a nice thing to say,” Appo said.

“My Daddy did not raise a good boy.”

“Sadly, you are not unique,” Appo said. He finished and then pulled out gauze and a brown bottle of antiseptic from another drawer.

“So what?”

“It’s a fact that children should be good,” Appo said. “I make no judgments about it.” He greased Cable’s palm with salve that smelled like fish and wrapping the hand with a strip of dark cloth. “Where I come from, children stay home.”

“Ourn got burnt.”

“Mine too, so what?”

“Alice.” Cable lay down on the floor because bending at the waist hurt.

“You’ll see her after we get back on the road.”

“We’re going our own way,” Cable said, breathing deeply. The hand hurt worse than ever now and he had a wall of fear he needed to repress.

“I traffic in children, run a show and deliver bad news, now and again,” Appo stuffed the used first aid supplies back into a drawer. “The Gaines children are running away with the circus. The doctor likes you and pays well so you got another chance and being with us gets you out of your Daddy’s view for a while. I would think you’d be grateful.”

“You don’t need me anymore. The dogs are loosed.”

“It’s not for you to ask what we want.” He slapped the boy gently in the face. “You got away, once. You won’t get away again. You also might consider that when you killed a man, you made yourself homeless, again.” Appo opened his hand to reveal Hadden’s necklace. He dropped it into Cable’s open palm and it slid to the floor when Cable could not clutch it. It clumped by his feet.

“We had to run.” He pinched the necklace between two fingers and dropped in a pocket.

“Because of Alice.”

“She’s a half wit with a baby belongs to her father and everyone knew. She named it. Her Daddy’s child and she named it Sugar.”

“Sharpers call ‘sugar’ what you steal.”

“Bully for you.”

“We’re knucks, sharpers. Cops won’t pay us a bounty for you. But they will take the doctor’s word and Mei’s. Then they’ll come take you. You’ll be in the papers. So,” he slapped his thighs. “Mei says you’re planning to buy a house with flowers.”

“I didn’t think that piece of linen was listening so well,” Cable said.

“You were going to leave.” Mei strolled into view with an arm around Alice.

“You don’t like me no more, Mei?”

“I like you fine, little man.”

“What about Alice?” Alice was distracted and in her own kind of shock. The sight of the children drew her attentions.

“Alice and I have become fine friends.” Mei hugged her and Alice did not resist.

“Until you die,” Cable said. “Less you fixed that problem of yours.”

“Plenty of fun to be had before then,” Mei said. She held Alice’s hand in hers as if they were friends and dragged her away. Then the curling wave broke and fear folded over Cable. He struck back with a memory; his mother telling him stories about Indian gods on a warm afternoon when there was no one about.

“People don’t matter to gods,” his mother had said. “People are like ants to gods.”

“What about the devil? He care about us? He’s like a god, right?”

“I believe you can ask him that yourself when you meet him.” She was tending a scrape. At the time he had been too young to do the bad things he had done since. But he still should have asked her how to be saved instead of damned. Afraid that she would tell him there was nothing he could do he kept silent and then spent the rest of the day running through the woods hunting and tipping birds’ nests out of trees until he could run no more.

Cable stopped arguing with Appo, it really didn’t matter where they headed or how they got there. Cable’s plans had failed and he’d lost the will to make new ones. The exiting troupe traipsed through the city unnoticed because by then it was certain that President Lincoln was dying. Those conspirators who were meant to be led to a boat by Gaines never saw him and thus never made their escape. Booth with the aide of rebel

soldiers escaped the city and by the time the children were being loaded aboard another train he and David were galloping towards Surrattsville hoping to make it into Canada.

A lean, weary figure sits down besides me. His eyes are fixed on the scenes below.

"They'll never let you out of here unless you forget all that," I say. I have no idea who they are but it seems there must be more than a single entity involved. The sad man leans forward in his seat as if to improve his view. The scenes below powered by his will shift dozens of times covering the lives of many. He is the first who seems to be able to pick what he will see.

"I dreamt about dying," he said.

"There was a war on," I say. "We all dream of death then." I want control of the view back but my will is subsumed in this man's wearing presence. He is skinnier than a coolie and taller than is seemly and his sense of self is filling the space that I consider my own.

"I was in my bed and woken by subdued sobbing," he says, "as if a number of people were weeping. I left my bed and wandered downstairs. There the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. I went from room to room saw no living person but the crying never stopped. I kept on until reached the East Room. There before me was a corpse wrapped in funeral vestments. "Who is dead in the White House?" I demanded.

"The President," a soldier answered me.

"You'd been warned then," I reply. "I have no pity for you."

"I had work yet to do," he says. "Difficult work ahead."

"No one will miss you." I say. "They're already filling your seat with another."

"That dream haunted me, haunted Mary but Charlie said that it was because I insisted on visiting battlefields. Did you dream of dying?" he asks.

"I dreamed of Cable and of living forever," I reply.

"Petty dreams then," he says and he touches my face. As he does, I feel the heat of the fire that killed me and I am overwhelmed by regret. I box the old man's hand away.

"Where do we go from here?" He looks around at the nothing view in this shadow space, notices my streaming ancestors and then stares back down at the ground. He isn't disappearing like the others did and I now have an idea that being remembered and remembering might be part of the problem.

"You can't help them," I say not to help but to hurt. He is distraught but I have a feeling they he will soon recover from this feeling.

He points to the scenery which shifts to a deathbed and a woman being forced out of the room by a group of men who seem mostly annoyed. "My wife will not do well without me," he says. "And my son will not help her as he should."

"You should have listened to your dreams then."

He looks at me, an old and ugly man. "And done what as a safety measure?"

"Saved yourself."

"This place is too empty," he says. "I don't know why you stay here." Then he stands. He vanishes within the course of a dozen paces. I hope he reaches salvation regretfully. The view returns to normal now and the children come back into focus.

“I wish you’d just let them little living things be for one living moment,” Cable said. The bundle he had tried to kick out of the boxcar snagged. He tucked the blanket more tightly around the body and tugged it free. It bounded down the slope and disappeared in the scrappy brush that grew along the tracks. Maybe he saw a shoe poke out as the bedroll settled. He let the image go. He had real worries.

“Daddy says he’s gonna kill you, Cable, and then you gonna go to hell,” Alice replied. She had buffered herself from the cold by nesting in a corner that she had lined with newspaper and currently cradled a box of kittens. Three of them were curled up inside the box. When they’d put Cable and Alice into the boxcar they had taken Sugar, as a kind of guarantee of obedience. But Alice needed things to cuddle and so she’d captured the kittens.

“Daddy’s mighty high on hisself if he thinks he gits to choose who goes to hell,” Cable said. Balanced on the edge of the door rail, he puffed on the fag end of a badly rolled cigarette and let the cutting wind clear his head. Looking after Alice’s mistakes was as hard a job as fixing his own. He had a feeling that if he had feelings, they would all just weigh him down. “He gimme broken bones and bad temper, made you a sinner, kilt Momma with meanness and says I’m going to hell. He’s mean and he’s a rotted coon, but he ain’t lord of the hereafter.” He flicked, the spent butt out the door. Angry at being kidnapped, he only had Alice to kick around and e hated her latest acquisitions. “We could save time, if you just let me pitch the rest of them things now.”

“Mean, like Daddy,” she said. The animals warm and well fed settled in next to one another atop the Bible one of the troupe had given her.

“Book’s as useful to ya as them creatures,” Cable said. She had been feeding the kittens. The rocking boxcar and the fact that the kittens kept overturning the milk had turned the nest grey, and it, in turn, had soaked through some of the Bible. She shook it to get rid of some of the liquid.

“Bet the sun don’t ever shine over you, Cable.”

“I been living under it longer than you. It mostly burns.” The fact of the matter was that Alice could not read. The book was a talisman rather than a source of information. In her haste to locate the crate that had contained the body Cable had just dropped away, she had opened several because she could not read the labels. Now, equipped with a pry bar, Cable now attempted to hammer together the boxes she had pried apart.

“Living in the dirt, underneath, is quiet,” Alice said. “The dark don’t make fun and Daddy let me be while I was there. Just me and my baby chicks down there, ‘til you ‘membered me.” *Main rigging* was the box she had chosen first. Cable hammered it shut and swore when he missed and scraped his arm. His hand was healing but still tender. This was not the time to be testing it.

“You need to stay away from others, Alice. It’s not safe. These people keep track of each another. There are people keeping track of us.”

“They’ll forget him, just like you forgot me when you left,” she replied. “Anyway it was a accident.” The kittens, sated and tiring had curled up around each other. She began arranging them in her lap so they fit in the space between her crossed legs.

“It always is, girl.”

Mean as his father was, there was wisdom to keeping Alice boxed up. In a flash of fantasy, Cable imagined a big glass tank that would house his sister. He could it cart around on wheels. He would allow her a Bible, her plant concoctions, the blasted baby and a change of clothes. Maybe charge five cents a peek. They needed a place where there were fewer people and more wide open spaces. He envied his dead mother, a little, sometimes dying seemed restful.

Harper's Ferry, the next stop for Appo's Monster Menagerie and Museum Exposition, would appear in the horizon before sunrise. Once they arrived the roustabouts would hustle tents up into the Maryland Heights while the performers, trainers, keepers and cooks ferried wardrobes and equipment. Pack animals and children would also haul loads. The Wild West stars were traveling by horse and would arrive later, carrying smaller and more fragile items.

"And I didn't forget or leave you, girl. Soldiers stole me."

"You forgot me but now I guess if you kilt a boy you'll never leave me. I'm the oney one who can keep with you when you go mean like you do." I would have disagreed but Cable kept his mouth shut.

"Didja hear me about the first thing? Keep away from them little kids." Cable and Alice traveled with Cable's charges. Tucked into the darker depths of their boxcar, between packing boxes, were three wrought iron cages. One housed the dogs and one contained an aging white tiger with stained fur. The lot reeked of piss. Sliding to the length of the give in their restraints, the containers shredded the metal floor and squealed as they traveled. The shavings whirled around the box, coated flat surfaces, settled on skin and worked their way through hair. The constant metallic screech combined with the

roar of a boxcar rocking down the tracks battered the senses, fomenting a meditative state among the travelers and killing conversation. When the children did talk, they either stood close or yelled. The dogs and the tiger slept no matter what they heard.

“They’ll forget,” Alice said, after a long moment. “like you forgot me.”

“God, will you never mind me?” Cable asked.

“I’m hungry and they don’t feed us ‘til the circus is struck, You got food,” Alice asked. Finished arranging the kittens, she now attended her possessions. The Bible was a loss but she tucked it away anyway. It had come tied to a cross, strung on a leather strip. She had failed to recognize the cross for what it was and had kept it in her pocket until she was told to wear it. Once she had discovered that the Bible had pictures, she had torn them out and started stowing them in a new cigar box, replacing the photographs of her missing family with drawings from Revelation. It had become another distraction. One of the many things she fiddled with rather than listen to Cable whenever he spoke of topics she preferred to ignore.

“Brittle and pralines in that.” Cable tossed a bag. She blew the catch. The bag bounced and broke. Its shattered contents sprayed across the pitted floor.

She swept candy pieces into a pile. “Don’t you want some?”

