

CROSSING THE POTOMAC

written by

Ilissa Davison

EXT. WINCHESTER, VIRGINIA - SUNSET - EST. SHOT

SUBTITLE: September 21, 1862  
Winchester, Virginia  
Of the Confederate States of America\*

\*Faded in to reveal

We see Winchester: golden fields with dots of orange trees, stone dwellings beside cobblestone roads with predominantly female pedestrians going about their daily tasks.

INT. WINCHESTER, VIRGINIA - LEWIS BEDROOM

A pale hand throws a log into a small fireplace. Sparks fly.

ANNABELLA "BELL" LEWIS (white, 20) watches the flames lick the new log, an open letter in her hand. It's addressed to, "My dearest sister," and signed "Yours" in a neat cursive. The contents are too small to be read.

JAMES LEWIS (white, 24) enters in a Confederate uniform, holding a musket. He knocks on the doorframe. Bell jumps at the noise and turns. We see her full figure for the first time... including a five-month baby bump.

BELL

James?!

The letter falls to the nearest bed. She runs to and kisses him - he puts his musket down against the fireplace just in time.

JAMES

What vision of loveliness haunts my home? I should consider myself blessed.

She shakes her head at him.

BELL

I was under the impression I wouldn't see you for months still.

JAMES

We battled by the Potomac, three hours' ride. I was granted permission for a short visit.

Bell slips from his hold and walks to the window.

BELL

A good wife knows when her husband lies.

JAMES

A good husband lies to protect his wife.

BELL

In every letter, you protect me! A woman has no right to the dangers you face along the Dixie, but I may have your mind! Pray, tell me, why have you come?

Bell holds James's gaze until he sighs.

JAMES

I was sent for one of my men--Lt. Daniel Collins, a deserter at last battle. He fled to Maryland--uppers sent men to burn his hideout at tomorrow's sunrise... along with Collins and his... companion.

Bell takes a few steps towards the bed, where the letter sits. James picks it up and begins to read. A few more words are visible: "A recent patient has given me much joy."

James meets Bell's eye. Silence.

BELL

I must warn her.

JAMES

Bell! No! She shelters a traitor! I alone am traitorous by saying such things!

She brings a small bag to her bed.

BELL

That is why you don't go.

James grabs her arm.

JAMES

Bell, have your wits about you! You speak of crossing the lines--

BELL

The line that split my family!

James sighs, and sits beside her bag. He motions for Bell, who sits on his lap. He buries his fingers in her hair.

JAMES

It's not right, to play God.

BELL

Then I sin in the face of duty. Is that not what you do each day you leave me?

They eye each other again. James drops his gaze first, watching her finish her packing with a mask of indifference-- fear creeps through the chinks. After a moment, he hides that fear again behind light-hearted teasing. Bell relishes in it.

JAMES

You must protect yourself.

BELL

How so?

He pretends to study her.

JAMES

Loosen your boots to throw at enemies. Braided hair may whip a man; the corset's hard edge may also aid you to knock a soldier clean.

BELL

You suggest I undress in front of a comrade?

She's finished. James grabs the bag in one hand, and squeezes her hand with the other.

JAMES

I ask you to return home, whatever the means.

Bell nods, then grabs the lit lantern off the mantle.

EXT. WILLIAMSPORT, MARYLAND - CONWAY COTTAGE - MORNING

SUBTITLE: Williamsport, Maryland: 1856

A young Bell (14) sits outside her home, in tears, staring into the distant horizon.

The house is delapated, the grass beside it dead and yellow. Bell's clothing are not only patched and streaked with mud, but so ragged and falling off of her that they can barely constitute as clothing. Everything has a layer of dirt.

A young LUCINDA CONWAY (15) joins her, and sits. Her appearance is quite similar to Bell's, with the same dirty, ragged exterior.

LUCINDA  
You must be strong, Bell.

BELL  
How can you say such things? We  
have nothing, now we have no one.

