

Purdy's first thought as she approached the town was for the frozen horses. Nothing in her forty-two years had prepared her for such a sight, let alone the countless numbers, and she thought in her ignorance how war must use them up like cordwood in a winter freeze.

Her second thought was for Enoch: *Please God, let him be alive*. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth then, put her wedding ring to her lips and kissed gently the gold band he had given her twenty-odd years before. "I love you," she said in a muted, prayerful tone, and if Enoch had by some miracle of faith and acoustics been listening, he would have heard the pang of her desire and the impress of her words in her voice.

"I love you," she said again, and moved on into the broken town.

What was left of Falmouth wasn't much. She pulled the kerchief wound round her neck up over her lower face. The place stank of sulphur and corruption and the mixture made her eyes burn and her belly queasy. Interspersed among the horses, men—or rather the used up skinbags of what had once been men—lay at frequent intervals. The several people walking this corrupted landscape worked with their faces half covered, as if the necessary business of taking up the dead made them outcasts, or bandits in their own land. The abundant dead made their efforts appear futile.

At first glance, the people of the town looked washed-out and pale. They lacked vitality and might have been counterfeit people. Their faces inspired dread, as if every soul in the world suffered from some awful form of insomnia. As if the world entire had taken ill at once. Smiling seemed a lost skill, known only to the before-time. The people gathered here and there in the yards of ruined homes, or along eidolic cobblestone streets. Now a small crowd, now a displaced family, now singly and by twos. Dispossessed of their homes, they fired their furniture and burned their heirlooms to keep warm in the frigid air of a December gone bad.

Enoch wasn't anywhere she looked.

This seemed to Purdy an illusory, insubstantial land and she had the idea that in so terrible a place people existed but did not live. A young girl, perhaps ten, stood beside a scorched tree which looked black and bonelike against the gray sky visible through its branches. The girl wore a dirty dress of some indeterminate color, lighter than the tree. Its tatters blew in the wind. She was stained red across her front, like she had pissed herself in blood. She stared hard at the girl, upon whose face was writ the graven image of death. She stood statue-like and Purdy herself finally had to turn away, feeling more the intruder. When she turned back but a heartbeat later, the girl was historical. She might never have been in the first place and now Purdy convinced herself that even if she found Enoch, he wouldn't be but a mere fiction of the mind himself. A

person could go crazy in a place like this, maybe had no choice in the matter. “Oh God in heaven,” she said, “oh God in heaven.”

She wept in the tiny moments like these.

A sort of quasi-life persisted all around her. Quartermasters set up supply houses and ordered a thousand different items in bulk quantities that would take days and weeks to arrive from up north. Hospital clerks counted the wounded, cataloguing their dreadful inventories with a sort of studied indifference, as if tallying so many cattle. Nurses, plain men and plainer women, came and went at all hours of the days and the nights, grudging witnesses to the carnage. Surgeons worked at their anatomical trade, exhausting themselves in their own bloodletting. Orderlies and aides moved amongst this confusion, taking a man here, dropping a soldier there, being generally useful in the thousand terrible ways a broken man needs assistance and support. Seamstresses made diapers, slings, and bandages from all manner of materials: curtains, dresses, fine linens, pillow shams, bedspreads, shirts, tablecloths, napkins, whatever rags or otherwise lay at hand. Cooks boiled meat and baked bread and made hardtack biscuits and turned all of these things out of portable kitchens set up hastily amid the rubble. They cooked grits and turned beans to gruel and boiled ham soup for shattered bodies to slurp through straws. Volunteers fanned out across the ruined countryside to serve up the food and spoon out the soup to those who couldn't spoon it themselves.

And so on.



