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Tags: [forbidden love](#), [disenchantment](#)

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Jake's worries about how to escape were relieved when Virginia arrived home in a state of acute distress over some disturbance in the village that afternoon, something about the new family. She had spent the afternoon replaying it over back fences with her friends and was in a fine state when she returned. He could never bear to listen to her bitter monologues. They reminded him of his own private transgressions against the village order. It was his habit to leave the house and let her settle back to the mood of relentless calm she preferred to show the world. Virginia's secret filled the whole house, while his was bundled quietly under floorboards or at the back of drawers. He had left a letter with money, keys and necessary documents in a place where she would find them, but not until the following day.

It was a warm evening with a picturesque sky. When Derek and Jocelyn saw him head for the door and don his walking shoes, they asked to come. But he had made note of unfinished chores to lay on them at that critical moment. Their faces fell. He kissed them both, setting once more the mark of protection on their foreheads, then turned quickly to hide his facial convulsions and fled through the screen door. He felt a momentary urge to take the car, but that would arouse suspicion. No one ever left the village after dinner. At the back corner of the tool shed he retrieved the small pack stowed there earlier in the day, then proceeded, keeping the outbuildings between himself and the kitchen window as long as he could, crossing open meadow toward the shadow of forest. The neighbours could not see him. He only had to cross one stretch of open field where the setting sun might reveal his path to Virginia. He hazarded a glance over his shoulder, but her voice still carried from the house. No one was paying attention.

A thundercloud had come up, burying the sun and sending gold streamers high in the atmosphere. The light didn't catch him after all, but fear still dogged him. There had been a spate of hangings recently: murderers dancing loosely from the scaffold on the green. Jake had harmed no one, and yet his private crime would be viewed with the same indignation. He crossed the stream then hurried breathlessly into the edge of the woods and found a trail along the edge of shelter. This he followed for half an hour, glancing constantly over his shoulder, or toward the advancing gloom. A bank of rain smudged the horizon.

Only once did he stop to open his bag and take out the letter from Michael, partly to hearten himself, partly to make sure no mistake had been made, that this was the night of their rendezvous. It seemed foolish to doubt, but everything had come apart with this one act of abandonment, and he reached for the only secure thread. Michael's words were passionate, reassuring. Jake reread them twice, then clutched the letter and hurried on.

At the road to Wemberley he had to cross. No one travelled at this hour, and yet this was the worst barrier. If anything had alerted Virginia, neighbours would be

watching this point. From within the trees he looked up and down, but nothing moved in the distance. The night was still. He stepped out.

A dark figure arose so suddenly that Jake gasped aloud and stumbled back. A person cloaked in black had been crouching by the shoulder. The robe was heavy and smelt of sweat, although not stale or unpleasant. A beard, peering eyes and two weathered hands were the only parts visible. He couldn't be from the village, where men shaved their chins. He took one step forward, but Jake recoiled, groping for his wallet.

'Take my money,' Jake said. 'Only let me pass.'

'I don't want it,' the man said in an old but musical voice. 'I know why you are leaving and want to give you something.'

Jake stood paralysed. The storm crowded overhead. A hiss of rain advanced over the forest. This time Jake did not retreat when the stranger stepped forward, bent and kissed him on the cheek. Blood rushed to Jake's face and he felt weakness in his groin. It took effort to keep from falling. The storm drew nearer.

'You will find what you're looking for,' said the stranger laying a paper in Jake's hand, 'but not where you expect it.'

He kissed Jake again. At that moment the first drop of rain struck Jake's forehead. The spell broken, he dashed across the road into the next section of forest. Thrashing through wet underbrush in the twilight, he found the trail again by chance, and kept running as long as he could. Once he stumbled over a tree root and sprawled headlong, scraping his shins and the heels of his palms. He stood up, brushing damp hemlock needles off Michael's letter. Then he ran on.

At last Jake came to the abandoned cottage where they had agreed to meet, but no fire burned inside and the windows yawned dark and empty. He passed inside and stood in the gloom hearing nothing but rain on the roof and his own heavy breathing. Michael had promised to come early and wait for him at nightfall. Jake wanted to call out, but was afraid to hear his own voice alone under the falling rain. Going back to the doorway he tried to reread the letter, but the words were illegible in the twilight. He suppressed an urge to use the flashlight, not knowing what else the night held in store for him. Instead he folded the letter and put it away, trying to decide what he should do next.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. He stood in the opening, peering into dwindling light. Not a breath of air moved in the forest, but leaves trembled and danced under the downpour.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Van Waffle.*