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Tender Morsels

Written by Margo Lanagan

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MARGO LANAGAN

TENDER MORSELS



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For my sisters, Susi, Jude and Amanda

Prologue

There are plenty would call her a slut for it. Me, I was just glad she had shown me. Now I could get this embarrassment off me. Now I knew what to do when it stuck out its dim one-eyed head.

She were a revelation, Hotty Annie. I had not known a girl could feel this too. Lucky girls; they can feel it and feel it and nothing need show on the outside; they have to act all hot like Annie did, talk smut and offer herself to the lads, before anyone can tell.

Well, we lay there in the remains of the hay cave that we had collapsed around us with our energetics. We looked both of us like an unholy marriage of hedgehogs and goldilockses. I laughed and laughed with the relief of it, and she laughed at me and my laughter.

'By the Leddy,' she said, 'you have the kitment of a full man, you have, however short a stump you are the rest of you.'

'I'm not so much shorter than you,' I said, perfectly happy. She could not annoy me; no one could, this night. Shakestick might come along and stripe our bums and fill our ears with shame and still I would be swimming in air. Let him try.

It was warm, perfect for nudding down, the air like warm satin sliding all over me. The last blue of evening, close around us, shielded us from eyes, and yet some stars winked there and were festive also and who could mind their watching? And moths flew soft and silver. The stars silvered them, I guessed, and the last light from the sky, and the slight light from Shakestick's lamps as he hurried the last of the haystackers, other end of the field. Anyway, they were low like a mist, the moths, like a dancing mist, large and small like snow wafting on a breeze, as if the very air were so alive that it had burst into these creatures, taken wing and fluttered in all these different directions.

Everything made sense – this girl and me wrapping each other, and what had gone before. I could see, as I'd not seen heretofore, why the whole world was paired up man to woman like it was, buck to doe, bull to cow, cock to hen: for both their releases, to keep them present on the earth, instead of away suffering inside their own bodies and heads. Moth to moth too, eh? Moth to moth – look at them, floating and flirting, giving off their moth-signals, curling their feather antlers at each other's nearness.

'Gawd, Annie,' I whispered. 'What are you made of? Caves and volcanoes!'

'I am!' she said. 'I am!' And she laughed, a careful laugh so as not to be heard outside this hay, yet full of delight and delights.

Our laughing wound down and we rested. We could rest a little longer, before Shakestick's deputies came along the field rounding us all up to go back to St Onion's.

'Here,' Annie said, and there was more kindness and gentleness than ever I heard in this girl's voice before; she was a brassy one, this one, all bawd and bluster. 'Close your eyes.' She closed them for me with her damp fingertips that smelled of her and of me, ripe with the thing we just done, the parts I just discovered.

'What?' I said. 'What you going to do to me?' Not that I cared, not the littlest jot.

'Shh.' With her smelling fingers she made a sign on my forehead, and another, and a third. She wrote and wrote.

'Makin your letters?' I said. 'Writin your name on me?'

'Shh.' She kept writing.

'You're very welcome to if you want.'

'Dought, shut up or I'll whap you,' she said, but without heat; she were too concentrated on the marks she wasn't making.

And she put me to sleep that way, and in my dream I sat up and the hay fell away, and it was daylight, and the field was full of haymakers, but they were all to a man or woman short-stumps like me. In fact I was one of the taller among them and one of the more handsome. *Dought*, they were saying. *Where is Dought? We need his aid at the wagon. Oh, here he is!*

And they needed me to do much what Shakestick did – that is, to say how things would be done and choose who would do them from the crowd. Respect came at me from all sides. People soberly took me at my word and did as I said. And several girls' eyes gleamed and some of the older women's too, towards me. I could have said the word and they would have follered me into the hay tonight just like I follered Hotty Annie.

'Come back, Dought. Here comes Oul Shaky,' says Annie in my ear. Darkness fell on the hayfield and she were pulling my pants up. Shakestick's anger blew and banged towards us. Everything was scramble and stack the last forkings of hay, and shouts and smacks of the head for a while. Then we were in the cart and able to rest, jammed in so close we might almost do the thing again and not be noticed.

'What was that,' I murmured to Annie who I was half on the lap of, 'what you done to me?'

'Well, if you don't know that, there's something wrong with you.' She laughed.

'No, after. On my forehead. So that I went away.'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I've begun to be full of that stuff, these last several months. Curious, int it. Did you like it?'

'Like it? If I could get there and live there I would be happy as a king in his treasure-house.'

'Hmm,' she said, 'I have wondered that.'

'Oh, I would be happy, all right, no doubting it.'

'No, I've wondered if I could send a person there. I think mebbe I'll be able to, one day. Right now all I can do is show.' She looked tired, and more serious than I had ever seen her.

The road's stones and sprouts flowed behind her along the gaps between the cart-slats.

Beamer leaned in and goggled at me. 'She will show anyone,' he said. 'You show her yours, she will show you hers, and even give yours a rub for you if you ask nice.'

'You goose.' Annie laughed and whacked at him. 'We're not talking about that.'

'Oh well, makes a change, then, don't it?' said Beamer mildly, and sat back to his place.

