

## Midwifery by Charles Curry

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The three-quarter moon kept a steady pace ahead of Elsie. It dappled the stuttering water she rode through and cast a silver gray sheen over the cottonwood trees around her.

Wind brushed the feathers of hair that stood out around her hat brim. A night bird—a raven—sounded an alarm. Other than that the night stood silent as she passed through it.

Somehow she found soon that she'd been brooding unawares on that spat with Tarrell the night after Catherine Hawley's birthing.

When Elsie had drawn the latch and plodded in by lantern light in the gray of early day, Tarrell had been nursing a mug of coffee in the kitchen room.

He had asked "What kept you so long?" His voice was thick from more than the coffee.

Elsie had gone wearily to the big table and set her bag down. "Lucy Hawley took longer than we thought. She had a false start that kept us busy for hours. I was just stepping into the saddle when Jeff called me back. It took some hours more for Catherine to come out."

"While your pups was driving me to drink with their capers."

Elsie had formed a rack from her clenched fists atop elbows braced on the knotty table.

"I don't know why you give up your fiddling for midwifing. "

"I didn't give anything up. I couldn't fiddle the baby out of her, but I knew how to do it, and what did you expect me... "

Tarrell glowered at her. "Wisht I could lay abed some morning when I got to drive stock over the pastures."

"What did you expect me to say, Tarrell? That I couldn't help them, though I knew I could?"

"Your work is here, minding your own kids."

She had laughed at that, and Tarrell had risen half out of his seat. "My eldest are of an age now, they don't need me to watch over them every speck of a minute. They can take up my chores if they need to. "

He had rolled and lit a cigarette. "You always was a damn lazy ass. Letting all your work for the kids. "

She had braced her hands on the table surface then and pushed herself up. "I'm going to bed. I can see there's no talking to you in this mood. Good night, Mr. Willows. "

Now the moon rode low in the sky, sinking lower yet while she watched. Her mount Patches paced the trail as slowly as a living horse could.

When they crossed the field at the top of their home hill he picked his way through, cropping grass at nigh every step. Elsie was half asleep in the saddle until a jarring branch swept her hat off at the opening of the woods.

Blind from lack of sleep, she could just heave the saddle and tack off Patches onto the stand, rubbing him down in a ritual of habit and breathing in the straw air that nearly lulled her off her feet.

When she left the barn Tom was just coming out of the trees, with his fly still unbuttoned. Elsie cracked a weak grin when she noticed that. “Button your fly, for the Lord’s sake.”

Tom grinned back at her. “I guess how Elsie don’t like seeing strange cock in her hen yard. Maybe it wakes her cat.”

“Just button it up, Tom. I’m not ready for any banter. Too, the word is pussy.” She ambled ahead of him to the porch, with her midwife’s pouch dangling slackly in one hand.

“Ain’t a pussy a cat?”

“A house cat.”

“Could be a wild cat.”

The laugh she laughed as she sat on the porch was a half-hearted one. “Have you known many wild pussies?” She began to remove her boots.

Tom sat down heavily next to her. “Some,” he answered back.

The dog Boots came up from the direction of the barn and hung himself over Sheba. The two of them watched the dogs at work for a while. “Dogs,” Tom said, “know what to do with a wild bitch dog.”

Elsie yawned herself into a response, “Will you please button your fly?” She began to rub her feet.

“You scared of a snake?”

She barked in weary laughter. “I wouldn’t call that a right snake, dear.”

“Maybe Elsie don’t know a right snake when she sees one.” He pulled her around to face him and, with her feet on his lap now, took over rubbing them for her.

The hound Scout came over to lick at Elsie’s face. She pushed him off, but he reared up to rest his front paws on her shoulders. The ruddy tip of his cock peeped out at her. Elsie yawned at it, then chortled at herself. She shoved him away and turned back to Tom.

“Will you please put your- cover your cock?”

“I think Elsie is afraid of snakes.”

She reached out a foot to push at Tom’s shoulder.

“You’re shameless.”

“Yes, maam.”

She shunted back away to herself, folding her arms around the pillar of her legs and rested her head on her knees.

Tom sat still where he was, watching the morning birds swoop away from each other. Dogs barked at something that moved in the forests.

Arditha came out on the porch with an ash bucket. “Could someone please make room for me here?”

Tom moved for her, where Elsie didn’t budge. In a little while more, Tarrell came out, making the porch planks quiver in his limping. The rolled cigarette planted in his face wobbled as he asked of Tom, “You want one of these?”

Tom shook his head for a silent *no*. Tarrell lit his stick then and leaned on a post of the porch roof. Chickens scattered over the width of the yard, chasing early insects. In time Arditha came back, swinging the empty bucket loosely in one hand.

“Is she asleep?”

“Looks that way,” Tarrell said.

Arditha heaved a sigh. “More chores for me. Can I please get by here?” She moved to gather up Elsie’s midwife pouch.

Tom stood and gathered Elsie up in his arms. Arditha stepped up to cross the porch. She held the door for Tom as he lugged Elsie indoors, then followed him along. Tarrell limped to the steps and eased himself down on the top step.

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