The Deer in the Mirror

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Lewis Mundy at fifteen wants to be a stagecoach driver. He has decided this since leaving his family’s small farm in Spotsylvania County at dawn and heading west toward Stevensburg, where he will serve as an apprentice to his uncle, a brick maker. To be a driver, Lewis decides, he must first develop a grand deep voice like that of Barnes, with his florid face and streaming silver hair, commander of this coach and its four enormous horses. Lewis’s own voice has changed, but it is still higher and lighter than he wishes.

Barnes bawls, “Next stop, Raccoon Ford.”

An old man beside Lewis shares a map, pointing to Raccoon Ford for Lewis’s benefit.

The canvas shade is rolled up on the window that gives onto the driver’s box, so Lewis is able to observe that a big man riding there with Barnes is waving his arms and raising some objection. Lewis hears the word fever.

“We always go to the Ford,” Barnes insists over the din of thundering hooves, “to change horses and have a meal.”

The big man hollers, “I tell you, there’s fever there. Don’t stop!”

Lewis watches in alarm as the big man grabs for the reins. Barnes shoves him, and the man takes a gun from his coat and with it, strikes Barnes on the head. Barnes reels and collapses from the box. The big man seizes the reins, but it’s too late. Spooked, the horses bolt.
Inside, six terrified passengers tumble screaming from the benches. Lewis lands beside a pregnant woman. He gets to his knees and offers her a hand, but she waves him away with a frantic expression on her face.

An older woman who might be her mother implores, “Margaret, are you all right?”

Margaret only moans. A man named Colonel Gault tries to support her with his arm around her shoulders. Earlier, Colonel Gault performed a trick that fascinated Lewis: he took off his leg, while everyone gasped. He explained it was cork, outfitted with a boot and stocking that fit into his breeches and the stump of his knee. He’d lost his leg in the war, he said.

The coach moves too fast for anyone to regain a seat. They cling to the benches. There is only one thought in Lewis’s mind: he must survive this wild, pitching run. The horses veer to the side of the road. Branches poke through the canvas shades, tearing them off with great rips. Noise from the top of the coach suggests the bags and parcels tied there are breaking loose. They bump along the roof and fly free. Lewis sees a trunk hit the ground and burst open, spilling petticoats. At least the horses seem to be back on the road. Lewis could enjoy this ride if only he knew they wouldn’t crash. If one horse stumbles and falls—but he pushes the thought away.

The pregnant woman, Margaret, thrashes and clutches her belly. From beneath her clothing comes a rush of liquid.

Her mother says in dismay, “It’s too soon.”

A young girl, no more than fourteen, slides toward Margaret. She loosens Margaret’s clothing and sets her knees up, legs apart—all as the coach bucks and sways.

Shocked, Lewis glimpses bloody garments, female flesh. He looks away.

Margaret’s mother, whose elaborate hair and jewelry indicate wealth, whose scent of lavender reaches Lewis even through this confusion, watches white-faced. A rock sails through a window and hits the old man who showed Lewis a map, making his cheek bleed.

On the floor, birth is progressing.

The young girl peers under Margaret’s dress and says, “I see the head. Now push.”

Colonel Gault is crawling toward the front of the coach. The horses’ breathing is different now, harsher. At least one of them, Lewis guesses, will have a permanently broken wind. Colonel Gault heaves himself through the window to the driver’s box.

The coach leans sideways. It must be riding on two wheels. It leaves the road and hurtles through a patch of bushes. Sounds of struggle reach Lewis’s
ears. A shot rings out, then a sustained yell. Something flies past the window, bulk recognizable as a man. Gradually the yell grows fainter. Lewis finds himself holding the gaze of the young girl assisting in the birth. Her eyes are hazel and intelligent, like an animal’s.


The coach slows by heartbeats, and Lewis dares to breathe, to blink. Raindrops fly past the open window; no, it’s spittle blown backward as the horses respond to the reins, once again feeling the bits in their sore, lathered mouths. At last, there is a kind of sinking and a dead stop. The rear of the coach slopes downward.

There is a baby among them. The young girl swabs its tiny face with her apron, and it lets out a hearty cry. A gnarled red cord stretches from the baby’s middle to its mother’s body. Margaret’s lower parts are covered again by her clothing.

The young girl says to the older woman, “You’re a grandma now, ma’am. It’s a little girl.” She kisses the top of the baby’s head. Its eyes are open and alert, but it’s quiet, as if realizing that silence and hardihood are called for.

“Does anybody have a knife or scissors?”

