The Deer in the Mirror

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*August 1716*
*Morrison Plantation*
*James City County, Virginia*

Verena Morrison Whitlow, a thirty-year-old widow, will have to share her house with another woman, for her seventeen-year-old brother Hugh is getting married. His pregnant bride, older by a good fifteen years, is above-stairs vomiting. Verena waits in the parlor with Hugh and the minister while the pendulum clock counts off the minutes and Hugh breathes through his mouth. Verena feels cold fury toward him.

The bride and her mother, a ship captain’s widow, arrived last night from Norfolk. Verena’s maid Sally, eighty years old and pure African, has attended the bride all day, holding her head over a basin; Verena raised the windows for fresh air.

Sweat creeps down Verena’s neck. Still the bride does not appear. She’s three months gone, Verena estimates. Hugh went to Norfolk in May to sell plantation goods and returned cocky and penniless. When Verena questioned him, he admitted to gambling. Two weeks ago, a letter from the woman announced her condition and imminent arrival. A postscript in another hand, probably her mother’s, insinuated court consequences if Hugh failed to marry her.

In the stifling parlor, the clock strikes six.

“Let’s move into the hall,” Verena suggests.
The minister agrees. Hugh is silent, terrified, Verena knows, a child taking an old wife.

The central hall is cooler, and they take seats in chairs along the wall. Through a windowpane, Verena observes the broad sweep of the Chickahominy River. She loves that view. The minister’s shallop, tied at the dock, bobs in shimmering light. Verena comforts herself: this time tomorrow, Hugh will be gone, off on Governor Alexander Spotswood’s westward expedition. The minister will stay the night, perform a blessing of Spotswood’s company, and then sail home to his six children and a wife who is ill with malaria. What might Verena send to her? Rose or barberry conserve; that’s good for debility. A jar of each, if she has enough.

Since the death of Verena’s father two years ago, the farm has struggled. The hemp and flax crops failed. The cattle died. The mulberry trees developed blight; the silkworms vanished. It’s harder to provide for the slaves, and they’ve taken to running off. Hugh is little help. The Morrison plantation is the last on the road west of Williamsburg. Governor Spotswood will stop for a double purpose: to gather Hugh, who will be only so much nuisance, and, Verena expects, to propose marriage to her.

At the sound of footsteps on the stairway, Hugh rises clumsily. His bride, with her mother and Sally supporting her, descends a step and sinks. She reaches for a basin proffered by Sally. Verena and the minister avert their eyes, but Verena is aware of Hugh staring slack-jawed while the woman heaves.

The minister murmurs, “Perhaps we ought to wait until morning.”

“Now,” says Verena. It was she who had the banns announced in church, and never mind the haste. She picked through her mother’s jewelry and found a ring to fit the woman, a pearl on an enameled band.

At last, the bride, her mother, and Sally reach the bottom of the staircase.

The woman has no one to give her away. Her father, Captain Thelaball, was a friend of Verena’s father. Captain Thelaball talked of pirates, of how they lit long, slow-burning matches and stuck them in their hair and beards for the convenience of smoldering fire and for a fearsome appearance. Pirates finally murdered the old captain. Now Alexander Spotswood, who was likewise a friend of Captain Thelaball, hounds the pirates to justice. Blackbeard, the worst of all, eludes him. Alexander seems obsessed with him, and his anger disturbs Verena.

“Would you like to be seated?” she asks the bride, who looks so ill that Verena feels a stir of pity.

“Yes,” the woman says, and Verena turns away from her fetid breath.

The woman lowers herself into a chair. “Oh!” she shrieks, pointing to the window. A deer peers inside.
Hugh says, “My sister’s pets. She lets them into the house and gives them treats.” He gives Verena a quick smile, and she remembers him as a child, clinging to her.

“You let deer inside?” hisses the bride’s mother. Her face, a hog’s, swings toward Verena, who ignores her.

The minister, who has witnessed an entire brace of deer in this house, clears his throat. “A charming eccentricity. Shall we begin?”

As he commences the ceremony, Verena remembers her own wedding to Thomas Whitlow. She was fifteen. Her father opened his finest wines: canary, claret, Malaga, and sherry, and there was dancing in this very hall. When Thomas died, Verena was still fifteen. Her marriage is recorded in the family Bible, where tonight she will write, *Hugh Bayly Morrison m. Lydia Frances Thelaball*.

“The ring, please,” the minister says, and Hugh produces it.

The ring sticks, and the bride shoves it over her knuckle. Verena winces: her mother’s pearl.

The bride’s mother regards Verena with triumph in her eyes. If only the old woman knew how poor they are, despite this fine house. Of course, Verena owns her late husband’s plantation, a property situated on the Blackwater River in Isle of Wight County. She keeps an overseer there and has tried without success to sell it. That farm is even less profitable than this one.

“. . . man and wife,” the minister says.

Hugh does not kiss his bride. After a silence, he addresses the minister.

“Mint julep?”

“That would be welcome.” The minister’s smile, though pained, is the first in the house for some days.

Verena sends Sally for the butler, Isom, and soon there are cold pewter cups for everyone except the bride, who waves hers away. Hugh bolts his julep and reaches for another.

