



Alice bent into the wind, the wire handle of the bucket cutting her flesh. A sudden gust loosened her grip and the water splashed into the tall grass that had hindered her steps. She lurched, then fell, softly cushioned by the green ocean. The tin bucket, her only one, lay atop the dense bluestem and then it shifted like a sail catching the wind and skimmed away.

She found her footing, then wept. The bucket was beyond her reach. Walking through the grass was like walking through a river. The tight little walkway her husband had hacked out to the creek was already threatened by the fast encroaching vegetation.

The precious bucket was lost now. Bouncing as easily as a scrap of newspaper. Numbly she headed for the dugout. The wooden door stood ajar. The wind had blown the contents inside willy-nilly. Her quilts were dumped on the floor. Her tinware unshelved. She was out of water and now there was no way to fetch more from the creek, which was a mile away. A pan will do, she thought wearily. Not in this wind, but tomorrow, perhaps. If the wind died down. If it ever died down.

"It will be better in Kansas," Robert had promised. "There's land. Free land. It's a perfect set-up for an ambitious man."

They had been living in a dump after the war. Little better than a shack on the outskirts of Richmond. A far cry from the plantation. A lifetime away from sweet afternoons and mint juleps.

"Kansas," he'd whispered. It was the first time she had seen hope on her husband's face since he came limping home from the war that had destroyed everything.

She found a piece of two-day-old bread and munched it before she fell exhausted onto the heap of blankets. *And where was Robert now?* Off collecting buffalo bones to be ground up for fertilizer and sold to the railroads for consumers back east. And she was alone. At least in Kentucky she had not been alone. She swallowed painfully, and finally roused enough energy to look around. Then she wept bitterly when she realized that the pan containing the last bit of water had blown off the shelf that served to hold their meager supplies.

"This is just temporary," Robert had assured her. "Just until I get some time to build a soddy." But he knew better than to look her in the eye. Course not. He was lying. He was worn down too. Too worn down to build a better place to live. Too worn down to track down neighbors who might loan them a grasshopper plow so they could cut sod blocks.

She stared at the door. She had to protect herself against the wind that was blowing straight into their dugout. She had to close it but didn't know if she could. Had to, had to. She pushed herself up and crawled on all fours to the door and wedged herself between

it and the wall. Then bracing herself she managed to get on her feet and walked herself upright with her back against the door. She reached for a short log, placed there for just such occasions. Her idea. One of the few she was proud of.

She shoved the log between the door and the wall and trembled from the effort this had taken. When she regained her strength, she turned and stared at the edge of the door, almost reluctant to dislodge the log. Then she braced her hands and pushed and pushed, heart thudding when the log dropped. Almost slipping, she made a final massive effort to resist the wind and slammed the door

against the frame. Then she swung the long wooden board on its pivot and jammed it into the slot.

It had taken all of her strength. She sank once more onto her pile of quilts and feather beds. She imagined Robert coming home to find her lifeless shrunken body. It would serve him right.

A knock awakened her, but her first thought was that there was no wind. The day was still. Alarmed, she realized she had slept through the night. Her tongue was parched, her thirst competed for attention with wild fear. There was no way of looking outside. No windows, no welcoming rays of morning sun shining through polished glass windows. And certainly no servant to present a calling card on a polished silver tray.

A knock. And if it was a murdering outlaw, that would serve Robert right too. Better even, perhaps, for him to find that her body had been ravished.

Unsteadily she crawled to the wall and steadied herself as she rose to her feet. She crept along the wall to the door.



"Who's there?" Her voice was weak, fearful. Then she scolded herself for letting the stranger know she was female and probably alone.

"Julie Thompson. I brought back your bucket."

Joy surged. A woman. A neighbor. Close enough to walk.

"A minute. I'll get the latch." She lifted the wood bar and swung it away from the hasp. She gasped. A Negro. A Negro woman. Tall, lean. Handsome. The color of sun-steeped tea. Her cheeks were a warm rose. The woman handed the bucket to her.

Dumbly, Alice reached for it and stared at the contents. She gasped. It was filled to the brim with eggs and berries and even a few potatoes. The woman carried a second bucket filled with water.

"I thank you," she stammered. "This is very kind of you." Slowly she raised her eyes then began to sob. "I thank you. This is unseemly. I don't know what has come over me."

"Oh, I speck you do. Out here affects us all this way. At first. But I've been here longer than you."

"How long?"

"Nearly a year now."

A year! A lifetime. How did this woman, this Julie get over it? What kind of magic had she employed?

Miserably self-conscious, Alice's tongue was tied. She didn't know the right thing to do. How should she act?

The woman looked at her hard and a knowing look came into her eyes, and she stiffened.

