This Is How You Must Always Tell the Story

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This thesis titled
This Is How You Must Always Tell the Story

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ABSTRACT

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The thesis is a portion of a novel, consisting of four short stories set in a fantasy version of the American Old West. These stories engage with myth and fantasy as a way of making sense of the unknown, as well as themes of identity, death, and resurrection. The introduction discusses the use of fantasy as an answer to historical or mythical questions, referring to works by Junot Díaz, Susanna Clarke, and Philip Pullman, and relates the concept of fantasy as answer to the stories in this creative thesis.

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INTRODUCTION: “MY VERY OWN COUNTERSPELL”: FANTASY AS QUESTION, FANTASY AS ANSWER

In the prologue to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yunior, the eponymous character's one-time roommate and the novel's primary narrator, describes the folkloric concept of *fukú*—"the Curse and Doom of the New World" (Díaz 1). Yunior explains that the fukú was released around the time of the discovery of the New World and that its legacy still rules over all of us—that to his parents' generation is was "real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in" and that "we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not" (2). While *Oscar Wao* is by no means a fantasy novel—even given the frequent comparisons of Trujillo to DC Comics villain Darkseid or the way Díaz uses *Dungeons & Dragons* game mechanics to portray scenes of violence—it's very clearly a novel about fantasy. Oscar's life and the world in which he lives is one where the worlds of fantasy, myth, and history simply must intersect; it's a world where Tolkien's demonic and omnipresent Sauron truly existed as a man called Trujillo; and where the fukú, the curse of the New World, has been raging on ever since Europeans set foot in the Western Hemisphere, catching all of us in its wake—putting all of us "in the shit" (1). Fukú is the only way to make sense of the events of *Oscar Wao* and of the Dominican Republic's violent history. In *Oscar Wao*, the fantasy is not "what if": the fantasy is what was.

This thesis explores a similar concept to that which vibrates at the heart of *Oscar Wao*: that we can best understand the feeling of mystery, potential, and possibly untapped divinity that many early Americans felt about westward expansion through fantasy. There
is, of course, a name for it--Manifest Destiny--but I prefer to think of the belief behind it as the first, and perhaps most foundational, American fantasy. We know, from our standpoint, that America is and always was something perfectly finite, but like any great story of exploration, nothing is truly limited until all of its borders are mapped, and until then, there can be anything between you and that other border.

I can think of no finer example of "what if" fiction than Susanna Clarke's wonderful novel *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, in which she explores the question, "What if magic and wizards had played a role in European history?" Set during an alternate version of the Napoleonic Wars, *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* engages in an artful and energetic exploration of an alternate history with some winking cultural humor; the principle characters in the first volume are magicians who, being British, find it much more polite to *study* magic than to *perform* it.

Clarke's novel, while excellent, provides a useful counterexample to what I see happening in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and what I am attempting in my creative thesis. *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* doesn't explore and literalize existing cultural myths, nor does it create new ones to serve as metaphors; instead, it asks "what if?" with an impressive commitment, and plays with the conventions both of fantasy and of nineteenth-century English novels.

Junot Díaz, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, conveys through popular culture, fantasy tropes, comic books, and role-playing games the supernatural
folklore surrounding the violent history of the Dominican Republic. And to his narrator Yunior it makes as much sense as anything else that supernatural forces must indeed have influenced the hardships of the Dominican Republic, primarily through one-time dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina. Yunior presents Trujillo as the fukú's "high priest," stating that "no one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse's servant or its master, its agent or its principle," but that "it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was tight" (3). This is not framed as a "what if" question--"What if Trujillo had not been a mortal man?"--but rather as a statement of fact, or a lens through which a particularly horrifying, even senseless, period and person might start to fit within a coherent narrative of human history.

Díaz's retelling of Trujillo's death goes further in illustrating the dictator's apparently supernatural nature, mixing elements of Grigori Rasputin's legendary resilience with the rules of fantasy role-playing games:

Staggers out of the bullet-ridden Bel Air, holding a .38 in his hand. The rest is, of course, history, and if this were a movie you'd have to film it in John Woo slow motion. Shot at twenty-seven times--what a Dominican number--and suffering from four hundred hit points of damage, a mortally wounded Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina is said to have taken two steps toward his birthplace, San Cristóbal, for, as we know, all children, whether good or bad, eventually find their way home, but thinking better of it he turned back toward La Capital, to his beloved city, and fell for the last time. . . . De la Maza . . . then took Trujillo's .38 out of his dead hand and
shot Trujillo in the face and uttered his now famous words: Este guaraguao ya no comerá más pollito. (Díaz 155)

It's quite vivid, yes, and even a little amusing; but it also serves to highlight just how nebulous and open to interpretation an individual moment can be, and how a culture's collected memories often begin to resemble myth more than history. Trujillo's death, once a true event, is now legend, right down to the words of his assassin, which translates as, "This hawk will not eat any more chickens." Stories morph with retellings, and here Díaz gives us a version of his own. He uses his fantasy as an answer to a question. How could Trujillo have been so cruel? It is the fukú--and it always was.

And how does Beli, Oscar's mother, survive her brutal beating at the hands of Trujillo's thugs? Here Díaz becomes even more overt with his fantastic elements, introducing a humanoid manifestation of the fukú in the form of the Faceless Man whom Beli and her descendants always see before times of great darkness--always described in italics, a man who "didn't have a face" (141). But the golden-eyed mongoose, who appears when Beli and Oscar are at their lowest moments, also plays a prophetic role, even telling Beli of her future children (149). Yet Díaz is always sure to place these stories in the mouth of a committed storyteller, our narrator Yunior, who states, "Whether what follows was a figment of Beli's wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say. Even your Watcher has his silences . . . . But no matter what the truth, remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena" (149). It is, once again, fantasy as an answer: Beli survives because of the zafa, the counterspell to the fukú in the form of her aunt's prayer; said prayer
leaves her aunt drained, "like Galadriel after the temptation of the ring" (156). And in answering the question of how Beli survived, the fantasy of counterspells and magic prayers becomes as good as truth, for a novel and for an entire culture's psychological wellbeing; or as the nameless reverend says in "Grantstown's Dead," it is "true enough for most."

The American Old West remains the inspiration for the most pervasive fantasies in American storytelling, many of which are almost Arthurian in their scope; cowboys are knights, crossroads towns are castles, and great evil lurks in the unknown emptiness of the deserts, plains, and mountains. Starting with "Grantstown's Dead," these stories work to suggest that the possibilities of the Old West--the infinite potential that many westward travelers wrote of--stretched into the impossible. After all, we're introduced to an entire town full of ghosts on the second page, and it only spirals further out of control from there.

