



A Woman's Work

[Kelvin Christopher James](#)

The children, too soon, had returned from their daily gathering. Keeba, mending in the kitchen, heard them dropping bundles in the woodshed. Seemed, too, that a heavy quarrel was an extra load they carried. Brought it rushing into the house, Sise and Kerrin raging at each other, Kibby judging with her five-year-old's inscrutability. "S'not fair, Kerrin," she was reasoning. "Sometimes y'have to be wrong."

Sise, her heart and eldest at ten, was first through the kitchen door. He set the problem to her: "Ma, he keeps messing up! Everything! Everything, Ma. He won't help at all. All he's doing is keeping on talking about bear and provok —"

Keeba took matters in hand: "Did you all close the door behind you? Did you say 'Hullo' to your mother? Or, Mr. Sise, are y'all just going to bust in your home and start spreading grievance all over the floors?"

Promptly they chorused, "Hi Ma," Kerrin off-note with "Moms." Sise scooted back and shut the door. Though not quickly enough to escape advice from Kerrin.

"You hads better put up the big latch too. . ."

Keeba thought, Nobody asked you, Child!, said, "Do not say 'hads' Kerrin."

". . . And the window." Kerrin finished his recommendations.

Sise appealed in a victimized quaver, "See what I mean, Ma?"

Keeba called sternly: "Kerrin! Stop provoking your brother. And right now!"

Kerrin's eyes filled swiftly. "But, Moms, I was only keeping alert. Just as you always say. We gotta be careful, I wasn't playing-" His protest blubbered into sobs and snot.

Keeba put aside the mending, opened arms to him. Herky-jerky, not at all reluctant, he came in. She cleaned his face and hugged his big, hurt, eight-year life onto her shoulder.

Privately, she also was trying to squeeze alarm away, as Kerrin's righteous tears had forced her to rehear Sise's complaint. The part about the bear. Kerrin was the cautious child. Mischievous, ever curious, but at the core, he shared her instinct for security. And in respect for this she attended to his uneasiness.

By now, Kibby had climbed on her lap to get in on the comforting. Over both snuggling heads, Keeba said, "Y'all getting too big for this, yu'know," and winked consolation at left-out Sise. Then, grimacing a resigned "aren't-they-kids" look, asked him, "What about a bear, son?"

"Northwise, Ma. In that gully by the long-time water-hole."

Her belly roiled from a familiar qualm: Day by day, the children roamed the woods farther and farther. Keeba pulled thoughts off that scary track. "Did he see a bear?"

"He kept saying he did, but we didn't. And we didn't smell any bear either, and we kept down-wind all the time. So I-"

"I didn't say it was a bear," Kerrin broke in vehemently, lifting his head. "I said I saw something big, like a bear. Glimpsed it as it went behind a tree. Darkish, big —"



Fred Gutzeit
Mylar Work Glove #23, 1982.
Spectral mylar on foam core
9" x 7.75"



Fred Gutzeit
Writer's Work Glove, 1982.
 Acrylic, pasta, cotton work
 glove.
 9" x 6.5"

The child cleared his good name as Keeba straightened up to a quaver. A dreaded, lurking thought had pounced: If it hadn't been a bear, it could've been a man. Her man — their father!

About her half-heeding ears the children's argument continued spluttering.

Sise: "Bears don't stay around these months. What'd they eat? Huh? Mushrooms? Huh? Are bears mushroom eaters? Huh? Huh?"

Kibby: "They could eat up people."

Kerrin: "Y'don't know nothing, Sise. I never said it was a bear, dummy, and dummy double dummy 'cause old lame bears're known to be devourous."

Sise: "Devourous? Ha! That's not even a word. So who's a dummy. It's another word for 'meat-eating' so you're not even showing off to anybody with big words you don't know, and you're just a — Maaa! Ma, he just called me names. Ma. Ma."

Keeba shoved her lap free, rose up to pace between kitchen and living room. Sise remained a pestering background: "Ma, Ma, Maaa."

"Yes!" she snapped.

"He keeps calling me names, Ma. It's all he does."

"But, Moms, he wouldn't leave me alone."

"Kerrin! You want to go pick a whip? Now stop bothering your brother. You hear me!"

"Yes, Moms."

Keeba returned to her pacing. She went to the front door, opened it and searched long, right and left of the clearing in which the cabin stood. Then she shut the door and pushed the big bolt to. Behind her back, Kerrin commented triumphantly, "See!"

To abort another situation, she turned on them. "Now, I'm sick and fed-up with all this constant bickering between both of you. Okay. So everybody to your books, right now. And be reading something smartening when I find you. You follow? So now all o'you, quick march."