Lewis hands the girl his knife, and she cuts the cord.

They are safe. Lewis is the first to react. He flings himself at the door but can’t wrench it open. He vaults through a side window and lands hard on the ground.

And here are Colonel Gault, minus his false leg, and Barnes, alive after all, showing a few good teeth in a bloody mouth. Lewis and Barnes help the others out and lift Margaret bodily, then place her beneath a tulip poplar. Her mother eases down beside her. The young girl still holds the baby. The old man, his cheek smeared with blood, squats on his haunches. Lewis’s hands are shaking, and he shoves them in his pockets.

This, then, is traveling. This is what it means to be out in the world.

Lewis and the others exclaim and sigh in tones of agitation and relief, and he feels on his own face the awe that shows on the others’. He realizes he didn’t pray. He thought only to live.

The coach has halted amid trees and briars.

He asks Gault, “Where is your leg, sir?”

“When we fought, he pulled it off me. That’s when I shot him,” Gault says.

The coach gives a loud, rude gulp. Even as Lewis watches, the wheels sink to the axles.

“Quicksand,” says Barnes. “We’d best pull her out while we can. Ladies and gentlemen, is there anything you need to save?”
The elegant woman and her daughter, Margaret, had boarded the coach in Fredericksburg with many trunks and bags. The woman says, “Everything is gone.” She has only a tiny purse.

Colonel Gault says, “Your things may well be recovered, Mrs. Tinsley. People will hear of this and want to help.”

Lewis asks the young girl, “What about you?”

She says, “I had one box.”

“So did I,” he says. The box contained his clothing, cup, tin plate, and blanket. There was something special, too—his mother’s clock, the only beautiful thing she owned. She insisted he take it to her sister, Lewis’s Aunt Susan, the brick maker’s wife. Funny: Lewis is almost glad the clock is gone. It would have made him homesick to see it and remember his mother winding it.

The elegant woman, Mrs. Tinsley, presses a handkerchief to her eyes. “My head aches.”

Gault draws a flask from his pocket. “Brandy?”

Lightning-quick, Mrs. Tinsley reaches for the flask and tilts it to her mouth for a long swallow. The young girl signals amusement to Lewis with her hazel eyes, and he grins, delighted at the small intrigue, but Barnes is calling for his help.

Together, Barnes and Lewis flank the lead horses and urge them on. The horses strain, but the coach won’t move. Barnes wipes his face with his sleeve and says, “Well, she was a fine coach.” He uncollars the horses, and they step nervously, whickering.

Seated on a stump, Colonel Gault smokes a pipe. It seems to Lewis that they are all under a spell. He asks Gault, “Do you want me to go and find your leg?”

A nod from the colonel, and Lewis is off like a jackrabbit.

Does he run for a long time or a short time? He will never be able to remember. Luckily the coach’s trail is easy to follow, a path of wrecked brush. And here they are: cork leg and dead outlaw, not a dozen paces apart. Lewis freezes where he stands. A bobwhite calls, a summer sound, soft and sleepy on this lost winter day. The big man lies on his side, so still, with one arm reaching out as if he died crawling. A cricket springs from his black hair.

Lewis bends down and grabs the leg. It weighs almost nothing, and the kidskin boot feels soft against his fingers.

By the time he finds the others, he is panting. Gault rewards him with a coin, pulls the leg on, and stands up, whole again.

Lewis announces, “I seen him back there. He’s dead.”
Barnes spits a tooth on the ground. “He almost killed us all. I ain’t heard about no fever at the Ford. Did any of you?”

They all shake their heads.

“Who was he?” Mrs. Tinsley asks.

“Said he was a farrier from Nansemond County,” Barnes answers, “but who’s to know if that’s the truth?”

“His hands, though,” says Colonel Gault.

“A blacksmith’s hands, perhaps,” concedes Barnes. “‘Twas a powerful knock on my head.”

Margaret rests on cloaks laid on the earth. The young girl caresses the baby as if it belongs to her. The old man calls to Lewis, “Is help on the way?”

“I didn’t see anybody,” Lewis says. Shame sweeps through him. Why didn’t he seek a farmhouse? Is the landscape that empty, is he so stupid?

“Where are we? Would someone please tell me?” Mrs. Tinsley asks.

Barnes answers, “About seven miles past Stevensburg, I’d say, ma’am.”

The women sigh and look at each other, as if the news could be better, could be worse.

The young girl brings the baby over to Lewis and says softly, “It’s a beautiful day. See?”

