



How Still Waters Run

A Novella by J.K. Marlin written as a character study

based on the serial story <https://lazarus-ink.blog>

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How Still Waters Run

First Part

Every time I come here I see you over there -- so beautiful you are. Then you take one look at me, and in a flash you're gone. If you just stay for a moment, I promise I won't come too near. I will write you a letter in this book. I can write, you know. I will read it to you, so it doesn't matter that you can't read. Papa says others don't learn to read in these times, but he says all his children must learn to read and we must even learn to dip into the inks to make some writings for saving. So here I am dipping into the oak gall inks for saving, so you will have a book of me when I am gone.

Momma tied up these papyrus ends and it has a ribbon here to make it a book. She says it is a book for my own words and prayers and thoughts. It is for any secrets I want to tell. I have some secrets. Momma says I should tell my secrets to God. But God knows my family too well, and if I told my secrets to God they might not be kept secret. And it matters so much that my family never knows that I know this thing I have to tell.

I come from the farm on the hilltop where everything forever and ever is perfect. We have a cow and a mule and they are very good. The donkey, Jack, is not always so good, so when horses visit he has to stay in the back shed by himself. Sometimes people come on horseback, so I brush down the visitor horses and give them oats and hay the same as I do our own beasts. We have chickens too, and a whole roost of messenger doves to carry words back to our family from the monasteries.

My papa goes to those places where he says "they pray without ceasing." That sounds hard to do, spending forever doing nothing but talk to God, day and night, never to brush down a horse, or plow a springtime field. But he says it works out because the prayers are chants and they do it together in the monasteries, and since there are so many monks they can take turns chanting the required psalms over and over again. So the psalms continue without ceasing but the people singing them can come and go. God probably knows all those psalms by now anyway, backwards and forwards, so God wouldn't even need to listen anymore. But God would have all that much more time to hear my secret if I made it my prayer, and surely, if God knew what I know, God would tell my momma.

So Papa wants all of us children to learn the psalms. I do it too, unless I can think of something else I could do. I'm not very good at the chants. When we are practicing together, sometimes he looks right at me and he can tell when I put the wrong verse next, even when I don't do it aloud. He just lets it pass. If my sister or one of my brothers mumbled a forgotten verse, he would stop and remind them they are wrong. He never stops the chant to fix my errors. So I think he just expects I can't really do it. And only part of my secret is that I can write with inks. I still use the waxboard for our lessons so I can blot it out blank again, and no one will know of my errors. But look at me now! I am writing in a book. One day they will all know I am good afterall.

Thank you for noticing me. I love it when you listen to me like that, but how carefully I must speak now that someone is listening. And there you are, blinking your beautiful coal dark eyes, and noticing me here. I hope you will tell me your name, but it's all right if you don't want to speak. Sometimes I don't want to speak, and so I don't.

My name is Simon. I'm named after my papa's papa. I never met him and now he is gone. But my papa said Simon is a very good name because it is the name of

a rich man in the Bible. The Bible has secrets too, you know. But those are secrets God already knows. The secret of Simon that God knows, but the Bible doesn't say, is that he was a very rich man because he traded riches from far away places with all those pilgrims who came to Jerusalem to chant psalms. Then, Simon got the pox and they wouldn't let him near Jerusalem. In those times, people with scars or blindness, or crutches, or whatever just had to sit outside of the city gates and beg of others for their bread. That was bad.

But Simon was so good that when a bad thing happened to him, he turned that bad thing into good. So when he had scars of pox, he didn't get a beggar's bowl and sit at the gates, instead he went to a town that had no gates, and built a big house. Then all the people who came to Jerusalem with riches for trading stopped off at Simon's house in Bethany and traded the silks and spices and special things with Simon for the kinds of coins they used in Jerusalem. And when the pilgrims returned to their own homes, and were passing through Bethany with the Jerusalem coins in their bags, they stopped to trade those coins with Simon for the silks and special things from far away places that Simon had traded with others before them. You can see how Simon could make the bad

thing, giving up his merchant's booth in Jerusalem because he had pox scars, into a good thing after all.

That's why, when my momma and papa knew a bad thing happened when I was born, they named me for the grandfather who could turn a bad thing to good.

My sister and I are winnowing oats today, so I have to get back to work, but I'll come again tomorrow if it is a sunny day. I will ask you again to tell me your name.

&

There you are again in your favorite place, and me in this place across the creek. I love this creek too, that's why I come here so often.

The waters seem to leap and dance so fast that the splashes of sunshine can flash and sparkle especially after the rains we had last night. I hope you have a place with a roof where you can go. Just look how the water dazzles with the sunshine today!

I like to climb out here on this big rock where you always see me and lay down here where it is warm in the sun and look over the edge of the rock down into the water. Did you ever notice that when the shadows are over the water you can see right through the top edge of

it and look down ever so deep all the way to the bottom. It is the long look past what everyone just sees quickly -- and there, with a slow watch you see a whole different world is right under this rock -- long strings of grass dance slow in the deep. It's not like the grasses of the fields that curtsey and dip when the wind passes by, then jump up standing tall again as though they'd never bowed down at all.

Deep in the creek, if you wander your gaze past the fast fish swimming by, there is the whole world of slow. A dark twirl of a snail spreads over a stone. She probably notices every little dent and pock of the rock that no one ever sees if they only take a fast look. Deep in the creek, the slow is very good.

So, is this the day you might tell me your name? If you mention it softly I will listen. I would like to be so strong like you are, and never speak. But I'll bet your name is something that's said long and slow. Maybe your name is like Waldonna or something lovely like that.

So you looked right at me when I said Waldonna. Is that because it is your name, and maybe I have come close to knowing? Are you afraid that I know? Or is it all right if I call you Waldonna?

"Simon" Do you hear my name? My mother's calling over the hillside for me to come up. Don't worry, I won't tell her your name. That's our secret. I have to go now. Good-bye, Waldonna. I'll come again tomorrow if the sun is shinning.

&

Yesterday I was going to stay here longer. It was such a beautiful day but Momma wanted me to ready the donkey cart, so Hannah, my sister, could drive Momma to call on people who have been sick to see if they are better now. Momma takes both of my sisters with her when she goes calling. Hannah is her apprentice and Layla is just a baby so no one else can watch her yet, but Momma.

You might already know, everyone knows this. Momma is a physician. She has a healing garden, and she knows all those things about healing. She doesn't do miracles, like they do at the holy places with the bones of saints because my mother's teacher was taught the Pagan ways. So mostly she learned to do the healing things of earth, not so much of heaven. Christians and Pagans all come to her the same. Now my sister Hannah has so much

more to learn than the rest of us. Sometimes Hannah can get proud as stone. She has reading and writing, music and prayer chants and then the women's farm chores all added on to the healing things. So she isn't sweet like you might expect a little sister to be. And then my older brothers can do lots of good things, and even my little brothers are quick at learning everything. Actually I'm the only one in our whole family who learns extra long and very slowly, finally.

Charlie and our other neighbors aren't like us. Sometimes I wish that Charlie were my brother, then I could just work all day and it would be good. Everything would be slow, not just me and the cow and the rocks in the deep. We would have slow chickens, and a docile donkey and the mule would never buck. The rain would fall slow, and the sun would rise slow so the rooster wouldn't wake until the sun was hot and high.

Charlie is a hunter. I suppose slow wouldn't really work for a hunter unless you only hunted skunks. Deer and squirrels are always fast, and just when you think a wild boar would be slow, it is off like a rock rolling off the hilltop.

So now you know one reason I like you so much. The first time I laid eyes on you, Waldonna, you were

walking through the meadow. The grasses laid down at your feet, but you were just going along slow and easy. You probably didn't notice me watching, but I saw you.

I can't stay long today. I have extra chores now because I have to do my brothers' chores while they are gone.

&

My older brothers are leaving again today to go to Metz. They are nearly teens and Papa says they are old enough to go alone. They are twelve now.

My age is only one thing, and it is the mark for a mistake. It is an X because I am ten. Maybe you think that sounds very old but I don't think anyone else notices that.

My brothers are Gabe and Greg. They are two perfectly matching twins. They just look at each other and they each see their own goodnesses. They are strong and very smart. They read and write and sing; they hunt with bows and they even ride on horses now. But they have to return the horses to Metz. That's why they are going there.

In the early spring they left with Papa to go to Luxeuil because he said they were old enough to go on

the pilgrimage, and it isn't very far to Luxeuil anyway, so they would all be back by the Feast of Resurrection.

Momma pretended like it was a good thing too, because, she said, I would be "the man of the house." Always she pretends I will turn a bad thing to a good thing.

Then when they didn't notice me there, Papa asked Momma if it was really all right to "leave so much work for Simon."

She said, "Of course you know Simon takes his time but does everything well." I know what she meant and so does Papa. She doesn't want to say it, but our neighbor Charlie calls me that all the time. "Simon the Slow."

&

Sometimes Momma and Papa and maybe even God believe that I can do so many things all alone with only my little sister Hannah nagging me directions. They trust me to be the "man of the house" when I am just a child with an X for an age.

So that first time when they left, Papa and the twins carried very thin pilgrim's packs just for the Good Friday pilgrimage. When the day for Feast of the Resurrection came round, all the rest of us went up to our

regular church in the woods. I drove the cart because Momma thinks I am the “man of the house” when no one else is left here to be that. Momma rode next to me on the seat because she has the baby in her arms. Hannah sat right behind the driver seat on the bucket upside down. And my little brothers didn’t sit on anything but the hay on the cart floor. The priest, Mater Doe, was so surprised we came when we had “only little Simon” to drive the cart. Momma said she would’ve driven the cart if we didn’t have a “man of the house.”

It was strange even at church to hear the songs without the voices of my papa, and Greg and Gabe. We don’t chant psalms at this little church. We sing dancing songs on a feast day like Easter. Momma plays a clay flute and Papa plucks a harp and sings along. But with Papa gone we only have flutes and a stick and the bucket for the drum.

Mater Doe is the priest for anyone who comes, not just for Christians, so she doesn’t punish for Christian rules. Our neighbor Charlie says she is a druid priest. She does wear a white robe, and her hair flows pure white. But sometimes I stay after worship up there and help her clear the old bones from the altar fires, and bring in new wood from the wood piles, and I can tell you that

only hunted animals burn on those fires. No children are burned up there. All she ever does with children is baptize them and sometimes she calls them into the dancing circle when the song is easy.

All the families, our neighbors and us too, came with food for sharing. So we ate and danced until the sun leaned from the west. But it was so strange without Papa and the twins. There seemed to be no way to fix a hole in the music no matter how loud I sang.

When we returned home, Papa and my brothers were already back from Luxeul. Yet it wasn’t as happy then as I would have thought. It seemed kind of terrible and different.

&

Greg and Gabe were talking, talking, stringing their voices together one after the other, telling a story that made Papa sad when he told it again to Momma.

Greg and Gabe took the mule out to the pasture. Even though it was nearly dark, they said they wanted to practice with him. They were pretending he was a horse, so they were taking turns mounting and dismounting, locking their legs around him, and pretending he would trot off like a full-bred horse with just a little kick to his

side. They know a kick doesn't trot this mule, but all they could talk about was horses.

We sleep in the loft over Momma and Papa's room, so if I stay awake late when everyone else is sleeping, I can put my ear to the floor and hear them whispering to each other. So now I knew what was going on. Papa said some of the close followers of Father Columbanus, who is the Abbot of Luxeuil, wanted Papa to be a messenger and take a letter to the bishops of Gaul. Papa said he didn't even know what town it is where the bishops' council was meeting, but he told them he couldn't do that kind of work anymore because he had a family now.

Then a dux who is Mayor of Metz made an order of it to Papa. The dux and a rich baro are waiting to send horses and soldiers to carry the letter, but the abbot particularly wanted Papa to do it, because Papa had met with the Bishop of Metz all those years ago and they were sure that the Bishop became a follower of the Irish abbot because the messenger made such a good case for the Irish to stay in the Vosges. Now only some of the bishops are meeting to accuse the Abbot of cutting his hair wrong or something like that. But Papa said no he couldn't be this messenger this time.