“No, I got apple jack left.” It would make him drowsy but he ached all over when he was sober. No sense in that when there was a cure. He headed to the door seeking escape from the smells in the car. He liked staring at the trees watching them pass and thinking of them passing him by instead of the other way around.

Alice picked up a big enough piece to chew, tasted it and then spit it into her hand. Then she tried other pieces, spitting them out in turn until she seemed to get used to the

taste and started chewing. “It reminds me of them ruint pickles mamma used to put up, ” she said.

“Hoo, could put them outside and scare off the beasts with the smell,” he laughed.

“Momma was better with medicines.”

“Momma knew that stuff sure,” Cable said. As he watched, a clump of movement separated from the tree line. The clump differentiated into pieces and began angling towards the train. As it closed on the cars, Cable was able to distinguish the silhouettes of six darkly clothed horsemen riding hard. They would have been gaining on the train with less effort had this been summer. The freighter, a battered relic, was running at about half speed. But April was a soggy month and this had been a particularly wet year. Additionally, the boggy terrain, blasted and churned by the progress of constant troop movements, presented obstacles.

“They ‘arn?” Alice asked. Bored with the kittens, she had pushed them away and come to stand by his side.

“They’re looking for big bugs, not itty bitty hill billy boys and girls,” Cable replied.

The riders advanced, hoof beats keeping pace with the raw scream of the train marked their progress. The men, faces hidden by hats and shadows, ducked their heads and rode in sync.

“Bible says...”

“Idiot Alice,” Cable said. “You cain’t read.”

“I can read.”

“Gimme the fucking book. I’ll pick a page and let’s see.”

“It says the wicked get punished.”

“Everyone’s wicked Alice. Hell would have to be as big as an ocean to hold everyone.”

“It says I can say I’m sorry. If I’m sorry enough, sorry every time then I’ll be safe.”

“It probably says, ‘saved.’”

“It’s a sin to have your Daddy’s bastard.”

“Oh, Little Miss, you make my gut ache.” Cable settled back by the door. He’d been smoking nonstop and sipping on the jack. Halfway to Harper’s Ferry, too late to stop drinking, he realized that the booze had bolstered rather than repressed his fears.

“I miss Jesse, don’t care what you say. He used to come just to see me. He was mine.” Alice put her hand on his arm. She had lost her handkerchief. They had been using it to cover her shorn scalp. Someone had told her she had lice and before she could be stopped she had cut off her hair with a knife. She was now left with short patches and a scattering of bald spots. Without her long locks Cable thought that she looked more like an alien spirit than a girl or a sister.

“The Bible is a waste of time Alice. It won’t make nothing go away, won’t make you better, won’t make us decent, won’t let us go back, won’t make Daddy give up.”

“They’re catching up,” she said.

The riders crested a final hill rising between them and the train.

“Those aren’t cops. Those are soldier coats and caps,” Cable closed his hand around hers.

“Skeer’d, Cable.”

Completely hidden from the light the dying moon cast across the floorboards of the car, Cable tried to find a way to sit that did not hurt his ass. The riders coming fast skirted

the tracks. Keeping distance in order to avoid the debris cast off by turning train wheels, they passed Cable's open door and then turned back towards the trees, taking advantage of what little road remained in the overturned landscape. The horses splattered with sweat and mud, trod through the muck while their riders, outfitted in Union blue, directed them towards the paths that would get them to Harper's Ferry before the train.

"You won't let them get us," Alice said.

"These'uns are looking for some others," Cable said.

"Not us?"

"Hesh up," he said, closing his eyes for a second. He would have paid boxes of gold for one night of sleep.

"You promised we'd go somewhere safe."

He rubbed the edge of his stump with his good hand and shrugged his shoulders. He seemed to stand crooked without the weight of a hand and a whole arm for balance. The strain bunched up the muscles around his neck and back in a pinch that numbed the stump.

"I want to go home, Cable." Alice rubbed her forehead.

"Got another headache?" he asked.

"Not so bad yet," she said. "But it tires me."

"I have the bottle around somewhere," he said. A few swallows and he could put her to sleep in the hopes that the headaches would leave her while she was out.

She said something he could not hear and returned to her charges. She crossed her legs and pulled the box into her lap. His sister had always been partial to pets. She had not been allowed to keep any, but she habitually named the chickens Momma would

bring home to eat. Crying each time they died, she angered their father so that he decreed that she should kill the birds when it came time. She stopped naming the birds and eventually she could kill them without crying. After that their father let Cable take on the chore.

“Where we going, Cable?” They were nearing the town. Mist rising from the boggy ground, backed up against the blue mountains.

“Gonna cross the mountains,” he said. “Gonna buy a house, where we’ll be safe.”

“Will you leave me, ever?”

“Taking care of you is in my bones.”

“Will they get us?” She had an idea of a mob of people following behind and for all he knew she was right.

“We’ll keep running,” he said. “We’ll lose them if we keep running west.”

“And I can have chickens.”

“Course.” He tried to catch her eyes but she would not look up from the box.

“What happens if some night you don’t come home?”

“You should go swimming in the closest river.”

She considered the proposal. “I cain’t swim, Cable.”

“Only if I don’t come home one night.”

“Will you come, too?”

“If I don’t come home. I’ll already be waiting for you on the other side of the river.”

“Which one?”

“Every one, girl. You cain’t help but find me.”

“How’s that?”

“If I don’t come home I will find the nearest river too. It’s where I’ll always be, waiting for you,” he said.

“Promise me,” she said.

“Course, Alice, I promise.”

He found her medicine bottle. “Take a bunch of swallows and I’ll read from your Bible ‘til you fall asleep.” She took the drink he offered and closed her eyes while he read but kept a hand on the box so that if he touched it while she was sleeping she would wake in time to save the kittens.

The Pioneers of the Pentecost Holy Church temporarily rested atop Maryland Heights, delicately balanced on four cement pilings, it was assuredly sinking into the mud. The heights was a point of land towering 1,448 feet above the convergence of the Potomac and the Shenandoah, and it shadowed the ravine where the rivers carved Harper's Ferry out of the mountainside. Reverend Edgar Ray was the local minister serving a parish of travelers too poor to stay in one place for long. He held formal services twice as week but prayer meetings occurred more often. There'd been more need for hope. Soon Reverend Ray's flock was scheduled to cross into the Alleghenies and like every progress it was trip that tended to cull the herd.

Cable was awake when the train pulled into town. He like to cherish early mornings and so while the rest of us unpacked he sat on a rock some distance away, drink coffee and watch us work. His charges would not be moved until everyone else had set up so he could afford to linger.

I liked Harper's Ferry because it was a point of continuous transition; it was never still. I'd grown up in wartime and so I liked soldiers. I liked Reverend Ray and his shabby church and I didn't have to believe in god in order to enjoy the sermons. No one stood out in Harper's Ferry because we were all foreigners of one type or another. Men, waiting for orders, were still stationed in encampments on the heights and in the naval yards and they mixed easily with performers and the roustabout. Circus freaks were a

collection of all breeds and configurations and they shared common experiences with soldiers, men forcibly assembled and forced to travel.

Because Harper's Ferry brought new audiences to the show, via the boats the circus settled in for a long run. Days turned into weeks and eventually even the freaks began to carve places for themselves in the town, becoming known for more than how well they performed. A ritual of poker gaming, launched at the end of each day between the two displaced tribes, began within a week of the troupe's arrival. Cable attended regularly as did Appo and many of the circus children. The soldiers' camp seemed permanent and even children born on the road can be charmed by this impossible ideal. Cable and a man McCutcheon a man who drank dark beers and never got drunk eventually shifted out as the most successful of the gamblers but they didn't win often enough to annoy the rest of the players.

"What the hell do you need to know about Reverend Ray and his Pentecostal menagerie for, Cable?" McCutcheon said as he dealt grey, greased cards to four companions. "Hand me that bottle, will ya?" he nudged a roustabout seated to his left.

"My momma was Pentecostal," Cable lied, blinking in the cigar and cigarette smoke that filled the tent. "Don't hurt to visit when you can."

There were three games going, The roustabout McCutcheon had spoken to put his cards down and opened a bottle of tan and brown with an opener chained to a belt loop. Then he flicked the cap to one of the children in the tent behind him so they could add it to their game of tiddly winks.

"Take it, McCutcheon," he said. But McCutcheon was still dealing so he set it on the ground in order to work two new cards into his hand.

“Surprised to know that,” McCutcheon said to Cable.

“That my momma was religious?”

“That you had a momma,” a sniffling soldier said before sneezing into the center of the group, causing two to recoil while they laughed and protected their cards.

Cable took McCutcheon’s beer and splashed its contents into the sneezer’s face. Lacking precision he sprayed others as well. “Keep your bad air to yourself Eddie. Die outside if you gotta.”

“Dammit, boy,” McCutcheon grabbed the bottle back and checked to see if there was any liquid left. “You got a temper like an cornered bobcat. Goddammit.”

“Boy’s got his father’s temper.” Trying to keep his cards dry Appo wiped his flushed forehead and then wiped his hand on his pants. Then, sweating in the soggy confines of the tent, he vacillated between tossing two or three cards back onto the table. He finally discarded four. The card table, a spindly Victorian classic, had been sawed down so that the players could sit on the ground. Chairs were harder to find than tables. Participants sat cross-legged until their backs began to ache after which they tried to stretch out without kicking one another.

“Didn’t mean nothing,” Eddie sniffed, wiping beer off his face. He also made an attempt to dry a book set between he and Cable. “Sorry.” The book was without a cover and the top page was now slightly damp. “What’s it anyway?”

“This.” Cable pulled it out and read the title, pausing to work out the phonetics. “*The Comanche’s Dream.*”

“What’s it?”

Cable stuffed the book into a back pocket. “All about cowboys and Indians.”

“Why you reading it?” said the hapless Eddie. Beer from his face had dripped down his shirt and the cloth matted to his neck.

“Gift from a boy once, grew up with him, fellow soldier with him. He said I should read more stuff than the bible.

The church.” Cable returned to topic.

“They take just about anyone no other church’ll take.” McCutcheon finished the beer in a swallow and tossed the empty bottle through the open flaps of the tent. Bouncing off the ground, it hit a rock when it fell again emitting a high ting. Then it rolled down the slope where a girl dressed in black scooped it up. She brought it to her mother who dispatched it with a disapproving air. “They take all the coolies and Micks come in to work the railroads,” McCutcheon continued. “Greasers, dark skinned, but no niggers. Even take some of those who go down in Virginius Isle where no good man is supposed to go.”

Bored with the game of tiddly winks they had been playing, the children had stuck a target on a support pole and were trying to plink it. They were better at distance than control.

“Ow! Somebody take those damn things from fur face.” The albino boy ducked too late to avoid being pelted by a bottle top that ricocheted off his forehead and dropped into Cable’s hand.

“Otvali, Walter,” replied Fedor, the dog boy, who was studying the flicking trade. He wanted the top back but hesitated to ask. “What’s that mean in English,” Cable asked. “Bet it’s not nice.” Then he expertly flicked the top on target.

“Sorry, Cable,” Walter said.

“Go find your eyelashes, rat-eyes.”

“Best three out of five.” Fedor scooped another cap from the ground and scuttled out of Cable’s way.

