Opening extract from

# All The Truth That's In Me

Written by

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We came here by ship, you and I.

I was a baby on my mother's knee, and you were a lisping, curly-headed boy playing at your mother's feet all through that weary voyage.

Watching us, our mothers got on so well together that our fathers chose adjacent farm plots a mile from town, on the western fringe of a Roswell Station that was much smaller, then.

I remember my mother telling tales of the trip when I was young. Now she never speaks of it at all.

She said I spent the whole trip wide-eyed, watching you.

# Book One

## I

You didn't come.

I waited all evening in the willow tree, with gnats buzzing in my face and sap sticking in my hair, watching for you to return from town.

I know you went to town tonight. I heard you ask Mr Johnson after church if you could pay a call on him this evening. You must want to borrow his ox team.

But you were gone so long. You never came. Maybe they asked you to supper. Or maybe you went home another way.

Mother chided me ragged for missing chores and supper, and said all that was left for me was what had stuck to the stew pot. Darrel had already scraped the pot bare, but Mother made me wash it in the stream anyway.

There's nothing so bright as the stream by day, nothing so black on a moonless night.

I bent and drank straight from it. It was all I had to fill my belly. And maybe, I thought, you'd be thirsty, too, after a scratchy day of haying, and before retiring to bed you'd dip down into the same stream and drink the water I had kissed.

You've cooled off here most summer nights since you were a boy.

I thought how, in the darkness, I would feel like any other girl to you. Beneath my dress I have no cause for shame.

I thought how, if you knew, you might look twice at me, bend your thoughts my way and see if they snap quickly back, or linger.

But you don't know.

And you never will.

For I am forbidden from telling.

## II

This morning I was in the fringe of woods beyond your cabin long before you were up. I had to circle around a tree so you wouldn't see me when you passed by on your way to the outhouse.

Something occupies your thoughts today. There's a spring in your step, and you hum as you walk. You seem in a hurry to get on with something.

Jip didn't notice me. He hovered at your ankles and rubbed his side against your boot. He's half deaf and blind, with little left of his sense of smell, but still you keep him. He's an old friend.

I watched your cabin as long as I could before I had to hurry back, lest Mother notice me missing.

## III

Darrel knows. He caught me in the woods outside your house. He threatens to tell Mother, if I don't do his chores for him

in the chicken hut and bring him berries and nuts and first cherries whenever I find them. He and his great mouth need my constant feeding in order to stop their constant talking.

## IV

Tonight the moon came out, and I went out with it, to watch it rise over the treetops. So silent, the moon.

I remember. Night after night, its silence would comfort me. How dark the nights when it went away. But it always came back.

It was my only friend in the years with him.

It is still my consolation.

## V

You are not like him.

No matter what anyone says.

## VI

Father used to say my singing could charm the birds down from the trees. Loving fathers will say anything, but I used to dream one day my song would bring you to me.

It was always you. When you gathered nuts in the forest with the other coltish boys, I liked your smiles and jokes the best. I swelled with pride when your slingshot brought down a big tom-turkey.

Do you remember me digging worms for you when you were twelve and I was eight?

I would meet you at the creek with my little sack of soil and

present you with the fattest crawlers I could pluck from pulling weeds in my mother's kitchen garden. You called me 'Ladybird'. It was Father's name for me. He meant 'sweetheart'. You meant 'girl worm-catcher'. I was still pleased.

You'd do somersaults when you knew that only I could see them. You pretended not to hear me clapping, and we'd both laugh when you toppled on your rear.

You left a basket of apples for me at my willow tree once. I saw you sneak away after.

In time, you became a man, and all at once, I became this.

## VII

Do you remember the Aldruses' logrolling? I can never forget it, though I suppose it must be just another day to you.

It was four years ago. I was just fourteen, and growing.