I always think when my papa says no, it means no. But the baro for the dux wouldn't listen to Papa's no, so he went to the stable where Gabe and Greg were with the horses and the stable boys. And the baro told Gabe and Greg they could ride horses and go with Papa and the soldiers. Of course they wanted to do that more than anything else. Then Father Columbanus sent the soldiers back home because he didn't want soldiers carrying his message. He just wanted Papa to do it, and his "men" could be his children. The abbot thought that was a good way to send the message and by taking the twins, he said Ezra (he calls Papa Ezra) could still be true to his family. Papa felt like no one heard him say no and Greg and Gabe had the abbot and a rich dux who was a mayor of Metz, and a rich baro all of them turned Papa's "no" into barely a whisper of "maybe." So now Papa came back and talked to Momma long deep dark and low into the night, until I couldn't hear their whispers anymore. I woke up in the morning and Greg and Gabe and Papa were setting out again toward Luxeuil but this time they took heavier packs and were talking only about horses.

&

Now for the rest of the winnowing and into the spring planting, I haven't had any time to come here and sit by the creek. I've missed seeing you there in the sunlight. I've had lots of thoughts to write in my book to read to you. I've had lots of prayers to say to God, when I am pretty sure he won't have time to listen, and you know me, I don't write those prayers. Even though Momma always sees to it we have plenty of time for prayers and lessons, and she knows I always get it in slow time. That I don't write prayers is nothing about not having time for prayer. I just don't want God-answers telling on me to my parents.

Really it isn't even about slow at all, though slow I am. Even my little brother Habert reads his lessons faster and easier now. Everyone is so good. If God heard long prayers from me I would always ask God to grow me to slither as fast as a fish and as wise as a rock. But Momma still has this very slow "man of the house."

&

I guess you caught me sad today. Maybe the sunshine will find some blue holes to shine through anyway. You and I both love the sunshine on these rocks

and logs and the glittering creek. I hope you can stay to hear what came of their journey to take the letter to the bishops.

This is what happened. Just a day after they left, Papa let loose the bird that comes back to our house. He learned that the bishops were meeting in Chalôns. Momma was glad to get the message because she was thinking that with horses they could be there in a week and back in a week and everything would be good again.

But then, I wished more than ever I really was the kind of Simon who could turn the bad into good. All of the great wonders of our family have no good ways to change what happened and make it better.

I know what happened to Papa and my brothers when they were gone. Little by little I've learned everything that happened now. I can tell you what it was that happened.

They arrived at the council of bishops in Chalôns. The bishops were expecting the abbot to come in person, and they imagined he would shiver and shake at the power of this Gaulish nobility all pompous in the miters of bishops. Greg said the bishops probably thought the abbot would come and bow and kiss their rings and say "yes your holinesses." And of course Abbot

Columbanus, stricken in awe, would say, "I will go back immediately across the sea to the island that sent me." But instead the abbot sent Papa to be the messenger to say the abbot chose not to come.

Gabe and Greg were peeking at the council through a gallery window, and they saw it all happen as it did. "When it was just our papa who went into the great hall bringing a letter," and Greg went on, "and the letter said something like, 'Good for you bishops for getting along with each other so nicely. But let's just let me, the foreign abbot, stay out of this and continue simply living in peace near the bones of so many of my Irish brothers who came all this way for Christ's sake into the hunting grounds of the dead king.'"

The bishops were angry with the letter, and since it was Papa who brought them the letter, they sent their guards after him.

Maybe you don't notice it from your place on the other side of the creek. Our neighbor Charlie couldn't figure it out either. But it happens a lot. People who pretend they have the power to rule over others but never pay attention to anyone else, miss knowing things, like where food comes from, and who brings them things. So when a messenger brings them a message or some

important news, they get the message itself confused with the one who brings it. The strange way of one who doesn't know the source of things tends to think that the messenger is the same as the message he brings. The messenger is the one who gets blamed for a bad message.

I mean, think of Jesus. He said forgive those who hurt you, and love your enemies anyway. I think when Jesus said it he was speaking in another language, but those Romans knew what he said, and they knew it would be way too hard to love enemies, and besides, it would make them feel like weak losers, yet Jesus spoke the message that God wanted, the love and forgiveness to everyone anyway. So what did they do? They just killed the messenger.

I keep meeting up with these kinds of hates that don't fit hurts because people just don't get the love your enemy part and little hurts fester into hurting the hurt, back on the one who started it, even if hurting that one doesn't make any sense and doesn't even put things back the same. It's how I see it anyway.

Thank you for listening to all of this dear friend.

I was thinking that I know full well what it feels like when your neighbors think you are a weak loser, even if your neighbor doesn't even know how to drive a plow,

and surely can't read or write or even sing very well. Some people just don't get it. Momma says not to worry over it, and Papa says if you stick by God's kind of love it might be a bit of a rocky and gullied ride, but it will be a safe end. Some kinds of goodness are forever, but when good is nothing more than what powerful people may think is good for them, goodness is a whimsy. It can change and shift leaving no one to know what goodness is from one moment to the next. And the ride is easy but the end is useless. So Jesus was the messenger of God's love and the Romans killed the messenger.

Now when Papa took that message to the bishops and they didn't like, they sent their guards out in the night, and the guards drove a polearm with a spear tip right through the middle of Papa. Even though, this is nothing like the end of this story, Greg and Gabe just howl and cry over that bad thing, and they say over and over that they are sorry. "Sorry, sorry, sorry." When Mater Doe heard them sorrying so much and saw papa laid out in a wagon, she thought it was them that tried to kill Papa. She sent them home and told them to get Momma and the other children up to the church immediately. So it was nearly dark when I put the donkey to the cart and we all went through the woody hillside, up

to the church while Mater Doe was worrying over the crazy twins wailing on and on that they are sorry.

Sorry feels like a power, but it isn't the power.

And no one is saying the power word "forgive." So everyone was afraid that night when the twins came home so filled with sorrys and no forgivenesses.

Then up at the church, there was Papa, pale, dirty, so badly sleeping, nearly dead then suddenly gasping like a fish washed sideways onto the bank of the creek. The twins brought him there to the church all the way from Chalôns in a dirty straw wagon towed by the old white horse. The white horse was the horse that Greg rode back home that night and now there was no horse to take the wagon back down to our house. I feared they were going to send me walking home in the dark to get the mule, but Momma thought better of that. And we all just curled up by the fires of the church to sleep the night while Momma and Mater Doe took turns sitting outside by the wagon with Papa.

Papa had wakened a bit in the night, and when the brighter shine started across the eastern sky, Momma woke me to tell me. When it is a day that Momma wakes me, the whole day is a good one. She strokes my hair and whispers close to me that this is the day that God has

made. She said that Papa woke in the night and his mind was nearly clear. She said Mater Doe was watching him when he woke, and she came and woke her to go out to tell him she was there. So Momma asked Papa why the boys were so sorry. What terrible thing had they done? Then he said they did only good things. They obeyed him when he told them to hide from the guards; that was when the bishops' guards were following cruel orders. So Greg and Gabe hid and watched. Then they took him from the earth and found that old wagon to bring him home.

“They were good boys.” He said, “thank you God” and now he is sleeping so we all needed to wake the other children quietly. Momma wanted me to take the donkey cart with Hannah and the little boys back down to our house.

Greg and Gabe were still sleeping when we got there, so we tried to keep quiet while we just did the morning chores as always. Hannah milked the cow and mashed some oats while I watched the little ones, then I fed the animals. There were the two horses there, the white horse and a gray horse that Gabe and Greg rode. I turned them out to the pasture with the cow but the donkey, Jack, had to go in the shed because he doesn’t behave around horses. I put out fresh straw.

Greg came out just as I was readying the mule with the tack to go back to the church for the wagon, and he said that he and Gabe wanted to talk with me. I went in and sat at the table with my two brothers and Hannah too. It felt like we were all grown-up together for this moment. I could almost believe the title “man of the house” was how they knew me just then. I was listening to them like Papa might listen. I just sat there quietly and let them talk. They told Hannah and me about the bishops and the guards and all the things that happened.

They said they saw the guards drive the polearm right through the middle of Papa, and then the guards covered him over with dirt as though he were dead and in a grave.

Then, the twins said they feared the guards would find them watching and do the same to them and Momma would never know what happened, ever. So they stayed hidden until the guards were gone, then they went back to the stable.

They took turns telling us this whole story. It was their “sorry” story, the kind you need to tell when your heart is hurting.

They said, “The Baro Dithrum of Metz ran away as soon as he saw what was going to happen to Papa, and

he rode off on his big black horse so we knew he was really gone when we got to the stable. The stable master had the old wagon rolled up to the stable doorway to clean out the stalls, and when he saw us, he thought we were the regular stable boys and he told us to finish that work. So we did, then the wagon was filled deep with dirty straw and no one was around at all, so we just put a horse on the wagon. First we tried Gabe's gray mare, and she would have nothing to do with pulling a wagon, so we tried Greg's great, long white horse, and she took to the wagon right away. That made Greg into the wagon driver. We went right back into the woods with the wagon to the place where Papa was laying under the dirt. No one would wonder what we were doing, because a hidden wood is always a good place to dump off a heap of dirty straw. And that was why we put Papa in the wagon under all of that whatever you call it in the straw and in the wagon."

We all laughed, except Hannah, because we all know what we call 'whatever we call it.' And whenever we say that word it's always very funny. It was a good moment for me just then, the good laugh at the bad word with my older brothers.

But it was this dirty straw thing that made them so sorry. They said that they really thought that Papa was

dead. Even when they hauled him into the wagon and covered him over with straw, they thought he was dead. They said they thought he was dead when they followed the river paths back the same way they had come and stopped at the stables where they had stopped with Baro Dithrum from Metz and Papa.

Gabe said, "We kept him hidden. We didn't talk to him, or even pray aloud for him."

Greg said, "We didn't know what was right to do with a dead person. So finally, when we were nearly home and passing by the path to the place where Charlie lives, we stopped to ask Charlie what he thought we should do. But Charlie didn't know. He wanted to put a knife to his throat like you would do a deer to be sure it is dead."

Gabe said, "Then Papa made a creepy sound, and we didn't really want him dead. We thought Mater Doe would know what to do. Of course Papa would know. But we just weren't sure about prayers, and all that stuff to do with dead bones, so we just kept him hidden."

Greg said, "Charlie told us to do as we would if we had hunted down a great buck or even an auroch on the king's hunting grounds. Hunting a great animal is an offense against the king, so you have to keep it hidden."

Gabe said, "Of course we have to keep a great forbidden beast hidden if it were dead or we would be found out for a terribly bad sin. We could die for it."

Greg added, "So we kept Papa hidden as though he were a great buck that had been hunted down, poached from the king's earth."

Gabe said, "Then, all of a sudden Papa made another terrible sound, like a person who was alive and hurting. Then we realized what a terrible thing we had done to Papa. We just wanted to undo everything we had done, to go back to that grave in the woods and save Papa's life. We wanted to care for him as he would care for us. But that wasn't what we did."

Greg continued, "When Charlie suggested we take him to the church and let Mater Doe figure it out, it seemed like such a good plan. But when we got to the church Mater Doe was grim."

Gabe said, "She took one look at Papa, and then she turned her coal eyes on us, piercing us with her gaze."

Greg continued, "We've never seen her in wrath before, but we've heard the rumors that she might rule the underworld."

Gabe added, "We said we were sorry, and just then everything seemed wrong, putting Papa in a wagon of

dirty straw, driving hard over a river trail, never even giving him food or a blanket... everything we had done was as terrible as Mater Doe was thinking."