“I’m hungry,” announces the bride’s mother.

Verena gestures to the dining room, where a cold supper is ready. Hugh hurries toward it, his mother-in-law at his heels. The bride attempts to stand, then gags and vomits onto her lap.

The next morning, Verena wakes early and hears them coming—Governor Spotswood and his campaigners. Presently they arrive, sixty men and their animals making a commotion in the yard. The Governor steps down from his coach. The minister prays over the expedition and then departs, taking with him, to Verena’s relief, the bride’s mother.
Pale and silent, Hugh joins Verena and the Governor at breakfast. Of his bride there is no sign, and to Verena’s inquiries, Hugh replies, “She’s well enough.” He fumbles at the sideboard for the brandy bottle.

Verena exchanges glances with the Governor—Alexander, to her. This is how marriage would feel, sharing buttered bread, small fried fish, and the intimacy of opinion. He brought oranges which came from Tangier, Morocco, where he was born to English parents. Shipments reach him often from his family holdings in that exotic place. He brought pomegranates too, and pepper, cinnamon, and cloves.

Already the day is hot, and judging from the noise outside, the men are eager to move along, yet Alexander lingers. After breakfast, he leads Verena into the parlor.

At last he says, “I would like for you to become my wife.”

She has seen birds mating on the road, so impassioned they don’t startle at the approach of a wagon. That’s how it should be, but she doesn’t feel it for him. “May I think about it?”

“Well you give me your answer when I return?”

“I will.”

“There is a condition,” he says. “The deer or me.”

A weight descends on her heart. Oh, she has dogs and cats, but those stay outside. She loves the deer’s reflections in mirrors, a glimpse of an animal’s head behind her own. There’s a fawn in the house at this moment, though she doesn’t know where.

“They’re wild animals,” Alexander says. “A buck gets angry, he’ll hurt you.”

Is this how wedded life would be, arguments and clashing wills? In the other marriage, everything was Thomas’s way, because she didn’t know her own mind.

She asks, “How long will you be gone?”

“Many weeks. I won’t take the coach into the mountains. We’ll go on horseback.” There’s pleasure in his voice; he likes to be outdoors. “We’ll follow the Rappahannock River, cross the Blue Ridge Mountains, and explore the Shenandoah Valley and beyond.”

The enterprise holds many dangers, Verena knows: rugged terrain; the difficulties of guiding a sizable group of men, no matter how trained and eager; and hostile savages. Though the Indians are mostly gone from the East, they inhabit the frontier in large numbers. “Please be careful,” she says.

Many of Alexander’s men are Germans, recent immigrants. He has told her of his plans for their future. He’ll establish mines and furnaces for smelting.
Everything he does is part of a larger design—as she herself would be.

The men are shooting rifles in the sultry air, wasting bullets. Dogs are yipping. Verena smells burnt powder. Alexander takes her face between his hands. His kiss surprises her, full on the mouth. He says, “You would be the Governor's lady. Mine, and that of Virginia. Does that appeal to you?”

“Such a public occupation,” she says.

“Only insofar as you would like it to be. Verena, do you realize what power you have?” His grin is mischievous, an expression she hasn’t seen before. “Any man would fall at your feet if you smiled, or creep off in shame if you frowned.”

“Blackbeard too?”

His face grows dark. “I hear he's taken yet another wife, his fourteenth, a young girl whom he forces to lie with his companions while he watches. Does that not sicken you?”

“Good heavens.” She feels more curious than sicken. “I doubt he actually marries them.”

Alexander clenches his fists. “I'll kill him. I'll cut him to pieces.”

His face is twisted in a snarl. Verena stifles a laugh and asks, “Is it true his flag is a devil holding an hourglass, for time running out? And a spear pointed at a heart? And his real name, what is it?”

“He's too vile to have any place in your mind.” Alexander's voice rises. “He's utterly depraved, a cruel, drunken thief and coward.”

“Edward something,” she says. “Is that right?”

“Edward Teach. Let us say no more about him, not while we speak of marriage.”

The fawn bursts into the room and knocks over a table, scattering china figurines. Alexander rises, grimacing, and steps over broken fragments.

“I'm leaving two soldiers here,” he says.

Surprised, she asks, “Why?”

“Suppose there's an insurrection? Two white women on an isolated farm aren't safe.”

Verena thinks of Sally and Isom and the people who work in her fields. She has never felt unsafe here. Hugh offers so little protection. It won't be any different having him gone. Last night as they finished supper, a bat flew into the dining room. Hugh shrieked louder than his bride, cowering from the bat's wavering flight, while Verena, the minister, and the bride's mother watched Isom swat the bat with a broom, scoop it off the floor, and take it out. If highwaymen burst in, or if pirates sailed upriver and seized Verena and her household, Hugh would still shriek and cower. He has always seemed childish
and lost. When he was barely two, their mother died giving birth to a stillborn
daughter. Verena had to raise him.

“Wish me Godspeed,” Alexander says, and he’s out the door.

“Alektor.” She follows, but he’s lost to her in the throng.