"Flower Girls," the second chapter of this thesis, features an Old West fantasy of its own. Anne and Belle, telepathic twins who travel with the sinister Mr. White, recount to their companion Dwyn the story of their hometown of Elder, a settlement that is never in the same place twice:

We tell him that Elder was founded a hundred years ago--it is always one hundred, no matter when the story is told. Seven men, or possibly nine, were traveling through a wide-open plain, possibly in what we now know as Nebraska. Their stores of food had long run dry, and in that year's awful drought, they could find nothing to sustain them. Theirs was a woeful lot--
one must always include this line in the story--and they knew well that they would die presently. But one day, in the height of their suffering, the men came upon a span of emerald trees and grasses, a place that it seemed had never seen a drought, and that they knew never would. Seven women, or possibly nine, lived there, and they welcomed the men and gave them food and sweet water. After recovering, two of the men decided that they would return east to tell their families of their remarkable find, but when they came back with a larger caravan, the shining green wood they remembered was gone. Word traveled of the town known as Elder ever since, but none could ever say where it truly was. This is how you must always tell the story.

The girls are clearly aware that what they are telling Dwyn is nothing but a story, no more true or false than any other: true enough for most. Their acknowledgment highlights how little people living in the present can truly understand the events of the past without the lens of legend and myth--after all, how often do real events ever adhere to a coherent narrative, real or otherwise? I chose the final line of this section to be the title of the thesis as a whole because I want to suggest that this is true of all of these stories: that they are paint splotsches scattered along the path of America's westward expansion.

In contrast to Oscar Wao, however, I am not exploring and literalizing cultural myths; rather, I'm inventing new ones as a metaphor for the boundless potential that the unexplored American West must have held, something I've taken to calling the "great anything." To this end, the first rule I gave myself was that the Old West of
"Grantstown's Dead," and by extension the other chapters of this thesis, would start as the Old West of films such as the Dollars trilogy and Once Upon a Time in the West. It's populated by nameless wanderers, traveling charlatans, knightly cowboys, heroic outlaws, and isolated towns that seem like they're always in danger. This is, of course, why we never find out the Reverend's name. He's Leone's Harmonica and the Man with No Name, the heroic figure whose lack of a name suggests a past he'd rather keep hidden. This is why Sophie is the distressed widow; it's why Mr. White is the snake oil salesman; it's why Everett is a literal cowboy. If this is to be a fantasy in the Old West, then it had best start with the appropriate archetypes.

The second rule was that this world must also be recognizable and concrete. Perhaps this is more of a corollary to the first rule; after all, the fantasy West of the spaghetti western remains within the concrete and real setting of the American West. The point of this rule, however, isn't historical verisimilitude. If the Old West of these stories isn't couched in something of what we know from history--places, events, attitudes, and ideas--then the stories threaten to wax into the "what if" of speculative fiction rather than the "it was" of myth.

#

Stories, no matter their purpose, must begin somewhere. For this I turn to Philip Pullman, author of the young adult fantasy series His Dark Materials, who addresses the way history can become myth more directly through his novel The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ. Here again is fantasy as an answer; to Pullman, the novel is "a story about how stories become stories" (qtd. in Higgins). In The Good Man Jesus and the
Scoundrel Christ, Pullman rewrites the New Testament of the Bible with two major changes: God is silent, and Jesus has a twin brother, named Christ. The first of these changes--God's complete absence as an active agent--works together with the subtle portrayal of Jesus's miracles to inject an unsettling ambiguity into the story's heart.

But while Jesus is the one who can work miracles--ambiguous though they may be--Christ is the brother with the true power, as it is Christ who writes down Jesus's story. Throughout the novel, Christ meets with a stranger who he assumes must be an angel, though it's implied there's something much darker about the stranger's purpose. He asks Christ to record Jesus's acts and travels, which Christ begins to do faithfully; halfway through the novel, however, the stranger begins to throw into question the relationship between history and truth, saying:

"That is exactly why you are the perfect chronicler of these events, my dear Christ, and why your name will shine in equal splendour with his. You know how to present a story so its true meaning shines out with brilliance and clarity. And when you come to assemble the history of what the world is living through now, you will add to the outward and visible events their inward and spiritual significance; so, for example, when you look down on the story as God looks down on time, you will be able to have Jesus foretell to his disciples, as it were in truth, the events to come of which, in history, he was unaware." (Pullman 124-25)

The stranger is presented as a sinister figure--it is he who convinces Christ to allow Jesus to die and to eventually pose as him to make it appear that Jesus has risen from the dead.
Yet, the stranger never lies, and there is a very deep truth in what he tells Christ: that the past has history--the events that happened as they happened--and truth--what the events meant to those who lived them, and what they mean to us now. This truth is what makes the stranger such a compelling antagonist, as he encourages Christ to construct reality through his storytelling, and to make the past, which the people to come will only know through his records, into what he wanted it to be.

In "Grantstown's Dead" and the other stories, this role falls to Mr. Alphonse White, proprietor of Mr. White's Magical Remedies. Mr. White, for all of his sinister goals, is not a liar. Even in the archetypal framework of "Grantstown's Dead," Mr. White begins to challenge what is expected: his snake oil does exactly what he says it will do. His stories are always true--and his story of Murano, the center of fifteenth-century Italian mirror making, is true even in our own world. But Mr. White has his own role to play, and he works to construct his own reality of magic and wonder from even historical fact. Of the mirrors made in Murano, Mr. White says, "And so the mirrors stayed magic. Sooner or later, glassmakers escaped, and with them went the secret. And now, that magic is lost." Here he finds that deeper "truth": that what we don't understand will always look like magic.

Mr. White is also a way to challenge and highlight the character archetypes that "Grantstown's Dead" sets up. It's through Mr. White's "medicine" and his repeated challenging of her that Sophie Everett becomes a widow in the first place--though only because he raises her from the dead and not her husband--but also how Sophie begins to come into her own. His medicine has made her like him: something not quite mortal, and
not quite human. And as Sophie comes to realize this, her role in the story begins to change. She's no longer the distressed widow in the tradition of *Once Upon a Time in the West*'s Jill McBain; instead, she begins to turn into a foil for Mr. White, and the other side of the story's magic. In truth, this development came as a surprise even to me: Sophie, more and more, began to transform into the stories' true protagonist, the role that I had originally envisioned for the Reverend.

But the Reverend, a con man turned novice preacher, isn't left unscathed either. He first comes to Grantstown in search of a home, or even a life, and it's through Mr. White's machinations that the Reverend is forced to continue his wandering. Mr. White acknowledges the Reverend's role as the nameless wanderer in "Sophie Explains Herself," and even suggests, "I don't think he has a name. Maybe he thinks he does, but he doesn't. And no matter how many times he tells you, it'll just float out of your brain like the seeds from a dandelion." Just as Pullman's stranger throws into question Christ's role as chronicler of his brother's acts, Mr. White picks apart the Reverend's role in the story: his namelessness, his righteousness, and even his ability to invent for himself an identity.

