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Jane

1643, Heptonstall

Winter

JANE IS UNABLE to wait. The moment Curate Burton has finished with those treasonous words, she squeezes Ned's hand, pushes past Richard, and stumbles out, not caring who sees. Ice has seeped into her bones, rising from the hard pew in the January cold. Her body begins to shake even before she reaches the doors, fumbling with latch and handle in darkness, and then she is outside, blinking in the cool light, birthed into a day that feels horribly new. It still looks the same: the churchyard, the heart of the town, with its patchwork skirt of flagstones marking the resting places of all those who came before. The sky is low, yellowish and pewter, bearing snow. The bare trees hold their arms aloft in a shock to mirror hers.

Her feet move with no instruction, treading their usual path. Her gloved fingers press against her mouth. Disbelief returns, over and over, like the shepherd's dog circling. She halts, removes one glove, bends and touches the familiar stone, tracing the names there. There's a new emotion today, alongside the old: a tendril of relief threaded through the grief and pain. "At least you are spared

this," she whispers to her youngest sons. She kisses her fingertips, presses them to the cold stone. Then she straightens and moves on, unseeing, unable to shake off the sense of walking through a dream.

She finds herself by her mother's name next. "Oh, what would I give for your counsel now." She bends forwards as her words spill into the air on clouds of breath. "You would not believe it. They dared to read the rebel muster in God's house . . ." It bubbles up, queasily, all she's just heard. Those words – *papists*, *enemies of the peace*. "They called on the men of the parish to fight against the King." She half-sobs, half-laughs then, in utter confusion. It's as if the sun rose in the west. "Aye, that's right. The King . . ." She butts against the impossibility of it being real. And yet, that news from Bradford: men slaughtered as they begged for quarter. Men loyal to the King. What has happened to her country, sliding so fast and so far . . .? "You would not recognise us now," she tells her dead mother. The world has become paper: able to fold, able to burn.

Jane swallows hard, determined not to break down here. From the corner of her eye, she sees the church emptying out at last. She can't face the crowd, not yet. She spots both Richard and Ned talking with the men, strident and serious, stepping importantly like so many jackdaws. But they are both in the smaller flock, while the others gather before the church door, twittering with something like excitement, Isabel's John among them. It strikes her then: how outnumbered they are. Just this meagre handful then, still loyal to their king? While all those others, their wits now addled by their radical religion, somehow believe the treacherous rebels are right. Oh, there were signs, she supposes, disorder on

the one hand, severity on the other, but she always thought a balance would be found, a midpoint. Instead, a fever has taken hold of her land, and most of those in the church seem to rejoice in it. She can't stay and hear them, not yet. There's half a morning, at least, in which to master herself and mask how she feels.

Head down now, she walks swiftly through the west gate and away, heading home. Oh, why, of all days, has she invited her sister's family to dine today? If she'd heard about the rebel muster being read, she would have put it off, but they are only just home from York and she's not yet caught up on all the news. They were delayed, finding a route unmolested by rebels. So it's too late and she must face them, today, across her table: her sister, her father. Worse, Isabel's husband and her husband's son – he mocks her, that one. She strides on, distracted, along the western path, barely aware of her surroundings: the snow-dusted moors in the far distance, the stone cottages giving way to winter-dark fields and scrubby heath, their lane snaking its way down the hillside, the white water below as the river roars in the way she wants to.

Finally, her shivering eases a touch. Town is no longer visible from this steep lane, only this smaller valley – narrow, steep-sided and laced with bramble below. This is home, here she feels safe. She pauses, taking a deeper breath, challenging that thought. What will happen if those people win? Perhaps they should have stayed in York where they were surrounded by right-thinking friends, plentiful enough to feel secure. She pictures again the two separate crowds in the churchyard, where Richard and Ned were so outnumbered. Will the rebels take this house from her? Her place, her man, her son? Fear, cold and slimy, squirms within.

Her legs buckle, and she staggers, gripping the stone wall, feeling its damp through her gloves, its sodden clinging moss. That can't happen. She will not let it. She shakes her head and hurries on. Even if the Fairfaxes have taken Bradford and Leeds, her little valley is surely safe from their war.

She rounds the last bend, gathering herself for the tasks and the day ahead. She'll do what she always does: lose herself in work. Today there is food to be made and folk to be fed, and the hall to be dressed for company. Feeling calmed by these practical thoughts, she moves between the weathered stone buildings, dark with age, the quiet of the Sabbath settling thick around them today – main house, brewhouse, bakehouse, barn, with the smaller cottages beyond. Someone calls her name. She finds Agnes, her housekeeper, already at her heels. Agnes looks tired, her quick grey eyes full of shadows, new weight on her broad shoulders. They enter the house together. Someone needs her: this is what always brings Jane back to herself. She pulls out the stool, pours Agnes warmed ale and flaps away her protest. The women run through the tally of what must be done. Jane will not be found wanting today.

She keeps her head high and calls out her orders as the household flocks to her. "Simon? See that the labourers' meal is cleared promptly."

The steward gives her a stare that would have made her quail when she was new to the house. "Mistress." That word conveys that only a fool would have failed to plan for this. He is tall, lean, and grey as a heron, precise and neat, with deep-set mournful eyes that notice all.

