

The Gelding

The pounding of hooves rattles the wagon with such force that Daisy is sure it would split into pieces beneath them. And knowing what lies ahead, she prays for it.

Next to her in the darkness, Nathaniel lashes the reins, urging the horse to somehow go faster, and Daisy's heart lurches. She might be sick.

Please stop this.

She presses her eyes closed, tears streaming as the world speeds by.

Make him change his mind. Let the earth swallow us—

A sudden break in the treeline pours moonlight over them and Nathaniel slows the horse.

The wagon comes to a halt overlooking a distance of clearing, on which sits Gableton Manor. Verdant gardens surround the three-story red brick mansion and vines of ivy climb up its north wall. Not a single light in any Georgian sash window. The manor, like its inhabitants, rests peacefully unaware.

At the sight of the house, Daisy cannot hold back her anguished cry and the horse starts.

“Quiet!” her father snaps.

After calming the animal, Nathaniel wordlessly directs the horse toward the manor.

Daisy curls over on the wooden seat, wraps her arms around her and stifles her sobs.

Nathaniel pulls the wagon as close as he dares without waking those within the house, then jumps from his seat to secure the horse to a nearby oak tree. Near six foot, five inches, Nathaniel's mere shadow would frighten a grown man, but it is more than his stature that makes him intimidating; a blacksmith by trade, Nathaniel moves through the world with intention, always knowing when best to strike.

And it is time.

As he secures the knot, a glint of moonlight the horse's eye stops him short. Nathaniel runs his hand along the gelding's cheek, and the animal peers into him. For the first time since hearing the news, he feels a jolt of doubt in his gut as he stares hard into the animal's face.

A snuffle from Daisy in the wagon brings his senses back to him.

Nathaniel goes to her side and extends a hand to his daughter. She blubbers, but knows better than to deny him. He helps her down gently and waits for her to calm herself. There is compassion here. It's brief, isolated to this moment, watching his sputtering child catch her breath— but it is there. He wipes a tear and she looks up at him.

“Which way?”

She points a shaky finger toward the back of the manor, and he nods for her to lead the way. Daughter leads father through the back garden until they reach the sill of a window about four feet off the ground. Like the rest of the house, it is dark— but in the moonlight a white handkerchief flits in the wind, an embroidered flower on its corner. A daisy.

Please, God, please stop him. Let him come to his—

Without hesitation, Nathaniel uses the white handkerchief as leverage to throw up the sash, then hoists Daisy onto its ledge. She begrudgingly slips into the dark house.

A whinny from his horse stops him quickly. He listens for movement— a servant on alert sounding the alarm or Henry Thomas Gableton bounding out of the darkness with his rifle.

Silence.

As he monitors his silent breaths, hearing the clomps of the horse, he remembers, strangely, the birth of that foul. How he had raised it. How he did what needed to be done to protect it... did the horse have a knowing? That Nathaniel would do whatever needed to be done?

In the darkness Nathaniel shakes his head to clear it.

Nonsense. Utter nonsense.

He hoists himself up the wall and slides over the sill in one sweeping motion, only his hand seen in moonlight as he slides the window closed behind him.

Elijah pulls mindlessly at the velvet canopy as he stares into the darkness from his pillow, replaying the scene over and over in his mind.

It was nothing new– the evening's events. He and Noah often went to the tavern to drink. They would pay for the company of women occasionally, too. And that night the pub had been dull and they had more pints than usual, so when Ruby brought over a new girl and offered he and Noah a lower rate, they looked at each other– *why not?*

But behind the tavern in the dark alley, a place Elijah had been many times with girls, some he had paid for, some he had not, something very different occurred. As he pressed up against the new girl– a mousy, nervous thing, obviously the reason for the discount– he became very aware of Noah with Ruby, an arms-length away.

As the girl's fingers fumbled with the buttons on his trousers, Elijah could already hear Noah's moans of pleasure, and the velvety timbre sent electricity down his spine, blood surged through him and warmth filled his loins, so quickly, so suddenly that he gasped.

