

JESUS PERMIT

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There is a picture in my mind, a picture on cloth. In it there are a house and some little figures. Also flowers, but I am not certain which kind. A sun perhaps and a moon, and a sailing ship, though I have never seen one. As I write in this book I think of it all. Then the picture changes and I see more things: a row of strawberries as large as apples, a running horse smaller than a fingernail. A fish leaping out of water and a green caterpillar and a bird. Things that swim and crawl and fly. That which is imagined, and that which is gone.

And white doves at the top, my mother said. Two white doves, flying. She put the linen in my hands as she told me this, and a case of needles and some thread, not too much. This is what I have left, she said. It will not be enough for all the things you think of. Nevertheless, you must begin. And so I will. The picture that moves and changes shape in my head will freeze when I take the first stitch, when the needle pierces the pale cloth. After that it cannot be changed.

It was a Saturday in March when I walked into an antique store with my brother Sheldon and his wife Carrie. I remember the day because Sheldon and Carrie always visit me on Saturdays. On that occasion, for some reason, they tried to take me to lunch at a restaurant on Fourth Street, and I lost control of myself and yelled at them and ran away. I hate restaurants. I always think everyone in them is talking about me, which they probably were that afternoon, due to my sudden violent departure: I pushed my plate and cup off the table and knocked over two chairs while making my exit. "I told you this was a bad idea," I heard Carrie say, as I shot past them on my way out the door.

I jogged down the street for a while, working myself into a full-blown panic attack, my heart pounding so hard I thought I might throw up. I was sweating through my best thrift shop flannel shirt. Wet patches were starting to show down my rib cage. Then I saw that I had spilled coffee all over the Dockers pants Sheldon and Carrie gave me for Christmas,

the ones with only two cigarette burns that I wear when I have to go out. They're old man pants that only my brother and his wife would think were attractive, but still. I was pretty sure everybody on the street was staring at me and laughing, or possibly reporting my actions and whereabouts to the police or some dangerous government agency. Also, having no sense of direction whatsoever, I was completely lost. After a minute I had to stop in order to catch my breath, and I heard Sheldon's voice behind me. "Simon!" he called. A moment later he appeared. "Buddy, I was afraid I wouldn't find you."

"What are you, my father?" I asked, between gasps. "Sorry, Pop. I guess I shouldn't have let go of your hand."

"Well, as the family story has it, I *am* three minutes older than you," he replied, trying to make a joke of it. "Which technically makes me your big brother."

We're fraternal twins, you see, he and I. This means a pair of people who happen to be born at the same time from the same parents, but are not any more alike than regular siblings. Even though they are twins, one of them, whom we'll call Normal, might grow up, go to college and become an accountant. He might marry a nice woman and buy a house with a flower garden in a safe, quiet part of Long Beach, near the ocean maybe. His twin, on the other hand, whom we'll call Loser, might turn out to be a seriously screwed up individual having, let's say, bipolar disorder with serious paranoid tendencies, who can't hold a job and lives in a crappy studio apartment in the decayed north end of the city, heavily medicated, spending his SSI checks on Pop Tarts and cigarettes. They might grow that way for about forty years or so, like two branches off the same tree, one long and green and straight, the other all crooked and twisted, with a few stunted leaves.

Normal might be named Sheldon and Loser might be named Simon: Sheldon and Simon Harding, two cute little freckled guys in a blurry photograph their mother took one day several centuries ago, only now they're not cute anymore, they're just a couple of prematurely balding guys in their late thirties, and one of them is crazy. Their parents, who were older, died quite a few years back, and now Normal and his wife take Loser on little trips each Saturday, to blow the stink off him since all he does is sit in his apartment all day, flipping television channels.

Sometimes they all take a walk, or Loser is forced to go to the grocery store and buy milk and eggs instead of Pop Tarts, or they have a picnic in the park. On Loser's really bad days, when he can't make it outside, they sit and watch TV together, and Normal's wife goes out and gets some sort of a treat designed to improve Loser's mood: donuts and coffee, or a pizza, that sort of thing. Loser puts up with all this because he feels sorry for Normal, who has nobody but him for a relative.

But the day of the restaurant stunt, Loser decided Normal had gone too far.

