



Printer's Devil Review

Rachelle Taylor. *Mercy*.
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Mercy

WHEN THE LAST SOW DIED, Merete Silas began scheming on how she was going to get the boy. Her plan wasn't terribly complex, though for several weeks she tried to make it so. She lacked the faculties of the women in her mother's old books to properly impress a man: she had no musical talents or a voice that could make angels blush, nor did she have any matchmaker friends. In some books a nice dress was good enough, and she settled on the idea. Something light and lacy with ribbons and beads and such. She bought the materials at a craft store in town that her daddy parked outside of when he went to check on his bank account. The light fabric was too thin and brittle, the lace too thick and gaudy. She hadn't been able to find any beads that would look nice in the shop, so she took apart a pair of her mother's earrings and sewed the pieces into the lace. The sleeves were uneven and too short. The transparent cotton left visible the dark impressions of her nipples and pubic hair, but any underwear she wore seemed to glow through the dress. There was no one to tell her which one was worse.

After an hour's consideration she decided not to take any chances and slipped on a pair of discolored panties. Her daddy wasn't home; he would've taken his belt to her legs if he knew she was doing chores in a dress. Usually he had her wear a pair of his old jeans and a torn flannel shirt.

Merete stepped on a piece of glass on her way out to the chickens' pen and cut her foot. She stopped to suck at the wound. Mrs. Carson,

the widow who sold her the fabric and the lace, had told her when she was young that sucking the blood from a cut immediately prevents infection from setting up.

The hens were in bad health. They laid infrequently and their eggs were useless often as not. The two cocks' feathers were falling out, leaving a delicate mat of red and black over the mud. Her daddy had moved them out to the far side of their property to keep them from getting the dogs sick. Her feet were dirty by the time she reached the pen with the feed, but she felt no shame. She'd seen the boy with dirty feet before.

From the chicken yard, she could see into the boy's property, brighter and more fertile than the Silases's. His folks kept their only livestock, a hearty herd of cattle, down the steep hill and cultivated the land above the pasture to resemble, Merete thought, a meadow in Paradise. The trees, placed throughout the property deliberately, bore fruit every summer. At the border of their properties stood a thick, squat willow tree, where the boy liked to sit and where Merete liked to see him sitting.

Eli Mahoney took his schoolbooks home to study over the summer, poring over them beneath the willow most of the day, occasionally making notes in the margins.

"I got to know this stuff," he'd said once, more to himself than to her. "I got to know all sorts of things. I ain't staying round here my whole life."

"Then where you going?" she'd asked, curling her crooked toes in the grass next to him.

He hadn't looked at her. He never did.

The dress would make him look at her. It wasn't all that pretty, she knew, but it was the closest she'd ever looked to a real lady.

It was important that she look older. Eli Mahoney was only a year older than she, but she'd been held back twice at the school until her daddy pulled her out. The other teachers suspected in Merete some mental deficiency, something even her daddy's academic influence couldn't cure. He'd tried home-schooling her for a few months, teaching her from the same textbooks he'd used for his students in town, at least until the woman from the state stopped coming round. Merete, her daddy had informed her, was incapable of being educated.

Her daddy had a woman in town now, with dyed yellow hair and false eyelashes that fluttered furiously when she laughed. During the school

week her daddy came straight home after his classes ended, but on the weekends he came maybe once or twice to make sure Merete still lived and that she was taking care of the house, then left again with hardly a word to her. Merete feared he was about to ask the woman to marry him. The woman didn't want a daughter, didn't want any children at all. That was clear enough from the round box of pills Merete had seen while rummaging through the woman's purse the night her daddy introduced them. And Merete had always gotten by without a mother.

"Your mama named you," her daddy told her, when she was old enough to realize that the pale woman on the living room wall had once been real. "Said you was her only real mercy. You ain't any kind of mercy, though. Neither one of you." It took a few beers to make him talk about his wife – a Danish painter he'd met on a tour of New York after he graduated from the state teachers' college. The woman moved in with him a week later, bringing with her a single suitcase and a cancer.

