

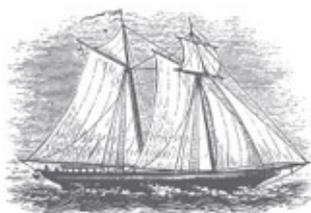
THE
STORY
OF
LAND
AND
SEA



A NOVEL

KATY SIMPSON SMITH

*THE STORY
OF LAND
AND SEA*



A Novel

KATY
SIMPSON SMITH



An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

FOR
MY FATHER

Epigraph

*There is a land of pure delight
Where saints immortal reign;
Infinite day excludes the night,
And pleasures banish pain.*

*There everlasting spring abides,
And never-withering flowers;
Death like a narrow sea divides
This heavenly land from ours. . . .*

*But timorous mortals start and shrink
To cross this narrow sea,
And linger shivering on the brink,
And fear to launch away. . . .*

*Could we but climb where Moses stood
And view the landscape o'er,
Not Jordan's stream, nor death's cold flood,
Should fright us from the shore.*

ISAAC WATTS

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Part One

1793

1

On days in August when sea storms bite into the North Carolina coast, he drags a tick mattress into the hall and tells his daughter stories, true and false, about her mother. The wooden shutters clatter, and Tabitha folds blankets around them to build a softness for the storm. He always tells of their courting days, of her mother's shyness. She looked like a straight tall pine from a distance; only when he got close could he see her trembling.

"Was she scared?"

"Happy," John says. "We were both happy."

He watches Tab pull the quilt up to her chin, though even the storm can't blow away the heat of summer. She is waiting to hear his secrets. But it is hard to describe how it feels to stand next to someone you love on the shore at dusk. He didn't have to see Helen to know she was there. Something in her body pulled at something in his, across the humid air between them.

"When you're older," he says, and she nods, familiar with this response.

"Why don't you ever tell about the ship?" she asks. "All the things you must have seen with her."

He looks down the hall at the shadows whipping across the slats and holds a finger to his lips. "Can you hear any birds?"

Tab slips into the kitchen for an end of bread in the darkness of the storm. She will keep asking him until he tells her. In the quilts again, she tucks close against him. As the wind rattles through the palmettos and the rain melts the window glass, John sings one of his sailing tunes to soothe her. Tabitha calls out, "Louder!" and he rises to his feet, unsteady on the mattress, waving his browned hands to the melody. His voice carries through the quiet rooms.

He doesn't tell her about the day he walked Helen onto a ship with a captain he knew from his pirate days, one small bag between them, and they curled beneath the gunwale until the frigate had pulled its anchor and filled its sails and was tacking through the shoals out of the bay. Only when the mate gave a wink did they stand—Helen wobbling, clutching him for support, laughing like a girl, her hair pulled by the wind—and watch the town slowly shrink until it was no bigger than a piece of driftwood, a brown and gold splotch against the shore.

He doesn't tell Tab about the beauty of her mother as she struggled to find some dignity on a vessel made seaworthy by its layers of filth. A year they were on that ship, married and her with the seed of a child in her by the end, and Helen transformed from some kind of pristine saint to the sunburned woman who tucked her skirts up to scrub the deck with him, who wrapped her hands around his when he fished off the side of the ship in the evenings. Could such a woman really have come back to live in the world again? The curses she learned, the brownness of her skin, the way her laughter got louder, as though to compete with the waves.

Who will Tabitha be when she becomes a woman?

After the storm, they walk to the shore to see what the ocean has relinquished. Fallen leaves and branches line the way. Half buried in sand is the cracked husk of a horseshoe crab. Tab scrapes her fingernails along its papery hide and leaves it for the waves to eat again.

It is 1793, and they live in Beaufort in a four-room house, two above and two below, built by a childless cousin in the lumber trade who was killed by a falling pine. One block north of the water, three blocks east of the store where John sells sundries. In the summer the doors hang open, front and back, and a salt breeze snakes through the hall. In thunder, the windows clamor. The girl's room upstairs faces the marsh and smells of fish in the morning and in the afternoon catches all the southern light. On moonless nights she sleeps with her father for fear of riding witches.

Mrs. Foushee leads the school in town, where children, mostly girls, pass time if their mothers are not birthing or poor. Their small hands rub the grooves in wooden tables and slip between the pages of spelling books. The letters dance for them. Mrs. Foushee is a soldier's wife and sleeps in his bed and listens to him remember the Revolution, but in the schoolroom she wearies of duty. For most of the day she sits, and has the children bring their work to her. She lets them out early or fails to call them back from dinner. She idles with her embroidery, sucks on candies, and sometimes dozes. The girls creep to her chair and watch, some fondling the pink brocade of her skirts, others plucking strands of silver hair fallen on her bosom and setting fire to them for the smell of it. Her eyelids droop; her mouth, still full in middle age, hangs limp. She taught Tab's mother too.

