



The Weaveling

A Novelette

by Dean Cochrane

for Christine

Olivia shifted on her feet. The spring sun felt good on her back through the fabric of her dress. She flipped her nut-brown braid, as thick as her wrist, over her shoulder.

"Come, Jeb, your lunch will be cold!" she called.

Jeb turned the horse at the end of the furrow and slid the plow into the earth. The big horse settled into the harness and began a steady walk toward Olivia. The wheat stubble, bright pale gold and spotted here and there with the hopeful green of spring grass, disappeared behind the blade under a rolling torrent of black earth. It reminded her of the hot sand of the seashore disappearing under the rolling waves of the oncoming sea, deep and mysterious and glittering with secrets.

Olivia eyed her hands. They were the hands of a frontier farm woman, tanned and strong, but with nails that were marked and short, and fingers made thick with work. Some of the dark earth was still embedded around the nails, though she had scrubbed them thoroughly at the pump. She had spent the morning digging and planting in the garden, pushing her grateful hands into the soil that had been deposited over aeons by the immense river that rolled by endlessly in the distance.

She looked up again as Jeb and the horse drew near. Both were sweating in the spring breeze.

Olivia sniffed the air. She didn't mind the scent of honest perspiration, either that of her husband, or the scent of Prince's coat. He glistened in the noon sun as Jeb removed his bit and put him on a ground-line in the sweet young grass.

Olivia squatted on the grass and opened the parcel, wrapped in a cotton towel. It held a dish, filled with stew, two thick slices of bread, and a wedge of cheese. She stayed, squatting, while he ate, content to watch him. He took the bowl into his lap and ate, his heavy shoulders curling around the bowl like a hawk over its prey. His waist was broader than it had been in the fall.

She didn't mind his waist. They were doing well enough, and it was all right for people to know it.

She looked admiringly at his arms through the shirt. They were thick and powerful.

"Jeb," she whispered, touching the back of his hand as he finished the last of the stew she had made. She wanted to lie under him, pinioned in the sun, the winter done, new life returning to the land. Maybe she would conceive. The ache, always with her now, was even stronger in the spring sun.

"Eh?" He was far away.

"Jeb, come on over here..."

He turned and looked at her. "Are y' daft, woman? Someone might see us! It's unseemly. Sinful, even, to delight in the body when there's work to be done, to indulge the flesh in the light of day! Besides, there's enough plowing to keep me busy for a week. Can y' not wait until dark? I need all the light I can get. I've no time for trifles."

She let her wistful hand fall. He smelled good, salty and strong.

"I can wait until dark, Jeb, of course." She gathered the lunch things and rose to her feet. Jeb lay on his back for a moment, then stretched and climbed to his own feet.

"Come on, Prince," he said. He pulled sharply on the bridle.

Olivia winced, expecting Jeb to strike Prince, as he often did. This time, he didn't, and she spoke as she turned back toward the house.

"When you're done here, would you turn another five furrows on the end of the kitchen garden? I've got more peas than I thought, and they were good last winter."

"Aye, they were. I'll turn 'em at last light, on my way for dinner, what say you?"

"That'll be fine," she said, and walked back to the house, the house in which she had been born, had grown up, been married, and now was childless in her twenty-fifth year.

Quietly, she seethed. Trifles, indeed.

* * *

She turned when she heard the door. Jeb entered, his head, neck and arms clean and wet from the pump at the well, and his feet still damp from the bucket she kept on the doorstep. He made little sound on the board floor her father had made one deep winter, planed by hand and polished to a glow.

There was more stew, with the last of the winter potatoes, and the second to last winter ham. She'd made new bread, and there was butter and wine.

"Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for Thy bounty, and ask Thee to bless this table," he said, and began to eat.

"Bread tastes off," he said.

Olivia sighed. She tasted her slice.

"I'm sorry, Jeb," she said, "I forgot the salt."

He took a pinch from the wooden salt cellar her father had made. He sprinkled it on the bread and butter.

"It's not the first time," he said.

She gave him a second helping of stew, though he really didn't need it. His work was done for the day, and extra food would just sit on his bones.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, her face feeling as if it were made of stone. He had grown quieter in the eight years that they had been married. Where once they talked of children, of cattle, of whether the lower field was better in oats or in wheat, now they passed the scant evenings in quiet before retiring to separate sides of the bed which had belonged to her parents, the bed in which she'd been born, and, in all probability, conceived.

He drank his third cup of wine as he finished the stew. She poured him another, hoping it would soften his mood. His eyes were on the far distance.

"Jeb," she said, "I don't like to think of children as trifles."

He started at her words. "Eh? What are y' talking about?"

"At lunchtime, you said you had no time for trifles. Children aren't trifles."

"We don't have any children."

She saw that the wine had reddened his eyes. Eight years of childlessness chewed at her.

"I know that, Jeb. But children aren't trifles, and before you can have children you must conceive, and that's impossible without... !" Her voice had risen, but she didn't care.

"You can't even bake bread properly!" His voice was loud, too, and slightly tumbled. He seized the half-loaf that remained and shook it in her face. "Why would I want to father children on a woman who can't even bake bread?"

"I forgot the salt, Jeb, that's all. That's a trifle. Forgotten salt, Jeb, is a trifle!"

"I'll not be bearded in my own house!" His hand slammed onto the tabletop, causing the dishes to jump. Her mother's yellow butter dish landed on the floor and broke in two.

Olivia knelt and picked up the two halves of the dish.

"Your house? Your house? This is MY house!" She stood, holding a piece in each hand.

The chair scraped as he rose to his feet. He was on her in a flash, raging.

Olivia backed against the tall counter under the window. A whirl of fear went through her: this had gone very badly, very quickly. Jeb was ranting incoherently, his face twisted with the blind rage of an adolescent.

The nearest neighbor was a mile and a half down the valley.

It happened with astonishing ease. Jeb got closer, menacing her, his arms waving. She brought her hands up to protect herself. There was contact, and she pushed, realizing too late that her hand had clasped itself around the handle of the kitchen knife.

Jeb stopped and looked down, stupidly. She did the same, looking at the butt of the knife, the eight-inch blade buried to the hilt just under his breastbone, the handle at a downward angle. His fingers fumbled for the haft, flailing desperately like wheat in the wind.

He seemed to be having trouble breathing.

"Oh, Jeb, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." she realized that she was babbling. She helped him settle his hand on the haft of the knife. If he could just pull it out, her fevered mind said, it would be all right. His lips were tinged with blue.

He sat on the floor, suddenly, like a toddler, his weight making the floor shake.

"Livvie..." he managed to say, his eyes, glassy, looking at her. Then he fell back.

In shock, she watched his fingers writhe and slow and finally stop. She sank down beside him and sat, waiting for him to move, to rise, to be angry with her again, perhaps to attack her, but he didn't.

She sat in that same position for an interminable time, waiting, her breath coming only reluctantly, until the candles went out one by one. When the last one stopped guttering and even that faint orange glow was gone, she started, as if she had suddenly heard something, and climbed to her feet in the blackness.

She felt along the wall to the bed, and lay down on it to wait until morning, when Jeb would certainly wake up. When the cold light of morning rose, she watched, waiting for the still form to rise, and Jeb to want his breakfast. There was ploughing to do.

The sun was up when she finally rose to her feet again. She felt the clawing fatigue of a sleepless night, but a fruitful clarity as well. Jeb would not get up. Jeb was dead.

She walked over and looked at him. His face was pale and blue-tinted. His eyes were almost closed, but not quite, as if he dozed, made of wax.

She avoided looking at him while she made some tea and went out on the step to drink it. She held the cup in her hands, feeling the heat of the liquid penetrate her living flesh as she looked down the shadowed fields to the hills that glowed brilliant orange in the sunrise.

The tea seemed to clear her thinking. They would never believe her. She would hang at the crossroads as a murderess, a husband-slayer, and be buried in unconsecrated ground, condemned to linger as a tormented spirit for eternity. She mused on the irony, wondering if Jeb would have reached the same conclusion if he stood on this step, her

lifeless body inside on the floor.