Alice swallowed hard. She'd had a slave who was close to white. She had grown up with her. They had played together. Talked, laughed, exchanged secrets when they were growing up. Practically friends.

She'd attended Loretta's wedding, watched her and her handsome Clarence jump the broom. But that had been before the war. She hated all Negroes now. She could not look at a single one without associating them with ruin. Lost property. Lost lives.

Weak with hunger, thirsty, Alice could barely stand. She leaned against the doorjamb and again looked at her bucket brimming with water and the other one filled with food.

"Where are my manners?" she said slowly. "Do come in."

The woman walked through the door.

"How did you know whose bucket this was? And that I would need water? And food?"

"Easy. The wind was blowing from the south, and everyone needs food. An empty bucket means someone's in a bad way. I followed the way the wind took yesterday and walked until I saw a little cleared place."

Alice made a limp gesture around the room. "My husband is away. Gathering bones to ship on the railroad." Then aghast at her lack of control she began to sob again. "I'm feeling poorly. Please understand that I don't usually live in such a mess. When I went for water yesterday, the wind was blowing so hard that I couldn't close the door. I could only push it shut from the inside and . . ."

"And there was no way to pull it shut from the outside," the woman finished for her. Julie swiftly swung the door open and examined the exterior jamb. "You need a handle and a deadbolt. Won't keep anybody out. You're set up proper for that but you need some way to shut it when you walk outside. I'll send my husband to take care of that."

"No, no, that's not necessary," Alice blurted. A Negro woman was bad enough. A Negro man was unthinkable. "No, Robert will take care of everything."

She flinched at the flash in the woman's eyes. The trace of the mockery she saw there.

There was an awkward silence, then the Negro woman made the first move. "You said you were feeling poorly. How?"

Stunned, Alice looked at her suspiciously.

"I'm a granny, ma'am. A healing woman. That's what I did before the war. I was Dr. Herbert's woman. I helped him with all his medicine. Including operations."

"I'm just feeling run down."

Julie crossed over to where she sat and picked up her hand and squeezed the tips of her fingers. Then before Alice could object she tilted her head and lifted her eyelids.

"When did you last have any meat?"

"A couple of weeks ago. We haven't been here long. Things weren't what Robert expected."

Julie blew out a soft little explosion of air. "I expect not. No stove then?"

"No."

Julie carried the cup of berries over to Alice. "Here. Eat some of these." She grabbed a skillet. "I'll take this out to your cooking trench and start it heating."

Alice pulled out one of their two chairs. Real food. Cooked. Her hands trembled as she lifted a tin cup filled with water to her lips. Julie emptied the bucket into a pan, then placed the extra eggs in a bowl, lined up three precious potatoes and put the extra berries in Robert's empty coffee cup.

Julie came back inside. "Fire is going." Then she picked up both buckets. "I'm going to the creek. You steadier now? Can you stand?"

She nodded.

"Close the door behind me. Latch it. I don't want the wind undoing our tidying up."

Alice obeyed and then wobbled to a chair. She dozed and woke up at the

sound of Julie pounding on the door. Startled, she rose and let her in. Two full buckets of water. Two.

Julie grabbed a potato and sliced it on the table. She put the contents on a tin plate with one of the precious eggs and went back outside. This time Alice knew to close the door behind her without being told. In a short time, the Negro woman returned with fried potatoes and an egg.

Alice's hand trembled as she lifted the food to her mouth. The woman watched her. "Didn't know you was in such bad shape or I could have done better. You lay down when you're done and I'll go back home and get some medicine and some more food."

"You're so kind. But will you have time to go and then get back home again before dark?" She did not want this Negro woman to take off across the prairie alone. She had not mentioned children, so perhaps there was no reason for her to go. She could spend the night.

"Dark don't matter. Just shut the door behind me."

Exhausted, Alice fell into a deep sleep. She jarred awake to a banging on the door. Confused, she propped herself up on her elbow. Then she remembered. "Coming," she said. "Coming."

"Coming." She wobbled toward the door, opened it and then gasped. Standing beside Julie was a man. Tall, slim, clad in denim trousers and a blousy blue shirt. His hair was close cropped, nappy, and he carried tools. And a shotgun. His eyes were curiously light. Somewhere between amber and grey. His features were even and he was hatless.

"My husband," said Julie. "Gabriel Thompson."

Alice felt her blood rush to her heart. Her whole body rallied to keep her heart beating, beating, beating. She had no idea what to do, say. She stood there speechless.

"Gabriel is going to fix your door so you can lock it from the outside too."

Dumbly Alice looked at the two buckets brimming once again with food. If they intended to do her harm it wasn't likely they would be toting food.

"Come in."

