

RYE AND WHEAT

Death came for me three times. The first time his heels clicked on the floorboards of my home I was only a boy. My eleventh summer was marked by a meagre harvest, burning heat and winds that shook the nails loose from our humble home. It was a hard day, but we had achieved much. Father finished reaping the master's last field on the other side of the river and my brothers had collected all of the grain. While I was tanning in the yard, Mary was downing father's other tunic, repairing a tear from a fall. Abigail was rocking Sarah, and I could tell when she stopped to fuss with her hair as the crying would start straight up again. I finished tanning the leather by mid-afternoon, and I thanked the Lord. Father had given me leave to play or wash if I finished before supper, and since the sun had been on my back and neck all day, I decided to go and cool off in the river.

The water cooled the aches and the heat of the day, and I lay back floating. I was glad to be naked and unashamed. The house looked to be wavering in the heat, so I span around to keep the coolness from the bed of the river on different parts of me. I cleaned the piss and shit from my hands and out from my fingernails and dunked my head underwater while looking for fish and crabs. By sundown I felt weary, but washed my clothes in the river so mother wouldn't have to. Then I carried myself and my clothes back home and sat down in front of mother's cooking flame, letting my clothes take in the heat.

We prayed to the Lord and ate. John and Joseph had extra helpings as the largest members of the family aside from father, though he ate less to ensure there was enough for Mary, Sarah, and Abigail. John smiled at me while chewing his bread and praised Mary for her work on father's tunic. I wondered then if she would be a seamstress. Joseph sat looking thoughtfully, his large shoulders and arms shining with sweat in the firelight. I had hoped the Lord would smile down on our family, sat in peace around a table and sharing in the body of

His son the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps he did. Perhaps he had no hand in which way the reaper's scythe swung, or perhaps I had offended him in my nakedness, or perhaps I had not prayed enough. Perhaps mother or father had displeased the Lord. Perhaps He had wanted them to join Him in His kingdom. I could just about hear her breathing, despite father's snoring. It was a turnip and onion stew, which was alright. I remember dreading her bread made from rye; the grains were tough and got stuck in my teeth. Before long, the thoughts slipped away like any other night, and I slept.

He took them all, aside from little Sarah. Maybe he felt it was unkind to leave me alone, or that it would be unfair to take her as well. Then again, a Reaper only cuts what is fully grown, unless it is diseased. Sarah and I, for whatever reason, were spared.

Finding able bodied men to help me bury them was harder than I had expected. The Lord had taken many from the surrounding hamlets. The master was gravely ill up at the manor, and his daughter had died. I spared them a small time of prayer. He was by no means a bad master. I had heard mother and other women at the market gossiping very impiously about barons eastwards and beyond who kept their peasants in the deepest levels of squalor. I was glad to have a home, my bread, rye or not, and my family gathered around our table.

The fletcher's boy, Joseph, agreed to help me dig graves for them if I would make use of a cattle's hide for them. I agreed. I was too young to work the fields properly, though I knew that now father and my brothers were dead, I would have no choice. Younger boys than me were already in the fields, and it was only because our family was so large and prosperous that I learned to tan. A gentle man named Viktor taught me, in the pleasant summer of my sixth year. Would he have lived longer, perhaps he would have apprenticed me. Perhaps not.

So, on I worked. When I could, I spared prayers for my family's immortal souls and cared for Sarah as best I could. So many had passed on to Heaven that the master had to increase our wages, lest we find work elsewhere we would be better appreciated. This helped me keep food in her belly and a small pot of money in our home. The time feels so hazy now, summers and winters passing by like blinks of an eye. I grew taller, stronger, smarter. Things began to return to normality after a few summers. Sarah was walking and talking when he came for us again.

Shouts rang out over the south hill. Paul and I were checking the shoots after a storm, pulling the rotted from the earth and discarding them for the worms. We dropped everything to run to the noise. When we crested the hill we saw them, ten and five men in leather cuirasses with swords and axes had descended on the hamlet. I saw Sarah cowering down by the river. We ran for the men. Already some lay dead in the square, their blood staining the earth.

The battle was short, though brutal. As Paul and I got to the houses we entered Samuel's home to look for anything to use as a weapon. Paul fashioned Lucy's iron cooking pan as a club, and I used his scythe, as I was the strongest of us. We were fortunate to catch two of the invaders unawares. Paul broke one man's skull in a single hit, and he fell with a thud. I cleaved into the neck of another as he turned around in surprise. The man's head fell from the neck, though the cut was not complete. Samuel often forgot to sharpen his blade. Now though, we had the full attention of the invaders. Those who weren't fighting another member of our little village had turned to us, baring their grinning blades, and broken yellow teeth.

We were forbidden to take up arms under usual circumstances, and as such we had no training. Paul took a sword from the man he had killed, and I did the same before the bandits

got too close. I think now this was a mistake, as I lost two arm's distance in reach.