At nine, Tabitha knows her alphabet and most small words and can count up shillings and pence on her fingers. She can play three melodies on the church organ, and if taken to France, she could ask for bread and water. This is also the bulk of Mrs. Foushee's knowledge. Most days Tab lets the woman sleep and the other pupils plait their hair. She stares instead through the open door to the ocean, which she knows better than she knows her mother.

The town is older now, in the way that some towns age; most of the young people have grown up. Some went to war and died, and others took their small inheritances and moved to Wilmington or Raleigh. When John's cousin was felled, no other relative would return to take his house in Beaufort. But John had a wife with child, and the sea was no place for a baby. The remaining families in town live in a slender band along the ocean, just a few streets deep. Those with money have collected the surrounding fields for rice or lumber, and beyond the plantations, marsh and forest unroll inland. A single road through this wilderness binds Beaufort to New Bern. The town seems to be slowly cutting itself off.

Tab doesn't know many children. There are Mrs. Foushee's pupils, some ragged boys that belong to poor farmers on the edge of town, and the children of slaves, whom she can spot in the fields by their smallness. They are half steps in the long rows of bent bodies. They rarely come into town, and when they do, they don't look up. Tab knows her father has some acquaintances among the slaves, but she doesn't think this is so unusual. Silent threads run in all directions through the town, and Tab

is not blind. He never brings them to meet her, though, or speaks to them outright. Tab doesn't know the rules about this. One woman comes into the store sometimes with eggs to sell and a little boy by her side, the same size as Tab. John looks at them hard, and the woman looks hard back, but their words are mostly ordinary. The boy tries to touch everything in the store. He feels the barrels and hoes and sacks of dried corn like they were all silk. He smiles at Tab, as though he knew everything that she knew. But Tab is not his friend, nor is she the friend of the powdery girls in Mrs. Foushee's schoolroom or the boys who throw rocks on the edge of town. She has her father.

Summer mornings when Mrs. Foushee is ill or Tabitha's blood is jumping, the girl walks to the marshes along the waterfront and swims with slow strokes to the sandbar between the sound and the ocean. She lies on the grit, limbs spread, fingers and toes burying themselves in warmth. Eyes closed, she sees battles fought on water. Ships—French, British, and ghost—with cannon booming and flags snapping, their precarious shapes lit by the piling clouds of summer. Bursts of gunfire paint the sunset.

She digs channels by the shore to let the water in and builds moats and islands of defense. Oak leaves pummel each other, and moss bits leap into the shallow salt water, bodies flung out to sea. Cannonball pebbles land on the leaves, dooming them, sending their wreckage to the depths for stone crabs to scuttle over. There are no mercies in this play.

The battle over, the leaves drowned, Tabitha searches for treasure. She has sewn large pockets onto the front of her dresses to carry home the pink-eared shells and dry fish bones. She used to leave her findings in a pit at the center of the island, but a storm scattered them all. Now she takes them with her. Her bedroom becomes wild with the ocean's debris. She steps on something sharp and pulls broken brass from a sucking cove where the water seeps in. A shard of armor, she assumes. Her father, not knowing the best thing for her, lets her wander.

At dusk, the marshes turn purple and heavy. From the sandbar, the dimpled muck of the shore smooths over. The reeds quiver with bitterns. A strand of clouds sinks to the west, blanketing the last pink edge. When Tab slips into the dark water, silver-brushed, a burst of herring gulls cries out, winging up. She opens her eyes beneath the surface, letting her body float, her hair drift. Her shift gathers water. A dark small shape passes below her, and she lifts her head up fast, gasping. A strand of hair slides into her mouth when she sucks in air. She begins to kick and reach and in a few minutes is ankle-deep again in brown grime, her hands reaching for stalks to pull her feet from the mud. Her pockets still hang heavy with treasure. Her wet legs collect sand all the way home.

On Sundays, Asa comes in a brown suit. Though he and John rarely speak of Helen, Asa's green eyes remind both men of her. He carries a book in his hands and waits in the hall for his granddaughter. John asks him to sit, and he shakes his head, staring out the open back door. John asks how his trees grow, and Asa says, "Passable." John leaves his father-in-law standing there and retires to the parlor to read the weekly papers. Later in the morning, John will wander down to the harbor and greet the ships that dock, looking for old friends amidst the crews. Tabitha comes downstairs in a

pinching dress, her only one without pockets, and slips her hand into her grandfather's without a smile. She says good-bye to John, and they walk the five blocks to church. The building is brick and stands uneasily on stone pillars. Asa is Anglican, but Anglicanism is dying out, and his old church was taken over by Methodists. Most of the Anglicans retreated to this smaller chapel, where they have realigned with the Episcopalians. He cannot keep track of the names of Christianity. People are still searching for what they used to know. Here there is no stained glass and the pine floorboards are warping. The church does have a little square tower and a cupola with a bell, but from the street one can see they rest at a tilt.