Purdy Gamble was middle aged, a hard looking woman of stout stature with a narrow face that narrowed still further at the chin. Her eyes were deep set and seemed ever in shadow, as if she had never to get enough sleep. She had survived the smallpox that had killed her sister as a young girl and the scars still marred her, her torso more blemished than her face or hands. She was not vain. She was in all things a practical woman, who had attained her two score and two years through hard work, long days, longer nights, the grace of God, and the love of a man so good she could imagine no other after him. His name was Enoch Gamble, lately of the Army of the Potomac, and she had not seen him in near two years.

She searched the lately disrupted town end to end and back again.

On her third morning in that awesome and dreadful place she awoke to the grunting and snorting of hogs feeding nearby. She had hunkered the night in a barn, had slept in her clothes yet again, had not washed in three days. What little warmth had been had come from snuggling with the piled strangers sharing her stall. She disentangled herself from this mass of others and rose from the bit of straw and took up her few possibles and stepped over the several folk and exited the barn. It had snowed in the night and with the blood and the dead both covered, the land lay ghostly white and without detail to the eye. The air was raw and smelled of her, of the barn, of manure and gunpowder and dead things.

A rat the size of a loaf of bread ran across her boot.

She spat with the wind and pissed in the slop at the corner of the yard, where was discarded the remains of a fiddle and beside that a doll's head whose china eyes were painted on and so always open. She paid a penny for a biscuit and two pennies for a pot of warm water. She

washed her face and hands and that part of her female things she could reach with modesty. She gave the soiled bathwater over to a family of three while it was still lukewarm.

She spent the remainder of the day as she had the previous, searching house to house, which is to say from hospital to hospital since every remaining building housed the injured. Sometimes two or three, sometimes a dozen and more. She went about this miserable business cold and shivering and blue to her carpals. She prayed with every other minute, sometimes that she'd find Enoch and sometimes that she wouldn't. She closed her eyes often and when she opened them not a damn thing had changed.

Scores of dogs roamed the town, so many it seemed they must outnumber the people she thought, and it was no rare sight to see them gnawing on the dead horses. Like rats. She had heard, and only heard thanks be to God, how some of the bastard dogs had chewed the bodies of the dead soldiers in the first days after the battle. Soulless creatures to be sure, but there was worse out there no doubt.

Near mid afternoon she turned into an alley and saw a man well-dressed in a warm-looking overcoat. His pants were around his ankles and he was standing with legs spread. An oldish woman was crouched before him bent-knee'd and he held her head in his hands as it bobbed back and forth. On seeing Purdy, the man pulled back and hiked his trousers and walked briskly to the other end of the alley, the woman all the while hollering after him how he had promised her a nickel for the tickle. She turned to Purdy, wiping at her mouth, and spat in the mud.

"You owes me a nickel, bitch."

"What? I...I don't know what—"

She came at Purdy then, eyes all alive with scorn and vinegar. She pressed her up against a wall, stripping her possibles away. The bag fell into the muddy lane. "You dumb bitch."

The woman reeked (no more than the rest of the town Purdy thought) and she turned away from the woman's breath. She pushed back, kicking at her, clawing at the woman's arms as the woman in turn reached for the bag. They came apart a moment, then stood an arm's reach each from the other.

"I didn't do nothing 'cept walk down the wrong street," Purdy said.

"That was my dinner you mussed up. Mine and my daughter. We gotta eat." Her breathing hitched and came in quick gasps. She cocked her head, put her arms up, fists at the ready.

Purdy saw the fight in this woman. Her own breathing came hard and fast, and her words ratcheted as she spoke. "I'm sorry. I know that's a hard thing. Feeding your youngins I mean."

"You owes me."

She saw how the woman was younger than she'd first figured, thirty maybe, with a hard, chiseled look about her. One eye was narrowed, just a slit. *She needs it more than I do.* "All right."

Purdy dropped one hand, kept the other raised before her face. She tried not to look like she was cowering, tried to look bold. "I'm just gonna reach for my purse."

The woman's one wide eye darted up and down Purdy's person, wary and weary both. "Go on. Don't try nothing, cause it ain't just for me. I'll cut ya if'n I need to. I got a knife. You should know that. I got a knife."

