



Miss Zilphia Gant, William Faulkner

Miss Zilphia Gant

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I

Jim Gant was a stock trader. He bought horses and mules in three adjoining counties, and with a hulking halfwitted boy to help him, drove them overland seventy-five miles to the Memphis markets.

They carried a camping outfit with them in a wagon, passing only one night under roof during each trip. That was toward the end of the journey, where at nightfall they would reach ... the first mark of man's hand in almost fifteen miles of cypress-and-cane river jungle and worn gullies and second-growth pine ... a rambling log house with stout walls and broken roof and no trace whatever of husbandry ... plow or plowed land ... anywhere near it.

There would be usually from one to a dozen wagons standing before it and in a corral of split rails nearby the mules stamped and munched, with usually sections of harness still unremoved: about the whole place lay an air of transient and sinister dilapidation.

Here Gant would meet and mingle with other caravans similar to his, or at times more equivocal still, of rough, unshaven, over-alled men, and they would eat coarse food and drink pale, virulent corn whiskey and

sleep in their muddy clothes and boots on the puncheon floor before the log fire. The place was conducted by a youngish woman with cold eyes and a hard infrequent tongue.

There was in the background a man, oldish, with cunning reddish pig's eyes and matted hair and beard which lent a kind of ferocity to the weak face which they concealed. He was usually befuddled with drink to a state of morose idiocy, though now and then they would hear him and the woman cursing one another in the back or beyond a closed door, the woman's voice cold and level, the man's alternating between a rumbling bass and the querulous treble of a child.

After Gant sold his stock he would return home to the settlement where his wife and baby lived. It was less than a village, twenty miles from the railroad in a remote section of a remote county. Mrs. Gant and the two-year-old girl lived alone in the small house while Gant was away, which was most of the time.

He would be at home perhaps a week out of each eight. Mrs. Gant would never know just what day or hour he would return. Often it would be between midnight and dawn. One morning about dawn she was awakened by someone standing in front of the house, shouting "Hello, Hello" at measured intervals. She opened the window and looked out. It was the halfwit.

"Yes?" she said. "What is it?"

"Hello," the halfwit bawled.

"Hush your yelling," Mrs. Gant said, "where's Jim?"

“Jim says to tell you he ain’t coming home no more,” the halfwit bawled. “Him and Mrs. Vinson taken and went off in the waggin. Jim says to tell you not to expect him back.” Mrs. Vinson was the woman at the tavern, and the halfwit stood in the making light while Mrs. Gant in a white cotton nightcap leaned in the window and cursed him with the gross violence of a man. Then she banged the window shut.

“Jim owes me a dollar and six bits,” the halfwit bawled. “He said you would give it to me.” But the window was shut, the house silent again; no light had ever shown. Yet still the halfwit stood before it, shouting “Hello, Hello” at the blank front until the door opened and Mrs. Gant came out in her nightdress, with a shotgun and cursed him again. Then he retreated to the road and stopped again in the dawn, shouting “Hello, Hello” at the blank house until he tired himself at last and went away.

Just after sunup the next morning Mrs. Gant, with the sleeping child wrapped in a quilt, went to a neighbor’s house and asked the woman to keep the child for her. She borrowed a pistol from another neighbor and departed. A passing wagon, bound for Jefferson, took her aboard and she passed slowly from sight that way, sitting erect in a shoddy brown coat, on the creaking seat.

All that day the halfwit told about the dollar and seventy-five cents which Gant had taken from him and told him Mrs. Gant would repay. By noon he had told them all singly, and hoarse, voluble and recapitulant, he would offer to stop them and tell them again as they gathered at the store over the pistol incident. An ancient mariner in faded overalls he pursued them, gesticulant, shock-haired, with a wild eye and drooling a little at the mouth, telling about the dollar and seventy-five cents.

“Jim said for me to git it from her. He said she would give hit to me.”

He was still talking about it when Mrs. Gant returned ten days later. She returned the pistol with no more than thanks. She had not even cleaned it nor removed the two exploded cartridges ... a hale, not-old woman with a broad, strong face: she had been accosted more than once during her sojourn in those equivocal purlieus of Memphis, where, with a deadly female intuition, an undeviating conviction for sin (who had never been further away from home than the county seat and who had read no magazines and seen no movies) she sought Gant and the woman with the capability of a man, the pertinacity of a Fate, the serene imperviousness of a vestal out of a violated temple, and then returned to her child, her face cold, satiate and chaste.