Sitting in the pew with his granddaughter, he wishes for cushions. When he was a boy, services were held in the courthouse; he had a gilded Bible and his bottom could rest on a pillow while he listened to the Lord's word. But now the sons are moving away, leaving their fathers' farms, and churches are left wanting. The town talked of building a canal to join the two rivers on the way to New Bern so boats could pass with goods, but the men who had the funds were loath to spend them, and Beaufort—which could have controlled the inland trade—became stagnant, and then began to shrink. The goodness in the world he knew has contracted; the common feeling they had under royal rule has turned to self-interest. Men grasp at money instead of virtue. All the men he knows are common bandits. He hopes God is watching.

Tabitha, who swings her legs when she is forced to sit, kicks the back of his ankle, sending his leg knocking into the pew in front of him. The minister pauses, and resumes. Asa pinches her wrist and glares.

The Reverend Solomon Halling stands at the pulpit and makes gentle flourishes with his hands. The pulpit is made of pine, carved with a large flower and several smaller flowers, which might also be four-petaled crosses. Asa always wonders if a woman made it. Halling comes down from New Bern a few times a year; mostly, they listen to vestrymen or sing songs amongst themselves. The congregation has been halved in recent years. Instead of gathering at the front, they keep their family seats, the spaces between them widening. Halling reminds the listeners what it is to be Episcopalian, that it is merely Anglicanism without the thrall to monarchy. A few women fidget in the pews. A child sneezes and then begins to cry, so Halling shifts to a hymn. The people stand, and those who earn their living by the sea rub their woolen vests. They blush to hear the sound of their own voices.

During the hymns, Asa always hears his absent daughter. The clarity of her tone once reminded him of his wickedness. He is one of the men who comes to church to punish himself, though of course there is pleasure in this penance. When he glances down at his granddaughter, she seems like a stranger.

After the parishioners have offered prayer and been exhorted to goodness and donation, the Reverend Dr. Halling stands on the sagging steps and shakes their hands. On this Sunday, Asa gives him a half pound for the new church and pushes Tabitha forward to shake his hand. Though new to the parish, the minister is worn, with graying locks frizzed around his shoulders and dull brown eyes. He was a surgeon during the war, and after the piecing together of men's bodies, the care of their souls has finally tired him. When he smiles, his teeth catch on his lip, so he is ever adjusting his mouth to bring it to stasis.

"My granddaughter," Asa says, his hand tight on her shoulder. Tabitha wipes her

palms on her dress. “She and her father are wayward in faith.”

Halling nods. “Has she her own hymnal?” He slips back into the church, upsetting a flock of older women who croon after him, and in a few moments returns with a tattered brown book and hands it to Asa. “Mostly Watts,” he says.

“I fear I am her only guidance,” Asa says.

Halling shakes his head and holds his hand out flat, palm up. “You forget the Lord.” He turns back to the crowd, which is still absorbing the presence of ordination.

Tab pulls on her grandfather’s hand. The tides are rolling out, and she can smell the fishermen’s catch, can hear the gasping holes the crabs make in the sand.

Asa holds the book on the walk home, wondering about the rightness of letting a heathen child possess the word of God. Where is the purpose in watering fallow fields? He wishes there was a minister year-round. His God is a fickle one, and Asa does not always comprehend the trajectories of the lives around him. He looks only for evidence of justice. He looks for reasons why he has been so punished.

In the summer of 1783, his daughter, Helen, returned to him after a year of dissipation. She had been seduced by John, a common soldier, married without her father’s blessing, abandoned her inheritance to set sail with the soldier on a black-flagged ship, and had come home with a belly full of child. Asa waited for God’s fist to fall on her husband. As John built new shelves in the merchant’s store in which he had purchased a share, Asa waited for the hammer to slip and strike John’s hand, the board to crack upon his head. During August storms when John and Helen would stand by the water, arms entwined, bodies warm for each other, Asa waited for the swells to pull John in, leaving his daughter alone on the shore. He wanted her back, untouched. He watched as they fixed up the house left to them by John’s cousin, painting it fresh white, filling it with oddments from the sea, tilling the grit outside for potatoes and corn. He never saw them sad or thoughtful. Their joy was the devil’s mark.

When her time came in October, a storm swept in from the southeast and whipped up the waves. Asa wanted to carry his daughter inland for the birth, to protect her among the trees, but she clung to the house she and John had adorned. If her child was going to know the world, she wanted it to know all, the gale and breeze alike. Despite Helen’s requests, Asa refused to pray for her. He had prayed for his own wife during a similar storm, during the same mortal passage, and she had been taken. He could not pray again, not in the same way. But he came to her when she began to labor, and he waited with her, as he had not waited with his wife, and the whole scene was a mirror to him, as if God was showing him what he missed the first time.

He and John carried water for the midwife, tore scraps of linen, carried more water. They did not speak, and when John reached for his arm, Asa pulled away. Neither man should have been a witness, but Asa insisted; he would no longer let women control this moment. They stood in the corner of the room with their arms crossed, eyes on the floor. Looking over the shoulder of the midwife, whose hands were busy with cloth and water and touch, Helen begged her father to tell her if this was how it usually happened, and whether her mother had felt this way. She was a child again, and needed his voice. He nodded and said everything was just as it should be, though he had not seen his wife in labor and wouldn’t know what was ordinary, but yes, no reason to worry, and surely Helen had the strength for it. But she was not listening.