“Hey,” Cable grabbed Fedor by his shirt forcing the boy to stop. “Take this.” He handed over the book.

“Stop playing with them kids and deal the next hand, dammit,” McCutcheon said. He sat to Cable’s left and passed him the deck. A stogy stuffed in his mouth made his diction less than clear. “Taking Richmond took less time than it takes you to shuffle,” he said to the boy who had learned to shuffle and deal one-handed.

“Bet you got no nearer to Richmond than here,” Cable replied, doling out the next hand. “Bet you was poling coal up and down the canal the entire war, Private.”

“Made it to the breastworks, at Petersburg. Almost to the end.”

Waving his hand in front of his face Cable fended off the gnats gathering in the twilight. “Protecting them or cowering low?” The graying canvass tent, initially set up to house mess, had been closed to keep out the bugs. But the combined body heat of twenty poker players, a dozen drinkers, the children ducking chores and several sleeping mongrels had created a smothering atmosphere. The group quickly surrendered and opened the tent flaps to vent, offering a view of trenches, pits, and military camps extending across the heights.

It also offered a view of Reverend Ray’s church. A plain square structure set off the ground by concrete pilings; it had no windows, one door and no pews. Looking more like a storage shed than a house of worship, it seemed to be crumpling within itself. A wide

crack running between two corners on the side of the building facing the gamblers' tent widened across its center and dripped a black goo.

"We mostly starved and died in them damn trenches." McCutcheon took a pull from his black and tan. "Praying for water, shaking with fever, needing shoes and dying in them. Spies cause both sides look the same coming and going so the Feds knew all about everything we did." He rolled the bottle against his forehead. They had no ice. The beer was tepid, but the glass kept it slightly chilled. "They finally shipped me to hospital before they climbed out of the trenches to burn the city. Poor bastards."

"Had spies in our units," Cable said. "Standing order kill was you find 'em."

"Good plan," McCutcheon said.

"Make some mistakes that way though," Cable replied.

"That building's coming down soon," Eddie remarked, seeing not only the crack in the church but the crumbled pieces of rotting cement collecting by the pilings.

"Comes down regularly though never with anyone inside, God knows how," a German soldier said. He said his name was Friedrich and he waved flies from his pale puffed features with a hand the size of a small ham. A good eighty pounds heavier than McCutcheon, Friedrich was even bigger than Appo and took the heat just as badly. He had already unbuttoned his shirt. He set down his cards in order to roll back his sleeves. "Sometimes the mud under the pilings moves just enough that it slops off to one side like a cracker box. They cannot build it too close to town because not one of them are welcome there. They cannot help but built it cheaply because they have no money so they keep putting up the same ramshackle they got to build up again each year."

“It’s as beat up as the rest of this town. No one lives here on purpose,” Cable said without looking up. Working the cards with one hand meant that he had to lay some flat on the table. Coordinating play took more concentration for Cable than it did for the others. Trying not to let the extra effort show took more effort still. The thinning paper was hard to work with thickly calloused fingertips and sometimes Cable had to bend the cards in order to retrieve them, causing creases which made the cards more fragile and therefore even harder to work. A rigid irritation characterized his efforts. Those who played with the boy steadily kept their eyes on their own cards and never remarked on the extra time it took for him to play his hand. It was well known that the boy’s pride was easily wounded, and he regularly demonstrated the fact that he harbored his resentments long after bad moments had passed.

“A little hard on the harbor, aren’t you, son?” Appo asked.

The view of the town below to which Cable had referred included the tattered remains of Main street that occupied the space in between the railroads and the riverbanks. Not all of the buildings had been razed. Shorter structures remained intact and some shops, damaged when their neighbors collapsed, only lacked a wall or an entire roof. Interspersed with these were a motley collection of grey trunks and bared branches sticking out like the spokes of so many beat up bicycle wheels. On the Shenandoah side of town, a Steamboat canted to one side in the water, its bow driven firmly into the riverbank by its captain who grounded it before the engine exploded and eviscerated its cargo hold. Whatever had been in the hold was gone now, leaving a gaping maw through which the opposite riverbank could be seen. Debris from the wreck tore free now and

again as the water worked the ship sending bits of wood and metal downstream to gather at a sharp curve in the river.

“It’s not as poor as home, but it’s got the same small hearted people and you never know who’s thinking what. Where I come from you cain’t make mistakes and ever forget it, but at least you know who hates you.”

“Go back home then.”

“We don’t belong anymore. Alice and me, we’re gonna find a place better.”

“Harper’s Ferry has changed hands many times of late, between Confederate and Union, and every time someone knew came to town they blew up main street, the bridges and the armory,” Friedrich said. “According to the way it has been treated, it is a beautiful sight. And hey, the Alleghenies is just down river. Go west, if you like.”

“Thinking it’s time I might,” Cable replied. “Been settling here too long. Goin’ lazy. Traveling’s better now too since they started catching conspirators. Feds have started easing up.”

“Only got two, the one that cut Seward and the lady what ran the inn and stashed weapons. Booth’s still out there,” McCutcheon said. “But if you gotta go then there’s your gathering crowd of pilgrims.” He nodded towards the congregation of plainly dressed penitents heading to service. “No more welcome in town than the carnies or the plague.”

“We’re circus, not c-c-carnies,” the albino stammered.

“Only you care about the difference, kid,” McCutcheon said. “Don’t get het up. I’m farther from home than four generations of family, dying in trenches, and I got me set off to the side up here just like you. And Fred here’s come across an ocean.” He elbowed

Friedrich who was hesitating too long over his cards. Not willing to be forced, he paused to scratch his beard that looked more like rusted wire than hair.

“My name is Friedrich, you indigent, Irish ass.”

“My kin is Scotch, Sauerkraut.”

“Sure, as if it matters.” Too big to fit under the table, Friedrich had been forced to sit alongside it.

“You can go home now. Bet they miss you on the farm in Germany.” McCutcheon grimaced at both the bet on the table and his cards.

“No future at home for me. You Americans think it’s over. One dead president. The fighting has just started.” Friedrich picked up his hand. “God!” he said, pronouncing the “D” like a “T”.

“You said you once got as far as St. Louis,” Cable said. “As far as the Missouri river.”

“Made it to the showboats set off in the river.” McCutcheon said. “They have all kinds of pretty girls working the floor. And them boats take you as far as you want to go. Card sharper like you boy might find it a hoot. Take your Chinese girl with you.”

“What are they waiting for?” Eddie asked. He had been watching the church goers gather as the church steps. “Why don’t they go inside?”

“Can’t gossip inside,” McCutcheon replied. “Reverend has rules.”

“You said them church mice were leaving. Heading out,” Cable said.

“Over the Alleghenies. Preacher roams around collecting them ‘til there’s enough to cross over. No matter that more than half of ‘em are gonna die before they see the other side.”

“Poor people sometimes make the strongest ones,” Cable said. “Used to doing without and working like dogs for it.”

“If they break an axle, if they get sick or if they get lost, they’ll set out there and use supplies while they fix sumpin’ and die in the meanwhile. They don’t have enough money to buy enough food. I been down there while the Reverend tried to barter. He got half of what he needs.”

“They got a guide?” Cable asked.

“They got a devil dresses in buckskin thinks he’s Davy Crockett’s cousin. Says he knows the way. A trail that lot of people, come the season. But they need a hard guy. Indians won’t be a bother ‘til after they cross to the other side but someone needs to ride scout, just in case. Someone needs to force the lazy ones to work. And he needs to be religious. The preacher insists.”

“Or know a secret about the good Reverend,” Cable said. The parishioners, looking more like penitents, continued to gather in front of the church.

“A preacher man with secrets?” McCutcheon said.

“No grown man has none,” Cable replied. “That’s all, boys.” He tossed down a winning hand, collected his money and stood.

“Feel your luck turning?” McCutcheon asked.

“Feel the need to talk to God’s man.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you would be the type.”

“Even I just feel the need to talk to a preacher now and again.”

West Virginia reminds me of China. It too had long wet seasons, grass and trees that clogged fecund spaces creating forests that grew so thickly in some places as to seem black in the ebbing and waning light. Here too the forests master the mountains. And just like at home trenches torn by men and machines had produced scarred places, dead zones where though the topsoil had been destroyed bright green tips continued to pierce the turf. Wide muddy paths dredged by men forcing cannon and brick loads up steep trails had cut into the growth, but fail to kill the botanical urge to produce.

The German was correct. Harper's Ferry had changed hands seven times in four years. The armory and its placement at the crossing of three rivers made it an attractive acquisition. Each time there was a fight no one gave up easy. But stubborn men don't seem to mind the blasted places they leave behind. Inhabitants found shelter from the downpours that made the river flood, amidst the redoubts and ammunition pits that peppered the landscape like scattered birdshot. There they would gather together under make shift shelters while rain washed mud, sticks and rocky conglomerate downhill where it clumped behind trees and circled the foundations of decimated parapets. Campers slept sitting upright. Men rolled up their pant legs. Women wore their dresses short to keep them out of the mud, and everyone stayed wet and cold all day long. The moisture cast a moldering taint, fostering a pungent mist that ranged the uphill.

Cable preferred to stand in the rain than attend service. He waited outside by the steps until the Reverend was done. Then he watched while God's refugees file from the rotting

church and spread across the landscape. In clusters of two and three, the scantily clothed scarecrow people filtered into the foliage that rounded the clearing. Leaving in the quiet mood cast by Reverend Ray's evensong weary worshippers trooped towards pallets piled under tarps. The temperatures dropped at night and water helped the chill pierce threadbare clothing. Families huddled to keep warm and wondered and worried about their trip over the Appalachians to a place where it was rumored they could travel to the Midwest plains where the climate was warmer and where they could own land and stop running because they had found home. A pack of drifters who no longer belonged to their own people, the mob consisted of Coolies heading to the coast, Swedes and Russians seeking farmland, Irishmen in search of jobs and Hessians who could no longer stomach railroad work. An Indian half-breed or two was threaded among the mix, Cherokee and displaced Ojibwa mostly. A ground down lot, there were more children present than adults. What the war didn't kill, poverty took and long hard miles tended to destroy the older ones faster. They all clustered together underneath the umbrella offered by the preacher who promised to guide them over the Blue Ridge pass onto fertile plains. As Cable watched they evaporated into the timberline like bedraggled fairies. Preferring to make his presence known only to the preacher Cable stepped into the shadows and waited out of sight.

One of the last men to leave the church stopped to speak to the preacher. Out of respect he backed down onto the second step. It sagged, but held. Then he turned and in one piece shook the pastor's hand and deftly arrested the progress of his son who was trying to dart away.

“Thank you Revr’nd,” the father said. Even standing a step higher the pastor was shorter than this congregant, a lank stooping figure who lowered his head to address the diminutive figure of his leader while he anchored his son in place. The preacher clasped the man’s roughened hand in both of his own.

“Good day to you, Michael,” he said. Dressed plainly but no differently than the rest of his flock, the reverend was set apart from the others by an effort of presence and an aura of intelligence that made him appear purposeful. If one spent time watching the man behave one noticed a kind of craft at work. He interacted with his parishioners but did not empathize with them. He understood their fears but had no sense of them himself. An alien among his flock he used the difference to seem unique when in truth I suspect that he was simply stone hearted. Still, he had an easy way with people.