The night of her return she was called to the door. It was the halfwit.

“Jim says you would give me that dollar and....”

She struck him, felled him with a single blow. He lay on the floor, his hands lifted a little, his mouth beginning to open in horror and outrage. Before he could shriek she stooped and struck him again, jerking him up and holding him while she beat him in the face, he bellowing hoarsely. She lifted him bodily and flung him from the porch to the ground and entered the house, where his cries had roused the child. She sat and took it onto her lap, rocking it, her heels clapping hard and rhythmic at each thrust, hushing it by singing to it in a voice louder, more powerful, than its own.

Three months later she had sold the house for a good price; and she moved away, taking with her a battered trunk tied with cotton rope

and the shotgun and the quilt in which the child slept. They learned later that she had bought a dressmaking shop in Jefferson, the county seat.

II

They told in the town how she and her daughter, Zilphia, lived in a single room twelve feet square for twenty-three years. It was partitioned off from the rear of the shop and it contained a bed, a table, two chairs and an oil stove. The rear window gave upon a vacant lot where farmers tethered their teams on market days and where sparrows whirled in gusty clouds about the horse and mule droppings and the refuse from the grocery store beneath.

The window was barred and in it for the seven years before the county Health Officer forced Mrs. Gant to let Zilphia go to school, the farmers, hitching or unhitching, would see a wan small face watching them, or, holding to the bars, coughing: a weak hacking sound soon blown away along the air, leaving the still pale face as before with something about it of that quality of Christmas wreaths in a forgotten window.

“Who is that?” one asked.

“Gant’s gal. Jim Gant. Used to live out to the Bend.”

“Oh. Jim Gant. I heard about that.” They looked at the face. “Well, I reckon Mrs. Gant ain’t got a whole lot of use for men-folks no more.” They looked at the face. “But she ain’t no more than a child yet.”

“I reckon Mrs. Gant ain’t taking no risk.”

“Hit ain’t her risk. Hit’s whoever’s risk that would chance her.”

“Hit’s a fact. Sho.”

That was before Mrs. Gant came upon Zilphia and the boy lying inside a worn horse-blanket in the woods one day. It was during the time when, every morning and again at one o’clock they would see the two of them going toward the school, and every noon and afternoon returning to the barred room above the vacant lot. At midmorning recess time Mrs. Gant would close the shop and when the dismissal bell rang, she would be standing at the corner of the playground, upright, erect in a shapeless dress of dull black and an oil cloth sewing apron and her bosom festooned with threaded needles; still comely in a harsh way.

Zilphia would cross the playground straight to her and the two of them would sit on the stone coping above the street level, side by side and not talking while the other children ran with random shouts back and forth behind them, until the bell rang again and Zilphia returned to her books and Mrs. Gant to the shop and the seam which she had laid aside.

They told how it was a client of Mrs. Gant’s that got Zilphia in school. One day in the shop she was talking to Zilphia about school; Zilphia was nine then. “All the boys and girls go. You’ll like it.” Her back was to the room. She did not hear the machine cease, she only saw Zilphia’s eyes go suddenly blank and then fill with terror. Mrs. Gant stood over them.

“Go home,” she said. Zilphia ... she did not turn and walk away: she seemed to dissolve behind her wan, haunting face and terrified eyes. The client rose. Mrs. Gant was thrusting a wad of cloth into her arms. “Get out of here,” she said.

The client fell back, her hands raised, the half-finished dress cascading to the floor. Mrs. Gant picked it up and thrust it at her again, her hands hard in a series of restrained blows. "Get out of my shop," she said. "Don't you never come here again."

Mrs. Gant went back to the room. Zilphia crouched in the corner, watching the door. Mrs. Gant drew her out by one thin arm. She began to beat Zilphia, striking her about the body with her flat hand while Zilphia's thin arm appeared to elongate like rubber hose as she silently wrenched and strained. "Bitches!" Mrs. Gant said: "bitches!" She ceased as suddenly and sat on the bed and drew Zilphia toward her. Zilphia resisted. She began to cry and vomit, her eyeballs back-rolling until only the whites showed, shrieking and retching. Mrs. Gant got her to bed and sent for the doctor.