They went, and left alone with her fears, Keeba busied hands with shucking some corn while she set her head to reasoning.

First point was, although it was possible, it was unlikely he had found her. Her brother, Macklin, sole accomplice, hated him and would not tell. Second was, this whole possibility of discovery depended only on Kerrin's, a child's intuition. And even then, if it were a man, it could've been any man on earth: a hunter, a local, a wild man, anybody at all. So logically, even though she was worried, there was no real reason for it.

But her fear wasn't bound by logic. Feeding on memory, defiant and scornful, it harried at her hopeful reasoning. Six years of marriage was a fact: five of rigid fear after he began flogging her and baby Sise. Five years of stiffening her soul to every lash after he'd found religion, his life organized around preachings which outlined her role by a doctrine that deemed women mindless property. And baby makers. Although, whether from love or habit or hope, she had tried to comply. Truly did. She tried to relax into place in his order: two steps behind and no public say, shrouded in drab clothes, meeting no eye, docile and shadow quiet. A person less, a better property.

Through the blurred years of beatings she strove to please and pander. Had covered her supple figure, camouflaged variously her distress at her baby-boys' beltings: Maybe they did need the discipline to form them into strong men. Then came Kibby's birth and his disappointment: "It's not a male," he declared. "All you did was waste nine months!"

That was the tad to tip the balance, that toppled the brute of inaction riding her will. Revealed was the Beast that caged her, the bully named Security. And panicked by this blighted comprehension, she thought for the first time of pulling roots, and running.

Terrified, daring her husband's rage and another licking, Keeba confided in her sole surviving family, Macklin, her always-sorry drunkard brother.

Macklin punched his palm. Weak ever-red eyes filling, he cried, "You gotta go North, Keeba. Get a

ways away from that God-ridden naturalman o' yours, girl. Looka' your poor face, uglying as he hitting you so often. Is a bigger hole than I can manage, but surely that man needs a planting. And he more than lucky that I'm a peaceful man."

"North" was the land Pa had left to them. Fifty-odd cold acres he got stuck with from a land auction. Bought because of a promise — more a rumor — of semi-precious stones, opals, to be found in the many dried-out gullies. Playing the pioneer, Pa had built a spring box, plowed up a garden, and built a snug cabin. Three, four years he prospected with just enough success to upkeep his hopes. But overall, luck was cold and hard to Pa's gamble. Time itself had double-dealt him in age and vigor, and he had to give up.

Once after Pa's passing, Macklin had used the cabin to dry out. Didn't last but two months, and he described the place as "chuck-away grit from God's crustiest toenail, the backsides of nowhere." Plainly the last wilderness anyone but Death'd come searching for a woman and three babies.

One other plus for Keeba was that this plot of earth having been Pa's secret cache, no one even knew the family had the property.

This point clinched Keeba's decision to flee, and rash in the moment, she made it so first chance: a weekend her husband left for one of his frequent religious conventions. For once Macklin came through competently: He arranged with the bank for her lump-sum share of Pa's pension. He helped gather and pack her sewing things, and her herb plants, and all the books she could, including her twelve-volume set of the *Encyclopedia Brit.* Then he got his friend to ride her brood and bundles to the out-of-town train station.



Fred Gutzeit
Work Glove — Light, 1968.
Spectral mylar on foam core
40" x 26"

From there, by foot, with a rented packhorse, she had come up-country to hole down like a trap-door spider. For in truth, there wasn't anywhere else she could go.

The first two years as runaway wife, Keeba never got far from fear. She used her mania to sweat out basic provisions from a hand-tilled garden and some yard fowl. She got her brood by on scrimp and saltless homegrown, and thanked God for good health. She so dreaded being caught, the first twenty months, Keeba made but two trips to town — to return the rented horse and for staples, aspirin, and rock candy — all the way, both ways, vowing "never again!"

Those early years she never relaxed. Every glimpsed shadow, every unusual noise said "Gotcha!" But, although full of startle and threat, the best surprise was how this up-country backwoods proved a safe nest. The once she was actually discovered, it was a forest ranger researching deer movements. Last year, and this — her fifth as fugitive frontiers-woman--it got even better. Three or four times, once on a snowed-in morning, she knew the serenity of being relaxed. These days it looked as if her scrawny 'security tree' was getting more than Hope from pioneer life — as if this harsh, quiet backwoods was nourishing it, and providing an evergreen branch of shade and safety.

A sound? A shift of air? All at once starting up in her chair, Keeba realized it was mid-afternoon and the children were too quiet. In a hustle she checked, found their note in Sise's scrawl: "Ma you are dozzzzing. We went south for wood."