The china cup which had held her tea fell to the bare earth beside the step. Olivia buried her face in her hands and wept for a long time, tears of pain and fear and loss. She had long since stopped loving Jeb, if indeed she ever had, as he had grown more reticent and withdrawn, but he was her husband, to whom she had pledged her life, and she wept for the promise of what had been when they had married eight years ago. She wept for her empty womb. She wept for the farm, where the Buttercup the milk cow lowed in distress at her straining udder, and Prince stamped restlessly in his stall.

Most of all, she wept for herself, for her dashed hopes and for the terrifying future that stretched before her like a January night, black and bitter cold. She could not stay here, on the farm her father had built. She would have to leave the house that had been her mother's pride. She would have to flee north into the frontier, or south into the teeming cities at the mouth of the big river. She would have to leave behind her name and her heritage, thin as it was.

She got to her feet. She didn't go back into the house, but went to the little barn and drew the milk from Buttercup's udder in hot silky streams. She pressed her face into the cow's warm musty side.

"I can't leave this," she said out loud. "I can't leave you," she said to Buttercup. The cow turned her head and looked at Olivia with her wet eyes. Olivia set the milk to cool while she fed Prince and mucked out his stall. She fed the hogs and the chickens, and went back to the house.

Squaring her shoulders, she went back through the front door. She looked down at Jeb's dead face. He hadn't moved, which surprised her a little. There were flies buzzing in the congealed blood on the floor.

"Now, Livvie, why didn't you think to do something about that last night?" she said, hearing her mother's voice in her head. "Never leave for tomorrow what you can do today," it said, in cool tones.

"You're right, Mother," Olivia said out loud, though she was really talking to Jeb.

She tied up her skirt and her hair, rolled up her sleeves, and set to work.

She went out to the barn and looked at Prince's draft harness.

"Too much for such a little task," she said. She took a rope and led Prince up to the house.

She crouched by Jeb's head for a long time before she finally mustered the courage to lift him and slid the rope under. He didn't feel like a man any more: he was cold and stiff. She slid the rope under him and knotted it over his chest. Then she went outside and tied a loose knot around Prince's thick neck, down low over his chest muscles.

Not that Prince would even notice 200 pounds. She took Jeb's shovel from the shed, and the Bible from bookshelf.

"Tchkkk..." she said in her throat, and Prince walked beside her. She tried not to listen as Jeb thumped out of the house and down the steps. She could feel the vibration in the earth from each of Prince's steps. She reached out and laid her hand on his neck, feeling the pulse of the mighty heart.

She led him across the rise to the west of the house to the steepest part of the slope. It was sandy here, but more important, it could not be seen from the house.

Olivia knew, as everyone did, that a ghost can only haunt you while you are in sight of its grave, and even then only between midnight and cock-crow.

She dug a depression in the earth while Prince stood patiently, one rear hoof cocked. The sun had passed its zenith, and she was ravenous, when she finally stopped digging.

"Tchkkk..." she said tenderly. Prince walked beside her, treading carefully through the mound of soft earth beside the grave. Behind her, she heard Jeb drop into the hole with a thud.

"Whoa," she said quietly. The horse stopped.

This time she had less trouble touching the body. Jeb looked aggrieved, somehow, his clothing dirty, sand and bits of dry weeds sticking to his dead skin. She looked at the rope: it was irrevocably bloodstained. She untied it from Prince's neck and threw it into the grave. She was shaky now, her hands trembling with hunger, but she set to work again, not looking into the again grave until she was sure that Jeb's face had been covered.

After that, she worked more slowly and carefully, filling in every void and pushing the earth down with her feet. She filled the grave a little above level because the earth would settle. She spread the leftover soil out as best she could and stood, sweating and faint, in the sun.

She opened the Bible, choosing a passage from the Book of Romans, and read:

For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.

Her words fell away on the quiet noon breeze. She led Prince back toward the house, stopping to turn him out into the pasture north of the barn.

She surveyed the bloody mess on the floor before making some more tea and sitting down to eat. She was tired, and longed to lie down to sleep, but there was still work to be done.

When she had eaten, she lit a fire in the stove. She drew water from the well and heated it while she scraped the thickest blood from the floor with a table knife. When the water was hot, she began to scrub. The water in the bucket turned crimson through eight changes and six hours of work, but when she was done, her work-hardened arms trembling from the day's efforts, the floor, and the steps outside, were clean.

Olivia ate a thin supper and went into the yard. There was a long trail dragged in the dust pointing the way to Jeb's grave. She took out her broom and swept the yard, dragging the dust around until the trail close to the house was gone. She eyed the remaining trail that led off through the harrowed field: she'd have to do something about that tomorrow. It stood out among the neat harrow-marks like a sore thumb.

Finally she collapsed into bed and slept.

She rose early the next morning. It was Saturday, and that meant that people

would be going to town. She dressed in Jeb's overalls, rolling up the legs, and his second-best shirt.

"It will have to do," she said to the empty room, "for his best one has a hole in it."

She tied up her hair with a bandana and perched Jeb's broad-brimmed straw hat on top. Then she wrestled Prince into his draft harness and hitched him to the harrow.

"Might as well kill two birds with one stone," she said, "If Jeb is working in the field, then nobody will come asking where he's gone, will they?". Prince didn't say anything. He just plodded on.

She walked in the dust behind the harrow, back and forth across the field, erasing the mark of Jeb's last trip behind the horse bit by bit. When she'd been working for several hours, she saw a wagon passing on the road that went near the river down below the bottom field. She clucked to Prince and tapped him with the reins so that he increased his pace as if he were feeling his oats. She tried to imitate Jeb's rolling gait, working hard to keep up with the horse.

The wagon belonged to Echovar Jones, she saw, and he wouldn't expect Jeb to come down to the road to talk when Prince was taking the bit in his teeth. She tugged at the reins in an irritating fashion until Prince tossed his huge head like an impetuous yearling. The mane that Olivia washed and combed and braided on Saturday evenings, ready for Sunday, flashed in the mid-morning light.

Echovar Jones, perched on the seat, waved. Olivia waved back, putting her arm high and making one emphatic motion in the manner of a working man.

She was perspiring heavily, the dust sticking to her skin, when Jones' wagon finally passed from view.

"Sorry, old boy," she said to Prince. She hissed through her teeth, soft sibilant sounds that she knew would soothe him. He quieted, settling back into the graceful plodding gait that he could maintain all day.

The field having already been harrowed, she was done by early afternoon, and she put Prince into the upper pasture. She made bread and a stew for the Sabbath, then spent a pleasurable couple of hours washing Prince and braiding his mane and tail.

When she returned to the house, she ate, and heated water. Alone, she stripped completely while bathing, enjoying the touch of air and water on her skin, something she would never have done in front of Jeb and his scowling piety.

She arose the next morning, clean for the Sabbath, hitched Prince to the wagon, and drove to church. She sat demurely in her accustomed seat, wondering if the staring parishioners could see the creeping guilt that chewed at her. She heard the high rustle of whispers running through the congregation.

"Where is Brother Jeb this morning, Sister Olivia?" Pastor Andrews asked as he greeted her in the line leaving the church. His clawlike hands cupped hers. "I hope he is well?"

"Oh, quite well, Pastor, thank you," she said, a little louder than was her custom, so as to reach all the ears that strained nearby. "He went to Bridestone to see his brother. To help him with some matters."

"Ah. Our prayers will be with him." Olivia wondered if his eyes, and the eyes of those nearby, flicked to Prince standing patiently in front of the wagon. She thought so, but she couldn't be sure. Bridestone was a long walk, especially for a man who, through marriage, had acquired such a fine horse.

Olivia thought about this as she drove home. It wouldn't have done not to be at church: the neighbors would have been over within an hour of noon to see what was amiss. She couldn't pretend that Jeb was in Bridestone forever, either. Anyone who knew Jeb would not believe that he had left her: he had no interest in women or drink or cards, and he kept to himself and his Bible.

She considered this as she sat in the sun reading later that afternoon. She found that even though she had intended to study Leviticus, she had turned to the Song of Songs:

O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.

Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes.

My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies.

Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bether.

Olivia looked out over the farm. Buttercup grazed in the warmth, while beyond her Prince rolled onto his enormous back in the grass. She felt again the soft ache between her legs, and higher, where she would bear a child. She longed for the touch of a man. For the gift of a child.

