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LAUREN GROFF

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For all my sisters

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Also by Lauren Groff.

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About the Author

ONE

I.

She rides out of the forest alone. Seventeen years old, in the cold March drizzle, Marie who comes from France.

It is 1158 and the world bears the weariness of late Lent. Soon it will be Easter, which arrives early this year. In the fields, the seeds uncurl in the dark cold soil, ready to punch into the freer air. She sees for the first time the abbey, pale and aloof on a rise in this damp valley, the clouds drawn up from the ocean and wrung against the hills in constant rainfall. Most of the year this place is emerald and sapphire, bursting under dampness, thick with sheep and chaffinches and newts, delicate mushrooms poking from the rich soil, but now in late winter, all is gray and full of shadows.

Her old warhorse glumly plods along and a merlin shivers in its wicker mew on the box mounted behind her.

The wind hushes. The trees cease stirring.

Marie feels that the whole countryside is watching her move through it.

She is tall, a giantess of a maiden, and her elbows and knees stick out, ungainly; the fine rain gathers until it runs in rivulets down her sealskin cloak and darkens her green headcloths to black. Her stark Angevin face holds no beauty, only canniness and passion yet unchecked. It is wet with rain, not tears. She has yet to cry for having been thrown to the dogs.

Two days earlier, Queen Eleanor had appeared in the doorway of Marie's chamber, all bosom and golden hair and sable fur lining the blue robe and jewels dripping from ears and wrists and shining chapelet and perfume strong enough to knock a soul to the ground. Her intention was always to disarm by stunning. Her ladies stood behind her, hiding their smiles. Among these traitors was Marie's own half sister, a bastardess

sibling of the crown just like Marie, the sum of errant paternal lusts; but this simpering creature, having understood the uses of popularity in the court, had blanched and run from Marie's attempts to befriend her. She would one day become a princess of the Welsh.

Marie curtsied clumsily, and Eleanor glided into the room, her nostrils twitching.

The queen said that she had news, oh what delightful news, what relief, she had just now received the papal dispensation, the poor horse had exploded its heart it had galloped so fast to bring it here this morning. That, due to her, the queen's, own efforts over these months, this poor illegitimate Marie from nowhere in Le Maine had at last been made prioress of a royal abbey. Wasn't that wonderful. Now at last they knew what to do with this odd half sister to the crown. Now they had a use for Marie at last.

The queen's heavily lined eyes rested upon Marie for a moment, then moved to the high window that overlooked the gardens, where the shutters were thrust open so Marie could stand on her toes and watch people walking outside.

When Marie's mouth could move, she said, thickly, that she was grateful to the queen for the radiance of her attention, but oh no she could not be a nun, she was unworthy, and besides she had no godly vocation whatsoever in any way, at all.

And it was true, the religion she was raised in had always seemed vaguely foolish to her, if rich with mystery and ceremony, for why should babies be born into sin, why should she pray to the invisible forces, why would god be a trinity, why should she, who felt her greatness hot in her blood, be considered lesser because the first woman was molded from a rib and ate a fruit and thus lost lazy Eden? It was senseless. Her faith had twisted very early in her childhood; it would slowly grow ever more bent into its geometry until it was its own angular, majestic thing.

But at seventeen, in this spare chamber at the court in Westminster, she could be no equal to the elegant and story-loving queen, who, though small in body, absorbed all light, all thought from Marie's head, all breath from her lungs.

Eleanor simply looked at Marie and Marie had not felt so small since she'd last seen Le Maine, her six amazon aunts gone to death or marriage or convent, and her mother taking Marie's hand and pressing it to the egg growing between her breasts, smiling hugely but with tears in her eyes, saying oh darling forgive me, I'm dying; and that great strong body so swiftly reduced to skeleton, acrid breath, then no breath at all, and Marie pressing all her vitality down into the ribs, all her prayers, but the heart stayed still. Twelve-year-old Marie's bitter anguish at the high windy burial ground; and afterward the two years of loneliness because her mother insisted her death remain a secret, for the family wolves would strip the estate from Marie as soon as they heard, she being just a maiden bastardess formed of rape, not entitled to a thing; two lonely years of Marie wringing what coin she could from the land. Then the hooves on the far bridge and the flight up to Rouen then across the channel to her legitimate half-sibling's royal court at Westminster, where Marie appalled everyone with her ravenousness, her rawness, her gauche bigboned body; where most privileges accorded her royal blood she lost due to the faults of her person.

