The Summer Bird Has Flown

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THE HOT sun shimmered the road into a long, gritty line from bend to bend. It curled each blade of grass and seared through the dirt to the very roots of the stunted corn. The summer had been wet, too wet, sucking the road into a mire and turning the corn limp and yellow. Now the road was baked hard and the crops shriveled. The sky was close hung and flat. No cloud dared its sun-beat hardness, no small wind brushed away its glare, and even the small songbirds silently waited, hidden in the last leafy bushes.

The girl walked lightly, taking no heed of where her bare, brown feet hit the jigsaw puzzle road. Her faded but clean dress swung in worn folds about her middle calves but fit snugly around her slightly swollen belly. The color of it, a hard, metallic brown lightened to softness, matched her sun-squinted eyes. Her hair, the burnt yellow color of ripe corn silk, had begun to loosen and fall about her ears and from the long braid down her back. She licked the little beads of sweat from her upper lip and hooked her finger more securely in the halter ring of the mule she led. The mule was loaded with oddly shaped bundles and loosely tied cooking pots and plodded passively beside her. She walked without

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Pre-vet., Jr.
much motion from side to side, her shoulders pulled strictly back, her never wandering eyes focused on the sweat-strained collar of the man she followed.

The man, Jed, moved with a self-conscious sureness as was his nature, but with a lop-sided reluctance because his three year old shoes were only thrice worn. His shirt, white this morning, was quickly turning splotchy brown and dust had taken the shine from his good, blue suit pants. He shifted the bag of odds and ends the mule pack wouldn't take from one shoulder to the other. Rusty-red hair covered his big boned wrist beyond the shirt cuff and spread down to his last knuckle. He slid a finger under his collar and wedged it around, dislodging the curly hair that crawled up his neck. He had the stocky build of a mule, though fortunately not the disposition, and most folks around these parts would agree that he could work like one, too. Like Callie's eyes, his mind didn't move too much or very fast.

Callie saw him as she'd seen him every day for quite a while and often before then. And her picture hadn't changed.

_God, he's got an awful lot a hair on 'im, don't he?_ Her mouth curled slightly. _Just like Paw, not the same color, but just like Paw._ "Thersh a pretty woman walksh on the shtreet . . . ." Her paw's voice careened up the yard walk, soon followed by the squat, dark, broad-chested man himself. "Hello my little preciouses. Yo' Paw's home. Tha' shtreet walking woman. . . ." His voice reached a cracking crescendo as the porch door banged shut with a stench of cheap whiskey. "Where's my sweet ones?" Little Kev and Marie were safely huddled under the bed in the back bedroom, and Callie met him alone.

"Hello, Paw."

"Tha' you Callie? How's my precious?" He came closer, squinting his eyes and cocking his head to see. Callie stepped back and grabbed the splintery door frame for support.

"You smell like a still, Paw!"

"God, woman, you look jus' like yo' sweet Maw—God
rest her soul. Jus' like her.” His voice tailed off and his chin sank. “Laurie. Laurie?”

“No, Paw, it's me, Callie.”

“Yo' got her face. Wha' do ya mean I smell—yo' ain't so pure yourself.” His eyes narrowed to slits. He clenched his fist. Callie winced. “Tha's all right, Precious, I'm sorry. Jus' like her.” He reached out and stroked her cheek, his thickly haired fingers brushing her chin. “Oh, Laurie, Laurie.”

Callie shuddered and blinked her eyes to the bright, searing sunshine. Over the field to the left three big crows wheeled ungracefully and sank out of sight behind a prickly, wild pear tree. That's all done with, too long ago to matter.

The road sloped down slightly. An oak tree leaned over the stone fence, not leaf-full and summer green or autumn gold but still a tree, and shaded the dirt. As Callie walked through the shadow it seemed cooler for a moment.