If her daddy did marry that woman, Merete wouldn't stay with them. Her daddy could go live in town. She'd keep the house and the dogs. She could steal another chicken and sell the eggs in town for a living, could steal another cock and breed them. When the bills came she'd tear them up and scatter the pieces in the yard. When the woman from the state came she'd hide down in the cellar with a shovel in her hand.

Eli Mahoney wasn't under the willow when she came to the chicken yard. One of the dogs, a mottled brown mongrel, left its post and followed, sniffing the dirt.

"You stay down there," she warned from the side of her mouth. "This is a new dress and I won't have you dirtying it up."

The mongrel ignored her. It kept its nose in the ground, inhaling sharply and chuffing. She'd tried to copy it once when she was little. The smell of dirt still turned her stomach.

It was cold out. The dew hadn't quite left the grass and her bare feet were soon wet. She hated her toes – crooked, inelegant stubs with broken nails, but she had only one pair of shoes and they would have looked ridiculous with her dress.

A second dog joined her. Her daddy called it a bulldog, but it couldn't have been a purebred. Merete doubted there was any bulldog in it at all. She shivered against the chill. Little bumps appeared on her arms and her legs and she felt her nipples harden; she realized she should have worn a bra too, no matter how dumb it looked.

Merete stayed by the pen for an hour waiting. Eli Mahoney didn't come. The dogs grew bored of her and sniffed their way back toward the house, pausing briefly to examine their hindquarters. At one point the balding cock squeezed through the wire and pecked her foot. She took no pains to pen it again. The cock always did as he wanted.

When the sun reached its highest point she sat on a great tree root to cry. The boy wasn't coming. He would never come – she knew it, she knew it like she knew there was a God and there was a hell waiting for all girls who looked like their mothers. Maybe it was a school day. Maybe there was another girl, a girl with straight teeth and clear eyes. God Jesus, he wasn't coming.

Merete moaned a secret obscenity and sank against the tree.



It was a foot that woke her, the toe of a boot pushing between her ribs – not swiftly like a kick but slow and gentle, like someone was trying to inch his toe down deep into her insides. She didn't gasp or cry out or even sit up. Instead she just opened her eyes and found herself looking up at Eli Mahoney.

"I thought maybe you was dead," he said, still pushing the space between her ribs with his toe.

"I'm not," she said. She lifted a hand to him. "You want to help me up?"

"No." He moved his foot away and crossed his arms over his chest to study her. There was no pity or affection in his eyes.

Merete picked herself up from the ground, dusting off her thin dress. One side of it was stained with mud. She curled her toes so he couldn't look at them. "Well. What're you doing over here, Eli Mahoney?"

He spat on the ground – clear, clean spit, free of tobacco juice. “I done said it. Saw you laying there and thought you was dead.”

“Well,” she said again, and repeated, “Well.”

“Is that dress new?” He reached for her arm and pinched the crooked lace.

Merete felt she could have cried for joy. She pulled the skirt out on either side as far as it would stretch and tried her best to curtsy the way girls did in old movies. “I made it myself. Just finished it last night.”

“It’s ugly as hell.” He spat again and wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand.

Merete bit into her lip. “My daddy ain’t home,” she offered. It was the last thing she could think of to say, the only thing.

Eli Mahoney looked down the length of her dress. His brown eyes settled on her chest where the thin cotton left her breasts visible. “You cold?” His mouth softened into a crooked smile. Even now his expression was one of superiority – the sight of her and any pleasure her body might have given him were not enough. He was going places, after all. He had books. He was going to get the hell off the mountain just like her daddy would. He’d take a woman with long eyelashes and a fake leather purse filled with birth control pills. He’d marry the bitch. And Merete would be left there with a dead farm and half-breed dogs that ate their own vomit. Her dresses would get uglier every year. When she died no one would find her. The dogs would get into the house and eat her bloated body.

She saw this destiny stretching before her clearly as if she were a fortune-teller or a woman touched by God. If she looked into her palm, she knew she would see it written there. The dress hadn’t worked; if she couldn’t get him now, she’d lose him for the rest of her miserable life.

“My daddy ain’t home,” she said again. “I can make real good tea. There’s some cold chicken in the fridge.”

“I ain’t coming in for no tea and chicken. What else you got?” He took another look at her chest, glancing momentarily back at her eyes to be sure she saw what he did.