It was a hot day in late summer. A young couple had recently arrived in Roswell Station from Newkirk, up north, and they wanted to set up housekeeping east of town, where the last forest overlooks the marshlands. Clyde Aldrus had staked out a lot and asked the town to come clear away the timber he'd felled. His young wife, Joan, was near to delivering her first.

You must remember the day's work. You left your ripening wheat fields and toiled under the hot sun all day long with your hatchet and axe, in company with the men and older boys and the oxen and their chains.

But do you remember the food? And what you said to the girl who prepared and served the hominy pudding?

I hope you do not remember my hominy pudding. I would rather forget that. I chose it because I'd heard you say once,

after church, that it was one of your favourite suppers.

Our whole family came: Mother, Father, Darrel and me. Father whistled all the way through town, driving Old Ben hitched to our apple cart. Mother sat beside him and shook her head, laughing at him. I held on tight to the hominy pudding cradled in my lap.

Mother sat with the women and sewed gowns and bonnets for the new baby. The young ladies presided over the table in their absence. We were all so nervous, we girls, about presenting our cooking to Roswell Station for the first time.

I stood slicing pears with Abigail Pawling when someone tugged me aside.

"Can you keep a secret?" Lottie Pratt whispered under her bonnet brim into my ear.

"Of course I can," I said. "What's the matter?"

She led me behind the pile of logs already gathered by sweating men. Back at the table, Maria Johnson and Eunice Robinson eyed us. Maria's new dress was blood red, with a white scalloped collar and black ribbons on the sleeves and bodice. Earlier, when Maria was out of hearing, little Elizabeth Frye said her father thought the dress dipped dangerously close to vanity. And if beauty wasn't enough, while the rest of us girls struggled with our puddings and hotchpots, Maria Johnson had brought three golden-brown plum tarts.

Lottie, who'd done all her father's cooking since her mother's death many years ago, had no reason to fear being outshone by Maria. Her yeasty rolls could rival even Goody Pruett's baking. She pulled my ear close to her mouth.

"I've got a fella," she whispered.

I pulled away to see her face. She must be joking. But her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were bright.

"Who?" I breathed.

"Sssh! Tell you later," she said. "Watch me tonight and guess. But swear you'll never speak a word of it."

My head spun with this information. From the corner of my eye, I saw you fasten a chain around a log and wave to Leon Cartwright, who led the ox team.

"What do you *mean*, you've got a fella?"

Lottie's chest swelled with her importance. "Says he's gonna marry me," she said. "He's given me ever so many kisses."

"Kisses!" I gasped. Lottie pressed her pink finger over my lips.

You turned then and saw us whispering there, and straightened up and grinned. I had to take a deep breath.

Lottie missed nothing. Her eyebrows rose. In a terrible instant I realised: you might be her fella.

"Is it Lucas, Lottie?"

She giggled. "What if it is?"

Eunice and Maria were openly frowning at us now. Mrs Johnson approached the food table, and Maria pointed her mother's gaze our way.

"I've got to know," I begged.

"Why, is Lucas *your* fella?"

I prayed my weakness wouldn't show. "Don't tease me, Lottie," I said. "Just tell me."

A shadow passed over us both, and we looked up to see Mrs Johnson's arms folded across her ample bosom. "Hadn't you young ladies best get back to your tasks?" she said.

Lottie hurried off, but I trotted meekly back to the table.

"There's a good girl," Mrs Johnson said, and patted my back. "Lads'll want food soon, and you'll want to show off your pretty face *and* your pretty dish."

I turned to Mrs Johnson in much astonishment, but she only winked back. Her daughter, Maria, was less patient with me.

"Run and fill these from the well." She handed me two large tin pitchers. I didn't mind an excuse to step away, so I headed towards the new well Clyde had dug.

I dropped the bucket down and listened to it splash. When I was sure it had sunk deep enough to fill, I leaned all my weight against the crank to pull it up again. This pulley was more stubborn than some, and I struggled to complete each turn.

"Let me help," said a voice. Someone beside me took hold of the crank.

It was you.