#

Why, then, do we need fantasy to accomplish this? Why must the citizens of Grantstown be ghosts? Why must Warren speak with owls, or Sophie see an intelligent mongoose? I think Pullman's stranger says it best as he tempts Christ to sell his brother to his death:
. . . human life is difficult; there are profundities and complexities and mysteries that look to the innocent eye like betrayal. . . . there is the noble passion for knowledge and inquiry, for philosophy, for the most royal study of the nature and mystery of divinity itself. Under the guidance and protection of the church, all these human needs from the most common and physical to the most rare and spiritual will be satisfied again and again . . . but only--only--if at the centre of it is the ever-living presence of a man who is both a man and more than a man, a man who is also God and the word of God, a man who dies and is brought to life again. (Pullman 172).

We search for narrative in all things: our past, our present, our future. But nothing is ever as simple as a narrative. Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina was a man--an evil man, but only a man. But that is not a compelling narrative. That is not a narrative that fits what the Dominican Republic saw and felt during Trujillo's reign. And for the stranger, the narrative of the risen Jesus Christ is what the future will need to be fulfilled, spiritually and physically.

In this way--because the truth is never quite as neat as fiction--all narrative is a fantasy, a myth that helps us make sense of what we know to be true. This is what Mr. White shows us through his storytelling, and what this romantic and magical portrayal of America's Old West fantasy ultimately reaches for. It's a counterspell, a zafa, aimed at dispelling the fukú of meaninglessness: it's myth, and fantasy, as answer.
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Higgins, Charlotte. "Philip Pullman creates a darker Christ in new assault on the church."


CHAPTER 1: GRANTSTOWN’S DEAD

Now, when our Reverend first came to Grantstown, he wasn't a preacher yet, not really, just a regular narrow man on a narrow horse. Grantstown was a little town along the road east of Denver City, and the Reverend came there in the middle of an unseasonably hot September, after riding several days through a wide green expanse--Mr. White might've called it a verdant waste. He traveled light, always did, just his hat, a bag of provisions, and a Bible. The Reverend always liked to say he had it around just in case one day he decided to repent, but then the Reverend was always a fine liar. The little village looked real inviting from afar: quiet, out of the way, surrounded by what looked like old cattle pasture, a good place to lay his head for a night or two before pressing on. But as he got closer, he met another fellow by the name of Everett, who told him he should probably turn back, on account of the land was cursed. The Reverend was never a particularly credulous man, but he believed this Everett, because Everett was a ghost. The Reverend knew that the spirits generally could tell when something otherworldly was afoot. So he asked Everett how long it had been cursed, and how it got to be that way.

"Don't know," Everett said. "Used to reckon it was an old Indian curse, you know the kind. But now I've been here a while, I'm starting to wonder if maybe it was here since God made it." He was floating alongside the Reverend as he rode his horse down the road toward the town. "Been this way as long as I can remember, and I've lived in Grantstown since the beginning. Always hot, too, even in December. Got to imagine it's hot now, too." Then Everett's transparent eyes lit on the Bible the Reverend was carrying, and he asked, "You a preacher?"
Strangely enough the Reverend's first instinct was not to lie. He'd never been a very holy man, Bible or none, but then he thought back to the mission where he was born. Figured he could remember a sermon or three, could read out scripture as well as anyone, and Grantstown looked a good enough place to stay a while. So he lied. "Yes, sir. Traveling preacher."

Everett said, "Well, we haven't had a preacher around here for some time now, and you don't look like you're turning back. Could use some guidance, if you want to stick around a bit."

By then they'd drawn close enough to Grantstown the Reverend could see it was about as dead as a town could be. Looked to have been abandoned at least a decade, maybe more. The front steps leading up to the bar were all rotten and collapsing, and so were the wooden pillars holding up at least a few of the houses' porches. There was no way those buildings should've been standing, but there they were, for all the world to see. The town was small enough, only a couple of crossed streets, it didn't seem possible a whole population could be hiding somewhere in there. The Reverend figured maybe one family stuck around, or a few old timers too stubborn to leave their cursed little village. So he asked Everett, "Who's 'we'?"

So Everett, ghostly thumbs hooked on his belt, coasted on ahead of him and shouted, "Everyone come and meet the new preacher!" And right as he said that, we came drifting out of the air, some forty of us. The Reverend had never seen so many spirits in broad daylight in all his life. All told we were a couple of families, some older men
stumbling right out the saloon's front door without opening it, a good gaggle of children playing in the street. As it turned out we were the curse.

All the Reverend could say was, "I'll be damned." He introduced himself, but from that day onward all we ever called him was Reverend, which suited him just fine.

Mostly the Reverend spent his days and nights in Grantstown drinking--the devil, he told us, always did own that part of him. Most of us stayed out of sight whenever we could, but every Sunday morning the population tripled just long enough for a little church service, then everyone would disappear once again. Everett, though, he was a consistent sort of man, generally liked to be seen, so sometimes he and the Reverend would get to talking for hours and hours. They'd meander up and down the streets, or sit in the saloon over a couple glasses--one full of whiskey, one empty. Everett was reluctant to invite the Reverend into his house, but once he'd tried to introduce him to his wife Sophie as she stared out the second floor window. The Reverend never could tell if she was even more transparent than her husband, or if she was just real thin. He raised his rough hand in greeting, but she faded back into the darkness, which we knew was just her custom. Everett assured the Reverend she'd come out for church, which she did, week after week, but she never seemed to stay long.

It came to be the Reverend lived next door to Everett and his wife, in a house old Jackson told him used to belong to a preacher by the name of Reverend Donald. Donald up and moved out when the ghosts started staying, and since the house was still serviceable, Jackson figured it ought not go to waste. In the next town over, Ashton, about a day's ride away, they knew about old Donald, too. He'd passed through there
complaining about all the spirits and some kind or other of curse. The Reverend rode there every other week or so for food and whiskey, and they all said it was very kind of him to minister to our old ghost town. Over time the Reverend turned the first floor of his house into a makeshift chapel, and he was mighty proud of himself for doing so, as he told us he'd never been particularly good at building things. Nobody ever sat in those careful little rows of chairs, though. Spirits had no need for sitting.

After the Reverend been there a couple weeks, Everett got to telling him how he'd come to cross over like he had. He told a story a little something like this:

Back when Grantstown was mostly alive--Everett liked to say "the living were in the majority"--Everett was a lawman and a real fearsome gunslinger. He'd killed a dozen men, give or take, by his own reckoning. He was real master of the quick-draw, and he'd have shown the Reverend if he had a gun still. One day--who can remember how long ago?--some bandits came riding into town, some half a dozen men come to take all their cattle. One of them was an Indian went by the name of Red Hawk, and Red Hawk threatened Everett's wife. Everett wasn't having a thing to do with that, so he drew down on those bandits and shot half of them dead before he was wounded.

Everett made sure to impress on the Reverend it was a loud and a long fight. He said, "The only reason I didn't kill 'em all was the cloud of smoke choking the air." The rest of them were scared off, he told the Reverend, but he was too far gone, and so he bled out with his Sophie by his side. "Was a good death," Everett said. "I went out honorably, like a lawman should."
The Reverend's index finger twitched, like an old reflex reminding him it was still around. He said, "Now, Everett, I don't reckon you even believe that yourself, on account of there's no such thing as a good death, and any gunslinger'll tell you that." And Everett took offense and faded away all in a huff. Just as well. The Reverend figured he probably got trampled by cattle, judging by all those rotting fences just outside of town, which is not a particularly glamorous death. But no matter how many times the Reverend asked, Everett never told him what happened to all the rest of us.