1

Liga's father fiddled with the fire, fiddled and fiddled. Then he stood up, very suddenly.

'I will fetch more wood.'

What's he angry about? Liga wondered. Or worried about, or something. He is being very odd.

Snow-light rushed in, chilling the house. Then he clamped the door closed and it was cosy again, cosy and empty of him. Liga took a deep private breath and blew it out slowly. Just these few moments would be her own.

But her next breath caught rough in her throat. She opened her eyes. Grey smoke was cauliflowering out of the fireplace, fogging the air. The smell! What unnameable rubbish had fallen in the fire?

She coughed so hard she must put aside the rush mat she was binding the edge of and give her whole body over to the coughing. Then pain caught her, low, and folded her – just like a rush-stalk, it felt – in a line across her belly, crushing her innards. She could hardly get breath to cough. Sparks that were not from the fire jiggled and swam in her eyes – she could not see the fire for the smoke. She could not believe what she was feeling.

The pain eased just as abruptly. It let her get up. It gave her a moment to stagger to the door and open it, her insides dangerous, liquid, hot with surprise and readying to spasm again.

Her father was halfway back from the woodpile, his arms full. He bared his teeth at her, no less. 'What you doing out?' White puffs came with the words. 'Get back inside. Who said you could come out?'

'I cannot breathe in there.' The cold air dived down her throat and she coughed again.

'Then go in and *don't* breathe! Shut the door – you're letting the smoke out. You're letting the heat.' He dropped the wood in the snow.

'Has the chimney fallen in? Or what is it?' She wanted to step farther out and look.

But he sprang over the logs and ran at her. She was too surprised to fight him, and her insides were too delicate. The icicled edge of the thatch swept down across the heavy sky, and she was on the floor, the door slammed closed above her. It was dark after the snow-glare, the air thick with the billowing

smoke. Outside, he shouted – she could not hear the words – and hurled his logs one by one at the door.

She pressed her nose and mouth into the crook of her elbow, but she had already gulped smoke. It sank through to her deepest insides, and there it clasped its thin black hands, all knuckles and nerves, and wrung them, and wrung them.

Time stretched and shrank. *She* seemed to stretch and shrink. The pain pressed her flat, the crashing of the wood. Da muttered out there, muttered for *ever*; his muttering had begun before her thirteen years had, and she would never hear the end of it; she must simply be here while it rose from blackness and sank again like a great fish into a lake, like a great water snake. Then Liga's belly tightened again, and all was gone except the red fireworks inside her. The smoke boiled against her eyes and fought in her throat.

The pains resolved themselves into a movement, of innards wanting to force out. When she next could, she crawled to the door and threw her fists, her shoulder, against it. Was he out there any more? Had he run off and left her imprisoned? 'Let me out or I will shit on the floor of your house!'

There was some activity out there, scraping of logs, thuds of them farther from the door. White light sliced into the smoke. Out Liga blazed, in a dirty smoke-cloud, clambering over the tumbled wood, pushing past him, pushing past his eager face.

But it was too late for the cold, clean air to save her; her insides had already come loose. She could not run or she would shake them out. Already they were drooling down her legs. She must clamp her thighs together to hold them in, and yet walk,

and yet hurry, to the part of the forest edge they used for their excrements.

She did not achieve it. She fell to her knees in the snow. Inside her skirt, so much of her boiling self fell away that she felt quite undone below the waist, quite shapeless. No, look: sturdy hips. Look: a leg on either side. A blue-grey foot there, the other there. Gingerly, Liga sat back in a crouch to lift her numbing knees off the snow. The black trees towered in front of her, and the snow dazzled all around. She heaved and brought up nothing but spittle, but more of her was pushed out below by the heaving.

She crouched, panting. From her own noises she knew she had become some kind of animal; she had fallen as low as she could from the life she had had before Mam died. Everything had slid from there, out of prosperity, out of town, out of safety, when Mam went, and this was where of course it ended, with Liga an animal in the snow, tearing herself to pieces with the wrongness of everything.

With one last heave, her remaining insides dropped out of her. She knelt over their warmth, folded herself down, and waited to die.

But she did not die there. The snow pained against her forehead and her knees, and the fallen mass of her innards began to lose its heat in the tent of her skirt.

She tried to lift herself off it. At first her knees would not unbend, so she tipped herself forward onto her front . . . paws, they felt like, her front claws. And hoisted her bottom up from there.

'Oh, my Gracious Lady.' Her voice sounded drunken and flat. Between pink footprints, her innards lay glossy and dark red. Her feet were purple, blotched yellow, weak and wet with melting pink snow.

She should go back to the house – that was all she knew. And so she laboured towards it, top-heavy, slick-thighed, numb-footed and hollow, glancing behind as if afraid the thing would follow her, along its own pink trail.

Da snatched the door open as soon as she touched it. He stood there, hands on hips. 'What's a-matter with you?' The air around him was clear and warm; in the crook of his arm, the fire flowed brightly up around the new logs. Would he even let her in?

'Something,' she said. 'I lost. Something fell out.'