"Trifles!" she burst out. She stood. "If he were here, I'd stab him all over again!"

She sat down again, the Bible forgotten in her left hand. Her right went to her mouth as she was overwhelmed with sobs. They would find her out, and she would hang. Her cousin Shem would inherit the farm, and he was hard on animals, harder even than Jeb. Prince would suffer under him. And she would never feel the tiny sweet breath of her own infant. She cried out again, an animal sound of anguish.

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She was up and busy the next morning. She fed the hogs and gathered eggs. She milked Buttercup, and decided that she would make cheese. She eyed the ploughing that had yet to be finished, but ploughing was rough work. If she were really expecting Jeb to return, she wouldn't attempt it. And so she did not. Better not to give the neighbors room to talk.

She had finished her lunch and was scrubbing down the cheese-tub by the pump when she heard the sound of an approaching buggy.

It was the Sheriff. He swung his spare frame down from the seat into the spring dust.

"Afternoon, Missus Chartrand. How are you keeping?"

"Tolerable, Sheriff, tolerable. How about yourself?" Olivia rose and dried her hands on her apron.

"I'm fine, Missus Chartrand, fine." He stood and hooked his thumbs into his belt. Olivia saw that it was a way to keep his hands from wandering around like stray cattle.

"Can I offer you some tea?" She turned and pumped the water trough full of

clean water for the Sheriff's horse.

"No, no..." the Sheriff said, his voice loud in the stillness that followed the rattle, clank, and squeal of the water pump.

"Well, then, if it's not too bold to ask, Sheriff, what brings you out this way?" Olivia hoped that the fear that choked her breast did not show on her face.

He squared his shoulders. "Well, Missus Chartrand, I was just curious. You see, I understand that Jeb has gone to Bridestone. A little odd, that. Why'd he go there afoot?"

"He wanted to leave the horse for me. To go to church of a Sunday, and to make my way to town when I needed to. 'A man's better afoot than a woman', he said."

The Sheriff nodded, his iron-gray moustache turning inward as he pursed his lips.

"I see," he said. "Makes sense. Tell me, then, the why of this: last Saturday, Jeb was seen harrowing the east field. Would have to mean that he left late in the day, wouldn't it? And he'd be hard pressed to make the riverboat going down, now, wouldn't he, if'n it leaves at six o'clock, which it does?"

Olivia was fighting for her life now. She pushed the panic down, finding herself astonished at the speed at which she was thinking.

"I took him. Prince and I took him in the wagon. And before you ask, no, we did not see a soul. Not a soul, Sheriff."

The Sheriff took his hat off and settled it back on in one motion. The peak was discolored at the front, the creamy straw tinted amber, from frequent repetitions of this same motion.

"Well, I reckon that's possible. Possible, Missus Chartrand, but not likely. Not very likely at all." He said it "Ay-tall", in a friendly and jocular sort of way, but his brown eyes were sharp. "And I reckon that Silas will remember whether or not he sold a ticket to Jeb Chartrand just last Saturday."

"Silas? He were pissed as usual," Olivia snapped, lapsing into the rough dialect of men.

"Were he now? How, then, did it come to be that I tossed him into the street from the saloon in the El Dorado Hotel at a quarter-hour to midnight? Silas don't ever start in to drinking but he falls on his face two hours later from it. If'n he started afore six of the clock, he'd never have made it damn near to midnight, now, would he?"

"That don't prove a thing! I'd like to see you try that before a jury!" she said.

Too late, she realized that she'd made a mistake.

"A jury? What in hell (pardon me, ma'am) are you talkin' about, Missus Chartrand? Nobody said anything about a *jury*. Nobody but *you*, now." The edge in the Sheriff's eyes had become a dangerous glitter. He stepped forward. Olivia recognized the set of his shoulders. He was a man on the hunt.

"Don't leave town, Missus Chartrand. That's all I've got to say right now. I got me some inquiries to make. Don't leave town. And I'll know if you try." He pointed a finger at her. He lifted his eyebrows, in what would have been a comic gesture if they weren't laid over eyes so deadly serious.

Olivia's blood was up, her pulse roaring in her ears, as the Sheriff turned to mount his carriage.

"You got nuthin' on me, Johnson Crothers!" she said. "I'll come and go as I damn please!"

The Sheriff took up the reins. His black mare shifted her feet.

"One other thing, Missus Chartrand, which I clean forgot:" His eyes were on her like two gimlets. "Why in tarnation was Jeb spending a Saturday harrowing a field that had been harrowed not three days previous?"

Olivia thought she might faint.

"I don't know that, Sheriff," she said at last. "You'll have to ask him that yourself."

"Oh, I intend to, Missus Chartrand. Good day." The Sheriff tapped the reins against the mare's haunches, and the buggy went back down the track. Olivia followed it with her eyes, numb, as it faded from view leaving only a trail of dust in the air.

She went into the house and sat at the table. She looked at her hands as they laid on the table top, and she thought for a long time. When she was done thinking, she stood.

"Well, Livvie, that's what you're going to have to do. It's your only chance. You'll just have to hope that she has a way to help you."

The next morning, she took the shotgun down from its place on the wall. She took the last winter ham, and her bonnet. She saddled Prince with the saddle that looked too small for him, the one on which her father had lengthened the girth so that it would fit a big draft horse when he had decided not to keep a saddle horse any longer. She wrapped the ham in muslin and a bit of canvas, and tied it to the saddle over Prince's rump.

She led Prince to the fence and climbed up on the rails. Strong she might be, but Prince was too tall for any but a powerful man to mount his saddle unaided, and she couldn't take the wagon where she was going.

It was a comfortable ride, though she felt like a child perched atop the broad back. The horse's long legs covered the ground in spite of his ponderous gait. Due to his great bulk, he walked steadily and smoothly, and she was able to draw her legs up from the position astride and rest them frequently.

She headed west, away from the road, onto the ridge that led up from the valley floor, avoiding the brush-choked draws. She followed the ridge to the hilltop, and then south to a gap where she went west again, then followed a ridge down into the damp bowl known locally as The Backs. Away to the south, she saw the narrow mouth of The Backs, where the road came in, and where the creeks that fed this small side valley backed up to make the marsh.

She followed a small ridge down into the swampy land, making for the cluster of trees that were spoken of in scandalized whispers in town.

When she arrived, she was surprised to find a small, neatly kept house of split logs and mud. There was no outward sign that black magic was practiced there. This place smelled of hemlock, dry moss, and woodsmoke. Woodsmoke tinted with dark purposes, she thought, possibly, but that might have been her imagination.

"Hello the house!" she called, not wanting to get down from the horse until it was necessary.

A short time later, a willowy figure appeared in the doorway.

"I'm sorry," Olivia said, "I'm looking for Grante Morna. I must have missed a turn somewhere."

"Don't be sorry. You found her, for she is me." the woman said. She had a lilting accent that Olivia had not heard before.

Olivia walked Prince over to the side of the house, where there as a chopping block. She climbed down.

"I need help," she said.

"Everyone who comes here does," Grante Morna said. "What have you to offer me in payment, should I be able to help you? And I warn you that I might not."

Olivia took the ham off the saddle.

"I have only this to offer you," she said.

Grante Morna looked at it. "It will do," she said, "dependin' on what you want of me. Come in." She turned and went into the house.

Olivia followed. Grante Morna put the ham down on the pine table that sat under the window.

"Now, tell me, what is it you wish?" she said.

Olivia hesitated. The woman in front of her did not look like Olivia's idea of a voodoo-woman. She was tall and lithe, her skin like good tea with milk, her eyes large and clear and startling warm grey. Her dark hair, tightly waved, was drawn back in a thick mass on the back of her neck. The weight of the knot emphasized the elegant length of the woman's throat.

"I need a man," Olivia said, as much to the woman's eyes as anything else.

"A man? A love potion? Won't work, my dear, no matter what no one say. Magic can do many t'ings, can't do that."

"No, not a love potion. I need to make a man. A man has died, and I need to replace him."

Grante Morna's eyebrows lifted. "Died?"

Olivia tried to meet her eyes squarely. Jeb had, in fact, died.

"Yes, died."

