

SLAVERY

CHAPTER ONE

It was one of those halfway days, of clouds and smoke and early dusk, when the sun sinks low on the edge of the winter sky and the smell of snow is so metallic and distinct, it seems as if the first flakes must already be falling, the fires lit inside and banked white drifts piling up along the city streets. When in fact the roads still lie bare, the stubble still sits frozen in the rutted furrows, and ice crystals star the puddles where a boot might step: and all is waiting, slow, silent and intent, and the very birds that fly overhead seem hushed in their darting flight, and geese row grimly, honking with the wildness of their wish for spring or snow.

Picture a young woman walking across the fields in late December, 1842. She's shod in heavy boots, wears a velvet dress, starched petticoats, stays, and a thick coat, as well as a handsome scarf, the latter wound around her head and over her thick dark hair so she doesn't feel

the cold except as a stinging spark against her cheeks, and an exhilarating pang, like licking a knife, deep within her chest.

She's twenty years old, the daughter of a mill owner, his second child, and she's there strictly speaking without permission: not so much released as transgressive, walking alone across a field at the end of a winter's day. She escapes to the countryside as often as she can, which isn't often, to walk there, to think, to breathe, and to escape the city's noise--the ever-present pounding of the mills that give the city its life's blood and its power, the dark sooty cotton mills of Lowell.

Once outside the city limits the oxygen felt thin and pure, while inside the crook of the Merrimack River there always seemed to be a shadow of coal dust in the wind, and the muffled stench of lye. This was a landscape Augusta Warren had known all her life, and once outside the city's pall of ashes, it was beautiful. The furrows stretched away from her in rough folds like homespun, the sky above was striated like silk, and the wind was as clear as glass. As she walked down the long slope now that led to the falls, she wasn't thinking anything, just breathing. She had just written a poem, and she knew it was a good one. Her mouth curved up as she thought that. She thought that now. In a day or two, or more like an hour, she would have forgotten this feeling or know it only as an immensity of longing and so...was that enough? Yes, she wanted to say now, yes and yes and yes. All things were certain and at peace in that particular instant, and all things search for their right state, she thought, not even knowing why. The cat makes its bed to kitten or to sleep, the snake strikes or suns, fish swim blindly not knowing why to lakes they scarcely can remember and men do too, she thought: not recognizing or admitting that primitive need, that overmastering urge to be whatever they were meant to be.

There was a poem there as well, she thought, but she wasn't about to pursue it now. One epiphany a day was enough. She looked around, suddenly coming to herself and shivering in the cold wet air that sprang misting from the falls to dampen her gown and her dark hair. This was where it had all started. It was the falls that gave Lowell its power, and had brought the cotton manufacturers there scarcely twenty years before, men like her father, to build their mills on the shores of that great rushing river and tame nature's mastery to their will. She rubbed her forehead, wiping the spray from her eyes as she looked across the chasm at the grim red-brick city, already paradoxically both raw and filthy, which had sprung up like a fungus overnight to satisfy the country's desire for better and cheaper cloth. Her father had done all this. His was the design for the locks that drew off the water to the waiting mills: his, the pattern for the engines that made it run. He had done all this before his second daughter was even born. Augusta was exactly the same age as the town. This was the world she had always known, a world not of fields, but of brick, not earth, but iron: the world of New England's flowering not of sky but of black smoke and cotton, a world not of space but of dark factories, and high brick walls, and closed, locked doorways, and everpresent noise.

The river was running high, and even though the bridge was sturdy, intended to support the carts and lumbering personnel wagons that brought more girls every year to work in the mills, she felt a moment's vertigo as she walked across it. This was where a girl had come once to throw herself against the cruel sluice-gates that drew off the water, a girl still remembered in the town, a girl who had once lived in their house. Funny that no one ever spoke of her now. She vaguely remembered a tall girl with pale gray eyes, like her father's, like hers. Well, she supposed, she could have fallen. She looked down into the swirling water and felt the chilliness

of December seep into her bones. It had been winter then too. She thought, I can see her jumping, sometimes, when the mist rises and you can see the horror and the desolation--when you become aware of how bad things really are...but that was not a thought she could hold onto. Lowell might be horrible, but it held a strange fascination for her as well. Here was crude, Yankee, steam-driven power, as naked as hatred, and as implacable. You could say No to it and beg for mercy, but it was like begging time to stand still. People might debate democracy, they might even claim the same rights for the North as the abolitionists claimed for the slaves of the South, but they could never deny the marketplace. Like a baby, it was amoral: it simply wanted more.

