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# 1

## AN IMPONDERABLE SPECIMEN

MY NAME IS YIP TOLROY & I am a mute. I have made not a sound since the day of my birth, October 2nd, 1815. I will say that my life has been something of a trial but such is God's wish & so I must tell my story here on the page.

Indeed I should thank Him for these 3 fingers left me, they might still hold a quill & feel the ink flow free beneath them. I did leave them other 2 where they lay & I have dreams still of the rains feeding them like greentip shoots where in that spot now stands a Hand, the wrist a smooth-barked bole & a Hundred Fingers wagging like branches in the breeze.

Answers have not ever come easy to me. By all accounts they is like teeth – you can try to pull them clean out but even then they will likely Splinter & Crack & there will be nothing but a palmful of dust at the end of it. Here is a lesson worth attending to – no One or Thing comes into this world whole & it is in the search of what is gone missing that our lives do find their meaning. That is the truth of it.

At one time a great many beardy doctors did apply their crude instruments to me though none was able to declare a reason behind

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my queer *afflictions*. I ought to make it plain I am not cut from the common cloth. Aside from my lacking a voice I stand at 4 feet & 8 inches tall & there is inexplicably not a single hair on my person.

Some have been willing to look upon my differences as mere eccentricities, though the majority have not been so generous with their opinions. I never did quarrel with them who chose to insult me & I did not simper up to them who chose to treat me with civility. It is not my business to decide how others wish to comport themselves. Only know that I have growed to look upon my own reflection in kind, for there is no hatred more pernicious than that which is turned upon the self.

It is true enough though that most people are affronted in one way or another at the sight of me. I have had many strangers & even them I considered friends claim I should be caged & preserved for the general public to enjoy as Entertainment. I did not figure this a likely chapter of my days but much to my dismay their wishes was to come true & I did in fact spend a short spell under the dubious protectorship of Mr. Jim Coyne & his Traveling Show. Of this I will tell you more later.

As for them doctors I come to understand they are a breed what do not much relish a mystery. On meeting me they would work themselves into a great lather of excitement & then after an hour of poking & prodding, looking down my throat & into my earholes, their faces would grow dark & irritable. More than once was I referred to as an Imponderable Specimen. I could not claim to have the understanding of such a remark back then but I had sense enough to glean it did not portend nothing good.

It is just my humble opinion that there is many stories writ beneath the skin what will not give up their meaning to no Earthly Eye. This I know troubles a doctor greatly. He will not confess to it but part of his studymnt of all them long yrs was in the hope that

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he will somehow keep on breathing long past the rest of us have quit.

Well I am still here & still breathing. No one has figured me out yet. I have led a life filled with wonder & misery both. That is the way God intended it. If you do not suffer pain then you will not know what it is to Live & Love. I have to hope there is not so much pain from now on to the end though, I do not think any soul could claim me a liar when I say I have had my fill.

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## 2

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# A CRUEL & UNUSUAL BEGINNING

**IT IS AN UGLY TRUTH** the day of my birth is fettered to an event for which there is no cause to celebrate.

Who knows how many others have arrived on the current of such cruel & unusual beginnings but I imagine us to be a Sad & Lonesome band, them who entered this Life & left the door ajar for their begetter to take their leave. Should I ever come across one such soul I would know them by their dark & cowed eyes, for like me they too must carry the weight of all that could have been.

My poor daddy did not get to hold me. He did not even get to take one look into my eyes. And I will not lie it has put a bitter twist on my lips to have wrestled with my portion of the blame. O yes that guilt is a Sour-Seeded Fruit what hangs from a man's heart, there is no dose of time what will bring him peace. Not until he is returned to the dark of the earth will he reconcile himself to all what come to pass in the light of his days.

It does seal my heart in Eternal Sorrow that to this day I do not know where his poor bones lie or whether they was not simply left for the wind to scatter or to sate the whiskered maw of some rooting

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hog. It does me no good to dwell on it but still I must tell you of how he met his end, for it was no accident or natural flaw what brung his heart to silence.

My birth it will not surprise your eyes to read was no simple matter. Death was busy that day trying to claim all he could. My own life-cord was snaked about my neck, a blue & slippery noose as if already I considered myself a weary veteran of life's many bewilderments. My Mama groaned & wept & bled. She arched her back & after a day of fret & toil expelled me on a blood-warm surf what ferried me to the Direful Shores of that day.