Both of my brothers were crying now as though I really was their papa and they were telling me the bad thing they had done.

And yet, I could understand why they were crying and so sorry. It hurt my heart to know their pain. Hannah was off with our little brothers outside. And there I was as the trusted listener to all of this.

Greg asked me if Mater Doe told Momma we killed Papa.

I could say the very good thing, "Maybe they thought that at first, but Papa woke in the night and told Momma you were good boys."

Like a true "man of the house" I just went back out and finished preparing the mule then walked the mule back up to the church alone to get Papa and Momma and baby Layla and bring them all home.

It's been a couple weeks now, but Papa still just lays in the bed, and Greg and Gabe help with the work that's left of putting up the grains and straw and starting the summer gardens; and Hannah and I still do the regular chores. Now today our brothers left for Metz.

So, Waldonna, I had kind of a long story to tell today. Thanks for listening all this while. I see your eyes are closing and your head nodding sleepy. I'll just sit here quiet for a bit if you want to take a snooze in the noontide sun.

&

It is another beautiful day. I expect my brothers are all the way to Metz today. Momma says it takes a little more than a day with horses but they will need way more time to walk back again.

Papa is feeling better. He called me into the room to talk to me alone as we were working on our lessons with Momma. I thought he could hear us through the door and he knew both Hannah and Haberd were finding my wrongs in the letter work. I thought he was just going to tell me to try harder. But that's not what he did.

First he asked me about practicing the psalms. We can't really practice chants without him and without Greg and Gabe, so I just asked him about Psalm 139 so he would know I was still working on it, even though we weren't practicing it these days. I wouldn't even get it wrong if he asked, but he excused me from it. He said it "probably wasn't my gift." I think my gift is to make a bad thing

good, and probably the psalms aren't that bad yet that they need me to fix them.

But then he asked me about the music at the church. That really isn't going very well without Papa singing and plucking his harp, and without Gabe and Greg who sing beautifully in Momma's same voice only stronger and clearer. Mater Doe can't hear, so if she starts singing the song, it starts sounding like the horrors up from the depths even though she gets all the words right and loud. The others, the hunters and the neighbors, try to hide laughing and my little brothers put their hands over their ears. So I just try to sing louder and then Hannah gets going in it and sings louder too and somehow we get the song sung, but it's really very bad.

I don't think I'm the only one who told Papa the music was so bad; Momma probably said it and I'm sure Hannah told him. So Papa is hoping I can make a bad thing good, I think. He told me I need to try to make a harp and learn to play it.

Well, he didn't say it like that. He told me to find a strong branch with a bend to be the harp, then he will help me put a string to it. He said I don't need all the strings he has on his, so I will be able to learn it. You know how he is always trying to fix it so I think I am learning the

hard thing. But I know he is making it simple for my slow way of learning.

Do you think of me as a harp player? Oh, Waldonna! I didn't mean to frighten you off. I promise if I get a harp I won't make any loud noises with it if you're trying to rest. I can understand you might not like the harp, especially if I accidentally make my harp into a loud sounding harp. I'll tell Papa I have to make my harp only play softly. I promise.

&

Oh, Waldonna, I'm so glad to see you back today. I was afraid my talk of the harp frightened you off forever. After you left, I walked up and down the creek bank. I found a big tangle of branches. I think it was an old tree that washed out in the spring rains, because it had a wild twist of roots. So I went back up the hill, and got the ax and the donkey cart, and cut the root into pieces so Papa could choose what would work best for the— I won't say that again, I know you are frightened of that kind of talk. But whatever won't work for that project could be firewood. It made a most interesting twisty, windy bundle of wood.

So we did pick out a branch for my, my "project." Papa said I will be able to choose to play it softly if I wish.

In fact he thinks it needs another little box or a dried gourd attached to it to make it louder. But if I bring it down here, I promise I will only play it very, very softly with no gourd.

My Papa makes strings of marmot gut. We have that now in the smoker hole under the shed. You probably don't know what that is or you'd be out of here quicker than if I said I was going to bring a harp if I were to explain it to you. It is a little frightening to know how harp strings are made.

But tonight I'm going to start drilling the string holes in the branch. Papa has a little iron drill and a bow that works for that. Well I have to go now.

&

We've had these cloudy days lately. I came down here yesterday and you were gone so I was worried all my talk about making a harp had frightened you. But I guess it was just a sunshine thing. Today the sun shines and I'm so glad you are here! I've been missing you, Waldonna. I was worried.

When it rained, everyone was in the house and it was such a big scribble of noise. Papa said if I wanted to practice the harp alone in quiet I could go out to the shed, and so I did. There's no fire there, and the smoke

hole for meat is under there, so it is a little bit stinky sometimes. I'm probably the one who should clean it out. Usually it is my brother's task, and they use that old meat for baiting traps. No one is hunting or trapping these days.

It is so nice to have this sunshine today and this stillness. Still is the secret treasure of this creek. It's one of those things like you are, it only stays here when it is beloved. If someone comes along who doesn't love the stillness, then there is no stillness. And that is how you are too. If I come along talking about noise and harps and music, just like that, in an instant you are gone. Sometimes I'm a little afraid of so much quietude. I figure if there is no sound at all the breaking of the silence will skew everything earthly again, and the stillness will be lost.

&

Here again. Yesterday was such a long and beautiful quiet here. I was nearly late for the afternoon chores. Momma says that's okay. She knew where I was and she said, "Sometimes we just need the time alone." I wonder if she is ever alone like this. I hope she doesn't think I am praying all this time like some old famished monk.

Yeah. The scary thing about too much prayer is that maybe God will answer you, and when God answers, it's always something you have to do. God just makes me think of all the needs, the animals who have no one caring for them, and the people who don't have warm fires, and the birds in the trees who have to hide from the hawks. You start off your prayer with thank yous and you end up caring about the whole hurting world. It doesn't hurt your heart so much to just mouth psalms and the proper prayer words you remember in your head, then you can get the praying done and God doesn't answer that with so much more to do. But if you really make it a prayer, just you and God talking, every thank you that comes into your mind is a "but what about those who don't have this." Then you realize God depends on us so much to be something like the "man of the house" only so much bigger than any man of the house and even more important than even a woman of the house! Then you make your prayer even bigger to tell God you remember all the things you haven't time to do, and finally someone -- like my papa said last night -- will say "You can only do what you can do." He said, "Even God only asks us to do what we can and that's enough."

Did you notice today, when the creek is still like this, you see the sky on the water and there is the same bird flying over on the water-side as is in the sky? It is so still today we have two of every beautiful thing. There are two of you if you look down at the top of the water. But as for me, I know not to look. When I look I see a beautiful boy, but he isn't like me. He is the good that I should make my bad of, if I really could make a bad thing good.

&

My papa is doing much better today. He says he is feeling better every day, and now he can get himself up when he wants to and walk around as he chooses. He used to need my momma to help him, and that worried him and me both, because even as he is, skinny and broken, he is the full size of a man. Now, today he asked me if I would go for a walk with him this evening, since he hasn't been out walking for a very long time.

The sun lingers longer in the afternoons in these days near the midsummer, and the evening chores don't take any more time, so Papa and I will have that special time just for walking slow.

&

So, last night my papa and I did go walking just before sunset. Papa used a walking stick like an old man

or a monk on a journey. It seemed strange to me to see him bent and slow, even though I know full well he will be strong again soon.

We walked in the healing garden where all the flowers are named for the hurts they heal. Momma keeps that garden for the work she does caring for people. But she says the best thing for Papa isn't the herbal infusions, it is the garden path where he can practice walking.

Yes, that sounds funny to think of walking as something to practice, like making letter shapes, or learning psalms. But Momma says he needs practice. When we walk among all those blooms in this season there is such a sweet smell, not like a sweet baking smell, or a fragrant wood on the fire, but a waft of unreachable goodness. If I close my eyes on an evening in that garden, I can think of sitting with all the other children in the whole world, sitting on the knee of God, because I think that the healing garden is exactly what God smells like.

And I think God noticed Papa practicing, and when he went in from our walk, he was more tired than ever, then this morning, he just jumped out of bed like a normal person and was out in the stable helping Hannah tether the cow for milking. Momma nagged at him to slow down,

but he's not listening. God is all about healing him just now.

He says this evening he wants to go walking with me again, and he is going to try to come all this way down here to the water and then climb the hill again. I think he will be so pleased to see this creek still runs beautiful and deep, but I may have to get the donkey cart to tow him back up the hill. That's what Momma thinks. She is worried he will do too much on his first tries.

Momma knows a lot about how people get back into walking. She has seen all of us through this kind of learning when we were babies. In these times she is setting little Layla down on the floor on her tiny little curly baby feet. Momma holds onto to her, and Layla just looks back at Momma, as though she were thinking, "Are you a completely whimseyed lady? I'm not made like the walking people. You really expect me to stand up on these baby feet?" Yet that baby trusts Momma to make it right for her, and she just gets cheers from all of us after she tries to stand, then goes down and just crawls along on her own. She likes to hear us cheer for her.

&

After you were gone yesterday, when the night shadow of the mountain was well across our creek, Papa

wanted me to walk with him down this hill. I guess you were home by then so we didn't see you here. But when we got all the way down the hill, my papa just sat down on the grass, as though he were already tired out, even though all we did was walk down the hill. He asked me to sit by him and take a rest before we started back up. I didn't really need a rest, and I was afraid if we waited too long the night creatures would be lurking. So I just got up and went back up and got the donkey cart. Momma came out worrying over that, wanting to know if Papa was all right. I told her not to worry. He was just sitting there, taking a long time resting, and I was afraid it would be too dark before we were back. Hardly ever has it happened that I wasn't the slow one.

So when I was only half way down the path in the donkey cart, there was Papa walking up the hill, leaning heavily on his walking stick with every slow step. When I got to him with the cart, he didn't say anything at all. He just climbed in the back of the cart and laid out on the straw. When I got home, Momma had to help him back into the house, and she was very annoyed with him for not knowing that he couldn't walk so far. She said she hopes this was a lesson for him to slow down.

So for me, I was kind of glad to hear her say slow is a good thing. Maybe she didn't really mean a slow child is a good thing, but somehow a slow papa makes that bad thing who I am seem good afterall.

I don't think Papa and I are going to go out walking this evening. So I'm going to practice my harp. It's all finished, and one string sounded beautiful, but it could have been anything making the same sound over and over again.

I played my song for Papa. It is a psalm that starts with a prayer: [Psalm 42:1]

“As the little deer longs for the flowing streams,
So my soul longs for you, Oh God.”

But if you only long for God how can it be a prayer? A prayer is when God listens and maybe even answers. The next verse isn't a prayer. It is just about that first verse. [Ps. 42:2a]

“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”

I sang the whole sad song just as it is as a psalm, and Papa nearly wept. See, that's why I don't want God to tell them my prayers. This song was already sung by everyone who sings psalms, so it wasn't like God was telling them my sad prayers. It was like I was singing someone else's song, but even then, my papa felt sad for

me. See! That is exactly why I don't want to pray to God and say this very sad thing that is my secret. God is already the one telling Papa this sad song is about me. When I finished singing, he just drew me close to him, and told me that he loves me, and even though he knows that God loves me, he said God will have to speak for God's self. Then he told me not to listen for God as a loud voice speaking a language, but to notice God listening in the depths of me. I don't want God to be listening in the depths of me. I want to keep my secret in the depths of me. So, Waldonna I'll just tell my depths to you. You never answer, either to argue or to make lessons of it. You just watch and let me go on and on. I really am so glad you are over there. The wide water between my place and your place is a comfortable distance for me too. I thank you, Waldonna always listening, never telling. When I learn to sing it more beautifully, I'll bring the harp down here and sing for you the whole song.

Oh, on second thought, I remember you don't like all this talk of the harp. I'll bring it on a rainy day when you aren't here to listen.

