COLD GRACE

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HONNO MODERN FICTION

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A Way Back

For a long time she whimpers in the dark, trying to find something to lean up against. It feels slick and smells rancid. Wet ash. The way you smell after a bonfire gets doused by sudden rain, the smell that won't come out of your clothes and makes you feel like a hobo begging in the dooryard.

Her legs hurt, and the blood is pounding between them. And it's dirty right up inside her, too. Her body is full of ash.

She'll maybe have to beg like a hobo in front of her own house now, if she can face it. Standing outside with the chickens, asking for grace. Them inside will cross themselves and shut the door, leave her looking up, holding her mouth open to the rain until she drowns.

Later, she thinks she must have fallen. She opens her eyes and it's just as black as with them closed. The taste of ash has made it into her nose and throat, and this is all there is ever going to be. There will never be light or sight again. This is hell, maybe. Not fiery, but the cold aftermath of fire.

Then, somewhere in the hours, streaks of light appear, coming through the edges of whatever it is they've stuffed in the smoke hole. They stab down at her like the light that comes through the clouds in pictures of God, then they go again. Maybe that will be how time passes now, a slow tolling bell made of sunlight, separating the pieces of darkness.

She isn't dead, then. There is something outside of where she is, space and sunlight and time. But of course, there will be something else. If they weren't coming back she would be dead now, or bleeding along the side of the road somewhere.

She chokes, her throat closing in. She coughs until bile comes up and then she is cold.

The sound of metal ringing wakes her up. Someone is making something, doing or undoing something with tools. Something made of metal, done in the cold dark. God knows what it is, what's next. There is a thump and then a long stillness.

The smokehouse door swings open. It is night but the moon makes it seem as bright as day. A horse nickers somewhere. The little brother, Eddie Allen, stands in the doorway with a finger to his lips. There is a bigger boy with him, one of the boat people from the lake. Eddie is so scared he's shaking, and for a minute that makes her feel older. Steadier. She stumbles as he pulls her toward the paddock fence, and the world crashes down onto her.

'I can't go home,' she says, and doubles over with the weight of it.

Little Eddie goes blank and stiff, looking at her like she's ruined everything. She can see he hasn't thought himself past that smokehouse door, and she can see what that cost him, too. She looks at the other one, T-Roy.

'Where can I go?'

Why is she asking them? They're both younger than her. Eddie ten, and T-Roy maybe fourteen. She almost feels she shouldn't leave little the little brother there, in that house full of blood and cold eyes. He's only a child. Then, so is she, according to her dad and her brothers.

She turns toward Eddie, reaching down to hold both sides of his face so he'll have to look into her eyes, and mouths a silent thank you. T-Roy gives him a shove and he turns back towards the house. Then T-Roy one puts his wool shirt around her and rolls himself over the fence, holding out a hand to her. Swinging her leg over the lower rail, she tears herself open again. Blood falls on the wood, black and thick in the moonlight.

The cuffs of his shirt don't even reach her wrists, but it's warm and dry and scratchy. It smells like earth and things rotting in the water, instead of like ash.

Under the trees the ground slopes down. After half a minute, the Allen place disappears into the dark behind them. He has hold of

her hand, pulling her through the fallen leaves, but the weight of the dark is stronger than him. It isn't long before she falls.

She curls around herself and crumples the wool shirt in her fists, pressing it into her belly. Sick tremors come through her body, like it's trying to shake the flesh right off the bone. She could vomit herself up until she's inside out, a pile of meat lying in the leaves, waiting for scavengers.

He keeps right on pulling at her, saying nothing. In the end, she has to gather the body back around herself and stand up. When the grey light turns into pink and gold, she can see the soot and blood on her skin. Looking like this puts a girl outside of everything good. There is no way back from here. Her mind circles around, trying to picture herself anywhere warm, indoors. But there is no warm indoors, no family anymore. The saving you get from young boys in the night is only ever temporary.