It was so cool and warm—leaf-filtered sun warm. She lay under the tree and her eyes followed the silver trunk up through the white bottomed birch leaves, quivering on their stems, to the golden, blue sky. Nearby, Hawley's creek talked its way gently over a pebbled bed, hurrying down to wherever it went. Her gaze fell down and kissed Luke beside her. He felt his warm arm pillowing her head and his fingers, curled through her hair, stroking a line from ear to shoulder. He leaned over her and they were close together again and she was bright and silver like the birch bark.

“Oh Callie, my Callie. Have I ever told you of the house we'll build? The finest house there ever was. With windows on all four sides, one for every season, and long, silk curtains and a feather bed.” Callie smiled against his chin and touched his naked back. He knew so many pretty things, of seas and skies and elf-fashioned rings. And his voice was deep and tender, and his eyes were far away when he spoke those flowing poems.
"And lots of children too?"
"Of course, and they'll all look like you."
"Please let them have your eyes," she begged.

He laughed at her, and the eyes she loved crinkled at their corners.

"'As fair thou art my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I,
And I will love thee still, my dear,
Till all the seas go dry.'"

He kissed her sweet again and held her strong. Above their heads a meadow lark began his song. She closed her eyes and still could see the warm, leaf-dappled sun.

Callie walked with her eyes closed, the mule more leader for a while than she. She couldn’t think of Luke anymore, not since that day. That day when they told her of the rabbit hunt and the fence and the gun, propped against it while they climbed, falling down. No, no more, that was done with too.

The shoes tied over her shoulder began to dig in. She opened her eyes and shoved the cutting laces over. She watched the bramble bushes go by, and the dull dirt fields, to keep her mind from running. They were almost to Jed’s place—just one more turn and up the lane. A black fly buzzed across her eyes and lit on her forehead. She brushed it away. Flies had come to the wedding that morning, too.

No breeze lifted the limp curtains and the flies came in the open window, circling madly over the laid out food and around the sweating, red necked preacher. Jed, as red through the simple words. Callie said her part so softly that no one but the preacher heard. But then no one really cared. Of course they thought she was lucky to have found a man as good as Jed, and so willing—'specially since the baby and all. And that was done with too.

By now they had come to the place. Jed opened the gate and took her hand as a child would, half afraid and half hopeful. "Well, this be it," he said with shy pride. "It ain't much but it's your home."
Callie had seen the place often. The house was the same gray color as the barn behind. A low shingled porch shaded the one door, and a battered vine clung entangled to a porch pole. He led her, smiling hopefully, through the door and waited for her reaction. The floor was freshly sand-scrubbed clean, but the scrubbing didn’t do much for its worn dinginess. A small, low table sat in the kitchen part of the front room, beside the window. Morning picked flowers in a mason jar sat in the middle of the table. Picked carefully that morning they were—blue forget-me-nots, yellow buttercups, and lily-of-the-valley. Fragile wildflowers, they lay wilted and pale in the heat.

Feeling his expectancy, she had to say something. “It looks right nice, Jed.”

His smile brightened his whole face and even pulled a reluctant smile from Callie. “Come, I want to show you something I made for the baby.” They walked into the bedroom, and he pointed to a small cradle, pale fresh-cut wood but polished smooth. On the end Jed had carved a fine, winged bird flying. “It’s not real classy but it’s made of good wood—birch wood.” He looked into her face eagerly.

“You know that birch tree up by Hawley’s creek, the one that’s taller than the rest?” Callie’s eyes jerked up wide to Jed’s face. It showed nothing. “Well, he’s going to be a tall man so he needs a tall tree for his cradle.”

She looked back at the cradle. A trembling started in her knees and spread upward through her stomach, filling the space between her lungs so that for a moment she thought she couldn’t possibly breathe. He’s cut the tree; our tree; for me. Oh my love, my darling. She closed her eyes. Songs and four-windowed houses and gold-green warmth, turned cold, flew round and by her. The meadow lark quit his song and up he went in the leaf-dappled light, through the silver leaves toward the sky and out of sight. When she opened her eyes the trembling stopped. She bent down, ran her fingers over the bird’s wing, and then rose and touched Jed’s arm lightly. “You’re a good man, Jed. You’ll be a good father.”