Pale & silent I lay atop the freckled slabs of her arms, only my hands what opened & closed in faltering bloom did attest to the putter of my troubled heart. My skin was like the finest vellum, it did not look fit to suffer a spring rain & my head was a frail & venous globe straddling my shoulders as an egg might the final stalks of a plundered nest.

It was no surprise then that Dr. Whit Parrick, our town's only practitioner at that time, should steer my daddy toward the cool shadows of the parlor & there inquire after the integrity of our spade, warning it would likely be put to use by nightfall. Dr. Parrick, he was not one to waste his words but spoke of my demise as plainly as of some turn in the weather.

But where an older man might have appreciated Parrick's candor & boldness of expression, my daddy – still young, still artless in the face of Death – could bear it no more. His eyes, so blue, so very piercing, assumed the dull & empty sheen of 2 buttons sewn into the head of a straw doll. Without a word he turned on his heel & begun to run.

# 3

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## COLD KNOWLEDGE

**I WILL WASTE NO TIME** in telling you that my daddy run right out that door & he did never come back.

No he did not return & night fell & my Mama was laid by lanternlight in bloodslick sheets while Dr. Whit Parrick soaped his hands & watched wide-eyed as she raged & cursed my daddy for a Weak & Gutless man. Dr. Parrick did think at first it was his own character come under siege until he realized it was her departed husband she so damned, O she did spare none of her characteristic rancor in her explication of him. She convinced herself that very night he was a coward of the Highest Order, I imagine now it did give her broke heart some comfort to think so little of him.

As for Dr. Parrick that dour man did surely tell every soul he come across in Peeper's tavern of my Mama's curses, for soon it was become common knowledge the lily-livered John Tolroy had lit off in favor of a childless life beneath the gaze of some distant spread of stars.

Of course you understand I had never knowed my daddy, he was gone before I got the chance. Some folk have told me over the years that you cannot miss what you never knowed, I never in all my days

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heard such Rot, it is a lie big enough to sink a ship. I do miss my daddy every day & through whatever mysteries in the blood is passed down from father to son, in all them yrs of my growing up I could not shake the notion that he had harbored no intentions of disappearing at all. Indeed I thought I knowed it for a fact he had not meant to be gone long, all he wanted was some air in his lungs, a moment to clear the clouds from his poor head after seeing his struggling boy. It did not sit true that he just upped & gone, I found I did have ideas of my own come to colorful bloom behind my eyes.

As I grew up like many boys I heard stories of men what wore masks made of sugar sacks & wagon canvas across their faces, holes poked in them for the convenience of eyes & mouths. They held up burning pine knots & went blazing through the black of night, roaming across Cherokee & White soil alike, not caring a bit for who they stole from or what brand of blood they let spill.

I heard them thundering hoofs & seen them ugly masks lit up near every night in my dreams & each time they was surrounding a man, their voices hollering out, their horses restless in the dust & their guns angled down from their saddles. Their mouths was always covered but somehow I always knowed they was smiling cruelly down at that man who was alone, frightened & cowering, turning every way only to find another mask looking down at him, another gun levelled at his heart. I never seen this man's face but them dreams did always end the same way, I woke with the echo of a gunshot in my ears & the Cold Knowledge that the cowering man had been my daddy.

I never told no one of them dreams, for when he never come back my Mama did her best to forget him. As is natural for any fatherless boy I would in time come to ask about him, though she was always well prepared. She was not the type to parry an answer with clever wordings or kindly distractions, as a fancy-dressed

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romancer might wear his heart upon his sleeve my Mama did wear her bitterness upon hers. She told me my daddy was a poltroon, her beliefs was stubborn as limpets, she would never say no word otherwise.

We do so like to think we is the writers of stories but they so often come to us fully growed, it is only for us to choose how they might be read. So it was the folk of Heron's Creek was happy to have their story as it was – John Tolroy had absconded his fatherly duties without a trace & that is the way it would be until someone did go digging for the Truth.

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# 4

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## SILENT ROARS & SILENT HOWLS

ONE WEEK AFTER MY BIRTH I was yet to produce a single noise. Dr. Whit Parrick might have thought it curious I did not cry on my gushing arrival if he had not become so endeared to the belief I was set to perish. And so when my breath did continue to come in Thin & Stubborn threads he had assumed my silence was no more than the lasting effects of my arduous passage into this Earthly Sphere. He told my Mama it was only natural I should need my peace & quiet, she should not worry, I would turn out a healthy little fellow if she give me the chance.