The girl had finally gotten her way into his trousers and took him awkwardly in her hand. "Already hard for me..." she attempted a husky tone that sounded more ill than seductive. He was, though– before he had even the chance to go through his routine of grabbing flesh in all the right places– shockingly hard. The girl took his silence as a means to continue, and she began to hike her skirt, and Elijah risked a glance to his left expecting Noah to be fully in the throws, or perhaps close to finished....

But Noah was looking at him. His head was nestled in the crook of Ruby's neck, who was making all the exaggerated exclamations as he thrust into her, but he was very clearly in the light of the rising moon, staring directly at Elijah.

The girl suddenly took him inside her without warning, and Elijah gasped, catching a smirk of delight on Noah's face. The girl whispered her own list of performative phrases in Elijah's ear, but all Elijah could think of was the immense pleasure it was to watch the sharp corners of Noah's smirk, lifting at every thrust of pleasure.

It was intentional. Elijah knew it now for sure.

Noah suddenly turned Ruby around against the stone wall and entered her from behind, ensuring he could have an unobstructed view of Elijah, bracing himself against

the wall. A surge of something jolted through Elijah as he began to thrust harder into the mousy girl, who closed her eyes and performatively moaned.

They were alone now in it, their two whores falling into habit. Elijah slid his hand across the stone until the tips of his fingers grazed Noah's hand and his face surged with a knowing— a decision. There was some bold crossing of some line in his mind as Noah pressed his hand over Elijah's as the two locked eyes and built toward their finish...

Elijah's breath quickens as he recalls it in his bed now, a warmth flushing through him in his musty room, safe in the darkness. Neither of them had mentioned it after. Ruby and the mousy girl collected their coins and he and Noah had gone back inside to have another ale. A few friends had joined them, and it felt now almost like he had imagined it. Like a dream that wakes you briefly in the night, only to hazily return the next day, drenched in uncertainty.

But it happened, thought Elijah.

His pulse accelerates at the memory of Noah's eyes fixed on him, the tips of his fingers pressed atop his, and Elijah knows it. He knows that something has awakened in him. Something he did not ask for and should be very scared of, but it instead deeply fills him with... *hope*.

Elijah is so deeply caught up in his thoughts of Noah that he does not register the intruder until Nathaniel is upon him.

* * *

Alice hears it first, bolting upright in bed. "*Henry Thomas*—" His wife whispers, shaking him and he groggily rolls toward her.

"What is it?" he hisses, but Alice puts her ginger to his lips. He squints through drooping eyelids, annoyed, but listens— and hears nothing. He gives her a look of exasperation at being awoken until it comes again— louder this time— a muffled yell from across the house. Henry Thomas sits upright, fully alert next to his wife. They barely

breathe, listening for anything else to help them to know what might best be their next move. A loud thud of flesh hitting the floor and a yelp of pain sets them into action.

By the fading light of their bedroom fireplace, Henry Thomas yanks on his trousers as Alice fumbles at her bedside to light the lamp. But just as she strikes the wick, just as Henry Thomas does his last button, Nathaniel bursts in the room with Elijah, bound and gagged, and throws him to the floor. Alice and Henry Thomas stand frozen, struggling to comprehend as Nathaniel draws his pistol and points it directly at their only son.

It is not until Daisy's tiny frame peeks out behind Nathaniel with a tear-stained face that Henry Thomas puts it together. He drops his chin to his chest and sighs, "I see my son's antics have gotten him in some trouble. Again."

"Father—"

"Do not speak, boy!" Nathaniel snaps, kicking Elijah hard. Henry Thomas winces but remains calm, his mind calibrating all potential outcomes.

"Elijah," he instructs, "Quiet." He thinks for a moment. "Nathaniel, you know me, my family. You know we can make this right—"

"The Gableton name won't get you out of this one."

"We don't wish to skirt our responsibility in it, just to come to an understanding."