"Died. Of the fever, no doubt," Grante Morna said. She drew out the word 'fever' - 'feeeevaaaah', and wiggled her hips crudely. "It don't matter, my dear, you can tell Grante Morna. Plenty town woman come here for de same 'ting."

"Plenty?" Olivia felt faint. "Men, too?"

"Plenty enough woman. More than one, and more than you. No men. We," Grant Morna pointed her long forefinger rabidly back and forth between Olivia and herself, "can make men. Only God can make woman!" She laughed.

Grante Morna indicated the straight-backed chair across the table from her. Olivia sat, allowing her breath to come out slowly.

"I'm guessin' that you got relatives askin', or maybe some lawman, so you don't want a long song. What would you ask me?"

"Will he last?"

"Of course him will last! Him be good as any man came from woman."

"Will he be... who he was?"

"No. Spirit of him is gone. You will have only de appearance of him. You must be ver' careful: him will be bound to you. Him will do what you say. Him will work to please you. Him will take the t'ought from you head. If he was a violent man, he will not be any longer. If he was a lazy man, a drunken man, a man with de fevah and wandering eye, he won't be like dat no more. So relations will wonder."

She leaned forward.

"Usually, best thing to do is to take him to church with you, have him find God. That explain a lot for most folks."

"He was a good Christian."

"Then him stop going. Lots of folks be happy with that, too."

Olivia nodded. The longing in her belly prompted her further.

"Will he be fertile? And..." she searched for the word, "...strong?"

Grante Morna smiled slowly. "As you make him." She placed her elbow on her crotch and raised her forearm, clenching her fist. "He be strong if you want him so."

Olivia considered. On one hand, she was facing the rope and unconsecrated burial resulting in her ghost stuck to the earth forever. On the other, black magic, and maybe eternal damnation. The only difference was that one came later than the other. Damnation deferred.

"Very well," Olivia said.

"One question from me for you," Grant Morna said, "The body, do you still have him?"

"No..." Olivia said.

"You must get it. Or find it. You need a lock of him hair for de magic to work."

"I can get it."

"Good," Grante Morna replied. She took the ham from the table and placed it into the pantry-board that was against the far wall. "I will make de magic now." She went to the door in the back of the main room in which they had been talking.

Olivia rose to follow her.

"No, it is better you stay here," Grante Morna said, holding up a hand.

Olivia settled back into the chair. Grante Morna went through the door. Olivia caught glimpses, and snatches of sound and smell, of unspeakable things in glass jars, or dried in dark-stained wooden boxes.

At last Grante Morna came out and closed the door firmly behind her. In her hand she held a small bundle wrapped in burlap. She sat in the chair opposite Olivia again, and put the bundle on the table between them.

"Here is what you must do. You must get some hair from the head of the man who has died. You must get some grass, some good strong saw-grass to make him skin, and some eart' to make him flesh, and some stone, to make him stone, and some salt, and some blood to give him to live. An' you need dis." She pushed the bundle toward Olivia's right hand.

"Now, after de sun has gone down, weave the saw-grass into him skin. Don't matter how big you make him, but leave him chest open for later. Fill him wit' eart', good clean eart' to make him strong. Put in two stones, good round ones, to make a man of him. Put in salt to make him a good man. Into him head, put de hair from de dead man's head. Don't need too much, just a lock will do."

Grante Morna leaned forward intently.

"Now listen close, for dis is important. When all is done, light a fire in de night. A good clean fire made with one kind wood. Don't matter what kind. Put de magic," Grante Morna's slender finger pointed to the bundle that she had prepared and that now lay, malodorous and dark, near Olivia's hand, "into dem flames. When de smoke rises, hold de weaveling into it. Stand for long time, hold him in de smoke, until de fire burn down."

"When de last flame is gone, make a hollow in the eart' in him chest. Put in some ember and ash from de fire. Close up him chest. Pour fresh hot blood on him. Don't matter what kind, but must to be fresh. Then close your eyes and turn around t'ree

times, saying de man's name each time. The t'ird time you say de name, your man be dere."

Olivia felt ill. The packet near her hand smelled awful. "No magic words?" This had to be a sin. A mortal sin.

"No magic words. Dem's from fairy stories."

Olivia rose to her feet. "Thank you, Grante Morna. Are you sure that the ham is sufficient payment?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders. "No matter what, payment is sufficient."

Olivia took her leave and used the split-rail fence to climb into the saddle.

"Tonight be a good night for magic," Grante Morna said. She was standing in the doorway, shading her eyes from the midday sun. "Come back now, you want anything, here?" She said it 'heah', in the manner of the people from the South.

Olivia turned as she reached the brush at the far edge of the clearing. Grante Morna was still standing in her doorway, watching. Olivia raised her hand in farewell before the cabin disappeared. On the way home, she gathered an armload of sawgrass, flat-bladed, tough, and dry, and two smooth round stones from the creekbed. To make a man of him, she thought. She chose large ones.

That evening, she wove the sawgrass into a rough doll. She put it into her laundry basket, then added the stones, the magic, and her second-best kitchen knife, the one with the notch near the tip. She took a little salt from the salt cellar and wrapped it in a bit of paper, and put it into the basket with the kitchen matches. She collected some split sticks of sugar pine from the woodpile, and put them into the basket. They would burn quickly and easily. She took the storm-lantern from its place on the peg by the door, and put it into the basket as well.

When it was dusk, she went to the henhouse, and picked an old hen who was destined for the stewpot. She bound her feet with twine, and put her in the laundry basket with the rest of the things. She took the shovel and the laundry basket, and walked across the field to the slope where she had buried Jeb.

She laid the fire ready for the match on the bare sand not far from the grave. She had no fear of being seen here, facing as it did onto the blank hills. She looked at the grave in the fading light, trying to remember which end held Jeb's head. She had walked Prince down from the field above, and the rope had been under Jeb's arms...

She began digging at the downslope end of the grave. She was not in a rush: she had until midnight before Jeb's ghost could rise from the ground, and by then she would be long out of sight. She dug down until the shovel struck something. She reached into the dirt and felt, pulling her hand back when she realized that she had struck Jeb's face. She scrubbed her hand on the sand, trying to erase the feel of his cold eyebrow, and the cut that the shovel had made on the bridge of his nose.

She dug a few inches further out, then took the knife and cut off a lock of hair. She assembled the doll as Grante Morna had told her, her breath coming in tortured gasps. She felt the presence of the open grave behind her, pressing on her back, and even though it was at least two hours to midnight, she kept glancing back to the open hole, half-expecting to see pale dead Jeb crawling out, the shovel-mark on his nose gaping open wetly.

Finally the doll was ready. She lit the lantern and refilled the grave, averting her eyes until Jeb's features had disappeared. That done, she lit the fire and, when it was going well, she laid the magic where it was hottest. She took the doll and held it out

into the smoke which rose as a rancid column into the clear still sky.

How long she stood she didn't know. Her arms began to burn, and she was forced to shift her position often in an attempt to relieve them. She felt sweat oozing from her hairline: she was of necessity standing close to the fire, and the heat and the effort of holding her arms out for a long period were a strain. The hen, securely tied to the basket, let out occasional squawks and flapped her wings in an attempt to escape.

The moon rose in the east, and still the black smoke poured out of the fire. The flames, she thought, should have long since ceased, the wood consumed entirely, but they continued to leap, bright orange and yellow.

The moon was well up when the last tiny flicker of flame died away. Olivia's arms were rigid bars of pain. Her shoulders burned. The muscles in her back were cramped into clusters of agony. Her buttocks and legs were taut with pain such that she nearly fell when she moved at last.

She laid the doll on the ground and opened the hollow in its chest. Her hands were shaking, both from the relieved strain in her arms, and with fear. She took the shovel and retrieved a few embers from the fire. She tipped them carefully into the place she had made in the doll's chest, then closed the earth over it and tied the skin shut with three more pieces of sawgrass.

The hen fluttered wildly, but Olivia was used to butchering chickens, and she removed the chicken's head with one cut of the kitchen knife. She held the bird's neck while she dribbled the hen's blood on the doll, head to foot and back again, then tossed the spasming body aside.

Taking a shuddering breath, she shut her eyes tight, and started to turn.

