

WHERE THE ROAD BEGINS

E. B. Moore

April, the final week—

Tucked in my narrow bed, I listen as Father slams through the kitchen. He's back from prayer in the barn, head full of God, on his breath the liquid of visions. His boots squelch with rain.

I see him clear as if I stand beside him, Father but not Father, as he comes through the dark, hunch to his shoulders, wet hair streaming into his black collar. He stomps his boots, kicks at logs stacked for the morning fire. I hear them roll the hearth, and clang, the iron fork falls on stone. At his every stomp I start like a skittish horse.

He fends off the oak table. Its legs chatter the wide-board floors. He trips into the sitting room, straight chairs pushed aside. He lurches to the stairs, one... two... finds the third with his knees... slap and slap, a hand on the fifth, on the sixth... then dog-paddles to the hall landing.

Breathing hard, he slides his bulk up the wall. "Isaac. Where are you, Boy?"

My name is Joshua, and has been all my eleven years, yet more and more when Father's not himself he calls me Isaac.

Patchwork quilt pulled over my mouth, eyes on the dark doorway, a flicker of hope lodges hot in my chest, hope I guard like a candle in the wind. Hope that he might pass me by.

Father pauses. I hear his boots regroup at the top step, hear his outstretched hand whisper along the wall to my room. His fingers hit the jamb.

Silence blisters. He paws the dark opening. A waft of manure fills the room.

With a clunk, he rounds the jamb. His boot catches the sill and he falls, tree through the door. Landing half on my bed, he sinks to his knees. The night-jar, empty or it would be now, spins under the bed.

God. He strikes the mattress, his fist a finger's width from my head. The bed shakes and under cover of its shudder I inch to the farthest edge, belly pulled to my backbone. I hold my breath, eyes squinched.

He weeps. Dear God... and it seems God answers. Yes, Father says. He and his God agree. They are as one, and I am less than crumbs under their table. I know because he tells me often enough. Crumbs, and though I strive to be a whole loaf, a slice would do.

The dark hangs thick. My own breath crowds shallow through my nose, and as is my habit, I pray, "This time, oh please may I be but a mote in his eye."

Mother's voice sounds down the hall, "Abraham, come. Jesus waits." Her voice is not commanding, but not to be denied. Something in the way she says Jesus, as if he stands in the room tapping his foot. She with her hair braided to the waist of her white nightdress, He beside her, hair loose to His shoulders, robes to the floor.

Father raises one knee, drags the boot beneath him, and heaves to his feet. He sways. One hand on the wall, he feels his way to the door.

I let out my breath and curl into the cornhusk mattress.

* * *

Lancaster County. We live Plain in black, pledged never to raise a hand against another. Separate unto ourselves we dwell in post and beam, fieldstone and mortar, fixed in a slurry of sweat and prayer, backs bent to the land that mothers us. We are Old Order, plainest of the Pennsylvania Plain ruled by the Ordnung. Unwritten these rules passed down on the tongues of our Ancients hold us, a flock safe under the Shepherd's eye.

This spring it rains, rain enough to make Noah rise and take up adze and mallet, and build. Oaks leather-lush, edge our narrow lane. In the front twenty, hay springs record high, only to flatten. The once slow creek crowns, browns over its banks, and the lowlands breed mosquitoes.

* * *

Saturday—

Today, in a fine mist, I harness Jonah to the plow. He's big and willing, but the ten acres behind the barn are soggy. My black pants wick water to the knees. The wind blows under the wide brim of my hat, yellow hair glued across my eyes and mouth.

As I push the plow, the coulter cuts the sod just fine, and the share digs, but the earth won't slide. No smooth wave rolls off the mould-board. Mud gloms forcing a halt every few paces, the furrow crooked as Jonah's hind leg. Father shouts from across the field, "Damn you, hold the line."

I'm trying, but my feet slip, boots unwieldy in thick mud-mittens. Reins loose around my neck, I hold to wood handles, muscles bunched, and push down mightily. "Come on, Boy, lean into it."

I lean hard on the handles. The wood cuts into my belly. All my weight, one stone more than a stunted sheep, not enough to keep the plow steady. It veers. The blade jumps the furrow. My grip lost, I hop after the runaway handles as they bounce along the ground. "Whoa, Jonah." I reel in the reins. Oh God don't let the handles break. Father will have my hide. He won't wait for the woodshed, and I'll deserve it.

* * *

Down in the cellar, Mother counts hams hanging from rafters, counts sausages, and last summer's beets, beans, carrots, a sunset of jars on long shelves. Food enough to feed us and any needfuls in Father's close held flock.

