

HOME

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virago

VIRAGO

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“HOME TO STAY, GLORY! YES!” HER FATHER SAID, AND her heart sank. He attempted a twinkle of joy at this thought, but his eyes were damp with commiseration. “To stay for a while this time!” he amended, and took her bag from her, first shifting his cane to his weaker hand. Dear God, she thought, dear God in heaven. So began and ended all her prayers these days, which were really cries of amazement. How could her father be so frail? And how could he be so recklessly intent on satisfying his notions of gentlemanliness, hanging his cane on the railing of the stairs so he could, dear God, carry her bag up to her room? But he did it, and then he stood by the door, collecting himself.

“This is the nicest room. According to Mrs. Blank.” He indicated the windows. “Cross ventilation. I don’t know. They all seem nice to me.” He laughed. “Well, it’s a good house.” The house embodied for him the general blessedness of his life, which was manifest, really indisputable. And which he never failed to acknowledge, especially when it stood over against particular sorrow. Even more frequently after their mother died he spoke of the house as if it were an old wife, beautiful for every comfort it had offered, every grace, through all the long years. It was a beauty that would not be apparent to every eye. It was too tall for the neighborhood, with a flat face and a flattened roof and peaked brows over the windows. “Italianate,” her father said, but that was a guess, or a rationalization. In any case, it managed to look

both austere and pretentious despite the porch her father had had built on the front of it to accommodate the local taste for socializing in the hot summer evenings, and which had become overgrown by an immense bramble of trumpet vines. It was a good house, her father said, meaning that it had a gracious heart however awkward its appearance. And now the gardens and the shrubbery were disheveled, as he must have known, though he rarely ventured beyond the porch.

Not that they had been especially presentable even while the house was in its prime. Hide-and-seek had seen to that, and croquet and badminton and baseball. "Such times you had!" her father said, as if the present slight desolation were confetti and candy wrappers left after the passing of some glorious parade. And there was the oak tree in front of the house, much older than the neighborhood or the town, which made rubble of the pavement at its foot and flung its imponderable branches out over the road and across the yard, branches whose girths were greater than the trunk of any ordinary tree. There was a torsion in its body that made it look like a giant dervish to them. Their father said if they could see as God can, in geological time, they would see it leap out of the ground and turn in the sun and spread its arms and bask in the joys of being an oak tree in Iowa. There had once been four swings suspended from those branches, announcing to the world the fruitfulness of their household. The oak tree flourished still, and of course there had been and there were the apple and cherry and apricot trees, the lilacs and trumpet vines and the day lilies. A few of her mother's irises managed to bloom. At Easter she and her sisters could still bring in armfuls of flowers, and their father's eyes would glitter with tears and he would say, "Ah yes, yes," as if they had brought some memento, these flowers only a pleasant reminder of flowers.

Why should this staunch and upright house seem to her so abandoned? So heartbroken? The eye of the beholder, she thought. Still, seven of her father's children came home as often

as they could manage to, and telephoned, and sent notes and gifts and crates of grapefruit. Their own children, from the time they could grasp a crayon and scrawl, were taught to remember Grandpa, then Great-grandpa. Parishioners and their children and grandchildren looked in on her father with a faithfulness that would have taxed his strength if the new minister had not hinted at the problem. And there was Ames, her father's alter ego, in whom he had confided so long and so utterly that he was a second father to them all, not least in the fact of knowing more about them than was entirely consistent with their comfort. Sometimes they made their father promise not to tell anyone, by which he knew they meant Reverend Ames, since he was far too discreet to repeat any confidence, except in the confessional of Ames's stark bachelor kitchen, where, they suspected, such considerations were forgotten. And what was their father not to tell? How they informed on Jack, telling him what Jack had said, what Jack had done or seemed inclined to do.

"I have to know," their father said. "For his sake." So they told on their poor scoundrel brother, who knew it, and was irritated and darkly amused, and who kept them informed or misinformed and inspired urgent suspicions among them which they felt they had to pass on, whatever their misgivings, to spare their father having to deal with the sheriff again. They were not the kind of children to carry tales. They observed a strict code against it among themselves, in fact, and they made an exception of Jack only because they were afraid to do otherwise. "Will they put him in jail?" they asked one another miserably when the mayor's son found his hunting rifle in their barn. If they had only known, they could have returned it and spared their father surprise and humiliation. At least with a little warning he could have composed himself, persuaded himself to feel something less provocative than pure alarm.