Regardless, the men descended on us. The details of our fight escape me now. I cut down two, and Paul got one before he was stabbed through the heart. Another was killed by Aaron, the blacksmith, from behind, though they continued their attention on me. It was four against one, and though I tried my best to defend myself, I was no match for them. I cut and stabbed and deflected as best I could, but then the man with one eye used his pike to impale me.

He grinned and spat at me as he pushed it through my torso, taunting me in a harsh accent I did not recognise. Everything had started to go black, and though the pain was like nothing I had ever felt, I was glad to have done my duty to defend my village, and to be seeing my family again. The world shrank away, the voices became dim and I felt the Lord reach out for me. I smiled as his hand brushed my face. The hand was smaller than I was expecting. I opened my eyes.

Sarah was touching my face, her own streaked with tears and snot. I was laying in a heap, the pike still sticking from my chest. The blacksmith's house had been torched, and he lay dead not too far from me and Paul. The fletcher stood by the well, bruised and bleeding. There were dead bandits across the square, but I did not see the one-eyed man.

"Are you dead?" She sniffled.

I looked down at my wounds. I was breathing, my heart was pumping, and the bleeding looked to be slowing.

"Maybe." I tried to move but the pain was overwhelming. Blackness took me again.

When I woke, I was still leant against the wall with the pike sticking forth from my belly. She opened her eyes in surprise and shook me. I batted her away and tried to speak. I tasted blood and coughed painfully before I managed to gasp out.

“Water.”

She rushed home for a container and then to the well, before falling to her knees and using her hands to bring it to my lips. I drank it in and took a breath. It was a hard, wet breath, and my throat crackled.

“Fetch a doctor, Sarah. I may yet live, but I need help. Take the money.”

“The men took it all.”

“Go and beg if you must. Otherwise, I will die here.” As I spoke, the fletcher noticed I was moving. He ran over to me and examined me.

“Girl, go to the house and ask for a doctor. I will pay what I can. Now.”

She looked at me with teary eyes, and it was all I could do to nod permission to go.

“May the Lord have mercy on you, tanner.” He began, “you sent four straight down to hell. Your efforts helped fend off the bastards, my family owes you thanks.” Tears were in his eyes now, and though he was not a strong man, his grip on my shoulder felt as hard as iron. “My doors are open to you as if you were my brother.” I smiled at him, but my eyes closed once more, and everything became black.

Mother touched my chest, where the blade entered me and ran her finger along my wound. She was looking up at me, which I found strange. Father was stood behind her with his hand on her hip and an approving look. My brothers were sat around the table with Abigail and Mary, and they held hands.

“We’re proud of you, my boy.”

I felt warmth. Their skin was clean and unblemished. Age had not wearied them, and their hair shone. Their teeth were perfect, porcelain white and their lips were plump.

“Is it my time?” They looked between them, seemingly unsure of what to say. Abigail stepped forward, closer to me before speaking.

“What of Sarah?”

“You must care for her” Mother said.

I felt in two minds. I was disheartened to be unable to join my parents, but ashamed that I considered leaving my sister. I knew they were right. Father held my face and smiled kindly.

“My boy, look at you.” He brushed my short beard with his thumb, “a man grown.”

Mother spoke next. “You will join us again, my son. But you must care for Sarah.” She took my hands in hers “Will you do that for us?”

White light began to glow from behind them, and I knew then that I must.

“I will mother. I will make you proud, father.”

He smiled and spoke again. “You already have.”

My eyes opened and an unfamiliar scene greeted me. Wooden panels glowed in the red light of a fire. I was laying on my back, held up on some kind of mattress. I had never slept in a bed before, and I felt for a moment like floating in the river. I thought perhaps I was laid upon a stack of hay, though nothing bristled my skin. I could smell pinewood burning and hear knots pop and crack as the flames burst. I felt strangely calm. I could feel my fingers, toes, legs, arms, chest, shoulders and neck, but it was though feeling itself was in another place. I was far away from my body, yet I was all there, complete.

“Where am I?” Said a voice. It was mine. I didn’t remember using it. I felt as though I had imagined saying it, as for a while, nothing happened. “Where am I?” It said again. This time, there was movement.

A face looked down at me. I thought at first it must have been an angel. The features were soft, almost blurred. The skin was clear, the eyes a blue like the summer sky and hair of an angel’s: like golden wheat of a good summer. Her lips were plump and pink as a babe, with a small nose. She seemed out of place in a peasant’s village. I had seen the Duke once as he and his retinue had come to feast with the master. His wife reminded me of this woman, so clean and pure. It was as if the air had cut no lines into her face, like the sun hadn’t hardened the soft clay of her flesh.

“Where am I?” I said again, this time with control.

“You are in the home of Aedward. He sent word for a doctor.”

I sat thinking for a while. I had never asked the fletcher’s name or heard it be said.

“Would you give him my thanks?”

She smiled and stroked my hair away from my forehead.

“I will.”

“And what of my sister? What of Sarah?” The woman looked to her right, and I felt a small hand squeeze mine.

“You’ve a hard body for a tanner.” The woman said.

“And you’ve an angelic face for a woman.”

Her cheeks burned slightly, though she smiled.

“What has happened to me?”