#

At the next church service, the Reverend gave our favorite of his handful of sermons. He spoke mostly about forgiveness--for others and for our selves. He said that we were unhappy, that we felt chained to where we were by our sins, which we thought was true enough. Everyone feels that way. "And yet God sent his only Son down to us," he told us, "to open our way to Heaven. And so we have to ask ourselves: what keeps us in this world, when Heaven awaits just on the other side of a righteous man's death?" He was reading right from a thin, yellowed piece of paper that looked to have been torn out of an old book. "It isn't God's forgiveness. All we have to do is ask and that's ours, right?"

We all nodded, because we knew this.

Sophie crossed her arms and frowned. She never liked to talk about death, we knew. For her, it seemed to be something of a sore spot that there might be somewhere else out there where she could be, but instead she was here in Grantstown.

The Reverend said, "It's us forgiving ourselves. How can we ask for the forgiveness of a thing so big and mighty as God without being willing, in some small
way, to forgive ourselves?" He crinkled the paper between his fingers for a moment, then folded it and slipped it into his coat pocket. "Of course, maybe that's just my problem."

There may have been a flicker of a smile beneath his thin beard. "For you, I think you'll find Heaven just on the other side of your own forgiveness. Your own happiness."

Sophie stayed the whole time, through the rest of the sermon, through the readings, and after just about everyone, even Everett, drifted out, she came up to the Reverend and said, "My husband told you his story, yeah? He likes to tell that story."

The Reverend jumped a bit. He said, "Yes, ma'am, he did. I don't believe it, though."

"Course not," said Sophie. "Nobody does."

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Everett?" said the Reverend.

"You could leave town, for one thing," she said. Before the Reverend could object, as he was winding up to do, she said, "We got no need for a preacher. I think all of us know, some more than others, there ain't nothing after this. They're all just looking to be lied to some. I was too, for a while. Nobody's got the heart to lie to us anymore."

The Reverend shuffled around a few papers scribbled with notes, shoved them in his Bible. "I'm not telling lies, Sophie. Just stories. Seems most folks around here believe, for one reason or another."

"Stories, then. Like the one about how you're a preacher."

At that, the Reverend only laughed and scratched at his short beard. "It's a good story," he said. "True enough for most."
"Or about how if we all forgive ourselves we'll lift right off this cursed old dirt and into the arms of some kind of loving God."

The Reverend reached into his coat pocket and gripped the paper he'd scribbled his sermon on. "I don't know what to say to you folks, anymore. Truth be told I don't know any more than you all do. Maybe even less."

Sophie was still, held her hands clenched together before her. "What do we have that you want, then, Reverend? If it was money you'd have been rifling through our cabinets weeks ago, but you ain't." She drifted closer to him, canting her head to the side to look into the Reverend's downcast eyes. "What are you getting from this?"

"I don't want anything from you, Sophie. Just tired of riding, is all." The Reverend made to leave, then, to stroll right past Sophie, but the door slammed shut as he was about to walk through it. He didn't turn around, just said, "Sophie, it is all I've got. I'm just tired."

When there wasn't a response, the Reverend looked over his shoulder, and Sophie was gone. He opened the door and strolled out into the hot October sun.

#

After that, Sophie never came back to church. Just as well, because the Reverend came to learn he wasn't really cut out for preaching. It only took a month or two to burn through all the sermons he could remember from old Reverend Jacobs at the mission. Then it took him about another week to realize he couldn't write a thing when he never knew if some invisible spirit might be peeking over his shoulder.
So it seemed like a sign right straight from God Himself when three wagons came down the road one Saturday evening. A slim man dressed in a very fine white suit led them, and when he saw the Reverend he brought his convoy to a halt. The Reverend went out to meet him by the side of the road, and introduced himself, and the man in white said, "Good to meet you, Reverend," and then introduced himself as Mr. Alphonse White. The Reverend walked alongside them as they rolled right down the center of town. All along the side of his three wagons there was a big painted sign, saying *Mr. White's Magical Remedies*, and he asked if the Reverend had heard of him, which he hadn't.

"We're a traveling medicine show," he said, "from New York."

He was a suntanned gentleman of about thirty, looked like he'd been on the road a while, and he had big, pale blue eyes. Mr. White was never seen without his wide-brimmed hat with an owl feather sticking out from it, but you could always see those eyes in the shadow. The Reverend never was much for traveling medicine shows. He'd run a few of them out of towns, and been run out of a few towns as part of them himself. The Reverend said, with his best attempt at cordiality, "Never been that far out east. How's the weather there this time of year?"

"I don't imagine it's this hot," said Mr. White. "But I like it better out here. All the magic's out here, you know. Not a thing for a man like me to do back east." Mr. White's crew all sat still on their horses, or leaned against the wagons. One of them, a squat fellow with a bald head, was staring at his fingernails, which were long, maintained real lovingly. He was talking to a woman with a huge scar on the left side of her forehead who was shuffling a deck of playing cards over and over in her gnarled hands. The
Reverend paused when he saw the big, pudgy man with the beard who was piloting the front wagon, stared, and lowered the brim of his hat.

We saw the big man crack a smile.

"So how many folks live in this town?" said Mr. White.

The Reverend turned his back to the wagon and said, "Just me."

So Mr. White said, "Then who're those people?" He pointed over at where a few of us gathered out of the air in front the saloon and the makeshift chapel, watching Mr. White and his crew.

"Ah, Mr. White," the Reverend said, "you said 'live.' Lot more people *reside* here than *live* here."

And Mr. White laughed, a real barking sort of laugh. "Why, it's a regular ghost town!" he said. "Couldn't have asked for a better place to stop for an evening." At that, without any other signal, his crew all started to dismount. The fingernail man took to opening the rear wagon, and a couple of young women--wispy twins, narrow and long--started unloading some bags. Mr. White asked if the town had any spare beds, since the ground wasn't exactly treating them kindly.

The Reverend told him just about every bed was spare. Then he said, "You ain't planning on staying long, I hope. Doubt you have much to peddle to folks like them."

"I surely do," said Mr. White. "You just haven't seen my medicine."

The Reverend said then that he couldn't really see the harm, so while they set up, he walked on over to where the rest of the townsfolk were gathered. There he met Everett
out in front of his house. "Folks like you just seem to travel in packs," Everett said. "Like wolves. We don't need medicine, Reverend. Like to think we're a bit beyond that, now."

"I don't know, Everett," said the Reverend. "He has got me intrigued."

"And the man driving the wagon?" Everett adjusted his ghostly hat. "Did you see him smiling at you?"

"He was smiling, was he?"

"He surely was," said Everett. "You know him?"