Eleanor laughed at Marie's refusal of her favor, mocked her. But but but. Did Marie truly think she would one day be married off? She, a rustic gallowsbird? Three heads too tall, with her great rough stomping about, with her terrible deep voice, her massive hands and her disputations and her sword practicing? What spouse would accept Marie, a creature absent of beauty or even the smallest of feminine arts? No, no, this was better, it had long ago been decided, back in the autumn, and her entire family agreed. Marie knew how to run a large estate, she could write in four languages, she could keep account books, she did all this so admirably after her mother died, even though still a tender little maiden, and what's more she did it so well that she fooled the whole world into thinking for two years that she was her own dead mother. Which was, of course, to say that the abbey where Marie would be installed as prioress was so poor they happened just now to be starving to death, alas. They had fallen out of Eleanor's pleasure some years earlier and had suffered grave poverty ever since. Also, there was a sickness still raging there. And the queen could not have the nuns of a

royal abbey both starve to death and die of a horrible coughing sickness! That would reflect poorly on her.

Her cold eyes rimmed in black bored into Marie; Marie had no courage to look back. The queen told Marie to have faith, in time Marie would make a rather good nun. Anyone with eyes could see she had always been meant for holy virginity.

With this, the ladies were released into laughter. Marie wanted to squeeze their twittering beaks shut. Eleanor extended her hand, encrusted with rings. She said gently that Marie must learn to love her new life, that she must learn to make the best of it, for this was the desire of both god and the queen. She would go tomorrow with a royal escort and Eleanor's own blessing.

Marie, not knowing what else to do, took the small white hand in her great rough ones and kissed it. Such things wrestled inside the girl. She wanted to take the soft flesh in her mouth and bite it to blood; she wanted to strike the hand from the wrist with her dagger and guard it as a relic in her bodice for eternity.

The queen swept out again. Marie went dizzy to the bed, to her servant Cecily, who kissed her head, her lips, her neck. Cecily was as blunt and loyal as a dog. She seethed and murmured calumny, saying that the queen was a dirty licentious southerner, that she had only been made queen the first time because of a single raging French sow, the second time because of a choking plate of English eels, that anyone could bed her for the price of a song, indeed just sing a romance and she'll lift her skirts, if none of her children looked alike it was for a reason, that the devil sent malice into that royal head, oh Cecily had heard dark stories indeed.

And at last Marie roused from her shock and told the servant to hush, for the queen's perfume lingered, a watchful ghost, in the room.

Then Cecily began to weep her fresh face ugly, all snot and blotches, and delivered the second blow. She told Marie that she, herself, would not be going with Marie to the abbey. That though she loved her mistress, she was too young and had far too much life to be lived to be buried alive forever with a bunch of dead-eyed nuns. Cecily was made for marriage, look at

these hips, they could bear ten hearty babes, plus her knees were weak and she was not made for kneeling all day long in prayer. Up and down, up and down all day, like marmots. Yes, tomorrow morning, Cecily and Marie would be separated.

And Marie—who had been born into this friendship with Cecily, the daughter of the cook on her family's estate in Le Maine, this rough person who had up until this moment been everything to Marie, mistress and sister and servant and pleasure and single loving soul in all of Angletterre—at last understood that she would be sent into her living death alone.

The servant wept, saying over and over, oh sweet Marie, oh her heart cleaved.

To which Marie, pulling herself away, said it must be the most unloyal form of cleaving.

Then she rose and stared out the open window at the garden in its cloak of fog, feeling the sun go down inside her. She put in her mouth the apricot pits from the fruit she'd stolen in the summer from the queen's private trees, because in the autumn and winter she liked to suck the bitterness out of them. Over the landscape within her the chill of dusk blew, and all in shadow went grotesque with strangeness.