God Jesus. She inhaled deeply. There was no time to pray. The uneven lace trembled under her fingertips as she slid the dress’s neckline down over her chest. The sweat between her breasts went cold in the morning air. He stared at her unabashedly, his brow knitted as if he were studying a dead butterfly pinned up on a wall, or a vivisected frog. She was terrified he would touch her. She wanted him to touch her. She wondered if she should raise her skirt as well to show him her underwear.

He frowned and gestured for her to cover herself. “You got any liquor in the house?”

Merete nodded and tried to smile. “My daddy has a bottle of whiskey under his bed.”

“Then I guess you better let me in.”



Odell Silas kept his bedroom in a perpetual state of being emptied. One by one the books on his shelf disappeared. In the cracked chifforobe his shirts and jackets steadily decreased in number, leaving behind a row of dejected wire hangers. The drawer in which he kept his pants now contained only two pairs of wool slacks for the winter; his underwear drawer held three pairs of briefs and a few balled-up, mismatched socks. There had never been any pictures on the walls – no photographs of his daughter or the pale-haired woman who, in some distant nightmare, had been his wife. On the bed lay a single pillow and a large green quilt with no sheet underneath. The floor was carpeted in a thin film of gray dust. Odell was making an escape, one that would never be announced on the mountain and would merit no wishes for good luck from his neighbors there. In the middle of the night, aided only by the moon, the last book would find its way out into his truck, the last pair of pants, the solitary pillow. When dawn came no sign of the man would remain, and over time the others would begin to doubt he’d ever existed in the first place.

Eli Mahoney entered the room ahead of her, feeling for a light switch and finding none. Merete felt she should have gone first. When

her daddy was away it was her house, and she had brought him into it. For a long time she'd planned the tour she would give him when she got him. They would start in the kitchen, where she'd show him where all the food was kept in case he got hungry and what temperature the fridge had to be at, and would end in her bedroom. She had already turned down the covers for him.

"When's your daddy going to get home?" Eli Mahoney asked. He went to the curtains and jerked them open.

She wondered whether or not she should shut the door. "Not til after four-thirty." Hours away yet. She put on a wide, happy smile for him.

He frowned violently. "Don't do that."

"Why not?"

"Cause you're awful ugly when you do it."

"I ain't ugly." She drew up to her full height and placed her hands firmly on her hips. Women on television looked sexy when they posed like that – it pushed their breasts out and made their bodies look thick and strong, dangerous, even. Her daddy's woman did it whenever he wasn't listening to her.

Eli Mahoney scoffed and mimicked her position. "I ain't ugly," he repeated in a prissy voice, rolling his eyes up into his head.

She stamped her bare foot. "I am not."

"Your eyes is crossed."

"Look." She shifted her weight onto one leg, pushing out the small curve of her left hip. "Do you want that whiskey or not?"

He grinned at her, narrowed his eyes like a girl. "I want it." He crossed the room to her daddy's bed. "I want it and I don't need you to get it for me."

The bottle scraped against the hardwood floor and came out from under the bed, glistening in the sunlight. It didn't fit into his hand; his hand fit around it, encasing it. Enshrining it. He held it more tenderly than a woman's hand and with more reverence than the preacher down the mountain held his Bible when he stood at the pulpit. In her old school book she had marked page 317, not for a particular poem or a passage

from a story but for an image – an oil painting of Lancelot, kneeling to receive the Holy Grail. Looking at Eli Mahoney's hand around the bottle, she understood the real meaning of that picture, the expression of divine gratitude on the man's weary face.

She had never been drunk before, nor did she get drunk now. The bottle was only half-full, and Eli Mahoney drank every last drop of it. When she asked him for some he refused to give her the bottle but offered to spit the whiskey into her mouth.

By the time her daddy came home, the boy had gone to sleep on the floor of the bedroom, drunk on the half-bottle. The truck roared and grunted and coughed its way up the dirt driveway, startling her from the vigil she kept over the boy, and she realized she'd been perched on the bedrail for hours staring at him. The muscles under her knees shrieked when she hopped down; the pain spread out upward and downward, contorting her calves, her thighs, until it finally found a home deep in the pit of her stomach, where it burrowed and fell silent. The bones of her toes cracked when she took the first step.