The reverend nodded to the boy who ducked his eyes and pulled against his father’s grip as hard as he dared. “Good day to you too, Henry,” he said to the boy.

“What do you say, boy?”

“Thank you, Reverend,” Henry said to the ground.

The Reverend bent down to meet the boy face to face. Placing a crooked finger under Henry’s chin, he tilted it up exposing a strawberry birthmark splashed across the boy’s neck and face. Henry blushed and the mark darkened as he resisted the gentle pressuring of the two figures shadowing his small form. “Ready for the big day, Henry?”

At first Henry refused to respond.

“Yes, Reverend,” Michael said.

“Yes, Reverend,” Henry said.

I don’t know what’s the matter with you boy?”

“Got a snare in the forest, Daddy.” He answered as respectfully as possible given that his attention was focused on returning to the woods where a line of wire was tied to bait with clove hitches and constrictor knots. Hidden underneath dogwood, it threaded through the winding Honeysuckle that danced underneath the trees. Trapped inside was a dead rabbit.

“Many changes in this boy’s life in a short period of time and now.” The preacher took his hand from Henry’s face and rested it on his head as if in benediction. “We’re about to leave on an adventure over the mountain. It makes perfect sense that he has forgotten his manners and some of his learning I would bet. We need to get back to his lessons. How’s your new puppy, Henry? I understand Mei found a replacement for your father’s lost hound.”

“He dropped into a deadfall,” Henry replied.

Henry spoke an abbreviated truth. Though he had used a deadfall to trap the dog, he preferred spring snares. His contraption had also snared a five pound Cottontail by the fore leg. Rather than stick its head in the noose it tested the placement with a paw. When the rope pulled taut the doe was trapped just above the joint. On humans it would have been a wrist.

“We don’t have luck with dogs since his mother died. Had to bury the dog’s bones myself, boy wouldn’t,” Michael said. In burying the dog the father had stumbled onto the place where his son had been disposing of small bodies. “Whyn’t you tell the Reverend what you are doing out there boy.”

“Just playing pretend Daddy. Preacher says animals have souls so I’m burying them so God can find them.”

"It's a waste of meat and time, boy," Michael said.

"Are you wasting food, Henry?" the preacher asked.

"No sir," the boy replied. He stood firmly corrected in between the two, his father's arresting hand and the preacher who turned Henry's small hand palm up.

"He needs a harder hand. Michael said. "I just don't have the strength with what it takes to get through the days." He let his son press against him because for a moment he had a flickering sense of the boy being in a kind of trouble he couldn't understand.

"Our guide arrives tomorrow," Reverend Ray said.

"I found a place for him on the riverbank," Michael replied.

"I've worked with him before. His experience and skill will be invaluable."

"The bank took my word about the money Reverend and let me put the tithes into your account." Michael put his head down like the boy had done. "It's a good thing you do for us, taking us to the Ohio."

"You are a good man Michael. See you tomorrow Henry?" He still held the boy's hand and the boy was still trying to pull away without being rude. "We need to continue working on your reading skills. You have missed some of our evening readings."

"He will be there Reverend if I have to walk him there myself."

"I should check all my traps afore it gets too dark Daddy." Henry shivered. The preacher pressed his hand. Henry held his breathe and stopped pulling back.

"Can I go?"

"Will I see you tomorrow?" the preacher held fast to the little hand.

"Yes Reverend. Can I go Daddy?"

Michael nodded. Finally free, Henry rushed down the steps towards a crude trail barely visible in the dimming light. Stumbling when he hit the ground he dropped to his hands pushed off and kept moving without stopping to check where he had scraped his knee.

“Tomorrow, Reverend,” Michael said. He tipped an oily brim and stepped away.

“God bless, Michael,” the preacher listened to the sound of the boy crashing through the undergrowth.

“What’s the matter with you boy?” Michael called out as he trailed his son down the hill.

“Your momma, rest her weary soul, would be ashamed.”

“Sorry Poppa,” Henry replied still crashing through the tulip poplar and oak stands.

At their approach flycatchers hunting bugs hiding in buttonbush shrubs hurried off. Gnat catchers and swallows darted through the air hunting open winged skippers that had been stirred from their nests by chipmunks and squirrels. Owls set their sights on mice. Grouse and quail shuffled out of sight while the foxes and skunk followed, leaving nests that were not necessarily filled with prey except to an animal that fed on babies.

The reverend turned to tend to the mess left inside. Not all his parishioners remembered to replace the things they borrowed during service and the benches were in disarray. After casting one more glance toward the trail Henry had just blazed, Reverend Ray stepped back into the church to effect realignment.

Have you ever heard a rabbit scream? It's the only sound it can make, a whistling cry that can be mistaken for no other. They cry when they are trapped and have run to the edge of their ropes. Some break their limbs in their struggles. Cable wanted to leave me and I had no choice but to snare him, by any means. Alice knew that I detested her but I worked on her. She like everyone else needed friends. And I kept her near so that Cable would never stray far. I stoked her faith in her God, because it kept her still and she was ripe for fairytales. Faith is a funny fairytale and it works on feeble minds. Thank you Grace for telling your children the Indian stories, for telling them stories about the devil. I thought the doctor, Appo and Cable's father would if not scare at least worry Cable while I kept him staked. He seemed to give up after the shooting. Meeting the preacher was a happy accident. He invited Alice in and told her more stories. But I should have known that Cable would tear off his leg rather than stay caged. I should have dropped him off the train, fed him a full dose and kept at it until he died. Maybe he would have been left here waiting for me instead of the other way around. I am certain this must all be Cable's fault.

But I also should have guessed that even death would leave me hanging by his string. I should have known better. Maybe the pox worked on my mind. I waited too long to go to the doctor. And I don't know if I am remembering this story clearly. The memories mix and sometimes maybe I am telling you things I wish had happened instead of what actually did. Sometimes I forget whose mind I am in.

I have been alone for a long time now. Since I remembered that Cable tried to leave me for good, no one visits me anymore. I stand by the row of souls that still have purpose and they pass away. I have drifted so far from my ancestors that they seem as distant as lights in the sky. My numbers are bad, if I still had numbers, for I believe that numbers are for the living and that once you die they no longer have a hold on you. Unless of course a one armed boy holds you near in his mind and refuses to let you fly. I have no luck at all anymore.

We followed a man like the reverend back in China. He was a leader who preached about the heavenly kingdom to the poor so we would follow. Then when he saw that we would lose the war he poisoned himself rather than stand by us to the end. My mother would say that he died honorably.

Cable ever the watcher, stood on the steps for some time as the preacher eased his chairs back into perfectly crooked rows. Pews required too much wood but everyone in town was willing to part with a chair or two, now and again.

“That little mudsill is fit to swallow his tongue. Is it ony the fear a God that’s got him quick stepping?” Cable said.

“He’s always had a shy way,” replied the minister. “Boys that age, it’s common.”

“Yes, sir.” Cable was slightly older than Henry but near enough in experience to know exactly what it was like to constantly be afraid of big men.

At sunset the bugs began to busy. A common damp nurtured a blossoming population. Mosquitoes, gnats and Dun Skippers swarmed at nightfall. A buggy bloom began to mass around Cable and he ignored it until Reverend Ray gestured that he should enter. Then he used his hat to wave a free space in front of his face and stepped inside. The reverend by habit calculated the size and shape of the boy who was a third his age, half his weight and just his height. Cable’s style of clothing had changed again. Now he wore a creased cotton shirt with rolled up sleeves. Pants worn patched at the knees were cut off at the bottom above the ankles. The end of the crippled arm peeked out from within its dirty folds and it was dirty. The bare skin had a greasy sheen because baths were often too much of a hassle and not necessary in the company Cable kept. His face was all bone and hollows. He had become a figure pared down, a scarecrow without the

stuffing. Moving through life was stripping away all but the necessities inside him as well.

“You got a grinding look, son,” the preacher said.

“I do as well as anyone else.” Cable carried his hat clenched into a ball. “You know.” He waved the ball. “You learn to make out.” He slapped a bug that had settled on his neck.

“I bet that when there are beds you prefer to sleep on rocks,” the reverend said.

“Something Christian in that isn’t there.”

“Nothing particularly Christian about needing sleep or food and you’re a little young to use that tone with me.”

Cable started to close the door behind him. But the Reverend waved him away and shouldered it wide open, scraping a surface layer of splinters off the stoop as he did.

“Sometimes the children return from the streets with donations and they come here,” he said.

Prayer books were still scattered about the room and a touch of mildew clogged the senses. It combined with a boggy reek. Setting cement, freshly cut beams and dust reminded Cable of rebirth and hope and he hadn’t expected to find it in a church. He squinted in the dark and inspected the room.

“Just rebuilt,” the preacher said, and made a gesture like a housewife apologizing for the mess.

“Bet keeping this place functional is like herding cats. They say it falls down a lot.”

“We worship whether there’s a roof overhead or not.” The preacher stiffened but before he could say ‘scat,’ Cable offered his hand.

“I work in the circus, Reverend. Me and my sister Alice, I mean. My sister, in particular, finds comfort in her faith.”

“My church takes all comers. And I know dear Alice, she comes to every service she can.” Ignoring Cable’s hand the reverend reached past it and clasped the boy’s shoulder, then quickly took his hand away because touching the boy felt like gripping wood. The boy neither invited nor rejected his touch. If asked, the reverend would have remarked that Cable acted as if he had not felt contact. He stepped farther towards the seats leaving the doorway empty but for the clouds of birds and bugs. Just outside Gnatcatchers and swallows dove into the insect hoards that had gathered. The small bugs bunched and spread in groups and like exploding flowers the clustered butterflies scattered and resettled in the trees as the birds worked. The owls hooted, the frogs burped and a dull buzz comprised of a million bugs lay in a sonorous bass line for it all. Rejected, the preacher started collecting Bibles while he waited for the boy to state his case.

“Do you share your sister’s faith?” Reverend Ray dropped the last of the bibles he had collected into a box.

Instead of answering, Cable shook his head.

Gesturing towards the pews, crude planks hammered together, the preacher allowed Cable to lead the way.

“My momma was Cherokee,” Cable said placing his hat on the seat in between them. Seeing the hat unbundled reminded the pastor that he had lost his own. He ran a hand through sparse black strands that had matted to his scalp and reminded himself to buy another. “Out of the hills in North Carolina.” Cable said. “Pentecostal cause of Daddy.

But the town didn't take to her in church once my daddy brought her down from the hills. So she prayed her way at home."

The preacher hung his arm over the back of the pew so that it almost touched the boy. He had learned his lesson about touching but in a parish comprised of many orphans it was hard to break the habit of intimacy that a boy like Cable disliked. "She died without God's comfort then," the preacher said.

"She died quiet. It was a comfort to the rest of us, I guess," Cable replied. He scratched the end of his stump against his lower jaw where a rash from his neck had begun to spread. "They called her a sinner, no, something else maybe." He rested his arm in his lap which caused the priest to flinch. "We buried her in the hills." Something scuttled across the roof, scratching the metal surface as it went, then the sound vanished, as if whatever crawled the roof had frozen or taken flight. "Maybe you can say. Was Momma a sinner because she let them keep her out of church or were the others sinners for kicking her out?"