"Good." She worries over him. Simon has no family, no wife.

Jane must find ways of caring for him that do not offend his solitary pride. "I can't tell which ale is sweetest – will you taste both for me, please?" She gives him two half cups and waits for the verdict, determined to warm him through.

"This one." Simon confirms what she already knows, and she's glad to see his colour improving.

"Thank you." She moves briskly on before he can guess her concern.

"Agnes, the new batch isn't as sweet, so let's serve that ale later." She adds, "Richard has the new cask of Malmsey, though none of Isabel's lot will touch it."

Agnes nods, steadier now. They exchange a swift smile and get to work, while Jane thanks God yet again for the presence of this able woman who has become a friend over the years.

It was not always this way. When Jane arrived here nearly twenty years ago, she wasn't the mistress, not yet, but a mere fledgling woman, lost in this large household: Richard and his parents, Simon, Agnes and her family, the farm workers who laboured and were fed here. But when Richard's parents were taken by the Lord, one after the other, in those harsh winters that followed, Jane had already proved herself and flourished here, with her good management, her recipes and remedies, her care. The arrival of their son Ned was sign enough the union was blessed.

A sour inner voice whispers: but what good had she done, when it really counted? She'd been found wanting when it mattered most. Again, it twists in her gut, that memory, the one that always waits, to knife her . . .

Banging on her parents' door, which had never been closed to her. Shut out, begging, "Let me in! I can help."

"Go home, Jane, please." Her father's stricken voice through the thick iron-studded wood. Not even opening it a crack. "Go home to your son."

She comes back to herself, here, in this kitchen. The centre of her life, her home. Here she is queen. Everything is ordered and under her control. She is loved, she is needed.

What woman could ask for more?

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By the time their guests arrive, Jane is ready, her defence all in place, made of charm and grace and the best food in the valley. She breathes in the scents that prove it: the roasted bird, crisply golden, fragrant with butter, honey and rosemary, and the loaves steaming as they cool.

"Welcome! Come in, come in," she greets her sister's family, beckoning them inside as Simon holds the heavy door open. "And Father, too? You are all so prompt today." She can sense them, solemn and bursting with the news they all heard that morning. She will not allow a gap for that talk to enter in.

Then Richard appears, jovial with forced humour, and Ned, thank God for Ned, her tall son whom everyone adores, her pearl beyond price. She reaches up and straightens Richard's collar, smooths Ned's hair where it curls at the nape of his neck.

As they tarry awkwardly in the corridor, Richard brings out some of the new jokes and stories he's heard in York, but this is not city company, and their guests stare at him blankly. Someone barrels through the buzzing knot of people – *Alys*, her heart

stumbles painfully. But no, no, it can't be. It's Beth, of course, what is she thinking? Bright-eyed, heart-faced, freckled. Only her beloved niece, grown taller in her absence: she hadn't spotted her earlier in the church.

"Aunt Jane!" Beth runs to her, wrapping arms round her waist, and that touch, that warmth, is so welcome that tears spring to Jane's eyes, to be blinked away as she kisses the child's soft cheek and embraces her.

"We missed you. Did you hear? The war is coming and my father must fight. Will Uncle Richard and cousin Ned fight too?" Beth's blue eyes are guileless as she gazes up.

For a moment, no one speaks.

Is this true?

She remembers the words that were read aloud this morning. She heard only treasonous, traitorous rabble-rousing. Somehow John has understood that speech as a righteous call to arms. How can that be? Is she mad, or are they? A hot surge of anger shocks her. For a heartbeat, she wants to shove them all back out the door and slam it in their faces.

In the time to come, she will wish she had.

She looks at her brother-in-law, John, who is already flushing in embarrassment. He can't really be going to war, this whiskery white mouse of a man, forever praying, forever fretting over his scripture.

His son Zach, perhaps: there's something in him she's never liked, something adder-like, coiled and dangerous. Jane would see Zach answer the muster and gladly. *Go, get yourself slain for disloyalty, see which of us will care.* She tugs back the thought as soon as it slips out. For Ned admires him, Zach only three years

older than her boy but already doing a man's work.

And Ned? Thank God Ned is too young. She can hardly bear to think of it, but surely this will all be over by the time he is truly a man. And her Richard has more sense, she knows.

While Jane stands distracted by such thoughts, Beth's talk runs on, and the tension eases. "And guess what we saw on the lane? A fox! And my mother said it was after Davie Earnshaw's chickens, but ours are penned and Philip checked the fence again this morning, and—"

"Did you, my dear?" Jane squeezes Beth's hand, turns her gently. "Look how you've grown, nearly up to my shoulder already." She forces a smile at her sister, trying to imagine how she would feel if it were Richard going to war.

Isabel looks pale and thin, her pinched face tight and inward, as she listens to Richard and John exchange their greetings. Her expression seems curdled, disapproving. *Well, leave then!* Jane thinks. *No one made you come.*

Her irritation flares again, her compassion fades. How much would it cost Isabel to meet her eye? Instead, she stands there, grey and wan, wraith-like – the shadow of a woman. If Isabel is sorry that John is to go and fight with the faithless rebels, then why not show it? Show something, anything, not this vacancy, this nothingness. She didn't used to be this way. When they were children, her sister was bright as flame, never still, chattering like her daughter does now, full of ideas.

