

The child was just there on the stoop in the dark, hugging herself against the cold, all cried out and nearly sleeping. She couldn't holler anymore and they didn't hear her anyway, or they might and that would make things worse. Somebody had shouted, Shut that thing up or I'll do it! and then a woman grabbed her out from under the table by her arm and pushed her out onto the stoop and shut the door and the cats went under the house. They wouldn't let her near them anymore because she picked them up by their tails sometimes. Her arms were all over scratches, and the scratches stung. She had crawled under the house to find the cats, but even when she did catch one in her hands it struggled harder the harder she held on to it and it bit her, so she let it go. Why you keep pounding at the screen door? Nobody gonna want you around if you act like that. And then the door closed again, and after a while night came. The people inside fought themselves quiet, and it was night for a long time. She was afraid to be under the house, and afraid to be up on the stoop, but if she stayed by the door it might open. There was a moon staring straight at her, and there were sounds in the woods, but she was nearly sleeping when Doll came up the path and found her there like that, miserable as could be,

and took her up in her arms and wrapped her into her shawl, and said, "Well, we got no place to go. Where we gonna go?"

If there was anyone in the world the child hated worst, it was Doll. She'd go scrubbing at her face with a wet rag, or she'd be after her hair with a busted comb, trying to get the snarls out. Doll slept at the house most nights, and maybe she paid for it by sweeping up a little. She was the only one who did any sweeping, and she'd be cussing while she did it, Don't do one damn bit of good, and someone would say, Then leave it be, dammit. There'd be people sleeping right on the floor, in some old mess of quilts and gunnysacks. You wouldn't know from one day to the next.

When the child stayed under the table they would forget her most of the time. The table was shoved into a corner and they wouldn't go to the trouble of reaching under to pull her out of there if she kept quiet enough. When Doll came in at night she would kneel down and spread that shawl over her, but then she left again so early in the morning that the child would feel the shawl slip off and she'd feel colder for the lost warmth of it, and stir, and cuss a little. But there would be hardtack, an apple, something, and a cup of water left there for her when she woke up. Once, there was a kind of toy. It was just a horse chestnut with a bit of cloth over it, tied with a string, and two knots at the sides and two at the bottom, like hands and feet. The child whispered to it and slept with it under her shirt.

Lila would never tell anyone about that time. She knew it would sound very sad, and it wasn't, really. Doll had taken her up in her arms and wrapped her shawl around her. "You just hush now," she said. "Don't go waking folks up." She settled the child on her hip and carried her into the dark house, stepping as carefully and quietly as she could, and found the bundle she kept in her corner, and then they went out into the chilly dark again, down the steps. The house was rank with sleep and the

night was windy, full of tree sounds. The moon was gone and there was rain, so fine then it was only a tingle on the skin. The child was four or five, long-legged, and Doll couldn't keep her covered up, but she chafed at her calves with her big, rough hand and brushed the damp from her cheek and her hair. She whispered, "Don't know what I think I'm doing. Never figured on it. Well, maybe I did. I don't know. I guess I probly did. This sure ain't the night for it." She hitched up her apron to cover the child's legs and carried her out past the clearing. The door might have opened, and a woman might have called after them, Where you going with that child? and then, after a minute, closed the door again, as if she had done all decency required. "Well," Doll whispered, "we'll just have to see."

The road wasn't really much more than a path, but Doll had walked it so often in the dark that she stepped over the roots and around the potholes and never paused or stumbled. She could walk quickly when there was no light at all. And she was strong enough that even an awkward burden like a leggy child could rest in her arms almost asleep. Lila knew it couldn't have been the way she remembered it, as if she were carried along in the wind, and there were arms around her to let her know she was safe, and there was a whisper at her ear to let her know that she shouldn't be lonely. The whisper said, "I got to find a place to put you down. I got to find a dry place." And then they sat on the ground, on pine needles, Doll with her back against a tree and the child curled into her lap, against her breast, hearing the beat of her heart, feeling it. Rain fell heavily. Big drops spattered them sometimes. Doll said, "I should have knowed it was coming on rain. And now you got the fever." But the child just lay against her, hoping to stay where she was, hoping the rain wouldn't end. Doll may have been the loneliest woman in the world, and she was the loneliest child, and there they were, the two of them together, keeping each other warm in the rain.

When the rain ended, Doll got to her feet, awkwardly with the child in her arms, and tucked the shawl around her as well as she could. She said, "I know a place." The child's head would drop back, and Doll would heft her up again, trying to keep her covered. "We're almost there."

It was another cabin with a stoop, and a dooryard beaten bare. An old black dog got up on his forelegs, then his hind legs, and barked, and an old woman opened the door. She said, "No work for you here, Doll. Nothing to spare."

Doll sat down on the stoop. "Just thought I'd rest a little."

"What you got there? Where'd you get that child?"

"Never mind."

"Well, you better put her back."

"Maybe. Don't think I will, though."

"Better feed her something, at least."

Doll said nothing.

The old woman went into the house and brought out a scrap of corn bread. She said, "I was about to do the milking. You might as well go inside, get her in out of the cold."

Doll stood with her by the stove, where there was just the little warmth of the banked embers. She whispered, "You hush. I got something for you here. You got to eat it." But the child couldn't rouse herself, couldn't keep her head from lolling back. So Doll knelt with her on the floor to free her hands, and pinched off little pills of corn bread and put them in the child's mouth, one after another. "You got to swallow."

The old woman came back with a pail of milk. "Warm from the cow," she said. "Best thing for a child." That strong, grassy smell, raw milk in a tin cup. Doll gave it to her in sips, holding her head in the crook of her arm.