"If you think you can buy his way out of this without getting your hands dirty—you're sorely mistaken, Henry Thomas."

"Daisy has worked in our house for two years now, she's like family—"

"My first mistake, trusting that my child was safe around your vermin of a son."

Henry Thomas drops any charm he had previously and says flatly, "How do we resolve this?"

Nathaniel lowers the pistol to his side looking down at Elijah who whimpers weakly. Henry Thomas waits for him to speak, running through the possible weapons nearby: *the fox rifle in the downstairs coat closet, his pistol in the study...* Why did he not keep something closer? He never considered an attack in his own bedroom.

"You have two choices," Nathaniel lifts his eyes to Henry Thomas, making it clear the decision will be his, not Elijah's. "The first: the two shall marry, the child is born a Gableton—"

“Impossible.”

Nathaniel laughs bitterly at Henry Thomas’ haste. “The second will require more than you’ll be willing to give.”

Henry Thomas swallows hard, his eyes drop to the wriggling Elijah. *This boy. This infuriating boy*, he thought.

“The second choice.” he says, a little too harshly. “Please.”

Nathaniel looks Henry Thomas straight in the eyes and says simply, “The second choice is that I walk out with his manhood.”

Alice feels like she’s standing on the ocean floor trying to run, but every inch of her is held from all directions.

Her husband has always handled things. Not to this severity, but he has taken the reins in difficult moments, navigating situations with diplomacy and charm. Maintaining likability. Tipping things their way. The *Gableton* way.

The portrait above the fireplace caught the light of the candle and for a second she thinks the eyes of Henry Thomas’ great grandfather glowering down.

If you marry this man, her mother had said, *he will always have the upper hand.*

Next to him, his great grandmother, pursed and glaring.

And so will you.

Across the bedroom a portrait of an uncle in uniform— *Or is it a cousin?* thought Alice— stares sternly down with judgment, as if no family of his would let this happen.

How sure Mother had been of this match, Alice thought.

“Henry Thomas Gableton would always have this power.”

And the silhouette of his mother set upon the dresser? Even the shadow, the up-turn of her nose radiates scorn.

“And you, dear Alice, wouldn’t have to concern yourself with matters of discourse. Your delicate nature, your anxious disposition would always be at ease with this man.”

Now Alice watches his face, blanched white, knowing all his cards are on the table.

“W-what?” Elijah, whimpers at Nathaniel’s feet. Thick strands of sweaty, matted hair against his forehead reminds Alice of when he had had scarlet fever as a boy.

“Nathaniel, you can’t be serious— he’s just a boy.” Henry Thomas reasons. Alice watches his eyes dart between Elijah and Nathaniel wildly.

“The choice is yours,” Nathaniel says as he goes to the fireplace, collects the iron fire poker and thrusts it into the burning embers.

The eyes of the Gableton empire bare down on Alice from all sides, and the whimpers of her son become excruciating. She wants to run to him, to lash at this horrible man, she wants to take him as far from this place that suddenly feels so foreign to her.

“P-please, sir—” Elijah whimpers again, and Nathaniel, in a sudden rage, drops to his knees and grabs him by the throat.

“*Please*, boy?” Nathaniel hisses, “*Please?! Did the Miller girl say ‘please’ when she found out she was carrying? What about the O’Hara family that had to send their girl away?*”

Alice watches in horror as Elijah’s eyes bulge out of his face and turns from red to purple. She lurches toward him but her husband grabs her.

“He’s going to kill him!” Alice shrieks, but Henry Thomas’ hands grip her.

“And the Hasting’s daughter who died-- they say she had a procedure!” Nathaniel bellows, unfettered. “Did she beg you to stay? Did she say *‘please?’*”

“Nathaniel,” Henry Thomas says sharply but firmly, “My son cannot breathe.”

Elijah’s mouth twists and gapes open and closed like a fish, and his coloring darkens to a shade of puce. Alice strains against her husband’s grasp desperately, “I beg of you, he’s my only child!”

