4,606 words

SILK CITY

1913

You cannot predict its unfolding, the dream that abuses nightly, a wild thing that pierces with toothy brambles, spiders through your unconscious. You hate its persistence, how it twists and burrows. A punishment you willingly endure because the ending, reliable charity, tastes of peach dawn and orange glow.

Tonight, the dream begins in the silk mill. You stand in the workroom, or rather a perverted copy that your mind accepts as true. Ceiling higher; windows taller. The air snowy, silk-dust drifting on the floor. Rows of power looms stretch beyond visibility, a mechanical army. In unison, numberless shuttles sail back and forth, indifferent, as they skim waves of broadcloth. The monotonous din fills your ears, invades your body. The machines eclipse all, eat human sound. Your feet vibrate from unrelenting busyness. Spaced every fourth machine, a woman like you -- check dress, dark apron -- hops to the rhythm of her looms, tending each in turn, a hollow jig.

The too-tall windows flood the room with bald light. Your hands yellow to blue. Every cranny bright. Every corner naked, the dignity of shadows denied. You scan the clear-windowed offices that look down upon the workroom. You cannot see the bosses, but you know

they are up there, perched in their eyries, sharp-eyed, watching. They catch everything -- perhaps they can even see thoughts.

Inside, you churn, nervous, afire. Your plan is the same as the worker's next to you, and hers as the worker's next to her. You wait, eyes primed, for the shop clock to proclaim the ninth hour. The workers in the ribbon mill down the street are doing the same. So too, the dyers next door. You will all meet in the street, march on city hall together.

As you work, your eyes flit between your looms and the clock. The minute hand sweats, each tick a labor. Finally, it sweeps the twelve. Your neighbor, Anna Lotta, clambers on a chair, an uncertain ostrich, and yells "strike" though none of you can hear her. But you see, and that's enough.

A great screeching, a death gasp, echos down the rows, down the endless columns as all of you shut down your looms at the same time. Incomplete wefts are abandoned, left to hug their warps uncertainly. Silence claims the workroom, a novelty that's quickly broken by the innocent scrape of a boot on weathered floorboards. Emboldened, other noises join -- intermittent coughs, a handclap. Each permission for the next. More hands clap. Feet stomp. The room buzzes, human again.

A few women wave silk flags and begin the familiar chant. "We weave the flag," they shout together.

You and others respond, "we love the flag."

"But we will not starve under it," Anna heralds, fist in the air.

Footsteps syncopate the beat of union songs as you march, victorious, toward the factory door.

A tingle in your mind. You look about. Lucia. She should be marching next to you. You search for her, your friend, who works the looms nearest yours, the one whom most mistake for a cousin because both of you have a dark, wayward curl which will not stay under your hair-scarf no matter how you pin it, no matter how many times you're docked for the transgression of unruly hair. You turn a full circle. Lucia is not in the crowd. You glance back at your station. She is there, labor unabated, tending her looms, no concern for the strike.

You shout her name. She turns. Wide-eyed, you take each other in.

Out of habit, she mouths her words. "I can't," she says.

You mouth back, "Don't do this."

Palms outstretched, she shrugs. Her wrists, heaven-ward, offer her story. There are five children. The eldest but twelve. Her husband gone, succumbed to an infection after an accident at the firework factory, an explosion of patriotic-hued safety violations, all-American negligence. The doctors could do nothing, they claimed, even if there had been money, if the factory owner had paid the bill as he ought.

You know all of this because you were there. You held Lucia as she cried, remembering your own husband's death three years before.

"Damned doctors -- do they really even try?" she sobbed.

Your foreheads touched as you exhaled and muttered the obvious, "Not for us."

But that was then. Now she appears before you diminished and disloyal, a scab. You're surprised by how easily you judge her. How quickly the acid rises, and bile licks the back of your teeth. She is an exile now, a line-crosser. The union organizers have been quite clear about that. Unite or die.

But it's more than that. You want her to feel your disapproval, want her to feel shame. Not because she needs to feed her family. Not even because she dares to do so above your own. But because her eyes hold questions you don't wish to answer, hint at regrets you're trying to avoid. The straightness of her neck -- its strength, self-possession -- suggests a sureness of purpose that makes you fret you've traded too much. Her whole person silently implicates you, and you hate her for it.

As if she hears your thoughts, Lucia mouths, "Where are your children?"