&

So I haven't had my harp very long, and already I asked my Papa to help me add another string. Two

strings will make two sounds and that will be more like music. Even though I still have to sing so many of the missing notes to have a song on it, but when the song comes around to those two notes I will play them. I'm going to play my harp this evening if I can find a quiet place up there. So I am working especially hard today, so Momma will know I need a quiet time alone this evening, and that will be when I play the harp.

&

So today my harp has two strings on it and I can play a good part of a song. I know another song that only needs two notes, and it isn't even about my soul or anything about me.

I've been practicing in the shed near the gardens and I heard the song from the trees. Then I tightened the strings with the pegs to match the sounds. So when the cuckoo sings, I can play exactly the same notes. I played the cuckoo's song over and over again, sad and slow and peaceful like the birds sing it to one another in the evening, and then a cuckoo came to the tree top near where I was in the garden, and it just hopped around and starred at me. Papa came out to the well and the bird flew away.

&

The sun was so bright and beautiful yesterday, I guess you saw that everything was golden. Did you see me when I came down here, Waldonna? I tried to pretend like I didn't know you because I could see you had your family with you. You do look a lot like your brothers and sisters; I noticed that. But when you didn't even give the slightest glance my way, I realized I'd better go on to another place, so as not to make it uncomfortable for you. They don't know about me, do they?

So yesterday I followed the creek path on this side and I walked back up the creek. Maybe you already know, but it goes deeper into the wood as it turns to edge along the foot of this hillside. At the crease between the hills it flows down from the mountains in a cascading little stream, and there it meets up with a broader creek. Our little place in this creek seems to be the deepest and the widest. Here it seems even the water slows to stillness just to ponder such beauty. I can tell you this, Waldonna, this place where we come is the most wondrous of all the creek I've ever seen so far. It is set in so much quiet and slows nearly to stillness on these summer days.

When I was up there where it meets the wider flow, that little part that edges between the hills was flowing down frantically over the rocks and logs, frothing, barring

teeth as it races ahead in such a rush to get right into that widening creek. Then the whole creek flows from the northeast as though it believed it was a great river. I watched it for a long while, and it never slowed down.

Together then, the waters from the mountain crevasse and the water from beyond toward the east aren't like our part of the creek. When it plunges headlong into the woods, it has to slow and spread ever wider picking its way through the roots of so many trees and the thick underbrush. All the earth of the forest is puddle and muddy. I had to step from one raw root to the next grabbing hold of the skinny trees just to walk through there without wetting my shoes. So what I know now is that this place we have found here is the true goodness of the creek. In this place, everything is still.

Someday, when I go wandering again, I will cross over that rill off the mountain, and then I will follow the wider creek that meets the waters there, and maybe I will go all the way to where it comes from.

Or maybe we will always just wonder, where does it come from and where does it go? Maybe it just goes on and on. Maybe no one knows the beginning and the end of it. It is like sitting on the knees of God in the middle of

my momma's healing garden. And Waldonna, I did say that I know what God smells like, and it is very sweet.

"Simon!"

I have to go now. But I'll come again when the sun is shining.

&

My brothers returned from Metz. When Papa heard their voices, he got up from the bed and laced up his leggings as though he was all fully healed and went out to greet them. He didn't even lean on his walking stick. I think he wanted to put the long wagon ride they took him on from Chalôns deep into the place where things are lost forever and we will never speak of it again.

Both of my brothers came walking because the horses belonged to the Baro Dithrum of Metz and that was where they left them.

All the chatter today is about how they went on a path by themselves following a river they didn't know. Momma told them to stop at the place where three barrels mark the vintner by the River Moselle. She said the wooden house had a sweet smell, and the vintner's wife was kind.

They reported that the vintner's wife still remembered when they stopped there those many years

ago. She said she remembered them because Greg and Gabe look just like Papa. But they don't. Papa has a beard, and he is a man and not a boy. She told Gabe and Greg that Momma was from Baden Baden, not far across the hills from them there. But Momma said even though she was born there, her real home was with her teacher on the Loire.

So now it is possible that if I followed the wider creek all that way back it would become that same river. Greg said it would. But he said not to try to walk there because it was too far to go on foot. They didn't even follow the river all the way when they came back. It was a shorter way on foot to just walk across the hills.

I asked them if they saw the place where the creek came down the crevasse between the hills, but they said as soon as they knew they were near home, they didn't worry about finding their way by following a streamlet. So they don't know about this creek with its muddy woods and this deep and quiet place. I don't think they would like it all. It is so very slow and quiet.

And besides, the dragonflies are always at the creek. I see you watching them now as they are fluttering over the still waters on their glass feathers for wings. See

that spotted one there? She just landed ever so gently on a stick no larger than the stick that is her.

My brother's friend, Charlie, says it's the devil who sends the dragonflies. They were in the pasture around the mule once, and Charlie said they were there to poke out the mule's eyes so the devil could have him. I told Momma about that and she said, "The devil only lurks in ignorance and made up stories. Whenever there is misunderstanding, there comes the lying devil to stir up stupid and smudge up truth."

So I wanted to know why it really is that the dragonflies were interested in the mule, when really they live at the creek? I wondered that, and Momma didn't know. So she said to watch them closely and find out what they are doing there with the mule. Maybe they like mule fur for their nests or something like that. So I watched and watched and then I saw what happened. A dragonfly snatched up a fly! And the mule has lots of flies buzzing all around him. Momma thought it was so fine that now we all know, and we don't have to make up a devil story just to have an answer to something we don't understand.

So if we watch the dragonflies closely, we might see them snatch up another bug. But here where they live

they are very fast and the bugs down here at the creek are so tiny. It 's hard to catch a glimpse of the hunts the dragonflies take of them.

And did you ever notice there are different colors of dragonflies too? These are the big spotted ones, but I've seen little shiny blue ones sometimes like fairies. And once there were two red ones, I saw. They folded themselves together into a heart. I'll bet you think I'm making that up. Greg said I just made that up. But I really saw it. It isn't like something anyone would just make up. Made up stories are about people or devils or wolves and bears doing bad things. That's all I've ever heard anyway. No one would make up a story about dragon flies.

Oops. So you've heard enough. And now you are gone. I will come back again if that's okay with you.

&

I know Momma doesn't allow Papa to draw up the water from the well. That is one thing she was very particular about – "No hauling wood or water." But there he was with the water pail we keep in the house. I know he picked that chore particularly to show off to Greg and Gabe that he is completely healed, even if he isn't. Maybe he makes a lie of that so they won't feel bad anymore. I just wanted everything to be good and I know

that Momma who knows all things about healing warns him, nags him actually, not to lift heavy things with his arms because it will open the wound in his chest. So I followed him to the well, and without even telling him what to do, I took the pail from him, and filled it, and took it to the door for him so he could be the one to set it inside where my brothers could see it. It was nice to share a little secret lie with my Papa and he knew it was our secret too. Helping Papa keep his secret gives me the kind of peaceful purpose that makes it feel so fine to fill the manger with fresh alfalfa or brush down a tired mule.

It is so good to have my brothers home again, so I don't have to be the strong voice in the song at church or do the kind of work that gets noticed and measured. It just feels good to keep the secrets of Papa's slow healing, and it feels good to find the mule gentle, and the donkey pleased, and to pat the old cow with assurance that Hannah is a child just learning to properly milk a cow. I know she understands that. Every so often we take our cow away to visit with others cows at a tribe that has cattle, and when she has a calf, we take the calf to them. But she's getting old now.

&

Sunny and beautiful as it is today, I've been longing for this peaceful moment to say these things to someone. The hardest thing today is Momma is weeping, and Papa is pushing back and arguing with the plans Greg and Gabe are making for themselves. Hannah has taken Haberd and Brandell to the healing garden to play a hiding game. Layla is too little to listen. Greg and Gabe are calling their thoughts plans, not dreams. Papa wants them to dream children's dreams. Papa says he loves them. They say God loves them too and doesn't demand they always stay children. So they have invented futures for themselves. Good skills in music and writing and reading, archery, hunting and horseback are the things that gift a nobleman to stand above the commoner and stand important in all the years and all the places. It seems my brothers who are called "common-born" boys made for themselves these uncommon promises just because of their very good in learning.

The baro in Metz assured them that they are of the proper age to become écuyer. They would care for horses and help a nobleman like the baro or the dux with their swords and armor. That would be a chance to learn the sword and then to become a guardsman even though they are really only commoners. Greg saw this as a great

opportunity to become the soldier who could have rescued Papa from the guards of the evil bishops. But as Greg and Gabe talked between themselves, they didn't share the same thoughts about fixing the terrible thing that happened to Papa. Gabe thought they could best repair the evil of the bishops by taking vows and robes of holy monks and by living in the community of Abbot Columbanus where they could oppose the bishops with words and prayers. So they brought their argument to Papa who didn't want to hear any of it, but he listened to them anyway.

He said they needed to take their time and not rush into the grown up choices just now. But Momma thinks they already made up their plans. Greg will be an écuyer in Metz, and Gabe will be a novice monk at Luxeul. To them, it seems like good plans.

Momma was worried about, what she said is, "putting so much work off onto the younger children." But that isn't a big worry really, because I can do what is needed, and Papa is soon to be well and strong again, and even the little brothers are growing up. And Gabe and Greg had already thought of that too.

Greg explained, "With so many more farms, and fewer wild beasts in the forests for the hunts, the hunting

times have become seasonal anyway. Charlie only hunts deer in the season of the running of the deer when not much planting and harvesting is going on. Charlie could be our hired man. He could come when extra help is needed, and for his payment he could take a portion of the produce that hunters need when hunting is off season."

Momma listened to this idea and suggested I could teach Charlie to farm.

What a bad thought that is. I can imagine just how that would go -- a nearly grown man, a sixteen-year-old, taking farmer lessons from a ten-year-old. And Charlie already holds a quarter-staff in my face, calling me "Simon the Slow" as though slow is a bad thing. And he knows nothing of the important things. This creek is just something not to fall into. And I would surely have to hide the bent stick that is my harp. I wonder, If he is here to take the place of my brothers, would Papa make him practice the Psalms? I know he can't read a word or ink a single letter. He's one who would swat dragonflies. And if I told him not to, he would say saving the dragonflies is "siding with the devil." He doesn't know truths from lies.

I can understand why this long story seems boring to you. I will be silent too, now, until they call me back.

&

Today it is all settled. But nothing is actually, "settled." Everything is just hanging in the air like diapers on the clothes-line, waiting the ever-changes that no one really wants to come.

Greg and Gabe are leaving the day after tomorrow to go to Luxeui. Papa plans to go with them. Momma wants them to take the donkey cart. She says, Sister Colleen would like to see the donkey again. Sister Colleen is Momma's friend who also knows all the secrets of healing, so this is a good plan. Momma and I both know Papa can't walk that far yet and taking the donkey cart will help him keep that secret from my brothers.

Tomorrow we will go to the church for the traveler's blessing from Mater Doe. She needs to see my brothers again and tell them that now she understands they weren't up to any mischief when they brought Papa up there in the wagon. Momma says the misunderstanding must be forgiven. Papa wants me to take my harp, and he's added a gourd to it to make it louder; he says just for this visit to the church, then I can take the gourd off again if I don't like it loud. It does make it louder, but also it is harder to hold it close. The cuckoos who sing with me will be annoyed if I play too loudly in the garden.

But Papa said he wouldn't play his harp unless I promise to play mine, and he also won't make me play alone. Momma says he is proud of me and wants to show me off to everyone.

My brothers have never heard me play, and I think they would say they were proud of me too, even if it is a lie. And I'm sure it won't be Papa who would laugh at me if my harp plays slow, and yet there will be others who will just watch and wait for my slow so they can laugh. I can just hear Charlie now if the music should happen to creep. He will sing in a loud and long wailing voice, his favorite words ever, "Simon the Slow." He will make a joke of it.

