

Easter Sunday,

the baby girl slipped out of the womb bleeding like a woman. She bled and cried for ninety days. The first week, the midwife helped the new parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ash, but after that returned home to her own family of six children (aged ten to sixteen, the ten-year-olds being twins). She was sore relieved that she lived miles away, out of earshot of the screaming baby. There was nothing to be done for it, the midwife said: this one had been born with the hysteria, and perhaps prayer would help.

By the first of June, Mr. and Mrs. Ash were at their wits' end, but they did not pray. Neither of them believed in prayer, because if prayers were answered, Mrs. Ash would have birthed a boy to help on the small Georgia farm her unmarried brother had rented for them all, then deserted. He had moved to the edge of a far-away ocean, to a place called San Francisco.

Having recently arrived on the farm, Mr. Ash was overwhelmed. He went out every day to work in unfamiliar fields, but kept looking back over his shoulder, hounded by his daughter's cry. The only time she paused her wailing

was when she nursed, but exhaustion soon dried up Mrs. Ash's milk, and piping cow's milk into the howling mouth became an ordeal of its own. Each of the parents slept in snatches and fits, and became short-tempered with each other, themselves, and a little yellow dog they found on their stoop one morning, a hungry stray who was nothing if not good-natured.

The Ashes were burly, red-faced Northerners, who had convinced themselves they were tired of cold and snow. They had followed Mrs. Ash's brother to Georgia, but after weeks had passed, they found themselves uncomfortable with the intensity of Southern weather. Maybe the baby was too warm, they reasoned, as they sat at the table one evening, eating the overcooked beans and dry cornbread that had become the staples of their diet. Mr. Ash had not gone hunting since their daughter was born, and Mrs. Ash had been unable to put in a kitchen garden, so their canned goods were running low. He mopped his forehead with a homemade handkerchief, and his wife poured him another cup of boiling coffee.

Let's fix a bed for her outdoors, they agreed, and Mr. Ash fashioned a sling out of a bolt of muslin and hung it from a stout branch in a warty silver maple tree that was settled all by its lonesome near a family of oaks. They thought that the maple's location, a hundred feet from the house, would guarantee a nice breeze.

The baby girl continued to cry night and day, swinging from the tree, but a time or two Mr. Ash could lean against the plow horse's flank and close his eyes. Mrs. Ash was able to take a nap one afternoon, and felt so rested that she made a two-egg cake for their supper that night. Diapers were changed twice a day, and daily baths were given in the close, dark kitchen, because the Ashes were not cruel

folk. Though Mrs. Ash washed the slings every other day, urine stained them. At least the hard Georgia heat dried wet clothes in minutes. Though the baby was rained on a time or two in the night, her parents, dozing in their bed, convinced themselves it could not be raining. They yawned and rearranged themselves in their cornhusk mattress instead of bringing their prickly daughter into the house.

Friday, July 13, Mr. and Mrs. Ash decided they should move back North where they had come from, and packed with haste only what would fit in one wagon. The next morning, Mrs. Ash fed and changed the disagreeable baby. While Mr. Ash tethered the cow to the back of the wagon, his wife climbed onto the wagon seat. When he jumped up beside her, he set the whip to motivate the horses, and the Ashes left the South behind.

The dog dutifully scampered alongside for a while, then disappeared. Mr. and Mrs. Ash were half the day down the road before they let themselves remember they had left their baby hanging in the tree. No matter. They had gone too far to turn back. Knowing that the midwife's husband trotted by their house on the way into town every Saturday afternoon (he howdy-ed them but never stopped), the Ashes traveled on with no misgivings about their daughter.

Late that morning, the baby smiled—it looked like a smile. She was hungry, her bottom was wet, and mucky with shit, but she was getting used to that. The hand in the wind gentled her back and forth, and she calmed a bit, alternating between loud bawls and pathetic whimpers. She was tired, after all, but stuck in a certain pattern of behavior. Cry, cry, cry.