As the storm tunneled through the streets of Beaufort, an infant arrived: red and angry and screaming over the howls of wind. The midwife placed the child in a basket while she pressed vinegar rags to the mother's wounds. John and Asa stood beyond the cast of candlelight, staring at the weeds of hair pressed against Helen's white cheeks, listening to the thinness of her breaths. She began to weep.

Asa left in the morning, after the squall had blown away north, and took his daughter's body with him. He said he would come back for the living child.

When Asa goes to church, he carries a list of sins in his heart, waiting for forgiveness.

Summer blends into fall. Yellow warblers and flocks of bobolinks arrive on the salt marshes, and sandpipers poke along the mudflats, watching for holes. In the forests around Beaufort, the sumacs turn fiery red, and the wild grapes grow purple and fat. By October, the evenings are finally cool.

Tab cannot sleep the night before her tenth birthday. She has a rasp in her throat that feels like dry biscuits. Kneeling instead by the window, wrapped in her mother's shawl, she traces patterns in the stars, fingering out dogs and chariots on the frosting pane, her chin propped on the sill. She closes her eyes only to imagine the model ship that might appear wrapped in brown paper at dawn. It has three masts and is made of thin paneling stained nut brown. Its sails are coarse linen, and a tiny wheel spins behind the mizzen-mast. Netting hangs along its decks. On the starboard side, a small trapdoor is cut into the planks that you can lift and peer through into the hold. She would fill its empty belly with detritus. Acorns, feathers, moss. She saw it in a shop in New Bern on their last visit there to purchase fabric for the store. Tab made a point of standing still before the window until her father, strides ahead, missed her and turned.

"Ships, eh?" he said, and tugged gently at the back collar of her dress.

"Tell me something again," she said, and as they walked away from the shining toy boat, he began another tale about her mother, and she knew that he had known, that he had seen the want in her eyes and understood.

In the carriage home, her father hid a large package beneath the seat and winked at her. All she had to do was wait for it to come into her hands.

John sleeps sometimes in his bedroom across the slanting hall from Tabitha, but there are nights when he can smell his wife's body in the bed and he takes his blankets downstairs. He finds a space among the furniture in the parlor—pieces given to his wife by her parents, and to them by their parents—on rugs bartered or stolen from vessels he has hailed on the saltwater rises, below paintings of flat faces and flat children holding shrunken lambs, between cabinets of glass bottles, Spanish gold, musket balls, a rusted crown, bells. The remnants of booty that are now only treasure to a child. There is a mirror in this room with a peeling silver back, and sometimes in its spaces, Helen appears, wearing blue, her dark hair in braids behind her head, curls sprouting. Her green eyes depth-colored. He talks to her here, or he is afraid, the way her eyes follow him, and he takes his blankets into the hearth room, where pots with grease line the fireplace and shelves hold dry goods, bolts of fabric, sacks of meal. This is where he keeps the store's excess. When customers ask for mustard seed, he

brings them here, or says it must be delivered special and so gets a few pence extra. They have never wanted, he and his child. And still her phantom moves through the rooms, reminding him of what they lack.

The night before Tab's tenth birthday, John sleeps on the low green sofa in the parlor. It faces a portrait of his wife's grandmother as a girl, who looked nothing like her, so he can imagine that he has loved someone else entirely.

He wakes in the middle of the night, as he often does, to her voice calling him. He walks out of the house, across the dirt road, and down to the marsh, where he closes his eyes and lets the wind pulse at him; through the harshness of brine and shore decay, he catches again the blooming smell of her. He has fallen asleep here before, but it scared his daughter not to find him in the house, so he's more careful now. The grief, besides, has waned to washes of melancholy, impressions connected to no specific hurt but to the awareness of a constant. He is in no pain but the pain of the living.

The frogs are calling in the darkness, hungry for rain. If flocks of birds migrate by the stars, perhaps the spaces between those points of light are not blackness but the bodies of birds; perhaps there is in fact no absence of light in the sky, only stars and birds. When he walks back toward the house, he sees a small shape against the upstairs window. The head of his sleeping daughter, pressed against the glass. So there are nights when neither of them can sleep in beds. This is what she has done to them.

John comes from no family of his own, so every turn of love and lack of love surprises him. His parents were dead before he knew them, and he was raised by kin who had kin of their own to cherish. He was caught between families, on a rural farm, with ties to no one. When he first left for the sea, his mother's second cousin wrapped him up a sack of crackers and was in the fields again before John was half down the road. When he came back as a soldier, there was no embrace. He wonders if fatherhood is easy to men who had fathers.

In October, meadowlarks descend on the shores and islands, and mockingbirds brighten the early days of fall with song. The morning raucousness is a sign that Tabitha's birthday is nearing, that time is passing. These days, when John sees her ramble into the house, mud-splattered, with bursting pockets and hair escaping from its pins, he senses he has not done right. He has not been a mother and father to her. She is a woman after all—if not yet, then soon—and he has allowed her to grow sexless and wild. He should ask Mrs. Foushee over more often, or Mrs. Randolph, his father-in-law's housekeeper. They could show her how to make tea.