His men halloo, milling and hurrying and sauntering, Negroes and Indians among them. The Germans’ guttural words sound like curses. Verena’s excited servants run here and there. Neighbors have arrived, seeking a word with Alexander. He is actually the lieutenant governor, though called Governor by all. The English governor, George Hamilton, the Earl of Orkney, has never visited Virginia. The Earl, it is said, spends his time among jesters and actors. He has Indians brought to him, preferring those with scarification and indelibly inked skin, and seeks to talk with them by inventing gibberish. Alexander regularly crosses the ocean to meet with the Earl and King George.

A fawn nuzzles Verena’s arm. Easier to forsake a man than the beseeching wild. She wants to believe some affection for her has grown in their unknowable hearts.

Alexander is conferring with a group of others. They surround someone on the ground. Verena approaches, sensing trouble. The fallen man breathes hard, his face dark red.

Alexander tells her, “Snakebit. He’s Conrad Brumback, a German. We’ll have to leave him behind. Sawney sucked the poison out,” and he gestures to one of the Indians.

“He can stay in the house,” Verena says.

Two large men step forward, and Alexander says to Verena, “Eisley and Bingham will protect you. They’ll keep watch over your farm and sleep in the barn.”

One look into their faces, and rebellion ignites in Verena’s heart. Their expressions are level and accusatory, as if she herself might lead an uprising. Spies, she thinks. They’ll watch me, not guard me. Bingham and Eisley carry the sick man into the house.

All bustle and hurry now, though to Verena, this hot noon feels wrong for starting off. Journeys should begin in the morning. One shout from Alexander, and the men leap into formation. How fast they leave her, even at a walk. Her neighbors depart. She waves to an arm that might belong to Hugh. Well, maybe this will make a man of him.

The sky goes green and dark, but there’s no rain. Verena’s bergamot and columbine are trampled. Hummingbirds hover above the ruined plants. Her fowl brood in their run; her dogs on the porch rest heads on paws. A dry storm, her mother would have said.
She met Alexander five years ago when her father invited him for a visit. When he arrived, she was making pastries with nuts and cherries. He first saw her with the dough in her hands, and once the cakes were baked, she served them on a silver dish. He ate several, she remembers. That pastry-maker is the person to whom he proposed, she believes, not the stubborn deer-keeper she has become. Well, a proposal buoys a woman’s spirits. A fine man, her father used to say of one or another of her suitors, concerned she hadn’t married again.

To her surprise, Dr. Evans, the physician who has treated her family for many years, comes riding into the yard. “The Governor sent me,” he says, “for the snakebitten fellow.”

She leads him into the house, where Conrad Brumback lies unconscious in the parlor atop the Turkey-work carpet. Sally is bathing his face with a cloth. On his swollen arm, the bites resemble the punch marks of an awl. His prominent facial bones and dark mustache make him handsome. Verena says, “You may go, Sally.”

Dr. Evans takes a bottle of turpentine from his bag and pours it into the wounds. “The poison will have to work out of his system,” he explains.

If Conrad dies, Verena decides, he can be buried in the Morrison cemetery. Yet the burying ground that comes to her mind is the Whitlow plot where her husband lies—a sadder, shabbier site which dates back ninety years, to the time when the Isle of Wight was known as Warriscoyack. Thomas’s grandfather is buried there, too. The stone says he was born in Dunfermline, Scotland, in 1609, the marker erected “by his Most Disconsolate Widow.”

Since neither Thomas’s first wife nor Verena bore Thomas any children, the long Whitlow line has ended.

“You’ve had hard times since your father died,” the doctor says. “Hugh’s learning about farming now, is he?”

“Slowly.” Verena watches Conrad Brumback’s impassive face. He is somewhere beyond sleep. She guesses he would agree that Hugh Morrison is a dummkopf.

“If what I hear is correct, the Governor will gladly help with this farm,” the doctor says merrily. “Are you to marry him, Verena?”

How dare he ask her such a question in front of a stranger, even if the stranger is unconscious? She says, “My brother’s wife is with child. Will you see her?”

You go into the earth when you die and are buried, and then what happens? She wonders as she takes Dr. Evans up the stairs. Lydia appears, haggard. It’s the first time Verena has seen her since the nuptials. She looks as if
she hasn't slept. Verena leaves Dr. Evans with her. Suppose she herself were in Lydia's position? Chrysanthemum and tansy, which she knows to be abortifacients, grow in her garden. Oh, maybe a child would be a comfort.

Her father died of a venereal disease. She believes he contracted it during a visit to England. No remedy aided, not powder of tin or asafetida or ivory filings in plantain juice. Suffering, he bathed in milk and camphor, endured tobacco clysters, and drank the water in which a smith’s tools were cooled, but found no relief.

Always time running out. The hourglass, the spear pointing at the heart. Who would refuse such society, the privileges and power that would be hers, were she the Governor's wife?

Descending the stairs, she finds a small doe in the hallway. The animal passes close enough that she runs a hand along the smooth hide. It's an August afternoon, with the sun lighting up the river, and suddenly, she feels happy and hopeful. Alexander Spotswood is in part a cause of her happiness, the more so because he is away.