But she didn't produce one and Purdy thought that was just bluster. She slid her hand between the buttons of her blouse, fumbled for the pouch she kept there. She had some coins,

mostly pennies, nickels, and dimes, a few quarters. She had paper too, Union script, but she didn't want the woman to see that. She didn't want the woman to see any of it. "Step back a piece."

"If you try to run, I'll cut ya."

"I know. I ain't gonna run. Those my possibles in the mud." She snapped open the small purse under her shirt and felt for the coins, counting them. "All I got is three pennies. That'll do ya good. Your daughter too."

The woman rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. "You looks like you maybe got more," she said, and her tongue came out in tittering unsteadily back and forth.

"That's for my own, for my Enoch. All I got is three pennies for the likes of you." She hesitated a moment, then spat. That was for effect. She thought, *I don't wanna fight you, but I will.*

The woman appeared to think on it some. She looked up and down the alley. It was empty, but she maybe couldn't count on that for long. "I got a knife," she repeated.

Purdy took her hand out of her blouse. She held it out in a fist, opened it palm up. "Three pennies. That's all you gonna get."

The woman snatched them up and spat in Purdy's empty hand. "I ain't no whore, no more than you. You'd do the same you was me. Me and my girl—she only four—we gonna eat tonight no thanks to you." She turned and ran down the alley in the same direction the man had gone.



On the fourth day Purdy found herself standing before a large brick mansion on the banks of the Rappahannock. A shambled place of shattered windows and pitted masonry. It stood the top of a hill attesting the violence of the recent days. In place of the front doors someone had hung a blanket. The battered walls still stood. The chimneys were tall, barren ruins that looked yet incomplete in their absence of any smoke. Icicles hung from the broken standpipe above the portal.

A clerk sat inside the front door, on a stool beside a pail where was built a small fire. It seemed to provide all the warmth the place offered, save for the fevered men beyond, and the clerk was hunched over it like a consumptive. He turned when she entered, her presence made known only by the rush of chill air as she pulled aside the blanket that did for a door. The warmth inside was thin and a stink of shit and piss wafted out with it.

"This ain't no kinda place ye wanna be," the man said.

"Beg pardon?" Purdy asked.

"Ye don't wanna be here," the clerk said, looking up from his warm seat. Like most every other person she had seen in recent days, he had the look of the damned about him. She wondered what she looked like to him.

"How's that?" Purdy asked. She covered a nostril with one finger and blew a string of snot into a cloth and then repeated the process on the other side.

"I said ye don't wanna be here."

"How you know where I wanna be?"

The man had a narrow, bushy nose with hairs bunching about the nostrils. These hairs

twitched back and forth as he spoke and the effect was weasel-like. “Like as not ye in the wrong place.” He made no attempt to hide the arrogance in his voice.

“I’m looking for my husband.”

“He ain’t likely here.”

“You don’t even know.”

“What I mean is,” the weasel was standing now, “ye should hope he ain’t in this place, lady. Got nothing but the worst hereabouts. Poor souls evir one of ‘em.” He blew on his hands.

“I gotta check, you know that much.”

“Ye alone? This ain’t a place for your sort.”

“Soldier” —she had almost said weasel— “this ain’t a place for any sort. I been walking this town near a week and I ain’t seen nowhere I’d want to be anywhere.”

“Lady, I got a man back theres,” his head bobbed toward the inner doorway by way of pointing, “what got his eyeball on 'is cheek. Just hanging there it is, like a...like a piece a beef on a string. If’n he wanted I suppose he could take it up in his hand and look behind hisself without turning his head a wit. It ain’t hardly a thing ye’d expect to see this side a hell. Ye wanna see that? Ye really wanna see that?”

“He got red hair? My Enoch he got red hair. Bright red.”

“Ain’t exactly his hair you notice ‘bout him.”

