

Clytemnestra's Requit

*"Oft have I heard that grief softens the mind,
And makes it fearful and degenerate;
Think therefore on revenge and cease to weep."*

- William Shakespeare

Irene was meant to be loved.

I adored her the moment I saw her, weeping with a strange combination of relief and the joy that she had joined our world. She had hair the color of cinnamon and incorrigible curls that framed her cheeks, freckled from sunshine and pink from laughter and affectionate pinching. Certainly I felt happiness at the birth of my other two children – another daughter and later a son – but Irene and I shared some kind of intangible connection that felt like old, unknowable magic.

It never crossed my mind that I would ever be like my sister. My husband and I were not mad with marital passion, but our marriage was agreeable enough. Arthur's family had owned land in Georgia for as long as anyone could remember. We lived in a white, three-story house with winding staircases in the middle of the plantation, at the end of a dusty road that was shaded by trees that had stood quietly for generations.

I think they pitied me at first, when my sister absconded to New York with that pretty, feckless party boy, Peter. But Faith was the sillier of us two, they all said; I had a good head on my shoulders, they all said. I had already given my husband three

children by the time my sister earned her reputation as an incurable adulterer: the Helen of the South.

But my children were my anchor: determined Evangeline with her gap-toothed grin, solemn, little Orlando, and ebullient Irene, whose light warmed everyone and everything it touched. Faith had no such anchor, so it didn't surprise me much when she took off in the middle of the night, drifting northward, crashing through the waves of her mindless passion.

I watched my children grow strong, but the year that Irene turned thirteen, the rains were slow and mild, and the crops were weak and too few. The next year was the same; the year after was even worse.

The war broke out during planting season.

Arthur wanted to go right away, but the plantation was in trouble. The slaves were restless, and after three profitless years, we had all but run through our savings.

"This year will be better," I told my husband. "It has to be."

He shook his head, staring at the long columns of neat numbers in the ledger. His face was tense, his neck strained, his eyes red from exhaustion. "It will be too late then. I have to go now – not after the harvest."

I knew he was right, but I saw no expedient solution, and so I left him to his brooding.

When he climbed into bed that night and gruffly explained his plan, I stared at him until he extinguished the lamp and covered his head with quilts.

"She's only *sixteen!*" I hissed into the darkness.

"It's a little young," he admitted. His voice was muffled beneath the covers. "But it's not unheard of."

I examined Irene's hope chest the next morning and found it woefully lacking. I had planned on at least another two years before my oldest daughter was married, and neglected to prepare the things she would take with her when she left my house. Or perhaps I had somehow thought that by delaying such a thing, I might keep her just a little longer.

It didn't matter. I told her of her impending marriage as I handed her a needle and thread, and we spent the rest of the day sewing in silence, as if a few hours of diligence could somehow undo my years of passive aggressive negligence.

"I'm nervous, Mama," she confessed to me softly.

"I know," I replied. "But you know that whoever your father chooses will be a good match. Maybe you won't go far. We will visit often. You can come and see your brother and your sister often, and we'll be close when you start having little ones of your own." I tried to smile.

"And you?"

I saw her hands were shaking as she smoothed her skirts and rose.

"What about me, darling?"

"You'll come too, Mama? You'll come visit me?" Her chin trembled and as her voice broke, so did my heart. For all her nubile features, to me she was just a baby who needed her mother.

“Of course,” I said, enveloping her in my arms. “I’ll always be there. Don’t be afraid.”

Arthur made a liar of me when he revealed the identity of Irene’s intended husband.

John Humphrey: a slimy, sinister man who lived in the next state over. He was infamous. The man traded in horseflesh and wives. He was good to his animals but not to his women.

His first wife died in childbirth – a reasonable enough tale, but there were rumors that she was already thin and weak when she went into labor weeks before the baby ought to have been born. Some said she’d had an accident the morning she lost the baby and died. She had tripped in the hayloft, caught the ladder too late and skidded to the bottom, where she lay on the floor of the barn until her husband found her and carried her inside.

I wondered if Irene would see the stains on the bedroom floor and know what had transpired there. Would she shudder when she passed by that room, poisoned by betrayal, and know that she was another doomed innocent, trapped and overcome by despair?

His second wife caught pneumonia and never recovered. I wondered if her coughs still echoed through the house.