LUCINDA  
Have faith in God.

They pause. Lucinda's strength finally gives in, and she too bursts into tears. Both girls comfort each other for a moment, then regain their senses.

BELL  
Tears cannot keep us fed.

LUCINDA  
Neither can the farm.

They give a half-hearted laugh.

BELL  
Will we ask for charity?

LUCINDA  
Not with a roof above us, nor  
property to sustain us.

She rises; Bell follows suit. Lucinda walks to a nearby plot of land, dry as a bone, the soil practically bleached. She lets a handful of dirt fall through her fingers.

LUCINDA (CONT'D)  
We can make the crops grow again.

Bell joins her sister knelt by the former garden.

BELL  
Seed and supplies cost money, Lucy.

Lucinda turns to her, fire in her eyes. As she speaks, she cleans her hands on her apron and fixes her appearance, using a dirty window as a mirror.

LUCINDA  
Then we will go to market and see  
if our neighbors find a honorable  
job for a single woman.

She walks with Bell to the stoop and picks up a pitiful basket.

LUCINDA (CONT'D)  
I hardly think such a thing never  
happened before.

BELL  
And if nothing comes?

Lucinda puts an assuring hand on Bell's arm.

LUCINDA  
Have faith in me.

EXT. THE WOODS - EVENING/NIGHT - MONTAGE

Bell canters down a trail; the lantern hits the saddle with each step. Time passes, but we only see the lantern. The glass bursts open, and the saddle blanket catches on fire.

The horse bucks. Bell grabs for the reins, the saddle, the horse's neck, anything--but falls. The horse gallops into the woods.

Her forehead hits the ground; she falls flat on her stomach, but the force of the impact sends her rolling on the trail until she's on her back, face towards the sky.

Bell stares at the canopy of leaves above her. Her vision is hazy. She focuses on a single leaf and tries to force the blur away, but the canopy keeps spinning.

She has only the strength to turn her head to the side before vomiting. She forces herself in a sitting position but cries out, shutting her eyes and rubbing her temples.

She tries to stand, but can't get off her knees. A hand cradles her womb as she attempts to crawl. Within seconds, her strength is gone, and she collapses back on the ground.

With shaky fingers, she loosens the bindings of her corset. A part of the fabric has split, showing what is obviously a bone of some kind. Her labored breathing is more visible.

She blacks out again.

EXT. WILLIAMSPORT, MARYLAND - CONWAY COTTAGE - FIRST LIGHT

SUBTITLE: August 3, 1860

Bell (18), on her hands and knees, plucks weeds and rocks from the garden. James (22), comes up the road. He stops at Bell's property to watch her work. Bell smiles, still looking at the garden. It's hidden from James.

JAMES  
Good morning, Miss Maryland.

BELL  
Must you call me that?

JAMES  
Until I know your proper name.

She stands.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
I rather liked your former  
position.

BELL  
You have no shame, sir!

JAMES  
And you? She who wakes at sunrise  
to be greeted by a handsome  
stranger?

BELL  
To *farm*.

JAMES  
So you say.

BELL  
On your way. Haggerstown needs  
their Virginian blacksmith.

JAMES  
Good day, Miss Maryland.

BELL  
Mr. Lewis.

James leaves. Bell stares longingly after him. She smiles,  
then returns to her work.

EXT. CONFEDERATE CAMPSITE - DAWN

A small plume of smoke greets the morning sun. The trees thin  
as the landscape transforms into that of a riverbank. Through  
them, we see a campsite, A CONFEDERATE GENERAL (fifties)  
reads a piece of parchment paper by the supplies table.

Bell wakes on a sleeping mat outside the tent. She groans,  
causing the general to kneel by her side. He places his  
parchment paper on the ground next to her.

GENERAL  
Mrs. Lewis? By Jesus, what business  
brought you to these woods in the  
dead of night?

BELL  
You know me, sir?

GENERAL

You must not remember; I accompanied your husband on his way back to the front six months past. I remember you as a dazzling host, compassionate woman.