My father the Deacon, upstanding as a white board fence, schooled to the Ordnung. By its rule he chops his beard perfectly square, upper lip razored. He graces his flock with honeyed words, and the lambs feed. Those Sunday moments milked, his pail fills. He pours kindness for the faithful.

I drink cow's milk, but it leaves a thirst at the back of my throat.

* * *

Sunday morning—

Our turn to host service. Well before light I dress by candlelight, the same as Father, black socks, a white shirt— Mother sews me in— black pants laced at the back, a black jacket. Mother in a black dress, apron, and shawl, helps my four little sisters. They're the spit of Mother in black except for black prayer caps where hers is white. We meet in the kitchen. Without breakfast, we carry chests and cupboards through rain to the barn, emptying the downstairs. We return with benches, seats for the twelve families in our congregation. One bench faces the rest, the bench where Father and the three Elders will sit.

Herr Kauffmann, one of the Elders, every time he sees me he says, "A fine man, your father." Kauffmann our nearest neighbor on the creek side, he's forever grateful, his collapsed barn rebuilt in a matter of days. Father gathered Plain neighbors from across the county, adding to our congregation's few hands.

"Yes, Herr Kaufmann, he is," I say, and this is no lie.

Father is what he looks and more, yet his nights in the barn aren't in keeping. How is it the man I know hides in the skin of the man they know? My own wolf in sheep's clothing. I look in the eyes of other fathers sitting at service, their children's faces rosy. No one winces.

If all families come, the littlest littles sit on laps, trading lap to lap when they get restless. Three hours of service and they get restless. So do I. Though at eleven I'm too old for such foolishness, I've been known to rooch around.

I don't squirm on mornings after a thrashing in the barn, then I sit looking fervently toward the last word, tender rump on the very edge of the bench. Father nods at my vigorous prayer. Most likely he thinks he sees the fruits of his midnight labor.

"Quit wool-gathering." Father scowls. My boots have puddled the sitting room floor. Water soaks into lines between the pine boards. He raises his hand. I flinch, and he lowers it. Mother's Jesus rules the house. When Father is in the barn, his Old Testament Lord holds sway.

"Now mop," he says. I mop, though I can't say what good it'll do. My sisters' feet are wet. Rebecca, Mary, Rachael, and Eve, all track water as they wipe down the benches. Mother spreads the damp as she cooks our share of dinner that follows the service. She stands by the fire and stirs a cauldron of lamb stew. She lifts pans of cornbread steaming from the stone oven. I'm hungry now, but we've more benches to tend before breakfast — cold corn-cakes and pickled pigs' feet.

"Why is it," I whisper to Rachael, "our neighbors share the work with us when they host?" Mother overhears.

"My Lazy Lumpkin." She shakes my shoulder. I don't begrudge the work. I just wonder why we're different.

One final trip to the barn, Eve, Mary, and Rebecca, long black skirts held above black-stocking knees, splash the ponding yard. The girls run house-to-barn to woodshed and back, carrying armfuls of kindling, small logs, Rebecca with her basket of eggs. I carry two jugs of cider siphoned from the storeroom barrel.

Once in the house the girls shake off the wet, a lesson learned from ducks. Chirpy and laughing, they fling off bonnets and wag their black-capped heads, flap shawls, and shake skirts, re-rain puddles on the floor.

"Over by the fire." Mother shoos the gaggle along, both hands waving. "Joshua too."

“Too hot,” I say, pant-legs scorching new-healed skin behind my knees. She holds me to her bosom, a kiss to the top of my head. I wrap my arms around her, holding tight to the deep comfort in her softness, the smell of stew and cornbread in her clothes, mixed with something unmistakably Mother. She gives a kiss to each of the girls. “Hurry now,” she says. “It’s time to ring the bell. Rebecca’s turn. Remember, slowly, you’re calling the faithful to church, not a fire.”

* * *

Though we’ve put off planting well into April, seed rots. Father and I watch thunderheads boil in from the hills. I lift my eyes to those hills but no help comes, only more rain, as if beyond the ridge lies the waterside of Ararat.

I’ve never been to the ridge. Beyond is discouraged if not expressly forbidden. That’s as God wants. We stay separate, uninfected by the rabble English in their rundown farms and Godless Gomorrahs. Father is hard, but Gomorrah would be worse. My mind floods with he-devils and she-devils in flame-lit finery, a seething mass ready to snatch a stray child, me, roast me alive, tear the flesh from my bones.

* * *

Monday—

Father and I stand on the ramp to the broad barn door, each of us, face turned to the sky, our hands to low crowned hats. Wide brims drip.