At that time Zilphia was pole-thin, with a wan, haunted face and big, not-quite-conquered eyes, going to and from school at her mother's side, behind her small tragic mask of a face. In her third year she refused one day to go back to school. She would not tell Mrs. Gant why: that she was ashamed to never be seen on the street without her mother. Mrs. Gant would not let her stop. In the spring she was ill again, from anemia and nervousness and loneliness and actual despair.

She was sick for a long time. The doctor told Mrs. Gant that Zilphia would have to have companionship, to play with children of her own age and out-of-doors. When Zilphia was convalescent Mrs. Gant came in one day with a miniature cook stove. "Now you can have the girls in and you can cook," she said. "Won't that be nicer than visiting?" Zilphia lay on the pillow, not less white than it. Her eyes looked like holes

thumbed into a piece of blotting paper. "You can have a tea party every day," Mrs. Gant said. "I'll make dresses for all the dolls."

Zilphia began to cry. She lay on the pillow, crying, her hands at her sides. Mrs. Gant took the stove away. She took it back to the store and made them return her money.

Zilphia was convalescent for a long time. She still had sudden crying fits. When she was up Mrs. Gant asked her what girls she would like to visit. Zilphia named three or four. That afternoon Mrs. Gant locked the shop. She was seen in three different parts of town, looking at houses. She stopped passers. "Who lives there?" she said. They told her. "What family have they got?" The passer looked at her. She faced him steadily: a strong, still comely woman. "Have they got any boys?"

The next day she gave Zilphia permission to visit one of them. Zilphia would go home with the girl from school on certain days and they played in the barn or, in bad weather, in the house. At a certain hour Mrs. Gant appeared at the gate in a black shawl and bonnet and she and Zilphia returned to the barred room above the lot. And each afternoon ... behind the barn a short pasture sloped to a ditch where scrub cedars grew ... in these cedars Mrs. Gant sat on a wooden box from the time school was out until the time for Zilphia to start home, when she would hide the box again and go around by the next street to the gate and be waiting there when Zilphia emerged from the house.

She did not watch the barn or, in the winter time, the house; she just sat there ... a woman who for twelve years had been growing into the outward semblance of a man until now at forty there was a faint shadow of moustache at the corner of her mouth ... in the timeless patience of her country raising and her cold and implacable paranoia, in

the mild weather, or with the shawl drawn close about her against the rain and cold.

In Zilphia's thirteenth year Mrs. Gant began to examine her body each month. She made Zilphia strip naked and stand cringing before her while the savage light fell through the bars and the gray winter drove above the lot. After one of these examinations ... it was in the spring ... she told Zilphia what her father had done and what she had done. She sat on the bed while Zilphia cringed swiftly into her clothes, telling her about it in a cold, level voice, in the language of a man while Zilphia's thin body shrank and shrank as though in upon itself, as though at the impact of the words.

Then her voice ceased. She was sitting on the bed, upright, motionless, her cold mad eyes gone blank as a statue's; and standing before her, her mouth open a little, Zilphia thought of a rock or a pile from which an abruptly undammed stream has roared away.

They lived now in a kind of armistice. They slept in the same bed and ate of the same food for days in complete silence; sitting at the machine Mrs. Gant would hear Zilphia's feet pass through the room and cease beyond the stairs to the street, without even raising her head. Yet now and then she would close the shop and with the shawl about her shoulders she would repair to the less frequented streets and lanes on the edge of town and after a while she would meet Zilphia walking rapidly and aimlessly. Then together they would return home without a word between them.

One afternoon Zilphia and the boy were lying beneath the blanket. It was in a ditch in the woods on the outskirts of town, within hailing distance of the highroad. They had been doing this for about a month,

lying in the mutual, dreamlike mesmeric throes of puberty, rigid, side by side, their eyes closed, not even talking. When Zilphia opened her eyes she was looking up at Mrs. Gant's inverted face and foreshortened body against the sky.

"Get up," Mrs. Gant said. Zilphia lay quietly looking up at her. "Get up, you bitch," Mrs. Gant said.

The next day Zilphia withdrew from school. In an oil cloth sewing apron she sat in a chair beside the window which gave upon the square; beside it Mrs. Gant's machine whirred and whirred. The window was not barred. Through it she watched the children with whom she had gone to school begin to fall into inevitable pairs and pass into and out of her vision, some of them as far as the minister or the church; one year she made the white gown for the girl whom she used to visit; four years later, dresses for her daughter. She sat beside the window for twelve years.

