

The day my father had brought her home the cicadas were so loud I thought the trees were splitting open. I sat on the front porch with my shoes off, playing with a stick and the ants that crawled across the boards, tracing lines in the dust while the summer dragged on. When the wagons stopped on the dirt road in front of me, I looked up. Three of them, brown like the dust around them and the horses shoes shined black like they had been oiled. My father stepped out of the carriage, his dark black hair falling out of his hat onto his eyes. Glancing at his watch before calling for the overseer. That's when I saw her. She was smaller than I expected, but I don't know what I was expecting, her face stayed lowered to the gravel, her hair was coming undone in the back despite being tied, her dress hung loose on her shoulders and her feet laid bare on the stones. Even with the man beside her tugging her by her arm she did not look up. I leaned back against the doorway, holding my breath but not knowing why. She looked up just once, her eyes passing over my father, the house, the fields, the overseer, and stopped on me. Her gaze freezing me in place. Something in my chest moved, like I had swallowed a little too fast.

She was pulled away before I could move. The man's hand clasped around her arm. Her eyes falling back down as he turned her towards the back of the house, his voice low and blunt. I took a step forward without thinking only to feel my dad's hand around my waist.

"Levi" he said lifting me off the porch like I weighed nothing at all. I laughed, the sound surprising me he set me back down and dusted the dust off of my shoulders. "You're getting heavier" he said bouncing me "How was your day?" he asked

I looked past his shoulder but she was already gone. "It was ok I think."

Nannas' voice called from inside, saying that supper was ready, my father straightened his coat and nodded towards the stairs. "Wanna go fetch your mother?" he said playfully.

I ran up the steps two at a time, racing down the hallway until I smelled the oil paint as I reached her room. I turned the corner to see mother sitting next to the window, her red hair cleanly tied up in a bun on the back, her painting dress that was once white now painted with yet another layer of colors. On the canvas a mix of blue gold and green, jumping out and clashing as they circled each other. The white of the canvas disappearing in their game.

"Whats that?" I asked, my eyes glued to the canvas

"Im calling it... Venus" Mother said, chewing on her paintbrush and holding out her arm to take me in.

"What's a Venus?"

"Venus is an old idea of beauty," she puts her head on my shoulder. "What do you think about it Levi?"

"I like it." My eyes watch as the colors danced across the canvas.

"I'm glad," She giggles "you want to paint a little?" holding out her gold tipped paintbrush towards me

"Yeah," I say, hesitantly taking the paintbrush and stepping towards the canvas, slightly holding up the paintbrush, unsure of where to put the spot of gold, scared that if I messed up it would ruin the fun that the colors were having.

"Hello, Mr. Pace" I hear my mother say, turning my head to see my father standing there smiling at us from the doorway.

“Hello Mrs. Pace” He says, stepping into the room.

“Nono,” she says pointing at his feet “no shoes in the house sir”

He playfully groans “ yes ma’am” glancing at the paintbrush in my hand, “you’re not making him into another artist are you?” he sits down and takes his shoes off, leaning them against the doorframe.

“Only if he wants to” she looks back at me.

I look at the canvas “I don’t know”

Father rests his hand on my head “Well in the meantime, I’ll show you some things meant for boys.” “Now come on lets eat” he kisses mother.

“You’re right” mother says “Nannas already mad you came back late,” taking my hand and walking out the door.

Father looks up at the ceiling as he follows us “No one would ever guess that I was the head of the household with you two around”.

Supper was passed the way it always was, plates were filled, passed back. My father spoke about the fields, the men he brought that week about what needed to be done before summer waned out.

“How many?” Mother asked

“Three,” he said “ Maybe four if the price stays low”

I drew the food across my plate, it becoming my own personal canvas

“Levi no playing with your food” Nanna said.

“Yes Nanna,” I sigh.

“Thank you Nanna” Mother says as Nanna refills her water, then head back to the kitchen to fill up the pitcher.

“Is the new girl here to help Nanna?” I ask.

“Yes,” Father replies before taking another bite “she was cheap so I thought it would be a crime if I didn’t.”

I look back down and keep eating my meal for a minute before turning my head back towards him “Where’s her room at?” I ask “Is it upstairs?”

“No,” He grabs at his water

“Whats her name?” I ask before he can finish his sip.