'What do you mean, silly girl?' he said crossly. 'You went for a shit and you had a shit, as you said.'

'Something else,' she said uneasily. His scorn, as usual, made her doubt her word, made her doubt her memory. Here he was, same as ever; here too was the house, all familiar, ready to go on just as it always did. Look, there was her weaving, put aside perfectly neatly. *Pick me up*, it snapped at her. *Continue with me; time is wasting!*

'Get in, get in!' her father growled. 'You are letting out all the warmth, standing there like a lummock.' And he flapped his hand at her, sweeping her in without touching her – and no, this was not what she wanted either. It was good to be warm, but dying outside in the snow would be less wretched than the indoor life again, in all its shuffles and snarls.

She washed and organized herself; really, she was quite similar to before, only somewhat softer and leakier and cramp-bothered. Her father kept his back to her, and hummed a tune under his breath. Slowly, slowly, she went about; slowly she began their meal, scraping the parsnip, pulling the dry-meat into its strands. Everything looked odd and felt odd in her hands, as if she had never done this before.

Her father, still humming, went out to relieve himself. He spent a good while doing it. Liga peeled the last onion they had and chopped it up fine and glistering, like salt-crystals or jewels, only with that good rich smell.

He strode back in, startling her and making her knife hover over the board. 'Mekkin a stew, are ye? I'll melt ye some clean water.' He was inflated, glowing. She felt him take the pot and go out again.

'Here we are!' He thundered in and swung towards the fire-place, hooked up the pot of snow, bullied the fire. 'Nothing cosier on a winter night: a nice hot fire, a bit of stew!'

He stood and turned, pleased, hands on hips. Warily, she glanced at his face, which beamed on her. All sense that she could judge things aright had left her; he would have to show her again, piece by piece, and she would have to sit very still and alert, and learn as well as she could.

Winter passed, night by long night and day by short day. Liga was kept busy following all her father's rules. These seemed to change by the hour. He railed at her for sitting quietly by the fire; he grew irritable when she busied herself about him. He roared at her for

oversalting the smoke-meat; in cold silence, he added salt to it himself. He nagged and banged about that her bloods did not come; when they did, he cursed her and called her filthy. He banished her to the truckle bed; 'What are you doing down there?' he said, outraged, when she went to it the next night.

The best was when he went into the town and left her; he had now forbidden her to be seen there, even in his own company. 'Especially that,' he said. 'Especially that. We don't want people talking, how old you are now and all filled out like that into your bodice.'

It was very dull there in the cottage alone, but it was better than the adventure of his presence, which, even when he was silent, put such a press on Liga's mind that sometimes she could not think at all; he made around himself a kind of frozen space into which she could only step wrong-footed.

At the very end of winter, Liga turned fourteen, and no one noticed but herself. Then spring exploded in its usual celebrations, fat with clumped blossom and bursting leaf, raucous with birdsong. In April, her bloods stopped, and Da grew by turns wilder in his tempers and more silent in his sulks.

'Bleed, girl, bleed!' he shouted at her one night, turning back to her after he had had at her and fallen away.

'I cannot *make it happen*,' she said angrily.

'I *know* that, curse you!'

'I'd think you would be glad – you always say how dirty it is.' And she crawled away to the truckle.

His head loomed at her over the edge of the big bed. 'Are you really so stupid?' he said, as if astonished.

And she supposed she was, because she did not know what he meant. She stared up at him, at the shaggy shape of her looming ignorance. She thought he might spit on her, so long and intense was his silence. But he only jerked out of sight, with a scornful noise in his throat.

In late summer he brought home a preparation in a cloth, and boiled it up, and drew the foul-smelling liquid off the boilings into a cup. 'Drink this,' he said. 'I have got it from a woman up town. She says it will give you strong bones.'

Is there a problem, Liga wondered, with my weakling bones? There must be. She glanced stealthily at her arms on the table beside the dreadful tea, and waited unhappily for something to crack and crumble in her frame as she sat there, her mouth shrivelling with the drink's bitterness.

The thought of her bones seemed to preoccupy him all that evening: he looked upon her with dislike, though she went about very carefully.

'I will go walking,' she said, because she would be shouted at if she did not tell him. She said it from outside, already making for the trees.

'You will not,' he said, and got up from the table. 'You will not,' he said again at the door.

Whyever not? her look said.

'You will stay by the house tonight.' And he was gone back in, to gloom at the table.

'For what? There is nothing to do here!' she said, but not loudly enough that he would hear and invent some nonsense work for her.

Right out to the edge of the clearing she walked, and circled there quietly, so that he would not hear where she was but would have to come out and look for her. This he did, twice, before he trusted her not to go farther.

Finally it was quite dark, and she had tired herself out with this form of taunting him, and with trying to read what he wanted and did not want. She heard him pull out the truckle with a great screech of the wood, and without thinking, in her disbelief and her relief that he would let her alone tonight, she went and stood at the cottage door. It was warm in there, and it smelled of his sweat and of the bones-tea.