"Go to hell," I said, turning my back on him and striding off as quickly as a winded, two-hundred-and-twenty-five-pound chain-smoker can stride. The truth is I was feeling worse, a lot worse. I occasionally have this hideous sensation that something is hovering in the air over my right shoulder. Sometimes I can even see the edge of its shadow. My heart started to race again, and I stopped suddenly, crouching on the sidewalk with my head down and my eyes squeezed shut. This time I actually felt something cold and soft brush against the back of my neck. *Get away, you, I thought. Get the fuck away from me.*

"Buddy," Normal (I mean Sheldon) repeated helplessly.

Then I heard quick footsteps, and Carrie's voice. The hovering thing lifted and drew back a little, though I could still feel it there. "Simon, stand up. Here's a place where you can hide," she said. One of my sister-in-law's many admirable qualities is that she doesn't waste time trying to reason with me when I'm in one of my states. If something is trying to land on your neck, you need to confuse it by immediately seeking shelter; Carrie understands this. Somehow I got to my feet and stumbled after her through a nearby doorway.

"This man needs a place to rest," my brother's wife said, and someone offered me a chair. I sat there for a while with my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. "This is an antique store," Carrie told me gently. "Perfectly empty and quiet. Nothing can get you here." As confused as I was at that moment, I could tell it was a pretty fancy place. The carpet beneath my shoes was soft and thick, and the whole place smelled like lemon peels and old wood.

"Is he all right?" someone asked, and I looked up to see a gray-haired woman standing there next to Sheldon and Carrie, looking worriedly at me.

“Oh, yes. He’s going to be fine,” Carrie told her, and the woman nodded and went away.

After a while I stood up. “Ready to go?” Sheldon asked.

My legs were still shaking, and I really, really needed a cigarette. My shirt stuck to my drenched back. I glanced around. It was like being in a museum: there were paintings on the walls, and cabinets full of china and crystal. The silence was broken only by the ticking of a bunch of old clocks. “Maybe we could stay here for a while,” I suggested, surprising myself.

Sheldon was startled, but Carrie took my arm. “Of course, Simon. What a good idea,” she said. “Do you want to look around?”

I nodded. After a moment I was able to stand up. We made our way slowly through the dim space, and I sort of came back to myself. The sweat cooled and dried on my back. Once I bumped into a table, and a bunch of plates on top rattled. But I kept moving. Suddenly, though, I stopped in front of a small piece of cloth framed on the wall and froze, staring at it.

“Do you like that, Simon?” Carrie asked.

“I guess it’s okay,” I said. The cloth was maybe eighteen inches high and a foot across, embroidered with letters and numbers, trees and flowers. The crude-looking figure of a bird had been stitched into the upper right hand corner.

“What is it?” Sheldon asked.

The gray-haired woman apparently worked there, because she came walking over. “That’s a sampler,” she said, as she approached. “American, we think. You can see the date and the name of the artist embroidered right into it. Do you know much about antique needlework?”

“No,” Carrie said. Then I saw the words, woven in letters of thread: *Wrought by Isabel Warren in her fifteenth year 1836.*

The woman smiled. “Antique samplers—pieces of embroidery, mostly done by young girls who were learning needlework stitches—are wonderful things to collect. This one is probably from New England.”

“Looks like something spilled on it,” Sheldon said. The lower right hand quarter of the fabric was all darkened and speckled.

“Yes, it’s rather badly stained. And there’s significant fraying, as you can see. Here—” she pointed—“The fabric is nearly worn away, though we’ve put a backing on it. This piece has had a hard life, and its provenance is largely unknown. Most of the stitching is intact, though,

and it would make a nice little starter piece. We have it offered at six hundred dollars, which is a wonderful price.”

“That seems like a lot. How much do they usually go for?” Sheldon asked.

“Oh, much more. A really fine piece, with a documented history and exceptional embroidery work, can start at several thousand dollars.”

“Wow,” said Carrie. “Who would have known?” She studied it carefully. “I like the trees at the bottom, Simon. Don’t you?”

I nodded, but only to be polite. I was looking at the bird.

“Willows were a common motif of mourning in these pieces,” said the saleswoman. “You’re right, these are well-rendered, but there is no documentation of whose deaths they commemorate, and the rest of the details we would expect to see as part of an illustrated landscape are missing.”

“Then why do you have it displayed?” my brother wanted to know.