The Reverend started cracking his knuckles and turned to look at the wagon train. The big man, his hair unkempt like the Reverend's was when he first came to us, was unloading some old boxes full of vials and bottles from the last wagon. The twin girls, with their identical pale hair all the way down to their shoulders, watched and talked with the bald man, who was turning the front wagon into a stage. Old Jackson said he swore the girls were talking in unison. The Reverend said, "You're talking in the present now, Everett. No, I wouldn't say I know him. Doubt he knows me anymore, either."

Just as the sun set, Mr. White's traveling medicine show began. By then, his crew had turned the middle wagon into a little stage, and opened the other two to reveal shelves of various tinctures and tonics, powders and herbs. The rest of us were just as curious as the Reverend was, because they all melted out of the air, gathering about as the twins, Anne and Belle, started strumming on a couple of guitars. Mr. White was saying things to them like, "I'm here to make all your ills disappear," and, "You're all looking a bit pale, and ladies and gentlemen, you won't believe it, but I'm here to help."
Everett and the Reverend stood side-by-side in the middle of the crowd, and through Everett the Reverend could see Sophie, eyes focused on Mr. White like she wanted to stab him with her suspicion. "This better be good, Reverend," mumbled Everett.

"Ain't as you've got anything better to do," said the Reverend, which made Everett laugh.

Eventually the Reverend told Mr. White it looked like just about everyone was gathered, and with just a little nod, he launched headfirst into his spiel. "My name is Mr. Alphonse White," he said, "and I'm here from New York City to bring to you a remedy those city folk don't even know they need." He jumped up onto the stage, and swung his thin arm wide, and a spray of what looked like jewel dust flew across the stage. "Mr. White's Miracle Powder, ladies and gentlemen, made of the finest unnatural ingredients!"

He flicked his wrist, and produced in his hand what looked like tiny icicles. Then with a flourish, in his other hand, he brought out a pile of pure white sand, which trickled down onto the wooden boards beneath him. The Reverend looked transfixed--there's the standard snake oil song and dance, of course, but Mr. White was a hell of a prestidigitator. And then he threw everything up in the air, the sand and the little shards, and when they came together, they exploded, and what fell down was snow.

All around, we stood in awe. Little Timothy Franklin gasped about the snow, and even old Everett shook his head and muttered, "God damn." Sophie just stood still, arms folded, unblinking.
"Some years ago," Mr. White said, "I was traveling in the Appalachian Mountains, and that, I think you know, is the one place in the east where magic still lives." He beckoned Anne and Belle on stage with him, and they were all decked out in white dresses, and looking real beautiful, the Reverend thought. "There I met an old mountain man, one hundred and fifty years old, and a poet might say his beard was gray as storm clouds, and he showed me his vast garden of herbs and fruits no man has ever known!" The twins each produced a pale blue flower, and they passed them off to Mr. White, who sniffed one deep and said, "All together, these herbs were the secret to eternal life and health! But that, ladies and gentlemen, is a tale for another time." And he threw the flowers out over the audience, where they faded out like sunspots in your eyes.

"No, my friends, I'm going to share with you today the last secret the mountain man passed on to me. But for that, I'm going to need a volunteer!" Timothy's hand shot into the air, and a few of the other children leapt to compete with him. Even a couple of the old timers raised their hands. But Mr. White had his eye set in one place, and he pointed right at Sophie, and said, "You look unimpressed, ma'am. Might you be in need of a miracle?"

"Afraid not," said Sophie. The kids' hands lowered slowly and a few of us perked up and turned around, like we never heard her voice before right then.

"Ah, I can see it in those big eyes of yours, ma'am," said Mr. White. "This is a once-in-a-deathtime chance for a miracle cure for all that ails you, and for free!"

The Reverend's eyes locked with Mr. White's, and it seemed like he couldn't look away again. Of course he wanted to see real magic happen; the Reverend was only
human, you see. "I think it's a good idea, Sophie," said the Reverend, and Everett looked aside at his friend and nodded too.

Sophie glared at the Reverend. There was some kind of storm building up inside her, just waiting to burst from her vitreous form, and she took a step back. "No. Pick someone else to test out your strange magics."

Mr. White drew a vial from his jacket, a little thing full of white powder that almost seemed to glisten like diamonds. That performer's smile faltered only a little. "You'll thank me later, ma'am." With that, he flung the vial out into the audience, right at Sophie. It should have passed right through her, but instead it seemed to bounce off her nothingness, and it shattered on the dusty ground amidst the accumulating snow. And when that dust touched that narrow foot of hers, she suddenly didn't seem so transparent anymore. The Reverend just watched as we all, in a stunned silence, reached out to touch her, and reached right through. Only Everett and the Reverend were still, hands at their sides. If the Reverend had looked to his left, he would have seen Everett's face slacken and fall.

And all the while, Mr. White kept talking, and the twins kept flinging disappearing flowers into the snow. "You won't believe how little it costs! Just one hundred dollars, ladies and gentlemen! Life Itself for a hundred dollars! You will not find a better deal anywhere else!"

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The next day, Everett begged the Reverend to go through every cabinet and drawer in Grantstown and pull together every last old ragged dollar he could find. The
Reverend sat at the table in Everett's house, the wood rotted and failing, and counted it out, with the snow melting off his shoulders. "Hundred and two dollars," said the Reverend.

"Are you sure?" said Everett. He hovered over the Reverend's shoulder, with his boots a few inches from the ground. A dozen or so more of us milled about the room. Little Timothy cared about the snow more than the medicine, but Jackson and his daughter Elaine chattered on and on about all the wonderful things they could do with hands. Some of these spirits the Reverend hadn't even seen before, looking out over his congregation on Sundays. "Count it again. That's all you could find, in the whole town?"

"This right here is a lot of money, Everett," said the Reverend, laying the fistful of dollars in a stack. "You didn't think Life Itself would be cheap, did you?"

"Just enough for one dose," said Everett, and they all fell silent.

Then the Reverend, the Reverend, could feel the prickles of their eyes all over his body. "I ain't making this decision," he said. "This is up to you."

"Talk to Mr. White!" said Elaine. "See if you can--if you can get a bulk discount!"

Mr. White hadn't left, of course, saying he would stick around in case they needed time to make up their minds. But everywhere he went, he was surrounded by spirits, dozens of them, more than the Reverend had ever seen in the whole town. They were old and they were young, some of them didn't even seem to have faces. All of Grantstown was a sea of gray and white, spirits and snow, and the Reverend was having a hard time telling the difference between the two. He looked out the window, towards Mr. White's
wagons, saw the mob gathered there, and clenched his jaw. Their voices roared like a sandstorm.

The Reverend first went to bring Sophie some food, a few dry biscuits and a glass of whiskey. He went up the creaky stairs--Everett didn't follow--and down to Sophie's room, where she sat itching, rubbing her whole body with her hands. Without waiting for the Reverend to ask the inevitable question, she said, "I can feel everything. My clothes. My skin. God, it's been so long since I had skin. Oh, God, Reverend. How do you stop feeling it?"