And while it wanted it the mills would run day and night, from five A.M. till seven P.M., every day except Sunday, pounding like her father's voice and merciless as his fists: the stern vengeful beating of a pitiless heart, grinding one and all finer and more indistinguishable in the interlocking meshes of its gears.

She walked across the bridge, feeling the wind keenly. Her house was just on the other side of the road. This part of Lowell was rich, almost, if not quite elegant: wide lawns and heavy wrought-iron fences protected the homes of the wealthy, those rare mill owners who, like her father, chose to live here rather than in Boston. She turned down Pawtucket Street and walked more quickly. Even here the mills were visible, several blocks to her right, and she kept her head down so she wouldn't have to see them. It was a corporation town: Penobscot and Boott, Prescott and Merrimack, and the greatest of these was the Warren Corporation, an industrial behemoth now with its own licensed cotton-growers, its own wool producers, its own sizing plant and its own dye works--a self-sufficient cloth-producing giant, as sprawling and

focused as a personal kingdom. Men and women boarded on the corporation: they worked at the Warren mills: when they got sick, they went to the Warren dispensary: and when they died, they were buried in the Warren Street cemetery. White faces that rarely saw the sun from one summer to the next were used to seeing her father standing above the looms, for he made a point of making himself visible, ramrod straight, his years at West Point making him appear in uniform even in a frock-coat. They didn't particularly like him, but they felt proud that he was there. No resident agents for him, the overseers reported directly to him every month--and his daughter found herself wondering now whether duty or desire kept him at his post. She strongly doubted it was desire.

As far as she could tell, her father loathed the mills about as much as she did. Not that they'd ever spoken about it. She and her father rarely spoke about anything, which was probably, she suspected, why she was his favorite. Little Edward, not quite five, could scarcely speak at all, for all he would one day be the son and heir: while little Ellen at eight was wild, a high-strung hellion who worshiped their father and was just barely tolerated in return. The butt of all his arguments, and the unending target of his annihilating rage, was his eldest daughter Iphigenia: her brilliant, biting, crazy sister Jenny. Jenny it was who provoked him, who stood up to him and got beaten bloody for her pains. Jenny who was exiled to her own wing of the house now, so her father would no longer have to look at her. Jenny who was called "mad", tetchy, wayward, difficult. Augusta was in an awkward position. She knew perfectly well her sister wasn't mad: she alone, apparently, of all her family, did. Even her mother seemed resigned or committed to her husband's fiction, but Augusta felt helpless to rescind it. I must be very good, she thought, and then everything will be alright.

She trailed up the long driveway to the house. When she came inside, the warmth of coal and thick rugs should have comforted her, but instead it made her feel queasy. The house was always hot, stifling, and she quickly shrugged off her coat and reached into her pocket. She had a present there for her sister. Not a real present of course, just a handful of chestnuts gathered from her walk, but their smooth surfaces still felt cold and hard from the outdoors and she knew they would please her. She glanced around quickly before running up the stairs, and in that instant she heard her father's voice: not loud, but peremptory. From the library. Calling her name. Reluctantly she took her hand out of her pocket and smoothed down her skirts and then went in to see him.

Her father was standing by the fireplace, and in that first moment she thought, as usual, what a handsome man he was. He was scarcely old. In his early forties, he had coal black hair, a short, bristly beard, and large gray eyes that dominated his severe, thin, rather pale face. One of the few men who was noticeably taller than she was (at nearly six feet, Augusta cursed him, among other things, for her height) he held himself so erect and stiff he appeared to tower over lesser men. He had full red lips and a beautiful aquiline nose, and large, knotted hands, although she tried not to look at them. He looked attractive and virile and she experienced a momentary wince of physical pain like a needle stuck in her side, as she forced herself to conquer her fear and advance across the carpet towards him. She bent her head so he could kiss her forehead, and smelled the faint odor of iron and machine oil on his clothes. When he took his lips away, she felt as if she were scalded.

"Hello, Father."

"Hello, Augusta. You've been outside. You're cold."