Julie unloaded the food and then marched over to Alice with a bottle. "Open your mouth," she commanded.

Alice obeyed and then swallowed the foul-tasting liquid.

"Every day. Take this every day. And there's seven eggs. Eat one every day."

It didn't take long before Gabriel came back inside. "You're all set."

"I can't thank you enough. Robert is going to build us a real sod house come spring. He didn't know . . ." Her voice faltered. "He didn't intend to treat me like this. This isn't his fault." Suddenly she knew this was true. She wanted them to know they were decent people. Not white trash. "We're quality folks," she blurted. "At least we were." She caught their amused glances.

"Ma'am, we were too," Gabriel said gently. "Julie is from the South, but I was from the North. I was a lawyer. Am a lawyer. Will be a lawyer again as soon as I can get my business set up."

"Out here? In this god forsaken place? How in God's name do you expect to have any customers?"

He flashed a grin. "Land location. Lots of paperwork involved with filing claims. Folks are pouring into Kansas. There's opportunity for folks that can see it."

White folks? flashed through her mind. *White folks too?*

"So don't be too hard on your husband. Time will prove him right to have come here."

Gabriel spoke beautifully. Perfectly, in fact. His wife's grammar was lacking. Not much. Just a little. Enough to mark her as lacking in education.

"How did you meet if you were from the North and Julie was from the South?"

"I was collecting information for an emigration committee. Taking notes on how people were faring after we gained our so-called freedom."

"He was born free," Julie said. Her eyes softened as she looked at her husband. "He started in public schools when he was just a youngster."

"And I stole her away, you might say. From her parents. They were sharecroppers. Poised to lose everything. In fact, they were sure to."

"We were slipping back into worse than before."

Alice's cheeks flamed. She knew what worse could be like. Knew the rage and bitterness of Southern women. The ones like herself who had practically been friends with their personal maids, then turned on them. Unbidden, a surge of stomach acid burned her belly and she looked away.

"But Gabe talked my folks into getting out of the South and coming West with us. They wouldn't come any farther than Topeka. But they is thrilled to be there. My father is a blacksmith."

Alice supposed they wanted to be called Negroes, not some of the other names that came easily to her tongue. These intruders who came unbidden into her house. She swallowed a lump of despair. "Well, much obliged," she said carefully. "Thank you so very much."

They exchanged glances. Something passed between them. They understood they were being dismissed. Gabriel's eyes were grave, appraising. "Glad to help. That's what neighbors are for."

Julie smiled weakly. "I'll check on you from time to time. You'll start feeling better. Not just your body. Your head too."

They walked to the door and swung open the wooden latch. Gabriel stopped in the doorway. "We're neighbors now. Your only other

neighbors until other people come. More people like us are headed this way.”

Alice stood there paralyzed. *More. More coming.*

He turned and looked directly at her. “I started digging a well last week. It’s hard work. It’s a long way down to water. It’s dangerous. Wells can cave in. Sometimes there’s gas at the bottom that can overcome a man.”

A well. Alice’s head spun at the thought of a well on her own property and what that would mean.

“A well means we’re going to stay. No one digs a well unless they plan to stay. We’re here for good.”

Alice nodded. What he implied was intentional. Not exactly a broadside, but close.

It was three days before Julie came back. This time with more food and an extra tub. She immediately grabbed up the buckets and went for water again. When she returned, she checked the contents of the little bottle of liquid.

“You’ve taken it like you should,” she said brightly. “Good. Feeling better?”

“Yes. I am.”

Julie set to straightening things. She came across a needlework sampler: “God Bless Our Home.”

“You need to hang this. There is a way. Even in a dugout. And you need to get your mattress off the floor. I’ll have Gabriel come back over and help with that. The damp isn’t good for you. But we need to air out your bedding first.”

“I can help carry it,” Alice said, realizing with a sudden surge of joy that she could hold up her end.

“This is fine work,” Julie said, eyeing the quilt on top of the mattress.

“It’s just the log cabin pattern. Do you stitch?”

“Lord, yes. It’s the only way I have to keep my head together sometimes.”

Alice stared at this beautiful tall woman. It was hard to imagine her ever having to struggle to “keep her head together.”

Together they carried the bedding outside and shook it vigorously. When they finished they smoothed the quilts back over the corn shuck mattress and put the room in order. Painfully self-conscious, Alice’s voice quivered but she looked Julie in the eye. “When you come back—” She paused and cleared her throat. “When you come back perhaps you can sit a spell and we can work on our blocks.”

Julie gave a slow nod.

“All I can manage is lap-quilting. I suppose that’s true for you too.”

“No, Gabe built me a frame. After we put our blocks together we can stretch it out before we get to the needlework.”

“Our blocks won’t match. They won’t be the same size.”