A few weeks ago, they traveled in the trap to New Bern, and while Tab peeked in shop windows and pitched stones at the governor's palace, he bought supplies for the store. Fabric, soaps, medicines. Rubbing the cloth between his fingers, he had chosen some simple linens for his customers in Beaufort, stripes and ticking, linsey-woolsey, a heavy damask. But there had been a silk that shone. Blue, with vine patterns in pink and green. The polish of it felt like the skin of his wife. He bought yardage for a ten-year-old girl, had it wrapped in brown paper, and they rode home in the carriage the following day. She had seen his proud grin. Fathering had no end. There was no stage at which you could no longer improve. They rode back through swamps and prairies and wooded hammocks, and as John guided their horses over the puddled roads, he watched sidelong as his daughter slumped and slept, her face against the carriage side.

He returns to the house, mud on his bare soles, and as the sky turns from purple to gray, he begins a pot of hominy in the hearth, spicing it with old fat and pepper.

She is asleep against the sill, her breath fogging the window in steady rhythm. The moon sheen in the sky begins to dim. Her head rests on one cocked arm, pressed against the chilled glass. Her knees are bent beneath her, and one hand curls into an empty cup. She is dreaming of water; always dreaming of water.

Below, John stirs the hominy. He pours a spoon of fat into the iron pot and watches it ease across the corn. When Tab was younger, his wife's father loaned them Mrs. Randolph, who cooked proper in the kitchen near the well. But like all grown women, she had reminded him of Helen. Now the outbuildings are home to the roaming chickens that Tab won't let him catch, so he buys dead ones at market. Sometimes she cooks, sometimes he. He sits back on his heels, his hands around the ladle, and stares into the fire. It moves like a woman.

The musky smell of the fat climbs the stairs, and Tab is awake. Her face contracts into the beginnings of a cry. Her body hurts from sleeping against the wall, though sometimes this pain is better than waking up in a soft bed. The bottom of the window has frosted over from her breath. To the south are no warm yellows, only a dull gray that lightens when she turns her head away and then back. When an egret bobs in slow flight beyond the far marsh, pale white against pale gray, she remembers it's her birthday.

Tabitha comes downstairs in bare feet, her head feeling crowded with sharp rocks. She follows the scent of breakfast. John is kneeling with the ladle by the hearth. She leans against the doorpost and closes her eyes. John turns at her small sounds, and smiles. "Look at this stranger, a girl of ten. What does she fancy?"

"Hominy, please," she says, "and pudding." Tab slips into a chair and rests her head upon the table, which smells of salt and old grease.

"You could have stayed in bed," John says.

"I don't feel very well," Tab says.

John spoons the mush into silver bowls that bear the scrolled stamp of his wife's family, and comes to feel the girl's forehead and cheeks. "From sleeping by the window, is my reckoning." He offers her a spoon. "Warmth will help."

She eats while he draws an image of the day. He proposes a walk along the shore, and when she asks about Mrs. Foushee, he says today is for the two of them. Not even Asa can intrude. He even hints at a gift. She smiles at the thought of the wooden ship with the trapdoor on its deck. They love each other extra much for being only two. Her mother is a phantom she thinks of fondly, like some angel from the Milton her father reads aloud, but she cannot imagine her in this house, her limbs moving in this salted air. Just as she would not like God to live in her bedroom, her mother too is better bodyless.

Her mouth dries and a bubble lodges in her throat. She swallows several times, then burps. She looks at her father, as if for an answer. A sea is rising in her. She stands quickly and moves to the corner, where the heat of grits and sharp stomach water floods through her mouth. A rusting thread runs through the puddle on the floor.

John brings her back to her chair. He dips a rag in the basin of water and stretches it across her forehead, then takes another to wipe up the vomit and blood. He begins to sing a shanty. When her breathing is calm, he carries her upstairs to bed. She opens her eyes as he lays her on the sheet.

“We’ll fetch Dr. Yarborough,” he says, and stands there, arms hanging, until she falls asleep again.

When she wakes in the falling of the afternoon, four uneasy men are in her room. One leans against the base of her bed, one sits and holds her wrist lightly, two stand in the corner, gray haired, murmuring. Her back is clenching in pain, as if something is growing there. There are splinters in her head. She cannot pull her wrist away from the hand that holds it. The room looks watery. The seated man in spectacles releases her and rubs the side of his nose with his finger. He looks at the man standing at her feet, who, when he moves, takes the shape of her father. One of them says, “We can only wait now,” and the other three men nod.