"Yes, Father, I went for a walk."

A chance, but in this case a safe one. "Come here to the fire then and warm yourself. You'll catch a chill."

She accepted his solicitousness, and sitting on a hassock, she also accepted a small glass of madeira.

"Well, my dear, what have you been doing with yourself?"

She tried not to panic. "Nothing, Father," she stammered, looking up at him and trying to meet his eyes.

Her answer seemed to displease him, but more in sorrow than in anger. He turned away to look into the flames of the fire, closing his hand into a fist on the mantelpiece and then slowly releasing it. "Have you been writing?"

"Yes."

"Good." Her father approved of her writing, which was one of the many things that made her doubt herself. "I'd like to see some of your work sometime."

"Yes, of course." She didn't tell him she had a copy of her latest poem in her pocket, nor did she have the slightest intention of showing it to him.

"I wanted to write once," he said, crossing over to his desk and looking down at the books and ledgers upon it, as if he expected to find stray verse there, interleaved with the mill expenses. "One of those vague thoughts you have. I wanted to write a history of our family."

"That would certainly have been...interesting, Father," she said, guessing at her lines, since she wasn't sure what her response should be. But he didn't appear to have heard her.

"I wanted to tell the truth. That's the sort of idea you have when you're twenty. How old

are you, Augusta?"

"Twenty."

"Ah." He smiled slightly. "The child of my youth."

You have two, she wanted to say, but of course she didn't say that.

"I know you know something about what's happened to us," he said, still fingering the items on his desk, as if their mere ordinariness could give him confidence. "But how much? Ah, yes indeed, how much?"

"I--" Nothing, she wanted to say, I don't know anything, and for a moment she wanted to mean that as well. She felt her heart racing against the tight velvet basque of her dress and her head felt light with the madeira she had tasted. At the same time, she felt immensely curious, with the uneasy feeling of picking at a scab and she thought, oh I want to get out of here, I don't want to hear any of this...

"Oh God," her father exclaimed softly, bringing his clenched hand down against the papers on his desk, with such control it barely made a sound. "I want to talk to someone...I want to explain, to justify, but I can't, there's no point...no point to it now..."

She felt, through her terror and her quick glances towards the door, something she rarely felt towards her father anymore: compassion. She thought, I'm twenty, he's forty-two, and he's speaking to me as an adult. Now if I can just manage not to annoy him, I'll be alright.

"What is it, Father?"

"I know you love your sister."

"Of course I do."

"And I know you think she's normal."

She is normal, Augusta thought. She had grown very still.

He turned and looked at her, his perceptive, lacerating gaze making her swallow and clench her hands unobtrusively in her lap. He said after a moment, harshly, "I nourished an intelligent child."

It's what you wanted, she thought, stumbling in her own mind. At least, I think it's what you wanted.

"We disagree."

"Yes, Father."

"But my decision is absolute. You know that."

She didn't say anything.

He burst out suddenly, "Damn it, why do you hate me so much!"

I don't, Augusta thought, terrified, looking up at him. She was incapable of saying anything and as she watched his strong hands grip and flex she felt a primitive urge to cry out and beg for mercy.

"Never mind..." His words trailed off and for a moment she saw such a depth of black despair in his face that she wanted to cry out again, to comfort him, to run out of the room, she didn't know what she wanted to do. Paralyzed, she saw two tears slide from his eyes down his face and into his beard. She saw the tracks they left on his cheeks. She couldn't breathe.

"Don't worry." He shook his head and she stood up trembling, wiping her fingers across her mouth. Going to him she touched his arms and felt the rigidity in them, the shuddering fight to keep himself under control.

"What have you got there?" He had just embraced her, and felt the chestnuts in her

pocket. "N-nothing, Father," she stammered, feeling her face grow red with shame.

"Show me."

She surrendered her little cache of nuts into his outstretched palm, her two hands putting them into his single big one. He looked at them briefly and then tossed them into the fire.

"What are you doing, bringing trash like that into the house?"

She couldn't speak, couldn't pick out syllables from the choices in front of her, and amazingly, she saw his face soften into what in another man would have been fondness.

"Silly little squirrel," he said, and she had the feeling she'd been dismissed.

"Good--evening, Father," she said. "I'll go and dress for dinner and be right down."