But no, they did not put him in jail. Jack, standing beside his father, made yet another apology and agreed to sweep the steps of

the city hall every morning for a week. And he did leave the house early every morning. Leaves and maple wings accumulated at city hall until the week was over and the mayor swept them up. No. His father would always intercede for him. The fact that his father was his father usually made intercession unnecessary. And that boy could apologize as fluently as any of the rest of the Boughtons could say the Apostles' Creed.

A decade of betrayals, minor and major, was made worse by awareness on every side that they were all constantly alert to transgression and its near occasion, and made worse still by the fact that Jack never repaid them in kind, though this may only have been because their own mischief was too minor to interest him. To say they shared a bad conscience about Jack to this day would be to overstate the matter a little. No doubt he had his own reasons for staying away all these years, refusing all contact with them. Assuming, please God, he was alive. It was easy to imagine in retrospect that Jack might have tired of it all, even though they knew he made a somber game of it. Sometimes he had seemed to wish he could simply trust a brother, a sister. They remembered that from time to time he had been almost candid, had spoken almost earnestly. Then he would laugh, but that might have been embarrassment.

They were attentive to their father all those years later, in part because they were mindful of his sorrow. And they were very kind to one another, and jovial, and fond of recalling good times and looking through old photographs so that their father would laugh and say, "Yes, yes, you were quite a handful." All this might have been truer because of bad conscience, or, if not that, of a grief that felt like guilt. Her good, kind, and jovial siblings were good, kind, and jovial consciously and visibly. Even as children they had been good in fact, but also in order to be seen as good. There was something disturbingly like hypocrisy about it all, though it was meant only to compensate for Jack, who was so conspicuously not good as to cast a shadow over their household. They

were as happy as their father could wish, even happier. Such gaiety! And their father laughed at it all, danced with them to the Victrola, sang with them around the piano. Such a wonderful family they were! And Jack, if he was there at all, looked on and smiled and took no part in any of it.

Now, as adults, they were so careful to gather for holidays that Glory had not seen the house empty and quiet in years, since she was a girl. Even when the others had all gone off to school her mother was there, and her father was still vigorous enough to make a little noise in the house with coming and going, singing, grumbling. "I don't know why he has to slam that door!" her mother would say, when he was off to tend to some pastoral business or to play checkers with Ames. He almost skipped down the steps. The matter of Jack and the girl and her baby stunned him, winded him, but he was still fairly robust, full of purpose. Then, after his frailty finally overwhelmed him, and after their mother died, there was still the throng of family, the bantering and bickering child cousins who distracted and disrupted adult conversation often enough to ward off inquiry into the specifics of her own situation. Still teaching, still engaged to be married, yes, long engagements are best. Twice the fiancé had actually come home with her, had shaken hands all around and smiled under their tactful scrutiny. He had been in their house. He could stay only briefly, but he had met her father, who claimed to like him well enough, and this had eased suspicions a little. Theirs and hers. Now here she was alone with poor old Papa, sad old Papa, upon whose shoulder much of Presbyterian Gilead above the age of twenty had at some time wept. No need to say anything, and no hope of concealing anything either.

The town seemed different to her, now that she had returned there to live. She was thoroughly used to Gilead as the subject and scene of nostalgic memory. How all the brothers and sisters except Jack had loved to come home, and how ready they always were to leave again. How dear the old place and the old stories

were to them, and how far abroad they had scattered. The past was a very fine thing, in its place. But her returning now, to stay, as her father said, had turned memory portentous. To have it overrun its bounds this way and become present and possibly future, too—they all knew this was a thing to be regretted. She raveled at the thought of their commiseration.