"You get used to it, Sophie," said the Reverend. He set down a dusty plate with the biscuits on the table next to her bed.

"My husband said it right," said Sophie. "You folks travel in packs. You and Mr. White. Couple of lying cheats, you both are. I don't know what you want from us."

The Reverend slipped his hands in his trouser pockets. "Mr. White ain't no liar. Seems he can do just what he says he can."

"And what? You think I ought to thank him?" She stared at the biscuits like she had no idea what she was supposed to do with them. Sophie looked real young, sitting there in her blue dress, but she just kept scratching, rubbing, rocking. "Everything hurts," she said.

The good Reverend, seeming to feel a flood of paternal obligation, reached out to touch her shoulder, but as soon as his chapped fingertips made contact she jerked away like a scared animal. So the Reverend bid her eat her biscuits and drifted on out of the
room, and as he closed the door behind him, he said, "Everything's going to be all right, Sophie." True enough for some.

The Reverend made straight for Mr. White's wagons, then, drawing his arms about himself in the cold. Already there was a half a foot of snow on the ground, and it soaked his trouser cuffs. All around him, spirits milled through the street and through the Reverend, all of them talking and chattering. The Reverend's teeth ground together and he couldn't hear himself think. He marched right through all the ghosts and saw Mr. White leaning against a wagon, doing card tricks to amuse himself.

"Mr. White," shouted the Reverend over the ghostly din.

"I don't see why you have to yell," said Mr. White. "I'm right here."

"I need to speak with you!"

"Are you deaf, Reverend?" Mr. White flicked the edge of the king of diamonds.

Our good Reverend almost lost control then, but just said, "Can't you hear them? All the spirits you woke up?"

"Oh, yes," said Mr. White. "I quite like it."

With that, the Reverend turned and began to trudge back through the snow towards the saloon. But it seemed like the crowd, the sound, was following him, and when he looked over his shoulder, he saw Mr. White strolling along just behind him. "I need to speak with you, Mr. White," said the Reverend.

"I know," said Mr. White. He motioned around himself with a long hand and said, "You get used to it, Reverend. Let's have a drink."
So they went into the saloon. In there, at least, the sound of the crowd, all speaking what sounded to the Reverend like tongues, was almost natural. The Reverend poured a glass of whiskey for himself and for Mr. White, and they sat opposite one another across a splintered table. "So, Reverend," said Mr. White, watching his whiskey swirl in the glass. "What would you like to speak with me about?"

The Reverend downed his drink and, while pouring himself another, said, "I ain't going to ask you to lower your price. I know men like you."

"You are men like me."

"The point is, Mr. White, you won't lower your price. So instead I'm going to ask you what's in this for you."

"Can I tell you a story, good Reverend?" Mr. White kept his eyes on the swirling whiskey. The sound of the glass sliding across wood was audible even among the chattering crowd. He said, "Let me tell you a story. Do you know, Reverend, that the streets out east are more often than not made of stone? They're not worn trails, they're made. Built, you see, by men who have places to go. They are planned, often mapped ahead of time, you see. Under control. One day, on the street, I met a beggar, an old gentleman who sincerely believed that, despite his situation, he could trust in a god, and that this God could hear him. You understand this, I have to assume, Reverend."

"Not another of your tales, Mr. White," said the Reverend. His face twitched, from the whiskey burn and from his agitation. "You got nothing to sell to me."

"I'm not selling anything to anyone," said Mr. White. "I am only telling you that this man prayed every day to be saved from his plight, as I think you might as well. And
every day, nothing happened, except sometimes a man like me would happen by and drop him a few pennies." He stopped moving his glass, and stared at the whiskey slowly coming to a rest. "So I asked him the obvious question. Why did he keep trying, if it had no effect? If, no matter how sincere his wish, his prayers would never be answered? And do you know what he said, Reverend? He said he didn't know."

The Reverend swallowed the remainder of his glass and poured another. He waited, but Mr. White didn't continue. "Well?" said the Reverend. "You put me through this much. What's the punch line?"

"That's all," said Mr. White. "There's no punch line. I swear, you won't take anything at face value, will you, Reverend? Maybe that's your tragic flaw." He stood, brushing some snow from his white suit. "I'm just out here trying to make the world better for men like that old pious bum. Look what sprouts up where I plant my seeds, Reverend. Ah, but listen to me, talking like a poet or a philosopher. I suspect the snow will lift within a couple of days, and then I shall be on my way. That should make everyone happy."

#

Within two days, the snow stopped, and the two feet of snow on the ground began to melt; and by this time the whole town was full of ghosts, countless spirits all talking at once. In all of them, the good Reverend couldn't pick out a single familiar face. He hadn't slept more than a few minutes at a time the past two nights, and while lying awake thinking about the sound, that God-awful cacophony, he started to understand Life Itself. So he went to visit Sophie, and when he arrived, he couldn't see Everett. If he was in the
house at all, he was drowned in what a poet might call a sea of white shapes, an ocean of found souls. But Sophie remained in her room, alone, thin and young, but even Sophie was screaming.

"Please!" she screamed. "Please be quiet! By God, please, shut up!" The accumulated biscuits from the Reverend's last two visits sat untouched on the table.

The Reverend tried to calm her down, to get her to stop screaming, but it was as though she couldn't hear him over the roar, which he was almost used to by then. Poor Sophie just gripped at her ears, squeezed her eyes shut, and wept.

So the Reverend talked at no one. He apologized to Sophie. He told her this was not about her, and that he was sorry she was lost along the way, and that he promised not to leave her behind anymore. He talked about his sermon--the one she stayed for, the one about forgiveness--and he asked her to forgive him, too, because he couldn't help but wonder if things would've been the same if he hadn't come. And as the Reverend watched Mr. White's wagon train leave town, he told Sophie, "I reckon it's time for us to move on as well. Ain't no place for us here." So he reached his arm under Sophie's--she flinched, but stood with him--and together they left the town for good. For our part, we forgave him, most of us did, with what few thoughts of our own we could still hear and still speak and still share through the din of Grantstown's dead.
CHAPTER 2: FLOWER GIRLS

Mr. White always tells us that the desert is where you go if you want to get lost. He is wise. Ours is not the desert of Egypt, sands like seas that rise and fall in waves, where you go to drown in the sun. America's desert is a place of rocks and plants that fight the rocks and survive. They live more than they should. This is what Mr. White tells us about the desert, and while our companions--clawed Dwyn, big, bearded Warren, and Prudence with that scarred forehead--wonder, "Who would want to be lost?" we understand what he means. We sisters are of one mind, with each other, and we believe with Mr. White. We ride on the back of the caravan's largest cart, that Mr. White's Magical Remedies will turn into a stage when we arrive at our destination. Warren, a taciturn, bearded fellow, takes the reins on our cart from Dwyn. Mr. White sits with us, telling stories, and we ask, "Mr. White, when was the last time you were lost?"