"See that you are." His face was stiff. Trying not to stumble over her skirts, she turned and fled out of the room, up the stairs and didn't stop running until she'd reached the third floor and her sister's apartments.

"Run in with the Emperor of Abyssinia?" Jenny asked, looking up from her book and referring to their father by her favorite nickname. Stretched out on her couch, Jenny looked wan and pale and beautiful, like a lily, with her dark hair framing her face and her huge gray eyes enormous. Her resemblance to the man downstairs was uncanny.

"Yes." Augusta put her hand up to her forehead and wiped the hair back. "I was afraid I wouldn't get out of there alive!"

"Oh, he would have just come upstairs and whipped me." Jenny dismissed the idea with a shrug. "You know that's his favorite pastime."

"Oh Jenny, that's not true." Augusta glanced at her sister and was met with a narrowed gaze.

"He's been twisting you around again, hasn't he? What did he do? Did he cry?"

"What?!" Augusta was astonished at the idea of her father crying in front of anyone else, her sister most of all.

"Oh yes. He used to weep whenever he beat me. Sometimes he said his heart would break because I was such an ungrateful child and didn't appreciate his chastisement!"

Jenny leaned back on her couch and laughed and laughed. Her laughter had a hard stony quality to it, a little uncontrolled, but it was real laughter all the same, unfeigned. She gestured to Augusta to come over and sit on the footstool beside her.

"Let me smell your hair. Mmm, you smell like the country. Sometimes I wish I could just get out of here and run and run...I feel like my body's going to sleep up here."

"You'll be let out someday." Augusta leaned her head against her sister's arm. "They can't keep you locked up here forever..."

"No?"

"Well...eventually they'll die!"

"Yes, and if I wait for that, I'll have a long gray beard! It sounds distinctly unhopeful."

Both girls laughed, and Augusta felt as always as if her sister were far older. The three years between them might as easily have stretched to ten. Having nowhere to go in her body, Jenny had traveled far and wide with her impatient mind, and brought back treasures of rebellion and satire Augusta could only dream of. But now she rubbed her limbs fretfully.

"It's true. I'm getting to be a weakling up here." She shrugged again, dismissing it. "Tell me what you've been writing."

Augusta dutifully unfolded her poem and read it to her, and Jenny frowned and made

perceptive comments. It seemed as if she'd already read and thought about everything.

"He said something about you..." Augusta said finally. "He said his decision was absolute. Jenny, do you ever think--"

"What?"

"That he might...send you away?"

"Oh yes. I think about that all the time!"

"And would you be happy? Would you like that?"

She couldn't meet her sister's eyes, and Jenny laid her bony, slender hand on her forehead, smoothing the thought away. "Well, I'd miss you, for a start, and I'd hate that. You're the one person I've got, Gussie. Don't forget that. You're my last hope."

They sat still for a moment, and Augusta said, "Do you ever think about how little we're told about anything..."

"Yes."

"And even when things do happen--"

"Yes?"

"We're not allowed to remember them, or talk about them. That girl who drowned..."

Jenny shook her head and said, "Not now. That's much too complicated a subject to discuss now, among the many things that Father's caused you to forget. It's after seven o'clock and you've got to get dressed and perfumed and ready to face and please him--"

"Why?" Augusta was suddenly rebellious. "Why should I always be the good girl? What not switch places? Let me stay up here and disobey him and you go down there and have dinner with him and smile and smile and--"

"Gussie, you're mad!"

"No I'm not! Why not--"

"Yes, you are. Now listen." Jenny got up with difficulty and walked over to the window. She had a slightly off-center way of walking, that no doctor had ever been able to diagnose, because no doctor had ever been informed of the severity of her beatings. Now she leaned her arm on the windowpane and looked at the lawn stretched below her, the frozen grass and the bare beds, the dead branches of the trees stretching up past her window like higher bars than any jailer could have erected. There were a few lost birds flitting here and there, too cold for song, their little bodies plumped and ruffled against the chill. She tapped her finger on the windowpane to watch them scatter.

"Look. They're cold but they're free. You know what I'm saying. But when you put them in cages they pine and die, so there's no point in even feeling sorry for them. Even if they live, they're never the same, and they never sing, so..." She shrugged. She looked like a young man standing there by the window, Augusta thought, she was so thin, with her broad shoulders and her white dress hanging from her small breasts and her narrow waist. A young man with the face of an angel.