"Jebediah Chartrand."

She stumbled, her legs stiff with standing.

"Jebediah Chartrand."

Her heart beat like the wings of the slaughtered hen.

"Jebediah Chartrand."

She opened her eyes.

"Jeb!" she said, nearly stumbling again with surprise and fatigue.

"Olivia," he said. She reached out and laid her hand on his arm in wonder. He was as solid and warm as any man she had ever touched.

"I've been gone for a little while, I think," he said. It was Jeb's voice, sure enough, but softer and kinder. He reached for her with gentle, strong hands and drew her to him. "I've missed you, my darling." He lowered his head and kissed her. She let her hands go where they wished, and they slid themselves up his broad back to his shoulder blades. He smelled like Jeb. He tasted like Jeb. But better.

"Come on," she said, when he raised his head. "It's late." She bent to pick up the lantern. The Weaveling laid shovelfuls of earth onto the remains of the fire. The two of them walked back to the house in silence. Olivia hung the chicken's corpse in the little shed by the door, ready for her to clean it in the morning.

"Yes, I've been gone a little while," he said when they stepped through the door. He circled the floor, touching the walls, the foot of the bed, the table, with tender fingers.

"We should go to bed," she said, "there's ploughing to be done tomorrow."

He brightened, smiling at her. "Ploughing? Good." That was unlike Jeb, who had always complained about working the plough. He went to the left side of the bed,

and hooked a thumb under his suspenders.

"Uh, Jeb?" Olivia was hesitant.

"Yes, my dear?"

"That's my side of the bed, remember?"

"Oh, of course!" He laughed, and went to the other side.

He is The Weaveling for certain, Olivia thought, for Jeb would never do such a thing, and I don't think I've heard Jeb laugh in five years. She turned to put the kitchen knife for washing, and when she turned back, the Weaveling was standing naked.

She gasped aloud: she had never seen Jeb completely nude. The Weaveling pulled back the comforter and slid into bed.

"Are you coming, my darling?" he said. He propped himself up on one elbow, and watched her with strange eyes. "Oh, stay out here where I can see you."

Olivia stood in place, feeling the oddness. Jeb had never seen her naked, either. She turned toward him and watched his eyes as she undressed and hung her clothes neatly in the walnut wardrobe that had been her mother's, and her mother's before that.

"You won't need that now," the Weaveling said. Olivia stood, shocked, holding her night-dress. The Weaveling pulled back the cover on her side of the bed. He watched her as she walked over, acutely self-conscious, and laid the night-dress at the foot of the bed.

She slid in between the sheets, and he immediately pulled her against his body. She marveled at the thrill that ran through her as their skins contacted each other.

As the Weaveling kissed her throat with soft lips, she decided that he was no longer the Weaveling, but was Jeb, the Jeb that had never been; the Jeb that she had wanted eight years ago.

* * *

Olivia stretched as gently as she could. Jeb's face lay, asleep, against the pillow on the other side of the bed, softly lit by the dawn light. She examined his face. It looked like Jeb, but different, younger, and it took her a little time to realize that it was because his face was relaxed. Even in sleep, the old Jeb had worn a scowl.

She stretched again, reveling in the delicious feeling of the bedsheets against her naked skin. She suppressed a giggle at the scandal of sleeping nude. She climbed out of the bed and stood for a moment feeling the cold morning air before dressing.

Out in the yard, she pumped water into the bucket and spun in a circle, dizzy with the previous night's pleasure. She pressed her hands against her lower belly. The melancholy ache was gone. She danced as she carried the bucket inside to prepare breakfast.

"Good morning, my angel," Jeb said. He rose from the bed and stretched before padding over to kiss her. He went to the stove and laid the fire.

"That's woman's work," she said in a light tone. Teasing, testing. Old Jeb would have barked at the suggestion. New Jeb merely smiled broadly, his face lit by the flames that began to eat into the clean wood.

"Work is work," he said, "no matter who does it."

Later, when she brought his lunch to him, she sat in the unploughed strip that separated this field from the next one and watched him. Prince plodded toward her in his graceful way. He went past, and Jeb said 'whoa' to him, gently, not at all like the

impatient tone he had used before, and then he went up to the horse's huge head and stroked him before removing the bit and tying the grazing line to Prince's bridle.

"He's a fine horse, Olivia," he said as he sat down. They ate the bread and cheese she had brought, and talked of plans for the coming year while they drank tea from the little stone jug she had filled.

"I supposed I should get back to work," Jeb said, "for when this is done it will need harrowing, and then I'll be planting." He looked sidelong at her. "Although Prince has been working like a champion this morning. I wonder what we might do while he rests a bit more..."

She giggled like a schoolgirl as he pulled her down to the grass in the warm noon sun. "Jeb, somebody might see!" Her protests were faint as her heart bounded with delight. She laughed with pure joy as his body covered hers.

"Let them," he murmured into her ear, after, his breath sweet.

But it was safe, for it was Tuesday, and nobody ever came and went along the road that passed a quarter-mile from them on a Tuesday.

The next day, Jeb was out early, the harrow moving over the freshly ploughed furrows like a hairbrush over tangled locks. He spoke soothingly to Prince, and didn't strike him even once. Olivia watched them, happy satisfaction in her chest. Harrowing was light work and Prince could go from sunup to sundown.

As she was preparing lunch with the new bread she had made, she heard the light brisk step of a small mare, and the rumble of a buggy. She went to the door.

"Good morning, Sheriff," she said. Her heart rose into her throat, threatening to choke her.

"Morning, Missus Chartrand." The sheriff stepped down from the buggy, his boots shooting little squirts of dust from the sides. Olivia dried her hands on her apron as she went to the pump. She filled the trough with fresh water.

"Thank you," the sheriff said. His mare walked the few steps to the trough and began to drink.

"Did you say, Missus Chartrand, that Jeb had gone to Bridestone?"

"I did, Sheriff."

"Well, that's awful strange, Missus Chartrand, because I sent a telegram off to Bridestone, and Sheriff Clumpus there tells me that no Jeb Chartrand has showed up there. In fact Jeb Chartrand's brother Abe Chartrand hasn't heard from him in a two-month." The sheriff reached into the rear seat of his buggy and removed a set of iron manacles.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to come with me, Missus Chartrand," he said "until I can determine just where Jebediah Chartrand is laying. I'm guessing, Missus Chartrand, that it is somewhere over in that direction, beyond the field that someone harrowed twice before it was planted." The sheriff's long hand gestured out in the general direction that Jeb's body, his old body, was lying.

"Jeb Chartrand isn't laying anywhere, Johnson Crothers. He's out harrowing the north field right now," Olivia said. She pointed, and the sheriff followed her finger out to the plume of dust that rose over the slope that divided the house from full view of the north field.

The sheriff dropped the manacles back in the buggy and set out for the field, Olivia behind him. She tried, and failed, to keep up with the strides of his long legs. They reached the edge of the field and waited while Prince plodded toward them, his

hooves, as big as dinner plates, raising huge puffs of dust.

"Whoa," Jeb said. Prince coasted to a stop and champed at his bit while Jeb walked through the cloud of dust.

"Morning, Sheriff," he said. He dropped the kerchief he was wearing over his nose and mouth. His face was grey with dust, his eyebrows like freshly turned furrows.

"Jeb," the sheriff said. He stuck out his hand. Jeb took it and shook, the single up-and-down motion of men who are familiar with one another. "Didn't you go over to Bridestone just last Saturday?"

Olivia's heart lurched. She waited for the Weaveling to reveal himself.

"Well, Sheriff, I believe I did," Jeb said, slowly, "but I believe that I stopped short of there and came back, missing my Olivia. What the hell has my brother ever done for me?"

"You believe you did? If'n you did, why don't Silas remember you arriving on the river-boat?"

"Because I came back through Ludlow's Ferry. Saved the cost of the riverboat fare."

The sheriff looked back and forth between them.

"The trip seems to have agreed with you, Jeb. You're looking happier than I remember you. But now, tell me, why did you harrow your south field twice?"

Jeb's eyebrows shot up. Dust fell from them in little trails. "Twice? I don't recall..." His eyes shifted to Olivia, caught her pleading look. "Oh, that. Well, we'd missed some spots, Prince and I, and I just wanted to fix it. Always believed that a man should do things right."

