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Crossing Over

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CROSSING OVER

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The first time I ever crossed over, it was market day and I was a little boy, barely six years old. I had spilled goat's milk on the linsey-woolsey that Aunt Jo had spent weeks weaving, the linsey-woolsey that she was going to sell at market. Hartah beat me unconscious, and I crossed over.

No. That is not true. I must have crossed over earlier, in dreams. There must have been times when my infant self lay asleep, restless and feverish from some childish illness, pain in my head or belly or throat. That's what is required – letting go, as in sleep, plus pain. Not great pain, but Hartah doesn't believe that. Or maybe he just likes beating me.

That first time, eight years ago – the milk staining the bright green wool, my aunt's gasp, her husband raising his head from the table with that look in his eyes and I . . .

'Roger,' he said now, 'you will cross over today.' Again Hartah raised his head, this time looking at me over the rim of his mug of sour ale.

My neck and spine turned cold.

It was barely dawn. We sat alone in the taproom of an inn somewhere on the Stonegreen Road. It wasn't much of an inn. Three trestle tables of rough wood on the cobbled floor, two ladders leading to 'rooms' above that were no more than lofts with dirty straw as pallets. The beams overhead were so blackened and ill cared for that soot dropped onto the tables. Still, last night my heart

had surged with gladness when our wagon pulled into the stable yard. During the summer we almost never slept indoors. But now the first leaves had begun to turn colour and the air smelled of rain. Hartah must have hidden a few pennies, or stolen them, to pay the innkeeper.

'Today is the Stonegreen harvest faire,' Hartah said. 'You will cross over.' Before he could say more, the inn door opened and four men entered. They were loud, laughing and joking, but no louder than the clamour in my head.

I can't, I can't, I can't, I won't—

But I knew I would.

'Brought your ram, then, Farlowe?' said one of the men. 'Puny beast – no prize for you, I wager!'

'Seventeen stone if he's a pound!'

'Pound of sagging skin and weak bones!'

Rough male laughter and cries of 'Ale! Ale before the faire!'

The innkeeper's wife came from the kitchen, Aunt Jo trailing meekly behind with Hartah's breakfast. She didn't meet my eyes. She knew, then, what Hartah would make me do this day, and how he would make me do it.

'Ale! Ale before the faire!'

'You shall have it then,' the innkeeper's wife said, a frothy mug in each hand and two more balanced on her meaty forearms. 'And breakfast too, if you're with money, you scurrilous lot! Good morrow, Tom, Philip, Jack. Henry, where's that pretty new wife of yours? When I was her age, I was never left alone in bed of a faire morning. Or did you wear her out before dawn?'

The youngest man blushed and looked proud. The others roared and teased him while the woman set down the ale. She was broad, red-faced, merry – everything my aunt was not. Aunt Jo set a wooden trencher of bread and cheese – no meat – in front of Hartah and backed

quickly away. So cowed was she that she didn't even realize he would hardly strike her here, in front of men among whom he hoped to be selling later in the day. Her thin body shuddered.

I felt no pity. Never once had she protected me from him. Never once. And there was no bread and cheese for me. Probably Hartah's stolen coins were only enough for one.

The oldest of the laughing men glanced at me. Casually he flipped a penny onto the table. 'Here, boy, water my horse and his burden, the one with yellow ribbons, there's a good lad.'

The penny landed midway between Hartah and me. I saw the muscles of his great shoulders shift, as if he meant to reach for it. But the older man watched us, and so Hartah merely nodded, as if giving permission. As if he were some sort of gracious lord. Hartah! Hatred burned behind my eyes. I snatched the penny and went outside.

The day was soft and clear, traces of the gold and orange sunrise still in the sky and the rough grass smelling of last night's rain. I fetched water from the stable yard well both for the horse and for the ram tethered in the cart, its horns bright with yellow ribbons. More wagons drew up to the inn, farmers arriving for the faire. Their cart-wheels groaned under loads of vegetables, sheep, baskets, children. 'The caravan comes! I saw it!' a child shrieked, leaning so far over the side of his wagon that he nearly fell out. 'I saw it!'

'Hush your noise,' his young mother said fondly. She wore a lavender dress and lavender ribbons in her hair, and her hand strayed to stroke her little lad's soft curls.

Bitterness ran through me like vomit.

Hartah would make me do it. He would make me cross over, lying concealed in the back of our worn and faded

faire booth. That was why we had come here. And to make it happen, he would beat me first, as he had all the other times.

I was no longer six years old. I was fourteen, and as tall as Hartah. But I was skinny – how could I be otherwise, when I got so little to eat? – and narrow-shouldered. Hartah could lift a cask of new ale on each shoulder and not even sweat. But now I had a penny. Could I run away on that? On a single penny and the memory of my dead mother in her lavender dress?

No. I could not. Where would I go?

And yet I dreamed of escape. Sometimes I gazed at Hartah and was frightened by the violence of my desire to do him violence. But Hartah had told me and Aunt Jo of finding the bodies of lone travellers on the roads of The Queendom, set upon by highwaymen, robbed and gutted. After such stories I huddled in my thin blanket and went nowhere.

My stomach rumbled. I took the penny round the back to the kitchen and exchanged it for breakfast, which I gobbled standing up in the stable yard.

A girl leaned against the well. There were other girls here now, climbing down from wagons or trailing behind their families into the inn. They wore their best outfits, wool skirts dyed green or red or blue hiked up over striped petticoats, black stomachers laced tight over embroidered white smocks, ribbons in their hair. This one was no prettier, no more bright-eyed, no better dressed than the others, although she wore black lace mitts on her hands. But she watched me. The rest of the girls looked through me, as if I were a patch of air, or else their eyes narrowed and their pink lips turned down in disgust. *Dirty. Weak. Homeless*.

But this girl watched me thoughtfully, her heavy bucket of water dangling from one hand and weighing

down her shoulder. Something bright and terrifying raced through me. *She knew.*

But of course that was nonsense. Nobody knew about me except my aunt and the bastard she had married, and sometimes I think even my aunt doubted. He can do *what*? Does he merely pretend? But Aunt Jo said so little, serving Hartah in such cringing silence that it was impossible to tell what she thought except that she wished I had not come to her on her sister's death. That wish was evident every moment of every day, but even so she didn't wish it as fervently as I.

However, there had been nowhere else for me to go. My mother dead, my father vanished before I had any memory of him. Aunt Jo would never talk of either, no matter how much I begged. And now, all these years later, still nowhere else for me to go.

The girl nodded at me and walked off with her heavy bucket. Her long black braids swung from side to side. Her pretty figure grew smaller as she walked away from me so that it almost seemed as if she were disappearing, dissolving into the soft morning light. 'There you are,' Hartah's voice said behind me. 'Getting breakfast, are you? Good. You'll need your strength this afternoon.'

I turned. He smiled. A mouth full of broken teeth, and eyes full of pleasure at what would come later. Slowly, almost as gentle as a woman, he reached out one thick finger and wiped a crumb of bread from beside my lips.