

She saw it once, through crowds of branches—and she loved it at once: it was her house. Late in the afternoon, their sixth day of traveling, the wagon moved down a clay road, mostly shaded. This road Ralston knew, as Emma didn't, to be the lower south border of the farm property. The wagon listed toward a strip of woods which was part of the farm wood lot. There was a pecan orchard, not large—and overgrown. A graying farmhouse sat back beyond it. There was a good stand of oaks. One more such place in mile after mile of farm properties, the weathering houses and orchards. Emma had seen too many to notice—in the long days of travel, anticipation had slowly drained out of her. But here Ralston left the road and turned into a drive. The mules came to a stop.

"Well, Emmalie?" This little variation in her name—it was his one show of something like fondness. But Emma was preoccupied. She had been struggling with a can of sardines, which she had part way open. The fishy broth had leaked out onto her fingers. Ralston turned toward her, looking pleased. Now she had the can open. She sipped the juice herself, to be rid of it.

"Well?" he repeated. She was still busy. Then she caught on to something.

"Hmm?" He watched now with open amusement as Emma's eyes traveled over the house, darted to the orchard and fields, then returned to the house.

"Is this it?"

Ralston just sat, looking pleased with himself.

"Is this *it*?" Emma's tone had changed. It was no longer a question, just a collection of words. Emma made a noise and handed the can to Ralston. In her enthusiasm, she lost all sense of the strain she had been under. They were here. And the house was her own. It was bigger than she would have expected, solid and well built. Tall and squarish, sitting high up on its cellar. It was a handsome house in a sturdy kind of way. A porch ran along the front, with three columns. The sight of it delighted Emma, its neglect a detail too trivial for notice. They continued around to the back, where Emma spotted the pump,

built right into the back porch. The Swann children had always had to run back and forth to get to the pump. Emma remembered having to run in the rain.

In her eagerness, the inclination to chatter returned to Emma. The house, empty except for the kitchen range and an ornate, fussy-looking stove in the parlor, had that strange feeling of vacancy about it. Across the back porch lay drifts of rain-pocked pollen, withered oak silk, and leaves. The prints of a pair of man's shoes led back and forth from the porch steps to the back door. But there was no trace of ownership left in those dim, hollow rooms. The house was theirs.

A ceiling. A room. It took Emma some moments to remember where they were. They had slept on a mattress laid down in the dusty front room. Ralston left the farm early. They made yet another breakfast that day on mush with a little sugar. It was a grim, unsatisfying meal. Ralston frowned as he ate. Emma too was not satisfied, hungry all the while she ate the mush. She found herself thinking, as she never had before, about food. The taste of new butter, fresh milk and buttermilk, the flavor of raw tomatoes, the sweet earthy taste of vegetables cooked with pork. But she was chatty and eager. She would start right away on her kitchen. The day was still wet and heavy with morning. By herself now, Emma swept and scrubbed down the floor. With the unpacked crates she made a makeshift arrangement of shelves and felt inventive about it. In her first flurry of work, she was content. But when she finished, an odd feeling came over her. For the first time in her life, Emma was entirely alone in a house. She had never, to her certain knowledge, been right by herself anywhere. Now she grew still and listened, for what she didn't know. In the house there was only silence. There were the bedrooms upstairs, which needed a good cleaning. But no. Wait. She didn't have to do it just yet. It would be

hours before Ralston got back. She didn't have to do anything just yet. This idea made Emma pause with one foot on the stair landing. A look of secret excitement passed over her face. By nature Emma was obedient. She had all her life consistently—for the most part cheerfully—done as she was told. Now there was no one around to tell her. The small excitement increased. Why, she might just as well take a look around outside, first. She could make that decision.