"Well, she got something in her, if she keeps it down. Now I'll put some wood on the fire and we can clean her up some."

When the room was warmer and the water in the kettle was

warm, the old woman held her standing in a white basin on the floor by the stove and Doll washed her down with a rag and a bit of soap, scrubbing a little where the cats had scratched her, and on the chigger bites and mosquito bites where she had scratched herself, and where there were slivers in her knees, and where she had a habit of biting her hand. The water in the basin got so dirty they threw it out the door and started over. Her whole body shivered with the cold and the sting. “Nits,” the old woman said. “We got to cut her hair.” She fetched a razor and began shearing off the tangles as close to the child’s scalp as she dared—“I got a blade here. She better hold still.” Then they soaped and scrubbed her head, and water and suds ran into her eyes, and she struggled and yelled with all the strength she had and told them both they could rot in hell. The old woman said, “You’ll want to talk to her about that.”

Doll touched the soap and tears off the child’s face with the hem of her apron. “Never had the heart to scold her. Them’s about the only words I ever heard her say.” They made her a couple of dresses out of flour sacks with holes cut in them for her head and arms. They were stiff at first and smelled of being saved in a chest or a cupboard, and they had little flowers all over them, like Doll’s apron.

It seemed like one long night, but it must have been a week, two weeks, rocking on Doll’s lap while the old woman fussed around them.

“You don’t have enough trouble, I guess. Carrying off a child that’s just going to die on you anyway.”

“Ain’t going to let her die.”

“Oh? When’s the last time you got to decide about something?”

“If I left her be where she was, she’d a died for sure.”

“Well, maybe her folks won’t see it that way. They know you took her? What you going to say when they come looking for her? She’s buried in the woods somewhere? Out by the potato patch? I don’t have troubles enough of my own?”

Doll said, “Nobody going to come looking.”

“You probly right about that. That’s the spindliest damn child I ever saw.”

But the whole time she talked she’d be stirring a pot of grits and blackstrap molasses. Doll would give the child a spoonful or two, then rock her a little while, then give her another spoonful. She rocked her and fed her all night long, and dozed off with her cheek against the child’s hot forehead.

The old woman got up now and then to put more wood in the stove. “She keeping it down?”

“Mostly.”

“She taking any water?”

“Some.”

When the old woman went away again Doll would whisper to her, “Now, don’t you go dying on me. Put me to all this bother for nothing. Don’t you go dying.” And then, so the child could barely hear, “You going to die if you have to. I know. But I got you out of the rain, didn’t I? We’re warm here, ain’t we?”

After a while the old woman again. “Put her in my bed if you want. I guess I won’t be sleeping tonight, either.”

“I got to make sure she can breathe all right.”

“Let me set with her then.”

“She’s clinging on to me.”

“Well.” The old woman brought the quilt from her bed and spread it over them.

The child could hear Doll’s heart beating and she could feel the rise and fall of her breath. It was too warm and she felt herself struggling against the quilt and against Doll’s arms and clinging to her at the same time with her arms around her neck.

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They stayed with that old woman for weeks, maybe a month. Now it was hot and moist in the mornings when Doll took her outside, holding her hand because her legs weren't strong yet. She walked her around the dooryard, cool under her bare feet, smooth as clay. The dog lay in the sun with his muzzle on his paws, taking no notice. She touched the hot, coarse fur of his back and her hand was sour with the smell of it. There were chickens strutting the yard, scratching and pecking. Doll had helped to start the garden, and how had she done that, when the child thought there had always been someone holding her? But the carrots were up. Doll pulled one, no bigger than a straw. "It's soft as a feather," she said, and she touched the child's cheek with the little spray of greens. She wiped the dirt off the root with her fingers. "Here. You can eat it."

There was an ache in the child's throat because she wanted to say, I guess I left my rag baby back there at the house. I guess I did. She knew exactly where, under the table in the farthest corner, propped against the table leg like it was sitting there. She could just run in the door and snatch it and run off again. No one would have to see her. But then maybe Doll wouldn't be here when she came back, and she didn't know where that house was anyway. She thought of the woods. It was just an old rag baby, dirty from her hand, because mostly she kept it with her. But they put her out on the stoop before she could get it and the cats wouldn't even let her touch them and then Doll came and she didn't know they would be leaving, she didn't understand that at all. So she just left it where it was. She never meant to.

Doll took the child's hand away from her mouth. "You mustn't be biting on yourself like that. I told you a hundred times." They put mustard on her hand once, vinegar, and she licked them off because of the sting. They tied a rag around her

hand, and when she sucked on it the blood came up and showed pink. "You might help me with the weeding. Give you something to do with that hand." Then they were just quiet there in the sunlight and the smell of earth, kneeling side by side, pulling up all the little sprouts that weren't carrots, tiny plump leaves and white roots.

The old woman came out to watch them. "She don't have no color at all. You don't want her getting burned. She'll be scratching again." She put out her hand for the child to take. "I been thinking about 'Lila.' I had a sister Lila. Give her a pretty name, maybe she could turn out pretty."

"Maybe," Doll said. "Don't matter."

But the old woman's son came home with a wife, and there really wasn't enough work around the place for Doll to be able to stay there anymore. The old woman bundled up as many things as Doll could carry and still carry the child, who wasn't strong enough yet to walk very far, and her son showed them the way to the main road, such as it was. Then after a few days they found Doane and Marcelle. Doll might have been looking for them. They all said Doane had a good name, he was a fair-minded man, and if you hired him you could trust him to give you a day's work. Of course it wasn't just Doane. There was Arthur with his two boys, and Em and her daughter Mellie, and there was Marcelle. She was Doane's wife. They were a married couple.