'Sleep in that tonight,' he said. He blew out the lamp and flung himself in the marriage bed. And though this should have been a relief to her, yet he had made of it somehow a humiliation, so that she crept away to the truckle and lay facing the wall and wondering what it was she had done, or which well-behaved daughter he had seen in the town today that made her so unsatisfactory by comparison.

Her own groan woke her in the middle of the night.

'What is it?' he said at her ear, clearly and instantly.

'My guts,' she said.

'What of them?'

'They are twisting like laundry being squozen out.'

'Thank the gods of all hearing,' he said. 'Thank the heavenly stars and the sun.'

He lit the lamp and stood looking down as the pain tangled

inside her on the bed, and drew itself tight. 'Don't you worry, my honey,' he said. 'It will all be over soon.'

'Yes, I am dying,' she managed. 'And right glad to die, too.'

He laughed – laughed!

'And you so glad to see me gone.'

'Ah, no,' he said with satisfaction. 'Ah, no.' And he stilled her head under his hand – she could not tell whether it was from annoyance or affection. 'I will make thee a hot cup.' And he was up and humming, waking the fire.

'Don't make me one like last night's.' The taste of it was still in her gullet, bitter, weedy. 'That's what has killed me, that woman's poison. Strong bones, my arse.'

He laughed that she had borrowed his way of talking. He went at the water-boiling with clanking gusto. She wished she might be well, to witness the spectacle of him doing this for her. Tremendously disappointed, she was, that she would die soon and not have pain-free time to look back on this and appreciate his kindness, to say to herself, *See, he was not such a bad man; look what he did.* She gasped and he set the door wide so that she could breathe better, and she marvelled at his doing so, and at the blossomy, bosomy, rotting night, stirring outside in its blanket of summer warmth.

But in from that night kept sidling the thin black witch who was the pain. It lifted Liga and clasped her and made her dance against its iron, and dropped her, and wandered away – and then turned back, suddenly urgently interested again.

Liga clambered and slid from moment to moment through that night, waiting for the pain to reach the pitch where she

would break apart and it would all be over. The very house was gone from around her – her very father was gone. He was a bee caught in her hair, singing. He was hands all over her, patting and laughing. 'Thank that muddy old hag,' he said. 'It is just as she said, after all.' Which made no more sense than anything else had, this night.

Dawn came, and he strode out to meet it and stand in the first light before the sun rose and sweated up the world again. With him gone – just then, right then – the crisscross of bands gave out that had held Liga to the iron-witch's ribs, and she felt, deep within, a movement of some significance. Whereupon she knew, like falling to the bottom of a well, 'Tis a babby! And then she fell through that well-bottom – which was thin and crumbly, and how had it ever held water? – into a second well: And that before, that was something of a babby too, come out in the snow.

Up she got, out of the truckle, and squatted beside it, holding on to its wooden edge. She was excited. She wanted to see it. It was coming. She would have a baby. Now the pain was not so much pain; it was more like machinery working, a body doing its job, something going right instead of wrong.

Down it worked its way in her. Her muscles knew, and squeezed it down, her own baby that would make her a mam and respectable, that would look to her for care and loving.

It turned some corner in her, through exquisite levels and points and presses of pain. She was weeping with the joy of the small arriving thing that knew nothing, that would be her companion and her plaything.

Now it was at the door of her – she would split like a berry-bead and spill out, baby and innards and all. She put her hand down there and felt the bulge, at once hard and soft. She was in between pains, and the house was scarcely big enough for her breath and her heat; the *world* was scarcely big enough.

'And are you done, then?'

Liga shook at his voice.

He came in, stamping off mud.

She tried to stop the baby, but it had been poised to rush out, and so it rushed out, with a quantity of wet noise.

He heard it too. 'Is it out? Are you done?'

Clumsily she bent over it, and tried to see it without him seeing – she must claim just this first look.

She had been all prepared to love it, but there was not very much to love. She had never seen a baby so thin and wizened. Its face was just creases, thick with down. It had the finest, darkest, sourest lips, disapproving anciently, godlikely, distantly. It had the look of a lamb born badly, of a baby bird fallen from the nest – that doomed look, holy and lifeless, swollen-eyed, retreated too far into itself to be awakened.

She gathered up the baby in her two hands, its unliving heat. She turned, holding it as far out as the cord would let her. She didn't know why she was showing him, *offering* it to him – to him, of all people, and so tremblingly. Maybe she imagined he would mourn with her?

'Give it here,' he said disgustedly, coming at her big and heavy, alive and full of will. He took the baby and went to turn away with it, but the cord dragged it off his hands.

She caught it. 'It's still attached,' she said. She was beginning to shake hard.

'Well, cut it, cut it!'

She thought he meant her to cut up the child. 'It is already dead.'

'Oh, you!' He swung from foot to foot in his exasperation. 'Don't you look at it. Give it me. Don't you go getting moon-moody on me; don't imagine this is anything more than you bleed out every month.' He took it again, more carefully this time, and tried to interpose his shoulder between her face and his hands.

The afterbirth came out, a great soft rag to her startled, wincing parts.

'Is that all of it?' he almost shouted, clawing for it, the child held like waste meat in his other hand, its head preoccupied with its ancient thoughts.