"I would not presume to guess what the preacher in your congregation might have known," the pastor said.

The conversation was dragging at Cable. Weighted to his seat he felt a tug inside. Ideas, memories, little clawed creatures crawled in his head feeding a waxing darkness within. The pastor turned to face him and Cable smelled flavored cigar smoke and peppermint. A chill was overtaking the mountainside. What had been hot and muggy now turned dank. Reverend Ray covered a hand with missing fingertips by clasping it in the other but he was too late to hide the detail from the boy.

“Have you come to beg favors because the hour is late,” Reverend Ray said. “If you are willing to commend yourself and are asking to join us. We can take you in. You and your sister for as long as we remain. Or do you perhaps want to leave the circus. It’s no place for children.”

“I take care of me and Alice.” Cable stared at the hand beneath the hand in the pastor’s lap and wondered at the power of faith that had never blessed him with a good thing. He had come to say something and now, sitting in the dark, he wasn’t sure he had the will. Through the open door drifted the rising rhythms of the peep toads and pickerels beginning to ratchet up as the light disappeared and the temperature plunged. An owl screech silenced the frogs and the birds for a minute. Then the frogs started back up, followed by the finches, too small to make a morsel for an owl, but just big enough to be snake bait.

“Father.” A waif in gingham stood just outside the open door.

“Missy,” the reverend replied.

“Dinner is ready.”

“I’ll be along,” he replied. She curtsied and left.

“You got a bad deal?” Cable pointed at the reverend’s fingers.

“When I was little,” the pastor said. “My father worked the saw mills. So did I.” He brandished the scarred hand missing the tops of the last three fingers.

“Is that your girl?”

“My wife as it happens.”

“Uh, she’s younger than Alice.”

“It’s not for you to say.” Before the words were out Cable had found his will.

“What if a preacher is a sinner, Reverend? Can a liar save anybody? Say, if this man done things? Say someone knew?” Cable asked. Outside the door a bird of prey dove in on prey and screamed. The sound, a hard solid note broadened and dissipated, echoing as it diminished.

“A corrupt minister is profound evil,” the minister replied. “His behavior should be of the highest order.”

“Can he be forgiven?”

“That’s a divine gift. It’s not for me to say.”

“I met this girl once she used to say that sin is only sin if you get caught at it. But she was pretty angry when she said it. Maybe she didn’t mean it,” Cable said. In his mind’s eye he found something that made him forget that what he wanted was a bad thing and his manner changed more.

“That’s a faithless view,” the preacher replied.

“People got to trust a reverend or they wouldn’t do things on his say so.” Cable tapped the reverend on the chest. The reverend knocked Cable’s hand away but now the boundary had been crossed. “Everyone here know that most people die trying to cross mountains?”

The preacher didn’t respond.

“What I do is follow people what I know is the fellow you got to guide ain’t had to cross those mountains all the way for some time. You oughta tell him to stop playing cards and drinking down in the isle. People listen in.”

“We trust in God in this church,” the preacher finally said. “We trust in the future and in our community and we accept what we are given. You perhaps have another view.”

“Alice asked if she could come with you, I guess. She and Mei been talking.”

“She asked. I am prepared to make allowances and offer her succor. Is that what you want too?”

Rubbing his arms as if he was cold, Cable stood and walked to the doorway. The only source of light in the room, the sunlight angling through the door, was gone. The boy put his hat back on and stood there. A declining moon gave him grey form. Standing in the doorway he presented a stark figure stripped of specifics, an unclear silhouette. “You take a boat upriver to your trailhead. I wanna be on it boat when it goes but I don’t want to be counted.” Cable lit a cigarette and tossed the match into a dry weed patch, incinerating it instantly. “Look at that.” He leaned against the doorframe that groaned slightly when he did. “It’s so wet out here you don’t expect to find stuff that burns like ‘at.”

“That makes no sense,” the pastor whispered.

Cable tossed another match onto another weed patch. “Me and Alice’ll just show up.” The flames highlighted the fact that the cold had taken all Cable’s color. He seemed the hue of aged parchment rather than flesh. The pastor had the notion that if he rubbed his eyes maybe the boy would vanish.

“Our journey will be hard but you would be welcome in any case.”

“We won’t stay the whole trip. We’ll get off just before you gotta skedaddle over the mountain.”

“Who wants you?”

“Lots of people, Reverend. But mostly just one, who won’t let go.” He laughed a blast of smoke and coughed once when it backed up on him. “Haven’t seen him yet but he has to be near and I’m running to ground.”

“Your sister says you are in trouble with the law. I will not help you escape judgment. I am a man of God.”

“I hear that we all are.”

“What about sweet Alice if you get caught?”

The voices of the men gambling in the tents drifted towards the pair. “I think this will work,” Cable said. “I’ve thought it through.”

“I am perfectly safe from the law. We don’t need your company to bring interest. Many don’t want us as it is. We are the cast offs.”

“You say no,” Cable said, “and I’ll go down to town and tell them you go down in Virginia’s Isle, the wrong side of town. I’ll tell the soldiers you’ve stole and they’ll find the money on you. I’ll burn this place to the ground and they’ll find a torch in your hand. I’ll pull kids out of my hat say you touched them. You should see my sister cry when she wants to. Everyone doesn’t have to believe me, father, only some. Don’t really know all I could do but I’m a good hand at turning up bad luck.”

“Someone will remember that you’ve been here. Someone looking for you will ask around. The river is the only way in and out of Harper’s Ferry.”

“Someone already is.” Cable shuddered as if he were cold. “But I got an idea to make it so that it might seem like we never left town. And if I gotta tear into you to make it work, I will.”

“No need to panic. We’re scheduled to ride the canal to Cumberland.”

“I know it. We’ll ketch up with you.” Cable stepped off the stoop into the dirt and headed down the same path that Henry had taken. The reverend followed him to the door.

“Have you ever entered a church before today, sinner?” The sinner in question kept walking towards the woods and was nearly hidden in the trees before he answered.

“Being in church is too much indoors for me Reverend. I need more room than a church allows.”

“You’re not afraid of hell, then.”

“I’m afraid of it Reverend but God just keeps asking me to do worse things every day. All I’m doing is keeping up.” The last words were hard to hear but the reverend got the gist of it.

The path from the church down to Virginius Isle snaked through the woods. Cable took his time. He was feeling sour and the act of trekking freed him as did walking in darkness. The forest blocked out the sky and the moon. A boy raised in the mountains learns the pattern to the way trails wind move, to the way growth is directed, so he does not need to see to find his way. Close to town the forest was quiet. It was also cool and wet. The calming smell of damp bark and leaves rising. Cable never liked the smell of urban industry. It always accompanied strangers and displacement. The woods housed his strongest memories of permanence. He felt at home when he was in them.

He thought he heard a steady sound and stopped to listen. The clunk of wood hitting wood rolled towards him. When it did not stop Cable stepped off the path and hunted it down. He found Henry pounding the substance out of a flattened raccoon. The beast was long dead but the boy was fired up. He cried as he worked but you had to draw near to see this. The wood chaffed his hands. He had to stop and reset his grip because the branch was a thick one. He dropped it once, then again. The third time he dropped it, he let it stay. The beast was splayed on its back every body part mashed and off color. The light in its glimmering eyes had been flattened to grey stones. And while it stared at nothing Henry knelt down and petted it.

“Good boy,” he said.

Cable stayed out of sight and left before the boy sensed his presence. He stepped away feeling as if he was traveling through time rather than crossing mere distances.

When he was younger, when the pressure of being a bad man's son forced him into the woods he too would seek out victims just to see how it felt to compel something that couldn't resist. He didn't pity the boy but he understood and didn't care. Henry would need to save himself.

The woods dumped directly into Virginius Isle, a small venue. Cable kept to the shadows until he was satisfied that no one there was looking for him. The preacher was right: their father could have not known where Cable and Alice had gone but he would sooner or later, think to follow the river. Because the circus had traveled by road, a slow trip, Cable had hoped their father might have even come and gone. If his plan worked and they escaped, their father might stop looking.

Where none but the dead-enders would go, Cable found the Indian. A pot-bellied teen dressed in a business suit, manning a tent. He saw Cable coming but waited for him to close in before he acknowledged his presence. An Indian selling wares in the isle was not unusual but keeping the profits of his trade required craft. He sat on the box that held his wares and stowed his cash in the weeds after every transaction was completed.

"How's the day?" Cable asked him.

"Like owning the little end of the horn. How about you mudsill?"

Cable handed over the last of his money and Indian gave him a bottle from the box and tucked the change into a hole in the ground. "I have a mind to soak in the drink for a bit," Cable said.

"He is here," the Indian said.

Cable hesitated but didn't have the drive to search the crowd. "We're fixing to leave soon," he said. "I just need to draw him in one more time. Hope he doesn't kill me, yet."

The Indian pulled a tent flap aside and let him enter. He faced the door and settled down to drink while he watched the foot traffic through the crack between the flaps. Fyodor mumbling in Russian stumbled in, and passed out before he could open the stopper. Cable crawled over and used him as a backrest. Fyodor was a stocky boy, with a broad back. The weight of one skinny cracker would not wake him.

Half way through his bottle Cable saw Alice wander past. Part of the reason he always knew when she was loose was that she and he always headed towards the same dark places. Children raised in bog water keep returning to its source.

She accompanied some of the troupe children. Taller than the rest, she stood out like a stork among chicks. She had a wad of money in her hand and from the way the boys clung to her she had promised to spend it. Cable thought he saw Jesse, the boy lying drowned in a riverbed stalked her while she worked the crowd. He was used to phantoms by now, judged them to be a trick of the guilty mind. When needs be Alice could parrot normal human interaction so successfully that she seemed quite the coquette. Out of habit Cable started to rise. She was a danger on her own.

Then he fell back. "Boy needs a day off," he said sloppily. "Needs time ever onct in a while." Hearing himself bungle the sentence he lifted his bottle to check the level. Lots of little boys together should make each one safer. His sister would first cull the herd and that took days. Cable thought of his mother and wondered why she had bothered with disappointing children. If the preacher were made of sterner stuff than he looked, both children would soon be in trouble. But the day had been too long and tired of the real, Cable relaxed and lazed inside a warming doze until a mud caked, boot caught his eye.

He followed its lines upward to the face of the bastard towering overhead. The man knelt and took the bottle then he swigged some booze and spat it out.

“Gotcha again, son.” Behind him the tent flaps were now closed.

Cable was too deep into the bottle and it was too late in the day, too long in the journey to be frightened. “You want your own, Daddy?”

Gaines prodded Cable. “Get it.”

“How’s your side?” Cable asked without stirring. If he was getting a beating he wasn’t cooperating in the slightest.

“Mick nailed me good.” Gaines touched the place where he had been shot. “Took a little mending time or I would have been here sooner.” He walked to the opening and forced the flaps aside but the Indian and his box of booze were gone.

“Where’s the boys, Daddy?” Cable sat up and steadied himself. “Bet they are looking for you? They give out your name yet? Davey looked ready to burst afore the president got shot.” He made a show of feeling around in his pockets for a cigar and a light. By the time his father decided to sit he had given up. The man made a wobbly descent and Cable realized that they were equally drunk and that his father now sat between him and the door.