“Sheldon!” Carrie reprimanded him. “This is an incredible thing. Its delicate condition is part of its charm.” She sighed. Sometimes, when she talks to my brother, I can hear the way Carrie would sound if she’d had children. She told me once she’d wanted them, but it didn’t work out. “I’m sorry,” she said now, to the saleswoman. “My husband isn’t much of an antiques enthusiast.”

The woman gave a little laugh. “Not at all. You’re right,” she said to Sheldon. “We wouldn’t normally offer something like this piece. But we purchased it for a customer on a limited budget who planned to begin collecting. It turned out to be not quite what he wanted. So here it is.” After a moment she went on, “We have a dozen or so others in the back room. Samplers are real windows into the past because they record, quite personally, the stories of people’s lives. Some of the most valuable pieces are embroidered with wonderfully imagined animals, baskets of flowers, even ships. Others commemorate births or document whole family trees in tiny script. You’re obviously drawn to this sort of thing,” she said to my sister-in-law. “Would you like to see the other pieces?”

“No, that’s all right,” Carrie replied, glancing at me.

I wanted to ask a question, but it took me a minute to figure out how. I hate strangers, and usually I can’t talk to them. “The rhyme on there,” I said, gazing at the cloth. “What does it mean?”

“That verse was popular on the mid-nineteenth century samplers, in one form or another. We see it often.”

Carrie read aloud, softly, “Jesus permit thy gracious name to stand...”

The first sentence is done. I have just finished working the final letter, a d with a little curved tail. The first part of it I will not say aloud, only the remainder: thy gracious name to stand. This is because those first two words it seems to me have a strong magic, and one which must be saved for when some apt circumstance arises and then I will use them to great effect. For today I am through with this work.

My mother was buried this morning after a grievous illness and was placed in a grave beside my father who left us a little more than six years ago now. My sister Rebeckah, who is eight and myself were most sorely moved by the service and when the pieces of frozen clay were put back into the hole we heard them falling like stones and Rebeckah wept upon the shoulder of my cloak. I did not weep. I was thinking of what I would write about this day in my diary with the brown cover, and of how my sampler will look when finished. It will have two weeping willows at the bottom I think, one for father and one for mother, though I will not work their names beneath. What is gone from this world is gone.

Inside it is as if I have swallowed a lump of that frozen ground. All during the last weeks of my mother's illness it was there. It rests in my chest as that dread disease rested in my mother's and made her gasp and cough. I think perhaps it is grief, like a bird of death resting. I do not know.

Now we will go to live with my father's business partner Jothan Leland who is more than thirty years of age, and his young wife Amity in their home in Boston. I saw him once when I was a little girl but all I remember is that his hands were clean and white. Amity I do not know.

This is the last night we will sleep in this house. Tomorrow we go away.

“Jesus permit,” Carrie repeated, “‘Thy gracious name to stand’. That’s beautiful, in a way.”

“Read the rest,” I said. I’m not religious, but for some reason I liked the sound of her voice saying the words.

“As the first effort of a youthful hand,” she continued, finishing the second line. She would have gone on, but the saleswoman interrupted.

“I would hazard a guess,” she said, “That this piece was made in

Massachusetts. A white dove motif is often found on samplers from a certain school in that state. Usually we see a pair of them. This one isn't fine enough to have come from that school, but it does have a similarly sewn dove, so the artist may have been instructed by someone who was at one time a student. Interesting that it's nothing fanciful, just a regular brown color. Ringneck doves, I think they're called."

"It's supposed to be black," I said.

"Yes, it's outlined in black, but that was common," the woman replied. She glanced at me, and I began to feel panicked again, because I don't like it when strangers do that, look at me, I mean. And I began to sense again, just faintly, the presence of the thing that liked to hover over me. Carrie seemed to realize something was amiss. "No, I see what Simon means: she began to work the inside of the wing in black, too," she said quickly, squeezing my arm. "You can see where the thread ran out and she had to finish it in brown. Thank you so much for your help," she told the woman. "This is all very interesting."

"You're welcome," the woman said. "May I give you one of my cards? I'll just go and get it."

I was glad when she went away. I was feeling desperate because the hovering thing had found me in here, but I had to hear the rest. "Finish the verse," I said, in a tight voice.

"And as her fingers on the sampler move," Carrie read, "Engage her tender heart to seek thy love. With thy dear children may she share a part, and write thy name thyself upon her heart."