So my Mama did what he said. She watched & waited. Indeed she thought me one of God's messengers, a wingless little emissary sent to bring down to her the white serenity of the clouds. In them quiet hours she could not help but imagine me in her store, handling her precious ledger & welcoming in her patrons. She would not have to want for nothing as I carried on her hard work & did polish the name of Tolroy to a High & Mighty shine.

But them imaginings was to be brung to ruin, you will soon see my *affliction* was about to announce itself.

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Them October nights was darkening quick & my Mama did not like to leave me laid in shadow. Perhaps she was like me with my own childs, I have stared at them in darkness & they do lie so still & breathe so quiet it is too easy to imagine a tragedy has befelled them, their little hearts stopped & their eyes stared blank at the ceiling. Once in the light they look so very peaceable, you can see the trickle of their thoughts in their curling fingers, in the wet & bubbling little purse of their mouths.

That October the air was still mild, not yet bit by winter's coming & my Mama was carrying a lit tallow through the parlor. She wished to place one on the sill above where I lay wrapped in my crib. She looked down at me as she did so & seen my lips curled & reaching out, I thought myself suckling blissful in my careless dreams, not knowing I was soon to be woke & a Shock of Light sluiced down on a dark little Seed of Truth.

As my Mama had walked across the room she had not seen the flame was bent in the draught & not 1 but 3 pearls of hot wax was rolled along its length. They hanged there like pale & guilty men on the scaffold & so as she leaned above me admiring my sleeping face, wondering at the dreams behind the flicker of my eyelids, only then was it she seen them 3 drops fall & land on my left cheek.

For a moment I did not move. My Mama's eyes was wide & shimmering, she did not rush to wipe them 3 drops clear, something held her very still & as my eyes opened she could see them beads of wax was settled on my skin like boils once lanced & now risen into scars. She thought I must be the bravest boy in all the world & reached to pick me up when my face begun to crumple & tears come coursing down my cheeks. She watched then as my mouth did twist into all them shapes from which a roar or howl is bound to fly from.

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But nothing come.

They was Silent Roars & Silent Howls.

My Mama could not take her eyes from me. She staggered back & fled the store with the tallow now extinguished in her hand & she left them 3 drops of wax to harden further on my cheek.

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# 5



## NO EASY JUDGMENT TO SHAKE

**SHE FOUND DR. WHIT PARRICK** in Peeper's tavern, his cheeks gone ruddy with drink & his bandy legs all but turned to ash beneath him. She dragged him from his seat, he did not have no time to grab his coat but only his black bag of rattling instruments.

Dr. Parrick was what my Mama knowed as another Weak Man. She had a great eye for such weakness, tapping for where a person was stretched & hollowed as a deathwatch beetle knocks upon the joists & rotten rafters through the long summer nights. She only had to look at him & he would squirm like a maggot on the end of a hook.

The doctor followed her down the muddy road as she held her skirts in her bunched fists. As they hurried through the darkness my Mama did breathlessly explain to him what she seen, she tried to tell him but her words was each & every one lost on that drunk doctor.

I am afraid you are not making yourself clear, slurred Parrick.

Here my Mama did turn & slap him, she took him by his scrawny throat & nearly shook his head off his shoulders, she told him in no

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uncertain terms that if he did not sharpen up his wits she would cause him no end of pain & trouble & surely he did not want that. She made him understand what she had seen & Dr. Parrick nodded to confirm his understanding was now a good deal clearer.

Once back in our parlor Whit Parrick was give a gourd of water & a tin mug of coffee to help speed the return of his senses. My Silent Howls was come to an end & my Mama had knelt & very gentle she had hooked a fingernail beneath them 3 beads of wax to lever them off.

When they was pried away she seen beneath them my skin was scarred, 3 little white circles did remain & I will tell you they is here to this day, a queer constellation what never dims but always glows out like Orion's Belt. O I might have wore them with more pride if I had knowed they was redolent of that Giant Huntsman but my knowledge of such Celestial Affairs was very poor back then, I only seen them as another ugly flaw on my person.

Dr. Parrick eyed me very cautious from his chair as my Mama lit the fire, he worked his face to make it sit like it might in sobriety, he could not see how foolish he made himself look. He suffered a bout of singultus & his eyes did widen with each gust what assailed his chest.