There was a long time when Lila didn't know that words had letters, or that there were other names for seasons than planting and haying. Walk south ahead of the weather, walk north in time for the crops. They lived in the United States of America.

She brought that home from school. Doll said, “Well, I spose they had to call it something.”

Once, Lila asked the Reverend how to spell Doane. What had he thought she meant? *Done*? *Down*? Maybe *don't*, since she didn't always sound her *t*'s? He was never sure what she knew and didn't know, and it pained him for her sake when he guessed wrong.

He paused and then he laughed. “Mind putting it in a sentence?”

“There was a man called himself Doane. I knew him a long time ago.”

“Yes. I see,” he said. “I knew a Sloane once. S-L-O-A-N-E.” Old as he was, the Reverend still blushed sometimes. “So it might be the same. With a *D*.”

“When I was a child. I was thinking about old times the other day.” She wouldn't have told him even that much except that she saw the blush deepen when she said once she knew a man.

He nodded. “I see.” The Reverend never asked her to talk about old times. He didn't seem to let himself wonder where she had been, how she had lived all the years before she wandered into the church dripping rain. Doane always said churches just want your money, so they all stayed away from churches, walked right past them as if they were smarter than the other people. As if they had any money for the churches to want. But the rain was bad and that day was a Sunday, so there was no other doorway for her to step into. The candles surprised her. It might all have seemed so beautiful because she'd been missing a few meals. That can make things brighter somehow. Brighter and farther away. As if when you put your hand out you would touch glass. She watched him and forgot she was in the room with him and he would see her watching. He baptized two babies that morning. He was a big, silvery old man, and he took each one of those

little babies in his arms as gently as could be. One of them was wearing a white dress that spilled down over his arm, and when it cried a little from the water he put on its brow, he said, "Well, I bet you cried the first time you were born, too. It means you're alive." And she had a thought that she had been born a second time, the night Doll took her up from the stoop and put her shawl around her and carried her off through the rain. She ain't your mama, I can tell.

It seemed like that girl knew everything. Mellie. She could bend over backward till her hands were flat on the ground. She could do cartwheels. She said, "I know that woman ain't your mama. She telling you things your mama would have told you already. Don't go sucking on your hand? Like you was a baby? You probly an orphan." She said, "I used to know an orphan once. Her legs was all rickety. Same as yours. She couldn't talk neither. That's probly why she was an orphan. She sort of turned out wrong."

Mellie was curious about them, if the others were not. She would drift back to walk with them, and she would put her face close up to the child's face, to stare at her. "She got that sore on her foot. That's one thing. Put some dandelion milk on it. I got some here. I bet I could carry her. I could." She'd be eating the bloom of a dandelion, the yellow part, or chewing red clover. She was pretty well brown with freckles, and her hair was almost white from the sun, even her eyebrows and eyelashes. "I hate these old coveralls. The boys about wore 'em out and now I'm wearing 'em. They're mostly just patches. Doane says they're better for working. I got a dress. My ma's going to let the hem down." And then she'd be off, walking on her hands.

Doll said, "She likes to pester. Don't you mind."

Lila didn't talk then. Doll said, "She can. She just don't want to." It was partly that Doll gave her anything she needed. She still woke her up in the night sometimes to give her a morsel of

cold mush. And Lila never even knew there was such a thing as cussing, till that old woman told her. It just meant leave me alone, most of the time. Once, she told that old woman she wisht she was in hell with her back broke, and the old woman yanked her up and gave her a swat and said, You got to stop that cussing. She'd gone off somewhere and come back with a little bottle of medicine for the sore on the child's foot that didn't heal, and it did smart when she put it on, but it hurt her feelings that the child would be hateful about it. Lila didn't know where to hide, so she just went into a corner and curled up as small as she could, with her eyes shut tight. The old woman said, "Oh, mercy! Doll, come in here! She's back in the corner again. Was there ever such a child!"

Doll came in and knelt down by her, smelling of sweat and sunshine, and lifted her into her lap. She whispered, "What you doing now, biting on that hand like a little baby!" The old woman brought the shawl, and Doll put it around her. And the old woman said, "She's your child, Doll. I can't do a thing with her."

They never spoke about any of it, not one word in all those years. Not about the house Doll stole her away from, not about the old woman who took them in. They did keep that shawl, though, till it was worn soft as cobwebs. But she felt the thrill of the secret whenever she took Doll's hand and Doll gave her hand a little squeeze, whenever she lay down exhausted in the curve of Doll's body, with Doll's arm to pillow her head and the shawl to spread over her. Years after she had become an ordinary child, if there were going to be people to deal with, Doll would whisper in her ear, "No cussing!" and they would laugh together, enjoying their secret. They didn't even mention the nights they spent bedded down beyond the light of Doane's fire, or the days

walking behind Doane's people, at a distance, as if they only happened to be going along on the same road.

They could keep to themselves because they had a bag of cornmeal and a little pot to cook it in. Every night Doll made a fire. As she walked she'd be looking for things they could eat. She caught a rabbit in her apron and killed it with a stone, and cooked it that night with a mess of pigweed. She found a nest of bird's eggs. She found chicory and roasted the roots, which were medicine, she said, a cure for the bellyache. Then finally one morning she took up the child and walked after Doane's people into a field of young corn and started pulling weeds in the rows where their hoes couldn't reach, and they didn't say a thing to her about it. The child stayed beside her, holding on to her skirt. When Marcelle brought a pail of well water for the others, she brought it to them, too. Doll thanked her, and held the cup to the child's lips, and then she wiped her hand on her dress and dipped her fingers into the cup to wet them and rinse dust from the child's face. Cold drops ran down her chin and throat and into the damp of her dress, and she laughed. Doll said, surprised, "Well, listen to you now!"