The crows are talking over their heads, telling each other about where they are. When she turns towards the place where she thinks the road will be, they are higher up and not at all as far from the Allens' as she thought. There is Jerusha Prichard's spring house. She could clean up in there, but the sight of the lock on the spring house door makes her stomach clench. She leans her hand against a tree, bleeding again.

'Well, you two're up early.'

Jerusha is standing at the side of her cabin in the pink light of the new day. This morning that is the sharp edge of some new life. Her grey hair is braided down her back and she's wearing a nightdress and work boots. Jerusha looks down at the blood and holds out a hand.

She lets the boy's soft, slick hand go and looks at Jerusha's calloused one. The hours pass in her mind's eye, the black smokehouse, the stabbing light, the whites of Eddie Allen's eyes. She feels like a doe being coaxed out of cover. Like there is probably a bullet waiting to cross the space between herself and Jerusha's comfort.

Jeanne

Of course, I remember.

Listen, sit yourself down and leave your recording machine alone. I'll make coffee. Well, yes, I can see you're from the city. Nobody local woulda worn those shoes up here. You're new, but government people come along every once in a while. They go again.

You'll have to take my country coffee as you find it, government man. I said, sit down. The chair's clean.

Yes, I've seen a recording machine. Whatever it is you think you're collecting, you can save your questions. They won't do you any good in my house. You want me to talk, you'll have to just take what I give you and be satisfied. I'll tell you the things I'd as soon give away anyhow. Certain things still come back to me every day, even though they're small inside the whole size of it.

Maybe you have a time in your life that carries on through everything that comes after? Things move forward, but it's like you haven't. You're always inside that time, underneath it all. Well, I'll tell you mine. It was the end of the year I turned from fifteen to sixteen. The end of wandering through the woods and chasing things, or hiding behind things and waiting. You could think of it maybe as the year I became visible, stopped hiding inside my mother's name. That fall, I finally arrived. Ripped a hole in the side of the world and walked right in.

Cream? You don't get it like this where you're from, city boy.

Them days, people used to shake their heads and roll their eyes when they said my name. They'd look at me and huff a big breath out and say, 'Jeanne Delaney'. It was a name with a meaning all its own, at least while I carried it.

My mother laid the name on my head before anybody could stop her, with its too many letters and all. Still covered in blood, the both

of us, that's the way Jerusha told it later. Both names my mother's and nothing in the middle. 'Jeanne Delaney,' she said, and then died.

Guess there could only be one with that name breathing at a time. If that's the case, I suppose I appreciate her passing it on. But what if she was only saying her own name? Expiring it on her way out, like? In that case, I never even had a name, did I? Well, everyone calls me Jeanne anyway. How they say it depends on who they are. The people from the Children's Aid always made it rhyme with bean.

'Twasn't until I was nearly grown Grampy and T-Roy told me Delaney used to be deLaneuville. I said, 'Why disguise one kind of Catholic under another?' Grampy just said, 'My father lived through the Aroostook war, girl. Don't even ask what happened to us after. Just take the Delaney and be grateful.' Don't look at me; I don't know what he was talking about. It was better not to be French if you could help it; I did know that. They called us vagrants, and pirates because we lived on a boat. They were wrong, and then right in a way, too.

Well, all right then, I'm grateful for the name she gave me and the life too. All of it. Look around you, city boy. See how much I have to be thankful for?

The fall I turned sixteen was 1913, I guess. That was the year we all went together into winter, me and Eddie and Jerusha and Eddie's big brothers. All of us together into the whiteness and the cold, and also into the can't-see-your-own-hand-in-front-of-your-face, can't-even-find-your-own-soul darkness.

The first of it was the day I met Eddie in the woods. Well, see, I'd known Eddie Allen all my life, but when we ran into each other that day it was a shock, like tripping and falling into a cold lake. It woke me up and changed me without any warning or sense.

Summer was ending but our boat was still docked at the bottom end of the lake. We were still living our warm weather life, swimming and ferning and soaking willows. Haying was past; we'd made some money helping Bud Crook with his.