“You were lucky, tanner. The weapon that pierced you so avoided your major organs. Your entrails were pierced, and you lost much ichor, but your wounds are healing and you’ve recovered some strength. You may still succumb to an infection, though, so I must insist you stay here and do as I ask.”

I took her medical words in and considered them. I looked down as best I could to see my stitched together torso.

“Why do I not feel any pain?”

“I administered opium and water. You won’t feel any pain so long as I administer you this.”

“How is it that you know of such medicines? Have you an education?” The angel smiled sadly and took up a pestle and mortar, crushing up herbs and seeds while she spoke.

“My father was a medical man and made his trade healing the weak and injured. He was ill some summers ago.” She removed the pestle and poured in a thick orange liquid before resuming grinding, “The pestilence laid waste to large swathes of our community. So, as he lay dying, he taught me what he had strength to, and left me his medical notes.”

“You read?”

“I am lucky in that regard.” She used her fingers to apply the salve to my wounds as she spoke.

“Had I practiced my healing talents at other times in history, perhaps I would have been hanged for witchcraft. As it is, with so many dying of disease and war, I am a welcome sight to many.”

“Why are we at war?” Came Sarah’s frightened voice. I squeezed her hand before trying to speak. The angel spoke before I could.

“You are not. The count of a place south of here is battling another lord to our east. It is often the way of men at war to raid villages without cause or mercy. Luckily for your village, your brother was able to save your homes and some lives.” She looked down at me and said quickly.

“I do not think they will return, after seeing how fiercely you defended yourself. The master has heard tell of it too and will have appealed to the duke that such attacks are to cease.”

I relaxed my shoulders at this and closed my eyes.

“Now drink this and speak no more.” She said, “you must save your strength.”

I lifted my head and drank an acrid liquid. Quickly, the blackness clawed back into my vision. I suddenly had a thought, in my final waking moments. I do not know why I said it, only that I am glad I did.

“Will you teach me to read?”

The woman looked thoughtfully down at me and smiled. Before I got my answer, my eyes closed, and I fell into sleep.

The angel’s name was Gabriella, and it is by her word and effort that I healed and learned to read and write. I am clumsy in my use of language, and would never have penned a great work, but it suffices enough that one day you may too read this account, my child.

I spent a great many days and nights resting, watching as my wounds scabbed and healed. Gabriella cared for both Sarah and I, soothing my sister’s worries and my pains. Once I was strong enough to stand, she began to lower the opium dosage. I hope that you will never

have to experience such a thing, my girl, as the pain of my muscle grinding against itself as I hobbled and stumbled around her home was more than I could have born on my own.

You were born to us three summers later. With her medical knowledge bringing ample work, I could resume my tanning. And as you know, my daughter, I became quite the successful man. There were trials, the hard winters tested our resolve, and faraway wars brought more banditry and conscription, but the Lord blessed me with as much earthly delight as a man could ask of his maker. What more does the clay want than to be fashioned into a beautiful pot, and one to have so much usage.

We used to bathe you in the river and laugh as you took unsteady steps around the embankment, trying to grasp at butterflies, dragonflies and bees. You would fall down and cry until we had kissed your bruises and rubbed our hands over yours, to which you would start giggling and light up our lives again. Your mother used to teach Sarah to read while I sang you lullabies to sleep. I doubt you'll remember all the books that she got through.

The Lord never saw such a virtuous pride as I did when your mother began teaching you words. Barely four summers old and reading, my daughter! I have pondered many nights while confined to this bed what your future will entail; teacher, preacher, maybe a clerk – excuse the ramblings and fantasies of a dying man, no matter where your life takes you, I pray that it is long and virtuous, my daughter.

I hope you will remember your mother, for she was the most excellent person I had ever met. Her death was cruel, and something I wish not to revisit in this letter to you. Know that as she died, she only spoke of you, and your life and education. She would have given every waking hour for you, if she herself had not been cheated.

And so, I too beg your forgiveness for leaving you, so soon into the world, I had expected another ten or twenty summers before my time, but alas, I think not. Had I the

strength to resist His call once more, I would have seen you grown, wed, maybe starting your own family. I shall take the image of your golden hair resting on your sleeping face with me to meet my maker. I pray that your godfather, Aedward will be a worthy caretaker for you in my absence. He is a good man, and his son was brave. Be good for him and for the memory of dear Paul. Your aunt Sarah is only at the abbey if you need her, and has retained some of what your mother taught her of herbs, medicines and tinctures. Be not afraid to ask for help, and if you are able to give help, never resist to.

My heart slows now, and I hear the clicking of Death's heels once more, my love. If you read this, do not worry, I do not fear him. Should the wheat have feared my father's scythe? Besides, our paths have crossed enough times to share a joke or two now, and I imagine Death shall be interested to see just how changed I am from the small boy he spared those years ago. I shall ask him to show the same restraint for you, and your family.

Your mother and I will be waiting, and we cannot wait to see you again. The time has come, and I have missed your mother too much . Before I go, all I have to say is this: You are loved, and important. It has been an honour and a pleasure to call myself your father.

Goodbye.