They crane their heads toward the tall, light-filled trees. It’s warm and brilliant for December, the air soft and beguiling. Afternoon now, with the day at its peak. There should be snow. There should not be this dreamy shimmering, but already, shadows gather at the woods’ edge, shadows that will lengthen and grow chilly by dusk. Lewis hears water trickling, tracks the sound to its source, and finds a clean spring. Proudly he points it out.

The girl kneels and bathes the baby, cupping water in her hands and carefully sluicing it over the tiny head and limbs. She dries the baby with a corner of her apron and wraps it in her shawl. “Now hold her while I wash my hands,” she says.

The baby is solid and surprisingly heavy in Lewis’s arms, and the girl’s shawl smells of her skin and hair. The day’s arithmetic amazes Lewis. They were eight when they set out: seven passengers plus Barnes, and eight when they halted, with one dead and the newborn among them. The girl takes the baby again, and Lewis is filled with the sense that she could be his wife, the baby their own. He bends to the spring and drinks his fill. When he stands, the girl is smiling.

“Look how pretty,” she whispers, stroking the baby’s cheek. Why whisper? He is charmed. She asks, “Where are you headed?”
“To my uncle in Stevensburg,” he says. “He’s a brick maker. I’m to learn from him.”

His mother arranged the apprenticeship, writing to her sister and her sister’s husband. The uncle agreed and found occasion in his letter to say, *Bricks are half their weight in water till they dry.* The information seemed dire to Lewis, proof of a dreary life of hard, stupid work. Much of the work of brick making could be performed by children, his mother admitted, but firing required great skill, and masonry was an art, she insisted, and maybe his childless aunt and uncle would will the business to him some day. *Send him,* the uncle wrote. His mother held the letter for a long while, as if time itself were an envelope, hers to open. Lewis would have liked more schooling. His father was dead, and his mother had married a man who wanted Lewis out of the way. He had two boys of his own, and they were workers enough for the farm, the new husband said. Lewis’s mother gave Lewis a good pair of boots that had belonged to his father. Her eyes begged him not to argue. He could not bear to tell her he wanted only the trip, not the apprenticeship.

“Are you still going?” the girl asks.

In her eyes, Lewis reads a new truth: the breakneck ride changed everything. He need not report to his uncle.

“Bricks are half their weight in water till they dry,” he says, and she laughs. He feels clever, pardoned from even the responsibility of deciding. “What about you?”

“My sister lives in Raccoon Ford. She has a baby coming. I’ve helped her before.”

“But the fever?” Lewis says.

“I hope it’s not true.”

Yet wasn’t there conviction in the outlaw’s cry? Fear stirs in Lewis’s heart. He imagines the girl entering a house, calling out greetings, and finding only silence.

“Look.” She points to the ground and to trees. “Persimmons. And pears. We’re in an old orchard.”

He takes off his jacket and gathers the fruit into it, swatting tiny wasps away. He puts a ripe persimmon in the girl’s mouth, and her lips brush his finger. He wishes he could make a homestead here with her and search out more bounty: nut trees, honeycomb, pheasants, rabbit.

She says, “You looked so funny, running with that leg in your arms.”

So she noticed him. He hides his gladness in a brag. “I’ve always been a fast runner.” Her face is sublimely peaceful, as if she has waited a long time for this baby. Doesn’t it need to nurse? He’s not going to say anything about that.
Women know their business. They return to the others, and Lewis passes the fruit around so all may eat.

“Gather some kindling,” Colonel Gault calls to Lewis. “I’ll make a fire.”

Glad to obey, Lewis fills his arms with sticks. Gault and Barnes will get everyone out. They can ride out if they double up. By the time Lewis delivers the wood, he has picked out the horse he wants, a claybank mare. Margaret lies very still, with her mother rubbing her head. Lewis realizes that a woman who just gave birth cannot possibly ride a horse.

Barnes returns to the coach and yanks out two bundles wedged beneath the driver’s box. The first, he explains, is his own. It yields a packet of tea, a tin cup, and a kettle. The girl takes the kettle to the spring to fill it.

“And this was his’n,” Barnes says. “Let’s see what he’s got.” He tears the twine from the other bundle and lifts out cheese and sausage wrapped in paper.

Mrs. Tinsley divides the food among them and brews tea in the kettle. From her purse, she takes a few ginger cakes and adds them to the meal. Never has Lewis been served by such smooth white hands, nor has he ever been hungrier. One bite of the outlaw’s sausage tells him it is made of venison. It is delicious, seasoned just right.

The coach emits a series of creaks.

“Busted,” says Barnes. “She’d need oxen to drag her out.”