"The point is we're not birds, Augusta. When we're in cages we can sing. We have to sing, sometimes. Or most of us do at any rate. Sing for your supper." She laughed drily, without mirth. "I don't. But then I'm different. You have to sing. No, don't make a face, you know perfectly well what I'm talking about. And for that you have to be intact...or as near to intact as possible. I'm not sure anybody could survive long intact in a place like this." She looked out at the lawn, seeing not merely the grass, Augusta guessed, but Lowell, the town, and possibly the

whole world. Her face looked grim.

"But--" She wanted to remonstrate, because Jenny was the clever one, Jenny, of any of them, deserved to sing songs of far greater clarity and brilliance. But Jenny was laughing now.

"Go along then! Sing for your supper, little wren! But be careful. Don't let them clip your wings. Sing nicely and they might even let you out once in a while. Then one day you can just fly away! Ha! Wouldn't that be a laugh on all of them?"

"Not without you," Augusta said, looking up at her. "I wouldn't go anywhere without you."

"Well, you might have to. Don't be too sure I won't just fly away myself someday..." Jenny added, as if talking to herself. "I don't have anywhere near your kind of patience, and I don't have any real singing left to distract me."

Augusta was deeply disturbed by their conversation but she didn't have time to attend to it, as she stripped off her heavy clothes and allowed her maid to button her into the black silk gown she would wear for dinner. Her father demanded punctuality, but he demanded elegance more, so she took the time to place garnets in her ears and put a dab of perfume at her wrists even though the heavy scent made her feel embalmed. She looked at herself in the mirror, the huge beveled glass showing back what she thought was an extremely poor specimen. She was tall, and although her sister had in fact broader shoulders and a more mannish carriage, she had the elegant languor of her enforced solitude to offset her lack of feminine graces. Augusta was tall and thin and wiry, and she had long wavy black hair that rioted out like a tangle of snakes all down to her waist whenever it had the chance. She had the family gray eyes, aquiline nose, full mouth, but in her case the eyes were watchful and the mouth was guarded and the nose was

buried in a book whenever possible. She had big, hideous hands, strong and capable, with long fingers and prominent knuckles, her father's hands, a mechanic's hands, and she hated them. She moved them with dissatisfaction against the raw silk of her gown and then hurried down to dinner.

But despite all her efforts she was the last person into the dining room, and her father gave her a pointed stare from the head of the table. Slipping into her place next to her younger sister, she unfolded her napkin and tried to pretend she'd always been there.

Her mother was as silent as ever, her eyes cast down and a slight smile, as private as a madonna's, on her face. Her mother was an enigma to Augusta. At thirty-nine she had borne four children, watched, and presumably connived at, the systematic destruction of her eldest daughter, and still seemed to have about her the untouched purity of a young girl. She was the only member of the family who could truly be called beautiful. Fairer, her hair was braided and arranged in a soft, thick coil that pulled her head back, like a heavy mass, and exposed the smooth vulnerability of her throat. She wore lovely dresses, pale pinks and buttery yellows, and her shoulders were always white and smooth, even when there were bruises on them, the mark of strong, spatulate fingers.

Augusta had never heard a cross word pass between her parents, and in fact there always seemed to be a faint, ever-present electricity between them, as if the thunderbolt that was her father thrummed a single, sympathetic nerve within the frailer mechanism of his wife. They were silent about this, and it didn't seem to make either of them particularly happy, but it was there.

Moving her gaze down from her mother, she looked at her little brother, who had as usual a suspicious moisture at the end of his nose, that would turn before the end of the meal into an

unmistakable drip. Little Edward was without a doubt the wettest child she had ever seen. Her sister Ellen next to her was scarcely better, crumbling bread into her plate and squirming in her place beside her. The seat at the end of the table was left conspicuously empty, as though reserved for Banquo.

Her father cleared his throat and asked her sister to please pass him the bread. Normally their meals were conducted in just such static silence, but tonight he appeared almost loquacious. He followed up his request for bread with one for butter, and when he had spread it he asked if anyone else wanted some. He chewed for a few moments, and then broke off to sip his wine, savoring, or at least pretending to savor, its taste. He ate another bite of meat, remarking on its flavor and succulence. By this point everyone else at the table was practically ill with nervousness.