Most families had long since torn down their outbuildings and sold off their pastures. Smaller houses in later styles had sprung up between them in sufficient numbers to make the old houses look increasingly out of place. The houses of Gilead had once stood on small farmsteads with garden patches and berry patches and henhouses, with woodsheds, rabbit hutches, and barns for the cow or two, the horse or two. These were simply the things life required. It was the automobile that changed that, her father said. People didn't have to provide for themselves the way they once did. It was a loss—there was nothing like chicken droppings to make flowers thrive.

Boughtons, who kept everything, had kept their land, their empty barn, their useless woodshed, their unpruned orchard and horseless pasture. There on the immutable terrain of their childhood her brothers and sisters could and did remember those years in great detail, their own memories, but more often the pooled memory they saw no special need to portion out among them. They looked at photographs and went over the old times and laughed, and their father was well pleased.

Boughton property lay behind the house in a broad strip that spanned two blocks, now that the town had grown and spread enough to have blocks. For years a neighbor—they still called him Mr. Trotsky because Luke, home from college, had called him that—planted alfalfa on half of it, and her father sometimes tried to find words for his irritation about this. “If he would just ask me,” he said. She was too young at the time to understand the alfalfa putsch, and she was in college when she began to see what the old stories meant, that they were really the stirring and smol-

dering of old fires that had burned furiously elsewhere. It pleased her to think that Gilead was part of the world she read about, and she wished she had known Mr. Trotsky and his wife, but old as they were, they had abandoned Gilead to its folly in a fit of indignation about which no one knew the particulars, just at the end of her sophomore year.

The land that was the battlefield would have been unused if the neighbor had not farmed it, and alfalfa was good for the soil, and the joke and perhaps the fact was that the neighbor, who seemed otherwise unemployed and who railed against the cash nexus, donated his crop to a rural cousin, who in exchange donated to him a certain amount of money. In any case, her father could never finally persuade himself that objection was called for. The neighbor was also an agnostic and probably spoiling for an ethical argument. Her father seemed to feel he could not risk losing another one of those, after the embarrassing episode when he tried to prevent the town from putting a road through his land, on no better grounds than that his father would have opposed it, and his grandfather. He had realized this during a long night when his belief in the rightness of his position dissipated like mist, under no real scrutiny. There was simply the moment, a little after 10:00 p.m., when the realization came, and then the seven hours until dawn. His case looked no better by daylight, so he wrote a letter to the mayor, simple and dignified, making no allusion to the phrase "grasping hypocrite," which he had thought he heard the mayor mutter after him as he walked away from a conversation he had considered pleasant enough. He told all of them about this at the dinner table and used it more than once as a sermon illustration, since he did devoutly believe that when the Lord gave him moral instruction it was not for his use only.

Each spring the agnostic neighbor sat his borrowed tractor with the straight back and high shoulders of a man ready to be challenged. Unsociable as he was, he called out heartily to passersby like a man with nothing to hide, intending, perhaps, to make the

Reverend Boughton know, and know the town at large knew, too, that he was engaged in trespass. This is the very act against which Christians leveraged the fate of their own souls, since they were, if they listened to their own prayers, obliged to forgive those who trespassed against them.

Her father lived in a visible state of irritation until the crop was in, but he was willing to concede the point. He knew the neighbor was holding him up to public embarrassment year after year, seed time and harvest, not only to keep fresh the memory of his ill-considered opposition to the road, but also to be avenged in some small degree for the whole, in his agnostic view unbroken, history of religious hypocrisy.

Once, five of the six younger Boughtons—Jack was elsewhere—played a joyless and determined game of fox and geese in the tender crop of alfalfa, the beautiful alfalfa, so green it was almost blue, so succulent that a mist stood on its tiny leaves even in the middle of the day. They were not conscious of the craving for retaliation until Dan ran out into the field to retrieve a baseball, and Teddy ran after him, and Hope and Gracie and Glory after them. Somebody shouted fox and geese, and they all ran around to make the great circle, and then to make the diameters, breathless, the clover breaking so sweetly under their feet that they repented of the harm they were doing even as they persisted in it. They slid and fell in the vegetable mire and stained their knees and their hands, until the satisfactions of revenge were outweighed in their hearts by the knowledge that they were deeply in trouble. They played on until they were called to supper. When they trooped into the kitchen in a reek of child sweat and bruised alfalfa, their mother made a sharp sound in her throat and called, “Robert, look what we have here.”