If Belle could get even paler, she does.

BELL

Th-- thank you, sir.

GENERAL

And got lost? Unwise, ma'am--a danger, woman alone in these woods. Here, sit up, I got water.

He grabs a water-skin from his supply table; Bell sneaks a glance at the parchment paper: a map of the Potomac. A farm just into Maryland is circled. She looks away just before the general gives her a waterskin. She chugs it, then gives it back.

GENERAL (CONT'D)

More?

BELL

Yes, sir.

The general turns and walks towards the Potomac, to refill the waterskin.

Bell shimmies out of her corset. When the general walks within range, Bell throws the corset; the exposed whalebone hits his temple. He falls the ground. She steals his map, then turns back and admires her handiwork.

BELL (CONT'D)

Bless you, my love. The world's greatest tactician, even in jest.

Her eyes catch the dying coals of the campfire. She does nothing.

EXT. BANKS OF THE POTOMAC RIVER - SUNRISE

Bell stands a foot from the river. She stares out at it; the distant shore to Maryland is barely in sight. Her vision refuses to focus--she rubs her eyes; it does nothing.

BELL

Four feet at its deepest. An easy trek. Soldiers make it all the time. Crossing the Potomac. Crossing the Dixie.



She falls to her knees. She sees the extent of her injuries reflected in the water: Her clothes are filthy. Hair is glued to a large gash on her forehead by dried blood. Other injuries cover her body. Her body's bruised, ashen, and flushed with fever.

Still staring at her reflection, she settles her left hand on her womb - the bump is more visible without the restraining corset. The sun reflects off her wedding ring. She closes her eyes; tears pour down her cheeks.

She pushes herself into the river, falling once again to her knees--but the river's too deep for that, and she's sucked under. She gasps for air, fighting the current.

She sees a large branch just out of reach on the riverbank, no doubt fallen from a storm. She lunges for it. With the tool in hand, she plunges it into the riverbank like an anchor, and uses it to push herself across the river.

She's made it. She hasn't the strength to go on; she lies on the edge of the riverbank. She looks like a corpse.

EXT. BANKS OF THE POTOMAC RIVER - SUNSET

SUBTITLE: April 15th, 1861

A hand is holding a newspaper, rolled. Only one, front-page headline can be seen: WAR! FORT SUMPTER TAKEN!

James (23) paces back and forth, waiting for Bell (19). His fist clenches tighter and tighter on the newspaper. Finally, he crumples it up and throws it into the river. It sticks to the muddy banks.

Bell finally arrives. She runs to meet him.

JAMES

Well?

BELL

How can you ask me to decide such a thing?

JAMES

Bell, the news worsens each day. There's talk at home, ever since the election... The longer we wait, the harder it will be to...

BELL

To run away.

Bell lowers to her knees on the banks of the river; a prayer position. She stares blankly to the other side.

After a moment, she takes the crumpled newspaper from mud. She stares at her worn hands, now covered in mud, cracked nails, patched clothing, and every other reminder of her home life.

She tries to wipe some of the mud from the soaked paper, but it instead breaks off and falls into the water. Only one word is still visible in her hand: WAR!

She stands. James is by a patch of leaves, plucking a small weed from the ground. He offers it to her as an engagement gift. There's a sad, broken smile as she takes it. He holds her close. She rests her hands and head on his chest.

BELL (CONT'D)

I love you.

EXT. WILLIAMSPORT, MARYLAND - CONWAY COTTAGE - MORNING

A small farm beside Conococheague Creek, a tributary of the Potomac. A small stone cottage, with dark smoke coming from the chimney.

SUBTITLE: Williamsport, Maryland  
Of the United States of America\*

\*Faded in to reveal

LUCINDA CONWAY (21, white) sews a needlepoint, sitting on her porch. DANIEL COLLINS (25, black), comes out the house and watches her work. Lucinda doesn't look up.