"I have an announcement to make." They all relaxed, as if a threatened rain had finally begun to fall. Augusta watched her mother's hand as she brought her own wine to her lips, and saw how the knuckles were white.

"This can scarcely come as a surprise. You know how worried I've been about your sister. How worried we've all been."

Augusta felt her throat close and the meat in her mouth turned to decaying flesh. With the greatest difficulty of her life, she forced herself to swallow.

"So I've been consulting with myself and with various specialists on how best to care for her. We've tried to help her, but unfortunately there's been no improvement. The Lord knows I've been patient. I've prayed for guidance and the wisdom to see my way. For many years now, I've reproached myself for her shortcomings. I'm sure some failing on my part has resulted in her

wildness, but unfortunately I've been unable to grasp what that might be. So I've finally decided that if it's God's wish that my daughter should be so afflicted, I have no choice but to accede to His will in this matter."

Augusta couldn't believe what she was hearing. She thought at any moment someone at the table would burst out laughing. She glanced at the coagulated graininess of the meat on her plate, and wondered if she should eat another mouthful, but perhaps her father would think it rude of her to look away while he was still speaking. She sat with her hands in her lap.

"So I've come to a decision. I've spoken to a gentleman in Boston who's had some success in these matters. It appears there's an operation which can be performed upon your sister and once a portion of her brain has been excised, it should significantly diminish her hysterical tendencies, make her more tractable--"

"Jared--!" Her mother's exclamation wasn't loud, but it was like a scream. Normally, she never referred to her husband except as Mr. Warren. Now she looked up at him and the electricity Augusta had always sensed between her parents seemed to flame and spit into a bolt of lightning. Her father looked devastated, and Augusta thought for a moment he was going to back down.

Then his dark brows lowered and his face assumed the expression she recognized from her earliest nightmares, and she knew someone was going to get hurt. Without really thinking about it, she drew in her breath and said, "Father, you can't do it."

His eyes swivelled to look at her, and she felt her insides turn to jelly. Somehow she'd gotten to her feet and now she wished she hadn't. It made her a bigger target. If she could have, she would have dropped through the center of the floor.

"What did you say?" His voice was a whisper.

"I said..." She couldn't go on, couldn't speak, couldn't move or look anywhere else but at him. She felt as if the rest of the world had stopped. Surely her mother and her sister and her brother had all been rendered immobile. There was only her and her father, and her father was going to destroy her.

"You can't...you can't let them hurt her like that. I know the operation you're talking about...it's butchery..."

"It prevents hysteria. From *hyster*. A disease of the womb, particular to women, although not so endemic in the entire sex. In your sister's case it's justified."

"She's not--"

"Have you become such an expert now in medicinal matters?"

Oh God, Augusta thought. She knew she was going to be punished now, it was just a question of how. She backed, prevaricated, lost her pride and tried to mollify him with self-mockery, wishing she were a dog so she could grovel at his feet.

"I'm not an expert, I--I barely know how to treat a sore throat!"

"Yet you'd advise a parent on how to rear his child?"

"No, I--I didn't mean--"

"Are you so ready perhaps to have a family of your own?" Something crossed his face then, too perilous to have been anguish, although she thought it was. "Perhaps you consider yourself ready for a husband?"

"No!" she said quickly, backing away from him. "I don't think I'm ready for that at all!"

"Ah, but you seem so ready to make your opinions known. I thought, here's a young lady

who's perfectly ready to go off, marry, and live quite independently..."

Mutely, she shook her head. She could usually gauge what direction her father's logic was taking him, but in this case she was confused. He looks like a toy soldier, she thought idly. West Point trains its cadets well. He looks almost funny. But she knew now she had no reserves left to laugh at him, and she had no male muscles, like those of a young recruit, with which to run away.

"I think you need to be taught a lesson," he said. Turning to his wife he said, "Marguerite, my dear, if you'll excuse us..."

He gestured to Augusta to precede him through the door, and she trailed across the shining hallway in her evening dress with her father following close behind her. Entering the library, she moved at once to the far side of the room and waited by his desk, while he got out his riding crop.

"Bend over."