The sick man, Conrad: all he can do is lie in the parlor, and she in her health might go to him. Her mind stops at that, the way her feet would stop at the end of a path. She enters the parlor with apprehension. His color is normal, his breathing regular. Slowly he opens his eyes. They’re a vivid blue.

She asks, “Are you better?”

“Yes.” He stretches out as if he feels strength returning. “You have a fine place.”

“Thank you,” Verena says, glad he speaks English. She recognizes the shock of physical attraction. How would it be, with him?

“The New World,” he says in wonder. “When the ship landed in Norfolk, it let the men off and took on cargo for Europe. I’ve never seen so much iron ore, glass, pitch, sturgeon, and bushels of, what do you call the tree that is a root, for tea?”

“Sassafras,” Verena says, transfixed by his blue eyes. “Could you eat something?”

“Yes, I’m hungry.”

She prepares a plate of the fruit that Alexander brought and adds ham, bread, and cheese, and takes it to him with pitchers of water and cider. She clears cards from a gaming table and sets the food down. Conrad Brumback remains on the floor for a moment. She senses he is examining the red heels of her shoes. With effort, he rises, comes to the table, and takes a seat.

When he sees the cider, he says, “I hoped for this. I saw the press this morning, and your people gave me some to drink.” He looks past her and gasps, “Ah!”
She turns her head and finds the little doe in the doorway. The deer kicks her hooves together and runs. Conrad calls out in his own language. Verena recognizes one of the few German words she knows: *Liebschen*. Sweetheart.

“I told her I didn’t mean to scare her,” Conrad says.

Verena chuckles.

He says, “Beautiful women are at their best when they laugh. And you are very beautiful.”

“How did you learn English?” she asks.

“My mother was English.”

She gestures to the food. “Please eat.”

She slips out of the room and closes the door behind her, embarrassed and delighted. She hears Dr. Evans’s footsteps on the stairs.

“There you are, Verena,” he says. “I’ve advised your brother’s wife to drink ginger tea to soothe her stomach.”

“I’ll make some for her.” She points to the parlor. “He’s much better. I took him food. How much do I owe you?”

Dr. Evans waves his hand. “It’s my pleasure to be of service.”

Clearly, he assumes the Governor will pay for her family’s bills.

“Thank you,” she says and shows the doctor out.

She brews a pot of ginger tea and carries it to Lydia, who is lying down on a high, canopied bed. She appears older each time Verena sees her. She has plaited her long, thin hair. Her hands, reaching for a teacup, show thick veins.

She says, “Will you visit with me for a little while? I’m glad my mother is gone.” Though her face is mottled, her manner is lighter, as if her mother’s departure has lifted some weight from her.

Verena smiles and takes a seat in a chair beside the window. She and Lydia may become friends after all.

Lydia sips the tea gratefully. “Hugh didn’t want to marry me, and I didn’t want to marry him,” she says. “When he came to see us, my mother served strong punch. I should have . . .”

“It’ll be all right,” Verena says, touched by her distress, her need to explain. Hugh may be lucky to have this forthright woman for his wife. “With Hugh away for a while, you’ll have a chance to get settled.”

Lydia is quiet, finishing her tea. At last she sets the cup aside and says, “I loved somebody else, a woman. My mother wanted it to stop.”

Verena holds her breath.

“So it stopped,” says Lydia.

That evening, Sally brushes Verena’s hair. Sally’s eyes are blue with cataracts.
Sally will die and her jawbone will be long like a deer's, Verena thinks. Sally announces that the slaves think Conrad Brumback died and came back to life.

“You can't believe that,” Verena says. These old blacks are not Christian, though the younger ones are, quite fervently.

Sally asks, “Will you marry the Governor?”

*I won't do it.* And yet there would be a sense of failure if Alexander simply went away, leaving her to the river and the farm and Hugh.

“He belongs to so many others,” Verena says. The kindness, the mischief on his face, come back to her, hurting her heart for a moment, but he is forty years old; his career and the world have claimed him.

“Belongs to that pirate,” Sally says.

Thomas Whitlow was thirty-eight, a widower whose uncle owned land adjoining the Morrisons’ plantation. Verena saw him only three times before they were married—twice at church and once when he came to visit her, or more accurately, her father. Thomas described his farm on the Blackwater River and asked for her hand. Her father was very pleased. She understood the marriage marked an enlargement of each man's fortune, and she was proud of that. *Verena Whitlow,* she whispered, and the words tasted strange.

Marriage was terrible. Thomas Whitlow forced himself on her, and when it was over, he sometimes cried. She felt little personal emotion toward him. What she did feel was a resolve not to crumble under a man’s authority as she had seen other women crumble. A wife owned nothing, only what her husband allowed her. Wives were no better than slaves. The passivity of her position appalled her, and she disliked Thomas’s house and the gloomy site, a two days’ journey south from her father's farm. The only thing she enjoyed was the smell of tannin from nearby swamps. The only familiar person was Sally, whom Verena took with her. Thomas set Verena to keeping his agricultural accounts. It was a cold winter. She mixed her ink with brandy so it wouldn’t freeze.