When he thought himself recovered, he stood up & demanded my Mama place me on the sawhorse table for his consideration. His shadow was monstrous on the wall as he did perform some brusque examinations. My Mama watched over his shoulder, the smell of liquor what flooded from the doctor's nose & mouth did make her wince but she never took her eyes away as between his forefinger & thumb Dr. Parrick held my tongue. I could taste the yellow tobaccy stains on their tips.

It is true in sobriety Dr. Parrick was very firm with his words, his thoughts left his tongue straight & true as arrows. But like many

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after a drink the quality of his conference was much depleted, he did begin to mumble & murmur, O gone was his hour of advising & opining & now he let whatever luckless soul was in his company suffer from his palsied thoughts. Without warning Dr. Parrick pinched me hard upon that thin & sensitive skin on the back of my neck & again my eyes widened & the tears come streaming down & again my mouth twisted in all them shapes what surely presage a cry.

But again they was Silent Roars & Silent Howls.

Dr. Parrick nodded.

He turned to my Mama & declared with somber prestige that I was Dumb & there was nothing to be done about it.

You must accept God's will, said he.

Twice now he was wrong about me. The first time he said I would die, the second time that I was dumb. Perhaps he might be forgive for the first but I must confess it still does leave a bitter wash in my mouth when I think of the blithe pronouncement that my head be empty.

With them words Dr. Whit Parrick left to return to Peeper's tavern & once there he did tell everyone that the Tolroy Child would never be more than a simpleton. And like the lie about my daddy every soul in Heron's Creek took it for Truth, they thought me a halfwit & let me tell you that is no easy judgment to shake.

# 6

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## BOOKS OF HISTORY

**MY MAMA WOULD NOT HEAR** of her own child or indeed herself suffering such Ignominy. All them rules what told of a man & his mind being a Finer & Sharper tool was ignored & deemed by her as Nonsense. She did believe herself the superior of every other being she come across, it did not matter what hung between their legs.

That very night she shut her store & did take the lend of a buggy & horse from Elijah Langston's farm & set off to have me mended. She wrapped around her shoulders her favorite shawl and did sit atop the box-seat, her eyes was lit silver by the moon, her handsome nose fit to furnish the side of a coin. O she was one of them rare birds whose nature is somehow made manifest by the very shape & color of their plumage. She wore atop her noble face a bundled hive of flame-red hair, it did rest barely contained upon her head by a legion of pins which she was forever adjusting to suit her mood.

She snapped the reins & moved off in a plume of dust, she would not stop until she had me cured. She traveled each day through the harvest rains & brewing winds to every doctor within 50 miles. She

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stayed at boarding houses with lousy sheets & when she run out of money she slept in haylofts & at one point was forced to pass the night in the hollow of a lightning-struck poplar with me swaddled tight at her breast.

Every doctor that had time to see me was no different from the last. First their eyes would take in my Mama, she was broad-assed & ample about the hips & bosom, it was far from uncommon for her to liven the mind of a passing gentleman & if she cast a certain spell over their hearts then it was also over other less reputable organs.

These doctors was no different, my Mama must thrust me before them to keep them from their ogling. Looking down at me they was suddenly very interested but their curiosity & puzzlement did seem to countervail their wish to help me. They was happy to poke at me & turn me upside down & nip & pinch at me until my hands & arms was covered with the half-moons of their fingernails. Of course I cried each time & they did observe my Silent Roars & Silent Howls but none ever looked beyond them tears & into my eyes where they would have seen me plead with a right & lively intelligence for them to stop.

Their conclusions was always the same – I was Dumb.

Some did even offer to pay for my corpse when I perished so that they might cut me open & discover some New Wonder what would ink their names in the Books of History. A few suggested some salve or embrocation to rub into my throat, they was old potions from the curled & yellowed pages of dusty books, my Mama did spread on a cloth a bolus of conserve of melted mutton suet, rosin & beeswax & pin it from one of my ears to the other. I do not need to tell you this was Hocus, it did no more than make my nose suffer its wicked stink & make of us a pair of fools.

The truth was not a one of them had a single notion as to what

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was wrong with me. My Mama took me back home. She opened up the store again. At first it did seem as if nothing had changed. But then slowly there was some shift, Hope begun to leak from her soul.

