

## Homecoming – Based on a True Story

The village didn't look much as Jed crowned the rolling ridge. A straggle of houses fringed the sweep of the river like a bank of wooden reeds, with only the squat church tall enough to compete with the willows weeping into the waters. All else was just a pastoral haze of agriculture. At least, he hoped it was. Someone out there would need a hand.

This was all alien territory, albeit just a morning's cart-ride from the familiar smells of home. He had climbed out of his shy, boyhood valley to squint out for the first time at the world beyond the comforting circle of village school, draughty church and the 'ostler that sometimes gave him a farthing for pitching in.

He swung down the lane, cultivating the gait of the journeyman, the hire-able swagger of the itinerant tinkers, carters and knife-sharpeners that visited back home. He memorised features along the way. Home was gone from sight and he might need to retreat. Here was a barn with a fallen roof, a cankered oak and the inscribed stone that probably bore the village's name.

The year was 'late gone' as his aunt used to say, but there was still warmth in the air as he clattered down to the small cobbled square where ringwormed children ostentatiously picked their noses at him and half-seen women filled shadowy doorways.

He dropped his satchel by the trickling fountain and gulped an icy mouthful, tasting different from the pump back home. 'Hello' he announced to no-one. I'm Jed, Lookin' for work. Need an 'and? I'm a right tidy 'elper.' The incredulous kids burst into braying laughter, mimicking his accent. He blushed furiously, 'All roight, , so I'm an 'ammets Cross man, what of it? Any of your fathers need work in the fields?'

Blank faces. He wondered if this village had sided with the King, back when these things mattered, back when he was a boy. Then a woman's voice, firm but with a hint of humour, called out. 'Jim Wheatley's short-handed at Leacroft, down by yon water meadows. If you know one end of a scythe from the other, I daresay he'll pay handsome.'

He strained to see which doorway the voice had come from. 'What village is this, lover?' he asked of the air.

'Burford St Mary... Loverrrrr.' she teased, staying hidden. He silently cursed himself for betraying himself an outsider, thanked the air and squelched down the beast-trod towards the river.

A week later, they were gathering in the wheat on a sweltering morning, the air thick with thrips. A hush descended on the men's bawdy song. Jed looked up from his work to see a woman ambling down the lane with a basket gyrating on her jutting hip. Even from a distance she had a sultry appeal, a rolling gait that achieved so much more than locomotion. As she drew to the far bank of the river, he could see she was of good complexion, a deal older than he but temptingly curvaceous and topped with a lustrous tumble of hair.

The other men stared fixedly at their hands but she paid no heed and splashed through the gravelly shallows, where salmon sparkled. She walked up to Jed, wet boots squeaking, eyes flashing with defiant assurance. Her flaxen dress was scattered with wheat seeds with a dripping hem; her nearness was a waft of lavender. Handing him a screw of paper, she said, 'I just thought you might be 'ungry, that's all. There ain't no way these beggars,' she waved an imperious hand, 'are gonna' share their tucksies with ye.'

He recognised the voice from the darkened doorway when he had arrived. Before he could thank her, she had splashed back across the ford and started up the lane, her hips swaying. Jed stared after her, then down at the roughly wrapped parcel in his hands. He scanned across the men's faces, tight with suppressed humour, as he drew out a roughly shaped bread bun, warm from the oven.

'Whaaaat?' he implored. 'What's so cussed laughable?'

'Yon Meg's right smitten and no gainsayin' wheezed Albert, the chargehand, through a white fog of whiskers.

'Well, it's mighty kind of 'er, but I already 'ad a bit saved up in yon bag' protested Jed.

Nichol, the ginger-haired giant, stumbled, guffawing, into the crop and sent a hapless bank vole scurrying into the path of Fitch the one-eared terrier.

Albert looked at Jed as if he were a small child. 'It's a cockle-bread, you great dumplehead! Maybe you don't have 'em in Hammet's Cross or maybe you're too light of years to know the ways of women.' He nodded at the crumpled ridge of the loaf. 'See, what the maids do...well, mostly they're maids...when they take a shine to a swain, they knead a bit of dough and shape it to ....theirselves afore bakin' it.'

Jed's incomprehension sent Albert's gaze skyward. 'They press it hard against their...clunnets to take on the shape and flavour of their femaleness and that draws you in, see. Like...a love potion. I'd say you were on the 'ook, stripling.'

Resenting the expectant gaze of his workmates, Jed retreated behind the bole of a giant oak and examined the bread with interest before pulling it apart between dusty fingers and cramming the steaming lumps into his mouth.

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Time passed; the water meadows flooded and drained like a breathing tide. Albert was claimed by the roots of the churchyard yews. When Meg took sick, Jed brought drafts of comfrey in a burr-elm chalice, but to no avail. He told himself it was to be expected, with her having twelve winters on him. He cracked pallid smiles at neighbours' kind words, replaced the nosegay on the door with an ivy wreath and devised comforting untruths for their bewildered children.

As they slept beneath a pile of sheepskins, he turned the papers over in his hands, the sheets that the pompous parson had excised from the parish records, sneering at Jed as if he were no more than a beast. The letters meant nothing to him, but he remembered the parson's words, all right. Tales not for the telling.

A disgraced father gone and fled, a child of twelve become a mother and left to rue her ruination, the baby sent away for appearances. And here was that child, drawn back like the salmon that fought up the sparkling river, guided by invisible forces.

It would have been easy to cast the paper into the fire, deny everything, hope the parson kept his peace and play the respectable widower. But he'd be damned to be ashamed of her. In the morning he'd go and see Simeon the stonemason, and see how many words he could afford.

And even now, if you brush the tickseed away with your shoe, you can still see the stone, smaller than those commemorating the squire's gazehounds.

"Margaret. Wife. Mother. Sister".

There's reading and there's reading, but not everyone would know she was all these to just one man.