

I turn away from my bible for the last time and look out the window again. Yellow fields of dried-up wheat and a dusty road say the same thing they had been saying to me: He's not here. And this last time said what I had felt for weeks: he's not coming back. I guess the last half of your life, you cry a lot.

He said he needed to go in town for a few days, try to find a way to save the farm. Being the fool I've always been, I believed him. Mother said he'd be the death of me. In that last fight we had, he said I never noticed him when he was around. It's not true, I did notice. I noticed that he hadn't smiled when he looked at me in months, that he looked away from me whenever I looked to him, and the extra large bag he packed before he left. I had called him many things, and *coward* was always true.

An Italian man on a record sang sorrowfully from inside. "Mefistofele" keeps me company since he left. He could never give me children. I never knew what they were singing about, but I enjoyed the emotion and excitement in their voices. Excitement is rare in this house, always has been. But that wasn't my fault.

I take a deep shuddering breath and walk inside to grab a slice of the bread that I baked this morning. I take a jar of preserves and slather it onto my slice. I ignore the box of white powder on the counter, fighting against my survival instincts and walk back outside.

The air is dead. Sitting in the rocking chair has the sound of a hanged man swinging from the gallows. Though how can he be swinging if there is no breeze? And how could life be brought back to this place if the man who made it alive were gone? Mother always said, "Without a man, you're nothing."

Suddenly my wind chimes play a jolly tune, and a perceptible and unexpected breeze drifts over the house. The breeze is from the east, and I look to the side of my porch. And standing there, in a long green coat with seven silver buttons is the Devil himself.

He strolls over to me casually and kneels down beside me. He greets and introduces himself, though I already know. He says, "I know its hard, and I know you hate the thought of more life, but I have a proposition for you."

"All the world can be yours, and you can make any life you want. You can have and be anything. You are all powerful, I'm at your command, under one condition."

I listen to his offer, but I look over the fields, and down the road. I know where it leads, and I refuse to go. "My mother always said to resist and refuse anything you offer, I'm going to do that now, I believe."

"Mothers say many things."

I look at my slice of warm fluffy bread covered in sweet fruit preserves and wince. I imagine a deep bitter taste to cut the sweet. Though I won't know for sure until I try.

"You must choose to live. The only way to have everything you want is to choose, to make it yours. Don't wait for it."

Without turning away, I grab my bread, take a bite, and look into the aggrieved eye of the Devil and say, "My life was bitter sweet, like soft bread baked with rat poison."