Marcelle was standing there, watching them, waiting to get the cup back. "I guess she been poorly for a while?"

Doll nodded. "She been poorly."

"She could ride in the wagon. You got a lot to carry."

"I keep her by me."

"Then set your bedroll in the wagon."

Doll never did put herself forward, but the next morning, when she had everything bundled up, Doane came and took it and set it on the wagon bed. He said, "We got some spuds in the ashes, ma'am. If you care to join us."

And after that she and Doll were Doane's people, too, most of the time, for as long as the times were decent. That would have been about eight years, counting backward from the Crash,

not counting the year Doll made her go to school. Their own bad times started when the mule died, two years or so before everyone else started getting poorer and the wind turned dirty. It seemed like the whole world changed just at that time, the mule gone first, which made the wagon useless. They couldn't even sell it, and they had to leave most of their things behind. The creature died on a lonely piece of road where they would not have been in the first place if it had shown any sign at all of what was about to happen to it. It just sank down on its knees and went over on its side while Arthur was trying to put it in the traces.

Lila heard about the Crash years after it happened, and she had no idea what it was even after she knew what to call it. But it did seem like they gave it the right name. It was like one of those storms you might even sleep through, and then when you wake up in the morning everything's ruined, or gone. Most of the farmers that used to know Doane and Marcelle sold up and left, or just left, and the ones who stayed didn't want any help, or couldn't pay for it. But there were those few years when it seemed that they knew who they were and where they should be and what they should be doing. There were those few years when the child began to be strong and to grow, when Doll was still herself, when Mellie still pestered and played her pranks like some half-grown devil trying to mind its manners. Evenings Doane might be away from the camp a while, somewhere trading one thing for another for some small mutual advantage or settling terms with somebody for the work they would do. When he came back again he'd look for Marcelle, never saying a word, but when he saw her he would go and stand near her, and then whatever else might have been on his mind you could tell he was pretty well at peace.

They all thought it was a fine thing to live the way they did, out in the open like that, when the weather was tolerable. It seemed true enough as long as the good times lasted. If they were tired and dirty it was from work, and that kind of dirt didn't even feel like dirt. Work meant plenty to eat and a few pennies for candy or ribbons or a dime for a minstrel show when they passed through a town. They never camped by a stream without bathing, and washing their clothes if the weather was good and they could stay long enough to let things dry. That was before the times when they began to be caught in the dust, and it would make them cough and cough, and the wind would blow it right through the clothes on their backs. But in those days they were proud people. If they could, they patched and mended and hemmed whatever needed it. They looked after what they had. Anybody could see that.

Lila did like to work in the Reverend's garden. He hardly ever set foot in it. It used to be that somebody from the church would come in now and then to keep the weeds down. When she came there at first to tend the roses and clean things up, she had made a little garden in a corner and planted a few potatoes, just for herself. A few beans. She didn't see any reason to let a sunny spot like that go to waste, and the soil was good. It had been a while. She loved the smell of dirt, and the feel of it. She had to make herself wash it off her hands.

Now that she was the Reverend's wife she had made the garden much bigger. She could get all the seeds she wanted. She still liked to eat a carrot right out of the ground, but she knew that wasn't what people did, so she was careful about it. She thought sometime she might just let the boy try it, to see how it tasted. (Two or three times she had even had the thought of stealing him, carrying him away to the woods or off down the

road so she could have him to herself and let him know about that other life. But she imagined the old man, the Reverend, calling after them, “Where are you going with that child?” The sadness in his voice would be terrible. *He* would be surprised to hear it. You wouldn’t even know your body had a sound like that in it. And it would be familiar to her. She didn’t imagine it, she remembered that sadness from somewhere, and it was as if she would understand something if she could hear it again. That was what she almost wanted.)

No, it was just a dream she had had a few times, two or three times, a kind of daydream. And it was the dream that stayed in her mind, not any real thought of taking the child away from his father. If he knew what she was thinking he would probably say, Soon enough you’ll have him all to yourself. Sometimes she wished he could know her thoughts, because she believed he might forgive them. Because the Good Lord would forgive them, practically for sure, she thought. If the old men knew anything about the Good Lord. If there was a Good Lord. Doll had never mentioned Him.

Lila’s thoughts were strange sometimes. They always had been. She had hoped getting baptized might help with it, but it didn’t. Someday she might ask him about that. Well, Doll always said, Just do what you’re told and be quiet about it, that’s all anybody ever going to want from you. Lila had learned there was really more to it than that. But she was very quiet. He didn’t ask much of her, though. Anything, really. In those first weeks she could tell he was just glad to find her there at the house when he came home, or in the kitchen when he came down from his study. Even a little relieved. Maybe he knew her better than she thought he did. But then he might not have been so glad to find her there. She wished sometimes he would tell her what to do, but he was always so careful of her. So she watched the other wives and did what they did, as well as she could figure it out.