“AND SHE’S MINE!” Nathaniel screams, meeting her eye for the first time since this nightmare has begun. His black eyes stop her cold.

“*Papa!*” a small voice from the door yelp, and Daisy steps in closer.

Alice watches as Nathaniel looks at his daughter and something in her face makes him release her son. Elijah flops onto the floor, and at his sputters and gasps. Alice collapses into her husband, still holding her.

Nathaniel turns toward the fire to check the tool in the fire. "What'll be, Henry Thomas?"

Alice looks up at her husband. Sweat has begun to form on his brow. He looks at his son hard, like the answer may reveal itself like if he just examined things one more time, went over the fact once more he would—

"Don't try my patience, Gableton!" Nathaniel raises his pistol right at Henry Thomas' head, who shakes his head incredulously.

"And what, you'll go to the gallows?"

Alice hears the click of the hammer pulled back and a sharp pain of fear ripples through her body sending a metallic taste into her dry mouth. Her face is wet with tears, but she doesn't dare move to wipe them.

"I've made my peace with God. An eye for an eye— one way or another, Elijah will reconcile his debt."

All look to Henry Thomas, and there is the longest silence there has ever been.

* * *

I stare down at my son, but I only see my own
father.
How he took me to the woods that day to
show me
a fox
trapped at the edge of the property.
He let me study it
in childlike wonder
and then told me he had brought me there
to kill it.
That I had to.
He had to.
And he had pressed his pistol into my tiny hands,
wrapped my tiny fingers

over the trigger and shouted

FIRE

And then I did.

But fox was not dead, no

It was very much alive and it was screaming and screaming and
in my panic,

I had aimed poorly and the bullet had ripped through its entrails.

I looked to my father for guidance

but he said nothing.

I had to choose. Without him, I had to decide what to do.

I pointed the revolver at the fox,

still jerking and screaming,

and I shot him again

eyes open this time.

Warmth splattered my face.

Choked sobs began to erupt out of me

But he knelt down and said, "No.'

With every catch in my throat, a 'no' to ease it back down,
until it was just two empty vessels looking at each other.

"Today you have learned

what it costs

to be a man."

And left me with the carcass.

He never knew, but I buried that fox.

I buried that part of me with the fox, too.

* * *

His perfunctory nod stills the room. Daisy holds her breath as if she remains still enough, perhaps Mr. Gableton could take the gesture back. But she watches her father accept, and, to her horror, it is set into motion.

It's a funny thing when something is decided, Daisy thinks, as she floats outside of her body, watching her father and his father struggle against Elijah's thrashing body.

When something is set on track, and you're just at the mercy of the vessel...

"Hold his legs!" Nathaniel barks, and Henry Thomas, white as a sheet, does so, watching Nathaniel undo Elijah's trousers. Alice drops to her knees at the pitiful cries of her son.

Something as simple as a kiss, two parted lips and suddenly they've swallowed you—

"FATHER, PLEASE!!!!" He screams, but Henry Thomas' head bows into his chest; his face, Daisy thinks, turns away like God himself must have on the day they took his own son.

He had been gentle that day, she remembers. It wasn't sweet though.

"Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven give us this—" Alice prays to herself as Nathaniel drags down Elijah's trousers to his ankles as his father holds his shoulders as he screams into his face.

He had appeared behind her as she was cleaning out the stall.

"MOTHER?! MOTHER DO SOMETHING!!!"

He was so handsome, but not very good with words— not like his friend Noah who charmed the girls.

"PLEASE, I'LL DO ANYTHING!"

She had turned to see him looming at the door, watching. Her skin prickled in a way that she could not tell if she liked it or hated it.

"I'LL WON'T DO IT AGAIN!"

There were a few exchanges. Every few words he found a reason to step closer to her, and she suddenly became aware of herself being stalked like the way the cat in the yard tracked birds.

"I'LL STOP I PROMISE!"

But when he stood there towering above her, she knew she could not fly. She still had her broom in hand when his hands were on her.