I wanted to run, but I had pitchers to fill, and how would that look if I bolted away? I hesitated with my hands still on the wooden handle, and you smiled at me.

"Here, we'll do it together," you said. With your hands overlapping mine, you rotated the well-pull effortlessly. My arms followed the motions to no useful purpose. I was sure my cheeks must have gone cherry red. You were almost a man now. It had happened to you so suddenly.

You brought up the bucket and poured water into my pitchers. Then you offered me a cold drink from the cup hooked to the bucket rim, and there was your boy smile in a broader, more angular face. I was so nervous, my arms shook to hold the pitchers. You took one of them and carried it back with me to the table.

"You've grown taller, Ladybird."

"That's what Mother says," I managed to say. "She's had to make me a new dress to fit."

I wanted to die of shame. Mentioning the fit of my dress to any young man, and worse, to you!

I floundered for rescue. "She… made me do a great deal of the stitching myself."

You glanced sideways at my grey dress, then up at me. "Looks like you've made a handy job of it."

We reached the table and set the water down. Maria Johnson saw you and twined her bonnet strings between her thumb and finger.

"Dinner's not for an hour yet, Mr Whiting, so you'll have to come back then," she said. "We can see you're working up an appetite."

Your gaze lingered on Maria's dark curls poking out from under her starched white bonnet. Then you tipped your broad hat at all the girls and strode off to the log-pull. Maria and Eunice both watched you go. I let out a long breath and leaned against the rough-hewn wall of the Aldruses' new home. Lottie caught my eye and smiled, and I sighed in great relief.

I knew then that you were not her fella.

That was the last conversation you and I had, and the last time I saw Lottie smile.

## VIII

The first red leaves appear on the maples. The morning air is cool.

I sit in the willow's branches and watch the chipmunks hard at work. A squirrel on a limb just above scolds me, showing teeth. He waits as if he expects an answer.

Golden light flickers through the pale leaves. In every bit of beauty, I see you.

You have your mother's face. Your father's strength, but your mother's face, made masculine and brown.

I remember her. So pretty, she made young girls jealous. So gentle, old women scolded her for it. So lonely, she succumbed to the dark-haired traveller your family boarded for a fortnight, and followed him on his journey west.

Reverend Frye preached the seventh commandment for half a year after that.

Reverend Frye never could take his eyes off her, either.

## IX

You miss your mother. Her loss made you older overnight, and the lines have never left your face.

There was one who took her leaving worse, and he is your greater tragedy.

## X

He never felt like your father to me. I knew he was, of course, yet never believed it. I never saw the cords of blood binding his flesh to yours. There were only cords of madness strangling him.

Your father died the night the town believed he did, and my captor was born from his ashes. Two men, not alike, strangers to each other.

## XI

The morning after the logrolling, I found something tucked in a wedge of branches in my willow tree. It was a bunch of posies, tied together with a wheat straw.

I ran home with them, brimming with delicious hope, imagining you in every kind of girlish dream.

I knew exactly what those flowers meant to you.

They weren't the first posies you'd brought me there.

I tried to imagine what I'd do when I saw you next, what I wouldn't say, and would; how I'd let you know without saying so that I cherished your gift.

Two years would pass before I'd get my chance, and by then, there was nothing left to say.

## XII

Lookout duty is yours tonight, so your bed will lie cold while you sit in a cabin perched on a hillside miles away and watch the sea. Clouds and storms you'll see, for the ocean is a restless neighbour, but it is the threat of lights by night and sails by day that takes farmers from their fields and beds. The homelanders will not forget the welcome we gave their first expedition when their ships found our river, and they looked upon our farms with lustful eyes. Long years we've braced ourselves for their angry retribution.

I'll sleep poorly knowing you're so far down the track and suffering to stay awake.

This is the silent price of vigilance.

At least you'll have Jip to keep you company.