I straddle the sill washed in the scent of dry hay, the near empty barn inviting as an ark.

Father, outside at the foot of the ramp, holds the bridles of two horses. Two of our six workers harnessed to a mud-laden harrow. The horses nicker. In their mouths bits rattle. The team stomps hooves big as my head. Father scrapes at mud stuck on the harrow disks.

Again the heavens clap. God buckets us with rain. The enormous horses stand mute on thick legs. They wait for our command and let the water run their coats, dropping in a line under the barrel of their bellies. For us they bear every discomfort.

How could Noah take but two? Who would he watch drown?

Had I been Noah, I’d have taken all six of our horses. I’d have relented in the face of sisters teary over cats. Teary daughters never daunted Father. Only last week Rebecca hauled his coattail as he strode to the hay-mow. Her swollen eyes streamed. In the hay, he dug out the most recent

nest of kittens, blue eyes new-open, their lips still damp from the tit. He stuffed all eight in a musty sack weighted with rocks. He cinched the top. "Drowning's a kindness," he said, kissing Rebecca's cheek. "We'd be overrun, cats breed fast as rabbits." He set her aside and headed for the deepest part of the creek.

I wouldn't want to be Noah. How could I leave this farm, the house, the barn, the orchards: peaches, pears, apples, the November persimmons? These fields wheat and flax, our garden vegetables in every color? They'll come yet this year. I know they will.

Father shakes his fist. "Stop lally-gagging, and get down here."

Would God have let Noah trade a father for an uncle? I wait for lightning to strike. A blessing for me, God's ear is pressed to someone else's head.

Between downpours, the sun drips through a cheesecloth of cloud. Toward day's end Father throws harness in a heap. "Dry it Boy. And rub that tallow in good." Harness for two horses only the beginning, he doesn't tolerate flyspeck on the barn's whitewash.

* * *

After I'm in bed, I hear Father tell Mother, "I'll pray in the barn." He doesn't return. I lie, hands behind my head, and savor the sound of peepers drifting up from the lowlands. It's a good evening. I feel it in the sweet ache of hard work, every bite of my dinner earned. I fight drooping eyelids. I don't want this feeling to end.

* * *

Tuesday—

The best of mornings. Last night's joy lingers. On opening the woodshed door, I find Father sprawled face down asleep on the floor in a welter of logs, as if the woodpile had risen up and beat him senseless. An empty quart jar sits next to a hatchet whacked into the floor.

I hear a thunk at the window and turn to see the mullions gnawed near through, and there's the culprit. A bloody-eared rabbit leaps at the window. I guess he ventured in from the cold, and Father shut his escape. But too full of prayer to aim the hatchet, a wild chase must have scattered my neat stack of logs.

The rabbit scabbles the glass and frantic for cover ricochets to the floor. Cornered and panting, ears flat to his spine, black eyes over-round, he turns on me. Yellow teeth bared, he screams. High and unholy, the

sound forced from an animal that makes no sound. He'd chew off a foot, he would. But which one?

His terror sticks like a burr in my throat. I run to my chores, Father still on the floor, the door left open.

At breakfast we five littles wait in ladder-back chairs. We sniff platters of scrapple, cornbread, headcheese. When Father comes through the door, we stiffen. Not a twitch. This method works for us, not always for rabbits unnoticed before the scythe.

As he stabs a fork in the headcheese, he scratches at splinters caught in his shirt, red-laced eyes half shut, on his cheek an inscription only the shed floor could write. Dead-animal breath licks us to tears.

Mother stays on the hearth. She pulls her shawl close. Under her white cap dark hair winds in a knot. Busy, she doesn't look up. But I see her eyes brown and owlish. She cuts shin-beef in the cauldron, and swings the iron arm over coals poked ready for an all-day-simmer. She and we eat when Father mumbles back to the barn.

I hear him as I harness the horses. He hammers his fists on the ground as he prays, "God help me." He rises from his knees, chanting hymns to his pitchfork, how our Old Order Ancients suffered, their bodies wracked by heathen hands. How our kin broke their bonds, came to New Eden, free to worship in Pennsylvania's rolling green.

I watch him go through the stable's Dutch door. He leans over the water-trough, smooth water showing his disheveled self. He smacks the surface with the flat of his hand, groans, and dunks his head. He comes up and dunks again. Hair dripping, his head thrown back, water sprays. He drops his wet shirt on the ground.

From a bucket, he takes a bristle brush and scrubs himself. He scours the back of his neck, under the beard, around the shoulder, down his arms and over the chest, scrubbing until he's clean and pink as a newborn pig.