And then he was gone, taking everything dripping with him, and Liga was too glad to be rid of him to do more than kneel there, a drizzling mess, and stare at the fact that it was over, stare at the messed floor.

'Muddy Annie Bywell,' she realized aloud, out of nowhere, a few nights later.

He was whetting his knife-blade before the fire, the pipe between his teeth with no leaf in it, just clamped there for habit.

'What of her?' he said, as easily as he ever said anything; the rhythm of the sharpening did not change.

'"Thank that muddy old hag," you said, that night. Did she give you that horrible tea? To bring out the babby?'

'She did,' he said. He paused, wiped the blade on the rag across his knee, tested it, and pointed it at her, and at his own next words, as if that made them more true: 'And well rid of it, we are.'

'That's not what I'm saying,' said Liga. 'She knows, is what I'm saying. What we did.' She did not even mean 'what *you* did'; he had brought her as low as that.

'She knows nothing.' He waved the knife and reapplied it to the stone. 'And what she says, no one believes, so it is as good as no one knowing. Why else would I go to her? Think on it.'

Liga thought. She could hardly imagine. 'There are people who take what Annie says very serious, every word.'

He gave a quick snort between sweeps of the blade. 'Women and God-men, and who cares what they think?'

'How much did it cost?' she blurted.

He glowered at her. 'A lot and don't ask. A *lot*.'

With her fingertip, she drew around a knot in the tabletop quickly, several times. Then she folded her arms, glanced at him twice. 'It might have been nice.'

'What might of?'

'A babby. The babby.'

'Ha!' *Sweep, sweep*. 'You saw it. It were a monster.'

''Twere not! Just undercooked, that's all.'

'I told you not to go moony,' he said around the pipe, concentrating on the edge's perfection. His face and front, his knees and shins, were orange slabs before the fire. His eye and

his lower lip gleamed, and the knife's light danced on the wall.

'It might have been a granddaughter for you,' she said, just to hear how that sounded.

'Why should I want one o' they? I never wanted a *daughter*.' And he laughed as if she were someone else, someone not that very daughter sitting opposite him, someone who would laugh along with him. 'I wanted *sons*,' he said, with a flick of his eyes. 'A man wants *sons*.'

Of course he does, thought Liga, and that must be where his rages come from, that disappointment. But—

'A son,' she said. 'With a son you cannot do' – another flicked glance from him made her falter – 'what you did on me. What you do.'

He looked at her narrowly, then widened his eyes. 'Naw,' he said, as if explaining to a stupid person. 'That is what you have a *wife* for.'

He almost laughed, almost snorted, almost spat – all three at once – as if her stupidity were not to be believed. Then he returned to his knife, and sharpened on.

Life went its dogged way after that. Liga worked and listened and reflected, and when her bloods came in November, for the second time since the night of the dead baby, she put Da's relief together with the memory of his looming head – *Are you really so stupid?* – together with the events of the summer, and she realized that one was a sign of the other. No-bloods was the sign of a baby coming; bloods were the sign of no-baby.

She bled again, three times. At the third, Da said, 'Mebbe

we have ruined you for babbies, wi' that mudwifery, wi' that tea.' He was cheerful for several days.

But the next month, as winter loosened its grip on them, she knew it had happened again, from her tiredness and faint illness, from the feeling of significance budding low in her belly. And she knew also what she would do, to keep this baby, to see it safely born in its own time.

When the next rag-time came, she took her rags when she went out to check the snares. She killed the leveret that was snared, and the older buck rabbit, and bled them onto the rags. Then she tied the cloth to herself.

All the tight watchfulness went out of Da when he felt for her that night. He clicked his tongue, and 'Curse you filthy things,' he said, but she felt him ease, and when she rose early to go and wash the rags at the stream again, he gave a certain satisfied sigh in his half-sleep.

Four more moons went by. The breasts on her, plumped up by the baby – he liked those, she could tell, but she caught him looking her up and down sometimes when she straightened from tending the fire, looking her up and down and scowling.

She collected her bloods a sixth time. This could not go on, she knew; she had felt the baby twitching in there, at first tiny and sudden as midge-larvae in a backwater, as if with joy, as if in play – and then not so tiny, quite solid and decisive in its movements; she could feel herself swelling, not just in body but in *self*, in happiness, with the pleasure of having a secret from him, a secret that mattered. It could not last; nothing she wanted for herself ever lasted.

'Wait,' he said from his bed next morning, and she knew it was over.

'What?' she said too carelessly, not like herself at all.

'Show me that.'

'Show you what?'

'The rag of you. That you're washing out.'

She held up the balled rag, the dark blotches on it.

'Bring it here.'

She pretended disgust. 'No, I'm to wash it!'

He held out his hand.

She went and put it in, and stood back a little.

If he had not seen from the dried, browning blood, her guilty face would have told him. 'What's this?'

'What does it look like?' She lifted her chin.

'It looks like last month's blood. Is it last month's?'

'Of course not!' She saw her own hands bleeding the bird last night, the bird they had eaten for supper.

'It's none of it fresh. Show me yourself.'

'I shall not.' She clutched her skirt to her legs.