John leads the doctor out, and Asa brings the vestryman closer. He does not speak clearly, but she thinks he is blessing her. Though ten years old, she feels very young and is wise enough to know that death only comes to mothers, and this she plans never to be. When she blinks, the vestryman is soaked, as though her grandfather rescued him from the sea, and the marsh grasses cling to his bald skull. His eyes are the sockets of a pecked-out butterfish. His wrists end in squids. When she opens her eyes again, the room is black and empty. Her pillow is damp, and her knees ache. She pulls her legs to her chest to stretch them and in this ball of pain, she rolls herself to her floor. She knows the thud will wake her father, but from here she can see the moon, pulling and pushing the ocean, kneading it along the shore. She hears its voices and is calm on the coolness of the boards.

When John appears in the doorway, she asks him to leave her where she is.

When the sun rises, they are both on the bedroom floor. Tab is dreaming of underwater. She wakes and remembers all the hurt, which pierces her back and knees and makes her muscles quiver and her stomach riot. She crawls downstairs and into the remnants of her mother’s garden and heaves blood again.

Asa finds her here, curled around a cabbage rose.

In bed again, wrapped in quilts too heavy to slip from, Tabitha hears the men below. She feels as if she is fainting, though she knows that if she were, she wouldn’t be able to tell. In the spaces between knowing and not knowing, she sees her mother sitting on the side of the bed, a leg swinging below the mattress. Tab knows one of them must be ten years old. They both have dark curls twisted up and away from pale faces. Her mother’s eyes are green, and Tab thinks her own are brown. Her mother’s dress is white and thin. She reaches out for it, but her fingers are weighed down by the quilt. Her mother is not smiling; if this were a dream, her mother would be smiling, so this must be real. When she moves her eyes, her head spasms, so she closes them and enjoys the feel of her mother’s weight on the side of her bed.

“She’ll be better cared for at Long Ridge,” Asa says. Asa named his turpentine

plantation after his own wife died in giving birth and a farmer told him land unnamed brought the devil walking. It lies a mile east of town, a white house planted between acres of pines to the north and a lawn that slopes south to the water. A white house in the midst of nothing.

“She stays.” John is not looking at Asa but at the waving rushes on the shore below town. They toss around and tell you nothing of the wind’s direction.

On the sofa, Asa crosses a knee and lets his hand fall on the side table, which holds remnants of his daughter’s life. A pincushion, a hair catch, a miniature on ivory that he once thought was being painted for him, before he knew his daughter had fallen in love. With his thumb, he presses the pins in to their heads. “I do this for the child, you understand,” he says. “I have no intent to punish you.”

John turns from the window and listens for any upstairs sound. “It wasn’t the sea that killed Helen.”

“No,” Asa says, “but it was you, and that amounts to the same.” He knows this isn’t true as he is saying it, but it feels good to cause pain, and it isn’t wholly false.

“Then despise Tab too.” John walks to the side table and places a finger on the pincushion so that Asa draws his hand back into his lap. “You are welcome to stay, but my daughter will be with me. Dr. Yarborough is tending her, and if there’s any danger, it will be the same there as it is here.”

Asa stands. “And what of your daughter’s soul? Will you let her go to the next world without a minister present?” He almost says, *Won’t you pray for her?* In blaming John, he is only blaming himself.

John pauses at the stairs, his back to Asa. “Tab isn’t going anywhere. And if their souls are what they live on by, then I am in keeping of them.”

Mrs. Foushee comes with a lemon cake, but she doesn’t ask to see the girl. John guides her to the parlor, where she sits and waits politely until John stands again and fetches a knife and two plates. She cuts thick slices.

“You know how much I care for your family,” she says. Before she married, Mrs. Foushee had taught Helen her letters. Though the teacher had left her stamp on most of Beaufort’s youth, she and Helen had been close. She had supported John’s cause when they were first courting. But like Helen’s other friends, she has drifted away since Helen’s death. She is thinking of this now, looking around the messy parlor. “I’ve tried to keep an eye on Tabitha, but she’s an independent sort, isn’t she? I don’t mean to neglect her, or you, certainly. I’m sure you’ll let me know if there’s any way I can be of service. If the girl needs some womanly guidance.” She has finished her slice and eyes the rest of the lemon cake on the side table.

John asks if she’d like some more.

“I couldn’t possibly. It’s really for Tabitha, bless her. You know girls this age are always getting ill—I think it’s part of growing. Soon she’ll fill out into quite a lady, you’ll see.” As though she were brushing away crumbs, Mrs. Foushee smooths her own ample sides, demonstrating what exactly a woman looks like. “Her mother was the same. Little complaints.” Despite having a husband at home, she harbors an affection for the young men of the town that is not entirely maternal. She misses the men who were garrisoned in Beaufort during the war—William Dennis, Daniel Foot,

Colonel Easton—and who have set up lives in more prosperous places. Of all the soldiers, John is the only one who stayed. Loss has a way of paralyzing even the brave. She reaches out now and pats his knee. “We’ll see her through it, don’t worry yourself.”

When she leaves, John is grateful for the quiet. In the first few years after Helen’s death, he thought he might be lonely, but Tab is all he wants in the way of company. He carries a slice of cake upstairs, but his daughter is sleeping, her mouth open.