The third and fourth lines are wrought, and twice in them I have worked the word, heart. My heart however is not a soft or flat thing upon which the Lord may write his name as if it was a piece of cloth or paper. It is rather the empty shell where the bird lives, the cold bird that cannot warm herself, but always stirs and moves her feathers in such a way that my breath is caught and tangled. Thus I think my heart is the cage that holds the bird as she grows.

She is not a white bird like the ones my mother put upon her own sampler as a girl in school back home in Deerfield, but a black dove. I have never seen such a bird but nonetheless I know it well from my dreams. She is exactly like a white dove but dark, with a round yellow eye. She makes a soft murmur of sorrow and sometimes of faith I think in her prison.

My mother was an able needlewoman. She taught this skill to me for some time before she died, for we were kept home with her in the last year before her death. Even so I do not sew as ably as I write, though I try. Before Mother left us I sat by the parlor window of our house and stitched as well as I could and wrote in my book and sometimes the sun shone through the glass, and sometimes I counted the shapes of clouds. On the day after my mother was buried, Rebeckah and I stood looking through that window which had frost flowers upon it that melted when we touched them with our fingertips. After a long while we saw a coach stop outside and it was Master Leland come for us. Then we left that house forever, and I did not look back. It is gone now like Mother and Father.

Now there is only Rebeckah and myself. The house of Master Leland has many fine things but I do not like him nor his wife Mistress Amity, who is great with her first child. Master Leland is a tall man with clean white hands as I remembered. When he came for us he said, You are not ill, I trust? Because my wife and I cannot abide sickness in our home. Your mother died of consumption and it travels much between persons. I replied, No, we are both well sir, and I did not tell him that there is a bird in my heart. If you are sick, he said, you will have to go. Do you understand? Aye sir, but we are well, I said again and I squeezed Rebeckah's hand to tell her not to be afraid.

Here in Boston where we have been three months it snows as in Deerfield, but it is not so pretty as there. Still, it is a fine place and if we walk to the top of a certain hill we can watch the sea. Sister and I do not sleep together anymore. Mistress Amity has put us in separate rooms, one next to the other. I asked leave to go to Rebeckah if she is lonely but the mistress said she herself will do so. I think she grows fond of my sister, who is a pretty smiling child with blue eyes, and that is well for Rebeckah.

My room has a bed and a candlestick and quilt and table where I write this. My sampler I keep in my work basket, under the bed where it will be safe.

Here I will record now a secret and that is on the second Sunday after our arrival I had gone to bed and my door was opened and Master Leland came in, closing the door behind him. He sat on the edge of my bed. He said, Are you quite sure you are in good health? Yes sir, I said. Let us hope so, he told me and then, Let me feel if your heart beats well and your blood is strong, and he touched beneath my nightshirt with his hands. Stop, I said, and he

told me, you must keep quiet, or your sister will waken. Yes, I think you are a strong girl, yes. And his mouth was on my neck and his hand over my mouth and nose. The black dove began to flutter her cold bent wings and I thought poor bird, she cannot breathe, and then in my mind I thought of the willow trees I would sew upon my cloth for Father and Mother and how I would form each leaf and then he was done with me.

Eight times now he has entered my room and done the same. I do not pray because God grants only some few things, and still I do not use the first words from my sampler because I am keeping them to save Rebeckah if need be. She shows no sign of injury and happily follows Mistress Leland about who has now had her baby, a fine boy. The mistress cares not for me but to Rebeckah she is nearly as a mother would be. My sister still looks much like a child, and I believe Master Leland touches her not. But I save the words of the verse anyway to keep him from Rebeckah should the need arise.

None of us said anything for a minute after Carrie finished reading the verse. Finally I fumbled in my pockets for a cigarette and drew one out.

“Don’t you dare light that,” she told me.

I looked absently at the cigarette. “Poor kid,” I said, “Working for hours on that ugly sample thing. Maybe she was afraid, like me.”

“Sampler,” Carrie corrected me gently. “And it isn’t ugly; it’s exquisite. And why do you say that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But she put a black dove on it. That’s a pretty goddamned scary bird, in my opinion. A fucking sad bird. Maybe she was terrified of it. Why didn’t somebody help her?”

“Help her? Why?” Sheldon looked perplexed. Then he started talking in that reasonable tone of voice I hate. “She probably just spent her days sitting and sewing until someone came along and married her. Then she had ten daughters and taught all of them to sew. That’s how it was back then. Doves aren’t anything to be terrified of,” he added.

