

KIND ONE

by Laird Hunt

Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2012

In the evening she would tell it. In the dusk light, when the candles were lit and the fire was low, she would clear her throat. When the windows were closed and the curtains drawn and the children tucked, she would set in to speak. When we had all gathered close, when our shoulders had touched, when we had taken her hands, when we had drawn in our breath. When we had shut tight our eyes, when we had thought of our days, the years of our suffering, our joy in the sunshine, that time by the water, cool drops on our foreheads, warm bread in our mouths. When we had all been spared, when our crops had come in, when the storm had stepped past, when we had said all our prayers. When the night stretched before us, she would open her tale.

[...]

ONCE I LIVED IN A PLACE where demons dwelled. I was one of them. I am old and I was young then, but truth is this was not so long ago, time just took the shackle it had on me and gave it a twist. I live in Indiana now, if you can call these days I spend in this house *living*. I might as well be hobbled. A thing that lurches across the earth. One bright morning of the world I was in Kentucky. I remember it all. The citizens of the ring of hell I have already planted my flag in do not forget.

Charlotte County. Ninety miles from nowhere. It was four hundred acres, varied as to elevation, with good drainage to a slow-running creek. There was a deep well, fine pasture for the horses. Much of the land never went under cultivation, and there were always frogs and owls for the night and foxes to trot bloody-jawed through the dawn. Birds must have liked its airs, because the airs were full of them. A firearm went off independently and we had half a flock for supper. In season, we had fresh corn and beans and tomatoes and squash. There was a boy who kept it all in shape. Two more looked to the pigs. The girls cooked and kept house and kept me.

It was a pretty country. Greens were greens. There was snow for Christmas and holly bushes to make sure it looked white. Breezes and flowers for the summer. Trees in autumn time stuffed with red and yellow leaves. Bulbs to crack open the earth when it came up on spring. It has been my whole excuse for a life since I held my breath and pointed my back at that place, but my mind has never learned to hold what transpired there against it. The land is the land and the land washes itself clean. I had a father who had been through battles who told me that.

Still, even if they are all gone, even if they are all scattered or dead, I would not want to come over the rise and across the stone bridge and arrive there again. No, I would not want that.

My husband's name was Linus Lancaster, which made me Ginny Lancaster, but they do not call me that here. I live in a house on a corner of a farm that belongs to the family whose floors I scrubbed for forty years. When they come to call, which some of the younger ones still do, they stand in the yard and holler, "You in there Scary Sue?" I am. I've got a view of a barley field and a woods they haven't taken the axe to yet. I've got a little kitchen with its own pump and a place to sit on the front porch when it is too warm. I've got a shelf of books they have let me have out of the big house over the years. I'll read just about any kind of a book you could offer, but it is mostly adventures and romances that sit close to hand. Books in which they die by the cheerful dozen and the knight comes to rescue off the damsel and the good lord of hosts lets it pour down happy ever afters like there wasn't anything else in his skies. Like he didn't have any other eventualities squirreled away up there.

Linus Lancaster was my mother's second cousin. He came to us from Kentucky and grabbed me up when I was just settling into school.

"Would you do me the honor, Ginny?" he said to me.

"Yes I would," said I.

"Then come along with me and be my fair maiden," he said.

"I'll come, I will," said I.

He told my mother about his piece of paradise, said he'd struck it rich as a king in trade and now was going to let the land care for him. He had good bottom land. A stream. A well with water so kind to the throat that it would never let you drink anything else. Good outbuildings. Sharp ploughs and axes. China and cutlery. Larders full. Healthy stock. People to look to it. He'd had a wife in Louisville, but she was now his dearly departed, and each night his soul would beg

him to bring it some Christian company. My father, the same who had been through battles, had a wooden foot and a cane to club on us with. Linus Lancaster told my mother about Charlotte County, but my father was there listening, quiet, the way he liked to. With a pipe at the ready and one eye shut.

There was a good deal to say about that place in Kentucky, and my father took it all in, every word. I mostly looked at him and at Linus Lancaster. I liked how new Linus Lancaster's shirt was. He had two of them in his valise and ten more just like it, he said, in his fine home. My mother liked to hear him talk. She got that look of hers, like a daisy under a sweet raindrop, when he would open his mouth and dance out at us with his tongue. My father saw that look and he saw Linus Lancaster and he saw me, there in my corner, mooning over it all. When it seemed like Linus Lancaster's tongue was done with its long dancing, my father straightened up on his chair and hit a little at the floor with his wooden foot. He looked at me, then at Linus Lancaster, then he cleared his throat. In school, the teacher had let me lead the lesson, my father said, opening one eye and shutting the other. The teacher had said one day it could be me to stand in front of the class and hold the chalk, and what, he wondered, did Linus Lancaster think about that. Linus Lancaster said he had heard that about me. He said he liked a woman who knew her letters. Said there was great accommodation in his heart for the delicacies of the mind.

"Do you want to go?" my father asked me later.

"Yes, I do," I said.

"I will ask you again—do you want to go down to Kentucky with this man, cousin to your mother, Linus Lancaster, to be his wife and do his bidding?"

"Yes, Father," I said.

He did not say a thing until the next day, when I was out in the goose pond with mud and wet feathers up to my elbows and all the geese honking and carrying on like I was the rapture come to smite them. My father quietly considered this carnival for a time, then he kicked at a goose come too close to his wooden foot.

"Go on then," he said.

We left a fortnight later. There wasn't much fuss to it. My mother and father, a third cousin and an uncle, a cow, the old mare, and a broken-wing chick. A turkey buzzard, looking for his lunch, haloed the house. My mother waved to her cousin with a cloth she was holding. My father pushed down his hat and held up his hand.