LUCINDA

Might I be of assistance, Mr Collins?

DANIEL

No, miss, I dare not interrupt such beautiful work.

LUCINDA

Your hawk's gaze interrupts more than any chatter would.

Daniel glances up and sees Bell trudging towards them. Lucinda follows his gaze to Bell.

LUCINDA (CONT'D)

Bell?!

Bell's face breaks into a smile. Lucinda throws her needlepoint and meets Bell in front of the porch, embracing her. The force, coupled with her health, knocks the wind from Bell. She catches herself and returns the hug.

Daniel descends the steps to the women; Lucinda pulls away. Bell is woozy, fighting to stay awake and alert.

LUCINDA (CONT'D)  
Excuse my manners--my sister, Mrs. Annabella Lewis. Bell, this is Mr. Daniel Collins.

BELL  
You nursed him well.

Bell turns to Daniel. Her expression hardens; her voice is icy and seething

BELL (CONT'D)  
We meet you at last, Mr Collins.

DANIEL  
At last, ma'am?

BELL  
You served under my husband.

Horror paints Daniel's face; Lucinda grabs his wrist.

LUCINDA  
It would be the calvary if they wanted you.

BELL  
They want him.

DANIEL  
I must leave--

LUCINDA  
No!

DANIEL  
--I have family in Pittsburg--

LUCINDA  
God's grace cannot save you if you travel in this state!

BELL  
God's grace cannot save him if he stays.

Lucinda glares at Bell.

BELL (CONT'D)

They come for you, Lucy. James sent me to warn you; they shall burn this house to the ground as soon as time presents itself. With you in it.

DANIEL

(to Lucinda)

Come with me. Aid my journey, and reap the rewards in Pennsylvania.

BELL

Go. It is best for all.

Lucinda puts her hands on Bell's womb, and smiles at her.

LUCINDA

My own guardian angel. Think of me often, until we next meet.

Bell smiles again, then, at last, gives into unconsciousness. Lucinda and Daniel immediately kneel at her side.

LUCINDA (CONT'D)

Ill from the journey, oh, Bell...

DANIEL

I met a smuggler in town, I can bribe him to take your sister home.

Daniel picks her up; the two hurry towards the road.

INT. WINCHESTER, VIRGINIA - LEWIS BEDROOM - DAY

SUBTITLE: April 17th, 1861

James carries Bell, in a makeshift wedding dress, into the bedroom. He lays her on the bed.

SFX: The sound of a firework or gunshot. It's impossible to tell.

Any sense of joy leaves their faces.

INT. WINCHESTER, VIRGINIA - LEWIS BEDROOM - LATER

James enters the room with Bell in his arms. He lays her on the bed, and wipes her forehead with a wet cloth. Bell stirs. James stops with the cloth and grabs her hand.

JAMES

Bell... Annabella... it's James...  
you're home...

Bell opens her eyes. She begins to lift a shaky hand to his cheek; he helps her reach all the way up.

BELL  
I failed you.

JAMES  
You saved your sister. You failed  
no one.

BELL  
I met a soldier. I stole his map.  
He knew you, he'll know what you  
did.

JAMES  
It matters not.

BELL  
You'll be shot for treason.

JAMES  
It matters not.

BELL  
I knocked him clean with my corset.

JAMES  
...Belle, I said that in jest.

BELL  
It matters not.

James smiles, though it shakes with grief. He moves her hand to his lips and kisses it.

JAMES  
Rest, my love. Raise our child in  
the fields of the Lord... I'll join  
you in a few days time.

Bell tries to smile; she almost succeeds. The ghost of her smile is preserved as she dies. James arranges her hands to sit atop her womb, kisses her lips, and stands from the bed.

He takes his musket, leaning against the fireplace, and gives her one last glance before leaving the bedroom.

The fire in the fireplace goes out, showing a thin veil of smoke. The coals are already cold.

CUT TO BLACK.

SFX: Gunshot

FIN.