He arranged his marriage to his third wife while the second was still sick in her bed. No one knows what happened to the third. Some said she was sick; some said it was another accident. Others say she just disappeared. I heard she was a little simple,

and given to extravagant fantasies, so no one really knew if her vague ramblings about threats and beatings were an omen or merely the product of a tragically incoherent mind. Now we never will.

Marriage to this man was a death sentence, and it had been passed upon my daughter. Arthur had sold her to her doom to fund his adolescent visions of grandeur on the battlefield.

“You cannot do this,” I said, following Arthur into the study and shoving the door out of my path where he let it fall in my face.

“It’s already done,” he said, perching on the edge of his burgundy, wing-backed chair. His pen scratched along the page as it ran dry. “Everything has been finalized.”

“But—”

“I know this is difficult for you—for us to be leaving at the same time.” He wrote harder as the ink in his pen continued to dwindle. “But I’ll be home as soon as the war is over, and Irene will be fine. You still have Orlando and Evangeline to worry about.”

“Choose someone else,” I said. “Choose *anyone* else. Just not this man.”

“No one else will take her this quickly,” he said. He shook the pen to encourage the flow of ink. “Humphrey has the money now, and that’s what this plantation needs if we’re going to survive.”

“You cannot take her from me,” I choked, coming closer to the desk. “Please—don’t do this.”

He reached for the inkwell to replenish his pen, but his hand slipped and the black liquid spilled out onto the desk. Arthur swore violently and jumped back, snatching his papers out of the way, but they were already ruined.

“For God’s sake, woman – don’t just stand there!” He reached gingerly in his pocket, trying to remove his handkerchief to clean up the mess, but only succeeded in covering his vest in black fingerprints. His shirt was ruined too, and as he scrambled to stop the flow of the ink sinking into the spoiled mahogany, I watched the stain settle beneath his fingernails and surround the calluses on his palms.

Milly must have been standing outside – whether eavesdropping or merely passing by, it didn’t really matter – because she descended on the desk and dropped an old cloth over the spill. “None that gon’ come out,” she said, tsking and shaking her head.

No, it wouldn’t.

Not the ink from Arthur’s shirt and vest, or the indelible marks on his desk, or the bloodstains of our daughter’s innocence in John Humphrey’s bed.

I was alone with her later that night, watching the slaves pack her belongings.

“I’m so sorry, Mama,” Irene sobbed. “I want to – I wanted to –” She hiccupped. “Be brave, but...but...oh, I’m so *afraid!*” She burst into a fresh round of tears.

These were not the gentle, poetic tears she’d wept when she found the dead kitten, or the pitiful sniffing she indulged in every month when her abdomen ached. Her face was grotesque: blotched red and screwed up in agony. She wailed the

haunting cries of the dead, coughing and choking on fear and grief, her hands clenched into fists.

There was nothing for me to do but hold her, so I wrapped her in my arms and I rocked back and forth on her bed as she cried helplessly. My hot, angry tears soaked the back of her head where she buried her face in my breast.

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“Female shall murder male: what kind of brazenness

Is that? What loathsome beast lends apt comparison?

A basilisk? Or Scylla’s breed, living in rocks

To drown men in their ships – a raging shark of hell,

Dreaming of steel thrust at her husband’s unarmed flesh?” (Aeschylus)

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“It’s not an official business deal,” I overheard Arthur saying. “No need to dirty our hands with paperwork when a handshake will suffice. It’s really just a good son-in-law helping an old man chasing his last chance at glory.”

The cigar smoke and boisterous, masculine chuckling that filtered out of the study made me retch.

The blood sacrifice worked. Arthur massaged his pistol to a shine, saddled his horse, and was gone within the week.

His brother, Thomas, whose farm was fifty miles east of ours, came to live with Orlando, Evangeline and me while Arthur was away. A horse had crushed the bones in his foot when he was a child, and his gait was labored, punctuated by the dull clunking

of his cane as he walked. Thomas was a shorter, slightly less angular version of Arthur. They had the same laugh, a short sound that sounded like a barking cough and smiles that didn't quite reach their eyes. He moved into a spare bedroom on the second floor of the house and politely integrated himself into the ordinary activities of our lives.

The first time Thomas crept into my bedroom late at night, I sent him away without thinking, rolled over, and went back to sleep. But he was quiet the next morning at breakfast, and seemed to watch me carefully as my children quarreled over biscuits and the last rasher of bacon. The way his eyes traveled over me sent a spark of awareness through my body, slithering from my toes through my veins until it curled up and settled insidiously inside my loins.

