

Reparation

Sarah was a tall and taciturn fourteen year old
the day my great-grandpa called her in his study
and told her she was free to go:

"Sarah, Mr. Lincoln says
you don't belong to us any more, so you can leave...
Sarah didn't say a word,
kept looking at the well-swept carpet,
hands clasped tightly underneath her apron.

"Well?" Great grandpa grew impatient.
"Master, where would I go? What would I do?
I've never been no farther than the town.
Would I have to leave alone?"
Sarah's voice was low and very soft,
one who spoke little and was little listened to.

They settled then that she would stay,
would not call them Master, Missus
but Sir and Ma'am, or Mr. and Miz Duncan,
that she would keep on working round the house,
maybe someday be in charge like Abigail.
She'd gather eggs and milk the cows, churn butter
just like always.
But now she would be paid; the butter and egg money,
that was Sarah's.

Grandpa Duncan put it in the bank, he said
when Sarah came back from market with her coins.
At Christmas he'd give her five dollars "from the bank"
so she could buy the children gifts,
one time a twenty dollar gold piece that Sarah spent on clothes,
a Sunday hat and pair of gloves, good boots not handed down.

The decades cycled by; Abigail passed,
and Sarah was in charge
of all that big old house and barns
and milking sheds and chicken coops.
Nieces, younger cousins came and went,
swept the carpets, made the many beds.
She sent one girl away big-bellied,
never said a word to anyone.

That's Sarah in the golden wedding party picture,
Dark-skinned Gibson girl among the blondes.

In 1919 great-grandpa Duncan died at 90
and when the will was read
Sarah asked Mister William, the oldest son,

about her bank account.
Mister William shook his head.
"Sarah, I don't know a thing about it.
You must have got it wrong."
And Mister William walked away.

Sarah walked too, into town with papers
in her pocketbook, fifty five years of records
all in order,
every penny that she gave great-grandpa
and every penny that he gave to her.

The lawyer was a young man from Chicago
just hung out his shingle.
Folks shook their heads that he would waste his time
helping an old dark lady file a suit against
the county's leading family.

Heads shook and kept on shaking
the day the justice ruled and found for Sarah,
ordered all the payment and the interest,
banged his gavel on the polished desk.
She took the money, took the train to Kansas City,
seventy years old, wore her Sunday hat with brand new gloves,
Bible underneath her arm.

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