Odell Silas was no more handsome than his daughter was beautiful. He was a slight man, naturally pale but tanned into a sickly, sallow color by too many days working their useless land. Atop his broad nose sat a pair of thick-rimmed, thick-lensed glasses, round and crooked and glued together in the middle. They magnified his eyes into grotesque pearls, too large and marred by the imperfections of his irises.

He didn't speak to her when she greeted him at the door. One of the dogs tried to follow him into the house, and he kicked at it clumsily, shutting the screen door against the mongrel's teeth. The battle with the dogs was an almost-daily ritual, and lately Merete had begun to feel a vague and bitter disappointment when their teeth failed to grasp onto her daddy's leg; she had never seen a great quantity of human blood before.

"Eli Mahoney's here," she told him. She realized she'd never changed out of the dress and with a gasp crossed her arms.

Odell regarded her as a man might regard a child that was not his own vomiting in a public place. "Is that so?" he finally asked and went

about making a pot of coffee. He left his patched-up jacket on – he wouldn't be staying the night. After he had his coffee, as he often did, he'd go back down the mountain to that woman. "Well, where is he?"

"He's sleeping. I tucked him out." She expected her daddy to look shocked, or perhaps even angry. She expected him to come at her, hands stretching forth to hit her face. She expected him to begin taking off his belt, to whip her while quoting what the preacher said about those who went to bed together before they were married. Her watercolor eyes defied him to do it. When he didn't react, she added, "We're having a baby together."

Her daddy didn't come near her, not one step. His hands stayed on the jar of coffee grounds, away from the belt. He didn't say one damn thing that reminded her of the preacher. Instead, Odell simply stared at her, eyebrows raised so high above his thick glasses that rolls appeared in his forehead. The grounds went into the coffeepot and were promptly followed by the lid. In the coffeepot the water began to sizzle – the sound was louder than Merete's breath, than the beating of her heart. A burning scent spread through the kitchen.

"You weren't a mercy," he said, turning to watch the coffee bubble through the glass lid. "Neither one of you."

When the coffee was done, Odell poured as much as the china cup could hold. He raised the cup to his lips, then stopped, looking over the rims of his glasses at her. His hand extended the cup toward her, but his feet made no move to follow. "You want any?" It was the first time he'd ever offered.

She shook her head and lowered her arms to her stomach, satisfied. "No. I can't. It's bad for the baby."

The cup sought his mouth again, and he drained it in only three swallows. If it scalded his mouth, he gave no sign. A light brown drop trickled from the corner of his lips to his chin.

"If it's a boy," she told him, "we ain't naming it after you."

"All the better, then."

After the pot was emptied, Odell dropped it into the sink for her to wash. He didn't say another word. Nor did he go into the back of the

house looking for Eli Mahoney. Merete had hoped the boy might wake up, so she could tell him about the baby in front of her daddy. But he stayed on the bedroom floor, unconscious and collecting dust, and her daddy strayed from the kitchen only to watch the six o'clock news. He went outside at six-thirty – to bring in his suitcase, he said. The dogs barked and howled, and Merete remembered she hadn't fed them for two days. There was a high whimper – her daddy's foot having finally connected with one of their heads, and then the truck started up. Headlights pierced the living room curtains. On the kitchen table Merete found a wrinkled fifty-dollar bill.



Eli Mahoney didn't believe her about the baby. She didn't tell him for another two weeks, wanting it to be a surprise, wanting to be sure. He had taken her money when he left the house but said he hadn't spent it yet. Frequently he promised to return it and then forgot.

Her daddy never came back. Merete didn't call after him. That woman could have him. The school could have him. She kept feeding the sick chickens until they died, the two hens together and the cocks five days apart. She meant to bury their scrawny corpses, but the dogs got to them first, leaving only their spines and feet. They dug up the last pig's body and salvaged what they could from it. When they ran off, she stopped going out into the yard.

Eli Mahoney spent most nights at the house. He refused to sleep in her bed, refused even to come into her room. He took her daddy's bed and her daddy's books. If she was quiet, he let her come sleep next to him under the big green quilt.