I thought of Arthur's tent, staked beside some lonely battlefield.

There was a woman with dark, knowing eyes who would slip between the flaps and kneel beside his cot, where he lay on his back, waiting. She kicked his boots aside and crawled on top of his body, fitting her curves to his and leaving only when he slipped the bills into her hands and fell into sated slumber. There was a different woman another night, with smooth, rounded hips and a breathy voice; another with silken curls and a smile to mask her worn-out face.

Those hands that grasped the thighs of strange, willing women were the same ones that had signed my daughter's death sentence, and I thought of his ink and powder-stained fingers roughly unlacing their unfamiliar corsets and tearing aside the petticoats that stood in the way of his pleasure. Images of John Humphrey's round, bearded face mingled with my internal portrait of Arthur's sweaty, satisfied

countenance hovering above me, and I swore in that instant that I could hear my daughter weeping. The bilious images built upon one another and melded together in a quivering mass of hatred, and the next time Thomas came to my bed, I didn't turn him away.

This was my revenge for my daughter's stolen innocence: to let my husband's brother take his pleasure in our bed of betrayal. He had sentenced my sweet daughter to a short life of ravishment and misery, but I would endure, and he would suffer every instant my heart continued to beat.

"I've had a letter. Arthur's unit is coming home soon," Thomas remarked one morning, snapping the paper closed and dropping it on the table. "Pass the biscuits, Orlando."

My son slid them dutifully toward his uncle and cast a baleful look toward me.

I ignored it. "I'll plan a celebration," I said. "Won't that be nice, Evangeline?"

"Yes, Mother," she replied, hunching over her plate.

"Mind your hair," I said.

She shoved her braids carelessly over her shoulders and dipped her head even closer to her plate. "Yes, Mother."

My children knew about Thomas and me.

The first few nights he came to my room, I would insist that he leave as soon as we had finished. There was no reason to prolong the whole business, or pretend like we particularly enjoyed sleeping in the same bed. Sometimes his foot would cramp up at night, and he would jerk in his sleep, or kick without warning, as though his foot could

somehow transfer the pain outward if it made contact with another person. That person was me, and after a bruise appeared on my leg from where he'd struck me with his heel, I sent him away without remorse.

One night Orlando was in the hallway and saw Thomas leaving the bedroom. My hair was in disarray as I stood barefoot in the doorway. Thomas struggled to fasten the buttons on his pants as he walked away, grunting in the same nondescript way he did when he was on top of me. He didn't see Orlando, but I did – and he certainly saw us.

He stood absolutely still in his long nightshirt, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. It was too dark for me to see his face, but I could imagine his expression clearly: his features blank, his eyes dark, mouth drawn into a thin line. He never mentioned the incident, and neither did I.

Evangeline's discovery was worse.

I half-wondered if perhaps her brother had told her, and she thought that if she caught us together she would rouse some sort of guilt within me and we would stop. But if the cost of my revenge was my conscience, it was a price I was willing to pay.

Surely she could hear the bed creaking rhythmically in the hallway. Perhaps she didn't understand what it meant – she was only nine, after all. I could see her over Thomas's shoulder as the door swung open. I tapped him on the arm and whispered for him to be still, but he ignored me, and Evangeline watched with wide eyes for another agonizing few seconds before she fled.

That was when she stopped meeting my gaze, and began answering my questions as succinctly as possible.

But neither child questioned me, and I did not provide any answers. For his part, Thomas continued to be as unobtrusive and pleasant as he had been since his arrival. Orlando and Evangeline's resentment was practically palpable, but ultimately ignored.

If Arthur's marriage plans for Irene had taught me nothing else, it was that nothing in this family was accomplished by an honest request, decisions could be made without any regard for the other members of the household, and not to become too attached to my children. Who knew what would happen when he did come home? Dazzled by visions of victory, he might insist that Orlando be sent to a military academy immediately, to train him to become the next Napoleon. Perhaps he had made another horrifying marriage agreement, and I would lose not one, but both my lovely daughters to men with cruel hands and cold hearts.

I had not heard from Irene in months.

She had warned me in her last letter that John did not like for her to write, because it tied her too closely to her old life. "He says that life is dead, Mama," she wrote, "but I think it is I who am dead inside. I feel nothing, except the ache of missing you, and Evangeline, and Orlando, and silly little things like the little tree by the fence where I used to sit outside and read. The memories of home are like a dream, and when I write to you, it feels like I am writing to someone who never existed. I'm not sure what is real."