Yarborough returns in the afternoon and places his cool hands on the girl’s body. She is asleep again, though there is no restfulness about her. John sits on a rush-bottomed chair in the corner and watches the doctor’s face. Yarborough opens her mouth, looks at her tongue. He peels back her eyelids, which are still and pliant. He rubs his fingers along the pale insides of her arms, looking for the blood within. He examines her as a child picks at his supper, knowing already what is there.

When the doctor turns, John is shaking his head. “Yellow fever,” Yarborough says. “She may improve. The likelihood, indeed, is that she will improve. But the danger is in the lapsing. Steady rest, fluids, quiet.”

“Nothing to be done?” John asks.

“Prayer,” the doctor says. “The minister from New Bern returns on his circuit tomorrow. You might have him stop in with a word.”

John is left alone in his daughter’s bedroom. He remembers being her age, being God-loving and prayerful. Believing in a goodness without end, and wrath for the undeserving. Even aboard ship, his cannon pointed at another crew, his sins could be laundered. But in the birthing of his child, he had forgotten to call out to the Lord. He only saw his wife, her belly, his infant. And without his prayers, she had been taken. This began his acquaintance with God as a vengeful child who, if ignored, will snatch his favorite toy away. So John offered him nothing. Unable to blame his daughter, he understood that God was the only one left to punish.

John had let Asa bury Helen in the churchyard, but the stone wings above her name seemed to him a mark of God’s victory. No more kin of his would find their rest there. He was only happy, Helen was only whole and well, on the open ocean. It was land that killed, not sea.

When Tabitha wakes, John cannot go to her for fear. “Will you take something?” he says. “Broth?” She moves her head once, as if to shake it. “Yarborough says you will be climbing trees tomorrow.” He stands and then sits again, his head in his hands, his fingers feeling at the roots of his hair. He looks at the grain in the floor of the house that he did not build but occupies.

Tab only sees a shape moving in distress.

“Would you like to sail a bit?” he asks her.

Now she remembers the toy boat wrapped in brown paper, and in that thought is clarity, a small space of focus in the haze.

The second night Tab is sick, John leaves her for an hour in the care of Dr. Yarborough and walks east away from town to Cogdell’s plantation, which adjoins Long Ridge, and circles around to the slave quarters behind the rice fields. He knows which is her

cabin. A man answers his knock, and calls for Moll. The woman who comes to the door is still young and strong, her hair wrapped tight in a red cloth and her face unscarred. A newborn crawls against her chest. Its hands open and shut, catching folds of fabric, searching for milk.

“What’s wrong?” she asks. No matter that he hasn’t spoken to her in years, though she once thought of him almost as a brother.

“I’m ashamed to come here like this,” he says. His wife died ten years ago, and this woman with the infant had been her property, her maidservant, her confidante, her friend. Though now that he is standing here, he doesn’t know whether Moll would have claimed that friendship. “My daughter’s sick.”

“What is it?”

“They don’t know. Yellow fever maybe.”

A boy curls around Moll’s hip to see the visitor, but she pushes him back into the cabin. “I don’t know much about herbs,” she says. “And no one here could do much for the fever.”

He nods.

She watches him wanting something more. She is sorry for him. She misses Helen, but she has no debt to John or his daughter. After Helen’s death, they moved in separate ways; Moll had her own life to battle. She is a field worker, not a guardian angel. His concerns are not greater than hers. The baby begins to cry: a long, piercing syllable that dissolves into hiccups. “We can’t do anything for yellow fever,” she says again. “Ask some other conjure man.”

“I didn’t know,” he says, gesturing toward the infant. “I should congratulate you.”

She waits for him to blush, to back away, to excuse himself, but he doesn’t move. He’s waiting for something too. If it’s sympathy, he knocked on the wrong cabin door.

“And the boy?”

“Davy,” she says.

“Can I see him?”

She scratches at her covered hair with her free hand, then calls for her son. The boy runs back to the door, almost bouncing. John is exhausted to see so much frantic energy. He nods once. The boy nods back, three times.

Moll, holding the infant with one loose hand, puts her other palm on Davy’s head, runs it along his scalp, squeezing it, as if to feel for soft spots. He shakes his head to free himself, but Moll slips her hand down to his neck to hold him still.

John could stand here and watch this mother love her son for days.

“Where’d you get your coat?” Davy says, pointing a finger toward John’s chest.

John looks down and says a tailor in New Bern made it.

“What’s his name? In case I wanted one someday.”

John waits to see if he’s teasing, but the child’s eyes are happy and serious, so John gives him the name.

Moll’s husband calls out from inside, and she can hear her girls’ voices escalating toward a fight. She bounces the baby to calm it, her hand still draped around Davy’s shoulders. “I’m sorry I can’t help,” she says. She should say she’ll pray for the child, but she doesn’t.

He rubs his face and leaves.