III

In the town they told about Miss Zilphia's beau, with amusement and pity and, here and there, with concern. "He'll take advantage of her," they said. "It ought not to be allowed. A person of her ... surely they would not sell her a license, even if...." She was a neat woman, with neat hair. Her skin was the color of celery and she was a little plump in a flabby sort of way. Her glasses lent a baffled, ascetic look to her face, enlarging her opaque irises.

As long as she had a needle in her fingers and was unobserved, her movements were direct, assured; but on the street, in the hat and

clothes which her mother made for her, they had that vague, indefinite awkwardness of the nearsighted.

“But surely you don’t think that she ... of course, her mother is crazy, but Zilphia ... poor girl.”

“It’s a shame. A tramp painter. She should be protected. How her mother can be so blind I cannot....”

He was a young man with black hair and eyes like wood ashes. One day Mrs. Gant found that he had been painting in the window at Zilphia’s chair for two days. She moved Zilphia into the back room ... it was now a fitting room; for two years now they had been living in a frame bungalow bleak as a calendar picture, on an obscure street ... and when he came inside to paint the walls Mrs. Gant closed the shop and she and Zilphia went home. For eight days Zilphia had a holiday, the first in twelve years.

Robbed of her needle, of the slow mechanical manipulation, Zilphia’s eyes began to pain her, and she could not sleep well. She would wake from dreams in which the painter performed monstrously with his pot and brush. In the dream his eyes were yellow instead of gray, and he was always chewing, his chin fading away into the blurred drool of the chewing; one night she waked herself by saying aloud, “He’s got a beard!” Now and then she dreamed of the pot and brush alone. They would be alive, performing of themselves actions of monstrous and ritualled significance.

After eight days Mrs. Gant fell ill; idleness brought her to bed. One night they had the doctor. The next morning Mrs. Gant rose and dressed and locked Zilphia into the house and went to town. Zilphia watched from the window her mother’s black-shawled figure toil slowly

down the street, pausing now and then to hold itself erect by the fence. An hour later she returned, in a hired cab, and locked the door and took the key to bed with her.

For three days and nights Zilphia sat beside the bed where the gaunt, manlike woman ... the moustaches were heavier now and grizzled faintly ... lay rigid, the covers drawn to her chin and her eyes closed. Thus it was that Zilphia could never tell if her mother slept or not. Sometimes she could tell by the breathing, then she would search carefully and infinitesimally among the bed clothing for the keys. On the third day she found them. She dressed and left the house.

The inside of the shop was half finished, reeking of turpentine. She opened the window and took her old chair beside it. When she heard his feet at last on the stairs she found that she was sewing, without any recollection of what the garment was or when she had taken it up. With the needle in her hand she sat looking up at him, blinking a little behind the glasses until he removed them.

"I knowed, once them glasses was off," he said. "I kept looking for you and looking for you. And when she come in here and I was working I could hear her on the steps a long time, a step at a time then stop, until she was in the door yonder, holding to the door and sweating like a nigger. Even after she had done fainted she wouldn't let go and faint.

She just laid there on the floor sweating and sweating and counting the money out of her purse and telling me to be out of town by sundown." He stood beside the chair, holding the glasses in his hand. She watched the dark rim of paint under his nails, smelling his odor of turpentine. "I'll get you out of it. That old woman. That terrible old woman. She'll kill you yet. I know she is crazy now.

I've heard. How she's done you. I've talked to folks. When they told me where you lived at I'd walk past the house. I could feel her watching me. Like she was watching me through the window. No hiding; just standing there looking at me and waiting. One night I come into the yard. After midnight it was.

The house was dark and I could feel her standing there, looking at the dark where I was and waiting. Watching me like when she fainted that day and wouldn't faint until I was out of town. She just laid there on the floor sweating, with her eyes shut, telling me to leave the job like it was and be out of town by night.

But I'll get you out of it. Tonight. Now. Not ever again any more." He stood above her. The dusk was thickening; the final swirl of sparrows swept across the square and into the locust trees about the courthouse. "All the time I was watching you I kept thinking about you wearing glasses, because I used to say I wouldn't never want a woman that wore glasses.