'Don't come outrage at me, you little sneaking.'

He pounced at her out of the bed. He was so heavy, but so quick; it always surprised her. There were two or three thuds and flashes and a jerking of her head, and he had pinned her breathless to the wall and upped her skirts and was holding the fresh rag away from her.

'Not a drop.' He dug the cloth into her and looked again. 'Dry as a fecking bone.'

He stood straight and looked in her face, satisfied, disgusted.

Then he slapped her harder than he ever had. She lay still on the floor under the spinning air, thinking he had broken her face.

'They say a good beating sometimes shakes 'em loose!' he bellowed down at her. 'They say a few kicks to the stomach!' He only gave her the one, but she was sure it had worked. She lay curled around her disaster while he flung himself about and shouted.

In time, he sank to the table, and muffledly said, 'Where am I to get the money? . . . Feckun deceiving witch! . . . What were you thinking?'

'And when you've done all that, sew me up a new shirt with the cloth I got you.' He stood at the door with his bag of kill that he was off to town to sell. There was a hare in it, or a good-sized coney or two, the way it swung. He had a plan now; he was not despairing as he had the last few weeks since he had discovered about the bab.

Liga bent to her sweeping. 'I don't know how,' she said coolly. She did not know why, but she wanted to make trouble, for him and for herself. It was like thinking she must put her hand into the fire, that the pains and the blisters would be gratifying somehow.

'Use the other. The other that's fallen apart. Undo it and spread out the pieces flat. Then cut around them, and sew the new cloth together like the old was.'

'There'll be more to it than that, I'm sure.'

'Have I got to clout you?' He lunged at her. 'Tib Stoner's

daughter that's *simple* can do it. What's up with you?'

'All up the top there.' She pointed at his chest. 'Where it's pinched like that. How do I do that?'

'You think I know?'

'Aagh,' she breathed. 'Just go, then.'

'Do I look like a sempstress?' he shouted in her ear. 'Do I look like your ma? Have I a skirt and a bosom and a big round arse?'

She turned and pushed him. 'Go on.'

'Push *me*?' He pushed her back – he was much bigger and stronger – and again, and again, until she was up against the chimneypiece, rolling her eyes, carefully not showing that her shoulder was smacked to bruises against the stone.

'Go on,' she said. 'Your ale is waiting. Osgood has peed in it special.'

He hit her hard, the back of his hand to the back of her head. She dreamed some shouting as she fell.

She swam up from blackness into the noise of her blood pulsing, into the tight feeling of a bump to her forehead from the bench or the floor. He had gone; he was striding away, a small figure between the table- and bench-legs, in a doorway full of trees beginning to colour with autumn, and lowering sky.

'Oh,' said Muddy Annie. 'It's him again.'

He stood in her doorway, all knotted up with emotions and posings. 'I want to do business.' He was trying to sound scornful of her, but he was afraid, not so much of her mudwifery, she knew, as of his having to resort to it.

'By the look of you,' she said, 'you have already done the business.'

He shifted his feet and peered in. It was too dark and smoky in here for him to see her; it would be like the darkness speaking, not a person.

'On whoever-that-poor-girl-is-give-me-three-guesses.'

'That's none of your affair.'

'No, thank the Leddy. Look at the mix of you, all proud and afraid of yourself. All swaggering, and yet—'

'I have silver.' He knew her well, this one. Knew how to stop her gabbing if he wanted.

She snorted, allowed herself one last little jibe: 'Silver won't stop my mouth. Int no one else you can go to, is there? I can say what I please.'

'Say what you please,' he said. 'Just give me my preparation.'

She got up off the stump she used for a seat. 'What will it be, a smoke or a decoction?'

'Make it both.'

'Ooh. He knows what he wants, this one. How *much* silver?'

He showed her, in his palm. He moved his hand so that the sunlight beamed off the coin and dazzled her, dazzled away all her rudeness.

She went to work, and did not speak for a while. He stood and watched until she told him, 'Sit aside of my light, on the bench out there. There's no need to watch me. Have I ever disappointed you?'

'I had to wait a good while for that tea to take, that you guv me.' But he moved away.

She went to the doorway. He was just planting his arse in the sunniest spot. 'And how long, pray, did you leave it, to come to me?'

He shrugged. 'I didn't think it would come out at all. I was readying to visit here again by the time she started.'

'This – *this* – is what you told me.' She made the exact belly shape with her hands. He looked away. And so he should; and so he should. 'Would that be about how far?'

'About.' He tried for carelessness again. Go inside, he'd be thinking, and get on with it, so's I can pay you and leave. She could read him like a charcoal-man's palm.

'Then shut your whining. That's a lot of flesh to shift.'

'Don't I know. You would of thought she was dying.'

The mudwife cleared her throat, spat on the ground. 'Silver,' she reminded herself, and went inside.

When she was done, she tied up the burnings and the drinkings in two rags and took them to the door. There he was, sunning himself, smug as fat Goodwife Twyke that sat in the town square, cutting maids to pieces with her tongue under the ash tree there. Muddy Annie felt her own face screw up with dislike.