#

You're outside now, one in a large crowd of women, each donning a version of the same mushroom-shaped hat, mourning black, practical but depressing, as if grief were never-ending, an everyday thing. At the front, rises a hastily constructed platform, rails slim and inconsistently angular from which a petite woman addresses the lot of you. The infamous Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. She is tidy and young, with upswept hair, fresh shirtwaist, more like a newly minted schoolteacher than a rabble rouser or a demon or whatever else the papers have dubbed her. Only the way she grasps the platform rails -- like she means to straighten them with her bare hands-- suggests the spirit that makes the newspapermen wary, and the mill owners, the mayor seethe.

Behind her, the mill, sinister and symmetrical, an expanse of white-washed bricks. The building's trunk, five window bays wide, juts ten feet farther toward the street than its wings, which splay straight on either side. At the pinnacle of the trunk, dead center, a stone oculus shines with inlaid bronze three stories above the mouth of the main entrance. The effect, a cyclops with arms stretched wide, poised to eat the young speaker whole.

"The working class must unite," she shouts, "only then can the universal evils of the capitalist world be eradicated. We must emancipate ourselves from economic slavery, from the bondages of capitalism."

The woman next to you nudges your elbow. You regard her, face unremarkable save a long, slender nose, which makes her appear more slender than she is. "That Miss Flynn," she says in Italian. "What do you think of her words?"

"Fine, I suppose," you respond, "a bit philosophical."

"Yes, but that doesn't matter. Listen." The woman pauses for effect. "Irish, but no accent. She's American."

You nod. You'd noticed that too. You regard Miss Flynn whose pale skin has no brown tinge, whose dark hair boasts flecks of gold.

"Can't tell if I trust her or not," the woman continues. "If I looked like her -- sounded like her -- I'd never set foot in this neighborhood."

You smile, warm to this stranger, this fast friend, who voices what you're thinking. If you looked like Miss Flynn, you'd work in a lady's shop, keep an apartment near the center of town, one with its own bathroom. Your children would attend freshly-painted schools, play with classmates whose last names end in consonants.

"One day we will control the means of production," Miss Flynn continues, clenching her fists as she speaks, "own the fruits of our own labor."

Your new friend sucks her teeth. "Santa Maria, these socialists! I don't need to own the whole damn town. I just want to pay my landlord."

"I just want to keep my boy out the mill," you say. It feels good to say this out loud, this fear that you keep bottled, that shreds from within. "He's thirteen," you continue. "If -" The

woman holds your eye, nods definitively as if you'd already finished your thought -- because you don't need to say: "If I earn more, maybe he can finish school." She knows.

The crowd sways. You sigh as Miss Flynn rails. "The truth is capitalism can't function without your labor," she says. "If we workers stand together, we are mighty as an oak. Separate, and they crush us like twigs."

"We workers," clucks the stranger, your new friend. "That's a laugh. Like she's worked in a mill."

You smirk and imagine what Miss Flynn's hands must feel like. Paper smooth, you bet. Sensitive hands that can't even tolerate a cup of newly poured tea.

"Still," you counter, "she wants to help us get more money. I'll stand with whoever raises my pay."

"No," your friend says considering. "That's right. You're right. We're in no position to criticize those trying to help. Still, I can't help but hate them a little, the organizers. "Look at them," she says jerking her head, indicating the line of grim-faced men in three-piece suits who sit on the platform behind Miss Flynn.

You don't answer except to meet her gaze. She's pinned it, the exact thing that's been bothering you at every union meeting: the organizers are doughy, full-cheeked. There's no way they live on union rations like you do.

Your friend continues, "Maybe it's worth it. Maybe we win more pay in the end. But how much debt will we have then? How's that getting paid off?"

"The grocer won't lend me credit anymore" you say. Your mind can't resist replaying your shame -- you standing at the till, basket full, the grocer ordering you to put all the items in

your basket back on the shelf. Your son watching with round eyes, etching memories lifetime deep.

You spit to curse the memory as your friend says, "Same here. The only thing worse than a WOP, apparently, is a WOP on strike. Even the damned negro grocer won't give me credit."

"I have papers," you say.

Your friend's eyes crinkle. "What?"

"Papers," you explain. "When we came here, my papa got papers from the official at Ellis Island. I still have them."

"Oh, you are precious," your friend says with a generous smile. "I like you. I do! What makes you think being a WOP has anything to do with actual papers?"