“They are if they hover over you, and you can’t get away,” I said. I could feel my breath coming faster, and all of a sudden I broke into a sweat again, heavier than before. I was so frightened I actually thought I might black out. The words came to me suddenly. “Jesus permit,” I said aloud. My voice rose; I could hear myself shouting. “Jesus permit, goddamn it!”

“Buddy, get a grip on yourself,” my brother said quietly, glancing

around. "He's having another panic attack," he told my sister-in-law.

"He's fine," Carrie replied. She looked up into my face. "Go on, Simon," she said quietly. "Tell us, tell me about the bird."

"It just hangs there!" I cried, clenching my fists. My eyes burned. I struggled to lower my voice. "You can't see it; you can only see its shadow. But it has cold feathers. If it ever climbs on top of you, it will tear your skin off and eat your body from the inside out."

"How do you know that?" she asked me.

"I just do."

Carrie thought for a moment. "Okay. Let's say the bird is real, and life is just completely...shitty. Pain and fear are everywhere, with death at the end of it all."

"Take it easy," Sheldon said. "I think we're getting too worked up here."

She ignored him. Gazing into my eyes, she kept talking. "Listen to me, Simon. Maybe the bird knows it, too. I think the bird is protecting you, or seeking your help, or both." She turned to my brother. "Buy it," she told him. "Buy the sampler for Simon."

"What the hell am I going to do with that stupid thing?" I asked.

"You're going to take care of it," she explained. "You're going to keep it safe."

"It's six hundred dollars," Sheldon said, sounding stunned.

"We'll take it out of our savings," Carrie told him. "Happy Fortieth Birthday," she added, kissing my cheek.

"It's my fortieth birthday?" I said.

"Yours and mine," my brother replied. Suddenly he laughed. "Why else would we try to take you, of all people, out to lunch?"

I put my hand up to the glass that covered the stained fabric. Then, carefully, I lifted the whole thing down from the wall.

"Pay the woman, Sheldon," Carrie said. "So we can leave."

Today I leave this place with my sampler folded in my pocket. Master Leland said, You will bring that book to me before you go, and I think he will burn it so that my words will not tell his actions. Still, I will record last night and what came to pass therein.

I was sitting in my room by the light of my candle, sewing. The willows were done last week and they are my best work thus far. My name is put upon the cloth, and also a date, marking the time three days ago when I

completed them. Today, however, I thought, I will put my dark bird upon my sampler, yes, and all this evening after supper I sat in my room and sewed upon it. My black thread has run out and I have changed to brown, but still I think anyone can tell it is a black dove. I was just knotting my thread, for the yellow eye was done, when the door opened and he came in.

I went to put out the candle but for the first time he said, No, leave it. Let me look upon you, Isabel. He came near and in the light I saw him and I thought, I cannot if there is no darkness in which to hide, I cannot. Dear God, forgive me that I must use the words now, not saving them for my sister if this comes to her, and I said aloud, Jesus permit him not to touch me. Then a miracle came. I felt the black dove stirring. Her wings fluttered and she flew up, tearing my throat with her claws though she did not mean to, and my mouth opened and she came out and flew about the room. It made me cough and I raised my sampler to cover my mouth without thinking. When I drew the cloth away there was much blood upon it.

Master Leland's face filled with fear at the sight of this bird and this blood and he drew back. You are mortally ill, you lying girl, he said and I said, Yes. How long? he asked and I replied, As long as I have been here and it may be you are ill too already, God willing. Tomorrow you will leave this place he said, his voice shaking, see that you are ready and he went out.

Now I will write a last true thing. After Master Leland left my room I saw the black dove beating her wings against the ceiling and I whispered, Please go poor cold bird of my heart, you are free. But she circled slowly about the room and then came down to rest upon my shoulder. Then she made the soft noise that a dove makes and I knew I would not leave this place alone. She will be with me always. And together we will go as best we can into the light.

"I think one of you better carry it to the car," I told them, when we stood outside the store. My hands were a little unsteady.

"No. It's all yours," Sheldon said, and Carrie smiled at me.

I clutched the small, flat parcel to my chest and glanced quickly out of the corner of my eye. There it was, a flash of wing-shaped shadow. *Okay then*, I said to it. *Let's go home*. And I turned and set off in the direction I thought was the right one.