She could only see up, and everything was green and leafy, though blue rips of sky showed now and then. Suddenly a face appeared close to hers. Her pink baby fingers poked it in the eye.

“Goodness, if it ain’t a baby!” the woman said, rubbing her injured eye. She turned to the man beside her, and said, “Trettor, help me git this baby out of here!”

The man and woman, husband and wife, were not young, but not gray yet either. It took both of them to separate the child from the sling without dropping her on the ground. Though the bundle was sodden and smelly, the woman did not seem to notice her dress being wetted by the diaper when she carried the fussy baby to the little square house.

“Ain’t somebody to home?” she asked at the front door of the two-room house, while her husband looked in the small, leftover barn behind the house. They had only stopped for him to pee under the maple tree, but found the baby, so he relieved himself in a corner of the barn. A little yellow dog padded into the barn and sat down to watch the stream of urine disappear into a fistful of straw.

“Ain’t nobody around here as far as I can tell,” Trettor said, stepping into the house. “Feels like somebody lit out in a hurry. Which is what we got to do, Lucy. We’ll be needing to get along. What are we going to do with that baby?”

“Well I ain’t a-leaving it here! Lawdamercy, what do you suppose happened to its folks? Bring in a pail off the wagon, and get me some water. I’ll clean up this child and we’ll be on our way.” Trettor obeyed her bidding, and she hollered at his back, “Bring a quilt, too, and some rags.”

The panting dog came into the house with Trettor, and kept his eyes on the man as he set the pail of water down and folded the quilt in quarters. When he spread it on the slatted wood floor, Lucy placed the fretting baby there and undressed it.

“Look! It’s a girl!” she exclaimed. “And I wager she’s hungry.”

“Don’t you go getting any notions,” Trettor warned.

“Notions is about all I got left, Trettor.” Lucy’s chin trembled as she smoothed the black peach fuzz on the baby’s soft round head.

“I got to get you out West,” Trettor said, squatting to put his arm around Lucy’s shoulders. “You got to be where it’s hot and dry, the doctor said.”

Lucy did not answer, because there was no satisfactory way to address the truth. Instead, she wiped the tiny face, torso and fleshy arms with a wet rag. “Help me,” she said, and when Trettor saw that she meant to dip the baby’s bottom into the pail to clean her, he did help by rubbing his calloused fingers over the baby’s buttocks and around its cleft while Lucy gripped her under the armpits. Though it was oven-like in the house, the little girl shivered.

“That should do it,” Lucy said, pulling her out of the dirty water as if she had been scrubbed on a washboard. The timid dog nosed at the water until Trettor dumped it outside in polished dirt by the front door. He told Lucy he should see to the horses, but she paid him no mind, busy settling the baby on the quilt to dry her off.

The Ashes had also forgotten the few clothes Mrs. Ash had sewn in preparation for the son they did not have. Gowns, diapers and receiving blankets were spread out on a small table near the bedstead built into one corner. While Lucy looked at the gowns, squinting at the even stitches in them, the little yellow dog side-stepped its way back into the house, over to the naked baby, and lapped its cautious tongue over her bleeding place. Lucy was studying what someone had penciled on a torn scrap of paper (*Billie Girl, b. Easter Sunday, April 15, 1900*) when there was a squeal.

“Shoo! Bad dog!” Lucy stomped her feet and chased the dog out the open door. She picked up the wet rag and wiped the dog’s slobber off the wide-eyed baby before she

fastened a diaper on her, then slipped a doll-sized gown over her head. "Hello, Billie Girl," she whispered.

Lucy hurried to unbutton her dress from the top before Trettor came back inside. Her own daughter had died only days before. She dragged a left-behind ladder-back chair to the door, for better light, and sat down with Billie Girl snug in her arms.

"Latch on, honey, try," Lucy cooed, rubbing her cracked nipple against Billie's perfect lips. Billie did latch on. Her throat was dry, but being less than a hundred days old, she had nothing to compare that feeling to, though it seemed more like hunger than thirst. She worked and sucked and pulled on the nipple, and when Lucy cried out, Billie looked up into her eyes and paused for a moment. But only for a moment. As liquid filled the tiny mouth, Trettor blocked the light coming in the door.