As Emma walked out to the porch, she realized that it was no longer early morning. The day was brilliant with new-washed sun and alive with the noise of birds. She almost laughed out loud that the day was so fine, that she was here, where she stood: that it was her porch, her house, the property of her husband. Emma glanced up, shading her eyes with her hand. The sky moved rapidly above her—she seldom stopped to look at it. She'd just have a look at the outbuildings and orchard, what was left of the kitchen garden.

When Ralston returned that afternoon, the wagon was loaded with hardware and groceries. There was a cow trailing behind the wagon, a crate of old hens and a rooster. The two of them sat down right there, on the back steps, to eat the tomatoes, biting into them like pieces of fruit. They made supper that evening on Emma's flapjacks, stacks of small golden disks—between each she spread new butter and sprinkled sugar. There was a pitcher of fresh milk, the first they had tasted since the morning of their wedding. As she served Ralston, Emma kept up a running chatter about the food she put down before him. This would become her habit. It was a pleasure for her to serve food; her conversation was a way of increasing the pleasure of eating it. There was an eagerness in both of them then, not just for the food, but for the effort they were undertaking. This was their own place, to build up, to make prosperous with the steady progress of slow and demanding physical work. And for the present, that had a rightness to it; it was what both had been brought up to do. Everything formal, informal, that could be said to have been their education, the whole of their upbringing and training for life, had led them to this place, this business of making their lives. This, then, was to be their life.

They were beginning it, with energies coiled like a spring.

When Ralston walked outside in the late light, Emma trotted after him. They stood together for a little, at the west fence, looking out over what had been the cornfields. Where Emma saw acres, Ralston saw neglect, even ruin. It was the best of soils, one hundred sixty-six rich Black Belt acres. A soil almost black, heavy in the hand and fragrant, not like the pale Wiregrass soil that fell through the fingers. Over the course of a single, sun-stricken summer, the acres of crops had reverted, were by this time thick masses of half wild vegetation. Emma knew a ruined field when she saw one—she could see that the state of things troubled him.

"Well," Ralston let his head fall between his shoulders and shook it, with something like a chuckle. "Looks like it's mine, now."

"I know you're proud of it." It was in Emma's nature to comfort. She gave a little stroke to his arm, and her hesitancy in touching him puzzled her. She felt a strong sympathy for him, then—she felt it often. She could have lavished him with affection at such times, if he had let her. Perhaps if she could have for once dropped that restraint, have been herself freely and convincingly with this man she had married, it may have made some small difference.

Ralston looked down at her curiously. He felt no need to reply, simply because a remark had been made.

Emma would have liked most to ask if he were happy.

She sat on the cellar steps, an unlikely spot for writing a letter. When she was discouraged, Emma hid. Or lonely: Emma hid. The hiding was compulsive in the empty house. She held a cheap writing tablet on her knees. With it she

used a pencil that she kept sharpened with a paring knife. There was so much that she wanted to tell them! But Emma's letters to her family were much like theirs were to her: short profusions of affection, with a household detail or two added—they were, none of them, especially well lettered people. She wanted to tell them how it had been. She wrote, instead, a single sentence: "We have finished up with the harvest." The sentence said nothing at all. Now she wondered why nobody had warned her. Maybe nobody knew. They, Emma and the sisters, had never done much picking at home—they didn't grow cotton. They grew peanuts. And the men did the picking that had to be done. Maybe they wouldn't have even believed her.

She and Ralston worked together, that first week, then the second, another—Emma lost count. First, the ruined cornfields had to be dealt with. Ralston moved inside the rows, muttering profanities where the masses of weeds had already gone to seed. In places it was difficult for the two of them to spot the stunted ears, and a good number of the corn plants were barren. With the mules and wagon behind them, they pushed through the tangles, twisting and snapping the small ears where they found them. The tall grass tickled and tormented Emma. Her face splotched and broke out. It didn't take long for the continuous twisting of the hard, stringy ears to make blisters in the palms of their hands. The blisters would rise, break, and make sore places. Emma had to force her hands to work again—but she didn't try to beg off. She knew she could leave off before Ralston, to go inside for the cooking. The kitchen was strange and dark to her eyes, coming in from the fields. She built up her fire, to rewarm certain dishes, to begin others she would set aside for the next day. In her fatigue, she confused herself.