The white dress wasn't there anymore. She draped it over the bathtub to wash one evening and left it for several days before she finally noticed its absence. It went as quietly as Odell did, thread by thread, until there was nothing left. She didn't cry for it.

"Do you want to feel it?" she asked Eli Mahoney, as he sat beside her on the couch watching college basketball. She reached for his hand to put it on her belly.

He jerked away and looked for a moment as if he might hit her. “Stop it.” He spit onto the floor – it was, she had noticed, a compulsion for him. “There ain’t no baby in there. I never touched you like that.”

“There’s a baby,” she assured him, patting her stomach. “God wants us to have one.”

“How do you know what God wants?” He turned to face her, peering into her eyes with more intensity than she’d believed him capable of. She felt as if he were looking at her for the very first time. “How do you know anything about God? Huh? You don’t go to church. They don’t want you down at the church. You know what the preacher says about you? Says you’re not right in the head, says your family’s never been right. They’re all inbred. Says it was God’s own mercy your mama died when she did. Says you’re practically an *in-val-id*.”

She moved before she knew what she was doing. Her hand flew wildly up into the air and fell, a shot bird, onto his cheek. She felt his skin peeling under her nails. Red scratches appeared on his face. The boy cried out and, trembling with the shock of her own anger, she slapped him again, clawing at him, using both hands against him. Her fists hardened like stones. Feeling her lips curl into a canine snarl, she pummeled the boy, leaving no pause between blows. His feet moved to kick her, but she offered no soft spots for purchase. The bony knuckles of her right hand found his eye. The boy screamed. She aimed for his open mouth. He deserved it, didn’t he? He was a rotten and decaying thing; he was not human; he had tricked her –

A flash of agony in her belly crippled her. She went down on her knees, panting and gasping for breath. She clutched her stomach. Her eyes bulged from her skull.

The boy just stared at her, pressing his weak and useless hands to his wounded face. His eyes bore into her as if he didn’t know her name.

“The baby’s hungry,” she said. “We need to find more food.”

Eli said nothing.

“Well?”

“I’m sorry,” the boy whispered. He wiped the blood from his face with his shirtsleeve and he slid off the couch. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.” But there was no recognition in his voice; his apology was just as empty as the ones her daddy occasionally gave her.

The boy moved toward her on his knees. His fingertips pressed her clammy flesh awkwardly. She shivered but didn’t push him away. He fumbled with her shoulders and she slid her skinny arms around him, searching for a proper fit. Was this what a boy was supposed to feel like – this nervous and wounded mass that tried to encircle her? Was this what their bodies were supposed to do? Pushing her nose against him like a dog might, she brought her face to his chest. Tears burned her sallow cheeks. She heard her own sobs echoing the empty house, and beneath them, the boy’s heartbeat.

She didn’t resist as he gathered her up off the floor. “The baby’s hungry,” she reminded him.

He pulled her into the hall and into Odell’s bedroom.

She didn’t resist.



Merete’s belly began to swell. The protrusion was small and soft at first, a low ridge above the line of her underwear, but with the passage of another month it grew harder and round. She patted it frequently and decided she should learn to sew before the baby came, else it would have only her moth-eaten baby clothes from the cellar. Her breasts became sore and seemed to swell, too. Many mornings found her hunched over the toilet, clutching the bowl against the nauseating cramps and hoping she didn’t shit herself.

If it was a boy, she wanted to name it after Eli Mahoney. Eli Mahoney, Jr. Little Eli, the product of a white handmade dress. But if it was a girl, she wanted a particularly special name, one that sounded beautiful and would make her beautiful. If it was a girl, she prayed it wouldn’t have her eyes.

Her daddy never came, and neither did the woman from the state. A quiet escape. She existed to no one, save for Eli Mahoney. She couldn’t check the mailbox down at the end of the drive for fear that the dogs might come back. She heard them barking late at night sometimes – it was their mongrel voices but with a different tone, a wolf tone, a hungry tone. Maybe they had taken up with a pack of coyotes. It happened all the time, although her daddy told her the state denied releasing coyotes on the mountain after they had almost died out years ago. Their packs

were getting thicker every year. She couldn't tell Eli Mahoney that the dogs had gone feral, though, for then he might be too frightened to come back to the house.