You cock your head, mull your friend's words while Miss Flynn's voice grows louder. "And the children," she says. "We must save them. It's time to evacuate. Loving families who sympathize with our cause wait to care -- and feed -- our children. In New York, in Philadelphia, they wait with outstretched arms, ready to do right by our little dears. Monday evening, just before dusk, in front of the mayor's house. A truck will wait to transport them to the city. It will be dark, but there will be so many cameramen, you'll think it midday!" Miss Flynn delivers this last line with a lilt to spur a big reaction, but the crowd's support devolves into uncertain murmurs and fearful gasps.

"Are you sending your children?" you ask your friend.

"Have to," your friend says.

"Well, you don't have to. It's optional."

"Union will cut your ration if you don't, say you're not committed to the strike. Can you feed your kids on what they give you?" She pauses as you shake your head. "Well, imagine half of that."

Miss Flynn's voice interrupts: "Our children will be safe, will grow strong as they wait for news of our triumph!"

Your friend turns to you. "Our children," she says with an eye-roll.

"She doesn't have any children, does she." You don't even bother phrasing it like a question.

"What mother would come up with this plan?" your friend says.

No mother, you think, obviously. And that's it. The proverbial last straw. Worry fractures your mind. Words stream out, a hydrant uncapped: "How will we know where they've gone? Do you think they'll be kept together? Can we send letters? Can we visit? Mary still needs someone to sit by her while she falls asleep. Will the new mother do it? And Penny must go to the bathroom just before bed or she will wet herself. She's so hard on herself when she has accidents. Will the new mother hold my Penny and tell her she's done nothing wrong, that her body is still learning? Maybe Joe can remember. What a thing to ask a boy to mother to his siblings!

"But perhaps this is for the best. I mean, there's no money, and we've no idea when the strike will end. My landlord -- I can't even think about it. We have to try, don't we? It's worth the risk. Something has to change, or life -- their lives -- will always be the same. And the union -- they're not perfect, but they've gotten us this far. All this work, all this sacrifice -- me, my husband, my father -- it has to be worth something. What if this works? What if this is the change we've needed?"

Your friend interrupts, "Yes, but -- remember Massachusetts. What do we do if it's like Lawrence?"

Her question stops your ramblings, spears you with a bolt of adrenaline. Your breath quickens, and you begin shaking so hard that you can't respond.

#

You're in a park with a wide, rolling lawn, a city common ringed by buildings that you vaguely recognize although you can't think why. You've not been here before. Yet, you know this place. Winter-dry air stings your cheeks, bites the inside of your nose. At the far end of the common, a train waits although there is no station house, no platform. Odd that, but it's the least of what catches your notice. What stands out are the colors, fully reversed, each its opposite. The sky, glaring red-orange for blue. The sun, a bald magenta orb. Shrubbery and sod, cheerful, but eerily violet. It's not ugly, this color scheme, just off-putting, like an upside-down map, familiar but weird.

As your mind adjusts, a crowd of mothers and children, dark and olive like you, gathers on the lawn. You overhear bits of goodbyes, mostly in Italian, as you bob through the crowd. Miss Flynn is here, but you don't recognize any of the other women, any of the children. It's evacuation day, you realize, but not yours.

One mother hugs a waist-high boy's head with smothering force. He doesn't resist but clings as if her stomach were air. Another woman kneels and holds the hand of a toddler whose hair is expertly done up in a four-strand lace braid. A simple thing, but smart. More than tangle-free hair, the intricate plaits are a message to the mother on the other side -- this child is loved, this child matters. The woman hands her daughter a twist of licorice. The candy, a treasure the

woman must have been saving for such a purpose. Her daughter may not understand what's happening, but sugar on the tongue may say enough.

A sharp wail makes you turn. A little boy, six, maybe seven, is crying so hard snot visibly runs into his open mouth. You look about for his mother and see a woman whose right-hand points authoritatively to the train, but whose eyes are fixed on the ground before her. She says to the boy in a flat, dead tone, "Go. Just get on the train so this will be over. Now. Don't make me spank you." She pauses, before bleating, "Please." The boy snivels and stares at his mother, but she keeps her eyes on the ground, finger pointed at the train, until the boy relents and walks away. The mother looks directly at you with the nut-dark eyes she withheld from her son, daring you to comment. But you stay silent. With a tight jaw, she says, "I can't keep pretending hot water is soup."

The crowd thins as more and more children head for the train. A glint, metal-bright, draws your attention. Just before the train, a line of state militiamen, stoic and battle-straight, bayonets out. You take a step back, turn to scan the faces of the mothers, confirm that what you see exists. But your attention is swallowed, because behind you is a line of policeman wielding billy clubs.

Your mind instantly recalls a newspaper photograph, and that's when you realize where you are, how you know this place. Lawrence.