Jane knows what doused Isabel's fire. It's the same for everyone here, all survivors of that terrible time, the one they never speak of. For a moment, the old darkness rises and she thinks it will smother

her, but she waits and she breathes and somehow she can carry on.

"Yes, we returned from York this week. The journey took longer, of course." Jane answers Zach's empty questions, barely aware of what she's saying; her words and gestures flow without thought. Agnes takes cloaks and hats, and Simon leads her guests to the hall with its fine Turkey carpet, where the table is laid, candles flicker in the sconces, and a fire burns. Beyond the leaded glass, the day is lowering already and it's barely noon.

Now she's noticed Isabel's shutteredness, she worries at it. Is there something else she should know? Is she sickening? Has someone else died? But then she sees her sister's face soften when their father takes her arm. All is well. It's the old pain, that is all. They are used to working round it.

"Father, please take this place, and Isabel, just there." He looks older, she thinks, more grey in his beard. Jane's seated her sister and father together, knowing it will please them. They talk to each other as neither will speak to her. She's barely heard a word from them about that time, leaving the horrors to multiply unchecked in her own mind.

She's right: soon they're lost in discussion of the gospel they heard earlier, heads close. Isabel does love her Bible. Jane watches her sister and her father talk, more animated together than apart. *The scholars*, their mother used to call them fondly. They've been like that even more, since—

She looks away.

She's put Ned opposite Zachariah, seeing her son drink in the words of the older boy. *Man*, she corrects herself, Zach's a man of twenty now, taking on his father's trade: vital work in these

straitened times. He's broad and doughy faced, strong enough, no doubt.

"So, tell me, Zachariah, will you lead the packhorse convoy all the way to London yourself?" she asks, so he may boast of his new role, taking on the task from his father.

Jane listens, sees her sister's face close up when Zach talks. There! What *is* that? It looks like fear. No. She wants to laugh at the thought. Not her sister, always so fearless: climbing trees, tearing across the common, her red hair loose in wind . . . But it is years since Isabel was that girl. The idea shocks Jane, but today she is seeing differently, and she is sure of it: that tightness in Isabel's face is fear, not disapproval.

All this talk of war, it surely alters them all, even her once-dauntless sister. That must be it, she decides, recalling her own sudden weakness on the lane. John will attend to Isabel, he who prides himself on godliness, who wears his goodness like a shield. Though who will do it when joyless John goes to fight? Following the parish constable to the rebel muster at Aberford, like a well-trained hound. She tries not to think these bitter thoughts, but it is hard today.

Jane turns to her sister's husband now, after Richard has sufficiently wearied him with listening to his plans for the new field, much neglected by its previous owner, the barrenness of its soil making it scarce worth sixpence per acre.

John faces her with an air of forbearance. *He probably pities me*, she realises. *He probably prays for me.* It makes her sick: the way the godly veil their treason with such piety. She takes a long, slow breath.

"John, I hope you are in good health?" She finds a safe question, examining John's mild pink face, clean-shaven, silver hair cropped close, his cuffs and bands pure white against the sober black suit. Why are these people so against colour? She glances down at her own russet gown, barely visible below her best lace-edged kerchief. She's only half-listening to his earnest recounting of his various ailments, which are apparently eased by prayer and his late wife's remedies.

When John goes off to war, Jane will attend to her sister more closely, and speak to her more often, so Isabel can ask for help when she needs it. There: a solution. She's good at those. Pleased with her plan, Jane smiles at her kin more warmly, just as the first dishes are brought in.

Richard says grace, choosing a simpler prayer, not their usual, to suit John and Isabel. Jane hopes her guests notice all the effort, all these gestures, large and small, that she has contrived to put them at ease. The food is good. Agnes has done well, just as she asked, and she made the sauce herself. She tastes enough to know that the compliments are genuine, and then devotes herself to conversation, occasionally catching Richard's eye at the other end of the table.

Jane and Richard make a good team. Close in age, they grew together, shaping and supporting the other, so she cannot imagine herself without him. He might not be handsome, as their son Ned is. He might not have made his own place, as John did. He isn't quick, like Zachariah. He inherited his wealth and this estate. He can be awkward, sometimes puppyish, in company. But beneath that, he is kind and thoughtful. Best of all, he needs her. He raises

his glass to her, when no one else is looking, and Jane is filled with satisfaction.

All is well. They talk of the meal, of the weather, of their time in York. Jane's shoulders relax: she actually feels them slipping lower, beneath the lace. The room heats up; the windows fog. Jane smiles at her husband, at her son, her father, her sister, her niece. This talk of war will pass, if they all see sense. It will not come to fighting, not here in this tiny tucked-away valley right on the western edge of Yorkshire.

Look at them, all here together. Jane takes a sip from her glass, reminding herself to be grateful for this family, reduced as it is. She's brought them together, kept them together, despite all they've been through. Nothing can alter that.