Lewis wants to see the coach sink, yet the waste of it hurts. It is pretty, with its wheels painted red, its sides blue.

The young girl suddenly looks unhappy. Her head bends, her thin shoulders sag. Lewis observes Margaret sitting up and holding the baby to her chest. Yes, the young girl wants the baby for herself. Lewis knows this as surely as if she said so. She is considering what might happen were she to grab the infant and run. She raises her head and meets his eyes. There is anger in her face, and he knows he has guessed right.

Mrs. Tinsley says, “Margaret and I must be home by evening. We’re invited to a supper party and a ball, although Margaret will be indisposed.”

Margaret announces dryly, “My mother doesn’t like any change of plans.”

Again the young girl catches Lewis’s eye and smiles.

Barnes says, “I’ll ride for help. Colonel?”

“I’ll go with you,” says Colonel Gault.

“I will too,” Lewis cries.

The old man says, “I’ll stay here with the ladies.”

“You’ll need shelter,” Gault says.

He and Barnes and Lewis cut branches from trees, and the old man fashions an arbor. They stuff leaves and brush into the spaces.
“We’re off, then,” says Gault.
The men choose horses. Lewis catches the claybank mare and leaps up on her back.
Barnes cautions, “We’ll go no faster than a walk.” He nods toward the mare and says, “Fleety’s her name.”
“Fleety,” Lewis says, the word lovely in his mouth.
“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” Gault calls to the others. They make a family group, together there. “Have you a gun?” Gault asks the old fellow.
“A pistol,” the old man says. “I’ll keep a sharp watch.”
Barnes takes a small book from his pocket and says, “I need your names and home places to make a report to the Craig brothers. They own the stagecoach line.”
One by one, they respond, and Barnes scribbles in the book.
“I am Hester Tinsley, widow of Charles Tinsley, and my daughter is Margaret Burnett, wife of Jehu Burnett. We live in Culpeper.”
The old man squares his shoulders. “Caleb Fitch, mapmaker, of Thornton’s Gap. Been to Richmond, trying to get back home.”
“Elly,” says the young girl shyly. “Elly Duffy from Petersburg.”
Lewis identifies himself. He is chilled by the knowledge that Barnes is recording the names in case some further injury comes to those who will remain behind.
“James Gault,” the Colonel says, “of Gault’s Crossroads.”
Elly tells Barnes, “Write down the baby. Write down Baby Burnett.” She takes something from her pocket, wipes it with her skirt, and hands it to Lewis: his knife.
“Keep it,” he says, wanting something of his to remain with her.
You looked so funny when you ran with that leg, and he tucks the image away to think about—her with the baby in her arms, watching him.

At the spring, they let the horses drink. So huge, the animals’ thirst.
“Too much at once will give them colic,” Barnes warns, turning his horse away from the water. Lewis lets Fleety drink a moment more. She ran so hard. He follows the men to the road, a narrow well-trod stretch, not so far after all from the sinking coach.
No one else seems to be traveling today.
Barnes says, “Now show us where he is.”
Lewis leads the way. The world’s gone empty. There is only this landscape of brambles and woods and sere grass. No farms or settlements or houses present themselves, no grazing animals. Lewis believes he recognizes a vase-
shaped elm. Shouldn’t they have found the body by now? He wishes he had taken longer to look at it, the first corpse he has ever seen.

A woodcock and its mate rise thrumming from a thicket.

“Well?” calls Barnes.

A groundhog hole looks familiar. No, Lewis can’t be sure. He, who is certain of landmarks at home, whose mother calls him “my Columbus,” has never been more confused. At last he points and says, “He was there, I think.”

Barnes grunts. “Then where’d he go?”

They climb down from the horses and examine the ground for signs of a man dead or alive. They remount, circle around, and meet again. Still nothing.

Barnes says, “Either he ain’t dead, or we’ve missed him. Did you see his face, boy?”

Did he? “Yes. He was lying on his side.” Lewis has never had the full attention of two adults whom he respects so much. “He wasn’t moving.”

“Did you feel for a beating heart?” Barnes asks.

“No,” Lewis says. Maybe the man was playing possum, holding his breath.

“Was there any flies on him?”

“There was a cricket on him,” Lewis says.

They pause, and Lewis knows the decision about what to do next is not his to make.

Colonel Gault ventures, “Someone might have picked him up, or he’s found a hiding place or another road. There’s an abandoned turnpike just ahead. Let’s get along.”