'This one is for the smoke,' she said, 'and this for the tea. Don't confuse them, or you'll kill her.' And then what will you do with yourself? she wondered. Come to *me*? She chuckled. Or go at donkeys and goats? 'You know my price,' she said, collecting herself. 'For the two.'

He brought the money out and they exchanged, bags with one hand, coin with the other, so that they each had what they wanted.

'Silly girl,' he said. For a moment Annie thought he meant herself, and was astonished, but then she saw the bitterness at his mouth as he watched her fold the coin away into her hand. Yes, there was a good weight of it. You could buy plenty with that, if you were not filling up your daughter with unwanted kin – two pair of good boots for the winter, maybe, or a month's ale at Keller's Whistle, or three at Osgood's if you could stomach his stuff.

She did not snort at him, though she could afford to now. She folded her arms and made a mouth and watched him go. Smoke *and* tea. He had left it even longer this time. That girl would have a fine wringing-out of it.

She remembered the wife, Aggie – she remembered her big with child, too, of the fecund old bugger. She could not recall the daughter, though, as more than a floss-headed, knee-high thing that she might easily be confusing with some other girl-child of the town.

A curse stirred deep in the mudwife, almost as if she were with child herself. She must be careful; she had a gift, and she must not allow anything to affect her too strongly, remember. That was why she lived out here, in this burrow, instead of in St Olafred's town – so that people would not bother her so much, knocking and demanding and bringing her irritations on themselves.

He was gone now, that . . . Longfield, his name was, and Aggie Prentice his wife. Aggie had had him on the right road for a while there, in the town. Helping out in stables, he was, and she was housemaiding for someone. Who was that, now?

The mudwife went back into her burrow, which smelled of all the poisons she had mixed, and the spices that made them drinkable and breathable. Carefully she tied up her grains and fragments, and every time that little floss-child walked into her mind, she said, 'No. Off with you, now,' and got out Longfield's silver, and rubbed the coins together.

Liga finished sweeping. She chopped kindling, scrubbed out the porridge-pot, attended to the cheese-barrel and the bread-starter, milked the goat. Whenever she neared the end of one task, he was in her head, telling her the next, and sharply.

She applied herself to the shirt. She thought as she sewed that she was managing it quite well, but first, with the bunching, she sewed it too tightly and ran out of the lower cloth, and then she unthreaded it and sewed it so loosely that there was a good half-a-hand hanging over, and when she had undone that, the pieces were all holed and unclean along the edges from her efforts, and she sighed and walked away from them, and occupied herself with small tidyings and polishings and thoughtfulnesses that might please him should the shirt not be ready when he came back. She could hear him commenting all along, on the poor job she did of this and the clumsy way she accomplished that; sometimes she looked up almost in surprise that he was not here, he was so strong inside her, directing her.

She sat to sewing again, but made no better progress. At the end, she laid the shirt aside, frightened of the oncoming evening and the sight of the poor work, so much like the snarl that would be on his face when he saw it.

She heard a rumbling up on the road. She would not see the carriage pass from here, but she went to the door to listen, to the coachman's cries and the drumming of the horses' hooves and the expensive squeaking of the carriage's underpinnings and the soft crashes and scrapes of leaves and twigs against the body of the thing on that narrow part of the road. She followed these noises with her eyes. Where might it be going? Away, away, that was all she knew; with people in it who never had to sew a shirt but only to wear one; who wore, day and night, clothing of such smooth stuff, made by such fine tailors, that Liga would never be allowed even to pick up the snippings from their workroom floor.

Now evening had come, just while she watched there. She hurried back into the house and built up the fire and began yet again on the shirtfront. She laboured into the night, and achieved one side of the bunching, at least.

She yawned, cracked her knuckles, stood and stretched, and went to the door. 'When is the old bugger coming, then?' she said to the goat that lifted its head from its folded forelimbs out there. Look, the moon was up and all, the trees scrambling black across the stars, empty of half their leaves but still concealing bird and road, and Da in his silent striding. Everything felt unlatched, and swung. Was he still in the village, or nearly home, in the trees there? Everything was waiting for him to appear and tell her what she had done wrong, and what she would be doing to make up for the shirt, and the bread not rising so well, and above all, the baby.

She could take the lamp up to the road, maybe, to see if he

were coming. But wouldn't that enrage him too, that she had left the house? If he had drunk enough at Osgood's, he would be angry whatever she did: leave or stay, sew the shirt well or poorly. He would be enraged by Liga's very existing, and by her condition, and by his own stupidity for drinking all the mud-wife money he had gained with that hare or whatever.

She took herself off to bed. Footfalls and rustlings filled the night outside, and imagined shouts of him coming drunk through the wood, calling out to her from high along the road, or from the path, or, like an owl, from the nearer trees. He walked round and round the house all night, never quite reaching it but always threatening to. In the course of one dream, she decided she would get up and go out and sleep in a forest place where he could not find her, but she did not wake widely enough to follow this good plan.