With a sharp inhale of breath, you pause time, grant yourself a moment to process. You regard the policemen, pale-faced, Irish all. Their eyes blunt with disregard. To them, you and all of these mothers are story-less faces, unwanted people. They've forgotten once-upon-a-time when their families were like yours. Time has baptized them, turned them into Americans.

You stare at these brass-buttoned men and wonder if your family will ever be an American to them, these officers who are second generation, you guess, maybe third. Will it take generations? You're trying to speed up the process -- have already altered your children's names to sound American, Joe and Mary for Giuseppe and Maria. Little Theresa dubbed Penny. What's more American than naming a child after money? And you dutifully bite your vowels, clip the wings of your "erre" to keep your "are" from rolling. But it's not enough. You try to stay inside in the summer, keep your skin from darkening. You'll never be as pale as these men, or the Anglos they copy, or the Dutch, but you can be paler than brown. Certainly, lighter than the negroes they loathe.

If you hate the negroes too, will that help? Isn't that what you've learned – that the true currency in America is aspirational hate?

As you exhale, time reanimates. The police line moves forward. One of them announces, "We've got an order from the judge."

Murmurs rise to shouts.

"Shut up!" he bellows over the mothers, "you came here to send your kids away to strangers. The judge says that's neglect. Move aside. These kids are going to the city home."

Shouts rise to screams.

Mothers and officers lunge for children. Children run and cry and collapse. Some break free; some are caught. Officers swing clubs indiscriminately. One punches a woman squarely in the jaw. Another steps on a fallen child's bare arm.

You stand in the middle of this chaos and scream for the officers to stop. You spin, disarrayed and toothless. "God is watching," you yell, but your shouts fall on closed ears. Riot-think erodes empathy, eclipses reason. An officer grabs a child, lugs him by the foot toward the

waiting paddy-wagon. Another drags a mother who clings to his ankle, which she bites as he slings her daughter.

You yell, and you yell and yell until the word "Stop!" cracks your throat, dries your lips. Your draw your fingers to them and notice your hands are smeared with a watery liquid, brightly green, spring-fresh and nature-pure. Curious, you lick a fingertip. Rusty, almost woodsy, familiar. You look about. The lawn is dotted with the same substance. So are the mothers' skirts, the policemen's coats. You look skyward, find the colors still backward, orange for blue, pink for yellow. Green is not green, you think. You lick your fingers again. The answer stabs. Your heart omits a beat.

"Who will pay for this?" you spit, waving your verdant fingers, "Who will pay?"

You're spinning again, pointing and accusing. But the police are gone now. The children taken. Only mothers remain, streaked with gory green. They stare at you, empty-armed. You begin to shout again but stop short. Your cries are futile, you realize, cruel even. Every mother in this field knows who will pay, will forever be paying.

#

You're sitting on the steel couch that doubles as your bed. Pallet worn so that when you shift your weight, metal seems to scrape bone. A familiar hand rests on yours, reminds you of the garden behind your tenement -- barrel planters, the pressure of dirt under fingernails, the velvet of tomato sprouts. You grasp the hand gratefully, raise your gaze to see your father's wizened chin, walnut eyes. His hand warms, golden, a ray of winter sun. Your father rarely visits your dreams now, not like when he first died, but you cherish his visits all the more for their rarity.

He pulls a worn map from the breast pocket of his tweed coat, a copy of the one plastered on city hall, a long view of the city, drawn from the vantage of a perfectly centered hill on the southern edge of town. It could be a map of any New Jersey city -- river undulating around a predictable grid of building-lined streets -- but the map's border is unmistakably Paterson. A likeness of each factory, every single mill, preens from its own two-inch square, one after another, around the entire edge of the map, like jewels around a virgin throat.

You remember seeing this map, years ago, when you first came to Paterson, when you still expected streets of gold. Your father pointed to various mills, saying, "Look, Vita Mia, look. There is work here." You nodded as he folded your shoulders into the crook of his arm. "In America, there is so much work, even their maps promise it."

Now, your father sits next to you, offers you the map. "Where are the children?" he asks, holding it out so you can point to their location.

You stare at the river, the predictable streets. Your eyes find a train, stack smoking, drawn along the outskirts. You clear your throat. "There're not on this map, Papa."

"Which map are they on?"

"I'm not sure. New York, or maybe Philadelphia. They haven't told us yet."

His eyes narrow. "What? Who hasn't told you?"

"The union people. The children left a week ago -- with the Flynn woman."