The sheriff looked back and forth between them again. "Thing is, Jeb, I don't remember that about you a-tall. I don't remember you saying that, and I don't remember you acting like you believed that." He turned and started back toward the house, and his horse and buggy.

"Still," he said, as he stopped and turned "you're alive, anybody can plainly see that, and odd as you seem to be, that's really all there is to it, ain't that so?" He turned back and walked swiftly toward his buggy, moving through the grass like an oversized stork.

"Oh, Jeb..." Olivia said, when the sheriff had reached his buggy and climbed in.

"Funny thing is, I don't remember harrowing the south field twice. I remember doing it last week, on maybe Tuesday or Wednesday. But I surely don't remember doing it again." He shook his head. "And I don't remember going to Bridestone, either, although I remember people talking about it."

He looked at her. The sheriff's buggy disappeared below the slope of land as he reached the road that would take him south into town.

"Dust's nice and soft, and warm," he said. He thumbed his suspenders off his shoulders.

It was indeed. She decided that she would worry about washing her hair later.

* * *

That evening, she made potatoes in ham fat with fresh greens from the creek banks. Jeb came in at last light, his dark hair gleaming with clean water from the pump.

"Smells good, Olivia," he said. He settled into his chair and started to eat.

"Needs salt, though," he said. He opened the salt cellar and sprinkled his plate with crystals. He took a bite, and then added more. Olivia looked at the plate, the food nearly obscured beneath a layer of white.

"That's enough, Jeb, surely," she said.

He looked at her, and she felt a momentary tiny shiver. "Go on," she said, "have as much as you want."

"Thank 'ee," he said, and took another spoonful from the cellar.

Later, they sat in the light of the lamp. He read aloud from a thick book of poetry while she knitted, making next winter's socks. Her needles moved to the music of the words which Jeb read, she thought, as if born to the stage.

After a while his words faltered and became leaden. Olivia glanced at the clock. It was a few minutes to midnight, but it was spring yet, and the nights were still long.

"You've been reading a long time, husband," she said. "You must be tired."

"Aye," he said. He put the book of poetry down, and as the clock began to toll midnight, he picked up the Bible and began to read silently. He read while she prepared for bed and slipped nude between the sheets. After that, he stood and extinguished the lamp. He came around to the side of the bed and stood for a short time, as if undecided about something, but then he joined her, and his mouth and hands warmed her just as they had earlier that day in the dust.

As he threw back his head at the peak, she thought she saw a shadow, a scar, over the bridge of his nose in the moonlight that came through the window, and her hands on his broad chest thought there was a mark just under the breastbone. But she thought that she must have imagined them and they were not there the next morning, when Jeb was once again happy and smiling, pulling her back into bed when he awoke, and tickling her until she shrieked with laughter and begged him to stop.

They worked all that day. Olivia planted beans and corn and peas in the garden. At noon Jeb came up to the house for lunch. They made love on the bed in the sunlight from the open door, and then worked together to plant long rows of potatoes in the garden patch. Jeb sang to her as he wielded the shovel.

The sun was near the western horizon when they stopped. They were both perspiring from work.

"Come on, Olivia, let's get cleaned up and have some dinner. A good day's work!" Jeb said. He playfully slapped her bottom with a filthy hand.

"Jebediah Chartrand!" she said to him, in the coquettish way that some of the women that she knew took with their men. "I'll thank you to keep your dirty hands from my person!"

"I guess I'd better clean them, then," he said, and scooped her up in his arms. He carried her over to the pump, and put her down, starting to strip off his clothes.

"Come on, then, Olivia," he said.

"Jeb!" she said, pretending scandal.

He pulled off his underclothing and stood next to her. His fingers, gentle, went to the buttons at the back of her dress. He pulled her close, kissing her, as he slowly stripped her bare.

She shrieked as the first bucketful of water poured over her. "It's cold!" But she scrubbed herself, and Jeb's back, and shrieked again with laughter with each bucket of water that raised a delightful tingling on her skin.

Later, she lay exhausted on the bed. It was nearly full dark, and Jeb's head

rested between her breasts, the both of which, head and breasts, were still wet from the pump.

"I've got to make us some dinner," she said. Jeb groaned. "Oh, Olivia, I'm too worn out with love for you to move," he said. She rose and lit the lamp. She made sandwiches, which they ate while drinking tea. After there was pie, and then Jeb yawned hugely.

"Early bedtime tonight," he said. He took his clothes off and climbed into bed, turning to look at her. He watched her while she did as she had before, undressing in the lamplight, and then coming to join him.

He rested a hand on her abdomen.

"I hope our work will pay off," he said. "A son, perhaps, tall and strong? Or a daughter, as beautiful and lyrical as her mother?" He pressed gently.

"It's possible, Jeb," she said. "I feel... different. But I won't know for sure for a little while."

"Oh, Olivia," he said, pulling her tight against him, "that would be wonderful." He kissed her, then fell asleep with his head on her shoulder. She drowsed contentedly, drifting in and out of consciousness, the scent and warmth of him enveloping her, before finally succumbing to a deep sleep.

She awoke before cockcrow. The dim blue light of predawn crept through the window. It was cold in the house. She felt the chill through the comforter. She rolled over to snuggle up next to Jeb.

She recoiled. Jeb's skin was cool to the touch. She slid back out of the bed and stood naked on the floor. Something else was wrong, but she couldn't place it. She pulled on her nightdress and crept around the bed. Jeb's face bore a scowl, a look of disapproval she well knew, and there was a livid mark across the bridge of his nose.

Her heart leapt into her throat with sickening force. The room wheeled around her and she fought the urge to vomit. In panic, she fled out of the door into the yard. Seeking refuge, she went to the outhouse and sat until the sun came up. When the light of the sunrise came through the gaps in the outhouse door, she stood and went back into the house.

Jeb was still asleep where he had lain. She quietly took her second best knife out of the drawer and put it on the table near to hand. She crept around the bed again, and started in surprise. The livid mark on Jeb's nose was gone, or, more likely, had never been there. The scowl, too, was no longer present, if indeed it had ever been.

"A dream. A nightmare," she said aloud. She put the knife back where it belonged and lit the morning fire. She stood close to it, and put more wood on, warming her skin.

"Good morning, my angel Olivia," Jeb said. He rose and came over to her to kiss her good morning. He was every bit as warm as he should be, she thought, and in the full clear light of morning, there was no mark anywhere on his face, nor any under his breastbone.

"You look a little peaked, my darling," he said, taking her face in his hands and tilting it back so that he could see her clearly.

"It's... nothing. A nightmare woke me early."

"A nightmare. That means you aren't working hard enough." He laughed. "Old wives' tales."

She laughed with him as she slid the first slices of ham onto the griddle. The

scent banished the last of the night fear, and she made coffee before tipping eggs into the pan to cook. They smiled and talked as they ate in the sunshine.

"I'm going to plant the wheat today," Jeb said. "Looks like a good day for it, clouds building up in the south, so I think we'll get rain before the week is out."

"I can't help you, for today is laundry day," Olivia said. It meant a heavy day of work for her, too.

After breakfast, Jeb loaded the seed onto the big wheelbarrow and hung the seed spreader around his neck.

"I'll see you at lunch. Will you be so kind as to bring it down to me?" he asked as he passed by. She was pumping buckets full of water to be heated for the laundry tub.

"I will," she said, and turned to her work. She tried to imagine washing small clothes, little bonnets or sundresses, or short trousers soiled with the dirt that small boys get into.

She heated water, and worked the clothes on the scrubbing board. Her hands grew red and swollen with the heat of the water and the work, but she kept on until the whites were snow-white, and Jeb's undergarments were clean, uniform grey. She worked until the stains were out of her aprons, and her hems were once again the same color as the rest of the dress.

She hung the clothes to dry on the long line between the house and the post near the cherry tree, and then it was time to make lunch. She made sandwiches of ham and mustard and preserved peppers, and placed them with the remains of last night's pie with a jug of cold milk and two mugs.

"Now, how am I going to carry this lot?" she asked of the wind. Spying her laundry basket, she swept it up and put it on the counter. She lifted the jug of milk, and was about to place it in the basket when something white caught her eye.