She read with two minds: that they'd gone out against her orders versus proud cheer at their enterprise. She went out into the yard and briefly searched the forest's southern glare. She hoped they'd have the common sense to remain close by, at least where her dinner-call could reach them. The nap had left her mind rested, though. So first things first; she went inside to build up the fire.

Live embers, hiding under a frosting of ash, still remained from morning. Keeba shook off the dead crust, packed the soft lumps of fire together. Then she built a tent of burnt ends over them and waited for the swaying plume of blue smoke. As it came, she bent over to blow it into flame. It flared into a rising fan of heat as, pins dancing down her neck, along her spine, she felt him, big and silent, behind her.

Strange how rapidly she adjusted to his dreaded presence. As if back from church, he was. Not a minute, and her mind flexed smoothly, as if expecting him all along. As if the lurker in there had merely fleshed out. Short of breath she felt unable, not strong enough to turn and look at him. She tried instead, to resume blowing the fire. No good. Her stomach suddenly was churning nausea. So she just crouched there animal-like, looking at the tiny flames' struggling conquest, and waited.

"Where are my sons?" he asked.

All her safe time slid away, a dried leaf on a swift stream. Same as ever everything became. His voice same rough challenge, jarring. Still not acknowledging Kibby: since his doctrine preferred sons. So long she hadn't heard his violent timbre, the never-soft force. With a quaver, Keeba answered,

"Gathering firewood —" then defiant by reflex, she stopped talking.

He didn't wait long. "Is that how you answer me, woman?"

Keeba knew what word he wanted. The address, the respectful term. Instead, she bowed her head, blew on the fire. And as expected, the cuff came. THUNK! to her temple . . . spinning the world into instant headache. . . pain harder, larger than remembered. Then his voice again, unbending like the cruel pain in her head: "You forget how to honor me, woman?"

Despite her resolution, through her clenched jaws, the pain whispered, "Husband!"

Only then she looked at him.

He was as big and strong and handsome as ever. Some streaks of gray had come into his beard. His eyes still shone religious certainty. Still looked upon a corrupt world with disdain. His lips still curled down contemptuous, forming the master's smile she had tried escaping. He said, "Yes, 'Husband' it is, and relearn how to say it. 'Cause I'm here again to stay."

And to this, a slavish self within confounded her, as it answered dully, "Yes, Husband. Do you want some food?"

She heard the children returning and tried to prepare an attitude, rustle up a bright face for their usual burst into the house. They were at their singing game. As always, she'd be required to judge. Kerrin was first in, and out of breath: "Moms-Hi-Moms-a-real-song-must've-more-'n-one-line-Right-Moms?"

Kibby came second, though already on defense, "No, no, no, Ma. One time the line's a chorus."

Sise, closing the door, saw him first. "Hi--Pa," he said meekly.

Kerrin and Kibby's quarrel stopped dead. They skance-eyed him, followed suit at greeting, even to the hesitation. A silence took command while he gave them a marshaling glare. They crowded to the far corner of the table in whispered consternation, until presently, Sise ventured, "Ma, can we go catch fireflies, please?"

Quickly, but too late, she said, "Ask your father."

He was hectoring already: "So, you all lose respect for me already, huh? Not even a 'Hullo' or 'How-d'ye-do'. Well, I'm tired this evening but with rest and a new morning, I'd be reintroducing you all to manners."

Then he strode out into the yard.

Dinnertime come, he wasn't eating. One eye out, one eye in, he surveyed her haven from a chair by the front window. The children returned from the yard — came back in with no spirit in their voices and greeted him like soldiers. Keeba served dinner, averting her face from their confused eyes as they bunched in silent appeal at the table. They chewed the food like it was their last meal. Each time she caught anyone's eye Keeba felt like a Judas. Their plates emptied, they said "Goodnight" to him, then trooped to bed. There, safely alone and whispering as they were being tucked in, the children pleaded like felons.

"Would he really, Ma?"

"Moms you wouldn't let him, huh Moms? Huh?"

"But I didn't make any trouble, Ma," Kibby sniffled.

Keeba kissed them hurriedly. "It'd be all right," she promised.

Back at the dinner table, the tension was like an overstretched balloon. Him sitting silent. An image came to Keeba's mind: a rabbit in the underbrush, heart a-flutter, dreading the run of the broken-toothed mountain lion. A lamed predator still swift and brute enough to live off frail meat. But rabbits had to forage. So she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and eyes kept to her toes, she cleared the table. Each time she passed him close she trembled. Couldn't pause her jumbled thoughts: Now her sensible denim work pants would have to go. It'd be back to those hobbling long skirts. Although, his muscles would perhaps dig them a new outhouse. Certainly he'd disapprove of how she had scatter-planted the corn. And reluctantly, as she couldn't ignore it: Had Macklin betrayed her for a bottle?