Morning came, sweet as new milk spilling up the sky, all dew and birdsong and bee-buzz. Up came the sun and beamed through the open window and woke Liga in her truckle bed. Had he come and she not woken? No, the big bed above was flat and untroubled. Had he fallen the other side of it, in his drunken state? She climbed over and no, the floor was empty there. She sat on the bed and stared at the strangeness of it. Maybe some woman? she thought hopefully. That would set things to rights; it would have to. Maybe he would distract himself enough, and drink enough with that woman, to forget about Liga and allow the baby to happen?

At any rate, she would dress so as not to be too available to him when he came. She washed and clothed herself, and then

went out into the sun. The day's hugeness lay before her. Something was wrong that he had left her alone so free, for so long.

She milked, attended the cheeses, ate a little milked-bread, and tidied after that. She sat to the shirt out in the sun and completed the gather on the second front-piece with such dispatch and neatness, she could not believe she had had so much grief from it yesterday. And then she went gathering greens near the marsh; she would check his snares as well, and maybe find something soup-worthy to please him for his dinner, or roast whatever was roastable, before he had a chance to sell and drink it. He would slap her, but she would eat meat.

But when she came back near sundown, he was still not returned. She was at a loss. She ought to go up to the village and find him, dig him out of Osgood's before he made a trouble of himself. For her own sake, she ought to locate him, see if he had broken himself somehow, or got himself put in the roundhouse. Before someone came by, smirking and gossiping all the way, to tell her; to say, *You are all he has, then, by way of family?* And to draw their own conclusions.

But instead, she propped the greens in water to keep them from wilting, and cleaned the snared rabbit kit and hung it, and neatened the shirt still further, and dreamed at the fireside.

She went to bed, and slept better that night than she had the previous. She woke to steady rain, though, and her cold duty. He would be so angry with her, that she had not fetched him sooner, before he spent all the coney-money. Or that she had not come and pleaded with whoever held him to

release him, because he was all that kept her from starvation.

She put a sack across her shoulders to keep the worst of the rain off, and went up the path towards the world. Two nights without his shouting, two days; she was flying apart, without him to pack her into her corner and keep her there.

She found him in the ditch by the road, face down. The water all around him was thick with floating autumn leaves, and several were scattered on him, as if the forest were moving as quick as it could to conceal him. He had not drowned – his head was all caved in on one side, and when she turned him over she found an unmistakable hoofmark on his soft front.

She stood and she stared at him. What was she to do? She had not the strength to carry him. And where would she carry him to? What was the point of taking him anywhere? She must dig a grave for him. Right next to the ditch there – she could roll him into that. But to leave him, to fetch the spade – now that she had found him, could she walk away from him again? she wondered. Was that permitted? And so she stood undecided, taking in again and again the signs of the violence that had killed him, unable to trust her eyes.

Clack-*hoik*. Clack-*hoik*. Here came Lame Jans, who was a bit simple too. 'What have you there, Liga Longfield?'

'It's my dad,' she said. 'Someone has run him down and left him.'

'He don't look too good.'

'Oh, he's gone.' Da lay there, embarrassing with his head spilling along the drain-water, his face as if asleep where it was not smashed, one eye the littlest bit open, leaves in his hair like

a girl dressed for a festival, a red leaf adhered to his head wound.

'Looks like he have been stompled by a horse.'

'I would reckon.' Something threatened to rise from Liga's insides. She squashed it down. What, you would cry for the old bugger? You would mourn?

But another part of her was all confusion. Without his voice and body to shape her, did she even exist? She had not the vaguest notion how to live on, alone. No, not alone – with this baby, this baby!

Jans shifted his stick on the road. 'You'll be wanting him on your kitchen table,' he said.

'You don't know what you're talking about,' she snapped.

'For the washing. You know. To wash him all down for burying.'

'Oh,' she said, freshly mortified. She had thought she must smell of Da's handling somehow, or betray it in the way she moved, in her face; it must leak out of her eyes. That was why, she thought, Da had kept her from the town lately, because she could not be discreet. She would announce by her very presence what no one must find out.

'I will fetch Seb and Da to bring him to you,' said Jans.

'That's very kind.'

The rain hissed all around them, and dripped among the trees its many different notes.

Off Jans swung. When he was a flat, pale shadow behind several screens of rain, he turned. 'You gorn home. They will bring him to you.'

'I can't leave him—'

'You will just soak here. You will chill to your very bones.'

He left her doubtful in the grey. And then, because *he* had said it, because it was instructions from someone else and not her own swinging will, she put the sack over her dad's face and made off home, without its weight and warmth, the rain driving cold into her back as her punishment for not fetching him earlier, for being so uselessly alive, for everything.

All she did when she got home was move the cheese-pot off the table, sweep the breadcrumbs into her hand, throw them to sog in the grass outside. Then she roused the fire and sat in the corner chair, wondering at the changed shape of things. Such a weight had lifted off her, she was surprised not to be up there, floating among those rafters, breaking apart as steam does, or smoke. And people would come soon and make this house a different place, look upon it and see how neatly she had kept it, look at the marriage bed and the truckle and not know, not for certain, the dreadfulnesses that had happened there. Certainly they would not speak of that possibility, not while she was there, whatever they suspected. Other people knew how to be discreet, even if Liga didn't.