Any tenderness in her dealings with me before was now begun to dwindle. She appeared to exhibit a grave mistrust of me, often I caught her staring at me with her head cocked & her eyes boring in mine. No she did not fondle me, she did not lift me up & offer sweet whisperings to my ear.

When I recall these yrs of my boyhood now I turn my mind to wonder what care she might have knowed in her own youth. The particulars of my Mama's childhood is mostly a mystery to me but I will say it is hard to imagine her enduring Fear or Lonesomeness, though it is possible she suffered beneath the penumbra of them 2 scourges as hopelessly as anyone else.

I will admit back in them early yrs I did not often think of her in such circumstances but again I feel I have reached a certain age & I have been inclined to revisit the past with my heart more Open & Forgiving.

Every so often I will see her now as clear as if she was resurrected like the Lord & stood before me in that long gray dress she so often wore, her bonnet hanging by its fastenings in her hand. I will see in her face then all them signs of Hurt & Pain I was too young to see as a boy but as soon as I move to touch her, she bows her head & will not look at me.

You do not know my Mama as well as I yet, she was so very competent in every way other than them feelings what lived in the service of her heart. It is only now I see she was so harsh because she was so hurt, it was them she loved the most what caused her temper to flare like the leaves of a maple in the setting sun.

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## MR. BARRE

SO IT IS YOU WILL now understand that when my daddy did not come home that night of my birth, my Mama did not pack all her belongings & retreat to some relative's home as any other might have done. The thought never come to her mind, if indeed there even had been anywhere for her to go. For she had set out already on the road she meant to travel & for such as my Mama there could be no turning back.

In the early spring of the year I was born my Mama & daddy opened a store on the edge of a town named Heron's Creek. I did not know it for some time but it was once a home built & owned by a Frenchman named Josue Barre. Mr. Barre had worked as a trapper along the Grand river & moved to Heron's Creek with his wife & child once he had growed tired of the stink of elk & beaver pelts & having to watch for Indians what wished to put an arrow in his back.

They did live theirselves a happy life in Heron's Creek until his wife & young daughter was took sick by a wicked fever. Their struggle was very quick as is the case when the body is pillaged by such cruel maladies, they died within an hour of each other, their

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hands was always locked to make that crossing together into the Next World.

Poor Josue Barre was then drove lonesome with Grief, it is a disease in itself & will see a man go mad if he does not escape its dark clutches. And so after he had buried his precious girls behind the house, he did then sell his property for a very low price & move off to some distant shores, it is not knowed where that heartbroke Frenchman went.

But I would myself spend a goodly deal of time tending to them 2 graves out the back of the store. They was marked with no more than saplings lashed together to form 2 awry crosses but with that little girl I felt a Powerful Kinship, not least because I would end up wearing all them winter furs she had once wore what Josue Barre had left behind in a dusty heap in the Top Room.

My Mama did often scold me that they was not mine to mourn. She warn'd folk is wont to become more possessive over the dead in ways they cannot be in life but I did not care, I often knelt in them long & swaying grasses & sent my prayers up for that lost little soul.

How it was my Mama & daddy had come to be in Heron's Creek & whose money they had used to purchase Barre's home with I cannot say. I am afraid that you too must suffer from my ignorance. Perhaps a day will come when I do seek them but I do not know what I will find & so have long surrendered them to the shadows.

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## THE STORE

**THE TOWN OF HERON'S CREEK** was small, no more than a hundred souls belonged to it. Its center revolved around a wide muddy street with 2 general stores & a blacksmith & a funeral parlor & a tavern & all them other small domiciles what sprout up & mark the beginnings of a Civilized Society.

The road was baked hard as stone in the summer months & in winter if the rains fell strong it was reduced to what you might call Sludge. Boardwalks was made & even before you turned the corner to see them you could hear the echo of bootheels on the wood & the chatter of them what did sit & smoke their pipes in the shade.

But my Mama & daddy's store was not in Heron's Creek, it did sit half a mile outside it down a pocked road lined with cottonwoods & other weed & scrub what in summer bloomed with the colors of nodding wildflowers but in winter was a tangle of brown & bitter creepers.

It was a 2-story building, clad in lengths of strong timber & the shakes of the roof made from poplar bark, a cunning practice Josue Barre had picked up from them local Cherokees what liked to keep the rain from their hillside huts with such ancient proficiencies.