"Anne, Belle," Mr. White says to us, "have you heard of the mirror makers of Murano?" We shake our heads. "There is an island near Venice, called Murano, that's known for its glassware. The Venetian glass they make is truly staggering." Mr. White flicks his wrist and produces from his sleeve a tiny ball of clear glass. It is as out of place on our creaking wagon as a raindrop on the ground. "Centuries ago, the glassmakers of Murano were the only men in the world who knew the true secrets of making mirrors. Perfect mirrors." He blows on the glass ball and it becomes reflective. We watch the passing plants shrink and grow in the reflection. Mr. White continues, "Men are, as you well know, greedy beasts. The glassmakers were treated like princes, but were forbidden to ever leave the island. The secrets were far too profitable to lose. Kings across the
world would have paid anything for the secrets, and they tried. But if a glassmaker left the island, he risked his life, and his family's. And so the power of the mirrors stayed secret." As he says this he moves his hand in a circular flourish and the mirror ball is gone. He is, in his heart, a showman. "And so the mirrors stayed magic. Sooner or later, glassmakers escaped, and with them went the secret. And now, that magic is lost."

We sit silently. When Mr. White does not continue, we know that his answer is complete, and we return to gazing across the passing stones.

At length Mr. White says, "I expect we'll be at our destination within a couple of hours. You girls get some rest. Your expertise will be needed."

"Where are we going?" we ask. "You never said."

"Home," says Mr. White. He does not smile, and only disappears into the wagon.

We debate among ourselves what that means. Mr. Alphonse White, purveyor of only the finest of snake oil, would never take us to his own home. He insists he does not have one. We say, "Perhaps there is a town called Home."

"Yes," we say, "and this is the place where all lost people end up. This is the place the lost mean when they say they want to go Home." We smile and laugh, because we know that the desert has many places like this. We have seen stranger ourselves. Just over a week ago Mr. White's Magical Remedies peddled its miraculous wares to a ghost town, but this proved unprofitable, because these ghosts were poor, and could not pick up what little money they had in order to pay us. Our lack of profit did not seem to bother Mr. White. It never does.
We mull over several other options, but then we say, "Is it possible that we are going to our home?" And then we say no more, because we know Mr. White, and we know that this is true. We know that it is impossible, and that makes it all the more true.

And as promised, within two hours we are in Elder, the town that cannot be found, and the town that cannot be left. This is our home. Was our home. "This was where Mr. White found us," we tell Dwyn. "Almost five years ago, now. We were barely more than little girls then." He is staring at his long, claw-like fingernails, which he keeps somehow perfect and smooth despite his job as Mr. White's all-purpose lifter and carrier.

Dwyn says, "That right?" His square, bald head glows in the midday sun. "Can't see why you two'd ever want to leave a place like this." He motions around himself, and we follow his gesture, and we know what he means. Elder is incongruous. Even in this rocky desert--Mr. White tells us we are in the Utah Territory--Elder is vibrant with grasses the color of absinthe. Small farms closely encircle the town, intermixed with fences enclosing cows and sheep. "Like an oasis," Dwyn says.

"Nothing so simple," we say. There is pride in our words, in our hometown. "Elder is never in the same place twice. They say that every traveler must pass through once, but only once. When last we were home, its terrain matched its surroundings. We think it was in Kansas." We look down at Dwyn--Mr. White insists we are simply tall, but we think Dwyn is quite short anyway--hoping to see his hairless brow arch upward, impressed.
"That right?" Dwyn gnaws on a biscuit instead of granting us our expected reaction. "And here I'd hoped we were going somewhere nice for a change."

"Elder is very nice," we say. "It simply brings its niceness with it wherever it goes." We pause for a moment, trying to remember something else of Elder with which to impress Dwyn. "It is not that Elder moves by choice, of course," we explain. "Our hometown is not a nomadic camp." And how could it be? Elder's streets are paved with stone. Its houses are sturdy and made of bricks, and its bank is old, the most secure in America, we believe. "Rather, nobody ever finds Elder by looking for it. It will never be where you think it is."

"Then how did ol' Alphonse find it?"

We had not considered that. "He found it twice, for that matter," we say.

"Weird son of a bitch," says Dwyn.

We roll to a stop in the center of town, a crossroads flanked by the grocer's, a church, and our old schoolhouse. We remember the old grocer, Mr. Henry, who would give us molasses candies whenever we would come by. We remember our teacher, Mrs. Fremont, who would never sit us next to one another, though distance could not prevent us from sharing our answers.

Dwyn hops off the wagon and holds out his hand to help us disembark, but Mr. White stops us before we do. "I'll need you to stay in the wagon for now," Mr. White says. He is below us and we cannot see his face under the brim of his off-white hat. "Mix up some of the old Indian Sagwa, you know the kind. Elder's always been known for its stomach problems."
This was true, of course. We say, "Mr. White, how did you find Elder again? After all this time."

"Don't you worry about it, sweet ladies," he says with a tip of his hat. "Now be a dear or two and get that medicine ready, would you? The recipe is on the inside of the cupboard, if you need a reminder."

We nod our assent, but stare at the ground of our hometown for a moment too long. We say, "Mr. White, do we not have time to visit our home? The stomach medicine will not take long, and it has been so many years since we have seen our mother. Elder's people do not know how to miss someone who is not dead. They have never had to do so." Our mother must be so lost, wondering where we have been. We feel, suddenly, inconsiderate. What had we been thinking, to stay away for so long?

Or do we care at all? Perhaps leaving was the best thing we could have done, and guilt, while natural, will only leave us stranded by the side of the road, held forever by Elder's undeniable gravity.

No. We feel a sudden realization that we are sad to have abandoned our mother, that this is not what good daughters do, and that our decision to leave was rash and youthful.

But, we think, we are the first ever to leave Elder. Ours was a great accomplishment, was it not? And our lives, of course, are our own.

We are not sure. Two minds.
Mr. White raises the brim of his hat, to lock his sky blue eyes with ours, the corners of his thin mouth weighed down. He shakes his head. "You'll have plenty of time to catch up later." He waves his dismissal.

As we duck into the wagon, stealing a glance in the direction of our old home, we see a man and woman leave the church. Are they Mr. and Mrs. Benton, our old neighbors? It has been so long. They seem to recognize us—we read this in the confusion of their faces—but we do not call to them. Our voices feel heavy and shy.

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The recipe for Mr. White's famous stomach medicine has nothing to do with Indians or whatever "sagwa" is. In one jar is powdered bull stomach, which Dwyn dries himself. Other vials, lined up next to a bouquet of white magnolias, contain simply grass, dirt, and pink salt that Mr. White says is from the Himalayas. We mix them in equal measure, then reach into our dresses and pull out translucent daisies. They seem to fade in our palms even as we look at them. The flowers, we know, are ours and ours alone. Mr. White taught us to make them—a simple trick, really, just breath, water, and a little practice—and now we are his flower girls. Mostly they are just for show, but sometimes he likes to have us include them in his medicines. They provide a nice sparkle to the finished product, truly, like white silver, but Mr. White assures us that the flowers do nothing for the medicinal properties, but we wonder if he would tell us if they did.