The regular clanking of spoons stopped. He puts his glass down and looks at me, not with anger or frustration, but with a lack of emotion that I rarely see from him. “Shes not a friend Levi,” he spoke “shes here to work.” I nod and look back down at my food. He raises his glass slightly and Nonna walks around the table to him and fills up his cup before setting the pitcher down.

“Bath time” she says resting her hand on my shoulder.

I look up at her “already?” I ask

“you’ve been playing in the dirt all day young man” she says sternly “If we don’t get you clean now the whole house will be a dust cloud.”

“Ok Nanna,” I get up, letting her lead me away.

“Goodnight baby” Mother says to me smiling.

“Goodnight” I reply looking at my mother before glancing over at my father.

“Goodnight Levi” he replies, smiling at me as I left the room.

The tub water was cold when I touched it. I hissed as my feet dipped in, and Nanna laughed as she steadied me by the arms. “Easy now” she said. “It won’t bite” she lowered me bit by bit until the water reached my waist, then my chest, until I was sat still in the tub, my knees pulled up. “What’d you get into today?” she asked, dipping the cloth into the water.

“I played with the ants” I said “And fed the horses sugar, when I wasn’t supposed to,”

“I know,” she chuckled, wringing out the cloth. “The stable boys told me.” I smiled a little and let her scrub my arms.

“Nanna?” I said

“Mm?”

“Whats the new girls name?”

Her hands slowed for just a moment “Your father hasn’t given her one yet.” she said. I frowned at the water

“Does that mean she doesn’t have one?”

Nana rinsed the cloth “Means when you meet her proper, she’ll likely have one by then.”

I thought about that “Does everyone not have names when they come?”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes “Some did” she said “Some had different ones.” I watched her hands dip into the water

“Did you?”

She nodded once, softly.

“What was it?”

She looked at me then, her brown eyes filled with something I couldn't describe. Her voice still gentle "Ill tell you when your older."

I leaned back watching the small waves ripple against the bathtub. "When will I get to see her again?"

Nana squeezed my shoulder "you'll see her around" she said "she'll be helping the house"

I leaned back in the tub and closed my eyes, the cold tub now lukewarm and the sun finally flying away.

My parents left the next morning .There was no long goodbye, no mother embracing me and saying they'll be back, just the sound of boots and the carriage pulling away, the house quieter for it. Nanna said they'd be gone a week, maybe longer, something about town and government matters, I didn't listen much past that. I was in the stables before breakfast, feeding the horses a bit of apple and brushing their coats until my hands smelled like hay. When I came back towards the house, I saw her. She looked different in the morning light. Cleaner, her hair was pulled back neat, her dress sitting better on her shoulders. I knew Nannas work when I saw it. I followed her without thinking, my body becoming a cat, ducking behind doorways as she moved through the halls.

Occasionally she would stop by a room and open the door, looking into it. She didn't look back once. She stopped outside my mothers painting room. After a moment, she stepped inside. I crept closer and peeked around the frame. She stood in front of the canvas, the one mother was painting yesterday, her hands folded tight in front of her, as still as an owl. The now dried blues and greens and gold caught light, their feelings frozen on the canvas. She stared at them like they might move again if she waited still long enough. The colors were staring back at her, almost reaching out to

touch her. After what felt like an eternity, she unclasped her hands, and my foot caught the edge of the rug. I fell forward with a thud. Like a deer that just heard thunder she turned towards me

“I-I’m sorry,” she said “I didn’t mean to be in here.”

“Its okay,” I said, scrambling up. “Its my mama’s room.”

She nodded but stayed still, like she was waiting for permission to breathe.

“Do you like it?” I asked, pointing at the painting.

She looked at it once more. “Yes” she replied softly.

“Me too,” I said. I stepped closer and held out my hand the way my father did whenever he met a new person “I’m Levi. What’s your name?”

She looked at my hand, then at the floor. “I don’t have a name” she said. Something tight settled in my chest and was replaced with something else. Father was gone. That meant no name.

“I can give you one,” I said before thinking.

She looked up at me then. For a moment, it felt like the painting had jumped out of the canvas. The soft curve of her cheeks reminded me of the hills my mother painted, the dark sweep of her lashes curling like the blue waves stretching across the canvas, and in her eyes were that same bright center– the gold my mother kept adding over and over, like a sun that refused to sit still.

“Venus.” I said. Her face unreactive to my words. Finally her lips parted.

“Venus” she repeated, testing it, then thinking for a moment. She smiled. “I like it”