“Don’t matter. We’ll do a little strip piecing here and there. It’ll look just fine when we put it all together.”

A week later, Gabe came back with Julie. He carried some very short posts and a saw in a sling. He balanced some longer boards on his shoulder. There was a hatchet attached to his belt. Alice couldn’t read his expression but on Robert it would have been annoyance at having to perform a task that detracted from more important things.

“Julie says you need to get your bed up off the floor.”

The two women looked at each other and laughed with delight at his put-upon expression. Julie winked. He made a face, but it was tempered by amused tolerance of being the butt of their joke. He set to work.

The wind was coming up. Julie latched the door. The two women spread out their quilt blocks on the table. They were eager to rearrange them and test for possible patterns. A bit of string stripping here and there would bring them all to size. It was also a chance to add flashes of color.

Julie had brought some precious coffee and set it to boil. She checked the sourdough starter she had placed on the shelf over the stove. “Just right.”

“I’m feeling better. I’ll make bread tomorrow.”

“That’s good. Remember to hold some starter out and stir a little more flour in it. Personally, I don’t think a touch of sugar hurts either. Should last you for years.”

They sat and worked silently on their blocks. As though she could read Alice’s thoughts, Julie looked up. “There’s just enough for one. Not enough for two.”

So *who then?* Alice thought. Who will get the first one? And where will we get the cloth for a second one?

Again, she had the sense that Julie could read her mind.

“I’ve got some extra cloth in my trunk and an old dress with some places that aren’t worn too much.”

“I can scare up a little too. And the menfolk can part with a few pennies for this.”

“And there’s feed sacks,” Alice said.

“We can go together to the store.” Julie said, her face still as she studied Alice’s response. “We can go together. To make sure the colors are right.”

All the color drained from Alice’s face. *Together?* To be seen in town with a Negro? Before the war, she could have passed Julie off as her woman. Her maidservant. In private was one thing, but a public declaration!

She was at a crossroads. She couldn’t stand still. To the left or to

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the right? And once she started down the path she couldn't go back.

She looked around at everything they had given her. The tonic, the food, the trips for water, the coffee, the starter. The blessed door latch on the exterior. "Yes. We'll go together," she said slowly. "Yes, together. But you get the first quilt." She reached over and patted Julie's hand.

There was a banging on the door. Muffled yelling. The sharp clang as the outside bolt was thrown back.

"Robert," Alice cried, jumping to her feet.

"Alice, open this goddamn door."

She rushed then braced her forehead against the door while she caught her breath. She could not collect herself. Everything she felt about the war—the Negroes—was doubled in Robert. Bitterness beyond description. Grief over their lost wealth. Grief for their home. Grief for the lost flower of Southern manhood. She swung the board away from the latch.

"Sweetheart, oh sweetheart." Robert clasped her to him and every muscle tensed as he caught sight of the couple standing behind her.

"Robert, I want you to meet our new neighbors. Gabriel and Julie Thompson. He's a lawyer," she added, knowing it might help if he knew right away this was no ignorant field hand.

It might help.

Robert had known a few quality Negroes. "They have been very kind to me," she added.

Gabriel eyed Robert's rifle pointed at the floor of the dugout. It could be lifted in a second. Robert eyed the hatchet in Gabriel's hand. It could be hurled in a heartbeat. The men were silent.

"Gabe knew how to get our bed off the floor," Alice said, nervously aware of Robert's focus on the hatchet. "Julie says I need to get away from the damp. They live over the hill south of us." She was babbling now. "They brought me water when I lost hold of my bucket. And gave us an extra bucket. He's digging a well. They've come to stay."

Please, please, Alice prayed. Gabe, you're a lawyer. A word man. Use your words.

Gabriel walked over to the bed and propped his hatchet against the frame before he slowly turned to face Robert. "Miss Alice says you were off collecting buffalo bones. I did my share of that too when we first came here. Did you have any luck?"

"Some." Robert's gaze at the bowl of eggs on the shelf, the two buckets, the quilt blocks spread on the table. He looked down at the floor, then he slowly turned and went over to the wall and lifted his rifle to the pegs hanging there. He glanced at Alice.

Tears welled in her eyes. Mutely she begged. *Please, please, please.*

"A well," Robert said slowly. "By yourself?"

"I could use an extra hand," Gabe said. "I have a grasshopper plow. It cuts sod strips. When we're done with the well, if you've a mind to, we can trade work and start on your soddy."

Robert took too long to reply. Too long for politeness, but he finally swallowed and looked his neighbor in the eye. "It's a deal."

Alice blew out a little puff of air. Her husband hadn't offered to shake Gabe's hand. Not now, not yet. But it would come. Plenty soon enough.

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