"Lucy, I told you," he started, but her look stopped the argument already forming on his tongue.

"We can't keep her, I know." Lucy kissed the top of the baby's head. "But she needs me. I'm going to see she's fed until we find someone to take her, that's all."

Trettor convinced Lucy to nurse from her pallet in the wagon so that they could be on their way, even though they weren't quite sure of their destination—somewhere along the way to California, or maybe California itself, someplace hot and dry, with mild winters. Someplace not Virginia. Earlier that day, Trettor had been told to follow this red dirt road to a fork, and take the west one. There was only one planned stop along the way, to see Lucy's sister in Memphis. Just before Trettor slapped the reins to stir the pair of horses, the little yellow dog hopped into the back of the wagon, under the makeshift canopy, and curled up

near Lucy's feet. His stomach did not growl, because Trettor had thrown him the brick of cornbread left on the back of the cook stove.

Billie Girl emptied both of Lucy's breasts and fell asleep. She and Lucy were still sleeping when Trettor reached the fork in the road, but the dog woke up and stuck his head out the front of the wagon, nosing Trettor's right shoulder. A boy with slumped posture was standing in the middle of the north fork, watching the wagon approach. He hailed the wagon and Trettor reined in the horses.

"Heading north?" the boy hollered, his bare feet shuffling. Trettor shook his head. "West."

"Oh, well, it don't matter to me," the boy said, coming alongside the wagon seat, nodding his head toward the back of the wagon. "You got anything in here worth having?"

Trettor secured the reins and jumped off the seat before the boy could look around on his own.

"My name's Mosey. What's yours?" the boy asked.

"I need to check on my wife," Trettor said by way of answer, and crawled into the back of the wagon. The baby was sleeping, and so was Lucy, but it was more than sleep for his wife. He had seen her this way twice before; she was out for a day and a night the last time. His chest squeezed when he thought Billie Girl had taken Lucy away from him, but relaxed when he saw the heartbeat in her neck. He picked up Billie Girl, gripping her doll-sized shoulders as if he might shake her, but instead, pressed his lips against her perfect, smooth forehead. That's when he noticed her birthmark: a tiny cross on the crown of her head. It would soon disappear under straight, dark locks.

Trettor looked back over his shoulder at the sun. It was slip-sliding away, and he was sinking along with it. He car-

ried Billie Girl out of the wagon. "So, Mosey," he asked, "do you think you could find this baby a home? My wife is too sick to care for her, and we've got to get to Memphis."

Mosey expected to run across a town in a mile or so, so he continued north. The soles of his feet were worn thin and his stomach growled. He had walked days on lonesome roads since his daddy had showed him the door, said he was old enough to be out on his own. I got too many mouths to feed, he'd shouted, to feed you, too. Mosey's legs still bore raised scars and oozing scabs from the Jesus belt hanging by the back door. Worse than that, every day Mosey recalled how empty his mother's eyes had been when she said nothing in his favor and watched him leave. He had to learn to go to sleep at night without her good-night kiss, and, at thirteen years of age, was ashamed that he still craved her kiss.

In minutes, Mosey came to an ugly two-story house shaped like a cube, sided with muddy brown shingles. A dark porch was overhung by a top-heavy second story. The roof was slick, hot tin. In contrast to the plain house were the flowers planted around the porch, red flowers that someone had labored to water in the Georgia heat. He did not know the names of flowers. Pausing to shift the load of the sleeping baby and her clothes, he noticed lace curtains at the open front windows on both stories of the house. He stepped onto porch floor boards painted a soapy blue, and knocked on the screen door. When he looked back at the flowers, he saw poison ivy growing along the steps.

A short, low-bellied woman answered his knock. Her face fuzzed yellow, as if sawdust had blown onto her cheeks. Patting the unruly knot of blonde hair at her nape, she belted, not unkindly: "What do you want?" In spite of the