There was so much to get wrong. She came to that first meeting at the church, after he had asked her to come, and when she walked into the room, all ladies there except for him, he stood up. She thought he must be angry to see her, that he was going to tell her to leave, that she should have understood it was a joke when he invited her. So she turned around and walked out. But two of the ladies followed her right into the street to tell her how happy they were that she had come and how they hoped she could stay. Kindness like that might have made her angry enough to keep walking if she hadn't had that idea in her mind about getting baptized. And when they came back in, he stood up again, because the kind of gentleman he was will do that when ladies come into a room. They almost can't help it. How was she supposed to know? They have to be the ones to open a door, but then they have to wait there for you to go through it. To this very day, if the Reverend happened to meet her out on the street he took off his hat to her, even in the rain. He always helped her with her chair, which amounted to pulling it out from the table a little, then pushing it in again after she sat down. Who in the world could need help with a chair?

People have their ways, though, she thought. And he was beautiful for an old man. She did enjoy the sight of him. He looked as if he'd had his share of loneliness, and that was all right. It was one thing she understood about him. She liked his voice. She liked the way he stood next to her as if there was a pleasure for him in it.

Once, he took her hand to help her up the steps at Boughton's house, and Boughton winked and said, "There are three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not," and they both laughed a little. She thought to herself, No cussing. But the Reverend could see it bothered her when they talked that way, making jokes they knew she would not understand. So when they were home again he took the Bible off the

shelf and showed her the verse: *The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maiden.* That was the joke. A man with a maiden. They were laughing because he was an old preacher and she was a field hand, or would be if she could just find her way back to that time. And she was old, too. For a woman being old just means not being young, and all the youth had been worked out of her before it had really even set in. So Lila had been old a long time, but not in a way that helped. Well, she knew it was a joke. People were still surprised at him, that he had married her.

She could see it surprised him, too, sometimes. He told her once when there was a storm a bird had flown into the house. He'd never seen one like it. The wind must have carried it in from some far-off place. He opened all the doors and windows, but it was so desperate to escape that for a while it couldn't find a way out. "It left a blessing in the house," he said. "The wildness of it. Bringing the wind inside." That was just when she began to suspect she was carrying a child, so it frightened her a little to realize that he knew she might leave, that he might even expect her to leave. She only remembered afterward that the first time she crept into bed beside him it had been the dark of the moon. It was the black-haired girl who told her about that, the one who called herself Susanna. She had three or four children, all staying with her sister or her mother, she said, so maybe she didn't know as much as she thought she did. Still, here Lila was with something more to worry about. The old man could have been telling her she should leave, she didn't belong in his house. Maybe that's how a gentleman would say it. If he wanted to, he could say, This was your idea, you're the one who said I should marry you. Maybe a gentleman couldn't say it. Sometime he might be angry, though, and forget about his manners, and that would be hard to live with. Doll always said, Just be quiet.

Whatever it is, just wait for it to be over. Everything ends sometime. Lila thought, When you know it will end anyway, you can want to be done with it. But if you're carrying a child, you'd best have a roof over your head. Any fool knows that.

One evening they went to old Boughton's house and the two men talked about people she didn't know and things she didn't understand. What else was there, after all? But she didn't mind listening. And soon enough they forgot she was listening. They had read about missionaries back from China, about how they had converted hundreds, and that was a drop in the bucket compared to all the people who had never heard a word of the Gospel and probably never would hear one. Boughton said it seemed to him like a terrible loss of souls, if that's what it was. He was not one to question divine justice, though sometimes he did have to wonder. Anyone would. Which was really not the same as questioning. And the Reverend said, When you think of all the people who lived from Adam to Abraham. Boughton shook his head at the mystery of it. "*We're* a drop in the bucket!" he said. "It's an easy thing to forget!"

The next day was a Sunday, and she had waked up early and slipped out of the house and walked away past the edge of town and followed the river to a place where the water ran over rocks and dropped down to a pool with a sandy bottom. She could watch the shadows of catfish there once the sun came up. She sat on the bank, damp and chilly, smelling the river and barely hearing the sound of it, hidden in the dark, not because she thought anyone would be there, but because she always liked the feeling that no one could see her even when she knew she was alone. The old man would wake up to an empty house, and he would dress and shave as he always did, and make his coffee and toast and gather up his papers and go off to church by himself to preach his sermon as he always did, and sing the hymns and pray the prayers and speak afterward with ladies who

wouldn't ask how she was or where she was, because they knew his marriage was a sorrow to him, one more sorrow.

She meant to do better by him. He was always kind to her. But she felt strange in the church. And the night before, lying beside him in the dark, she had asked him a question about China. He tried to explain and she tried to understand. He said, "I believe in the grace of God. For me, that is where all these questions end. Why it's pointless to ask them." But he seemed to be telling her that Boughton might be right, that souls could be lost forever because of things they did not know, or understand, or believe. He didn't like to say it, he had to try different words for it. So she knew he thought it might be true. Doll probably didn't know she had an immortal soul. It was nothing she ever mentioned, if she ever thought about it. She probably wouldn't even have known the words for it. All those people out there walking the roads all those years, hardly a one of them remembering the Sabbath. Who would know what day of the week it was? Who wouldn't take work when there was work to be done? What use was there in calling a day by a certain name, or thinking of it as anything but weather? They knew what time of the year it was when the timothy bloomed, when the birds were fledging. They knew it was morning when the sun came up. What more was there to know? If Doll was going to be lost forever, Lila wanted to be right there with her, holding to the skirt of her dress.