Momma says if he does that, it is just to hide his own fears that he can't play the harp and then here is this ten-year-old who can play music. But Charlie is a near grown man. He is four years older than my older brothers. How can he have any worries over what a ten-year-old does?

&

It's another beautiful new day, Waldonna! I thought you'd be over there.

My Papa and brothers just left in the donkey cart to go to Luxeuil. They took one of our birds so it can fly

back home with a message for us if they have something to say. They are going to ask if Gabe can be a novice there, then one day become a monk. Gabe might even talk Greg into doing that too. That's why Papa wants Greg to go. They already know most of the things they would have to learn, so I don't know why Papa thinks they would be turned away. Papa wishes them both to be monks and no one to work for the nobility of Metz. So Greg is hurt because Papa is choosing one twin over the other. But Papa just says the same few words again each time they talk about it.

"A prayer heals, a sword wounds."

Papa says, "Greg mumbles like a heathen scholar when he argues."

But Greg argues, "A sword in a righteous hand slays evil."

Then Papa argues back like a stubborn king sitting on a throne cushion filled with rusty barrel hoops. He says, "God can answer a prayer a thousand ways whether or not the prayer is spoken by a righteous person. But how does God answer a sword? The Creator of all that is, the source of love itself, has no just answer for any act of the sword because God loves all people both the righteous and the person considered to be evil by

another person's meager gift of judgment. So to wound someone believed to be evil with a sword in the hand of a person who thinks he himself righteous, denies God's love for both. It is always true, 'A sword wounds; it never brings healing.'

Greg argues again, "My own judgment is not meager. And my righteousness is the unbending truth."

And Papa says again, "Swords wound, Prayers heal."

So that's when they all decided to go on to Luxeuil to see what is needed to follow Gabe's dream. But I can see plain as rain that Papa is stubborn, and Greg is his son too. Maybe everyone is stubborn up there at my house, except Momma of course, and me.

I'd better get home now, I think I have all those extra chores again, now that I am "the man of the house" once more. Do you think I'm looking older these days?

Sometimes I'm glad you never answer.

&

This was a bit of a surprise for me, and I'm supposed to think it is a good one, but I don't. Papa and my brothers stopped off at the hunter's village on their way to Luxeuil yesterday and talked to Charlie about being our hired man. So he showed up this morning to

help with chores, and Momma thinks I can show him a farmer's work, and she thinks he can learn it.

He's not one to know any beasts as living critters. He's a hunter. For him, all animals are to be eaten. So there he was this morning ready for chores.

The first thing is to tend to the beasts. So Momma asked him to watch me and learn what to do. I brought the cow around to the milking stall and put her rope loose around her nose, so she could nibble at the manger, but not so loose that she could turn her head to the side and nibble at Hannah. I told Charlie to do that just the way I do. Then, I petted the old cow a bit and told her not to worry about having a visitor like Charlie watching there. I told Charlie we would leave her with Hannah when she came out to milk. But the old cow was worried. She opened her eyes big and round and black and just kept pulling her head from side-to-side to get a look at Charlie. I told him to come up where she could see him better, then I told him to talk to her softly, and pet her a bit, so she doesn't have to be afraid of him.

He argued, "I'm not going to talk to a cow! You're just setting me up to look silly! This is all a mean trick!"

Then the cow was frantic, as you can well understand. She was tugging and stomping and carrying

on. I told Charlie to wait outside for me while I try to get her calmed down. But she was still so worried when Hannah came, so I thought it best I be the one to milk her today; I wouldn't want Hannah to get kicked or stepped on or anything. She's just an eight-year-old, you know. Hannah went back in the house, and Momma came out and saw Charlie standing around the stable door kicking a stone around, and she asked him why he wasn't helping. He said I was playing a trick to make him a fool.

Momma knows I don't much want to teach Charlie the chores, so she thought I probably was trying to trick Charlie, and she sent me into the house to sit at the table until she came back in to talk to me. Hannah was in there at the table watching Layla and she just kept making faces at me, like I was some kind of lizard or something nobody wanted to touch.

When Momma came back with Charlie, we all sat at the table.

Momma asked me to tell it right in front of Charlie. What was I doing to play a trick on Charlie, instead of teaching him the morning chores?

I said I wasn't playing a trick on him. I was showing him that the first thing to do is to get the cow tied in the

stable for milking. But the cow was worried about somebody new being out there. So...

Charlie interrupted, "The cow was worried?" How can a cow be worried? And what do I care if the cow is worried. It is a cow!"

Momma explained to Charlie then, "We can't frighten the animals we are caring for. We have to always assure them we will be kind."

And then she said the thing that made me feel so grateful I have her for a mom, and not Charlie's mother. She said to Charlie, "Simon is particularly good with the animals because he moves slowly and carefully around them; he is always kind and gentle. The animals trust him. That's why we wanted him to be your teacher for the morning and evening chores."

Then she said, "Maybe it would be better for now, if Charlie came later in the day for the work in the gardens and the grain field."

So you can know this was a very good day for me. I want the book of my life to have a happy ending. So maybe I should stop writing right here and say how it finally turned out that it is all right if I am "Simon the Slow." Sometimes slow is the good thing. So this is the day when Charlie's words can't hurt me anymore.

Now Charlie is back and he is just supposed to be picking stones out the field. Tomorrow Momma wants me to show him which are weeds and which are herbs in the healing garden. So maybe I'll come back again, and write some more, and read you this story of how things are. Maybe I shouldn't end it just when it is getting good.

Today it is especially beautiful here where the sun shines down and plays on the water with its sky color. I'll bet if I climb onto the rock and look down today, I will see that boy again. I can see him when the sky is on the water.

PART 2

Yesterday I didn't come because it was raining in the morning, and the rain had barely stopped when Charlie came to work in the garden. I was supposed to show him what weeds to pull. He told me it wasn't a job for a man. Pulling weeds was what his grandmother's geese do.

I told him, "We have pigeons for messages with the monks, and we have the hens that lay the eggs, but none of our birds would ever think of pulling the weeds and if they ever tried it, I would expect it would be a disaster. I'll

bet the pigeons would just fly back to their nests and the hens would just hang around in the parsley and never ever peck at any weed at all."

We both laughed, and then I felt like maybe I could be something like a friend to him, like he is to Greg and Gabe.

He seemed so much more thoughtful of me today, and instead of arguing about geese, he offered to ask his grandmother about sending them over here for this work. That sounded like a kindness.

"How do the geese know which are weeds?" I asked.

He didn't really know much about this possibility. It seems they don't farm at all in his village, but his grandmother has an orchard that was always just there, and so were the geese. They don't fly away, they just stay in the orchard and on the little orchard pond. But only his grandmother knows anything about it.

So for now, we had to get the weeding done as we always do in Momma's healing garden. We have to get down on our knees and pick through the plants choosing only the weeds to pull out.

Momma likes this garden laid out a special way with walking paths that divide it into groups of herbs. One

group is for healing teas, and some sweet, some bitter, some things just to put on your skin, not to eat at all. – She wants the purposes kept separate because she doesn't ever want someone who doesn't know bringing in a big pot of wormwood for a sweat tea or something disastrous like that.

“It should be in rows,” Charlie explains, “so we can see what we’re doing.”

I showed him the weeds from the plants, and this first time he got it confused, so the weed heap he made was littered with some of the good plants that Momma wanted us to keep. I tried not to shame him for being so slow to learn. I know well what that feels like, but surely Momma would think I’m a terrible teacher if I don’t at least scold him for it. Then guess how I made a very good plan after all! I know that isn’t fair for me to ask you to guess, really, because you would have to know that Hannah had just come outside with Haberd, and she was wondering how we were doing. Also, if you were to guess, you would need to speak, and I know you always keep a proud silence. So I will just tell you in my words what I did.

I called to Hannah to bring Haberd over to us. It happens that my four-year-old little brother is very quick to learn things, and Hannah has been teaching him the

herbs. So I spread out all the whole weed heap in front of Haberd, and Hannah was shocked that so many of Momma’s most precious herbs were laying out on the top of the earth, spread out like dead things on the ground – so many roots laid bare in the sunshine. But Haberd thought it was a really fun game, and he just went right to it sorting the weeds from the herbs. Once it was done he had no interest in another “game” and he led Hannah off, chasing after him to find anything else he could find, anything else that looked like trouble. Haberd is a tease that way.

So then my lesson for Charlie, was finding the places the herbs belonged and planting them back.

That is why Part 2 of my book can be all the ways I actually do make a good thing out of a bad thing. With Haberd’s sorting, Charlie could see that I wasn’t just picking on him for being ignorant, but that there really were some plants that are herbs and some that are weeds. I think he was thinking this whole project of picking and choosing which to pull was just something I made up to annoy him. For Charlie there seemed to be no truth in my instruction. It was like I just made everything up when really, I was only telling him things that are true for everyone. A truth is something a four-year-old knows

before he ever knows of a world where there could be lies. So Haberd could easily see Charlie's errors. Haberd never even thought that someone would just make up the idea that some things were weeds and some things were herbs in order to trap someone in error. But at least now Charlie didn't blame me for tricking him with this. He could see it was just a fact that he would have to learn.

And I know something else, also. Haberd will learn to lie even more easily than he learned truth-telling. He just hasn't had a need for it yet.

Hannah took Haberd back into the house, and a minute later, Momma was hurrying over to the place where we were working. She looked at all the herbs uprooted, and she got down on her knees to help us plant them back. I could tell she was annoyed, because she was working fast and heavy fisted. Then she told me to show Charlie how to draw a pail of water and pour out the water gently – she said “gently” raging with wrath – “through a sieve” she said with her teeth tight and a terrible face. She said, “very, very softly sprinkle the herbs that were just replanted.” She hardly looked a Charlie at all. And I could see she was in no mood to do anything softly just now, so it was up to me to water these plants properly.

I told Charlie, when we are making it seem like rain for the things of earth, the hardest to do is to pour out a gentle rain, yet that is what we must do.

“So you figure, when it is pouring down rain, it is because Mother Nature, or maybe God is really annoyed with us?”

“Maybe” I answered. But I know this is something for monks to wonder over, not for boys trying to manage softness with a bucket and a sieve. We just had the project to do.

Momma finished replanting and stood up and looked at what had been done. Then she smiled at me and put her hand on my shoulder. I knew she was telling me I had done something good here, but she didn't want to say it with words, or Charlie's feelings would be hurt.

Even though Charlie is sixteen-years-old, I happen to know he has tender feelings. If I accidentally hurt his feelings, he wouldn't cry or anything. He would just turn mean and tell me I am the one who is bad. Maybe he turns mean, because mean is how he thinks he can turn his own bads to goods. And now this is Part 2, when I see that who I am is the boy who can make the bad things good after all. So when Momma or Papa believes that I am the good thing, it seems to make it so.

Then Momma sent us out to pull the rocks from the earth and stack them on the edges, to make a new place to plant as a field of beans and barley when the earth softens for the plow at the end of winter. So for the rest of the afternoon, we picked rocks.

&

Today Charlie isn't coming to work. He said he was going to ask his grandmother for a goose to pull our weeds. Momma said she'd heard of weeder geese before, but she thought they needed to be trained or something.

"Well, what about the pigeons that always come back here from Luxeuil? You trained them, and it seems like it would be much harder to teach a bird a map, than a weed."

She explained that the birds that return to our house were brought here when they were just nestlings, and they always think this is their home, so that's why they come. We didn't really train them. We just planned for them to know this was their home.

"How come some pigeons fly to Luxeuil?"

"They were raised in Luxeuil, so when a monk or someone brings one here from the monastery, it will fly back to the monastery when it is set free."

&

Do you know something, Waldonna? Momma said the bird came back from Luxeuil with a message from Papa. Did you notice a gray bird flying up to our farm? I didn't see it either, but Momma said she thinks Papa and Greg might be coming back very soon. But maybe Gabe won't come back ever. He wants to stay there and get the lessons in being a monk. I'm not sure he has so much to learn, since he already reads and draws his letters very nicely, it's said, and he can chant all of the psalms and some other Bible verses as well. I would suppose the only other thing he needs to learn is to be quiet all the time. That might actually be very hard for him to do.