They moved away.

Irene had hinted that they might, in that final, heartbreaking, horrifying letter of hers, but she said she did not know where they would go, or when they would leave. I was frantic the morning my first letter was returned. I sent another, convinced it had to be a mistake. But that one came back unopened, just like the first, and I was rocked by the realization that my daughter was gone forever – as good as dead.

I thought of her hourly – Irene, with her cinnamon-colored curls, covering her mouth with her hand to muffle a giggle, her soft, sweet face, her round cheeks, her innocence and grace. How could anyone ever wish ill upon such a creature – much less enact cruelty himself?

But men are not the only ones with a capacity for cruelty.

Arthur would return soon.

The serpent inside my belly shivered with anticipation as it began to uncoil its long, unforgiving body. It yawned lazily, stretching its jaws.

I wanted him to feel trapped as he had trapped Irene into a dark life as John Humphrey's fourth wife. I wanted him to be helpless – to know that he was doomed, and utterly powerless to stop it. I could not sell him into a life of misery, but I could punish him regardless.

Arthur loved chicken.

It was a simple pleasure, certainly, but there was something he'd always found satisfying about knowing that the plantation was enough his kingdom that he could call for chicken in the afternoon and have it on his table that night. I think he liked the idea that he was so much the master of his little kingdom that he could see a chicken

bobbing about in the yard, think it plump and hope it tender, and find out for himself when he carved it into bite-sized pieces with his knife.

Soon after Thomas read the report in the newspaper, I received a letter from Arthur confirming that he would return home within the fortnight. I ordered Milly to prepare a chicken for dinner the night we expected Arthur's victorious homecoming. Everything had to be just right.

I spent the morning releasing my pent-up aggression on the slaves, ordering them to complete menial tasks and clean portions of the house that I knew Arthur would never notice.

"You think this is sufficient?" I snapped, pointing to part of the banister that the little house slave had failed to dust. "You think he won't notice? You think because he's been away that he won't remember every *corner* of this plantation?"

Appropriately cowed, she set to work again immediately, and I swept away to harangue another house slave, feeling my aggression fall away a little at a time. The serpent was taking the place of my raw anger, unwinding its long body and filling me up, preparing to strike.

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She who hunts is she who shared his bed.

Howl, Furies, howl, you bloody ravening pack,

Gorged with this house's blood, yet thirsting still;

The victim bleeds: come, Fiends, and drink your fill! (Aeschylus)

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I set a boy to watch at the gate, one who could sprint ahead of the slow-moving horses to alert us to his arrival. We gathered on the front steps of the house after the messenger burst into the house, gasping that his master had arrived.

“I’m so happy you’re home,” I whispered in his ear as we embraced. “I have longed for this day. “ I touched his bearded face as he drew back. My eyes welled with tears, and I swallowed hard and wiped away those that fell.

“Sweet wife,” Arthur said, shaking his head. He laughed merrily and squeezed me again, pleased that his silly little woman had waited so long and faithfully for him, and found herself overwrought at his return.

He clasped hands with his brother. “All is well in my coop?” he asked.

Thomas – shorter, stockier, more recently bathed – returned Arthur’s slap on the back. “I cared diligently for all your chickens,” he said. “And especially your favorite hen.” He smiled at me, his manner restrained, fraternal – perfectly planned and executed. “It was no easy task.”

“I believe you,” Arthur said.

“You know how fowl play,” Thomas said conspiratorially.

In the dining room Arthur remarked how elegant Evangeline had grown, how straight Orlando sat, mistaking their stiffness for composure and their silence for politeness. He regaled us with stories of his triumphs on the battlefield, particularly proud of how he had managed to secure the plantation while the rest of Georgia lay in smoldering ruin. Geography helped – we were far enough west of Atlanta that we

weren't in any direct danger, but Arthur hadn't taken any chances with the source of his livelihood.

"Winning the war was really an impossibility," he explained as Milly loaded a serving of chicken onto his plate. "All Jeff Davis wanted to do was *not lose* – but really, all things considered, I think we all know the man is a bit of a dreamer. Have to be a realist, haven't you? Plan ahead, strategize. Sherman understood – Sheridan too. Funny how the Yanks go on and on about loyalty and keeping one's word, but welcomed this Southern gentleman with open arms when he pledged his life to the Union after fighting for the Confederacy for three years."

"Shifting loyalties are a strange thing," I agreed. "You never know what a person might do to survive."