Scourge broke out among the sheep. They tottered and died. Verena couldn’t bear to look at them. On the third morning of the sickness, Thomas stirred charcoal into their oat feed and went out among them. He came back at midday and said, “They’re no better,” and his face showed tears of grief. That surprised her, and she reached out to touch his hand. He ate nothing and went out again.

That afternoon, in the chilly parlor, she served tea to visitors, a wool merchant and his wife. She wanted to run away from Thomas, his dark house,
and his dying animals. Those were her thoughts as Sally collected the teacups. Sally would drink the dregs, Verena knew, for the sugar. Thomas burst in, staggering. Alarmed, she thought instantly of the sheep.

“I’m sick,” he said.

The visitors departed, and Verena helped him to bed. He pushed the blankets away, dirtying them with the charcoal on his hands. She felt the heat from his body on the blankets.

Five days later, he was dead. Verena hung the Whitlow coat of arms upon the door and sent two slaves as messengers, one by land and the other by water, to spread the news.

The Whitlow graveyard had once contained a small church within palisades. At Thomas’s funeral, mourners stood amid the ruins. The marker erected by the Most Disconsolate Widow was broken, portions having been carried off by fishermen to serve as mooring stones. The entire site was washing away beneath the brackish waters of the bay. While the minister prayed, Verena pondered the fact that she could continue to live in Thomas’s house. By the time the prayer ended, she had decided to return to her father’s home.

She allowed her father to take charge of the Whitlow plantation. That had been the reason for the marriage, after all. Her father sent an overseer, and the overseer and his family have lived since then in Thomas’s house, the rent deducted from their wages.

Thomas must have felt passion for her. “Dear Verena,” he said while dying, her hand in his, and the emotion in his voice touched her heart for the second time. The first time was the day he wept for the sheep.

Once she turned sixteen, the iron band that was her wedding ring no longer fit, and she took it off. Fourteen years had to elapse and the Colony’s highest official propose before she reconsidered how Thomas said, “Dear.” The memory feels like an angry chaperone as she thinks of the snakebitten German in her house, in her dubious care.

The trip to England took place when Verena was eighteen and Hugh six. With their father, they visited relatives and toured museums and gardens. In London, Verena was courted by an elderly duke. Her father said, “You could do far worse, Verena.” To her, the duke was absurd, with false calves tucked into tight stockings, and paint and powder upon his face. Yet men bowed to him; women curtsied and fluttered their eyelashes. The duke had a country estate—actually a castle, Verena saw as he handed her down from a carriage. Fountains and statuary surrounded her, and swans swam on a marvelous lake.
Inside, suits of armor and chain mail stood beside a massive staircase. The duke guided Verena and her father down to his wine cellar, serving them glass after glass. Verena stumbled as they left the cellar. The duke’s hand caressed her back.

Other guests appeared, and a banquet was served: roast pheasant, cakes flaming with rum sauce, and many bottles of wine. “Do you whip your slaves?” a man asked, stroking Verena’s arm. In America, he said, he’d seen blacks in a headgear of bells which rang if they tried to run away, instruments so heavy they could snap a neck.

Irish musicians played jigs and reels. Swept into a dance, Verena tried to avoid the duke, whose face turned up again and again, eyes and lips dark against his pale, wrinkled skin.

In the night, in candlelight, she woke naked. A man writhed on top of her, and she recognized the duke’s cologne. She pushed him, and he slapped her across the face. She kneed him, and he buckled backwards, cursing. She jumped off the bed and ran out into the hallway.

Door after door she flung open, finding pleasure-lovers in all manner of dishabille and congress. In one room, her naked father played with two women. In another, a dozen people mounted each other. A woman clutched a bedpost while a man spanked her. Mirrors hung on the walls and the ceiling. A swan flapped its wings, filling the air with down: it was a world of ejaculate and smoke, panting and whimpering. A man grabbed her wrist, but she wrenched away.

Down the stairs at a run. She slammed into a servant bearing a tray, and they all toppled—Verena, servant, and glasses of champagne. She rolled down the steps until she landed at the metal feet of an armored soldier. Did he flip up his visor and leer at her? Didn’t he?

When she, Hugh, and their father departed from England, a man on the wharf sang a ballad. She’d never known a human throat could hold a note so long. She threw coins to the man, but they fell into the oily water. The movement brought pain in her womb. Those weeks at sea, she willed it out of her, pushing bloody gobbets from her body. The issue didn’t stop until she smelled the pines of the Virginia coast. She washed with salt water and welcomed the sting.

The following night, she hears a scream and sits up in bed. Another scream, and she hurries to Lydia’s room. She turns the knob, but the door doesn’t open.
“Lydia!” She pounds on the door, but no sound comes from inside. In a moment, a light travels up the stairs. She expects Sally, but it’s Conrad, holding a lamp.

“I want to help.” He points to the door and makes a pushing motion.

“Yes.” Startled that he seems so much recovered, she calls, “Lydia, stand back.”

Conrad sets down the lamp and puts his shoulder to the door, but it doesn’t budge. Lydia must have bolted it. Conrad perspires with the effort.

Isom the butler appears, his eyes heavy with sleep. Verena sends him to fetch a ladder. “Climb to Mrs. Morrison’s window,” she says, “and see if she’s all right.”