Waldonna, does that frighten you? You were here a second ago and now... Oh, I see what it is. Right here, now coming up the creek path, turning onto the hill road, there they are!

&

So yesterday while I was here talking with you, Papa and Greg came back from Luxeuil in the donkey cart. I guess you saw them, because you left in such a hurry. I ran over to meet them so I could walk Jack the donkey back up the hill and they could both ride. I know Papa doesn't want Greg to see he isn't very good at climbing the hill these days. He says he's healed. But

Momma says she can't be sure of that. Greg took her aside and asked her what was wrong with Papa. She pretended like he meant "wrong," as "stubborn" not so much "wrong" as "broken," and she said he is just noticing how he will miss his boys when they are grown up and gone, so he is acting so stubborn about them staying at home.

We all really wanted to know why Gabe didn't come back with them, and we were just waiting for them to tell us everything. We had to wait for the evening supper to be spread so we would all sit at the table and feast on the changes that are happening to our family.

Before we ate, Greg and I went out to do the evening chores and I told him all about how things were going with Charlie as our hired helper. Greg said with Papa home now, that won't be a problem anymore. He didn't say anything about himself staying home.

Then we all sat at the table together waiting to hear what happened at Luxeuil. Papa said a very long thank you prayer, but it gave no clues except to ask God to help Greg make a righteous decision too. I thought it sounded like he was going to get God to make Greg stay home, but after the prayer, Greg asked Papa if he meant

what he said, that with the help of God it was his decision to make. Papa didn't answer.

Papa said he thought Gabe would settle in at Luxeuil with the other young boys in their care. Then Greg told what happened when Papa wasn't in the room for the questioning and testing of Gabe.

Greg said the teacher came in and told them Papa had to go to the overseer of benevolences. So while they were deciding if Gabe qualified, he would find out what expectations Gabe himself had for the steps he would have to take in his studies to qualify for a monk's vows.

Momma asked Papa if Gabe needed a donation to be accepted as a novice. Papa said that was usual, but he asked if a note could be passed to Father Columbanus to know if a special dispensation could be made. The overseer of gifting was reluctant.

Greg interrupted this talk between Momma and Papa. Greg figured none of us children would be interested in this benefactor thing. And he was right.

Greg told us, "The teacher had a little pointed stick, and he walked all around us. He told me to sit on a bench at the far side of the room so I could watch but couldn't give my brother any help. Gabe sat in the middle of the room, facing front also, so I couldn't even see the

look on his face. The teacher asked him if he had ever seen a page of writing before. Gabe and I couldn't figure out if this was a trick question or what he was really asking. So Gabe said he thought so. What page did he mean? The teacher flung his stick around like a wand and said, 'Letters my boy, are you familiar with letters on a page?' Gabe asked a perfectly reasonable question, 'which page?' And the teacher swatted at the table top near Gabe's place. Gabe wasn't sure what he was asking, so he just set a starting place for this test. He said to the teacher that he believes he is literate. 'So here you are a well-spoken commoner and you believe you are literate. Either you are literate or you are not. It is not a belief.'

"I am literate..." Before Gabe could say 'sir' again, the teacher said it is 'Father.' If you should become a young student here, you would address me as 'Father' until you are of such an age and advancement of learning that we will be brothers together. I can understand what Gabe was feeling about that. Brother is odd enough, when his brother is so exactly like him, but Father is far distant from what we would imagine of this man with the dancing stick."

I laughed at his telling of all this. But I really felt a deep emptiness with him. "What would it be to have a

brother forever and ever who is just the same as you, as Gabe is with Greg, and to have a different thing altogether be a brother?" I told him it must have hurt his feelings to lose a brother like that.

There was a terrible silence at the table. Then Momma reached her hand over and put her hand on my hand and said that monks are brothers to each other in spirit. It seemed it was about Gabe and Greg, but then, that terrible silence told me something else. It is something not to talk about. Momma and Papa have a secret to keep too. I've always known that. It is buried deep with the bad thing I could never make into a good thing.

Greg was just chattering on and on about the teacher and Gabe.

"The teacher had a great big book of Genesis laying right there on a table. We've never seen a book of Genesis before. It was wider than the psalms, and bigger than a gospel. He opened it and held it up for Gabe to see. 'Now son, tell me if you can read this writing.' Gabe answered, 'I will have to read it from the page, Father, because I don't know this book by heart.' The teacher seemed impatient and said, 'Read it then, son.' Then Gabe read aloud a very strange story that no one would

ever tell because it seems to be about twins and one was playing a trick on the other. Isn't that right Papa?"

Papa answered there are lots of odd stories in Genesis. "We haven't really spent much study time with that book." Papa was apologizing a bit for our frail education, "But as I was telling Greg on the way home, this story was about Jacob trading the bowl of stew for his slightly older brother's birthright. It is one of the several stories about Jacob and his family. Jacob was always up to some kind of trick to get everything for himself. He wandered off and played his tricks on his father-in-law, who maybe played tricks right back on him, and then when the brothers lived apart from each other for many years, and the day came when they would meet up, Jacob was worried he would have a terrible price to pay. He was afraid his family would one day get back at him, so he was trying to make up with him by sending lots of fine gifts ahead and thinking up some good apologies, and..."

Greg interrupts, "Papa, do you think the teacher thought we were those twins?"

Papa laughed. "Well if he did, he didn't know you both very well."

Thinking as I was just then, about brothers, I thought about what it would be like to have Charlie for a brother. Every time he had a bad thought he would make it into a trick to play on me. Maybe Gabe and Greg were just fortunate they were brothers together.

"So Greg," Papa started the story again, "tell them what happened with Gabe's test."

"That was the best part ever. The teacher was amazed. He said, 'You were actually reading that, weren't you? A little twelve-year-old commoner, reading like a priest. Amazing!' And Gabe said, 'My brother is good at the lessons also.' I was afraid he was going to give me a test, and make me stay there too. He didn't even make Gabe use the inks, only a wax board to show off his letters, and again, the teacher was amazed."

Papa ended the story for us. "So Gabe was allowed to stay, even though I brought no benefactor's gift and we are commoners. But Greg, if you would decide to stay at Luxeuil too, I think the benefactors of Metz would know you are worthy. You think about it."

&

I can see why you are bored, Waldonna. It was probably not an interesting story for someone who never has taken a reading and writing test. I guess we can all be

glad Greg said they never even asked Gabe to chant all the psalms for all the hours. That story would've just gone on and on.

We can just sit here in the quietness of the day together and let only the songs of birds fill this silence.

&

I have plenty of time again to read my book to you today, Waldonna. And the sun keeps right on shining. Charlie and I finished up the new field for the beans and barely next year, so we just have the regular chores to keep up with, and with Papa and Greg both here now, my part has mostly been to watch out for Papa needing to hide his healing hurts from Greg. I was planning that it would be a very long time before he is able to carry water and cut firewood.

But he took me aside today and said he is fine now. He has to do those things to gather back his full strength. I said I would ask Momma about that. And I did. And she said to do whatever Papa says. Then, she took me aside and said how she was so proud of me for taking care of everything and everyone. It wasn't even at bedtime when everyone has to think of nice things to say before the thank you prayers. She said it to me right in

the middle of the day. "Your Papa and I appreciate you so much."

Appreciate is sort of like love, only it isn't required just because you are God's creation. It's about things someone meant to do on purpose. I really appreciate appreciation. I appreciate you, Waldonna, for listening to me as I write my book. I appreciate Greg for coming back home with Papa, and I appreciate Papa. I appreciate appreciation – it is spreading over everything I see. I even appreciate Charlie for trying so hard after all. Of course, some things are still just regular thank yous.

Thank you God for the beautiful blue waters running down from the mountain and through the woods and stopping right here so the sun can play with the sky shining on an earth place and the dragonflies can dance after flies and then bend themselves into hearts together.

So that's how it is, Waldonna. All the appreciations spread, and then suddenly you are in the middle of lots and lots of thank yous. Everything around us is golden and beautiful. That's why you come here everyday, isn't it Waldonna? That's why I come.

&

So today, little Layla can stand on her own little legs. Momma was holding her as though she was a

walking person. She smiled and laughed and kicked her feet, then plopped right down. Hannah was right there to pick her up again, but she was slithering like a lizard away from her big sister. Momma went over and picked her up again, but Layla already knew something she had never known before. She was a person and she could do things on her own. Momma told Hannah to watch her, and she took Brandell and Haberd outside with her to see the new flowers blooming all through the place where only flowers may grow. She told me to come along with her, she had a favor to ask.

PART 3

She wanted me to look over each of the flowers blooming in that place. The whole little patch was a sea of white daisies flowing with the breeze. Each flower was catching its own spot of sunshine right in the middle of it. She said, when I saw one that had withered, I was just to pop the withered head off of it and put it on the refuse heap. She said not to pull the whole plant out as we would do with a weed, just to leave the empty stem to be a reminder of the flower that once was. That's how it is true that only flowers may grow – and there are naked stems there that remember them.

So I went to work on that, popping the wilted heads off the daisies. Each time I asked her if one was wilted enough to pop it off, she said yes.

“Take any that aren’t fresh anymore. Not having to hold onto wither lets the plant grow fresh and strong, and then, when my birthday comes around in the autumn season, the place where only flowers may grow will be all in full blooms again, when everything else is falling away for the winter.”

As we worked, Haberd could see what I was doing, and he was going to do it too, but Momma said he couldn’t just pop the wilted blooms. He would surely pull out the plant, because he is still so young, even though he knows which ones to pull, his hands don’t always do what he wants them to do, and he would just pull too hard. So I asked Haberd to find me the ones that were withered, and I would pop them off. We worked on that for a few minutes, but then he wandered off, as he does.

I worked on it alone until it was done, and only pure white petals were left to dance around in circles centered with those sunshine orbs. They were bobbing and dipping all through the whole flower patch. It still feels strange to take away the blooms with nothing more

than a promise and a wish that they will bloom again just when everything else withers.

So that was all the extra work I had to do today, and here I am, just sitting here on the warm rock writing in my book, and basking in the silent sunshine.

&

Last night when everyone was sleeping except me and Momma and Papa, I put my ear to the floor of the loft and I could hear them talking. Papa told Momma all that was happening while Gabe was taking his test.

At Luxeuil, the monks had just received a message from the Bishop of Metz. The news was spoken by a nobleman of Metz, Baro Dithrum. He's the same fellow who wants Greg to come and ride his horses. Baro Dithrum was the man who went along with Papa and my brothers to carry the message from Father Columbanus to the bishops. So when the bishops sent their guards to kill Papa, Baro Dithrum ran away and he just rode back to Metz and told his bishop that the council of bishops were probably pretending they never got the message and were still waiting for Father Columbanus to come for their judgment of him. Now you would think that all bishops would be of one mind, because they all say that they are of one God, but it seems the Bishop of Metz is of a mind

to appreciate Father Columbanus, and not want him sent back across the sea where he came from.

This probably seems like a boring story, but trust me, there is a ghost part to it. The Bishop of Metz heard from Baro Dithrum that Papa was killed by the bishops' guards, but he hadn't really seen it happen like Gabe and Greg saw it.

Now Father Columbanus and his monks got the message that the messenger they were calling "Ezra" was killed, and his sons were nowhere to be found. They were all sorrowing and keening for Papa, and even keening for Greg and Gabe. They were trying to make a plan to send someone to tell Momma what had happened to her family, when all of a sudden, all three showed up at the monastery and no one was dead or lost. They were just going on about the business of finding a place for Gabe among the monks.