She washed up, put away the wares, rinsed the towels, set them to dry. Back to the table, she asked, "Husband, anything else?"

Reading from his pamphlets, he observed, "Says here 'a wife should forsake all and cleave to her husband.' Says here 'the father must teach his sons to grow.'"

Although her tongue felt like ashes each time, Keeba answered, "True, Husband. True," just as she had forgotten to. A wave of nausea filled her mouth. Gagging, she rushed to the window.

"What's this, what's this?" he asked. Tone sharp. Voice bright.

"I had to spit, Husband," she answered, and turned to rinse her mouth from the water barrel. Though she caught, as he regarded her, his slow eyes long at her stomach.

"Something going on there?" he murmured, the speculation in his face already condemning.

Quickly, Keeba invented, "No, no, of course not, Husband. It's just that I tried some forest mushrooms yesterday, and you know me and my weak belly." She forced a bright smile to face his skeptical assessment.

"Time will tell," he murmured. Then a glance towards the children. "They asleep yet?"

Eager to postpone whatever his agenda, Keeba offered, "I'll check," ready to run and look.

He thwarted that: "It's okay, anyhow. They should be. Meantime, you and I have some reckoning to do. Come here!"

Heart sinking fast, Keeba went closer.

"So, what you have to say?" he demanded.

"Nothing, Husband. I'm sorry."

He hit her then, punctuating his blows with words: "So that's all I get for five long years?" PUNCH! "Sorry? Only sorry?" SLAP! "That's all you got for me?" CUFF!



Fred Gutzeit
Critics Glove, 1982.
Copper tacks, pasta, acrylic on
work glove.
9" x 7"

Hurt came in solid, dizzying jolts. Sudden explosions that shocked and stung her face, her head, her arms, her ribs, wherever he set them off. Silently, each and every one, she took them. Absorbed them as if flesh were feathers, a damping pillow. For shame, for pride, for the peaceful slumber of her children so near by, she made no sound. Although this angered him more. Made him call her "stubborn," and swing harder, hit more cruelly. To break her. Yet, she held. Would not yield and cry out. Blows battered at her will, only to meet: Would not! Would not! Would not! A wall his force couldn't breach. Whatever he might do, it'd be her victory. Her children would not know.

Then a punch behind the ear put her down.

The daze receding, she recalled his distaste for such shows of weakness. It used to be she'd get an extra slap for falling down. She pulled herself up unsteadily, held the table for support, staggered within punch range.

"You have no remorse?" he cross-examined. She could smell the rage on his breath.

"Yes, Husband. I do."

That wasn't good enough. She flinched back as he reached and grabbed her breast, and twisted and squeezed as he repeated, "You feel remorse?"

It engaged all her effort not to scream through the mauling. New hot pain lanced through, paralyzing her left arm, shoulder, neck. She retched and gasped and breaking down, surrendered her other firm resolve: sworn while running five years ago. She called his name. Voice shredded thin as webs, she begged, "O spare me, please, Ajabi. Forgive me, please. I am sorry."

Somewhere inside, her soul reproached, "Coward, creature, weak."

But she didn't care. It didn't understand. Her "never again" was made without his iron strength on her tenderest flesh. Her "no more" was said without his pinching this fiery hole through the middle of her femaleness. And to stop that Hell was worth broken oaths, soul, anything.

Which, suddenly, he did. Then, as relief shuddered sorely about her bleeding nipple, he said, "I'm tired now. We'll talk the rest tomorrow. Make a bed for me here on the floor. I'm sleeping alone until we see how your belly situation develops."

"Yes, Husband," Keeba said, and dragged herself to get the bedding.

She made his bed and fetched him a cool mug-full from the barrel.

Then he went to a fitful sleep.

Before Keeba could rest, though, there was still woman's work: check the fowl run for eggs, tether the milk goats, set some beans to soak for tomorrow's cooking. Pained and gut-weary, reaching inwards deep for energy, she thought of the children, and as comfort before her chores, she trudged over to their beds. All asleep they were. Except that Sise's cheeks remained fresh wet with tears! And suddenly trembling, she exclaimed without words, "O God! All in vain! It is all in vain!"

She had won no victory! And like a stone down a well went her will to endure. Her eyes filled at the wearisome pointlessness. For already her boy, her heart, might have heard it all. Might've felt all his mother's agony and in despair, wept himself to sleep.

Keeba spit on her fingertips and daubed her child's yielding cheeks, and just like that, these tracks of gentlest flood set her off.