She had put on her own dress, not one of the nice ones from the Boughtons' attic or the new ones from the Sears, Roebuck catalogue, and her own shoes. No need to worry she might dirty them. When she stepped out the door she felt that good chill, the dark of the morning she used to wake up to every day. The trees stirred in the darkness, and birds made those startled sounds they do when the stars are gone and there is still no sunrise. The river smelled like any river, fishy and mossy and

shadowy, and the smell seemed stronger in the dark, with the chink and plosh of all the small life. She eased herself down to the edge of the water and put her hands in it. She took it up in her cupped hands, poured it over her brow, rubbed it into her face and into her hair. Then she did the same thing again, wetting the front of her dress. And again. Her hands were so cold she felt them against her face as if they weren't hers at all. The river was like the old life, just itself. Nothing more to it. She thought, It has washed the baptism off me. So that's done with. That must be what I wanted. Now, if I ever found Doll out there lost and wandering, at least she would recognize me. If there could be no joy for her in whatever was not life, at least she might remember for one second what joy had felt like. Lila thought about that for a while, seeing Doll walking ahead on some old dusty road, nothing on every side of her, and calling out her name so she would turn, and then running into her arms. No, Lila would be sitting on those steps, after it was dark, long after, and then Doll would be there, all out of breath, saying, "Child, child, I thought I was *never* going to find you!" When the sun had been up a little while she decided she could go back to the Reverend's house. Maybe no one would see her. They would all be in church.

She put on the blue dress she had found in the mail order catalogue he gave her. It was the first time she had taken the dress out of the box it came in. And she put on the white sandals, and she brushed her hair. In St. Louis one of the girls had said to her, Just pretend you're pretty so they can pretend you're pretty. The old man would come home, or stay in his study at the church. Someone might invite him to dinner, which they ate in the middle of the day on Sunday. And he might say yes rather than come back to his own house, which would still be empty, or where he would find her and have to think of a way to speak to her. When she did something wrong, something that made

him unhappy, he was embarrassed by it, and he would smile and say, "Perhaps you could help me understand . . . you are so quiet . . ." But she would not know how to explain, and if she told him how strange and alone she felt, and wanted to feel, he would wonder why she stayed with him at all. Now that there might be a child she'd best try to act like she belonged there, at least for a while. Her hands still smelled like river water, and her hair. She still felt a little more like who she was. That was a help.

She could read. Doll had seen to that. She might sit on the porch with a magazine and wait for him there. Then he could ask her what she was reading, or she could tell him that there was a word she didn't understand, as there certainly would be. So she was sitting with a copy of *The Nation* in her lap, when, hours after church would have ended, she saw the Reverend walking up the road, Boughton beside him, the two of them talking together as they always did, and listening to each other, as if, so far into their lives, some new thing might still be said, something not to be missed. Boughton saw her first and said a word to the Reverend, who glanced up, and then they stopped in the road to say goodbye and the old man came on alone. His body still had the habits of largeness and strength, as if he had learned to be a little slow when he moved, out of consideration for whatever might be around him, whatever he might bump or displace. Still, he was slower than usual, taking his time, approaching his own door with a reluctance she saw and regretted, since this time might be the time that he would not forgive her, or at least the time that he would have decided he did not want her to stay.

He took off his hat as he came up the steps. Then he stood there a moment, turning the brim of it in his hands, just taking her in. "*The Nation*," he said, as if that was as strange as anything else that had happened to him lately.

So she said, "I got to do more reading. It's something I been meaning to do for a while now."

After a moment he said, "Yes, well, that's always worthwhile, I guess." His voice was mild, almost amused. He shifted his weight, the way he did when something surprised him a little.

So she said, "Seems like I'm carrying a child." She had not meant to tell him then, but she couldn't very well wait until he decided to be angry to tell him, or until he told her he just wanted his life to himself again, as she expected him to do any day. If that happened, her pride would make her leave, without a mention of it, and there was no telling what would become of her and the child, if there was a child.

He said, "Really." He sat down on the porch swing beside her, at a little distance from her. He said, "Is that a fact." Then he said, "This is not at all how I thought this day would end."

She had not looked at his face yet. She was watching the wind move the trees. It was a soft evening wind, and the trees were darkening, filling with shadows. It would be time to stop working, not soon but sometime. A wind like that used to mean the day isn't endless, sometime there'll be supper and talk and sleep. So many things they knew together and never spoke about at all.

He said, "So, then, you've decided to stay."

"I never did plan on leaving." For a town it wasn't such a bad place. The trees were big enough that it was almost like living in the woods. There was no reason not to make another garden. She could plant some flowers.

After a minute he said, "When you go off like that, you might leave a note. I don't always know what to think. You left your wedding ring."

"I just forget to put it on sometimes."

"Yes. I guess I knew that."

"I'm always wearing that locket you give me."

It seemed strange to her to wear a ring. It was a gold ring. She might harm it in some way. It might slip off her finger and be lost.

“Lila,” he said, “I’m glad to know you aren’t planning to leave. But if you ever change your mind, I want you to leave by daylight. I want you to have a train ticket in your hand that will take you right where you want to go, and I want you to take your ring and anything else I have given you. You might want to sell it. That would be all right. It’s yours, not mine. It doesn’t belong here—I mean it wouldn’t—” He cleared his throat. “You’re my wife,” he said. “I want to take care of you, even if that means someday seeing you to the train.” He leaned forward and looked into her face, almost sternly, so she would know he meant what he said.

She thought, We would be safe here. He would be good to a child. But if he was going to put her on the train, where would the child be then? Would he expect her to leave it behind when she left? Or did he think there wasn’t going to be any child? Well, sometimes you expect you’re going to have a baby, then nothing comes of it. You can’t set your heart on it.