Isom obeys, and Conrad goes too. A full moon casts generous gray light. There is the screech of the bolt sliding back. The door swings open, and Lydia cries, “There’s an animal in here, behind the curtains.”

Verena lifts the drapery and finds a fawn in hiding, its eyes huge. It’s the same one that was in the house when Alexander visited. Was that only yesterday morning? “Come,” she says gently, reaching out. The fawn emerges, and she leads it down the stairs and lets it out. It must be hungry and thirsty, but it will find its mother, even in the night.

Only then do Bingham and Eisley materialize, bounding out of the darkness. If there were an uprising, she’d be dead before they responded.

“I don’t need you,” she calls, anger in her voice, and the men amble away. Isom and Conrad Brumback come back inside. Conrad catches Verena’s eye. His lips twitch, and he laughs. She finds herself laughing too. The sound rises up and down the stairway like a song. She feels the excitement of Conrad’s healing self, beside her.

They laugh their way down the hall. It feels like dancing, a step for him, a turn for her, and once they’re in the parlor, she puts her hands to his chest and kisses him. Because of the laughter, she feels she has known him a long time.

In silence they take off their clothes. She has on only her nightgown and dressing gown, as if this parlor were their bedroom. So strange, her parlor in darkness. Moonlight catches on the clock face and on their bodies. What a surprise: her hair is turning white down there. Beneath her hand, his heart beats feather-light. She traces the knots of snakebite on his arm. He lays her out and she uncurls beneath him.

Afterward, he says, “The Governor wants to marry you. Everyone knows.”

They sit naked on the parlor carpet. She hardly knows him, yet she loves him. She says, “I haven’t been with any man since my husband died.”
“I’m honored,” he says, “that you would choose me.”

“Now you have to stay here.” She makes her voice playful, but she means it. She is struck by the sudden, almost violent connection she feels to him.

“Did you say you would tell the Governor when he returns?” asks Conrad.

“I’ll tell him I don’t want to marry him.”

“But you would be almost a queen,” he says. “I can’t give you anything.”

All she can do is shake her head.

“I’ll soon be strong enough to catch up with the others,” he says.

“Don’t. You need to stay and rest.”

“Everything I own went with them. My broadax, pick, and spade. My other clothes.”

“My brother has things that would fit you,” she says, “and if they don’t, I’ll have Sally make new clothes.”

“No, no,” Conrad says with a smile in his voice. He kisses her cheek.

She feels sharp disappointment that he doesn’t reach for her again. She slips on her nightgown and dressing gown, climbs the stairs, and gets back into her bed, astonished. Mere hours ago, she heard Lydia scream, and look what that led to. Her skin smells of turpentine.

The next day, he works in the blacksmith shed and fashions a lock. The metal bolt has a heart at one end, a tulip at the other. “For you,” he says. She asks him to put it on the door of her room, on the inside. He does, but he makes no attempt to lie with her again.

Now that he is recovering, he sleeps in the barn with Bingham and Eisley. He works hard, repairing the weathered dock on the river, and makes the other two help. Verena goes to her fields to see to harvesting. She has got to make the farm produce, but her mind is on Conrad. He is making up the rules, and she follows. He converses with her warily and in only one spot, at the back door of her house, away from Bingham and Eisley. He is twenty-five, she learns. If she married him, she wouldn’t have to share him with anyone. This appeals to her, as do his traits of caution and intelligence. And loyalty, since he spoke of rejoining the expedition.

Verena and Lydia take meals together and stroll along the river when the day’s heat eases. They walk as far as a certain white oak, then turn around. More than a week has passed since Alexander’s visit. He must be hundreds of miles away, in high country by now. She imagines the column of men heading into a mountain gap and disappearing forever.
Beside her, Lydia gestures to Conrad working on the landing. “I’ve never seen a stronger man.”

They walk silently, though Verena believes Lydia knows what has happened.

Lydia twists a handkerchief in her hands. “Your brother and I won’t be happy.”

“You’ll be happy once the baby comes,” Verena says, “and Hugh will be proud.”

Lydia asks, “If you don’t marry the Governor, will Hugh be angry?”

Verena glances at her face and finds sympathy. “I imagine he would be. Having the Governor as a brother-in-law would be a great advantage. But I . . .” and she pauses.

“Don’t marry him if you don’t want to. Look what happens if you let somebody else choose.”

Verena thinks of the heart-and-tulip lock and hopes it means Conrad wants her, that he is waiting for Alexander to return so she can refuse his proposal and accept Conrad’s. She tries to feel encouraged. Yet days and nights slip by, and she can’t sleep.

The Governor’s Palace be damned.

It bothers her that Conrad has only one set of clothing. One morning she gathers some of Hugh’s shirts and trousers and goes out to the barn. She finds him trimming his mustache, peering into a mirror balanced against a bale of hay. Gravely he puts the scissors down and faces her, his arms crossed over his chest. Bingham and Eisley are snoring in the straw. She sets the clothes on top of the hay.

He says, “I told you, I don’t need more clothes.”

“Talk to me,” Verena whispers. Her hands tremble as she motions him outside.

