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Vignettes from "Pariah"

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Vignettes from "Pariah"

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Vignettes from “Pariah”

Danielle Dattolo

Rosebuds

Father’s always grinning now, a sloppy grin, the kind that bares both rows of teeth. And the corners of his mouth turn up until they reach his cheeks.

His cheeks are rosy—not like Mama’s cheeks that used to look like rosebuds—but a splotchy red. And when he lifts his head high enough for me to see, or throws back his head to laugh when Mama leaves the room, the rounded skin that hangs below his chin is splotchy too.

When Father and I walk home from the tavern, I pray. Mama says that God is always listening, and I hope so, and I hope that it’s not too late for Him. I hope Hannah is asleep, and that’s what I pray for when we’re out of earshot of Abraham Willet’s cousins, who drink with Father and who yell at him and throw empty bottles in our direction, all the way to Huntington Street. I’m not asking, all I’m doing is hoping, Father says. He’s scowling, like it’s a bad thing.

I still think Hannah’s cheeks look yellow. Mary and Elizabeth looked like that, Mama said, and their eyes did too. The three of them had Mama’s rosebuds, Hannah most of all. She’s getting some of her old color back. Sometimes, in the morning, I watch her pinch her cheeks, the way Mama does now.

Mama, whose eyes are always red; who doesn’t smile when I bring Father home, even though she’s the one who asked me to.

Debt

Everyone has their vice, Mama used to say. You can’t give the devil an inch.

We don’t have money to pay off Father’s debtors. I thought, if I left school, what had been dedicated to my education at Canterbury could instead fill the little oak chest in the kitchen cupboard, the one Mama set aside for those looking for money from us. I came home because we didn’t have any, and now there’s nothing but scraps in the chest. The one only Mama and I know about. The one I wouldn’t even tell Hannah about. But

he still found it.

Every day, he ventures to the tavern earlier and earlier. The boys from the schoolhouse haven't even been released when I see the empty chest, its brass latch hanging haphazardly. I don't want to go to the tavern again.

He was a self-made man unmade by drink, and this increasingly public knowledge unnerved Mama, and she said an arrest was all they needed, that the family's image would unravel if he was arrested. She wanted to keep sitting in the pew closest to the altar. Mama was concerned, should his condition worsen, we might not be able to return at all. What would become of his soul? It was the only matter she feared more.

When I find him in the tavern, the flap of flesh beneath his chin seems to hang lower than even yesterday. Folds in his forehead age him, as do his sagging cheeks and heavy-lidded, red-rimmed eyes. The tavern is not empty, but he sits alone. He can't buy much whiskey with the money from the oak chest, but it will be enough for him. It will be enough for him to put up a fight, enough so I must involve the bartender to restrain him while I convince him that Mama asked for his return.

Instead, I call him a wretch. I shout at him. The words taste venomous, like the acidic bile I disgorged after he left some whiskey out for me late one night, back when I felt esteemed to partake. I was ten.

I want to fight him today, but I don't want to make him come home.

Communion

After Mama's death, I stopped bringing him home from the tavern. His first arrest came a week later; his second, days after the Justice of the Peace released him. Reverend Lord called him to the church the following Sunday an hour before the congregation would gather. I was summoned, as well, but Hannah had to remain home. The reverend was clear: He would not partake in the Eucharist. He had been denied the Body and Blood of Christ.

You are not a man of moral standing. The goodness of your character has waned, and with the passing of your wife, may she rest in peace, you have increasingly and outwardly spurned God.

The words in my head, like echoes.

Public drunkenness will not be tolerated within this congregation. There is grace for your mistakes, but you reject it in favor of floundering in your own debauchery. You continue to live in your sin, and your arrests—your public scenes—show us no indication of atonement for your actions. You are not in a state of grace. You are not pure.

It's not real. All that Mama had prayed for, for our souls and our standing, has been released from his responsibility, renounced by his deeds.

May God show you the error of your ways.

Father

And Papa has passed. Dr. Lathrop convinced Reverend Lord to do the service. It took two days for him to agree. This letter will no doubt get to you late, but perhaps I will see you at the service. It will follow Mass on Sunday. He hasn't left us anything in his will.

I will be staying with the Lathrops until the funeral. Mrs. Lathrop has been kind enough to put me up in your room. She said I can leave when I'm ready.

You are in my prayers, Brother.

Yours,
Hannah

I'm glad I'm not there; I'm glad I didn't have to sit through his last hours, or hold the hand of a man that left us on our own, that left us subjected to the jeers of classmates and townspeople. I only regret that I can't hold Hannah, when I think of how she must be crying without much solace. Only the Lathrops are there for her in my stead, but I'm glad they are. I couldn't bear to watch her cry.

Even in death, he hasn't given us anything. He leaves me nothing but his debt.