“I guess I’ll have me a look then.”

“Naw, ye don’t wanna come in. Not here. This the divil’s place I tell ye. The divil’s playground.”

“That’s damn near blasphemy boy. And how you think you can tell me where I want to be? What’re you maybe twenty? I’m old enough to be your ma. Ain’t your ma taught you no better?”

“My ma, she niver seen hell from the inside. I guess I have.”

“How many men you got in this place?”

“Maybe fifty. Maybe fifty-five. Depends.”

“Depends?”

“On how many come at their end in the night. There’s always a few what cross the river. Some nights more ‘an a few. I ain’t counted since yesterdey.”

Purdy said nothing to this.

“I guess there’s some here what gots red hair.” The clerk finally said, apparently allowing how she wasn’t going away.

“Any answer to the name Enoch Gamble?”

“I dunno. But I hope not, I sure's hell hope not. It ain't gonna be nothin' good if'n they does.”

She pushed around him and went inside to discover here indeed was a place where only the worst cases were to be found. Men lay crowded together for warmth, their eyes following her, begging. She wept as she went, fearing to touch the men, who didn’t look like men at all. Actually, they did look like men and that was the profaning nature of it. Broken in body but stolid in mind one moment, they writhed in agony the next. Being amongst these afflicted was like being afflicted herself, as if what they had was catching. She was suddenly and completely consumed with a great fear Enoch would be found among these poor souls. A moment later her fear flip-flopped and she thought *I won’t find him here or anywheres else*. She was sure he had

died, that he'd been buried in some nameless grave alongside a hundred other poor fellows on some godforsaken hillside. Or worse. His body had been left to rot on a field somewhere, was even now being chewed on by those bastard dogs...

A curious chittering sound brought her back to the moment. A heavy and irregular cacophony she had trouble placing at first. It filled the place and was both awesome and claustrophobic at the same time. The noise hurt her ears. She came shortly to understand it was the sound of so many teeth chattering. That such a sound existed on this earth she had not previously known. The knowledge did her no good and in fact some little harm, as she became at once hot despite the cold and had trouble catching her breath. She slipped and looked down to see a peculiar red ice caking the floor.

She wanted to run, needed to run. The weasel had been right. *This ain't a place for your sort.* Another moment in this purgatory and she'd be as condemned as the unfortunates already here. She couldn't go forward and so turned around and there, immediately before her, was the weasel clerk. His pointy nose was a size too small for his face and his front teeth a size too big for his mouth. His nose twitched when he spoke.

"You okay? I told ye don't come in here."

She punched his rodent nose. Not especially hard, but it caught him off guard and spun him back. "Piss off," she said.

"You hit me. Dammit, ye hit me. Jesus lady." He groped at his smeller and blood came away on his hand. "I oughta—"

"Shut up."

He kept wiping the blood and looking at his finger, but he kept shut up.



Purdy's hand throbbed. She thought of the woman in the alley. *Don't try nothing, cause it ain't just for me. I'll cut ya if'n I need to. I got a knife.* She hadn't had a knife, of course. Except, in a way, she had Purdy now realized. Her daughter, her loved one. Her love for her daughter was her strength—her knife. Her love was the tool that powered her, made her a force.

Purdy thought of Enoch, how wherever he was, he had no choice in the matter. Maybe he was dead, but she didn't think so. She couldn't think so. She stood tall and worked her hand and took a deep breath, then another. The pain in her hand felt...good. The air was different now, had somehow turned. Maybe better, maybe not.

She pressed on into the dwelling.

The men reached out, pulling at her with filthy hands, fingers twisted and broken. They wanted for everything: clothes, a drink, a bath, something to piss in, something to eat, a smoke, a hand to hold. The air reeked with the stink of their slops. At first she hadn't wanted to touch them, but after a while she found she had to touch them, if only to assure herself of their humanity. She found it an easier way to go too, moving from man to man and wiping their dirty faces with her kerchief, with whatever was at hand.