She thought perhaps her daddy might be driving up to get his mail every so often, or maybe he'd had it forwarded to wherever he lived now. That woman's house, more than likely. The electricity stayed on and no one came around to collect a payment. The phone never rang.

Her clothes got tighter. She let them out as best she could, but without a sewing machine the work was tedious and she lacked the patience or energy for it. She felt tired all the time. The morning nausea gave way to afternoon nausea, and she found herself unable to eat very much before the sickness returned.

The baby was hard on her, but that was her trial, what God had put before her when he decided to endow her with Eli Mahoney's child. The baby was hard, and she feared it would get harder yet as her condition progressed, but it was only so that she might be truly grateful for it when at last it came. She thanked God for it every day: *Thank You for my house, thank You for Eli Mahoney and his baby, thank You for my baby, and please don't let me die here, don't let the dogs get in and find me.*

Eli Mahoney came around when he could, when his schoolwork wasn't, he told her, suffocating him. He still intended to get the hell off the mountain one day and she intended to go with him, so long as he found a good neighborhood down there for the baby. Whenever she reminded him of their future together as a family, he got quiet and stared at the wall, kneading his hands and spitting out the side of his mouth. He hadn't told his parents about the baby, hadn't even told them about Merete. She wanted them to see her when she was prettier, after the sickness had passed, even if her stomach was big as a pumpkin by then. Right now she looked terrible, like a dirty, tubercular waif nobody would want to wife their sons and mother their grandchildren.

Whether or not he was happy about the baby yet was questionable, and she prayed about that, too. He stared at her stomach and felt it often of his own volition, but never tenderly, never like a proud father or a lover. His fingertips pressed too hard into the swell and when she cried out

in pain he studied her with that familiar, almost academic, scrutiny. He asked her a litany of questions whenever he came – Was she all right? Was she eating? Was she still tired and vomiting? When she told him, giggling ecstatically, that she'd felt the baby kick, he rose from the bed and slid his pants back on, then proceeded to stare at her stomach a while longer. He said he was trying to find a way to talk to his mother about her. He said he hoped to get an answer to his question soon.

Merete awoke on a cold morning with the need to piss. Eli Mahoney hadn't slept with her that night. She propped herself up on her elbows and slowly lowered her feet to the floor. The muscles in her pelvis contracted and she almost fell; she clung in desperation to the side of the mattress. The pain flared once more and faded, and her belly tightened with the promise of its return. She rubbed the swell of her baby as she staggered to the bathroom. The truth was she hadn't been eating well, despite what she'd told Eli Mahoney, and it occurred to her that her insufficient diet might have caused a kidney stone or something of the like. It would be hell to push out, but it couldn't hurt the baby.

She sank onto the toilet with all the weariness of one who has walked for years on end: Lancelot, at the end of his journey, beholding the Grail. Nothing left her. Another cramp gripped her pelvis and her vision blurred. The pain doubled her. Her forehead touched her knees. She screamed for help and realized she was alone. Her thighs were hot; she felt sweat rolling off of her, burning her, burning –

It greeted her with no glory, no sound but her own cries fading in her ears. The red spot on her underwear had come quietly in the night, taking form and shape in the emptiness that filled the house. Odell and the white dress had left a place open for it.

She bolted upright. The movement tore her muscles again and another rush of blood coated her thighs, staining her pale nightgown. The panties slipped down to the floor, white cotton now an obscene red. A wet scream caught in her throat and she tried to run. Something within her seemed to burst and she pitched forward, clawing at her swollen stomach.

The door was not locked. She grasped the knob and flung herself outside into the cold dark. Far past the trees she made out the dim shape

of Eli Mahoney's house – miles away, countries and oceans away, God and His Heaven away. All its windows were dark, its occupants gracefully asleep. The blood coursed freely down her legs to pool at her feet with each halting step. She could make it that far, surely, surely, *surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and the baby and oh God the baby ...*

She collapsed in the chicken yard. A final sound tried to leave her lips and stopped – a nonsense word, a word spoken in a pleasant and fleeting dream – as the poisoned cells that had blossomed along the banks of her womb for fifteen years ruptured. Her hands sought the last warmth of the dirt. Somewhere on the mountain a dog let out a long wail and fell silent. •