## XIII

Darrel will have no more of schooling, he says when he comes home this afternoon. The new schoolmaster's tedious, and he's introducing Latin. What use is Latin? If English is good enough for the Bible, it's good enough for Darrel. So reasons my brother, the philosopher, and he cracks his slate over the hearth to clinch his argument.

Man of the house, he calls himself! The orator dreams of soldiering. He takes Father's pistol to train his aim on rabbits. The rabbits need not fear, but Darrel would fear for his own hide if he had any sense.

Father wouldn't have stood for Darrel leaving school – and Darrel head of his class, no less! – but Father isn't here any more, and Mother needs an extra hand at harvesting.

Father wouldn't have liked to see us earn our living brewing spirits, either.

## XIV

I kneel in the garden to pull the beets. They burst free on the first tug, fat and voluptuous, and my basket soon fills. I shake the beets in clumps and dirt rains down.

Father loved this soil. Mother was the only thing he loved more, and he loved her fiercely. He made this soil fruitful and beautiful. While he lived, few farmers in Roswell Station were as admired.

I feel closest to my father when my arms are caked with good brown earth. And so I stay to help my mother, as he would want me to.

## XV

You were not in search of an ox team when you sought to visit Mr Johnson. You had a deeper favour to ask.

I heard Maria talking to Eunice Robinson at the well on the green. They all forget that I have ears. Or they don't care.

Maria boasts, but her eyes don't.

You will marry her at the next full moon.

## XVI

Are you proud to wed the village prize? Satisfied to beat Leon Cartwright and Jud Mathis?

Do you do this for love, or money? To erase the stain of your father's fall?

Or to be rid of me?

## XVII

I flee to my rock in the woods, the place where Father and I would go to sing. I watch the sun set, the slim moon rise and fall.

Mother will murder me.

You are to marry.

Night is cold, like the river, who beckons me with her song.

I came back from two years with him as if from the grave, to a new day among the living, and thought myself happy to return. But the night and the cold, the dark and dead feel more like home to me now.

Only the thought of you dispels my darkness. You are the sun in my world, and how can I endure to watch you set into another woman's arms?

## XVIII

Come morning, I enter the house and Mother slaps me so hard even Darrel pities me.

"You of all people should know better than this," she says. "After all the sleepless nights you gave me before! You've got no proper feelings!"

## XIX

I rake the coop and gather the eggs, milk the cow, and dump the ashes. Water from the stream, and wood from the pile, then I wash up and wheel the cart to town.

Deliveries done at last, I run to my willow.

There was never a hope. I'm entitled to nothing. There is no one to tell, and no way to tell it, as I am now. I couldn't find words even if I was able. No words could ease this unbearable weight.

I cry to my willow tree: robbed of years, robbed of dignity, language, tranquillity.

Last of all, cruellest, robbed of you.

## XX

Housewives and daughters, like chattering squirrels, revel in news: a wedding soon! The bride, so beautiful, the groom so tall, the pick of the village. Their marriage will be a festival day. Maria's relations will steal daylight to crochet her lace.

All the other little broken hearts – and there are bound to be many – will be burned on the altar to youthful beauty and love. It's thin comfort to think I'm not alone in my woe.

## XXI

The sun still rises; roosters still crow and the cow still makes mud. Mucking out her stall was once Darrel's job. Nothing like fresh manure to season a heartache and show me what my fancies are worth.

Uptown, during errands, I see you on the street, surrounded

by well-wishers who heap their congratulations on you. A few men harangue you with jokes. Your smiling face is apple red.

Standing near me are some who whisper about your father's slide into his pit of drink. They whisper that you'll do the same, but whisper only. When you approach, they smile and clap your back and say, What a fine farm, Lucas. What a fine wife she'll be, Lucas. You've got a man's shoulders now, Lucas. Just like—

They stop, they stammer. They remember some other errand.

For all they know of your father, they should pity him. They should mourn.

Only one person knows a reason to fear him.

And she has no daggers in her tongue for you.

## XXII

There is much I don't remember.