A few times she thought she saw Enoch among them, but each time when she drew close he wasn't there. The men asked if she had any tobacco, any paper. A soldier gave her a crumpled envelope to post, to his folks in Schenectady, New York, he said. His or someone else's dirty

fingerprints smudged the envelope. She promised to post it at the first opportunity and stuffed it in her blouse, alongside the pouch.

Another grabbed her dress and would not let go till she came close. When she did he pled his case; how he missed his girl back home, how he doubted ever seeing her again. The heat coming off him was palpable and his skin the color of burnt walnut. He pleaded would she kiss him. She touched her lips to his cheek and he said how she smelled was just like his girl back home smelled and how he had known it would be so. His grip on her dress slackened and his eyes were closed when she pulled away from him. The look of peace upon his features was biblical.

She skipped over the dead, which were a few and obvious. She knew them by the lack of any visible breath. She teared as she held the hand of a boy who had been chest shot several times. Looking at him, and she couldn't say how she knew this, she knew he was at his end, that he had only another moment or two left in him. His chest yet rose a half dozen times and each time a briefer plume of frosty breath passed from between his lips until at last there was not at all. His hand remained in hers and she squeezed it but there was no response and she let it go while it was still warm. She stood a long time at his side, staring into his open eyes as if she might learn something of who he'd been. She had never seen a person die before this day but it seemed to her his eyes should be closed. She pressed a thumb and index finger one to each eye and drew the lids down.

She cursed the weasel clerk. Not because any of this was his fault, but because she could.

† † †

Her first glimpse of him was not much hopeful. At first she thought it was a trick of the light, thought it couldn't be him. She had given up any idea of finding him in this place. Perhaps had hoped not to find him in this place. But then there he was, chicken-wire thin with threadbare undergarments rusted an ugly gray-brown by skin oils and bits of road dirt. It was only by his flaming hair, grown long and unruly, that she knew it was him. She had run her fingers through that hair a thousand times and each of those tiny memories summed to a whole more than their parts now and a sure chill went through her. She would know that hair anywhere. She would know him anywhere.

He was the best man she had ever known and the only man she had ever loved.

His face was bushy and overgrown, his beard unkempt, the features underneath uneven, not so much evocative of Enoch but of Enoch as might be reflected in a looking glass, one cracked and tarnished with age so that the glass had gone cloudy. Such a glass dulled the features, but only dulled them and she saw through to the luster underneath.

His right cheek was puffed out and bruised. Looking closer, she saw a neat, black hole in the outer corner just below his eye, no bigger than one of the nail heads in her kitchen floor back home. The eye itself was a hideous thing. The lid had fallen open and the globe within was ruptured and sunken and runny. She put a fisted hand to her mouth and bit a knuckle, as if doing so might blind her to the horror before her. She stood in the cold air, her breath a visible, heaving sigh rising over the confused clatter of the sickroom. Somewhere a dish shattered and it echoed hollowly through the mansion's busted walls. She heard a scream. Somebody hollering words

she heard only faintly. A low moan, then a deeper one. Somewhere someone was crying. Outside, a man was yelling at a horse, calling it a “dang fool of a animal.” Dogs barked in the yard.

She put all these distractions to one side of her mind, away from the here and now, and gasped. She watched as Enoch’s good eye opened at the small sound of her, searching the piece of room where she stood. The single eye looked too big for his face. He, himself, looked too small for this world.

*Not dead.* The thought—the realization—hit her like a hard wind and it was all she could do to remain standing.