There’s fog this morning, and the leaves are turning yellow. She looks into Conrad’s face and sees remoteness. It’s not her honor or Alexander’s that concerns him, she realizes, so much as his feelings for some other person whose presence she senses like a shadow.

She should have guessed before. “Is there a woman in Germany?”

“Yes,” he says. “I said I would send for her. I promised.”

“Do you love her? Do you want to marry her? How can you, now?”

“She’s a young girl, my sweetheart.” He actually smiles, as if expecting
Verena to be glad. “Her family has died. She lives with an aunt, and they’re very poor. I said I would bring them here, her and her aunt.”

“But you could marry me.” She hates how imperious she sounds.

He pats her hand. Her mind registers that: pats her hand, when he could embrace her. “It is not even a question.”

“I love you. Don’t you want to be with me?”

“There was a full moon that night. It made us do what we did.”

She stares at him.

He touches the corners of his lips as if from nervous habit. “You’re a rich lady. I am nobody. Why do you want me?”

“I’m not rich at all. This place is . . .” She waves her arm toward the fields. Can’t he see the farm is floundering?

“I don’t love you.”


She heads back to the house, her head feeling as if it’s on fire. She will tell Alexander yes. Yes, and they can be married right away.

Later she glimpses Conrad from her window. He moves among the trees for a little while longer, and then he is gone. Bingham and Eisley idle at the repaired dock, fishing. She keeps to her room miserably all day, looking out the window, hoping Conrad will return. How easily he departed, as if he were relieved. He was relieved, she realizes.

At supper, Lydia announces, “I’m going back to Norfolk.”

“But you can’t,” Verena says, stunned. “You’re married, and the baby is coming.”

“The baby will be legitimate when it’s born, and then Hugh can divorce me. He’ll be glad,” Lydia says. “He can make provision for the baby. I won’t ask for much.”

It’s evening. They step outside to walk along the river. Lydia’s broad face looks peaceful for the first time. Verena realizes she has been thinking hard.

“Are you going back to your mother’s house?” Verena asks.

“I’ll live with my woman friend,” Lydia says. “We can take care of the baby together.”

The breeze lifts their hair. Verena reminds herself that Hugh’s well-being will be affected by the choices Lydia makes. “Hugh may want the child to live with him, especially if it’s a son.”

“He may keep the child, if it comes to that.” Lydia spreads her arms.

“What chance would I have in court, after all?”

“How will you and your friend survive? Who is she?”

“She’s a widow. She owns a tavern. Sailors go there from round the world.”
“Where will you live?”
“There are rooms above the tavern,” says Lydia. “I’ll work there, too.”
Verena imagines drunken men and the hard, noisy labor of serving them: horrendous. She feels frightened for Lydia. “Please stay. I’ll quit having deer inside. It’s folly. I shouldn’t risk a fawn’s being away from its mother for so long. I haven’t made you welcome enough.”
“You’ve done all you could,” Lydia says.
“Won’t you stay at least until the baby comes?” Verena says. “Hugh is young, but he’ll treat you properly. I’ll see to it. Can’t you see a life here, pleasant enough?”
Lydia says, “I would be so wretchedly unhappy, and so would Hugh.”
“Those sailors, aren’t they rough company? Fighting, causing trouble?”
“Most of them are decent, just far from home. There’s a hired man who keeps order.”
The river is deserted. The world feels humid and empty, as if it’s both old and new. A cloudy dusk has fallen, darkening the water along the shore.
“I’ve done badly by Hugh,” Lydia says. “I’ll leave a letter for him. In a few years, he’ll hardly remember me.” She tugs at her pearl ring. “This was your mother’s.”
“Keep it, Lydia,” Verena says.
“My hands are swollen. It won’t come off,” Lydia says, as if in apology.
They reach the oak where they usually turn around. Verena thinks this is the second honest conversation she has had today, possibly the last she’ll have for the rest of her life. She has but a few moments to say the things that are true. “I fell in love with Conrad, and now he’s gone.”
“Will you marry the Governor?”
Verena looks across the water but sees instead a drawing room, herself receiving guests, hears Alexander’s voice and children’s voices. That life seems a haven of comfort and stability. With her wounded, disappointed heart, she should welcome it, but she shakes her head.
Lydia says, “Did Conrad go to join the expedition? Back to troop quarters? Go to him. I’ll go with you, if you want.”
“I don’t know where he went,” Verena says, “and he loves somebody else. He said so.”
“Those two thugs out in the barn, do they know where he is?”
A mosquito stings Verena’s cheek. She slaps it away. “They probably do, but I won’t ask them. Conrad doesn’t want me.”
“Let’s go back to the house,” Lydia says.
I loved a man, Verena thinks, and he left; I made a friend, and she’s leav-
ing too. Conrad is the only man she ever wanted to marry, not from conviction that she should, but from desire. Those birds in the road, heedless while they coupled: will she ever know that feeling again?

Bingham and Eisley are fishing from the dock. As Verena and Lydia pass by, the men make a show of adjusting their shirts, smirking.