“They offered 30,000 for Booth and no one mentioned me,” Gaines said. He patted Cable’s cheek. “Couldn’t. Wasn’t where I said I’d be, was at the cop station telling them what I knew.”

“It’s good news for you.”

“They’re gonna pardon deserters who sign a pledge to the Union,” Gaines said.

“Think I may get out of this thing alive. But you still got problems.”

Hoping his father meant hiding out and not hiding from the law Cable kept his mouth shut. Someone trying to get inside argued with the Indian who had returned to his post. They could see wobbling shadow figures through the fabric folds.

“Boys should keep their heads down until they become men,” Gaines said.

“Some boys can,” Cable said. The arguing outside stopped and the Indian’s silhouette settled back on its box.

His father handed him a paper that said anyone who found Cable could collect an award.

“Dead or alive.” Cable crumpled the notice and tossed it away. “I’m famous.” The paper traveled a long arc, bounced off the tent and fell to the ground near his side.

Gaines laughed into a coughing fit. Shaped by rage, the sound tore its way out. “My daddy was such a liar.” He said. “He said working hard was the stuff,” he swallowed another dose from Cable’s bottle. “Then a course, he died leaving nothing behind for anybody to live on.” He waved his hand at a lost horizon. “Learned to fight from my old man. Learned to take nothing from no one. You got that from me.” He worked his bottle some more then let it rest on his chest while he thought. “Then, he just lost all the blood in his face one day, choked up and died.”

Staring at the tent flaps as if he could see through them Cable thought he heard girls giggle. Which reminded him of his sister except Alice never giggled, as far as he could remember.

“Funny being the outstanding citizen in the family,” Gaines said. “Calms you.” Someone punched the tent and moved on. “But it’s not perfect. Only kingdom a man really has is family. He’s nothing without it.” He poked Cable, raised the finger to make a

point. "People judge. Can't just let my flesh and bone just wander. What kind of man would that be? Boys, they got to obey and move on, but the girls, they got to stay."

Gaines hovered over his son in a slowing sway, his words were evenly measured, and the sweet smell of warm booze drafted on his breath.

Shot to a spot beyond where he could proceed, the plain truth bubbled up in Cable. "Doesn't make sense. Wish it made sense," he said. "You'll just take 'em home and stuff 'em in the dirt."

Gaines took a deep breath, another drink. The words were coming harder. "You can't beat me boy. Not the way of the world for boys to best their old men." He stopped speaking and Cable waited. When he was in a lowing mood Gaines worst impulses could be thwarted with patience. "I know all your tricks," Gaines said. "Tried 'em all before you were born. Give me my girls or I will get me the police to hang you. You got the baby stowed somewhere. Never can fucking find them both at once." He leaned in close so he could mumble. "I may even let the Chinee and you can go. Did me a favor killing that preacher's boy."

If Gaines had been smarter he might have been able to read the look in his son's face better. The boy slouched backwards until he was lying on the ground. "Been too trusting," Cable said. "Not my style." Then he seemed to drift and Gaines tapped him with his boot. "Come to the circus tomorrow night," Cable said. "I'll have 'em both there and then you'll go away. Tired of the job of them girls anyway."

Gaines grunted and stood. "That's a good place." He finished the bottle and dropped it. He paused before he stepped through the flaps. "I set boys on the dock, the rails and the roads. I guess I can't stop you from taking to the hills. Do that and they'll just run you

down after I call on the sheriff. Might call the sheriff anyway but I wanna make you come to me and hand them over so they know you can't do nothing."

"Why do you care, Daddy?" The words slipped out and Cable was surprised that he still wanted to know.

"They're mine and you need to be taken down a peg." He inhaled again and Cable heard the liquid railing of bad lungs. "Might turn you in after but you can run faster on your own, might even doing you a favor, making you mind." Then he left. The tent flaps slapped together cutting off what little light the night had to offer. The Indian ducked inside once he was certain that the big man was gone for good. He brought another bottle with him.

"I would have run off from home except I was scared, never left the mountain until the war. Where was I gonna go? Now I run off, he still keeps coming. Shit."

"Need something," the Indian asked. He meant another bottle.

"Shit. Ghosts and shit." Cable replied and so the Indian turned away.

Fyodor grumbled and tried to roll over so Cable punched him until he lay still. Then Fyodor muttered something in Russian. "Shut up," Cable replied. He forced the dog boy flat and leaned against his bulk until he too passed out dreaming of the day by the river when he drowned his neighbor because his girl told him to.

I may have lied to you in the beginning. Maybe it's true that the day Jesse died was the day everything changed for Cable and not the day he beat Hadden to death. I was trying to save us. My mistake, that I now see as I stare down at the ground to the boy who didn't care who sleeps with the girl I was, is that Cable was a child who had lost all he

could stand to lose. One more back step and he would have disappeared into the brush forever, just another 'coon beaten to death by another stick of wood. When he told me about his plan to disappear I thought it meant us alone, us alike. I thought he meant to blow up the world and start fresh. We'd leave the circus and all of it behind. I see space between Cable and me that I did not see then. I see fractures now between who I am and who I was. The girl I was should have known better. I had the wisdom of my ancestors at my back and I should have known better. I definitely overplayed my hand.

In the middle of another creative iteration, Harper's Ferry was bustling with construction. Boats ferrying building materials lined up on both banks as workmen carried supplies to the mills, the factories, the arsenal and the bridges, stretched across both rivers that were being repaired. The railroad station, the first building to be fully restored, serviced passengers night and day. Supply wagons coursed up and down the main roads accompanied by teams headed towards work sites. Stores and saloons, a lower priority than the rest of the reconstruction, were sheltered in tents. Rows of white steepled canvas alternated with permanent structures as merchants hawked services and wares from saw horse tables set at the entrances. Dogs, raccoons and skunks boldly foraged the trash heaps for food at night and rested in the shadows just out of sight during the day. A bang followed by a yelp or squeal signified the beginning of the business day for merchants whose first chore was to clear vermin from the space around their shops. Overhead falcons and turkey vultures glided across town, casting about for easy marks.

Less refined amusements settled in the sludge at the low end of town. Every time it rained tents washed away. The facilities in Virginius were scraps--open gambling booths and whiskey shops. Dirtier, more weathered and comprised of materials easily lost and easily replaced, these facilities housed the transient types. On average, someone was killed in Virginius Isle nearly every day. Unwise tourists could be fleeced of all they owned on a single visit.

Alice and I walked these streets twice a week for business. The day before each show we were supposed to post new bills. I see us from here. Me, a foot shorter and ten pounds lighter leading the way, like mistress and chattel, or fox and stork. Alice, followed several steps behind the smaller, straight backed figure, and I had to keep her in tow with constant conversation. She had no settled focus and would have drifted otherwise. She had been out all night and needed sleep but I hadn't wanted to leave her alone. Once we reached a point in the center of isle, I pointed out places where Alice should hang fliers, separated our stack and gave her half the sheets. She could ruin any job so I watched her hang a few before I fully attended to my own part. She had trouble from the start.

"Start by putting one on top of that beer bill. Cover them all over." Then I crumpled and tossed away an advertisement for hair cream and replace it with one of ours. All other bills were in competition for attention. What could not be removed was covered over and soon our trail was littered with shredded remnants. When I looked back the way we had come I could see the wind off the Potomac drafting down main, street carrying much of our fodder back to the water's edge where it smushed against the river banks.

"Too high," Alice said, reaching for a circular placed slightly out of range. "But I see how." I wasn't listening too closely and so before I knew it Alice had crossed the street and retrieved a solution to the height problem.

"Arresti il ladro," someone shouted. "Thief!" This and the fluttering of shiny fliers being hurried away by the wind caught my attention. I turned and saw my near barefoot, companion crossing the street with a shoe shine's maple box under her arm. The papers fluttering by had been the pile Alice should have been carrying. The harried owner of the stand rushed after her. "No," he cried after the girl who did not listen. Grabbing her arm,

he turned her around and tugged on the box. "Dialo di nuovo me." Then he tugged her arm, but was afraid to pull too hard. "Please, girl," he said in heavily accented English. "Dialo indietro." And he tugged again when Alice balked.

"Hey, dago," someone shouted behind him. "Watcha doing to the girl!"

"It's a carnie. Who cares?" Citizens lolling on the street, bunched up.

"Can you do tricks?" a man asked. Then he laughed when I directed a hand gesture as him as I hurried over.

"Don't cause trouble," I snapped.

"It's too high," Alice was too engrossed to hear the caterwauls. Clutching the box she hampered the man's efforts to retrieve his property because in order to grab it he had to risk touching her chest. "It's too high," she said again and hugged the box more tightly.

"Please." He released her arm but followed her. When she used it as a step stool she had to stand on the box in tiptoe to replace the offensive poster.

"Give it back." I reached for the box and missed because Alice twisted away.

She pointed at the circular overhead. "I need this."

I screamed four sharp curses at her which stopped her from squirming then wrenched the box from her hands and returned it to the Italian. "They gonna toss us out of this town if you cause trouble," I said. Then she looked about to cry prompting another possible scene. So I sat her down and made her sit still. Looking at her closely I could see that she hadn't bathed in days. "I wish you'd clean up better," I said. I pulled up a piece of her skirt and tried to wipe some of the grime from her face but it was as dirty as she was.

"Don't you got a better dress?"

“Reverend gave me some, but I like yellow,” Alice said, submitting to the quasi-cleaning as if she were a baby. The dress was the same one she had been wearing since D.C. A gift from some charity, it was another prize she would not relinquish. “And I like my shoes. I found them.” She raised a foot to reveal a shoe so worn at the heel and toe that she was in reality, barefoot.

“You’ve no pride, Alice.” I spit on another piece of the skirt and only managed to make another streaking mess on her cheek. “You always gonna look like a dirty half-breed no matter what.”

“Close up. You look poorly,” Alice said and I realized she’d been staring at me while I rubbed.

“Get those.” I dropped the dress hem and pointed at glossy bills whirling away in the wind. Appo had printed them in Washington. They featured animal acts and pictures of acrobats. Shiny figures glistening in the sunlight as they whirled down the street. Alice hurried after them and began to take pleasure in the chase forgetting that she was supposed to catch the papers and not just chase after them. I yelled at her now and again when I thought of it. But still she stumbled around like a chicken. So I decided to ignore her and continue my part of the work until eventually she caught up to me in order to hand over a fistful of wadded wet circulars. “You been drinking? No, not smart enough to drink,” I said and threw the papers away. “Just keep with me. I’m getting bored with you.”

“Sometimes I wished I was to home,” Alice replied. “Don’t like all this moving around. Jesse says I should go home.”

“Jesse, who?” A sleek black carriage filled with well dressed occupants passed by and I tuned Alice out. The carriage made me jealous and I wondered what it was like to ride in one. “Jesse.” The name registered like a page finally turned face up. “Jesse. Like a ghost?” I asked.

Alice plucked at her chopped locks and then fussed with her frock. “Do you think I got all the bugs out?” she asked, looking up as if she could see her skull. She stopped by a shop window and tried to inspect her reflection but she saw a bulletin board in the background of her reflection and went to it and began tearing down all the notices regardless of their content so that we might have more space to post ours.