Papa told Momma the worst part of that misunderstanding was that everyone at Luxeuil, who didn't know them, thought it was rude for a commoner to bring them his son, just at a time when the monks who had been in that community for the longest time were grieving for this family who most people didn't even know. Then when someone who used to know Papa came along, he

was shocked to see him. Papa said he felt like he was walking through the corridors as a ghost. Every time he saw someone he knew and he expected a warm greeting as an old friend, the person paled, or screamed, or called on God to help, or just plain ran away. So Papa was a ghost to them and by some strange nature of ghosts, they were afraid.

To me, that seems the oddest part of this story. Why were Papa's friends, who are monks, afraid of the ghost of someone they know to be a friend? As Papa tells of this, no one even seems to wonder why the monks had fear. Momma just reminded Papa she is grateful he is alive and well.

But I still wonder about that fear. Wouldn't it be a good thing to be with the spirit of a friend once more in the grieving time? The only bad ghosts I've ever heard of were told in stories of hates and hurts and vengeance. Fear of ghosts is spewed up from a hurting heart. That's what I think. The badness of a ghost is nothing more than the bad that a living person carried with him into death. At least that's what I suppose. And if I suppose that, then also, I suppose that goodness can become a ghost as well. If death has any power to add badness to the earth,

then wouldn't you think that death could pour out spirits of goodness too?

If you live in a world of monks where all Spirit is goodness, then it seems it would be a blessing to have ghosts roaming among the living people.

But Papa said he had to explain to everyone that his sons took his bones in a wagon all this way home, and then he said, they all remembered that his wife has amazing powers to allow healing to happen.

I woke up this morning just happy everyone is home now. Well, except for Gabe. And now we can only wonder how long Greg will stay around here.

&

Without Gabe here, it sort of feels like Greg is a guest. Our lessons are put aside these days, and the assignment of chores is all a muddle. Papa has taken on some of my tasks, hauling water and cutting wood. And Momma lets Hannah watch Layla along with the two little brothers, so now Momma has more time to make all kinds of special treats as she would make for a guest, but it is just for us. And Momma helps me with some of the heavy things that need to be done. Greg is doing the big projects Charlie didn't finish up doing, so next year we will

plant that bigger field just for the things people like to eat.

There is talk that the cow is old for calving another season, and Momma would rather have goats for making cheese and cooking with goat milk. Most people here don't have those white cows like ours because they are usually something raised by a Druid and some Pagans. And mostly people are Christian around here. So we have to walk to a Pagan village to freshen the cow. Momma says goat hair will go nicely into threads for weaving. And Papa is making us a loom.

When we were all talking about changes, I remembered Charlie's idea to get a goose to pull the weeds in the healing garden. Greg thought that was an amazing plan, so after our meal, he went on to Charlie's house to take the sack of grain Charlie earned working. I think Greg wants to tell Charlie about Gabe's test at the monastery. But I can imagine Charlie isn't much interested in reading tests.

I think Greg is also going to ask more about getting us a goose to pull the weeds in the healing garden.

Have you ever heard of a goose that could pull weeds? I guess that kind of thing isn't important to you. I kind of agree, there are no weeds when everything that

grows is part of the Creation. And when you start to see it like that, it turns out so many things you might never have noticed are really beautiful. That's something you show me even without words. I see you always just watching everything, and then when I start noticing those little things always around us, I see that they are beautiful too. Thank you for showing me that. It is another good thing to put in this part of my book about good things.

&

I'm glad to see you back today. We've had rain and clouds for all these days, so I expected you wouldn't be out here. When it cleared up a bit, I came down here anyway. In the dreary shadows of clouds, everything was different. There was a different quiet then. It seems there was a secret of a sorrow with pillows for weeping all over the skies.

Maybe it's Greg's sorrow. We all know it is a sadness we have for Gabe because he isn't sitting with us on the benches at the table for meals. I wonder if anyone makes butter for biscuits over there, or if they even have a cow for the buttermilk. It is a good feeling drawn up from the bad to imagine that he is having a very fine time there with so many others he calls "brothers – brother this, and brother that." All those new brothers must help

fill the emptiness that Gabe is feeling with his twin brother away. That kind of sorrow is an understanding kind of hurt. Like, Waldonna, when you notice the beauty in the weeds, I can see the weeds we would pull from the garden in a new way, through the way you see, and then I know something more of beauty. Seeing sadness is like that too. It seems all of us who are a family of people just know another's sorrow through our own.

So I came here at the last breeze of the rainy days, and saw on the calming currents of the creek the last of the drops splashing holes on the stillness of the water. Today the holes aren't there. It is a beautiful silence we share, isn't it Waldonna?

&

Greg asked Charlie about the goose that pulls weeds, and Charlie said he asked his grandmother if we could have one of those. It seems Momma was right when she guessed they would need to be trained when they were very young, just as the birds who come back to us with messages from Luxeul are the same ones that were hatched and fledged in our own dovecote. So then, Momma wanted to go and talk with Charlie's grandmother about the geese. She took the donkey cart and a special gift of butter and biscuits for all of them. Usually, she

just takes people healing herbs and fixes for hurts, so when she shows up with a basket of biscuits, they will surely know she has come asking.

Papa and Greg have set to work stacking a higher wall around the healing garden and stretching the wall that is there to touch the shed. With the wall that way, the goose can go inside the shed when it is cold and be near where the chickens roost. The one thing about that shed, though, is that it is the very place where a whole nest of honey bees have their hive. Papa climbs up the ladder on the outside of the shed and takes out a honeycomb. I think he keeps it a secret how he does that because he doesn't want the bees to know when he is coming -- it makes them angry, and he doesn't want any of us outside when the bees are angry. Even the chickens have to stay out of the shed when the honey is harvested. I don't know what that new goose will do with all the stuff that goes on in that shed.

And this is the strangest thing of all. Papa and Greg have dug up a place in the new part of the healing garden, which is the part nearest the shed, and they are taking all the rocks out of a hole and using the rocks for the new wall, then making the hole deeper and deeper, with only a thin layer of rocks in the inside of it. And they

plan to dam up the rill that runs off the mountain and under the shed. Then it will go into the hole and make a pond for the goose. When the pond is filled, the water won't just spill out anywhere, like where the water runs down here and muddies the wood, it will leave by a particular place they plan and go back to being a little rill under the shed again. Can you imagine people bending a creek and making a pond? I would have thought it was God who made the paths the waters follow.

You probably already knew about this. But now I see that those beavers who swim all around with their big old sticks are the ones who made this little stillness like a pond in our own creek here. I say my thank yous to God anyway for our still water here because you could say, God made the beavers who stilled the waters. I mean, you could say that. In a way, it's true. But you don't have to worry about that. I don't think the beavers will ever take this place away from us. Surely they can't move this rock which is my favorite part of this.

I'm just lying here in the sunshine looking off the edge of this rock, and today I see that the sunshine owns the pond. All I see when I look over the edge into the water is the blue of the sky and off here in the corner a big bolt of sunshine. Sometimes when the sun shines

above, I can see right through the shadow of the rock and into the deep. And sometimes, when the sunshine tips in the afternoon, I look and there is the sun shining right back for a sky on the water. Once when the sun was just right, I hung way over the edge of the rock and looked straight down. I saw something then that I know I should never tell anyone that I saw. It is something I know. And it is something God knows, and it is something my parents know too. But Momma and Papa don't know that I know. So that is my secret.

&

Greg and Papa were along with us today at church. The songs were nearly the fullness of perfect music. It felt so good to be with everyone, neighbors like Charlie's family – even his old grandma came up from that valley there. Momma's visit to her, talking about a goose, she said, made her feel so useful.

"The geese are very old, and the orchard where they pull the weeds is also very old."

She talks on and on to tell us they are all the same geese and all the same orchard as she has always known. And she is very old.

She doesn't hear very much, like Mater Doe, but she doesn't watch for a listening clue. She just yammers

on and on in her own silence, so everybody hears whatever she snorts about, and she never hears any of us answer back.

She rants on and on in repetitions about the foreign monks of the monastery, and she chastises God for letting them stay on the sacred hunting grounds of Gaul, though no one is sure which god let them in and what god it was that sanctified Gaul. I listen as hard as I can, as many times as she complains the same thing, she never names the gods. But today she made a hard effort to come all this way to the church in a handcart, with Charlie and his brothers towing it by the handles like they were oxen. She wanted to see Momma and tell her more instructions for having geese in an orchard. Or maybe she is telling the same instructions again that Momma already heard. But she wanted to see Momma again.

I stayed after everyone left today to help Mater Doe haul out some bones that were left after the altars burned. Even in this bad season for the hunt, a broken old stag was burnt up in praise of gods somewhere, wherever the smoke curls off too, I guess. I hauled it away for her, back to the pit in the woods.

I was telling Mater Doe about you. But don't worry, I know she doesn't hear my words. She just watches and stares, as though she could hear. I can talk to her about any secret or wonder or even something I only guess at, and she never argues back or tells me she knows better because she is already wise. She just watches my face and decides if I'm telling something that is good or not. You know how I appreciate that, don't you, Waldonna? It doesn't matter if she knew anything of what I was saying. Still she watches me with her sparkling black eyes as if it were important. When I left, she touched my hand and told me to come again.

She was watching so carefully today when Papa and I were playing the harps for the singing. I wish she could hear me play. I'm getting better at that all the time. My little brother Brandell just stares at my fingers then he pretends to play the harp by wiggling his fingers as fast as he can and waving his hands in the air. That's how I know I am playing so well.

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So this is what happens with the geese. Charlie's grandmother doesn't raise the geese, she just keeps them there, so Momma can't get any baby geese, even if she would be one who would give something like that. And

she isn't. Momma was told of another place where geese are raised. Someone at the church has a neighbor, so it is near enough that she can go in the donkey cart. Greg is going to go with her, so they don't even need me to get the cart ready this morning. Papa and Greg are nearly done with the goose wall and the new water hole in the healing garden. I think a goose will make our farm perfect. Things are always changing.

Papa and Greg are trying to get the big things done, so they can go away to Metz, and Charlie will be our helper again.

When they were at the monastery leaving off Gabe to be a monk there, the monastery gave Papa a letter to take to the Bishop of Metz all about Greg. Papa read the letter, and he told Momma in their whispers last night that he feels, as a commoner, all these kings and dukes and barons are reaching into our family to take the sons away. I think he is sorry he made us learn to read and write because commoners aren't supposed to do that. He said it is a problem of "fitting into the clothes of a king too easily, while living a monk's simple poverty." That's what Papa said, and he needs to make gifts in Gabe's name, as Gabe becomes a monk.

I heard him saying that our farm is not ours. I thought it was God's, but it is part of the lands that are overseen by the monastery and under the rule of the kings. The kings are always fighting, so when there was no king to rule this part, the grandmother of the king ruled, then a different king came along with the same grandmother, and then no king was ruling, so a nobleman was helping out by being in charge, then he decided it was more important to have a monastery than a castle, so he just became the bishop, and all we know is a commoner like Papa doesn't rule this land. That is the big mess of things that makes it so Papa has to take a better gift than a sack of barley in Gabe's name. So, if Greg goes and works for the rulers of Metz, then the gift from Metz will be in Gabe's name, and it won't matter that Papa is common. It sounds complicated doesn't it, Waldonna? I don't even understand it. I'm just glad I am slow at reading so I might still be common enough to belong here. It is quite a nice farm, and soon, to have a goose, it will be even better then.

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Here I am the "man of the house" again so I have to wait until my work is done before I can bring my book and scribe my thoughts of the day. So, Waldonna, when you

have already gone in for the day, I will just write it to read to you tomorrow. This is what happened here yesterday, when you weren't here, and yet I was writing.

I went out on the warm rock where I like to lie and look straight down into the deep of the still pool because the shadow of the rock keeps the sun from spreading the blue of the sky across the top edge of the water. When the rock shadow curls under in the afternoon glint, and I look straight down on the water, I sometimes see the boy who is my secret. So yesterday, after you were already gone away, I looked down, and the boy was there looking back at me.