Frowning, she freed the patch from the weave of the basket. It was paper, she saw, not a scrap of cloth carelessly torn from a shirt or an apron as she had first thought.

"What in the world?" she said to the wind that came through the open kitchen window. She unfolded the paper, and salt cascaded onto the countertop.

"Salt..." she said, recognizing the packet at last. It was the salt that she had prepared on the night that she had made the Weaveling. "But that means... what did Grante Morna say? Salt, to make a good man of him." She felt her blood run cold.

"Oh, Livvie, Livvie, you fool, what have you done? Forgot the salt one too many times, you have," she said. She went to the dresser and dug under the clothes in the bottom drawer. Down at the bottom was Jeb's pistol, a heavy Gault .44 from war days. She flipped open the cylinder and saw the shiny brass cartridges, yellow and heavy as butter. Five of them filled the cylinder. She stood and tucked the pistol into her dress pocket underneath her apron. It banged against her thigh as she swept up the salt and put the lunch things into the laundry basket. It continued to thump comfortingly against her all the way out to the south field.

Jeb was walking swiftly over the harrowed earth, turning the handle on the seed spreader. A fan of seed spread out in front of him in an even spray. He looked up and saw her. He raised his hand.

"I'll just finish this load, and I'll come. Won't be a minute," he said.

He dusted his hands as he came over. Olivia watched him carefully, but there

was no sign that he was anything but the cheerful, loving Jeb she had had since Monday night. Still, her hand crept down to the revolver. He ate the last of his second sandwich and took a long drink of milk. He picked up the pie, and two forks, holding one out to her. He raised his eyebrows comically.

She laughed, and her hand came away from the butt of the pistol. She took the fork, and they shared the last half of the pie, good and rich with the last of the fall apples seasoned with butter and cinnamon. His eyes smiled as their fork-encumbered hands touched.

After the pie was done, he kissed her, and ran his hand over her breasts wistfully.

"I've got to get back at it," he said. "Look at that sky." He climbed to his feet and filled the seed spreader from the sack on the wheelbarrow. Olivia packed the lunch things back into the basket and went back to the house, the pistol bumping her with every step.

In the house, she looked round, then slid the pistol under the mattress on her side of the bed. She looked south at the clouds building up, and set the irons to heat. She retrieved the sweet-smelling clothes from the clothesline, and started on the least pleasant of Thursday's chores. She pressed the clothes, sprinkling them with clean water and switching irons frequently. The heat in the kitchen was fierce in spite of the open windows and door.

The wind came up, pushing cool air into the house. Olivia wiped her forehead gratefully and glanced out the window. The clouds were still away to the south. She hung her last petticoat in the wardrobe and put water on to heat for dinner. Jeb would likely work until dark.

When it got dark enough, she lit the lamp, and was thinking about lighting the lantern to go see what Jeb was doing when she heard the pump. The soup was bubbling on the stove. She slid the pan of biscuits into the oven.

"Good evening, my angel," Jeb said. He put his arms around her from behind. She tried to control the stiffening of her back, and evidently failed. "What's wrong, Olivia?"

"Nothing," she said, turning toward him. He was shirtless and wet to the waist from the pump. "I'm a bit tired, is all."

"Well, then, sit, and I'll serve dinner." He smiled widely.

"Oh, no, Jeb, that's not necessary." She examined his face for signs of a mark on the bridge of his nose, but there was nothing in the soft light of the lamp.

"I insist, Olivia." He led her to the kitchen table and held the chair out for her. She accepted it, noting as she did that it was the one closest to the bed, and the pistol. He put two bowls of soup on the table, and followed them with a plate of biscuits. He put the cutlery down and handed her a napkin.

"Should I say Grace?" she asked. He waved his hand dismissively.

"I tell you, Olivia, I'm going to have to work tomorrow. I'd like to get the rest of the north field sown before Sunday..." He continued to talk between mouthfuls of soup and biscuit. She looked at him sidelong, examining his face for signs of the scowl. There were none.

Jeb looked up and caught her.

"What is troubling you, my angel?" he asked. His voice was tender, like she imagined her own would be when she was addressing her child. "Is it the soup? The

soup is very good." He reached out a hand and caressed her wrist.

She looked at his smiling face for a moment. She thought, fleetingly, of the revolver under the mattress. It seemed like a foolish overreaction.

"Oh, Jeb, I had the nightmare, and I'm having trouble shaking it. I'll be all right."

"Tell me about it. That will help, won't it?" His eyes, which had for years been flat and closed, were warm inviting brown in the lamplight.

She tried to overlay the scowling face of old Jeb with this new one, and failed. It had been a dream, she thought, a foolish woman's dream. And I nearly shot him over it. I nearly killed him a second time.

"No, Jeb. Talking about it will just bring it back, and it's fading now. I'll be fine in a little bit. Now, you go sit while I clean up." She rose and took the dishes from the table. She glanced over at Jeb from time to time while she washed them. He was reading the book of poetry, and she caught him smiling once or twice, and when he did, her eyes thought they caught fleeting shadows of children playing at his feet.

He rose from the chair as she dried the last dish. She polished it carefully before placing it in the sideboard. When she turned, Jeb took her in his arms. He put his left hand on her waist and, with his right, he lifted her hand. She recognized the starting position of the waltz. He began to hum "The Night Bloom Sings", which was popular on the river boats and in the sweltering cities downriver.

Olivia laughed for joy. They stepped around the floor, her voice joining his. Her skirts swept the boards, first on one side, then the other, as she leaned in time to the music that they made. When "The Night Bloom" was done, they danced to "My Solitary Rose" and "The Sounds of Twilight" and "Violets of Spring".

They fell on the bed. He covered her face with kisses. His insistent hands pulled at her garments, and she yielded readily, her own hands busy undoing his shirt. Their bodies touched occasionally until they lay fully pressed against each other. Olivia reveled in the feel of his warm body against hers, pushing herself against him as if trying to submerge herself beneath his skin.

He slid himself down her body and placed his head between her thighs.

"Jeb..." she gasped, in protest, but the first touch of his mouth caused her head to fall back, and thereafter she wasn't able to speak. She could only make inarticulate sounds of pleasure until her body was wracked with spasms and she fell back against the coverlet.

Without a word, Jeb moved over her and when he moved to enter her, she sighed with exquisite happiness. She clutched his naked hips, and abandoning all propriety, pulled at him as hard as she could, her hands splayed on his back, or his buttocks. She wanted to take him inside her, all the way, consume him, and keep him with her forever. She ground her hips against him, and cried aloud when he grunted and breathed 'Oh, Olivia... Olivia... Olivia' in her ear.

They lay tangled together while their blood cooled. His finger traced her ear.

"I love you, Olivia." The words shot through her like a cannon, words that she had never heard from a man.

"I love you, too, Jeb," she said, and as she said them she realized that they were true words. She had never loved old Jeb, and she was certain that he had never loved her. He had wanted the farm. This wasn't old Jeb, this was new Jeb, and he wasn't the Weaveling any more. Old Jeb didn't care to dance. Old Jeb didn't want children, not

really. Old Jeb had little concern for her, Olivia. This was Jeb, the new Jeb, and she loved him.

Finally it grew too cool in the room, and Jeb lifted her tenderly and put her under the comforter. He doused the lamp and got in. She snuggled against him while their bodies warmed the clean cotton sheets. The last thing she remembered as she drifted off to sleep was his voice humming "The Sounds of Twilight", very low. She could feel the vibrations of the low notes in his chest.

She woke suddenly. For a moment, she couldn't find the reason for it. She shook her head as the clock struck one. One AM, she thought, fighting through the thickness of sleep. Too late to be awake. There was work to do in the morning.

There was something wrong. She pushed her hand out, feeling for Jeb, but the bed beside her was empty and cold. She shivered.

There was something else. She sat up, gagging. The room was filled with a choking odor that caught heavily at the back of her throat. She reached toward the foot of the bed, looking for her nightdress, but remembered that she had come to Jeb's arms without it.

"Livvie..."

It was Jeb's voice, but it sounded different. She gagged again at the stench.

"Why'd you do it, Livvie?" Something moved in the moonlight.