I grabbed her wrist hard enough to hurt. Alice blanched but did not pull away. “Cable been talking to you about the war, stupid girl?”

“No, Cable never says nothing about the war.”

“You know Jesse is dead though,” I said. Resisting the urge to slap the girl I released her and picked up and replaced a roster of slain soldiers that she had discarded. “You hold onto the stack from now on and I’ll post.”

She took my papers and dutifully followed me.

“You know what they say about ghosts?” I progressed down the street to another post. “Ghosts come to earth when they are hungry. Maybe he wants to eat you,” I said. Then I reached for a bill and saw Alice looking at the sores on my arm. Ragged clothing hid fewer evils.

“Do they hurt?” Alice asked.

“Naw and they go away.” I pulled my sleeves down. “Keep me from getting customers when they come though.”

Alice looked stricken. “Don’t say those things.”

“What did you do to Jesse that his ghost is mad at you? You tell Cable that you seen ghosts?”

“Just makes Cable mad,” Alice replied. “Been better for everyone if it had been Jesse instead of Cable who found me. Cable says...” Then she stopped herself and sought a distraction. “Look Mei, it’s a cat in the watering trough.”

“What are you saying?” The girl’s mind was like a paper lantern whirling down a breeze blown river. I looked at the trough against my better judgment and saw nothing but the water being churned by horses lapping at its surface.

“Well, you can’t see it, but I do.”

“You said, ‘Cable says,’ Cable says what?”

“I don’t know.” Alice plucked at her hair again tugging single strands from her scalp.

“I said stop it.” I slapped her hand. Slapped her twice to make up for the times I had resisted the impulse. She flinched but didn’t react otherwise.

“Did you every have a baby, Mei?”

“Not one I kept.”

“You don’t know where it is, your own baby?” she asked.

“No, I don’t know where it went. I’d rather you tell me about cats in the trough,” I said.

“A whole baby? Did you lose it?”

“I gave it up.”

“Couldn’t your mamma raise it?”

“I was on the streets, my momma was long gone.”

“Then you come to know Cable.”

I laughed without humor. “Yes, after that I come to know Cable.”

“But he’s not your suitor.”

She could ask questions that tugged. “Tired of this,” I said. “This is a dumb job.” I set the fliers down on a bench in front of an empty store and found myself standing in front of a plate glass window so recently installed that the grease marks remained on the pane. “You ever want a suitor, Alice?”

“I had one, once.” Alice stared into the dark store behind the glass. The room was unfinished, wiring poked out of the walls and the shelves had yet to be assembled. Packing crates and the tools to open them were scattered about. A vibrantly striped banner stapled across the counter proclaimed it to be the showroom of Bessie’s Best Ladies Emporium. Wire mannequins shaped like perfect women were lined up towards the back.

“Sure you did.” I looked around then tested the handle and found the door unlocked. After glancing at the street one more time, I pulled Alice inside the shop and locked the door. “Proper gentlemen callers who buy you things. They buy you pretty yellow dresses. Look.” I picked up a pry bar and leveraged open a box.

Alice approached the box timidly, touching its sides rather than its brightly colored contents.

“Someday Alice.” I rummaged through the outfits until I unearthed a yellow dress and its matching underskirt. “Cable might leave you. You’ll need a man. Cable might get a wife and she won’t want you around.”

“No, Mei, Cable promised.” I made her hold the dress up and then spun her towards a mirror.

“You want to be beautiful, yes?”

“How can you make ghosts mad?” Alice lowered the dress so that the skirt crumpled against the floor. I while seeking a shawl gestured to her to hold it up higher.

“Look for red dress,” I said. “Sometimes red scares ghosts away.” I found my new shawl, composed of a thick bright fabric and wrapped it around my shoulders. “Ghosts only come to bad people.” I held out my hand to take the yellow dress back and handed over a red one. “Jesse must have come to tell you something because you are a bad girl.”

“Cable never tells me nothing about Jesse. I swear. Won’t even let me cry over it.” Alice laid the dress against her front and looked about to cry. I took a dizzy spell and leaned against a box to keep from falling.

“Are you pretty sick, Mei?” Alice asked.

“I’m pretty sick.” I held out her hand to retrieve the red dress and dumped it back into its box.

“You gonna die?”

“Cable made the preacher say we could go over the mountains,” I said.

Alice nodded. “Secret.”

“If Cable went away the preacher would take care of you. You could go with the rest of them.” I pulled a chair over and sank into it. The sun shot across the floor leaving an ugly bright imprint on the ground and its reflection hurt my eyes. The horse hoofs striking ground outside sounded harsh and the silence inside the store suddenly seemed mean. “I think you’ve given me a headache,” I said. “I thought if Jesse didn’t come home

maybe they'd kill you cause of the baby," I said. "They'd have done that where I was born." It didn't seem as if Alice could understand and it did seem as if I should confess aloud once. "Cable went home for you. The big man is looking for you."

"Don't want to talk no more Mei." Alice reached up to pull at her hair but stopped in time. She was tracing patterns in the dust with a toe.

"They would get you a house on the other side of the mountain too if you wanted. Isn't that what you want?" I sighed.

"Cable says we'll go together, like a family. After the show tonight," Alice said. Getting restless she walked to the box of dresses and shifted through the contents just to see all the colors the box contained.

"Cable says many things," I said. "Not all of them true."

Boxes at the bottom of a crate caught Alice's attention. They were boxes filled with dolls with porcelain faces and long hair. She picked one and set it in my lap.

"They're pretty," Alice said. "You should have something nice for your own too."

I picked it up and looked in its eyes, then posed it next to my face and stared into the mirror where I noticed that both she and the doll had the same bloodless pallor. "I will soon have what I need Alice. What is missing is getting you what you need."

“Do you really know what you’re doing,” Cable asked. I was making a final twist on the twine to complete the seal. My hands were shaking and sweating like they’d never done before. I put the weakness down to being sick. We were in the animal tent where empty, open cages awaited their charges. In the adjoining tent circus spectators were settling into their seats while the performers were collecting at the back passage of the big tent, jostling to get the best place in line.

“It’s called a Thunderclap,” I said. “And I was rolling them down hillsides when I was still too young for pigtailed. So shut up and hand me that.” I wiped my hands on my skirt and pointed at a box of primers. Then I fit the last one into place and sat back. “There.” The device was one of several. “Hold them carefully. They might not all blow, but even some will do.”

“I got some problems to talk about now,” Cable said and I would have been paying closer attention to him but I thought that I had won my war, finally won.

“This whole place goes high in a minute.” I slipped on an oil patch and nearly dropped the iron package I was manipulating. “There is something in the smoke,” I said, “that also makes one ill. Is Alice coming? You made sure, yes?”

“I said we’re going, just you and me,” Cable replied. “You and me and all our secrets.”

“I wouldn’t tell anyone the truth Cable. It was just a pushy thing to say. But you couldn’t take care of all three of us anyway.” I handed him three more balls and he set

them outside. “Three girls are too much for one boy to handle. So wait for Alice to come.” The tiger cage was empty because the cats were displayed in fancier digs for the purpose of the show. They could be heard growling by the front gates. The music was winding up and from its tone we could tell that the barkers were still warming the crowd. Cable took that ugly locket he still carried from his pocket and fondled it.

“I bet she’ll walk into the cage without a fight if you tell her too,” I said.

I settled the last charge that I would set from this side and looked for the matches.

“We’ll be happy. You’ll see.”

“If you know what you’re doing.”

“Trust me,” I said.

Although he had checked the exits before, Cable checked them again. “No one’s coming,” I said.

“Daddy says, ‘hey’,” he replied.

I looked up and heard the tone I should have recognized earlier.

“Says I did him a favor killing Jesse and since you and me and Jesse are all that were there I guess I now know why he finds us so easy. Even when I done shrugged off all the others.” He glanced outside the tent flaps again although there was nothing new to see.

“You needed to be forced to see, to be pressed and he just wants that witless girl and her blind brat.” We had a room full of bombs and matches to separate us from everyone else and the sound of the crowd setting the perimeter for privacy and still I knew that we were not crossing the mountains together.

“I killed a boy,” He said and I was at his side before he could finish, clutching at his arm so fast that he almost lost balance. “It’s an offence now that we lost the war.”

“He was a spy,” I said.

“So you said.”

“You don’t care about that stuff.” He shook me off but I grabbed him again.

“It never ends,” he said. “Scatter this whole place to the skies and unless you die here too it never ends. Boy was doing the right thing and I killed him for it.”

I struggled with an insight. “Without Alice there’ll be no more trouble. She’s addled. I am unbreakable and he was a spy.”

He forced me back and grabbed him so that he couldn’t push me away. “I stood over a boy like me and held him under until he died. He was a good boy like me, before you came along.” He could get one of my hands in a grip but not the other and I hit him in the face as many times as possible until I ran out of breath and he dragged us both to our knees.

“Worse than my daddy in a rage, is my daddy when he’s easy,” Cable said. “He’s not gonna forget me. He’s gonna stand at the scaffold and watch while they pull a hood over my head. And Alice will be lost too because you can’t be trusted.”

“I can save you from the noose.” I pulled free but stayed on my knees. We were shouting in the big tent now. The acrobats were taking center stage. It was a family from the Far East and they worked without a net. Cable could tell from the sounds of the crowd which feat the fliers had completed.

“This is better for everyone,” he said.

“He was a spy,” I said. Someone in the audience screamed. The fainthearted always overreacted. The fliers knew their trade and had never fallen.

“I was never gonna trade you for Alice,” Cable said. “I just thought we’d make somehow.”

“You don’t care. You never care,” I said. There was a hush. The big act. The show seemed to happen faster when you couldn’t see what was happening.

“Was he a spy like you said?” The question that made what he had done all wrong or all right.

“Yes.” The crowd applauded.

“No,” he shook his head. “Not Jesse. I should have thought harder.”

“Why are you thinking on this now?” The children in the audience were giggling which mean that the clowns were worming their ways through the crowd bridging the gap between one act and another.

“I’m gonna kill a bunch of people. From now on I’ll be something much worse and it ‘members me of the first day I killed anyone and who got me to do it. I can’t fall so low without good reason.”

“It’s too late now, to wonder.” The music started up again. It signaled some of the freaks riding in on elephants.

“I always thought Alice lied about Jesse,” he said. He grabbed me and tried to twist my arm behind my back. “Why would anyone but kin love Alice?” I bested him and tripped him, but he kicked me legs as he dropped and I ended up on my back.

“What did the preacher’s son say to you that got him killed,” Cable asked. I dug into his face and neck with my fingers while he tried to pin me down. Then he punched me and I lost my breath. While I was catching it he dragged me to the cage and locked me inside.

“Baby’s not his,” I screamed as he shut the door. “Fucking thing isn’t his.” He had dropped the lock. To retrieve it, he had to release the door but when I lunged he kicked the cage shut and the door hit me in the face. Ignoring the nosebleed, I reached through the bars and pulled his hair. A clump pulled away. Then I hissed. “Your daddy was messing with her.” Words rushed like rusty nails through clenched teeth.