“I can’t yet know for sure,” she said. “Whether there’s going to be a baby.”

“I understand that.”

“You might think it’s a story I made up to smooth things over. If it don’t turn out to be true.” She didn’t want to have to worry about what he might think if a day came when he stopped trusting her. *When* that day came. She was sure it would.

He said, very gently, “I would never suspect you of such a thing,” as if a lie like that would be too low for her even to think about.

She thought, If it *was* a lie, and if it had come to mind, I just might have told it. It surely did smooth things over. She said, “I ain’t what you seem to think I am. I done some things in my life.

Like I told you.” The time would come when he would understand that, too. Better that he shouldn’t be too surprised. She knew he wouldn’t ask for more particulars, not now.

He was quiet, and then he said, “You are the only person in this world I want to have sitting here beside me. That isn’t what I think, it’s what I know. I guess it doesn’t explain anything. Have you had supper?”

“Some bread and jam.”

He patted her knee. “I wouldn’t call that supper. We have to take care of you.” The kitchen was empty, so he went to the neighbors and came back with a bottle of milk and a can of baked beans. He laughed. “We’ll do better tomorrow.” She knew about that other wife and that other baby. If she had given herself some time to think, she’d have realized they would be on his mind.

She was there in Gilead in the first place because once when she was walking along the road, probably hoping to get to Sioux City, tired of walking, tired of carrying her suitcase and her bedroll, she had noticed a little house sitting a way off by a cluster of cottonwood trees, a sort of cabin someone had built and abandoned along with the fields around it. So she thought she’d take a look. Then she knew for sure it was abandoned because people had camped there and left clutter behind, and broken up the stoop for firewood, and no one had ever fixed any of it or cleared it away. The people who left the mess might come back and tell her it was their place—just look at the beer cans and the snoose tins, who you think put them there? She had seen that happen before. You seen them spent cartridges out by the trees? You think it was squirrels dropped them? Nothing to do then but move on.

But she had been there for weeks and so far no one had

come. She knew how to get by so long as nobody bothered her. Plenty of fish in the river. There were dandelion greens. Mushrooms. You can chew pine sap if you want to. You can eat the roots of things. Cattails. Wild carrot. Nettles are very good if you know how to pick them and cook them. Doll said you just had to know what wouldn't kill you. Most folks don't eat squirrel, but you can. Turtles. Snakes, if need be. Lila couldn't really live that way for very long, only until the weather turned cold. But she wanted to stay in one place for a while. The loneliness was bad, but it was better than anything else she could think of. It was probably loneliness that made her walk the mile or so into town every few days just to look at the houses and stores and the flower gardens. She never meant to talk to anybody. She had a dress she wore and a dress she saved, and she was wearing the good one, the clean one, the one she kept a little nice so that she could go walking where people might see her, when she got caught in the rain that Sunday and stepped into the church, just to save her dress. And there was that old man, speaking above the sound of the rain against the windows. He looked at her, and looked away again. "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

They didn't really ask for money. They passed a plate, but nobody made you put anything in it. She began counting up the days, so she would know when it was Sunday again. She lost count once. People living the way she was could go crazy. She began to wonder if that had already happened to her. She thought, If I'm crazy, I may as well do what I feel like doing. No point being crazy if you have to worry all the time about what people are thinking anyway. There were ten or twenty good reasons why she would not go to church. Doll never did. The place was full of strangers. She had only the one dress to wear. They all knew the songs, they knew what they were supposed to do and say and what it meant. They all knew each other. The preacher said things that bothered her, she couldn't make sense

of them. Resurrection. But she guessed she liked the candles and the singing. She guessed she didn't have a better place to be.

She was probably crazy, and she was probably leaving, so she decided she would talk to that preacher. There were a hundred reasons why she would never go to his house, in that same old dress, and ask him a question. She was never one to put herself forward. But there was no way to keep the mice out of that shack. The fields around it were going all to tansy. In St. Louis they gave them tansy tea, and she hated the smell of it. So she had decided to leave. Then why not ask him? He would just say, That crazy woman came to my door with something on her mind, and then I never saw her again after that. Soon enough he'd forget it ever happened. He wouldn't know what to tell her. But who else was she ever going to ask?

When he saw her at the door he looked surprised and not surprised, as if he had no reason to expect her and there she was anyway. He was in his shirtsleeves and house slippers, looking older than he did in the pulpit, and she thought she had come too early in the morning. But what did it matter.

He said, "Hello. Good morning," and waited, as if he expected her to explain herself. Then he said, "Please come in." When she stepped inside the house, he began to apologize for how bare it was. "I'm not much for keeping things up. I suppose you can see that. Still—" and he gestured at the sofa, which was covered with papers and books. "Let me make a little space for you here. I don't have much company. You can probably see that, too." She didn't know then that it would have embarrassed him to have her there, a woman alone with him, a stranger. But he didn't want her to leave, she did know that. "Can I get you a glass of water? I could make coffee, if you have a few minutes."

She had a day, a week, a month. She said, "I got nowhere to be."

He smiled at her, or to himself, as if he saw that the mystery

of her presence might just be something a few dollars could help with. He said, “Then I’ll make coffee.”

She stood up. “I don’t even know why I come here.” She recognized that smile. She had hated people for it.

“Well— We could talk a little. Sometimes that helps. I mean, helps make things clearer—”

She said, “I don’t much like to talk.”

He laughed. “Well, that’s fine, too. A lot of people around here feel that way. But they do enjoy a cup of coffee.”

She said, “I don’t know why I come here. That’s a fact.”