Why, they’re wearing the garments she left at the barn. If she tells them to return the things, she’ll be admitting the clothing was for Conrad. She has to pretend the clothes were meant for them, too. Their faces appear surlier than ever. She could order them to leave, but that would be a kind of surrender.

“Pay them no mind,” Lydia murmurs. “You can be independent. You have a place.”

Verena knows they will tell Alexander about Conrad. Maybe the news will carry on the wind. Alexander will hear it in the report of the guns his men fire to claim land for the King.

She had thought the choice was hers to make, but it isn’t. Until today, this evening, she’d have said no. But with Conrad gone and her spirits sinking, she would say yes. As she heads back to the house in the dusk, Lydia a heavy shadow beside her, she knows Bingham and Eisley will be her undoing.

If she wants Alexander badly enough, she could keep vigil by the road, spend all her daylight hours watching for his return. It’s too soon. He must be still out west. There has been no letter. Well, in such country, how would you get a letter out? Surely he could spare one man to ride back. Yet he had not promised her any letters.

Days pass. Bingham and Eisley fish from the dock until a chilly, stormy spell descends. When the sun breaks through, she finds the dock empty, the barn empty, Bingham and Eisley gone. She should not be shocked, but she is, her throat dry, her heart plunging. She imagines them running for the western hills, so eager to carry the news of her treachery to Alexander that they don’t stop for rest or food.

To leave this farm is to disobey Alexander. He ordered them to protect her.

In the barn, the mirror Conrad used when trimming his mustache makes a brilliant mocking disk on a bale of straw where he left it. She sets the mirror on a wooden shelf with curry combs and buckets. How strange to see her eye caught in reflection among the tools.

Work consumes her. The rain has spoiled at least half the melons and corn. She pulls ears from stalks and finds worms curling in the cobs. Slaves slice open the first of the yams for her inspection: stringy and pale. At least the tobacco
The Deer in the Mirror

has survived, and the squash and pumpkins. The grapes in the arbor are sticky, fallen on the ground, rotting. She tears the remaining grapes from the trellis and piles them into baskets until her hands are blue. Three deer come close, and she feeds them. Their long necks bend as they eat.

Lydia finds her and says, “If I don’t leave soon, it’ll be too late for me to travel.”

Verena begs, “Stay with me until Alexander comes back. And Hugh.” She wipes her hands on her apron and pets the deer.

Lydia samples a grape. Her mouth puckers. “Will you help me leave? Please, Verena. Isn’t there someone who could drive me, or take me away on the river?”

Verena’s neck aches. Sunset blazes around them, making her stained hands look black. How lonely she will be when Lydia is gone. “All right,” she says. “I’ll send for a boat.”

The vessel arrives the next afternoon, manned by a skilled waterman. “I’ll write you, Verena.” Lydia kisses her cheek.

She feels almost too bereft to answer. Isom helps Lydia into the craft, Sally hands her a basket of food and drink, and the waterman lifts Lydia’s baggage and secures it with rope. The man steers away from the dock, out toward the river’s dark channel. Waving, Lydia disappears.

Another week goes by. Bingham and Eisley reappear on the dock, fishing, as if they have been there all along. Not a word passes between them and Verena. She tries not to wonder where they have been or what they have been doing. Dry weather returns. Red leaves tumble through the sky and pile up in the yard. With every wagon that passes, each cart and rider, any yelp from her dogs, she finds herself hurrying out of the house. Once at dawn, she struggles to push her arms into her dressing gown before running barefoot outside, but it’s only a peddler, sleepily making his way on a mule.

Alexander has to come this way. There’s no other road.

At last, on a September noon with sky as blue as the center of a flame, she hears wheels and shouting. She hurries to a window. It’s the entire expedition, men and their horses as clamorous as the day they set out. She had almost forgotten them, thinking only of Alexander. The head of the column reaches the house, the men unkempt and jubilant. She searches for Conrad but can’t identify him in the throng. Two figures—Bingham and Eisley—stride out of
her yard and jump upon a wagon. She sinks down onto the floor and hugs her knees, her breath tight in her chest.

Sally taps her arm. “Go down to the parlor.”

Verena does so, her feet numb on the stairs. Dust lifts from the road and stains the windows yellow, yet the marching men have gone quiet, or is she only imagining that? Quiet except for trudging feet and the jingle of harness.

The door opens, and a man calls, “Verena!”

It’s Hugh, taller than he used to be, with sparse new whiskers making his face strangely older. His face shows no secret knowledge, only eagerness. She embraces him, and he asks, “Where’s my wife?”

“She went back to Norfolk. She left a letter in your room.”

Confusion spreads across his face, but Verena darts past him, out into the yard.

The column has passed except for a few desultory wagons. The Governor’s coach, red and black, still approaches, bringing up the rear. Four bay horses pull it, grand animals with matched gait, the driver nestled in the box. Verena hovers beside a barberry bush and takes a deep breath. The air smells of wood smoke. She has come this far, as if her feet and not her heart have decided for her. She steps forward.

Draperies are drawn across the coach’s windows, white silk curtains. The driver catches her eye and flourishes his whip. Dust rises into her face, and her ears fill with noise as the coach gathers speed. Her dogs rush toward it, snapping at the wheels. Then it’s gone.