I waited for him to say something. But he just looked up at me. He has golden curls just like mine but he has my momma's eyes.

So maybe it was his blue eyes that gave the sky the idea to spread blue all across this still water. Maybe the deep waters already know him well. He said nothing at all to me with words, but maybe he wanted me to know him in a way of just knowing, when we didn't have to say anything or write anything. He is my secret. So we just watched each other for a very long time. I watched him, and he watched me. When the breeze came and wrinkled his face, I just went on home keeping him in my heart.

Today, he isn't here. Now through the shadow of the rock, I can see green feathered rocks and the swiggly grasses, dancing their slow water dances, spreading arms out longing to reach away to the far places wherever the creek runs off after the beaver dam. The slow longing grasses can never reach there, though, because they are clinging to the rocks at the bottom of the creek with their roots. Roots can do that to you. They keep you safe in one place, but they never let you loose to see something more. Momma told Greg when he and Papa left to go to Metz, "Remember your roots." I think she wanted him to stay at home forever, even though she knew he would leave one day. That's how it is with family, no matter how much you love them, they unplant and follow the longing.

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Momma went back to some far neighbor who raises geese. She took a bag of oats and traded, not for geese, but for fresh goose eggs that she kept warm all the way home. Now she is letting our hens, the setters, have them for setting. When they hatch, I would suppose the hens will be very surprised. I am supposed to watch for that when I go out to get eggs. Momma wants to take the baby geese away from the hens when they are looking a bit more like baby geese than baby chicks, and then she

will try to give those geese the idea that weeds are very tasty and healing herbs aren't that good. She says that's how they will learn to pick weeds.

Now, this is very odd. Hannah and I are going to be pulling out the tiny little baby weeds and saving them for the goose training. Momma said we aren't supposed to do this when Charlie is here helping, because he surely won't understand what we are trying to do, and even if he did know it, he wouldn't be able to tell which were tiny weeds and which were the healing herbs. He already can't figure that out, and it will be harder when we are letting the herbs grow and then collecting the baby weeds to keep. But it was Charlie who knew all about the weeder geese in the first place! You would think he could at least get this right. Momma doesn't want to risk it.

She said we might not even have enough baby weeds in the healing garden when the time comes, so she laid some out little tiny weeds on the table and asked Hannah and I to pay careful attention to what they are so we can collect them from other places where we go.

That's the thing about weeds and gardens that is the oddest nature of all. Weeds are only weeds when they are in the wrong places. So if I find a garden weed here at the wild grasses by the creek, where we normally

would let them grow, I'm supposed to pull them out very carefully with their roots and take them up to the cottage for Momma to put with the goose things. These baby weeds aren't supposed to go on the heap, they are only for the feed stash for the geese. What is so bad we pull it up in one place is so fine to keep in another.

So in my heart, I tell my secret brother that something that seems bad in one place is the same thing that may be good in another. It makes it very confusing to make a bad thing into a good thing. But it also makes it possible.

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Papa came back from LuxeUIL this morning. Greg stayed there, so Papa came alone. On their way he and Greg walked to LuxeUIL before they went on to Metz, so Papa also saw that Gabe is doing well, and was happy to see them, but he's not lonely because he lives with others. That's good. Then at LuxeUIL, they borrowed horses from the stable to ride to Metz. That is why Papa is home so soon. If they had to walk there, it would have taken them longer.

Papa said he talked with the Bishop of Metz about Baro Dithrim's offer for Greg to be trained as a guard one day, and Papa said he was against it. He gave the letter

from the overseer of gifts at Luxeuil to the bishop of Metz, and the bishop told Papa he knew the gospels well so he knew that Jesus would never be a warrior. But Papa didn't like his answer because he was only saying Jesus wouldn't carry a weapon and that seemed to be saying nothing at all about Christians. That is Papa's worry. The bishop said that by the rule of the church, Greg would not be doing a sin to learn the sword, but the bishop doesn't know about Papa's stubborn ideas of the Bible.

Even Momma will argue that Papa only listens to the Jesus rule, and she says the Bible is so much more than that. But we never learn any of it except the gospels and the psalms.

Papa answered Momma with an arguing tone, "The Jesus rule is the whole rule. Jesus learned his rule from the most ancient law: Love God above all else, and love your neighbor as yourself. Anything that breaks that law turns to spoil in God's time. Even if it is in the epistles and the prophets, if it doesn't keep the rule, it will turn to spoil. The sword is always against love for an enemy. It only divides!"

He was talking with Momma about never bending this hard rule and I was stacking the wood in the house. Then when they saw I was listening, they went together to

the place where only flowers may grow, and I saw them out there a long time, just bowing their heads, and holding hands, then hugging. I know they were very sad. That is where they take their sadness together out to that place where only flowers may grow.

But now that place has only leaves and stems for the daisies because I pulled the withered tops off the flowers and put them in the heap. So there they were, Momma and Papa together in that special place with no flowers at all, only sadness that Greg and Gabe are both gone away now. I wish I could make this bad thing good for them.

So just now, Waldonna, I'm waiting for the sun to shift to the west a bit so when I look down from the rock where I will see my brother's face, he can know what I know in my heart, that Momma and Papa are sad just now. My brother is the whole of goodness that was lost to them on the day I was born – that we were born, he and I. Maybe he still knows the way to touch their spirit with goodness.

When I come down here, Waldonna, and I see you with your brothers all sitting here by the creek, then in an instant, it is just you watching and listening. You must know what it is to have brothers and then to have no

brother, or to be a parent of two sons and then they are gone away.

I should shout my woes to God, I suppose. But if I tell God that I know the secret of my brother, then God will tell them I know him. And it will only sadden Momma and Papa all the more because they never want me to know the bad thing of my birthday. We each keep the same secret from each other so no one can hurt for it. It is buried deep in the earth, down, lower than even the roots of the flowers may reach -- dark and cold in the depths of that place where only flowers may grow. Today there is nothing blooming.

The stems that I left there turned pale and brittle. Yet even now, Momma promises flowers will bloom again on my birthday. And even now, they take their sadness to that place empty of flowers as it is. When the green leaves leftover there move a bit in the rustling, the tangles of wither show at the roots. I can't see how this will ever again wear that white flower cloak with each daisy eye a new sun.

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If I could see that face on the water, I would speak to him today, and I would tell him that Momma and Papa think he is only in the earth, deep in the soil where even

the roots can barely touch him. They imagine his bones in the darkness, but when I come here to look into the deep, I see him here, blue eyes like the sky, like the sky that glints off the water. He has the same eyes as Momma. I can tell him, I know what it is to have that kind of golden hair. It makes curls and Momma touches the curls, and combs them pretty. She always cuts the black hair of Papa and Greg and Gabe in the Roman style, but she says she can't bear to cut our beautiful golden curls. Do you notice when she is touching our curls? For me, the slightest little breeze struts along and tousles my hair, then my hair is just a mess of straw. But you are one who would always have had the beautiful curls if you were here for touching. I know you are the goodness of us. I think they would be very happy to find you here as I do sometimes. They could just come here and look over this rock and down at the water, and see you just looking with no word spoken only the silence of deep love. Where no words are spoken, in that deep place where God can hear prayers, there is nothing that is lost. You are here for me and for them. In God's time of forever is the love.

&

Waldonna, I'm so glad to see you. I was just thinking of my brothers. Greg and Gabe are gone away

now, and the thing I won't tell them that I know is the secret I keep. It is that I have a brother too.

I just call him brother, but I don't know what they named him. He was the sadness of death at my birth. Momma and Papa try so hard to pretend I am the goodness of that bad, but really I just remind them of the hurt. Now he is in the place where only flowers may grow just beyond the well. But still, I come here to see him. I know who he is. It is for him that the flowers bloom on my birthday. My secret is that I know his soul. I hope God never tells them that. It will only make them remember their sorrow.

We should stop talking now. I think someone is coming down here. Charlie is sneaking there through the tall grasses behind you. Watch out, Waldonna!

&

THEN?

I am writing now in Simon's book.

On that terrible day I found this little journal I made from papyrus ends that were a gift for our very quiet, but thoughtful son, Simon. I found it by the big rock by the creek.

These last pages were left unwritten as are the years of his life to come. And so I have filled these empty pages with my tears.

Charlie said he went down to the creek and he saw Simon on the big rock writing in the book and talking aloud "like a babbler. Then," he said, "on a log across the creek there was a big delicious-looking pond turtle." So Charlie said he "crossed the creek at the shallows and went around behind the grandpa of all turtles, creeping up on that great feast of turtle soup, that was just sitting on a log staring at Simon like it was his pet puppy."

Charlie said he thought it would be easy "just to take that turtle. But Simon yelled and scared it into the water. Then Simon went in to save the turtle."

Turtles can swim. Simon couldn't.

When his brother Samuel didn't live, I tried so hard to keep a secret of my own guilt and grief hoping to save my living children from my sorrow.

But Simon knew my secret and that became his secret. The good thing that came from the bad was that Simon left us his words and here is the spirit of him, always.

Though I tried to keep a secret of the sorrow Simon found the spirit of that baby anyway, and now he

has given me this little window into heaven to know Simon's own spirit is also set free. Through our grief we know Simon now, in the same way he has always known his brother.

Laz took the pale form of this beautiful child, in his arms, drenched in the creek water. He carried him up the hill isobbing. We all saw the father's tears. Hannah and Habert, and Brandell – I had Layla in my arms, and Charlie was following close behind when he brought Simon up from the waters. The father's tears flowed down as he laid this tangible thing, pale and soaking onto the leaves and stems of so many gone daisies.

He wailed, right in front of the children. He said, "I have so often carried my sleepy children up to the loft at bedtime..."

Hannah looked at me, and she saw I was sobbing too. Today the children saw us crying.

It is my instinct and my need as his mother to touch my son, to hold him close to my breast, and tousle his golden curls one more time.

Laz blames himself. He said he never taught Simon to swim because he never even considered the creek was so deep.

Laz keeps repeating his failing. "Of all the useless things that I pushed him to learn, I just never taught him to swim. I could have done that. He would have learned it well, but I didn't know how deep the water would be."

I tell my husband it wasn't his fault. It was just something that happened. I learned those words from him. "It isn't your fault. It is just something that happened." He said that to me over and over again when Simon's brother Samuel was born in the silence of no breath or baby's shout. And then Simon was born, shouting his full cry into life!

But I know Samuel's death was my fault, because I am the person who is called on to save the babies and the mothers and any others failing in life. I am the one who heals people. I guide them safely through birth and I hold them back from death.

Laz always adds, "...with the help of God."

So, should I blame God? I'm the one who didn't take time when these twins were in my womb to sit with them in quietude.

"Passed" Laz said, "Yes, that is what can be said. Whoever he was, who was and is beloved to us and to God has passed from this cold and wet being we can hold in our arms and kiss one last time, passed on to a

shimmering place of Spirit that visits us in peace and then wanders off to be ever near his brother Samuel whose name we never said. We lay this child deep in the earth, deeper than the stems and leaves, deeper even than the reach of roots.”

I see it in their faces around me, looking up at me, hoping not to see my tears. It is my instinct to hide my sorrow from them. But now, I see that each of these little ones, seeing both of their parents in such sorrow, know that to be loved is not just worthy of hugs and smiles, love is also worthy of tears.

So, our children ask, why doesn't God just fix this flaw in love?

I can answer, “Maybe because we know God is love, and love shares our grief.”

Now Simon is side-by-side with his brother, Samuel, who shares his birthday with Simon. So when these flowers bloom the second time in October, we will always know these boys are beloved.

Samuel lives all mingled into Holy Spirit and that is where Simon found him. Simon told a turtle he named Waldonna about this brother of his. Earthly life, even life forever and ever is the riches of grief as grief is --
untouchable beauty -- immeasurable pain.

To Simon, I love you always, Momma