* * *

Wednesday—

Dark start. He catches me reading by candlelight, a reader of books beyond Bibles. "Wastrel," he spits from my bedroom door. I sit on the bed, wishing I could shrink into the mattress. I should be dressed.

"A poor farmer you'll make, if ever." He sneers.

I may be eleven, but I am a farmer. I plow the land, follow the sweep of

Her, staving off rill and washout. This is fact. This is my light not hidden under a bushel.

I revel in Her, Her moist earth fresh between my fingers. I breathe Her in. Come spring, corn planted in rows, wheat seed scattered, I watch the sprout of green promise. I trust in Her. If I bend my back, and sweat, She will show me a true resurrection. Father can't say I'm not a farmer.

He looks at the book. Two more years of school is all I have, every book a treasure. "The Inferno, is it?" he says, and with a grunt, "Inferno it shall be." He flings the book, pages fanning onto the fire. How will I explain this burning? It is her own, "...my teacher's private book," I tell him. "She says..."

"I don't care what she says. Not another word." Father picks up the slate, wood wrapped, my assignment chalked last night— He reads, "List today's accomplishments :

fed cows, mucked gutters, milking, fed sheep, horses, helped collect eggs, spread straw, walked to school, English grammar, English vocabu—" He isn't half through the list and his face turns red. "Rubbish!" He shouts and throws the slate after the book.

* * *

This night I listen to the peepers. An owl hoots. I hear Mother through the bedroom wall, "No, Abraham. He's only a boy, and you a Deacon."

And he answers, "Much is expected of Abraham's son. A spared rod and he will spoil."

"But..."

"But what, Sarah. Are you the Deacon? The husband perhaps?"

What answer could there be? There's only the bang of their bedroom door, him clomping, my door flung open, latch gouged into the wall. Plaster rattles the lath. He stands gripping the doorframe, breath fierce through his nose.

One long stride brings him to the bed. He snatches my arm, shoulder stretched fit to pop. He hauls me clear of the bed, quilt and sheet tangled. Drag and drag. The covers fall away. My bare-feet slide as he takes the stairs two at a time. I hit every third, down and through the kitchen. Askew, my legs crack against chair legs, the table leg. An ankle skins on the hearth, and bang, we're into the blowing rain.

He has me by the hair, bumping my head against him. My nightshirt clings, a second skin. Wet wool and sweat rise off his jacket as we splash

across the dooryard. Wind slaps my shirttail, stinging welts from his last ministration.

Wild with what's to come, I drive my heels into the ground. He is strong as Jonah, the ground mud-slick. My bare feet plow crooked furrows toward the woodshed.

"Please," I beg. Again God's ear is somewhere else. I yowl, voice muffled in Father's sleeve. He wrenches me forward. The night is ripe for benediction.

In the moments empty of pleading, the peepers have no voice. The owl doesn't ask who. It's as if Father and I are in a separate world. No one to see. No one to hear.

In the now neat woodshed, one-handed, Father skids aside the chopping block, an oak stump, hatchet in the end-grain. Blood and feathers mark this morning's slaughter. A speckled rooster had run headless circles, unaware escape was already his. Now gutted and plucked, he hangs in the rafters by yellow feet.

Father places a candle on the stump next to the hatchet. Black boots kick the floorboards free of kindling. The rooster's speckled down springs to life on drafts through the chewed window. Father kneels, saintly in the candle's circle of radiance.

In miraculous sleight-of-hand, he holds a quart jar brimming with clear liquid. "Communion cider," he says, eyes full of reverence. "Pray with me Boy."

Shackling fingers dig in above my elbow. He hauls me to my knees. His other hand lifts the jar. He takes a swallow and pulls his lips tight to his teeth as with pain.

He takes another swallow, that cider with its serpent bite usually hidden behind the grain bin and a hexing of pitchforks. The liquid doesn't look like cider. It doesn't smell like the cider we liffles siphon from barrels in the storeroom.

"Lord forgive this boy," he intones. And Lord knows I want forgiveness. I need forgiveness for reading, for wool-gathering when I should be working. For letting a rabbit dinner escape. For when I wish those things I shouldn't. But the others...? My fault—the mud clogged plow. My fault— seed rot. My fault— rain. If these faults are mine, surely I could rise, take up my fright, and walk from this woodshed.

Father prays. His fingers bite the back of my neck, his other hand

holds fervent to the half-empty jar. Through the window, distant as someone else's life, I see our house outlined in the dark, the steep slate and high chimneys. My bedroom dormer, my sisters' dormer. And if I listen intently, I might hear their sleep, my mother's held breath.

On the first floor, a square of kitchen glows orange with the lamp she left on the table, light for my way to bed. I wish I were there.

