

BOYS

In the pre-dawn light Eleanor picked her way through the farmyard to the barn where the cows were lowing and twitching while adjusting their positions in anticipation of their regular morning milking. The faint light shed by the oil lamp told her that her father was already there as usual. As she went to open the barn door she was gripped by an explosive pain in her midriff which caused her to double over and she grabbed the barn wall to steady herself and then felt a rush of liquid spill down her thighs. There was just enough light to see a small shape no bigger than a shrew lying unmoving in a pool of blood and other bodily fluids. Eleanor had miscarried and she hadn't even known that she was pregnant. She called out to her father:

" Pa I need to visit the outhouse "

" Well don't be long " he replied " there's work to be done "

Eleanor scooped up the inert form in her hands and scuffed the earth with her bare feet to obscure the bodily fluids standing stark against the dusty ground. She went round behind the barn and down to the river grabbing an old sack as she went. At the river she hitched up her skirt and dipped her naked lower body into the ice cold water and washed herself clean. She then towelled herself with the sack and moving back up the bank she searched with her hands in vain for the tiny foetus.

" Where are you at girl " came a shout from the barn and scrambling up the bank Eleanor shouted " coming pa "

After the milking was done and as her father sat on a barrel and lit his pipe Eleanor said:

" Coffee pa? I could sure use some "

" Right you are girl and see if your ma has any of those barncakes left? "

Eleanor hurried off by way of the river and a short search of its bank in the full light of morning showed the now dry sack but no foetus. It was likely a fox or racoon had come by and taken it. Eleanor hurried on into the kitchen and brewed the coffee before returning to her father with the pot, two tin mugs and two barncakes. They drank the coffee together and she ignored the pain in her body but later that day she succumbed to its hold on her and took to her bed early. Her mother looking in on her later had missed her tears and saw only the inert form of her eldest child sleeping off a bug or bout of flu.

Over the next few weeks Eleanor got her physical strength back but her anger would not cool. She had wanted to kiss the boy, she had wanted to kiss him very much, but she wanted that to be all that happened but he would not stop and he was bigger than she was and stronger too. He had forced her to the ground and pushed up her dress. He had painfully penetrated her so that when she cried out he had covered her mouth with his hand.

" Shut up " he mouthed but only once as his excitement was over very quickly and he rolled away saying " there we are, ok? " and Eleanor flew at him with a flurry of blows.

" Hang on, hang on " he cried

But she was wild with anger and confusion.

" You bastard " she cried, not really knowing what the word meant but she had heard her father use it and then how her mother had upbraided him.

She spat at him and went to hit him again but he held her wrists and the fight went out of her and she started to sob.

" Sorry " she heard him say but she was running now, scared and ashamed in equal measure. This was not the bully that Abraham had dealt with in his poem. This was another boy from a local farm with hormones raging and friends egging him on when they drank alcohol and smoked after church down by the river. He was ashamed too and tried several times to see Eleanor and appease her but she was having none of it. She was sore down below and angry up above.

One evening over at her aunt and uncle's farm with her brothers and parents mixing in a raucous disorganised happy group playing games and eating too much she used a visit to the outhouse as an excuse to go into their bootroom. Eleanor knew what she was looking for and took one of the three flintlock muskets that lay amongst the rifles and shotguns that were haphazardly stored amongst the boots and outdoor wear. It would be several days before its absence was discovered and after a thorough search of the property and outbuildings its loss was forgotten.

" Probably one of the farmhands tilting at crows " said her uncle to his brother." idiots and nerdowells the lot of them. I have a good mind to take it out of all their wages but that would only make them lazier than they are now. It will probably turn up "

Eleanor hid it away with the dolls and the silver dollar and her diary. It was only in the middle of the night that she thought of using it upon her assailant and so it lay there gathering dust and was soon relegated to an object of curiosity after a tall gangly boy with a serious face and purpose in his manner renewed her trust in the opposite sex. His name was Abraham Lincoln and he was a year or so older than her. He looked like he had been assembled by old men from memory and then stretched on a rack. His coffin face rarely smiled and his limbs articulated like those of a newly born colt but he was kind, intelligent and most importantly trustworthy. Eleanor liked him and then loved him or thought that she loved him. He was attentive and loyal and had a depth that other boys didn't have. He made her feel safe so much so that she thought of telling him of her shame with the other boy but changed her mind when she read his story of the bully. She could imagine what he might do to him not only from the story but also because she had seen him wrestle and so far never lose. So her mouth stayed closed and the gun remained where it was and they spent time together before and after school and chores and at no time did she feel vulnerable or unsafe even though her sexuality and growing confidence meant that on occasion she now wanted to feel unsafe, to be desired, to be a woman.