He would not allow any of his children the luxury of modesty, and beat them all on their bare skins. Leaning far across the desk, she gripped her hands over the other side and waited while he pushed up her skirts and unbuttoned her under drawers, folding them neatly down against her thighs. Then he beat her mercilessly on her bare buttocks.

Even then, she knew there was something wrong. Not merely with the act. But with him. But her mind closed against it but she thought, he feels guilty, so this will make him feel better. She gritted her teeth to endure it. Finally he was finished, and as he moved shuddering to stand by the banked fire, breathing through his mouth, he said quietly, "Augusta, please arrange your clothing."

She tried to pull up her undergarments, but her hands were shaking. There was blood. Dimly she thought, I've got to get out of here, but the thought of even moving was impossible. She shut her eyes.

"When you're ready to join us, you can come back to the table."

He was standing still, looking at her, and she wondered what he was thinking. Did he want her to forgive him? Love him? Thank him? Something told her hold onto that idea, don't lose it, it's important, but she already felt it fading. Now that her knees were buckling, she was thinking how pleasant it might be to faint.

"I'll join you in a few moments..."

She heard his footsteps turn and retreat back into the other room, and the minute she heard him leave, she was stumbling, up and out into the hallway, to wrench open the front door and run down the icy steps to the cold dark gravel of the driveway where she turned and vomited quietly into the rose bushes. She sank down onto her knees, feeling the cold through her thin dress but not minding it, feeling her head throb with dizziness, shame and pain. And then nothing. And then rage. Rage and a shuddering quick fear that lanced through her, making her glance up, appalled, at the dark house beside her, because how could she feel this? This was her father, the man she depended on for everything. The man who was her anchor in the world. Where would any of them be without him, her mother, her sisters...? He was their life: but he was wrong, wrong, a wrong, cruel, vicious man who beat the life out of them all for some twisted and pathetic reason...why? Why?

She didn't know. She couldn't think anymore. Looking up, she gradually got to her feet, thinking, I want to leave, but of course she couldn't do that. If I leave here I won't even exist.

She had the strangest thought then. Life washes over you. You're born, and you don't even know the why or how of anything, and if you weren't told, it all remained a mystery. There were mysteries beyond speech, certainly mysteries beyond articulating in that house where no one spoke. She didn't know who she was, who her sister was...who any of them were. And life kept washing over you like the sea, she thought, while you struggled to stand erect and take one moment to look out and see, to glimpse the outlines of the distant shore.

She wished she had the stamina to run away, but she knew she couldn't. Re-entering the big dark house, she thought, just go upstairs, put on your nightdress and fall asleep. The sheets of her bed were smooth and cool. Her room, though stifling, could be made bearable by opening a window. She could lean on the windowsill and look out over the barren lawn towards the river and think herself out there. She'd already become adept at flinging her mind out into another place, the first skill of poetry. Now use it. Owned and oblivious, she couldn't even raise her head, but oh, the wildness in her heart, the longing to escape. She knew there was a world out there where great men spoke, great issues fought and armies moved across the faces of the earth, but wherever they were, she knew she could never go there. She was fated to stay put in her father's house, unraveling mysteries and writing them in code no human eye would ever even see. She couldn't want more than that, wanting more was the moon. She turned and slowly made her way up the stairs.

When she entered her room she could hear voices raised in anger, her father's shouts, perhaps blows, and she thought, they've told my sister they're sending her away. She felt nothing then but a curious abstraction. Looking around the room, she thought, it all looks so normal, no one would know this place is soaked in blood--and then she shook her head to dispel that thought

as well. Please make them stop, she thought, pressing her hands to her ears. I can't bear it anymore. She staggered to the window and yanked up the sash as far as it would go, letting in the icy night air and drowning out the sounds of their fighting with the clean, clear, dark, rushing of the falls. Then she fell back onto her bed.

She couldn't know, wouldn't know until the next morning in fact, that her sister had taken a similar escape route, throwing herself from her window at some time during the night past the trees that were her only bars to smash her body to bits against the ground below. If she had known, she might have stopped her. But then again, perhaps not. As it was, she remained in ignorance all that night, and went to sleep with the sound of cold, clear running water in her ears. She was swept down to a powerful, mud brown river as comforting and all embracing as the sea, and she didn't know anything more until she was awakened, as they all were every morning, by the high, shrill, mindless shrieking of the five o'clock whistle from the mills.