Purdy felt the gold band on her finger and pulled at her clothes, as if to do so would somehow make her more presentable, as if being presentable mattered in that—what had that weasel called it?—that devil’s place. She had worn the same clothes—a simple gray work dress with a fitted bodice and a straight paneled skirt gauged at the waistband—for something like four or five days now. Muck from the town crusted the hem of her skirt and the brogans beneath. Specks of blood and pieces of the men she had touched on her way to this moment clung to her clothing, which therefore looked filthy and neglected. She pulled at a sleeve and picked at the waistband of her dress, even felt the bump of her small purse, before coming back to the notion he was still her husband and she still his wife. She took another moment to regain herself, which mostly meant she wiped her face on her sleeve and ran her tongue over her lips, and stepped forward.

“Enoch,” she whispered, afraid to disturb him. Then, afraid not to, she said, “Enoch? Honey?”

She saw he still wore the ring she had given him all those years ago and her lips turned up in the bare semblance of a smile.

His remaining eye rolled once or twice more, like some hideous compass finding true north. When it finally settled on her there was a moment of hesitation, of uncertainty. Maybe he thought he was imagining her. Maybe he thought he had died and she was an angel coming to claim him, or that he had gone over the bend and was a crazy man and she a figment to taunt his raving lunacy. She saw his mouth come open. His lips pursed like he wanted to say something but nothing came of it. Perhaps he couldn’t talk, perhaps he’d never talk again.

“Oh God, what they done to you?”

“There, woman, it ain’t nothing that bad.” When it finally came, his voice was hardly anything at all.

He looked like a man who had been to hell and brought a goodly portion of it back with him. She was immediately thankful she had heard him speak, for had she not, she would have thought him crossed over the River. His face wore the same fevered, drawn look as the others in that cursed town. It seemed the war had taken most of him and what was left lay in a heap before her. On the instant she decided she didn’t care, thought *whatever remains will be enough*. She kissed him long and gentle on his forehead. His skin was too warm and it wasn’t until just that moment she knew he was still alive. Her eyes misted and she thought how much she loved this man.

He shivered under his frayed blanket, which looked some gossamer in the light. The odor of stale piss clung to him. She took him in her arms and held him a long moment, wanting to warm him, remembering the feel of him against her breasts, sensing the life still in him, at the



same time noting how small he felt.

*Whatever remains will be enough.*

“I’m gonna clean you up,” she said, and dabbed at the corners of his mouth with the sleeve of her blouse.

The room he occupied in that old mansion had been some sort of library in better times. The walls were lined with hundreds, maybe thousands, of books. A large brick fireplace dominated the room, though if there had once been chairs and a sitting area before it, there was not but cots and sick men there now. Cold ashes covered the floor of the firebox, surrounded by more books and pieces of books. The weasel clerk came to mind without a moment’s hesitation. He had been crouched over that burning pail on her arrival and she allowed in that instant how she could justifiably kill the sonofabitch.

It didn’t take long to rip apart a score of books and get a fire going and the room warming. Whoever had lived there had been a scholar, but Purdy could not read and had no use for books and thought how reading them just now would be the least use of them. She boiled water and took it around, encouraging those who could to wash themselves. She broke off pieces of the soap she had brought for Enoch, passing them out to those able to bathe themselves. She rubbed a wet cloth over Enoch’s arms and legs and across his back and washed his soiled underside. He didn’t look small she decided—thin maybe, but not small. She saw his fat was gone, that he was all muscle and sinew, a tough old bird.

*Whatever remains will be enough.*

For his part, he never took his eye off her. “I knew you’d come.”

She couldn’t stop weeping as she worked, not knowing if these were tears of joy at finding Enoch alive, or tears of sorrow at finding him so poorly living.

He reached out and wiped her cheek, his hand frail and trembling all the way, like a twig quivering in an autumn rain.

“Of course I came. Would’ve come sooner—” Their eyes met. He looked so thin. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here sooner. Lots sooner.”

“Hold me, woman.”

And she did.

They stayed, together, another four days at Falmouth, amid the chaos of a defeated army. In that time the library was turned to ash and the sound of hammer blows was everywhere. Later she would discover all the coffins piled along the road leading to the train station and know what the hammering had ordained.