In the morning Tab cannot stand to walk. The dizziness turns her body into vibrating points. John tucks the quilt around her, lifts the damp bundle, and carries her downstairs to rest on the sofa while he gathers meal and potatoes into a sack, some jugs of water. To save her from the graveyard, he must take her to sea. He took her mother once, and being on the water only made her bloom. Tab will get well beyond the reach of Asa's religion. He looks at the paper parcel above the shelves in the hearth room and wonders if a dress could be made of such fine silk aboard a wayward ship, with villains for seamstresses. No, it will be here for their return. She will come back whole and womanly.

Tab's vision is clear this morning, and though her body rejects her guidance, she is well enough to feel a thrill at what the day will bring. She is trailing in her mother's path.

It is Sunday and the ships are come to harbor. Trading ships and whaling ships and ghost ships whose crews know her father. When Mrs. Foushee reads them stories, she calls them buccaneers. Wicked men who lure vessels for the plunder, who tie ladies to the masts and make them scream to call the navies in. John tells her little of those days, so the scenes in Tab's head are of her own devising. She is ten years old, of an age when the wicked are the heroes. She has outgrown tales of moral children.

In the night, when she had called out in pain, John told her they'd set sail with a black crew. She would be the ship's queen, and with her scepter would guide them to the Indies. Sugar, gold, parakeets, beaches without muck and weeds. He told her of the blue and yellow of the islands and the bone-soaking sun and the wild ladies who brewed potions for their lovers. Tab said she didn't have a lover. John told her to hush and keep still.

Now she watches him fumble through the house, shutting windows and picking up oddments, and wishes she could cut a finer figure as the lady of a ship. She senses her face has become unlike herself, for her father won't look at her straight.

When he is ready, he straps the sack across his back and lifts her, still wrapped in the quilt, and with his foot pulls shut the door of their house. He has left a note for Asa, another for his partner in the store. Helen would tell him to stop, he hasn't thought about a hundred things; what about a brush for Tab's hair? If he paused, he would not be able to move again. He has always been led by a buried instinct, and this brought him his wife and it brought him his daughter, so he trusts it now and doesn't go back for a brush for Tab's hair.

He carries her, stopping along the road to adjust the weight, to the harbor, where the only men are foreign and tired eyed; the saints of the town are making their preparations for church. He lays her gently on the ground, leaning up against a hitching post, and searches out his old mate Tom who docks from time to time. In asking for him among the tattered crews, he faces blank looks and evasions. He heads to a man-of-war still loading provisions, and the captain is gracious enough, but he hasn't seen John's friend.

"Do you need extra hands?"

The captain shakes his head.

"I sailed for two years before the war, then put in good service in the army. I could show you letters," he says, though he has no letters.

"I'm sorry," the captain says.

At a smaller schooner, they ask to see his commendations, so he stands tall and tells them with a bite in his eyes that he has worked ships twice as big and for half shares, and they tell him to move on.

He should go back to his daughter, who might be cold, but he can't walk away from the docks. There are no other paths that he can see. A sailor walks past with a load of nets and a familiar beard, and John asks once more about his friend, who would give him passage on any boat.

The sailor pauses and shifts his load. "Tom been strung," he says. "Caught for something, maybe pinching rations." When John doesn't reply, the sailor walks on, dragging rope behind him.

John squints at the south horizon and a flat sea.

"Tom Waldron? He minded mast for me."

John turns to see a young gentleman with a thin patrician nose smoking a pipe, his free hand playing about his ruffled neck.

"Hezekiah Frith," he says, and tilts his head. "Looking for passage?"

"You wouldn't take me. I've a daughter, ill."

"And where are you bound?"

"Merely away. The Indies."

Frith taps his pipe, then tugs his coat sleeves even. "I'm a man short. What ships have you ridden?"

"The *Mohawk*, the *Victory*, the *Tryon*. But a woman—" John says.

"I have no superstitions there. I like them for a cover."

"And the fever."

"We've a physician aboard. Keep her separate and well aired." Frith glances toward the town road and sees the sagging patchwork bundle. "Little girls," he says. "We're making for Bermuda, catching what we will along the way. You'll take Tom's post for no pay. And no pinching. We run small business, and little harm. We'll drop you on the island, and if you sail again, I'll offer shares. Is that a bargain you'll shake to?"

John sees his dead life breathing. He remembers taking another woman on a ship, carrying Helen—not ill, but a bride—on deck, her smile reflected in the sun, the sea not wide enough to mirror their affection. He is here again, grasping, because he is selfish of his child. He cannot lose another piece of his family. But Tab seems to yearn for this too. In his fatherhood, he is protecting her from death and God and misery, and so does what every man would do. He shakes Frith's hand and takes his daughter on board the *Fanny and Betsy*, a cedar-hulled three-mast sloop. From the deck they can hear Beaufort's church bells ringing.

Inside the small church, Asa sits in the last pew. When the service is finished, he will catch Dr. Halling and take him to the white house along the shore to speak words above his granddaughter. John has lost his faith, but Tab is still a green plant growing, absorbent to the Lord. He could not save his daughter, but he will save this little relic of her. There is still time to redeem himself. He bows his head as the visiting priest sermonizes. He should move to a city, where he could hear the gospel weekly. God is always listening, but Asa cannot hear his voice enough.