"I may have liked you better when I thought you had no sense of humor at all," she told him, but she allowed him to kiss her hand in apology.

* 

It was strange to call him John; the word felt ripe in her mouth, one of the few sounds that did not change from the North to the South. For so long he had been Mr. Thornton, an easy murmur of politeness, but now she could confess, against the curve of his shoulder at night, that she'd thought of him as John for a long time.

"Mm?" he asked, sleepily interrogative. "Since when did this uncalled-for familiarity take hold?"

"I'm not sure," she said, though that was not quite the truth.

He shifted and turned, sheets loud against his skin, and Margaret flinched. He caught her expression and smiled. "Am I in danger of waking the household?"

The household consisted of Dixon, who had arrived after the banns had been read for the first Sunday. She'd taken one look at the visitor at the back door tonight and sighed, "Oh good Lord above, do your worst but it's not Hell's wrath you'll face if you don't marry her, it's mine," before taking herself to bed.

"I may have liked you better when I thought you had no sense of humor at all," she told him, but she allowed him to kiss her hand in apology.

Which would have been all be well and good, but then he kissed the bend of her wrist, the hollow of
her elbow, working his way methodically toward her mouth. "If you do not wish me to make noise, then sate my... curiosity," he replied. He pressed against her; it was not his *curiosity* that she could feel against her thigh.

"Very amusing indeed," she said. She threaded her fingers through his hair, pulled him up - she had discovered within herself a greediness, an impatience with the slow circles he spun around their bodies. He laughed, like he always did, and for a moment she paused and looked him in the eye, wondering at this man that she had known for so long and yet who was still unfolding before her. "You hardly ever laughed before," she said, smoothing her thumb along the careworn corner of his eye. "When I first knew you, when you would speak to me - you never showed any evidence of--"

"My sense of humor?" he guessed.

"Happiness," she corrected. She wanted to ask, but it was perhaps too large for this small bed, in her small room, in her small house.

"Yes," he said.

"What?"

"Yes. You have given me happiness, although I must warn you that I always had a sense of humor."

"I shall argue that point until my dying day," she responded, distracted by his hand which had slid down her side to grip at her leg, pulling it around his hip and opening her to him. "John, please..."

"I can't decide which I like better," he said, still smiling, but voice hushed like a confession, a prayer. "The plea, or my name."

"I'll give you whichever you'd like if you'd -- oh," she said, because it was still a surprise, the way he pressed into her. She tightened her hold on his hair and he made a low noise against her neck. "I -- please, John, *please.*" Perhaps that last was said with a teasing smile, but he kissed her as he began to move inside her, and she considered herself well-rewarded.

* 

"What were you going to say, before?" John asked later, his cheek rough against her breast. His hand covered the other one, running his fingers idly across her nipple and glancing up at her through his lashes. "About my name."

It was still dark out, but the hour had turned from very late to very early, and Margaret knew they would both be yawning over their breakfasts in a scant few hours, just as she knew she should chide him to leave her, slip away to his factory and his thunderously disapproving mother (whose promise to take up residence with Fanny and her husband seemed nearly as much a fever-dream as John's second proposal).

Instead she threaded her fingers through his and placed their joined hands on her stomach, frowning deeply. "Before you debauched and defiled me? For a second time this evening, I might add."

"Are you complaining?"

"Oh indeed I am," she said, smiling broadly.

"I shall consider that in the future."

"And what I was saying was nothing of great import," she said, now of all times feeling shy. "But it's
strange -- I think I began to call you John, in my mind at least, after that day at the mill."

"When you saved my life," John said. There was no accusation in his tone, not anymore; it seems that her love now had bled him of his bitterness for her scorn then, but perhaps this was the crux of the matter, the thing that she felt pressing against her throat when he smiled at her and called her endearments.

"Yes. I just - I should tell you something, something that you may not wish to hear, but that I feel you should know, before--"

He rested his chin on her collarbone, serious. "What is it?"

She could not look at his eyes; she watched the way their fingers twined together, thinking how strange it was that her hand should seem so indistinguishable from his large, rough-hewn one. "I didn't love you then. I know many would say that I did, and simply did not know my own heart, but when I defended you--"

"And then refused me," he added, tone flatter now, giving away little.

She continued on. "I truly meant what I said, that day. But -- but it is important that you know that, because it means that you have -- that I have -- I came to love you as I learned who you truly were."

"I see." He squeezed her hand just enough; she gathered her courage and looked at him.

"Are you angry?"

"Only at myself. I told you that day that I understood you perfectly, but I don't think I did."

"And now?" she asked.

"Now, I love knowing that I may never understand you."

"That was very impertinent, Mr. Thornton," Margaret chided, and laughed, relief coursing cold and sweet through her veins. "I thought you might be -- disappointed."

"You've done many things to me, Margaret," he said, dragging himself up her body to kiss her softly on the mouth, the cheek, the chin. "But you've yet to disappoint me. I doubt you ever could."

Works inspired by this one: [Podfic of] The Third Sunday by knight_tracer

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