The slight satisfaction in their father’s face confirmed what they dreaded, that he saw the opportunity to demonstrate Christian humility in such an unambiguous form that the neighbor could feel it only as rebuke.

He said, "Of course you will have to apologize." He looked almost stern, only a little amused, only a little gratified. "You had better get it over with," he said. As they knew, an apology freely offered would have much more effect than one that might seem coerced by the offended party, and since the neighbor was a short-tempered man, the balance of relative righteousness could easily tip against them. So the five of them walked by way of the roads to the other side of the block. Somewhere along the way Jack caught up and walked along with them, as if penance must always include him.

They knocked at the door of the small brown house and the wife opened it. She seemed happy enough to see them, and not at all surprised. She asked them in, mentioning with a kind of regret the smell of cooking cabbage. The house was sparsely furnished and crowded with books, magazines, and pamphlets, the arrangements having a provisional feeling though the couple had lived there for years. There were pictures pinned to the walls of bearded, unsmiling men and women with rumpled hair and rimless glasses.

Teddy said, "We're here to apologize."

She nodded. "You trampled the field. I know that. He knows, too. I'll tell him you have come." She spoke up the stairs, perhaps in a foreign language, listened for a minute to nothing audible, and came back to them. "To destroy is a great shame," she said. "To destroy for no reason."

Teddy said, "That is our field. I mean, my father does own it."

"Poor child!" she said. "You know no better than this, to speak of owning land when no use is made of it. Owning land just to keep it from others. That is all you learn from your father the priest! Mine, mine, mine! While he earns his money from the ignorance of the people!" She waved a slender arm and a small fist. "Telling his foolish lies again and again while everywhere the poor suffer!"

They had never heard anyone speak this way before, certainly

not to them or about them. She stared at them to drive her point home. There was convincing rage and righteousness in her eyes, watery blue as they were, and Jack laughed.

“Oh yes,” she said, “I know who you are. The boy thief, the boy drunkard! While your father tells the people how to live! He deserves you!” Then, “Why so quiet? You have never heard the truth before?”

Daniel, the oldest of them, said, “You shouldn’t talk that way. If you were a man, I’d probably have to hit you.”

“Hah! Yes, you good Christians, you come into my house to threaten violence! I will report you to the sheriff. There is a little justice, even in America!” She waved her fist again.

Jack laughed. He said, “It’s all right. Let’s go home.”

And she said, “Yes, listen to your brother. He knows about the sheriff!”

So they trooped out the door, which was slammed after them, and filed home in the evening light absorbing what they had heard. They agreed that the woman was crazy and her husband, too. Still, vengefulness stirred in them, and there was talk of breaking windows, letting air out of tires. Digging a pit so large and well concealed that the neighbor and his tractor would both fall in. And there would be spiders at the bottom, and snakes. And when he yelled for help they would lower a ladder with the rungs sawed through so that they would break under his weight. Ah, the terrible glee among the younger ones, while the older ones absorbed the fact that they had heard their family insulted and had done nothing about it.

They walked into their own kitchen, and there were their mother and father, waiting to hear their report. They told them that they didn’t speak to the man, but the woman had yelled at them and had called their father a priest.

“Well,” their mother said, “I hope you were polite.”

They shrugged and looked at each other. Gracie said, “We just sort of stood there.”

Jack said, “She was really mean. She even said you deserved me.”

Her father’s eyes stung. He said, “Did she say that? Well now, that was kind of her. I will be sure to thank her. I hope I do deserve you, Jack. All of you, of course.” That tireless tenderness of his, and Jack’s unreadable quiet in the face of it.

Mr. Trotsky planted potatoes and squash the next year, corn the year after that. A nephew of the rural cousin came to help him with his crop, and in time was given the use of the field and built a small house on one corner of it and brought a wife there, and they had children. More beds of marigolds, another flapping clothesline, another roof pitched under heaven to shelter human hope and frailty. The Boughtons tacitly ceded all claim.