

BREAKING-POINT

Forgive me, Mercy. Or, by asking you to forgive me, am I asking you too much? A wife — however loving and however loyal — should not be tested beyond her limits. Allow me, therefore, to lay my account before you and ask you to forgive only so much as you can.

You have always known that my father hanged himself. He lies on the open moor in an unmarked grave. To take one's own life is a sin. But there are many greater crimes and his conscience, I believe, was clear. It was his hope that the Lord, in his infinite compassion, would understand his pain and spare him from eternal darkness. His wife, my mother — the only woman he could ever love — died giving birth to me. My father had fought his grief valiantly and raised his son and successor in the ways of righteousness. He had shared with me all the skills and secrets of his craft and now his time had come. His duties had been fulfilled. His debts had been paid. He had, he prayed, earned his right to join his beloved in Paradise.

Measure, mark and step aside. After time has passed, return to measure and mark again. These are the carpenter's habits of precision. Before the chisel, before the plane, before the saw; before making the cut that cannot be reversed. Measure, mark and step aside. The beam from which I found my father's body hanging — twisting and turning in the cold black draught from the open door — was of his own impeccable construction. The stool, that he had kicked away from under him, I had fashioned myself while still his apprentice.

You know me, Mercy, to be a melancholy man. It was, you said, my black sadness that drew you to me. Your hope was always that you could cure me. That you could bring me into the light. Your fear has been that you could not and that I would follow my father. You have lain beside me while, caught between sleeping and waking, like a fish on a line, I twisted and turned in the night. In the morning you have comforted and

consoled me. My gratitude is beyond any measure but this is the confession I never made. The enemy I wrestle with at night is not my grief. It is my guilt.

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We were honoured when the Governor's Chamberlain, sheltering in our village from a storm, lighted upon my father's workshop. When he commended a writing-desk I had recently completed for our priest and asked if I would construct such a piece for his own use, it seemed that Fortune had smiled on us. 'But it must have a lock,' said the Chamberlain. 'An unbreakable lock. Indeed it must have more than one lock and they must all be indestructible.' 'Alas, we are carpenters and not locksmiths,' said my father. 'We work with wood but not with metal.' I saw the shadow passing across the Chamberlain's eyes like clouds across the Moon. 'But we can learn, Your Honour,' I said. 'We will certainly learn.'

The Governor's Chamberlain was greatly pleased with the writing-desk I made for him and charmed by the ingenuity of the locks. The plate, the hinge. Metal, I found, agreed with me as much as wood. Measure, mark and step aside. After time has passed, return to measure and mark again. The screw and nail would take more strain and hold more firmly than the wooden peg. I was moving beyond the blunt workings of the carpenter's bench to more subtle mechanics. Now — joining the chisel and the plane — the saw, the clamp, the vice, the grinder became my constant companions. The Chamberlain required more from me. A decorated table for his wife, a chair with a hidden compartment, several magnificent chests. And all of them with locks.

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A motherless child does not sleep as soundly as his companions. Recurring in my dreams was the sweet face of a woman. So gentle, so innocent. I imagined that she must be my mother offering me comfort from the place where she had gone. But, as I grew older, she seemed so young that I felt sure the face I was seeing in my dreams must be the woman I would marry.

The Governor's Chamberlain was loath to lose me to the Governor's Chancellor but it was clear he had no choice in the matter. I was set to work designing and constructing a cabinet to hold the secrets of the State. A chamber within a room within a wing whose existence — unless revealed by treachery — could never be discovered. And then, as they were required, the engines and instruments of war.

Mercy, yours was not the face of the woman I saw in my dreams but you have been the best of wives and borne my moods and humours. You have accepted my silences and not tormented me with unending questions as other women might. There were times when I wondered if the sweet girl's face might be our daughter's — how beautiful she would have been — but we have not been blessed with children.

The Governor's Chancellor generally met me with frowns. The Governor's Constable has always bestowed on me a smile. But I will admit it. I am more in dread of the Constable's smile than ever I was of the Chancellor's frowns. In truth, I seldom see him. The men I work with in the Chamber are the Constable's Enquirer and the Enquirer's Scribe. The words we exchange are few. 'Are you ready, Master?' the Enquirer will ask. 'I am,' I say. 'Then let us begin.' And so we go. A twist, a turn. Tightening and loosening, measuring the strain. 'A little more, Master.' I do as he bids me, watching constantly for the breaking-point that would bring the end too soon. Before the task is completed. 'That will serve for today, Master,' says the Enquirer. The Scribe rolls up his notes and we return to our families.

I have not lied to you, Mercy. I have never lied. But nothing I say convinces you that I have not. Isabella! The name I cry out in the night is not that of a lover. It comes to me from the darkness like black owl. The wings flapping. Isabella! Isabella! Is it her name? I don't know, I don't know. You have said that you will forgive me if I have mistress. More than that. You will understand. A man's needs will not always be gratified by his

wife. I am, you tell me, still lean and vigorous while you — in the way that women may — have become plain and plump. 'What causes me anguish, husband,' you say, 'is that your lover should cause you such distress.' But — how I wish I could compel you to believe me, Mercy — I need no other lover than you. No other lover. None.

The devices I inherited were crudely made. They had no exactitude. It was easy to see why joints would split or snap. Why they would crack and break and shatter. Why they would come apart before the task was completed. The carpenter's skills are not easily measured. How may one piece be compared with another? But mine can be noted daily. By the answers the Enquirer receives, by the accounts that are recorded by the Scribe.

I could not keep it for ever from my father. Did I expect that, after my confession, I would be absolved? 'None of us is free from guilt,' he said. 'Who knows the ways of the Lord. He may find it in his heart to forgive you. Yes, forgiveness may be yours. But forgiveness may not be enough. You will need to live with the black memory of your deeds through all Eternity.' He looked at me steadily, put his carpenter's hands on my shoulders and returned to his workshop. Measure, mark and step aside. Beyond the door, the wind was howling.

I hear the grinding of the wheel, the creaking gears, the moaning of the rollers. That is all. Nothing beyond their workings. Nothing except, 'A little more, Master. A little more.' And then, when finally the task is completed, 'That will do for today, Master.'

I do not hear their voices. I do not see their faces. My eyes focus on the parts and not the whole. The legs, the arms, the feet, the hands, the toes, the fingers. The body mechanical. Its levers. This is how it must be.

Once my father was buried, I asked for an audience with the Governor's Constable. 'You are asking to be relieved of your duties?' he said. He smiled. He smiled again. 'Oh, no. No, no. That cannot be allowed. You should know that once you are set on this path, you cannot step aside from it.'

Why then did I find myself looking into her face? The sweet face I had known all my life. So gentle, so innocent. Why then — and only then — did I hear such a chorus of screaming? Shrieking, howling, weeping; tearing the air. Although she herself was silent. Quite silent. No words. No cries. No curses. And no breath.

Each night, I see a body hanging from the beam. It twists and turns in the cold, black draught from the open door. But it is not my father's face. It is hers. I shout out the tormenting name. Isabella! Isabella! Night after night. Night after night.

My time has come. I must seek out my soul. Forgive me, Mercy. Forgive me if you can.