"The Flynn woman?"

"She says it will be fine. They will be fine. It's just until the strike is over."

"When is that?"

You hesitate, jaw clenched. "I'm not sure. They say soon."

"What is soon?" When you don't respond, he presses. "How -- Why did you let them go?"

"I -," you sputter because now you're not sure why you let them go. You had sound reasons, but under your father's eye, they feel small, surmountable. "I was out of options, Papa," you try. "The mill and the long hours. They make us tend four looms now. I'm exhausted all the time. And the strike. There's no money. The grocer swats me out of his store, less than a fly. And they don't like us, Papa, the Americans. They think we are trash. It's just too hard here. Things have gotten too hard."

"Too hard?" His eyes question, flash with the resolve that kept all twelve of your siblings together after your mother died giving birth to your brother, Antonio.

You flush and begin to cry. "Yes, Papa."

"But, Mia Vita, these things -- they are hard, yes -- but they're the price for being here. Don't you see? They're what America costs."

"But I think we've paid enough, Papa." You're crying harder now, not bothering with the tears, which wet your collar, your neck, your breast. "When does it end? It's time to stand up, Papa. I must keep Joe out of the mill. All of them out of the mill. Can't you see? I'm doing this so their lives will be better."

"Oh, Mia Vita," Papa says as he thumbs your cheek. He draws you in, cradles you, his baby, snuggles you as if you'd never grown. "Don't cry. You're making this too difficult." He holds you in silence for what you wish were eternity. Then, "Do you remember what the most important thing in life is?"

You gulp, nod into his elbow.

"And what is that?"

"Familia," you whisper.

"But, you don't know where your familia is." His words saw your spine, sever your nerves. You know what he will say next and cringe in anticipation.

He pets your head with his thickly knuckled hands and says, "So how can anyone's life be better?"

#

You are running. To door after door, you fly. Up a brownstone stoop; down a cobblestone street. You're in New York. You're in Philly. It could be either. It doesn't really matter. Your feet are speed. Your nerve metal-strong.

You will find your children.

Now.

House after house, you inquire. Each door, paneled oak with a lion-mouthed knocker. Each time, a faceless voice states through an open inch, "Deliveries at the back."

"Please," you implore, over and over again. "My children. Joe. Mary. Penny."

"Wrong house," the voice always replies. "We've none like that here."

Methodically, you search. Door after door after door. Always, the cracked door tells you no one has heard of you or your children.

One house, two, a dozen, a hundred. Your heart pounds. You will try every house. Every single one.

Then, the light shifts. It's nighttime, but you hadn't realized it until now. The change, subtle at first, soft. Then dramatic, dawn-glow peach and orange. Faint yellow chases the dark into the outer reaches of heaven. The new sky is revelation, tastes like answers. You lick your lips, belly full.

Your heel stomps the cobbles with a definitive click. Damn it! You've been such a fool.

You know where your children are.

You begin running again. Out of the city. Through fields, stands of trees, past the Passaic. Over train tracks, through tenement alleyways. You run up the insect-eaten, wood backstairs that groan under your weight. You leap onto your couch which is magically new now, luxurious as a cloud, fluffy with blankets, thick with quilts. You disappear into this wonderful mess of fabric, roll on your back, and stretch your arms out for your prize.

Instantly, you feel the press of small bodies, the comfort of weight. You open your eyes, look down upon three babies, rose-cream sweet and angel-pure. They grunt. You coo. You shift your body so that you can touch every inch of them -- your arms, your stomach to their backs, their fuzzy heads.

Love courses over you, through you, washes you clean. The four of you are joy, hidden berries tucked along the forest floor. And goodness, like stained-glass butterfly wings, rich and alive. You are peace, a river-cool mist. Your chest expands, lifts with lightened breath. Everything feels possible now. Options endless; hope limitless. Transformed, you breathe them, drink them, these downy babies. You draw them closer still. Your laugh, a buoyant, free thing, caresses their cheeks.

This moment is your wealth. What you've craved, paid for, earned. You must ignore the thoughts that press from the edges -- that your children are no longer babies, that they were born years apart, not triplets. You must hold those thoughts back. Focus on the babies, instead, let them linger. Revel in their little bodies that comfort, feet that paw like fingers. You must, because you are starting to wake. And when you do, you'll have five seconds -- only five -- five shimmering moments to float and bask and believe. You must cherish these, live a life in them,

because the sixth is daylight, cold, a thief that crushes truth on your tongue, like shattered glass and salt.