A sense of failure washes over Lewis. The men eye the woods’ edge as they proceed. The outlaw might be hurt and dying. Animals might find him and eat him up, and his bones would bleach out beneath the trees.

“’Tis the first time a baby was born in my coach,” Barnes says with wonder in his voice.

The men talk of the election a week past. James Madison is to be the next President. Lewis learns that Gault knows Madison, and Gault himself plans to run for governor. He will campaign for farm reform, especially for crop rotation and the reduction of tobacco growing. Tobacco depletes the soil, he says, and Barnes nods. Gault himself plants corn, wheat, and hay in succession at his farm, he says.

At last, Gault announces, “He can’t have gone too far. He was bleeding out at the shoulder where I shot him.”

“If I find him,” says Barnes, “I’ll have his neck in my hands. The stocks, the pillory, whippings, it’s all too good for him.” His voice grows hoarse. “If my dog was aboard, he’d have had his throat out.”

“He’ll be found,” says Gault. “Why, we might meet him at the tavern.”
Barnes says, “He’ll hang for this. Tarred first, if I have a say.”
“I saw a man dunged and feathered once,” says Gault. “The townsfolk were out of tar.”
The men laugh, a long sound of release. Lewis feels heartened.
Gault asks Lewis, “This is a rough town, Stevensburg. Do you know the place?”
“No, sir. I’ve come to work for my uncle, Samuel Hornbeak. He’s a brick maker,” Lewis says, but bricks have nothing to do with him anymore. He could turn east, go all the way to the ocean, and take his place on a ship as a fisherman or a whaler. Yes, that’s what he’s meant for, a better vocation even than that of stagecoach driver.
Barnes says to Gault, “A fine report it’ll make, sir, you saving us.” To Lewis he says, “The Colonel lost that leg to the British,” and there’s pride in his voice. “Battle of Cowpens, wasn’t it?”
“I was hardly older than this lad,” Gault says.
A soldier’s life, then, that’s what is meant for Lewis. A sailor’s life can’t compare.
Gault says, “I once pricked my finger on a thorn and almost lost my hand. A black line ran down my arm, and I was sick all through my body. A thorn on a rosebush, it was, a rose my wife grew in our garden.” He raises a hand, fingers splayed. “That was a worse time than my leg. While I was sick, my wife gave birth, and she and the infant died.”
Lewis has been wishing he had tales of hardship, but Gault’s story cuts through him. He can’t imagine what it would be like to lose a wife. Gault rides on jauntily, then exclaims, “That party Mrs. Tinsley talked about—I was to be there too, for dinner and dancing. I had forgotten. Well! There will be other parties.”
“We’re nearly to Stevensburg,” Barnes says. “It can’t be far.”
“When men fight here, it’s brutish. Gouging,” Gault says, turning in his saddle to Lewis. “Seems to me there’s a brick maker missing both his eyes.”
Lewis gasps. Gault laughs, and Lewis understands it’s a joke.
“I once seen a man tear off another man’s balls,” says Barnes grimly, “over a woman.”
“Was she beautiful?” asks Gault.
“The most beautiful woman alive,” Barnes says.
“Blonde hair or dark?” asks Gault, and Barnes says yellow, then red, then admits he can’t rightly remember.
Their distraction begins to feel dangerous to Lewis. He fears that the other passengers, back in the woods with the approaching shadows, will be forgot-
The Runaway Stagecoach

ten. Yet a moment ago he’d have run off to sea. He says, “We’ll have to get a wagon.”

The men don’t seem to hear him. Gault complains in a high falsetto, “Oh, I have a headache,” and claps his hand to his forehead. Barnes brays with delight.

They reach the outskirts of town. From a public house, men call out greetings.

Gault says to Barnes, “First, a drink.”

Beer, then whiskey, then cherry flip and rum punch and applejack. Gault is buying, urging Lewis to have another. Barnes’s red face flashes from behind a hand of cards. Trappers fresh from the frontier throng the bar, wearing caps with wolf tail crests. Gault tells the story of the stagecoach, reenacting it. Lewis finds his own voice newly deep amid the commotion. A girl steps out from behind the bar, and soon she has him talking about whether he’d rather be a soldier or a sailor. She has good teeth, though her breath is sour. A fiddler arrives and strikes up a tune, and Lewis is glad he doesn’t have to talk any more. The girl’s face shows he has taken her to the ocean. She is not as pretty as Elly Duffy, but he is captain of a ship now, its sails alive with wind.