Sometimes in my dreams the memories return and I cry out. Or I wake and feel caged by the darkness, and forget I'm no longer with him.

Mother yanks my hair then, and orders me to stop my devilish wailing.

## XXIII

Today I took Mother's egg basket and a jug of cider into town. Walking towards Abe Duddy's shop, I saw Leon Cartwright cross the street to catch Maria. She was on her way somewhere, and from the looks of it, couldn't get there fast enough. I was only ten paces behind them, but neither of them heeded me.

"Marry him, will you," says he, right in her face.

"I'll marry him if I choose to," says she, walking on as if he's not there, so fast he has to trot to keep up with her.

"You don't love him," says he.

She stops. "I'll love him if I choose to."

"Pah."

She walks again. He grabs her arm. "You only want his farm," he says. "He'll never have your heart."

That's when I took an egg from my basket and whipped it as hard as I could at Leon. The shell smashed, and the yolk soaked into his curly head.

He turned, shouting, then saw that it was me. That made him stop. Years ago it wouldn't have.

I glared at him. He plucked the shells from his hair and cursed but did nothing more.

Maria regarded me. Those dark eyes that drive you wild looked me up and down as though she was seeing me for the first time. She almost smiled. She almost nodded. Then she turned and walked on, leaving Leon to go home and dunk his head.

## XXIV

I realised how easy it would have been to miss and hit her with my egg instead.

I wondered if that was what I should have done.

## XXV

Tobias Salt, the miller's freckle-faced son, trudges back into town from a long night's lookout. His eyes are puffy and his footsteps slow.

"See anything, Toby?" Abe Duddy calls from his shop.

"Never do," says Tobias, and he rubs his eyes.

"That's what I call a good watch," says the old storekeeper.

## XXVI

How busy you are now. Harvest, and a wedding. A new room on the cabin to please your bride. Timber to cut, along with winter wood. Corn to reap and potatoes to dig. If only there was someone to help you. No father, no kin, and your friends are busy with their own harvesting.

Rocks to gather, vegetables to pick and bottle.

You work like a plough horse, but you whistle. Soon there'll be a wife to help, to tend your nest, to weed the garden, to mend your trousers and stuff your mattress, to serve something warm when you come in each night.

Will she? Will her soft hands spin your wool, and bind your wheat into sheaves, and pluck the grubs off your potatoes? Will her china face turn bronze beside you as you labour in your fields?

## XXVII

No one calls me by my name. No one calls me anything, save Darrel, who calls me Worm. Mother never really tried to stop him. When she calls me, it's "You, shuck these," "You, card that sack," "You, grease this down," "You, watch the tallow pot."

"You. Keep still."

The warmth I remember in her eyes is gone, replaced with iron. Father is long-since dead, and the daughter she remembers is dead to her. She buries the name with the memory.

No one calls me by my name.

Younger children do not know it.

I remind myself each day at sunrise, lest one day I forget.

Judith is my name.

## XXVIII

I hung the posies you left me upside down in the barn rafters to dry, to preserve them for ever and gaze upon them always.

I was gone before they'd finished drying. When I returned home after my years away, they still hung there – brown and shrivelled stalks no one took enough notice of to sweep away.

They are there still, so wrapped in spiderwebs that only I can tell they once were a young sweetheart's nosegay.

I take them down now, and outside, where I fling them high into the autumn sky, like a bride who tosses her bouquet.

## XXIX

I came across the schoolmaster near the forest's edge. I was picking pears. Two weeks new to Roswell Station from the academy up at Newkirk, he was out strolling in autumn dusk, and he came around a corner in the path. I pulled back and hid behind my tree but he'd seen me, and he took off his hat. Longshanks, I named him. Slim as a hoe, with a face the colour of new cheese and wayward dark hair that hangs before his eyes, so that he must always be pushing it back. So this was the teacher Darrel was rid of. Which of them was the luckier?

His eyes searched me as if I was a piece of Latin, ready for translation.

"Good evening."

He *spoke* to me.