She never figured or planned. Gave nary a thought to it as, wide-eyed, she tiptoed from their slumbers, light and wary past her sleeping husband, through the kitchen out-swinging door and into the yard's open quiet. Into the soft cool out there. The rustling sighing night so filled with natural smells of fowl-pen and pine gum. All of it soothing, reassuring.

Up through the black-leaved canopy, a yellow star gleamed unwinking, indifferent. Keeba looked away from it, shivered and blinked herself together, then brisk to the woodshed she went.

Gently, Keeba put the tool on the table and stooped down to watch her husband in fragile repose. Settled down now, he lay on his back softly snoring. His face asleep was strong and composed — the face that had swept her away, had promised to care forever. Plainly it showed whence came Sise's mouth, and Kibby's high cheekbones. A trying face with pride enough behind the looks to pursue a dream, to conquer mud and mountains at it. He'd defend them from the sordid world, he had said. Brave he was, but real life had upended his dreams, and rather than admit mis-dreaming, he'd joined with a cadre of like losers. His ideals and his family, he would never give them up, he swore, and man of his word, the five years of searching had proven him. So hard, so strong, from God-knows-where he was come home at last. Just the man he had promised to be.

His snoring stopped abruptly as he turned on his side. Enough to startle away her reverie and set Keeba to the task. She stood up, waited through the petite swoon as blood rushed sudden through her head. Then she picked up and hefted the familiar weight, fingered its edge, somewhat dulled through the years. She sighed, positioned herself and measured, then swung down at the target.

Once, with all her might, was enough.

Blood and a ferocious tumbling. Blood geysering all over. His head remained horribly attached by a sliver of skin and lolled askew after his convulsing torso. Bulging-veined arms flailed. A silly foot kicking at the table legs. Every surprised limb jerking about and thumping around. The scattered bedding gory. Red getting everywhere. On the walls and the floor and the curtains at the front window. Although, too, the craziness was slowing down. The center of it losing urgency, the spasms diminishing. Until a bit more twitching, and all was still again.

Only then Keeba crept from the corner where she'd fled to squat and watch and cringe into her fright.

Her next hours passed hard at cleaning up. First the torso, dragging it by the legs — the head hanging sideways, hideous — to the back door, then loading it on the wheelbarrow and pushing the load to the woodpile, and clambering up to pull and drape him near the top over the loose slope of sticks and brambles and saplings. A tricky operation because of his weight and the blood's slipperiness, which made it like a scramble through a thicket toting a shifting ton. But eventually, though bruised from the scrabbling and falling, she managed to set him properly. Then thinking to make a more thorough burn, Keeba shifted and restacked the pile to surround and partly cover him, until grimly satisfied, she lit the pyre and tended it to efficient independence.

While that burned, she went indoors to do the bedding — some and the curtains so soiled, she simply added them to the fire — and the floor, and the walls, and the front door. All this cleaning used up the fifty-gallon kitchen barrel, and much of her soap. Off and on, as she scrubbed, she looked at the pyre in the night. It burned nicely, a dramatic scene popping sparks, steadily sizzling away his blackened mass into swirling smoke and flame. The children would've enjoyed the fire show.



Fred Gutzeit
Work Glove (Journalist), 1982.
Acrylic on glove
9" x 7"

By the time Keeba got to washing herself, the only water left was the animals' drinking trough — quite satisfactory when compared to toting heavy buckets from the spring. The splashing chill braced her skin, laved away the stickiness of blood and sweat. A liquid massage extra gentle around her hard day's wounds and bruises.

The fire now had become a curtain of eager, writhing flames. It had roasted away his flesh, leaving his teeth incandescent and flickering in the sweltry skull. Keeba thought to later find and bury these. His bones seemed puffy, powdering into ash flakes. She gave the dying bonfire a final look and started inside as, on the horizon far behind its glow, dawn promised a rosy bouquet.

As Keeba settled down for a nap, she thought of what she'd tell the children tomorrow. Perhaps she'd say that their father had helped her clean the cabin, then he had gone away. She wouldn't say for how long. It'd be better if he remained a presence. She'd tell them he'd changed for the better, stronger after he'd found his goals. She'd develop a list of good-father's images. Even now, without effort she could think up several. She'd make certain they knew him the right way.

She sighed heavily — very tired right now — and yawned as her thoughts drifted to the prospect of re-gathering all that winter's firewood, and to refilling the kitchen barrel, and to some parts of the floor that she'd have to go over, and to the full day's trek to town for winter supplies, and to the warm woolen pants she'd just burnt. . . .

Sleep rescued her.

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