Yet something tugs at his mind, a spot of worry. He is supposed to be somewhere else. The girl wants him to dance. Drink has taken away the bad smell of her breath. The spot in his mind opens up into a picture: the people in the woods. He can see them plain as day. Elly’s face merges with the face of the girl in front of him, and there’s the old man standing guard, protecting the group at the edge of the forest, where anything might creep out to tear them up.

He asks the girl, “Is there fever nearby? At Raccoon Ford?”

She shakes her head. She may mean no; she might mean, I can’t hear you.

He tells her, “I have to go.” He makes his way to Gault and calls out, “Colonel!”

Gault has climbed to the top of the bar. Expertly he unfastens the boot and leg and raises it to the sound of cheers, while his face splits so wide, Lewis sees his palate shake, sees all the way to the loudest sound of all, which is Gault’s laughter. Gault tosses the leg above his head and catches it behind his back. The crowd roars. As long as people applaud, Lewis sees, there is nothing else for Gault—nobody stranded in wilderness, no dwindling day.

“Sir,” Lewis calls. “Colonel Gault.”

Gault cups his ear, and Lewis says, “We have to go get the others.”
Gault pauses, and in an instant, the cork leg becomes part of his body again, and he eases off the bar. “Yes,” he says, “I’m ready.”

Lewis heads to the door. He’ll check on Fleety and the other horses in a field beside the tavern. Gault and Barnes can borrow a wagon, and he will go with them. Maybe they can get fresh horses and allow these to keep resting. Sunlight falls across their manes and turns the broom sedge gold. To the west, Lewis discerns blue mountains, pale as a daytime moon. He looks behind him for the colonel.

Gault is allowing the bartender to pour for him again. The girl with the pretty teeth hooks her chin over his shoulder and drinks from his cup. It’s a game. The girl is good at it. Lewis should have known he had no chance with her. It’s Gault’s shoulder where she rests her head, Gault’s thigh pressed against her body.

Where is Barnes? Lewis scans the place and finds a passageway leading to a second story. There goes Barnes with his arm around a woman’s waist. Lewis recalls the driver’s yearning talk about women, and panic strikes him. Barnes and Gault, heroes to him these several hours, are succumbing to desires. He had not expected this. They should be back in the forest by now.

Nausea burns in Lewis’s gut, yet the clear spot comes again in his head. He shuts his eyes. If he can go deep enough inside his mind, he might find the outlaw. The spot widens, and at its center is a pool. The outlaw’s face rises up from the pool, eyes and mouth enormous, and passes again before the window of the coach, slowly. Lewis discovers it’s an honest face, urgent and earnest, the face of a man to whom they owe their lives. The vision brings Lewis into a shed with a glowing forge. With tongs, the man lifts out a horseshoe. He is a farrier after all, with deer meat sausage in his mouth, a lively savor of pepper and sage.

The clear space wavers in Lewis’s head. Nausea washes through him again. The sweet stuff did it, the flip and the punch. The farrier’s mouth is moving. Lewis listens. The man is shouting but there is no sound. Ruined baggage lies upon the ground. Finery hangs from treetops, dresses and baby clothes waving in a breeze.

Lewis opens his eyes. Those people are expecting him. He couldn’t say how long was the ride from the ruined coach to this tavern, if it were one hour or many that he and Gault and Barnes traveled in the beautiful light. Margaret Tinsley Burnett, having given birth, needs a bed to lie upon. It would have started in another bed when she opened her legs and let a man in. Lewis suspects women like it as much as men. Otherwise there wouldn’t be so many babies. His mother is pregnant again. He feels grateful to her for sending him away.
He leans across the bar and asks the bartender, “Is there fever about? At Raccoon Ford?”

“Aye,” the man says. “They’re sick and dying from it. Stay away.”

Gault and the girl are busy. Lewis will have to go alone. Again he heads toward the door, but there’s a huge tree coming through, carried by staggering men who cry, “Yule log!”

Women pull kettles away from an enormous fireplace, and the men wedge the log into it. Soon Lewis smells sweet burning cedar and every good supper that ever came from the hearth: roast pig and mutton, fowl basted in their own grease. Women bring out trays of oranges and oysters, and bowls of syllabub with cream floating on top. Lewis tips the cold, sweet oysters from their shells into his mouth. He peels an orange and eats the slices one by one. He has found the people he belongs among. He looks with love on the feasting crowd. Gault and Barnes slandered these folk unfairly. No one here would hurt another.

Something else is coming through the door, a trunk with shiny brass fittings, borne by men who make Lewis think of pirates. People fall upon the trunk, rifling the contents and seizing luxurious garments from the pile within. Two women fight over a lacy gown, clawing each other’s arms. Drops of blood spatter the silk. The smell of lavender reaches Lewis as if Mrs. Tinsley herself is there.