It was the end of a lot of things besides summer too, the day I chased after that car and then cut up into the woods towards the beginning of the next thing. 'Course I didn't know any of that at the time, me all tripping over my feet and not looking down at what was in front of me.

I'd gone out that morning to get some blackberries for my Grampy. Already, Grampy couldn't get around much.

T-Roy, that's my big brother, had made a little gangway we could throw out to the dock for him, instead of just a plank, but mostly Grampy stayed on the boat. By the end of that winter, he wasn't moving from in front of the stove except once a day for the necessary. So I wanted to make him some blackberry jelly because he said it reminded him of his own *me'mère*. See, I was a good girl. Believe me or don't, I don't care.

There weren't any women living on the boat but me. T-Roy had always wanted Etta Grace, but she'd been ruined and gone since before the time I'm talking about. He didn't get another woman until later, and that wasn't exactly by choice. For almost all the time I was growing, summers on our boat was just me and T-Roy and Grampy.

In the winters, once we dry-docked the boat and the water froze, the men headed up to the north end of the lake and I went to Jerusha. From her house I went to school as much as I had to, to keep the Children's Aid away. Jerusha taught me quilting and canning and things. She braided my hair and washed the blood out of my clothes without saying anything. Like I said, I pushed my own mother out on my way into the world. She took up the slack, I guess. After Jerusha lost Etta Grace she was all alone in the cabin, unless it was me there. So I spent the winters with her even after I was old enough for work.

I went to school on and off until I was nearly fifteen. If you stayed still too long and didn't get yourself to a school, the people from the County or the State started eyeing you up, wanting to 'help' you. You didn't want to give them any excuses. The most important

thing, according to T-Roy and Grampy, was that you never asked for money. I never have, still, and that's kept my name mostly out of their filing cabinets all my life. Mostly.

Up at the north end of the lake there was a one room schoolhouse with a potbelly stove, the kind of thing they put in aspic and show to the tourists from Boston these days. The teacher there was Miss McLaughlin. I remember I thought it was funny calling her Miss, because she was older than Grampy. She gave me a book about Joan of Arc, written by Mark Twain, and some other ones where the people they called Iroquois were all bloodthirsty or else very noble and entirely without feeling of any kind. All the white women were terribly virtuous and fell down praying all the time when they should have been wetting themselves with terror on account of the bloodthirsty ones. *Leatherstocking Tales*, that was called.

Down in the town there was a bigger school with five classes. I went there some, too. I liked Miss McLaughlin, though. It was her who inaugurated the tradition of huffing my name out while shaking her head. As in, 'Jeanne Delaney,' huff, 'you're bright as a button, but you're hanging by a thread,' sigh and shake of the head. She rapped knuckles with that ruler, but we didn't mind. It felt kind of loving. Sometimes, there'd be a kid who wasn't so well taken care of. She'd send us all outside to play and make them take a bath in a tin tub by the stove. They'd come out all pink with miraculous fresh clothes on, looking like new-born eight-year-olds.

Anyway, it was from Miss McLaughlin's books that I learned about courage and swashbuckling sort of stuff. Blame them, if you like. Once when I cut myself with the gutting knife, T-Roy said that's what school did to you, made you practically cut your fingers off 'cause you were dreaming about knights in armour while you were supposed to be paying attention to gutting the fish. Grampy said school could save you and that's what the country was here for, and we should take advantage of it. Old people always said that. They didn't have the Children's Aid when they were young to disabuse them of that particular kind of starry-eyed notion. Me, I

wanted the shining armour, not the scholarship to Bryn Mawr. I'm still glad about the books, though.

So I went to school some and never asked for handouts. You say the government is paying you and a bunch of others just to gather up our voices? Well, they wouldn't pay a mother and baby not to starve. Not without making files on them, maybe tearing them apart and locking them up somewhere. Maybe worse.

Delinquent, degenerate and dependent: they could only ever pin two out of three of those on me, and those were the two that depended on which way you looked at it. I ducked them and dodged them like I was the Pathfinder and we moved ourselves up and down the lake, back and forth across the borders, county, state and nation. The last of my going to school was about a year before that day I saw Eddie Allen sleeping in the woods. That fall I'm telling you about I was done with classrooms, but not with Joan of Arc.