“SIR, sir listen to me LISTEN TO ME I’LL DO IT– I’LL MARRY HER, don’t listen to him he can’t stop me– I’LL MARRY HER I’LL MARRY DAISY!”

It wasn’t that she didn’t like it. It was that she didn’t feel a part of it. Like he was doing it to someone else, but that someone else was her.

“Hold still boy, I don’t want to take more of you than I’m owed.” Nathaniel says sincerely into Elijah’s tear-streaked face.

When he finished, he kissed her hard on the mouth in a way that was final. A way that seemed he felt he was supposed to.

Nathaniel takes out his knife and gives Henry Thomas a look to prepare himself.

And, Daisy thought as she watched him leave the barn, a way that left her lonelier than she had ever felt before.

“Quick as the horses?” Henry Thomas asks.

“Quicker.” Nathaniel answers.

A scream like none she has ever heard rips through the manor as Daisy watches her father castrate Elijah. His body, once stiff in struggle, suddenly falls limp.

* * *

Darkness... A charred smell...

Noah’s outstretched fingertips grasping at his...

Elijah had not particularly wanted Daisy, the milk maid who flushed every time he approached the stable. He had not particularly wanted any girl. He had enjoyed them. But it was their *wanting him* that he enjoyed. They way their eyes fluttered, their breath shortened, the way they stumbled and mumbled their words when he flirted. Daisy had been so shy about him, so easy of a target that he hadn’t planned on following through.

“Elijah.”

Elijah hadn’t remembered the color of Daisy’s eyes.

I must’ve looked, right? I must’ve, he thought. But he could not recall them being such a dark gray as the color he saw across his parent’s bedroom.

She had white, angular shoulders, pink, pouted lips... the same shade as her nipples which he strangely made a note of, as if he were reporting back to someone, for research...

"Elijah."

How still she was. Not rigid. Not stiff. Not fighting— he would have never— but... did he even look her in the face before he... Elijah couldn't remember if he—

"ELIJAH!" Alice screams, and Elijah gasps into consciousness.

She cries in relief, clutching him to her, rocking him on the floor.

The floor. I'm on the floor—

And it all comes violently back to him.

Nathaniel returns the iron fire poker to the hearth. From the corner of his eye, he sees Daisy at the door, white as a sheet, but still upright. He takes a moment to look at her standing there. His child is so small, even for fifteen, but her face is set in a look he recognizes. She is not small anymore.

He turns to Alice who clutches her son like when he first came into this world. But Henry Thomas is turned away. At first Nathaniel thinks it's to hide his gaze from his mutilated son, but he realizes that he's staring up at a portrait. Some dead-eyed estranged kin that could no more help him than God himself.

Nathaniel kneels down to pick up the bloody member on the floor. As he does, he sees Elijah's eyes— now far off in a catatonic state.

It doesn't seem fair, Nathaniel thinks, that he should get to be someplace else entirely when we have to live in this awful moment of his own creation. Nathaniel feels the anger bubbling up inside of him until the thought of the gelding comes to him. His horse, obediently waiting for his return outside the manor. The gelding, with its far-off eyes, obedient. Faithful.

Nathaniel pats Elijah's leg, then tosses the severed member into the fire.

"Come, Daisy," his voice grumbles, soft and low, and he leaves the room.

Daisy gives a final look to the silhouette of the three Gabletons. She wants to say something, do *something*— but knows better.

She turns and follows after her father.

Such an absence fills the space where the father and daughter once took up so much before. Henry Thomas could feel the emptiness behind him where they once stood. He doesn't need to look right now. Later he will look— right now he will just stare straight ahead.

Such smooth strokes, Henry Thomas thought. Smooth, thin brush strokes. It must've taken years. Henry Thomas couldn't imagine sitting still long enough to make a brush cover the canvas, much less long enough to truly capture a person's likeness. To create those cold eyes stare down at all who pass. To make truth simply appear like that— their real essence. Preserved forever. So that we would never forget. So we could never forget...

Outside a horse whinnies.