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All them who come across that store never entered it without giving some time to the studymment of it, it did boast certain idiosyncrasies only the mind of a Frenchman could be responsible for. It was not the more common low & thickset cabin of them parts but tall & thin like an old townhouse you might see on them cobbled streets of Europe.

O yes it was awful angular like a boy what had growed out of his clothes overnight. That is not to say Josue Barre was not a gifted craftsman, the windows was high & very artfully fit, the wood around them scribed with delicate little curlicues what could have been the leaves of plants or wisping clouds. He had made for it too a deep & shadowed porch what my Mama could not ever keep free of leaves & dirt, her broom was worn to nubs by her daily efforts. If there is a sound what brings me back in my mind to them early days it is the Scrape & Itch of sorghum tassels against some dry & dusty boards.

Perhaps if anything did speak of my daddy's contribution & even as some measure of his character which I was always searching for, it was the painted sign what creaked & swung in them mountain winds. It read TOLROY'S STORE in dark green lettering, the outlines carefully shadowed in a bright & splendorous red. I took this to be a demonstration of some poetic leanings on my daddy's part & for a while did fancy myself a blossoming artist.

Though the paint had begun to curl & flake by the time I was old enough to inspect it, I could still tell it was done with a loving hand. To hear that old sign creak & sway when I was drifting off to sleep was a great comfort to me, it was as close as I could get to him in them days.

The rest of the building remained a weather-worn gray, growed dark in some parts over the years & greenly darned with islands of moss & lichen. Them bits what clung to the lower quarters of the

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walls my Mama made me pick off with my own 2 hands. She had no doubt hoped I would grow tall so that I might put myself to use in keeping its windows clean but that time was never to come & so I was spared the degradation of that task.

The store itself occupied the front of the building & the parlor the rear. They had both been the one room in Josue Barre's time but I believe my daddy built joists & lengths of timber to separate the two.

The parlor was a neat & humorless room with a small circular window looking out onto a patch of scrub & the privy half hid by a mulberry tree. Its high ceilings made it seem far bigger than it was, it did boast a small kitchen & a sawhorse table with 3 ladderback chairs but the walls was kept bare & even when the fire was lit it did not seem to add no warmth but only created an army of rioting shadows which often frightened me when I was a young boy.

A narrow dog-leg staircase led up to a landing no larger than a stable door, one room was my Mama's & the other mine. My room had once belonged to that little girl & often was the time I heard her delicate weight upon them old boards as she went searching for whatever Unfinished Business she had left behind. I was not ever scared at such times, I listened out for her & willed her to keep looking until she found what she did so need. I had a straw tick on the floor but no other furniture to speak of, my Mama said she did not see a bedroom useful for anything other than sleep.

There was then another little staircase what led up to a room at the top, I come to name it the Top Room. The slant of the roof made a person any larger than a child stoop but I never had to, I could walk around easy as you like. It was in here that my Mama had discovered the heap of old furs & pelts left behind by the Barres, beaver hats & coats & blankets & a pair of moccasins what that little girl had wore & fit me perfect.

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The store was a brighter affair with them 2 large windows what faced out onto the road. The dust my Mama swept up from the bootheels of her customers often turned & roiled in the light what come pouring in. My daddy's skills was not so advanced as Josue Barre's, my Mama did claim she had repaired the crooked shelves he had built what threatened to tip the rows of goods onto the floor. There was 2 great cabinets what displayed a mighty selection of liniments & embrocation what the sickly of Heron's Creek often sought.

The counter was a veritable fortress behind which my Mama kept Watch & Order. She guarded it with her life, there was a rifle kept on a rack & her ledger what she carried under her arm wherever she went.

You would be right in assuming it was my Mama's ruthless Assiduity what made the store a success. I will tell you more of that later. But it was also its positioning what she knowed was so very important which is why she did not feel herself to be at a loss not being on that main street.

She would have travelers, wayward & fancy types alike, tumbrils & carriages come rolling down the road & it was TOLROY'S STORE they would see & stop by to refresh themselves or stock up on supplies for their continuing journey.

It come to pass between the lips of every man & woman for miles around, word did travel fast as fire even in them days with no telegrams or rails to carry them.



# 9

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## A MENACE

THE STORE WAS MY MAMA'S savior, all her dreams was holed up in there, but still it was no steep dig to learn of the sorry soil from which my own life was expected to grow or indeed see the path what would lead me to its end, so lonesome was it that it might have been carved across the moon.