Then one day you looked at me and all of a sudden I was seeing you without the glasses. It was like the glasses was gone and I knew then that, soon as I saw you once without them, it wouldn't matter to me if you wore glasses or not...."

They were married by a justice of the peace in the courthouse. Then Zilphia began to hang back.

"No," he said; "don't you see, if you go back now, if you risk her seeing you now...."

"I've got to," Zilphia said.

"What has she ever done for you? What do you owe her? That terrible old woman. Don't you see, if we risk going there.... Come on, Zilphy. You belong to me now. You said to the judge you would do like I say, Zilphy. Now we are away, if we go back now...."

"I've got to. She's my mother. I've got to."

It was full twilight when they entered the gate and went up the walk. She slowed, her hand trembled cold in his. "Don't leave me!" she said. "Don't leave me!"

"I won't ever leave you if you won't ever leave me. But we ought not to ... Come on. It's time yet. I ain't scared for me. It's for you. Zilphy...."

They looked toward the house. Mrs. Gant, dressed, in the black shawl and bonnet, stood in the door with the shotgun.

"Zilphy," she said.

"Don't go," he said. "Zilphy."

"You, Zilphy," Mrs. Gant said without raising her voice.

"Zilphy," he said. "If you go in there ... Zilphy."

Zilphia went on and mounted the steps. She moved stiffly. She seemed to have shrunk into herself, collapsing from inside, to have lost height, become awkward.

"Go in the house," Mrs. Gant said, without turning her head. Zilphia went on. "Go on," Mrs. Gant said. "Shut the door." Zilphia entered and

turned, beginning to close the door. She saw four or five people halted along the fence, looking back. "Shut it," Mrs. Gant said. Zilphia shut the door carefully, fumbling a little at the knob. The house was still; in the cramped hall the shadows of the twilight loomed like a herd of motionless elephants. She could hear her heart faintly, but no other sound, no sound from beyond the door which she had closed upon her husband's face. She never saw it again.

For the next two days and nights he lay hidden without food in a vacant house across the street. Mrs. Gant locked the door, but instead of going back to bed she seated herself, fully dressed save for the oil cloth apron and the needles, in a chair at the front window, the shotgun leaning at her hand. For three days she sat there, rigid, erect, her eyes closed, sweating slowly. On the third day the painter quitted the vacant house and left town. That night Mrs. Gant died, erect and fully dressed in the chair.

IV

For the first six months she believed that he would hear about it and return for her. She set six months to the day. "He will come before then," she said. "He will have to come before then, because I am being true to him;" now that she was free she dared not even put into thinking the reasons why she should wait for him. For that reason she left the shop half finished, as he had left it, for a symbol of fidelity. "I have been faithful to you," she said.

The day came and passed. She saw it accomplish, quietly. "Now," she said, "that's finished. Thank God. Thank God." She realized how terrible the waiting and believing had been, the having to believe. Nothing was worth that. "Nothing," she said, crying quietly in the dark, feeling

tranquil and sad, like a little girl at the spurious funeral of a doll;
“nothing.”

She had the painting completed.

At first the odor of turpentine was terrible to her. It seemed to obliterate time as it had the stains of twenty-five years on the walls. Her life seemed to elongate, like rubber: from one time she seemed to see her hands prolonged into another one, fitting and pinning. Then she could think peacefully, since beyond the safe ritual of her fingers Zilphia Gant and her husband were like dolls, furious and tragic but quite dead.

The shop was doing well. Within a year she had a partner, but she lived alone in the house. She took three or four newspapers, thinking that she might some day see his name in print. After a while she was writing guarded significant letters to agony columns, mentioning incidents which only he could recognize. She began to read all the wedding notices, substituting her name for the bride's and his for that of the groom. Then she would undress and go to bed.

She would have to be careful about getting into sleep. She was much more careful about that than about getting into her clothes. But even then she sometimes slipped. Then she would lie in the dark, the mock orange bush beyond the window filling the silence with its faintest suggestion of turpentine, beginning to toss lightly from side to side like a surf getting up.

She would think about Christ, whispering “Mary did it without a man. She did it;” or, rousing, furious, her hands clenched at her sides, the covers flung back and her opened thighs tossing, she would violate her ineradicable virginity again and again with something evoked out of the

darkness immemorial and philoprogenitive: "I will conceive! I'll make myself conceive!"