Lewis cries, “That belongs to Mrs. Tinsley. And did you find a clock?” They don’t hear him. The trunk lid falls on a woman’s finger, and the woman curses.

Lightly the girl detaches herself from Gault and steps toward Lewis. She has chosen him. He can’t believe his luck, but he can’t go with her, can’t forsake those who wait for him. He must leave right now and get a cart. Yet the girl places her hands upon his chest, and he has dreamed of holding a girl in his arms. For years it seems he has dreamed it. He draws her toward the steps where he saw Barnes take a woman.

The girl leans her head back and says, “God-awful, that leg. I couldn’t, with that.” Her laugh would nail ears to the pillory.

Bullets strike his chest, so he knows he became a soldier after all. He’s lying on a battlefield, surrounded by others crying out, the sounds high and keening or oddly thick, purring or snoring. He didn’t know the dying snored. The bullets sting, and they’re wet. He sits up, dazed. Night has come, and sleet pelts through an open window above him. It’s dark in this attic room, yet he makes out moving shapes. Several couples engage quietly; another makes a racket.
He is naked, and the girl is gone. He scrabbles for his clothes, pulls them on, and hollers, “Where’s my boots?”

“That oughta be the name of this place,” comes a wheezy male voice, followed by a woman’s laugh. “Wal, it’s true,” the wheeze says, aggrieved.

Lewis had stuffed his warm stockings into the boots, so they are gone too. Barefoot, he runs down the steps. The log in the great hearth burns with enough light that he can make out skewed tables and jumbled crockery in the deserted room. Oyster shells give off a faint reek. His head beats with pain. He finds a mug of stale beer and gulps it down, but his tongue stays dry.

Might the people in the forest have been located and brought to the shelter of houses here or in another place? Unlikely, in the dark. Would they have come out on their own? No, they would not know which way to go, and there was only one horse remaining among them.

There cannot be many derelictions greater than leaving helpless people out in the wilderness all night.

He goes around back to piss among the empty beer barrels. It’s a ragged dawn, and the ground and the road are puddled with ice. He reaches into his pocket for his handkerchief, but it’s gone. His money too, and the key to his mother’s clock.

At least the sleet has stopped. He finds he knows this place. His mother told him how to reach his uncle’s house: Take the road out of town going west. Go to a sycamore tree and turn north. You will see the treading pit where clay and water are mixed together. Beside it is the drying shed, and a pile of clinkers and broken bricks called bats.

His Uncle Samuel has rheumatism, so it’s Aunt Susan who hitches the mules to the wagon, all the while yelling at Lewis: “Get the bread out of the oven. There’s dried peaches and boiled eggs on the table. We was expecting you yesterday.”

Uncle Samuel groans from a chair beside the fire. How thin he is, with slits of eyes that bespeak heat and toil. Quick-thinking, this uncle and aunt. They listened hard, taking in all that Lewis told them. He gave a version of the story, leaving out references to time, to the long afternoon and night that he spent at the public house.

Now Uncle Samuel says, “You say there’s a baby out there? Take a quilt and wrap hot bricks in it. We got plenty bricks,” and he moves his legs as if they pain him. “Why are you barefoot? They wouldn’t send you from home that way.”
Lewis is glad to be gathering bricks, so his uncle won’t see his face. He admits, “I took off my boots last night, and somebody stole them.”

“A woman, you mean. You might find them on market day,” Uncle Samuel gibes, “sold by the thief. You can buy them back from her.”

An angry thought comes to Lewis: if it weren’t for the people in the woods, he could be enjoying the memory of the girl’s body beneath his own, the heat and frenzy they made together.

“Maybe she didn’t take them,” he says. “Maybe it was somebody else.”

“Ahh,” his uncle says. “Well, there’s a pair of boots in the cabinet that might fit you.”

Lewis opens the cabinet and finds the boots. They are big enough and won’t chafe, though one has a hole at the side. He does not deserve them.

“Thank you,” he says.

“Yesterday you wouldn’t have needed boots. It was so warm, we stomped clay till dark,” says Uncle Samuel, “us and all the children in town. Now the pit’s froze.” He stretches toward the fire like an old cat glad for warmth.

