

ONE

IT WAS NIGHT, and dogs came through the trees, unleashed and howling. They burst from the cover of the woods and their shadows swam across a moonlit field. For a moment, it was as if her scent had torn like a cobweb and blown on the wind, shreds of it here and there, useless. The dogs faltered and broke apart, yearning. Walking now, stiff-legged, they ploughed the grass with their heavy snouts.

Finally, the men appeared. They were wordless, exhausted from running with the dogs, huffing in the dark. First came the boy who owned the dogs, and then two men, side by side, massive redheads so close in appearance they might be twins. Dabs of firefly light drifted everywhere; the night was heavy with the smell of manure and flowering apple and pear. At last, the westernmost hound discovered a new direction, and dogs and men lurched on.

The girl scrambled through ditchwater and bulrushes, desperate to erase her scent. For a perilous moment she dared to stop running, to stand motionless, listening, holding her dark skirts out of the water. In the moonlight, her beautiful face was hollow as a mask, eyes like holes above the smooth cheeks. The booming in her ears faded slowly, and she listened to the night air. No wind through the trees. The

frogs had stopped shrilling. No sound except the dripping of her skirts and, far away, the dogs.

Nineteen years old and already a widow. Mary Boulton. Widowed by her own hand.

The girl stood in her ditch under a hard, small moon. Pale foam rose from where her shoes sank into mud. No more voices inside her head, no noise but these dogs. She saw her own course along the ground as a trail of bright light, now doused in the ditchwater. She clambered up the bank and onto a road, her stiff funeral skirt made of bedspread and curtain, her hair wild and falling in dark ropes about her face. The widow gathered up her shawl and fled witchlike down the empty road.

AT DAYBREAK SHE was waiting for a ferry, hooded and shivering in her sodden black clothes. She did not know where she was but had simply run till the road came to an end, and there was the landing. A grand, warning sunrise lay overhead, lighting the tips of the trees, while the ground was in shadow and cold. The hem of her skirt was weighed down by mud. She whispered in camaraderie with herself, the shawl about her ears, while another woman stood uneasy by the empty ticket booth and held her children silent. They all watched her with large eyes. Even the smallest seemed to know not to wake the sleepwalker. Out above the river's surface, fat swallows stabbed at unseen bugs and peeped to one another in emotionless repetition. The ferry sat unmoving on the other side, a great flat skiff with a pilot's cabin in the rear.

The widow considered the ticket booth, realizing suddenly that she had no money. Behind her was the long, vacant road she had come down. It was stick-straight and lined with trees,

and at the limit of sight it bent to the left where no movement, no human shape was yet visible. Her mind had cleared a little because she felt less afraid, and she now saw the world around her in a sharper, simpler way. Even the wind, rising and subsiding and fluttering her collar, followed a less ornamented rhythm than before. She could see it blowing, an infinite number of slack lines waving before her.

A boy on the other side of the river came to the edge of the bank and waved. One of the children waved back. He put his hands to his mouth and hollered. A man's voice hollered back. The widow turned to see a tall figure in coveralls coming down the road, his hand aloft. He must have emerged from an unseen path through the trees. He unlocked the door to the booth, stepped inside, slid back a tiny window, and leaned on his elbows. The woman and her children crowded in at the window and together they debated in hushed voices. A child's hand reached up to finger the dull coins and was slapped away. Once they had paid, the woman moved her children away to the dock. The river swept by in lavish, syrupy whorls, over which the ferry now laboured. The sky was withering with morning, whiter by the second, and over the shallows and the slim line of sand, insects could be seen gliding, carried giddy on the wind.

The widow roused herself, tucked a strand of hair under her shawl, and went up to the tiny booth with its window. Inside, the ticketman's racoon face floated in the dim, close air.

"I haven't..." she began.

He said nothing, simply waited. His hand lay on the counter before him, knuckles heavy and cracked.

The widow gazed in disgust at his fingernails, pale and sunk into the flesh, with a rim of dirt about each one. A cluster

of slumbering things, and above them, darkness and the man's watching eyes.

"I haven't any money," she managed.

"Can't get over if ye can't pay."

Her mouth fell open. Part desperation, part surprise at hearing an actual human voice. "Please, I need to get to the other side. I'm...late getting home."

"Out late, eh?"

The feral face came a little farther out of the gloom, fixing her with eyes that were clouded and small. He seemed to be considering an alternative meaning to her statement. She held her collar tight and waited as he gathered the unknown thoughts together.

"Been visiting?" His face took on the shadow of a smile. It was not an unkind face, exactly. The widow nodded, her heart beating hugely.

"Your mother will miss ye, won't she, if ye don't get home?"

The widow had never known a mother, and yet she nodded vigorously.

The ticketman's smile became a leer. "Can't have that."

He rose and stepped from the wooden booth, taking the widow's elbow in his massive hand. They walked together down to the river. The ferry, now docked, churned and roared and dug up the river mud. A scarf of cloudy water made its way downriver, where the current stirred the clear and the murky together. Black smoke issued from the ferry's funnel and was snatched away by wind. The man helped her to the railing, then went back to the shore.

The widow looked down into the boil of water, wood, and parts of fish churning in the soup, the ferry rocking

deeply as if trying to tip her in. Her stomach lurched and she moved over by the engine-room door. Inside, the ferryman, who couldn't have been more than sixteen, struggled with various levers. She closed her eyes and clutched her hands together as the boat backed away from the shore, leaving solid ground, and swung slowly out into the current. The horn bawled suddenly, then again, acknowledging the ticketman left on the shore, and he raised his hand, standing among the flowering trees.



AN HOUR LATER, two men stood waiting at the river's edge — red-headed brothers with rifles across their backs. Large men, identical in every way, standing close by each other, not speaking. Each with huge chest and arms, sleeves rolled up, like two lumberjacks in a rustic play. But these were not lumberjacks. The pallor of their faces, the close trim of their beards, belied any suggestion of work. And they wore fine black boots.

The ticketman, like most superstitious country people, mistrusted twins, disliked the puzzle of them, the potential for trickery, the sheer unnaturalness. He'd been to sideshows to see the horrors in which twins figured as highlights: bottled "punks" and rubber replicas, conjoined monsters melted together by the breath of hell. He'd stood with his neighbours, scandalized, all of them sharing the barker's opinion that human birth is a treacherous thing, and woman is its greatest dupe. Now, studying the brothers from the gloom of his little booth, he tsk-ed in sour disapproval. Twins or not, he overcharged them anyway.