One evening she opened the paper and began to read of a wedding in a neighboring state. She made the name substitutions as usual and had already turned the page when she realised that she was smelling turpentine. Then she realized that she had not had to make any substitution for the groom's name.

She cut the story out. The next day she went to Memphis for two days. A week later she began to receive weekly letters bearing the return address of a private detective agency. She stopped reading the papers; her subscriptions lapsed. Every night she dreamed of the painter. His back was toward her now; only by his elbows could she read the familiar action of the pot and brush. There was someone beyond him in the dream whom she could not see, hidden by that back which was less of man's than goat's.

She grew plumper, a flabby plumpness in the wrong places. Her eyes behind the shell-rimmed glasses were a muddy olive, faintly protuberant. Her partner said that she was not hygienically over-fastidious. People called her Miss Zilphia; her wedding, that three day sensation, was never mentioned. When on the weekly arrival of the Memphis letters, the postmaster rallied her on her city sweetheart, there was even in this less of insincerity than pity. After another year there was less of both than either.

By means of the letters she knew how they lived. She knew more about each than the other did. She knew when they quarrelled and felt exultation; she knew when they were reconciled and felt raging and impotent despair. Sometimes at night she would become one of the

two of them, entering their bodies in turn and crucified anew by her ubiquity, participating in ecstasies the more racking for being vicarious and transcendent of the actual flesh.

One evening she received the letter telling that the wife was pregnant. The next morning she waked a neighbor by running out of the house in her nightdress, screaming. They got the doctor and when she was well again she told that she had mistaken the rat poison for tooth powder. The postmaster told about the letters and the two looked upon her again with interest and curious pity. "Twice," they said, even though the letters continued to come; "what a shame. Poor girl."

When she recovered she looked better. She was thinner and her eyes had cleared up, and she slept peacefully at night for a while. By the letters she knew when the wife's time would be, and the day she went to the hospital.

Although she had recovered completely she did not dream any more for some time, though the habit she had formed in her twelfth year of waking herself with her own weeping, returned, and almost every night she lay in the darkness and the mock orange scent, weeping quietly and hopelessly between sleep and slumber. How long must this go on? she said to herself, lying flat and still and for a time tear-flushed of even despair in the darkness and the dying rumor of turpentine; how long?

It went on for a long time. She was gone from the town for three years, then she returned. Ten years later she began to dream again. Then she was walking to and from school twice a day with her daughter's hand in hers, her manner on the street confident and assured, meeting the town with level and tranquil eye.

But at night she still waked herself with her own weeping after the old habit, waking wide-eyed from a sleep in which for some time now she had been dreaming of negro men. "Something is about to happen to me," she said aloud into the quiet darkness and the scent. Then something did happen to her. One day it had happened, and after that she dreamed hardly at all any more, and then only about food.

V

At last the letter came telling of the birth of a daughter and of the mother's death. Enclosed was a newspaper clipping. The husband had been killed by a motor car while crossing the street to enter the hospital.

The next day Zilphia went away. Her partner said she would be gone a year, perhaps longer, to recover from her sickness. The letters from the city sweetheart ceased.

She was gone three years. She returned in mourning, with a plain gold band and a child. The child, a girl, had eyes like wood ashes and dark hair. Zilphia told quietly of her second marriage and her husband's death, and after a time the interest died away.

She opened the house again, but she also fixed a day nursery in the room behind the shop. The window was barred, so she need not worry about the child. "It's a nice pleasant room," she said. "Why, I grew up there, myself." The shop was doing well. The ladies never tired of fondling little Zilphia.

They still called her Miss Zilphia Gant. "Somehow you just can't conceive of her as a wife. If it were not for the child..." It was no longer

out of tolerance or pity now. She looked better; black became her. She was plump again in the wrong places, but to people in our town that and more is permitted a woman who has served her appointed ends.

She was forty-two. "She is as fat as a partridge," the town said. "It becomes her; it really does."

"I should be, from the way I enjoy my food," she said, pausing to chat with them on the way to and from school with little Zilphia's hand in hers and her open coat, stirring in the wind, revealing her sewing apron of black oil cloth, and the straight thin glints of needles in her black bosom and the gossamer random festooning of the thread.

The End