Over the course of them first yrs I begun to develop most unusually. Long before any young bones is said to enjoy the act of locomotion I was begun to climb out of my crib & go walking about the room. And I will say they was not them little tottering steps what lead to a fall but small & quick & well balanced as a mountain goat.

I was not yet a yr old when my Mama come in & found me on my feet. We did stare at each other a long while & she looked at me as if I was the Devil himself. She come to pick me up but I would not have it, I hid beneath the table until she fetched the broom & proded me until I did surrender.

She left me again like this but each time she returned to find me on my feet & carrying out my investigations, she would lament that she had give birth to such a Menace. Eventually she fastened me down

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with 2 of my daddy's old belts, if I could have howled & screamed I would have but you know by now I was silent as the grave.

Of course by the time I reached my second yr I still had not made a sound. My Mama now allowed me to walk where I pleased but she had realized I was barely grown any taller than when I had first set foot on the ground, my head still reached no higher than the seat of them parlor chairs. My arms & legs was not abbreviated, they did not suffer from no abnormalities, I was simply very small.

Not only was she become aware my height was not changed but it had become quite apparent that no hair had grown upon my head or anywhere else for that matter. No lashes or brows or even that faint down you see catching the sun & glowing on arms & shins & the soft slope of jaws.

Imagine then how I come to look beneath her Hot & Darting eyes. I was her only child, a boy what weighed no more than a stook of corn, who could not talk, who God had cursed with such strange & ignoble torment. I could not help but reckon then that she must surely think me the Worst Thing that had happened to her.

She did not bother to call on Dr. Whit Parrick ever again or any other doctor for that matter. She tarred them all with the same brush, she believed them a Great Scourge on the world.

She was not so fond of any other folk either, I do recall the first day my Mama took me to town. She was awful anxious, grabbing at my wrists & pinching me, she did take me to her room & plant me in front of the large looking-glass propped beside her bureau. It was pocked & discolored & cracked in places but she hovered behind me & smoothed out the creases in my shirt & dusted the knees of my britches.

The great offense of my baldness was redressed with a broad-brim straw hat of the ilk favored by them farmers what worked the rows in the hot summer months. I do not know where she did

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acquire it but it was a tightly wove piece with a misshaped crown & a blood-red band above the brim. I had not ever wore a hat, it itched terrible on my skull but each time I took it off my Mama thrust it back down. She warned me that if I took it off outside then she would strop my behind like never before.

It was the end of summer, all the leaves of the cottonwoods still green but fringed in brown, the last of their white fluffy seed drifting off in the breeze. I cannot have been but 3 yrs old, I was so small as I walked beside my Mama that I could not hold her hand without her having to stoop down.

But I did not want to hold it anyway, it was great excitement for me to see beyond them walls & the patch of scrub behind the store where there was nothing but the privy & the mulberry tree & them 2 sorry graves.

When we come to the town I had not ever seen so many people in one place. They was women & men & animals all milling about together, the dust of the road swirling about. I did feel my Mama's grip tighten as we kept on walking toward them but then we noticed many was begun to stop in their tracks to look at me. The nerves of all them eyes on me made my face grow hot, without thinking I took off my hat & begun to turn it in my fingers.

O yes that was when I first did see them recoil as though one touch of me might bring the Devil dancing to their door. I heard the whisperings & felt their ornery stares, they come rushing at me like cruel & sucking waves.

My Mama quickly seen I had removed my hat & roughly pushed it back down on my head so that it turned my ears down until they ached. She spun me around & we went straight home, all them people staring after us as we went. She thought perhaps Dr. Parrick had been right about one thing – that she must come to accept God's will & I would never lead no Ordinary Life.

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# 10

## BETWEEN OUR EYES

LOVE IS NO EASY CLOUD to catch, no feeling is as simple or as knotted but to most it is clear enough every mother must surely love her child more than the world itself. But it gives me no small quiver of shame to admit I thought back then my case did prove the exception to this noble rule.

As the yrs progressed my Mama begun to talk to me less & less. We did exchange some rudimentary gestures with our hands – I might point and poke at things I did desire, or when I was struck by hunger or thirst reach up to my mouth and make of my hand a pinching claw – but even these did seem to tax my Mama and stoke her temper. Only if some practical task demanded it would she seek to communicate fully. I will tell you it did little to brighten the shadows that crowded my heart and I could not help but feel I was not hoped or prayed into being like most other childs, but rather snuck like Odysseus in that wooded horse beyond the guarded gates of my Mama's womb.