Father's grip loosens as his prayers drone, "... for I am Yours even unto the flesh of my flesh, my Isaac." Tonight again, he calls me Isaac. But will God stay Father's hand as He stayed Old Testament Abraham's hand, Isaac saved before the knife descended?

Careful, slow and careful I shift sideways. But, he's quick at my ear. "Ow." He twists me to my back on the floor, the jar set by my head. He pats the floorboards beyond the candle's glow. The usual apple-switch not found, he swipes the floor in wide arcs. I collected the switch for this morning's fire, me thinking to save myself.

He stretches out the other arm. "God bless it." And for a moment I'm forgotten in the candle's flicker. The blade of the hatchet glints. I fear the depth of Father's devotion. Even unasked, Father might offer me to his God.

I spider backward, arms cocked, palms down, feet under my rump. One out-flung foot catches the jar. The remaining liquid splashes. Dark blotches run rat-quick under the woodpile. Father bellows. He lunges for the jar, and misses as an un-split log rolls beneath his foot. He lands hip first beside me, his face close enough to kiss.

His fingers grip my shirt. Snake breath hisses. "God calls, Boy." In the pit of his eye, I see no hint of reprieve, only my own dark reflection, the open mouth, the panicked eyes. Even God himself couldn't stay this Abraham's hand as he reaches for the hatchet.

My fists close in his beard. Wiry strands lock my fingers, his lower lip pulled from leering teeth. I push with every sinew, arms, shoulders, back, forcing his chin up, neck bent, Adam's apple exposed. I free a hand, and with all my might, I hit him.

We roll hard against the chopping block. The block lurches. Overhead, the candle tips. The flame fights to stay upright as it topples. The candle clatters on the blotchy floor.

A blue whoosh, and flame enfolds us. Orange and yellows leap, scorching clothes and skin and hair, yet his grip fiercens. My shirt tears. As his hands pass my lips, hope dies and I am boy no more.

I am badger. I am mouth and tongue. I am teeth latched in his flesh, and he in the Devil's own rage, lifts me shoulder first, head bent, and I am through the chewed window, shattering mullions and glass, landing in a sea of shard-studded mud.

I sit up, wipe my eyes on a shirtsleeve. I peer this way, that way. The house and barn shimmer. Yellows spark off puddles between. How is it I sit here, pig in a wallow, about me the smell of roast meat and burnt hair? The woodshed wall sheets with flame, and from the door a separate conflagration steps forth. I gape.

"The Burning Bush." I am on my feet. "Dear God." And there in the midst of the burning is Father. He falls groveling in the wet. He beats at his clothes, splashing until the flames snuff. Lump in the mud, he lies there.

My breath comes in short bursts. Surely he is dead. But he rises to his hands and knees, beard melted, his hair burnt to raw scalp. One hand reaches. "You..."

The woodshed roars. Smoke billows in thick low-slung clouds shot with sparks, and I am back to boy, all tatters and mud. Terrified.

I hear the faithful, and look toward their shouts and the clunk of their boots and buckets. Fast, they come roused from bed, over the fields and down the lane in answer to our iron bell, the insistent clangor as Mother, it has to be Mother, sounds fire. Poor Mother, I should help. I jump to my feet.

"You..." Father's arm shakes. "God wants you."

He falters. His finger of accusation aimed at me, my head fills with its own clangor, run, run.

I sprint behind the barn, over the white fence, through harrowed fields, hedgerow to hedgerow, stone and rock. A fire licks inside my chest, little room left for air, the harsh out, the desperate heave in. My legs wobble and wobbly like a new lamb, the burnt skin eerily painless.

I run, for who would believe me, badger or boy, over the word of their Deacon.

I enter a deeper dark I know is woods, the slap of branches. My eyes leak, nose too. I stumble through wind-fallen limbs seeking... Seeking what?

In the still woods, Father's words thunder in my head. God wants you. And when he has me, what will He have? What's left but a bleating lamb, too young to graze?

God can have me, my festering days, my nights before starvation, so few they'll be with my too little fat to tide me into summer.

I have no need of summer. I need only a hollow to curl in, a blanket of dark.

“So be it.” I tell the woods. Let blessed peace have at me.

* * *

Hand in hand with hope, panic drains.

Ah. Peace. I feel her dark arms around me. My knees drop me to the woods floor. From this bed of leaves I look to heaven, thankful and — “Oh. Oh, Damn.” I'm damned if the riven clouds don't part to a sliver of moon.

Damned if I don't see ahead a paler dark through the woods — a road— and on this road, I'm damned to hope. In my chest. White-hot. Oh hideous resurrection.