That particular morning when I saw the car, I don't think I even noticed the fall coming, let alone the rest of it. I paid my own kind of attention to things, on my own time.

I couldn't help running after a car, could I? A passing car was an event, them days. I saw it coming up the valley, with the sound that was like purring from far away and like you couldn't hear yourself think when it was up close. It was painted the colour of dried blood, a kind of red brown, and the sound of it echoed off the sides of the valley, changing pitch as it came. The roof was made of canvas and the man driving actually had on a cap. The lady in the back seat was reading, like she couldn't even feel the wind from the open windows, like she wasn't excited by any of it a'tall. One of those charity ladies from the hospital, I guess, used to riding around in automobiles.

I knew I'd never catch the car. I chased after it just to make a breeze of my own, get in the road for a minute and feel the power of my own legs. Call it vanity if you like. I don't care what you call things, I'm just telling them to you. I gave chase.

We both slowed down going up the hill past Jerusha's cabin, the car and me. Then the car dipped and disappeared and by the time I crested the hill it was twice as far away and that was when I saw two crows (joy) swooping into the trees above the creek. I had to follow them into the woods, because you do, don't you? The lady in the car kept going down the hospital road and I cut through into the trees behind Jerusha's place, all hollow and echoing the absence of Etta Grace. But I didn't stop to feel that either. I was keeping an eye on those crows. I just knew, that time, they were flying towards joy.

And they were. Joy among a lot of other things, as it turned out.

So, I followed those two birds up into the woods, then later forgot all about it; only just thought of them, now I'm telling you. When you get older, memories put themselves back together. You had that yet, government man? Might not happen for you if you keep carrying around that recording machine, using that for a memory instead of your own head.

I knew where the best blackberries were and it wasn't even a mile, but I was taking a long way around on account of the birds. I went into the yellow birches and stood still for so long I saw a quail with her nearly grown children still tagging behind her, and later a fisher cat, travelling on some kind of fisher cat mission.

You see? I could be still and notice things when I wanted to. It was a game I liked to play, practising stillness, seeing what would come out if I was quiet enough. That practice made a difference later. If I wasn't so good at quiet, they might have seen me there, watching while they did what they did to Eddie. Or worse, Eddie might have known I was watching. But I'm getting ahead again. Like I said, it runs through everything.

After the crows and the quail and the fisher cat, I came out under the pines and Eddie Allen was sleeping there in the woods like it was his own house. Even though I knew Eddie from when we were children, somehow I'd never seen anything like him before that day. He had on a plaid wool shirt like a logger would wear, working in January with the steam coming from his mouth. I pictured him like

that, swinging a hatchet and sweating. I just stood there in between the patches of sun, picturing him in every season. Swimming in the red pool in the summer, too. I guess I was staring, but he looked like a song or a prayer to me. He just struck me different all at once. I don't know. Anyway, I wished he'd just keep on sleeping.

Now there's two pictures lying over each other in my mind. It's only now I can see that the shape of him was the same at the beginning and the end, sitting with his legs stretched out, leaned up against something. Except that first day his hands were free and in front of him.

Later, Eddie told me he came out that morning because he smelled it, the good rot in the woods that means summer is over. He said he could smell me coming too, before he even opened his eyes. You felt like an animal around him, like something hunted, but it wasn't a bad thing. It was like he could reach into the silence around you, feel what you were about to do without you having to say anything. He thought of everyone like they were an animal he was tracking, but you need to understand that was a kind of love. He loved the deer, even while he skinned them.

When he did open his eyes, I stepped aside and looked down. I think that was the first time in my life I thought about what I was doing with my arms and legs. Jerusha would have been happy; she was always telling me to watch my limbs and quit knocking into things. Right then, though, they seemed too many, in the way.

Eddie just looked me up and down, stopping at my boots.

'Ain't you got a button hook, girl?' he said.