He put the lock in place and turned the key. “It wouldn’t have mattered who the real daddy was. If a good boy says it’s his, it’s a strong statement. Could have washed all my father’s will away. Think he’d fight a preacher’s son? Think he’d say out loud what he’d done just to keep Alice at home?” He was panting now. I think it was the first time I’d ever saw him afraid. He felt his pocket and found his lighter. “We could have gone home,” he said. He had to flick it several times to get a flame started. “Alice could have married.” He knelt and lit the first fuse. “I could have been free.”

“You wouldn’t have taken me with you if you went home.” I reached for him although he was too far away to touch.

One fuse lit. “It was a big unit,” he said. “I didn’t know he was there until that day. But he told you about his girl and before he could say it to me, you made me a killer.” The fuses did not light easily and his flame died in between starts. “Why didn’t you kill him? Oh,” He struggled with the lighter a final time. “Because if I done it I would have felt bad.”

I dropped to my knees and reached through the bars again. “You weren’t never taking me with you.” I said wiping the blood from my face and smearing it on my shirt.

“You’re like a stone that never stops dragging on me,” he said. “I might have taken you with me but then the old man said he knew and I knew, like you know for certain about some things, that you were always going to be a mistake.”

I remember begging and then I started screaming my voice blending with the sounds of the crowd and that’s when Cable ran abandoning me to the company of the sputtering fuses and a leaning shadow that only he could see. I do not remember hearing anyone else scream so maybe I died first.

The fire worse than Cable had planned and the chaos pinned him in place to witness the results. The first blasts threw flames that consumed the smaller tents in flashes of light. Ceilings rained sheets of heat and tent poles cracked in two before they fully burned. Tent walls curled then fell. Some patrons suffocated, some burned, some were trampled. Others who could not force their way into the outward flow remained trapped at their seats beating at passers-by with their fists. Then the fire made its own wind and sent smoke rolling across the landscape following by ranging tendrils that shot towards the hillside to torch the mountain. Unable to look away Cable had a glimpse of clowns in the big ring as spinning birds of paradise. He could not see his father but Tom Gaines had front row tickets and Cable hoped that would satisfy.

A second set of explosions were followed by a whump and a heavy waft of hot air. The next blasts birthed the firestorm. Rolling to hide his head Cable ducked the hot flow when it reached outward. Then he crawled on his hands and knees until he reached fresh air, felt a sting and realized that his head was burned. Animals trapped in cages shrieked. Elephants burned in their shackles. The monkeys banged at their bars and escaping horses kicked slow goers. Men pinned by poles cried out and Cable froze as he watched them burn. Then he thought he heard cannon fire and sensed that he should run but the urge was bayed by panic and a misty view of a ditch he had once escaped. This fire was too big. The sound of the men in pain and the billowing rush of fire held him fast. Those who made it past the fire tried to tend to others and were joined by volunteers rushing uphill.

Human cries were trampled by port sirens. Then a running man tripped over Cable jolting him to his senses so he stood and ran for his life.

As usual, Alice had not been where she had promised to wait. She and Cable ran into one another in the dark by the river. Only the fact that he fell backward made her miss when she swung her blade.

“You took too long,” she said. She was filthy, her hands were caked with mud and when she raised them to scratched an itch she made a brown swath up her cheek.

“Where did you go?” he asked. The answer was a simpering sorrow in her eyes. “Shit.”

“I only took him,” she said. “Hid him in the pit.” Then Cable saw that she had been scratched. Moon shaped marks on her face and neck. “He got away, Cable.” She tried to shrink away.

“Where is he?”

“There’s a place where they play soldier,” she said. “They play soldier there. He took me there to show it off.”

“Where is this pit? Exactly where is it?”

“It’s too dark now. Don’t go.”

She became insistent and he didn’t have time to argue so he tied her to a piling and left to see for himself if there was a mess to clean. Stumbling across the munitions dump in the dark he agreed with her that it was goddamn dark. The pit was a mess of rock and metal. They’d blasted a piece of the hillside away to make room for their war toys. Coils of rope as thick as his arm lay in splayed piles catching his feet as he struggled across the

pit seeking the boy or the body. Alice did not always kill. She said it was a game, the killing was always accidental. He found Henry, who hadn't made it very far, buried the body as best as he could and retrieved Alice. They had a boat to catch.

“She looks very motherly your sister.” Dr. Tumblety said. Alice wrapped in a blanket, sat several feet away rocking the baby as the boat drifted along compelled by the burros pulling it through the locks. Cable and the doctor ate up top because neither could stand to go belowdecks. It wasn’t a great meal. Hard tack soaked in broth. Still averse to things that he had to chew Cable let the bread soak before he ate. Alice had waved away her food.

“My sister likes to tend things that don’t talk.” Cable said. “Cherokee would have called her a scarecrow momma.”

“What does that mean?” They were moving as slow as the donkeys could tow. The bank and the trees cut off any view of the buildings they were a creaking water wheel whished nearby and somewhere in the distance animals huffed in the night. A spot of light broke through overhead but both the stars and the moon were in a dimming mode.

“Cherokee build scarecrows to hold souls,” Cable said. He looked over at Alice thinking to offer her more food but she was humming softly to the child now and in light of the scene they had just survived he was willing to leave her alone. The doctor tapped him on the shoulder and he realized that he had stopped talking. “They make a house for something while it waits to go where it is supposed to,” he continued. “Alice is a scarecrow. Not all heart. Not all there. Something living inside a building that looks human.”

“You don’t like her.”

“If she died, I would follow. I know what made her and it isn’t fair.”

The doctor took a swig of a beer. The ride had been rescheduled according to his orders. The preacher and his tribe rested below where there was no walking room. But the beginning of the trip had cowed the travelers and most were gripped with a desire not to see where they were headed. “I’m not much of a drinker,” the doctor said, handing the bottle to Cable. “Where would you go if you could choose,” asked.

Cable finished it and dropped it overboard. “Away. The biggest space you could find.” Cable said, visualizing not where they would go, but what they had escaped. He remembered his father’s breath, his mother’s medicines, horse shit in the straw and underneath the house where the chickens drifted. He saw the shack with a dirt floor and a roof that drizzled dust, pollen, lice and straw and leaked when it rained. He heard his father’s stumbling, the bang of a door that never completely closed and he remembered a lot of crying.

“World is full of space.” The doctor showed him a newspaper with Booth and the others on the front page.

Cable crumpled it up and tossed it away. “You lost your president,” he said. “Lost your hostage, I mean.”

“Got away from me,” the doctor said. He wore a green jacket with yellow braids tonight. His gloves were black. “My investors might need time to adapt so I’ve closed up shop, taken everything with me.” He stopped to watch the conflagration that was dimming by now. Once the tents were doused the fires on the hillsides would still need to be tamed. “Tonight is a win for you. You can be anyone you want from now on.”

The notion tempted Cable to take stock. The barge scraped against a sidewall which made something at the waterline chirp. "Riverboats take you lots of places, you can live on them and no one on them cares who you are," Cable said. "I'd like to try that."

The doctor shrugged. "We might travel together for a time. A man and his children can find entry into better places." He pointed at the wracked copy of a cowboy novel that Cable was reading. "I can also get you better books."

"I don't need another Daddy."

"You need a teacher but no, not another father and I am not a family man. But these people below are going to bore you before long. You need another plan."

Hadden's necklace had survived and Cable clutched it. He looked at his meal, felt the sodden tack and fed it to a dog lying at his feet.

"What is that?" the doctor asked.

"One of the mutts that made it out the tents," Cable replied. It was scarred and too skinny. "Scooped it up when I was running off."

"Whatcha gonna name it, Cable?" Alice as always, with an eye for nestlings of any kind had crept near. It was a rangy creature, made for long journeys. Alice patted it on the head and it rested its muzzle on her knee. Once it realized that she had no food it dropped down and curled up on the deck.

"I'm gonna call it, Jesse," Cable replied.

"What fer?"

"Gonna keep him with me, always."

They passed through a range of shadows as they headed off towards the sea but none that they recognized and none that held a grudge. The doctor eventually left, heading up

front. Once he departed Cable pulled objects from his pocket, marbles, a dart with a broken tip and a knotted piece of string. “Took ‘em from Henry,” he said.

Alice cupped them in her hands dropping them from one hand to the other. “It just lives in me, Cable. I can’t say more. You gonna miss Mei?”

Cable gestured her to be still and put his arm around her. And they sat and listened to the sounds water, the boat and the mules made. And when Alice got tired of holding the child she set it down next to the dog that moved over to cuddle the baby for warmth.

“What’s this place?” Tom Gaines asks. He sits down next to me as if he means to take up the whole seat but this is not the world below and Chinese girls do not give way to old men up here. When I refuse to make room, he stands up.

“This is where you come when you interfere with the plan,” I say. He is a corrupted presence and sitting near him I fell clean in comparison.

“Who’s he? I do know him.” The figure was rising up into view becoming clearer by the moment.

“Jesse,” I reply.

Tom Gaines grunts. “Preacher’s boy. What’s he want?”

“He was supposed to save your children from you but I stopped him and so he trapped me here until it all got fixed.” Mr. Gaines isn’t paying attention. I think he may have only heard half of what I’ve just said. Focused on the things he has left behind he is staring below like I did when I first arrived. “Where’s my boy?” he asks.

“Your boy made it out alive, for now.”

Below us they are loading Mr. Booth’s body onto a boat. And his spirit simply appears in the seat to my left.

“They are calling your plan, “a disgrace to the age,” I say.

Dressed as he was on his last day he looks nothing like the dandy you see in the newspapers. His fine shirt is covered in blood, the black books grey with ash and his hair

burned away. He still holds his cane with the silver handle like a dandy though. "They weren't worthy of my or my finest efforts," he says. "And, are you vanishing?"

"I think," I say, "that this room is only big enough for one sinner. It's your turn now."

"You're as great as me," he says scornfully. "You made as much of a stir."

"Without me, you wouldn't be here," I say. "I think we're in Mr. Lincoln's dog house and I think there are many rooms like this hanging overhead for conspirators like us until we understand what we've done." Booth doesn't believe me but I have been here a while and the view is suddenly very clear.

Sometimes you have to read a story twice to know its meaning. This is where the universe places misfits when the world is warped. Wars are a symptom of that. Maybe your president should have lived. Who's to say?

I knocked the world out of balance when I killed Jesse. I really only lied, but I admit that I told a powerful lie. It seems that there are people and pieces that must stay in place or the world doesn't work. Cable and Alice had been destined to a life I wanted so I killed it and the weight of my sin trapped me in this bad space until my mistake was fixed and until my replacement arrived.

Now Cable knows the truth and so Jesse can go. Alice may never be sane, but maybe the baby will learn to see. There is Jesse now passing upwards, ever faster. He won't pause here. He doesn't even glance my way when he blows by. I feel a weight in my chest now and as he rises above me, I begin to fall.

I also guess that until Jesse ascended there was no place for me in hell. Existence maybe is a puzzle and all the pieces must fit before any can find their places. I look for

my past to save me but I am not even Chinese anymore. The rows of elders waiting for me and mine on an ancient riverbank have severed their ties to this girl as I drop to my proper spot in the universe. I am Mei, still a three and it's no longer a lucky number.

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