In general form, it looked like Jeb. But not like the Jeb who had been in bed with her until recently. As the figure moved into the moonlight, she felt cold terror rush into her.

There was a wet, open gash on the bridge of Jeb's nose. His clothing was tight, his limbs swollen with decay. The chest was dark with clotted, rotting blood, caked with dirt.

She screamed, and, crouching beside the bed, scrabbled frantically for the revolver. Jeb continued forward as she leveled the revolver and pulled the trigger until the gun was empty. The space between them filled with gunsmoke, silver-blue in the moonlight. Bits of sawgrass and earth spattered on the kitchen floor.

Jeb kept coming. He lunged.

She scrambled sideways. Jeb's boots slipped on the rag rug she had made when she was thirteen years old, and he crashed down beside her. She rolled and climbed to her feet, then ran for the door, her naked back crawling with fear. It spurred her on with frantic heels.

She slammed the door behind her and sprinted for the barn, sobbing with terror. She pulled the slide, looking behind her, and opened the door. She willed her eyes to see in the darkness, to find Prince's saddle. She felt for it, laid her hand on it, and pulled it from the peg on which it hung with a grunt. But it was too dark. She'd never get it on. She went to the barn door and closed it slowly, quietly.

"Please, God, help me," she mouthed under her breath. "Keep him from finding me. Hide me for a few minutes."

She felt beside the door and found the lantern and the matches in their spot. She lit the lantern and turned the wick down.

"Livvie!" Jeb's voice, thick and menacing, came from the direction of the house. "It's no use, Livvie. I'm going to find you. And I'm going to kill you. The way you killed me."

She carried the saddle into Prince's stall, oblivious to the cold wet horse dung in

which she stepped. Her fingers shook with urgency, fumbling, as she tried to fasten the girth.

She heard a sound at the barn door. The buckle on the girth slipped open and the strap dropped.

"Please, God!" she cried.

"Livvie." Jeb's voice came from the front of the stall. She screamed, and went to the back wall. She started to climb the rails. A cold hand pulled her down. She struck out with her hands, hitting yielding, rotting flesh. The stench was unbearable.

She managed to duck away, and went to the far corner of the box. It was hopeless, she saw. Jeb was between her and the door, and Prince, stamping restlessly, blocked the wider part of the stall, where she might have had a chance.

Jeb took step toward her. In the lantern-glow, she saw something glittering in the center of his chest. He reached up with his right hand and pulled her best kitchen knife out from where it rested among the five bullet holes she had put there moments ago. He raised it, clotted with black gore.

"Join me in Hell!" he said, and Olivia felt the strength drain from her legs. She sank down and raised her hands to ward off the blow.

Behind Jeb, Olivia saw a mountainous form. It raised up, and then two enormous hooves came down, smashing into Jeb's body repeatedly. Propelled by nearly a ton of muscle, they drove down again and again, scattering the floor of the stall with chunks of woven sawgrass and hardened earth.

Olivia sat in the corner of the stall for some time. She realized that she had voided her bladder in fear. There was no sign of Jeb's corpse, no rotting flesh to be seen, only sawgrass and earth stained with chicken blood, but in the middle of the stall lay her kitchen knife, which she had been missing, and which she now remembered had been buried while still embedded in Jeb's heart.

And the stench. The smell of the grave hung in the barn. Prince's eyes rolled, and he stamped thunderously. She climbed to her feet on trembling legs. Stepping gingerly, her arms shaking, she managed at last to fasten the girth and fit Prince's bridle. She led him out of the barn.

She went to the pump and washed her legs and feet. The cold water braced her, pushing the sobs of fear that had been threatening to wrack her body. Wet from the waist down, she looked around at the farm. She knew what she had to do.

She went into the house and dressed. She collected a few things: her family bible, some food, the shotgun, the pistol, some clothing, all the money. She loaded them onto Prince's saddle.

"You saved me, but we have to leave here," she whispered into the horse's ear. She stroked the thick neck. "Jeb is haunting this place, and we'll never be safe here again. And I must avoid the hangman." She went back into the barn, walking gingerly. She looked into the stall.

The bits of the Weaveling were not where they had been when she had left. Something, or some one, had gathered them into a pile. The fear leapt in her again, a sickening wave of panic. She ran to the pigsty and opened the gate. Without waiting to see that the pigs left the barn, she opened Buttercup's stall door, then the gate to the chicken coop. She went back into the barn. The Weaveling lay, nearly complete, on the floor. Her kitchen knife lay near the sawgrass hand.

She shrieked, and, catching up the lantern, hurled it onto the Weaveling. The

lantern broke, spilling burning oil onto the sawgrass and the straw on the floor. The Weaveling caught, and as she backed out of the door of the barn, the last thing she saw was the figure coated in a sheet of flame. Faceless, it writhed in agony, while its stumplike hand continued to creep toward the handle of the knife.

She led Prince to the split-rail fence and climbed onto his back. She put her heels to his flanks, and rode away at a canter. She did not spare a backward glance until she was a mile away, and climbing up to the pass that would lead her to The Backs. Before she went over the ridge out of sight, she looked back to see the barn, which now sat anchoring a tower of flame in the night.

She saw that the flames had spread down the fence, and would probably consume the house within a short time. She turned back, and rode on.

* * *

"That is behind you now," Grante Morna said. She poured a smooth amber arc of tea into Olivia's cup. "And you have more than you self to t'ink of."

Olivia looked up from the table.

"You have him horse. An'..." Grante Morna trailed off. She raised her eyebrows questioningly, holding out a dish of sugar. Olivia took a spoonful and stirred it into her tea, then another. She felt fatigue sliding into her bones like twilight, but the lamp was bright, and the tea was good.

"And?" she said.

"Him," Grante Morna said. Her hand waved in the direction of Olivia's abdomen.

"Him?"

"Him." Grante Morna said definitely.

"Him..." Olivia said. She felt the rightness inside her. It felt good.

"Don't I have to worry about... about... well, the bad seed?" Olivia asked at length.

Grante Morna shook her head. "Pssssh. No. Child is made from woman, from de womb. Man just plant him. Woman grow him, water him, make him to live. Mark here my words: if you are a good woman, then him will be a good man."

"How do you know it's a him?"

Grante Morna cocked a smooth-skinned eyebrow. "Do you doubt so?"

Olivia shook her head. She drank the sweet tea.

"Was it the salt? Did the Weaveling turn because I forgot the salt?"

Grante Morna nodded. "I t'ink so. It make the Weaveling weak, so de vengeful spirit of de dead could move in. Like an empty house with unbarred door. Remember this: salt is strong protection against de evil things of de night."

Olivia looked into her teacup. The red liquid swirled. Like blood, she thought.

"Blood and salt and evil..." she said aloud. "Tell me, Grante Morna, is this Jeb's child or the Weaveling's child I carry within me?"

Grante Morna stood in a single smooth motion and came around the table. She knelt and looked intently into Olivia's face, her grey eyes intent.

"It is your child," she said. She laid a long hand over Olivia's womb. The heat from her palm penetrated. For a moment, Olivia could feel the tiny life within her belly.

"Come, now, rest. You are safe here, and tomorrow is time enough to decide

where you and your big horse and your son will go." She stood, tugging at Olivia's hand, and Olivia followed her into the bedroom, where the quilt was turned back, the hollow in the bed showing where Grante Morna had lain before rousing with Olivia's arrival. Olivia sank gratefully into the bed, which smelled sweet and clean and not at all what she would have imagined a voodoo woman's bed would smell like.

"Sleep now," Grante Morna said. "Tomorrow is time enough."

Olivia allowed her eyes to close as the other woman left the room and shut the door behind her. Through the window, she heard Prince's satisfied whicker. As she drifted off to sleep, she realized that she was free.

She hugged herself with joy.

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Dean Cochrane is a writer of fiction who currently resides outside Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Like most people these days, he has held a variety of jobs. He has been a fruit picking tractor-driving orchard worker, although he did this without pay for his father, so this might not qualify as a 'job'. He has been a yardman in a lumberyard for an irascible and pungently flatulent Englishman. He was a green-chain-man and chipper operator at a sawmill. He wasted a great deal of time in retail management before becoming a computer programmer.

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