After the corn came the cotton. The bolls were small, undersized like the corn, not easy to spot through the Jimsonweed and Johnson grass. The tiny bolls affected Emma like something deliberately vicious. The hard, sharp hulls stabbed her fingers. Emma's cuts swelled and bled—and she knew she'd be stabbed again, in the same places. She wrapped her own fingers in strips of cloth, but Ralston wouldn't let her wrap his. The picking seemed to go on

forever. Ralston swore. Emma wept. Salt water ran through her eyes. Perspiration or tears, she couldn't say—it didn't much matter. The plants caught and tugged at the bag that she pulled. The strong equinox sun hammered. With each other Ralston and Emma grew silent, bruised by their weariness. There were times during the picking when Emma cooked, served, ate beside Ralston without a word passing between them. Just to be still and be quiet—they needed that—though Emma less so than Ralston. After the corn and the cotton, the digging of the sweet potatoes, the lifting, cutting, and bundling of pea plants were gentle harvests, in comparison.

Now Emma was by herself. On the farm the couple's labor divided. Emma had no more part in the harvest, except for the daily gatherings of fallen pecans. She walked with her eyes on the ground, her feet making a dry, swishing noise in the leaves. It was comfortable work. It was lonesome. She didn't realize at first how lonesome—after the fieldwork, anything had seemed welcome. Now she lost sight of Ralston during the days. Until now they were working, pushing ahead, punishing themselves with work because there was a goal to keep moving toward—a great and final culmination. What had that been? Emma had lost the sense, now, of just what it was.

Ralston came in from the fields only to eat—he ate quickly—then went to the barn. She observed him as he ate—he was preoccupied. He seemed to have no need of her, beyond the food she set down before him. She had assumed it to be a fact of life—that need, until now satisfied, that she had for other people. People to touch, to tease and fuss over. She needed the chatter that made a day comfortable. Ralston felt no need for these things, it was obvious. By nature he tended to silence, just as Emma tended to chatter. Emma would come to learn that her husband was easy and talkative only in the company of men. Yet with his wife as the only audience available, at times he was driven to talk of the little daily matters that troubled him. This, then, would gradually become his habit: to depend on that audience. Emma answered in

soothing non-sequiturs, little comments about his food or rest. His silences were no longer as disturbing to her as they once had been—she had learned to pace out the rhythm of Ralston's silences.

But the burden of her days bore down on her. Emma's longing for her family was like a physical illness. No one had told her it could be this way. Always, before, there had been company, the three other sets of hands, her mother's and sisters'—she had lived with the closeness of bodily contact. Now there was only Ralston's brief, nightly gratification of that need of men—there were no caresses, no fond touches—unlike her own family, Ralston was not fond of being touched. And with her own family there was always the jostling, the blandishments, as well as the kisses and pinches. The stroking. There was a thing that she wanted—Emma couldn't have attached a word to this feeling. She was nonetheless driven by it that night when she had come up to find Ralston sleeping. He lay curled on his side, facing away from the doorway. Emma sat down to unpin and re-braid her hair; and as her fingers worked, she watched him, not aware that her mind was also working. She was lonely—there had never been reason to give the feeling a name. The house was quiet. It was empty. The fields lying around it were empty. Silence—that mean, unaccustomed thing—filled the rooms of the night-swallowed house. Emma blew out the lamp and lay down behind Ralston. If only, if just—she didn't know what. Tentatively she touched his back, then withdrew her hand like she had touched something hot. It was not the sex act that she craved—Emma's body was not yet awakened. She knew nothing of sensual pleasure. In his sleep, Ralston twitched a shoulder, as he would have done to toss off an insect.