"It's true," Arthur said. "We all do what we must, and in this case I would say it has worked out perfectly for our family."

He went to bed early.

"Haven't had food this good in months," he said, laughing. But some of the boisterousness had leaked from his manner, and his gait was labored as he moved upstairs to sleep in his own bed for the first time in years. His face was pale and shone with a faint sheen of sweat when he curled up on the mattress. I pulled the covers over him like a child, but he did not stay long in bed.

Two of the slaves found him asleep near the outhouse, his trousers soiled where he had not managed to pull them down quickly enough on the trip down. He had

apparently spent the entire night emptying both his stomach and his bowels, alternating with tortuous regularity for hours.

We put him back in bed and I called for the physician to come immediately.

“What’s he had to eat?”

“Nothing since last night,” I said. “But we all ate from the same table! I don’t understand—I prepared such a lovely dinner...” I wrung my hands and the physician put his hand on my shoulder.

“There, there,” he said. “He’ll be all right. I’ll bleed him before I go. It might release the last of the toxins from his body and give him some rest.”

The bleeding left Arthur even weaker and more miserable. I pressed a cool cloth to his forehead and perched on the edge of the bed. “I’ll move to the spare bedroom and leave our bed to you until you feel better,” I told him.

“Ridiculous,” he said, tossing his head back and forth on the pillow. “Survive being thrown from my horse at Chancellorsville—almost had my leg blown off at Antietam—and now *this*.”

“Shh...you’ll be all right. Rest now.”

But Arthur was not all right. The days passed slowly, and, unable to keep down any substantial nourishment, he grew weaker and weaker. My affair with Thomas continued as it had before Arthur returned home, but no one breathed a word of the pleasure we took together at night, and we were attentive and solicitous to both Arthur’s sickbed and the running of the plantation throughout the day.

There were no overt signs, but somehow he knew. After a fortnight of languishing in the bed we shared and I had abandoned, he hardly spoke anymore – it cost him too much effort. But his eyes shifted meaningfully between the two of us when we visited him together, and I gave him other signs to obsess over during the long hours he was confined to his bed. A smile meant just for Thomas, touching his forearm with ostensible innocence but obvious intimacy – Arthur saw all this, but he was powerless to stop it – and he hated it.

Not even free to walk around the grounds he owned and had given so much to preserve, Arthur became a prisoner in his own marital bed. I insisted that he must have total rest, and we hung heavy curtains in the bedroom, so that even on the most pleasant of days, only the barest hint of light crept into the room. The air hung heavy with sickness and the threat of mortality. Darkness stole his hope.

Everyone knew he was miserable. We watched him carefully, encouraged him daily, insisted he'd regain his health soon. But our platitudes were not enough, and his desperation mounted.

I slipped into the bedroom that night. He watched me crawl onto the bed at his feet and untie the modest bow at my neck, loosening my chemise enough to expose the tops of my breasts. "Thomas is waiting for me," I whispered. "I can't make him wait. But you dropped this. You ought to take better care of the things that belong to you. Here – here it is –" I slipped the surgeon's sharp lancet into his hand. "Remember how you took it when you thought the doctor wouldn't notice? Very clever of you to use the

physician's tools for your own suicide. It is a shame about the chicken, my darling – it always was your favorite.”

His eyes were wide, but he was too sick to speak, and his moans – too soft for anyone to hear – disappeared when I closed the door behind me.

Milly screamed when she found him dead. His eyes stared unseeingly at the ceiling. The bloodied scalpel lay close to his motionless fingers, and the quilts were ruined, marked indelibly by the blood that had dripped from his forearm.

“Tried to bleed himself,” Milly whispered to the other slaves down in the kitchen. “I gone up there to give him his breakfast, but he was so *still* – oh! Lawd, it so dark in that room that you can't hardly see anything till you get up close. It like a prison. I used to clean that room every mornin', but now it just like a spooky little prison cell.” She shuddered. “God res' his soul.”

He had stolen Irene from me, but now Arthur was gone forever too. He couldn't hurt anyone ever again.

Perhaps we would have peace now – Thomas, Evangeline, Orlando and me. But some part of me resented the prospect of peace. Irene's life had been brutally destroyed. Why should any of us have relief?

I think I already knew: the serpent had only begun to feast.

**

Oh, shame! Conspiracy!

A heart obsessed with hate

And lurking to betray

Pollutes this house anew

With deadly injury where deepest love was due! (Aeschylus)