It is in the Good Book – I believe Proverbs 1:8–9 – where it rightly says a mother's teaching *shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck*. Not a day does pass where I

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have not took that book's blessed weight in my hands & turned its silken pages. I know there is much to be said for mothers & their duties in them long & wondrous tales, for it is spoke in clear & honest terms that a mother *openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.*

For all who is blessed with a voice it is of course the tongue what does the talking. For them what lacks a tongue by nature or has had it cut from their mouth in some gruesome turn they might make signs of their hands. But for me in them early yrs it was the eyes what served. They is fine tools to the likes of me. Filled with words what must remain unspoke they can still be read as they feed off light & shade & dart & dance. No, there is nothing they cannot tell you.

So I begun to think – & I do believe my Mama would agree if she could call down from her Saddle of Stars – our silences was not silences at all but a space that did occasion some intelligence to pass between us & our feelings was made clearer than if words had ever been spoke. It was not uncommon for her to spend entire days without saying a word & the day cannot be said to be any less full for the lack of them. How I do wish I could do the same with my Mama again now but she is gone. If you do not know it already Love might well be like a potion in a bottle but it can also be the cork what stoppers it, that is all I will say on that matter for now.

# 11

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## NO IDLE WHEEL

IN MY MAMA'S DARKEST moments, she did claim God had cursed me with a Great Genius for souring a person's countenance & loosing upon their innocent minds a storm of Black & Troublous thoughts. I did not have God figured for such a schemer but she thought she knowed His work as well as any & she had seen many of her customers – locals & wanderers alike – take a queer turn after seeing me.

So it was I found myself sent from the store most days to spend my time outside. For them first yrs of my life she would not let me out but now she could not have me in. It is fortunate for me that Mr. Josue Barre had left that great wealth of furs in the Top Room, some of which did once belong to his long-dead daughter. They was still far too big for me but once I grewed into them they did come in handy in them winter months & I was kitted out like an old trapper with beaver hat & all the *accoutrements* as Mr. Barre might have said.

It was around this time the many injustices in my life begun to vex me greatly, for I knowed I did possess a Fine Intelligence even if I could not make it plain. When a boy's tongue is stone dead &

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he does affect no likeness to any other creature on God's earth, his brain must be no idle wheel but turning quick to score the passage of its own travel.

By no choice of my own I was forced to grow acquainted with the great virtue that is Patience. If folk no longer recoiled from me then they now chose to ignore me & I shared more in common with them risen spirits said to roam than I did with them what was made of Flesh & Blood. I would counsel that people do not know the value of Silence & how their lives would benefit from it if they was not so intent on filling it with sound.

But it was much to my wonderment that my other senses grewed in their reach. I did begin to listen with ears pricked so sharp I could parse the words of a conversation 20 yds off & eyes so very lively & watchful I might count the nose hairs of a man sat astride his mule in the next county. To this day these eyes & ears is fierce instruments, undimmed in their mastery even if the light is growed thin & wintry or all them noises of the city are in full clamor.

But all that does not count for much if you cannot talk or so I then slowly begun to realize. For are not words the very mudsills on which our lives are built? How can a man live without his voice – that was the question that so often scampered around my brain like a dog with a taste for its own tail.

# 12



## STOOL BENEATH THE ELM

SINCE MY MAMA HAD CHOSE to exile me from the store I had took to spending much of my time beneath a squat little elm that fed its ancient roots across the road. I was not so far away that I could not see the store & all the comings & goings along that particular stretch, busy as it was with wagons & drovers come rattling in from Gainesville.

Occasionally my Mama would stick out her head & scowl at me, she did not think it a respectable spot to linger. She was not content that I was out of the store but now wished to pass judgment on where I spent my time beyond its walls. I knowed I could not win but did not understand why she must make my life such a misery.

I must say that old elm would have served as no hatstand. It was a queer old specimen, its trunk stooped as an old peddler & its limbs pronged heavenward in abject supplication. I come to think it had a personality all of its self & that we was the pair of us united in all our losses & longings. It does strike me now as a sad reflection that I was resorted to the adoption of timber for a companion but in my defense they was desperate times indeed.

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