He shrugged. “Since you *are* here, maybe you could tell me a little about yourself?”

She shook her head. “I don’t talk about that. I just been wondering lately why things happen the way they do.”

“Oh!” he said. “Then I’m glad you have some time to spare. I’ve been wondering about that more or less my whole life.” He brought her into the kitchen and seated her at the table, and after he had made coffee they sat there together for a while, saying practically nothing. Yes, the weather had been fine. He traced a scratch on the table with his finger. And then he began to tell her about the brother and sisters who died before he was born, and how his mother said once that the stairs were scuffed by the children’s shoes because she could never keep them from running in the house. And when she found a scrawl in a book, she said, “One of the children must have done it.” There was a kind of fondness and sadness in her voice that he heard only when she mentioned them. So when he found a scratch or a mark on something, he still thought, One of the children. His brother Edward, the oldest, was spared the diphtheria that took the rest of them. So Edward knew the children, and he had stories about them. One, closest to him, was named John, a family name. Once, he heard his brother call him Non-John, thinking he was too young to understand. Because Edward missed the

brother he had lost, he always did miss him. He was—very loyal to him. Their mother and father and grandfather seldom mentioned those children. They could hardly bear to think of them. “There’s been a good deal of sorrow in this old place,” he said. “Some of it mine. Some I used to wish were mine. So I sort of live with the question. Why things happen. I guess this isn’t much help.”

She liked to hear people tell stories. The saddest ones were the best. She wondered if that meant anything at all. Of course, when people talked about themselves that way, they were usually trying to get you to talk about yourself in the same way. That would be what this preacher wanted. But she and Doll had a secret between them. The old woman who took them in said, “Doll, you know you can go to jail for stealing a child. And I can go to jail for helping you do it.” She said, “You’re flirting with the worst kind of trouble.” So Lila couldn’t think of breathing a word, even now. Stealing a child, when Doll had come to her like an angel in the wilderness. The Reverend talked about angels, and the notion helped her to think about certain things. She was swept up and carried away, with that old shawl around her.

He said, “I don’t often talk about this. I don’t often talk to anyone who doesn’t know about it already. You’ve come here to ask me a question, and I’ve been going on about myself.”

She said, “I liked that story.”

He looked away from her and laughed. “It *is* a story, isn’t it? I’ve never really thought of it that way. And I suppose the next time I tell it, it will be a better story. Maybe a little less true. I might not tell it again. I hope I won’t. You’re right not to talk. It’s a sort of higher honesty, I think. Once you start talking, there’s no telling what you’ll say.”

She said, “I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Apparently not. I do. I’ve spent my life talking— But you have that question. Maybe you could help me understand it a

little better. Tell me how it came to be on your mind. In a few words.”

She said, “I got time to myself. I think about things.”

“Yes. Clearly you do. Interesting things.”

“I spose everybody thinks about ’em.”

He laughed. “Right. But that’s interesting, too.”

“On Sundays you talk about the Good Lord, how He does one thing and another.”

“Yes, I do.” And he blushed. It was as if he expected that question, too, and was surprised again that the thing he expected for no reason was actually happening. He said, “I know that I am not—adequate to the subject. You have to forgive me.”

She nodded. “That’s all you going to say.”

“No. No, it isn’t. I think you are asking me these questions because of some hard things that have happened, the things you won’t talk about. If you did tell me about them, I could probably not say more than that life is a very deep mystery, and that finally the grace of God is all that can resolve it. And the grace of God is also a very deep mystery.” He said, “You can probably tell I’ve said these same words too many times. But they’re true, I believe.” He shrugged, and watched his finger trace the scar on the table.

After a minute she said, “Well, all right. I better go now.” She didn’t always remember yet to say thank you for the coffee, thank you for your time and your trouble. He walked her to the door and opened it for her, and she forgot to thank him for that. He looked tired, and as though he was sorry the conversation had ended. He said, “Thank you for coming by. It has been interesting. For me.” Then he said, “Whatever it is, or was, that you didn’t tell me, I regret it. Very much.”

Still, she believed she must have turned him against her, when she thought back on it. Showing up at his door like that. But the next few days people she didn’t know would stop her on

the road and offer her work, even a spare room. One lady invited her for a supper at the church, and she went, hoping the Reverend wouldn't be there. They said they expected him, but he didn't come. That was the lady who told her about the wife and the child, speaking very softly out of respect for the sadness of the story. She said it was something he never talked about to anyone. Reverend Boughton, of course, but no one else. "He forgets things, like he did the supper tonight," she said. "He's always been that way."

If she stayed in Gilead, she could earn some money. She could buy some things at the store. Soap, and thread, and a box of salt. She could be in out of the weather when she wanted. All they asked her to do was a little gardening, a little washing and ironing, and she could do those things as well as anybody. So it wasn't really charity. They didn't bother her with talk. They gave her Sundays to herself. If she left she had nowhere to go especially, except not St. Louis. She decided she might as well stay for a while, putting a little aside to make things easier when she changed her mind. It was one of those Sundays, after church, that she thought to walk up to the cemetery. She found the wife and child there, sure enough. The grass was mowed, but nobody had thought to prune the roses.

He had given a sermon, "Let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." He said it meant that when you did a good thing it should seem to come from God, not from you. It should not feel to other people like your goodness, and it should not feel that way to you, either. Any good thing is less good the more any human being lays claim to it. She thought, All right, that's why he told these other people to help me out. That's why he can't look at me. You'd think he was ashamed of something. Ever since that morning I went to his house and he could see well enough I was on hard times, he's hardly said a word to me.