And she felt ebbing out of her the dazzling love that had filled those years in Eleanor's court in Angletterre, that brushed even the difficulties and the loneliness in Marie with a fine and gleaming light. Her first day in the court in Westminster, she still had the salt of crossing on her lips when she sat at supper, overwhelmed; and at last the lutes and hautboys played and in the door was Eleanor, swollen with the end of pregnancy, belly and breasts, her right cheek enflamed, for a tooth had been pulled that day, and she moved with such tiny footsteps she seemed to glide like a swan, and she wore that same face that Marie had seen and loved in her dreams from the time she was small. The light in the room drew to a tiny pinprick illuminating only Eleanor. This was the moment that Marie was lost. That night she returned to Cecily in the bed already snoring, and woke the girl by moving urgently against her hand. Marie would have hunted for a grail, hidden her sex and ridden off to war and killed without sorrow, she would

have borne cruelty with a bowed head, would have lived patiently among the lepers, she would have done any of these things if Eleanor had asked them of her. For it was out of Eleanor all good things flowed: music and laughter and courtly love; out of her beauty came beauty, for everyone knew beauty to be the external sign of god's favor.

Even now, after being thrown away like rubbish, Marie considers, ashamed, riding toward the glum damp abbey, that she still would.

For she is stunned at the poverty of this place in the drizzle and cold, the buildings clenched pale atop the hill. It is true that all England is poorer than France, the cities smaller and darker and fuller of filth, the people scrawny and chilblained, but even for England this is pathetic, the derelict outbuildings, the falling fences, the garden smoldering with burn piles of last year's weeds. Her horse plods along. The merlin cheeps, unhappy, plucking down from under its wings. Marie slowly nears the churchyard. All she had known of the place was that it had been founded by a royal sister made saint centuries before, whose fingerbone in death can now cure a boil; and that in the times of the Danish invasions the place had been sacked and looted, nuns raped, that in the marshlands all around there were still sometimes found skeletons with runes that had been tattooed so deep their tracery showed on the skulls. And when, at the inn where she had rested for the night, Marie had tentatively said the name of the abbey to the girl who had brought up her dinner, the girl had blanched and said something in English swift and incomprehensible, but the tone of her voice made it clear the people of the countryside found the abbey a dark and strange and piteous place, a place to inspire fear. And so Marie had dismissed her escort in town to arrive at this place of her living death alone.

Now under the yew she counts fourteen fresh black graves, shining beneath the drizzle. Later she will learn that buried there are the bodies of a dozen nuns and two child oblates taken only weeks before by a strange disease that made the flesh of the sufferers blue as they drowned in their own lungs; that some of the nuns are still sick, wheezing and giving rattling coughs in the night.

There is cut holly on the raw graves and the red berries are the only things that glow faintly in the mizzle, in the world at large, which has no more color in it.

All will be gray, she thinks, the rest of her life gray. Gray soul, gray sky, gray earth of March, grayish whitish abbey. Poor gray Marie. In the tall doors of the abbey now, two small gray nuns have emerged in their woolen habits.

As she nears, Marie sees that one of the nuns has a great soft ageless face, billowy, eyes gone white with the clouds in them. Marie has been told little of the abbey, but enough to know this woman is the abbess Emme, to whom an internal music has been given as solace for her blindness. She has heard the abbess is terrifically mad, if in a kindly way.

The other nun has the face of a medlarfruit, yellowish, sour, which the people of this strange wet country called openærs, or open arse, for the anus that god thought fit to press into it. This is Subprioress Goda. She had been selected in haste when the former prioress and subprioress died of the choking disease, as she was the last nun remaining who could write Latin in a hand legible. The queen's proposed dowry was enough to keep the nuns alive for some time, Goda had written Eleanor begrudgingly, they may as well take the bastardess Marie. The faults in Goda's letter were grave.

Marie stops her horse by the doorway and painfully slides off. She tries to move her legs, but they have ridden thirty hours over two days and are now boneless in her dread and terror. She slips in the muck of mud and horse shit and falls swift upon her face at the feet of the abbess. Emme looks down with her white eyes, vaguely seeing the form of her new prioress against the ground.

The abbess says with a voice more sung than spoken that the new prioress's humility speaks wonders for her. Thanks be to the Virgin, Star of the Sea, who has sent such a modest and self-effacing royal creature to guide and heal the abbey after its sorrows, the coughing sickness, the hunger. The abbess smiles airily into nothing.

It is Goda who lifts Marie to her feet, muttering what a great clumsy lunk this girl is, a giantess too, and how peculiar-looking, though these