Lewis flies about the unfamiliar house gathering what they tell him to fetch. He piles things into the wagon, and he and Aunt Susan depart. Aunt Susan drives like a madwoman, her hair whipping around her face. Lewis’s mother said, 

“You’ll know your aunt because she looks like me, but this woman, with her blustery energy, is nothing like his gentle mother. He wonders if his mother’s sister died and Uncle Samuel took another wife named Susan. She lashes the mules, shouting. He is sorry he does not have his mother’s clock to give to her.

If the people in the woods are still alive, Lewis vows, he will settle in and serve his uncle, will dig clay, tend fires, carry loads too heavy for his back. Brick making may be crude, but there is art in masonry. His mother’s words come back to him. On trips to town, his mother pointed out Flemish bond and English bond. Headers and stretchers are laid in different ways, she said, making attractive patterns that bear the weight of walls.

And if the people are dead?

Then he will have only their names.

Trees whirl past. He clings to the side of Aunt Susan’s wagon. How can mules run so fast? This is nearly as bad as yesterday.

At last he hears a shot that might be a signal from the old man’s gun. Aunt Susan stops the wagon, and Lewis calls out in a voice as loud as Barnes’s. He picks up a scent of smoke, and through the ice-glazed trees comes a faint reply.

Aunt Susan turns in at a clearing and there they are—the travelers, the
horse—and Lewis is the stunned one, counting an extra head among them. It’s the outlaw, tied to the poplar tree.

Elly Duffy explains, “He crawled up to our fire. We didn’t see him till he was right close, and then we was scared. Mr. Fitch was about to shoot him, but he said he was sorry. He begged.”

“While I held the gun on him,” Mrs. Tinsley says, “Mr. Fitch tied him up.”

The old man, Mr. Fitch, says, “He’ll be allowed his trial.”

Is this stranger truly the man who sailed past the coach’s open window? Lewis can’t trust his eyes, but the clear spot in his mind opens up to say, It is. The man’s face is bruised, and a bloody stain, bright as a sash, covers one shoulder. His scarred hands are a farrier’s indeed, big as anvils and ropy with veins.

Elly says to him, “I hope you are shown mercy.”

He says, “Thank you, Miss. It’s mercy you’ve all given me.”

“Where are Colonel Gault and Mr. Barnes?” Mrs. Tinsley demands of Lewis.

He hesitates and says, “I thought they might have already come for you.”

Mrs. Tinsley says, “Well, young man, I think you are a diplomat.”

“He means,” Elly says, “they’re drunk somewhere. Is that it?”

All of the rescued party throw back their heads and laugh, their voices ringing through the woods. The outlaw laughs too, a sorrowful sound. Lewis and Mr. Fitch untie him from the tree. It’s lengths of wild grapevine, thick as rope, that hold him. The man’s skin feels hot against Lewis’s fingers, and his bloody shirt emits an odor of rot. He doesn’t look nearly as large as he did yesterday. “I won’t run off,” he says, creeping onto the wagon, but once he is seated, Mr. Fitch binds his hands and feet again.

Margaret bundles her infant into a quilt. Mr. Fitch hops spryly up on the last horse that pulled the coach. The others pile into the wagon. Lewis stomps out their smoldering fire and takes a seat beside Elly, who holds the kettle in her lap.

“There’s fever at Raccoon Ford,” he says to her. “They said so in Stevensburg.”

“I said so yesterday,” the outlaw announces, “and if that driver had listened, none of this would’ve happened.”

“My sister needs me,” Elly says.

“Don’t go,” Lewis says, “please don’t go.”

“I must,” she says. “I will,” and Lewis thinks it would be fine to have a wife with such a strong spirit.

Aunt Susan declares, “Lewis, you drive. I’m wore out.” She hands him the reins and scoots over.
Lewis asks Elly, “Where’s the coach?”
Elly gestures toward a space of slick, grainy mud. He can make out a spar here and there, like the tips of buried masts. It’s the top of the coach, so small he can hardly believe it carried them all. It is here, yet it’s gone. He’s looking at a grave.
Elly says, “You’re wearing different boots today, worse ones. Why is that?”
When he doesn’t answer, she peers into his face and gives a low hiss, as if she has figured out what happened in the night. She switches places so Lewis is beside the outlaw, who is hogging the food Aunt Susan passes around.
“Well, drive on, boy,” Aunt Susan says. “What are you waiting for?”
Lewis tells the farrier, “I thought you were dead. I saw you dead.”
“Oh, no, you didn’t.” The man shakes his head. “You don’t know what you saw.” With his bound hands, he takes a dried peach from a sack and puts it in his mouth.
Lewis breathes hard, as if he’s been running all his days. He can barely cluck to the mules.