We have been with Mr. White long enough to know that his remedies work precisely because they do not. And we have also been with Mr. White long enough to know that this is the most he will ever tell us. And yet, even as we grind the flowers with
our pestle with the dried stomach and the grass and the dirt and it comes together into a silvery liquid that is thick like the sweet molasses we ate as girls, we remain unsatisfied.

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As we fill the final vial of stomach medicine, there is a knock on the wagon's shuttered door. Mrs. Fremont, visibly older--has it been that long?--stands, frowning, wringing her hands. "Anne and Belle?" she says. "Have you really returned?"

"Yes," we say. Our voices are those of the classroom, deferent to her authority, but she shrinks at their sound. In the silence, we look at one another, then down to her, and we know that we are grown up, that we are now equals. So we say, "Mrs. Fremont, it has been so long! It is so good to see you."

"How?" Mrs. Fremont steps back. "You shouldn't be here. You shouldn't still be so young. Children, it has been ten years."

"Five," we say.

"Five years can't explain my wrinkles," says Mrs. Fremont. "No, children, you have been gone ten whole years. You shouldn't have been able to come back. What strange magic brought you here?"

We remain crowded in the wagon's narrow door, watching Mrs. Fremont step back further with each sentence, as though we are witches come to steal her children's souls for our black incantations. We say, "Our employer, Mr. White, brought us here. But please, Mrs. Fremont, how is our mother? How is Elder?"
But before she can respond, Mr. White sweeps in, seemingly on the heels of the hot desert breeze. "Can I help you ma'am?" he says. His face is only a smile. "The girls have ever so much work to do, but perhaps I can be of service."

"Mr. White, she was our teacher," we say. The urgency in our voice surprises us, and we feel it is somewhat inappropriate. Did we miss her so much?

"Is that right?" says Mr. White. "Some day you'll have to tell me about the twins as children, ma'am."

But she has already fled, heels clicking on the stones. Why run from Mr. White so? Are salesmen truly so terrifying? Of course, Elder's people are historically distrusting of travelers. Perhaps that is it. They shall all lock their doors tonight, we expect. After she has left, we tell Mr. White we are done with the stomach medicine.

"Make sure you have some flowers ready for the show," he says.

"Those take so little time," we say. There is pleading in our voices. "Can we not go see our mother? Just for a moment?" But then we say, "She has probably forgotten about us. There is no reason to go see her."

Mr. White's eyebrows perk up. "There's no need to be so grim, Belle. But you're right, the flowers won't take long. So get them out of the way."

We agree to do so, though something within or between us feels odd and prickly.

But when we finish the flowers, and Mr. Henry's widow comes to see us to tell us that Mr. Henry is six years dead, Mr. White swoops in to see her off and instruct us that he may require some bottled snow for this show. And once we are done mixing diamond
dust and cloud-filtered sunlight, Mr. Benton visits, but Mr. White sweeps him away before he can tell us what he feels he must.

By now it is late afternoon, and Dwyn and Warren are converting the wagon into a stage. We sit on the ground and watch them work--Mr. White says he needs us near for when the show is to begin. Dwyn says, "I don't see why he won't let you go see your ma."

We say, "We expect he wants us focused. Business before pleasure."

We also say, "He is cruel. It is his fault we left in the first place. We should have stayed."

Dwyn nearly drops a crate of medicine bottles. "Never known you two to disagree," he says. "I'm thinking you might need a break."

We simply look at ourselves.

"Is it true that time moves faster here?" Dwyn begins to stock the stomach medicine shelves. We made far too many vials, we think. "That's what White said, but you know him, always going on about magic this, mystery that."

"We think so," we say. How long has our mother missed us? Does she know how to miss us anymore?

"We never go anywhere nice," Dwyn says. He glances over at us as he works. At this time during a normal setup, Dwyn would be yelling at us to make ourselves useful and lift some boxes, and we would try to help, but he would laugh us off and tell us he was joking. This time, he says nothing.

To fill the silence, we decide to tell Dwyn of Elder's history. We tell him that Elder was founded a hundred years ago--it is always one hundred, no matter when the
story is told. Seven men, or possibly nine, were traveling through a wide-open plain, possibly in what we now know as Nebraska. Their stores of food had long run dry, and in that year's awful drought, they could find nothing to sustain them. Theirs was a woeful lot--one must always include this line in the story--and they knew well that they would die presently. But one day, in the height of their suffering, the men came upon a span of emerald trees and grasses, a place that it seemed had never seen a drought, and that they knew never would. Seven women, or possibly nine, lived there, and they welcomed the men and gave them food and sweet water. After recovering, two of the men decided that they would return east to tell their families of their remarkable find, but when they came back with a larger caravan, the shining green wood they remembered was gone. Word traveled of the town known as Elder ever since, but none could ever say where it truly was. This is how you must always tell the story.

#

During the show, we look out over the crowd, searching it for the face of our mother, but we are disappointed. There is not even a shadow of her there. There is not even the hole in the crowd where she should be. We take part in Mr. White's patented spectacle, throwing our fading flowers over the crowd to prove magic to a town that knows it in its foundations. We aim our flowers at those we knew before we left so that we can see their faces as the blooms melt in their hands, our favorite part of our show, but we miss every time.

#
Mr. White thought that instructing us to sleep in the wagon would keep us from wandering at night, but we know better. We sneak out of the wagon at night and slip down the streets, fighting the urge to laugh at the echoes our shoes seem to make on the stones. We navigate to our childhood home blind, bereft of moonlight by the clouds, and we knock at the door. We wait a moment and knock again. "Mother?" we say, careful that the neighbors do not hear us. The people of Elder prize their sleep.

No answer comes. "She must be asleep," we say.

"But she is a light sleeper," we respond. "We know better than anyone that the slightest sound would rouse her." Before we can stop ourselves, we reach out to try the door and find that it is unlocked.

The front room of our home is dark and cloaked in dust, and the darkness is cold like the winters that Elder never sees. Mother's prized lace tablecloth lies folded on the table. Its creases speak of years untouched by anyone's hand. Her candleholders are empty of even a trace of wax. There is a pile of ash in the bottom of the stove. She was never so untidy. We wrap our arms about ourselves and walk into the house, towards the bedroom we once shared with our mother. If she sleeps, she will hear us approach. We step heavily. In the darkness, we see that the bedroom door is open, and peeking in, we see that no one is there.

They say that one does not leave Elder except by death--except for the two explorers and we sisters, of course. It is not a rule, we know. It has never been written. Elder's people feel it in their stomachs like a block of gold. They cannot leave, and they would never want to.
This is how we know that our mother is dead.

But then we see the flowers: a fresh bouquet of white magnolias resting atop our mother's bare bed. We slump onto the mattress, close our eyes, breathe deeply, and choke on our oncoming tears.

But we also watch ourselves and say, numbly, "Do not cry. We cry only for the past."

We are of two hearts, we sisters.

And now Anne looks up, blinks through her tears at me, and says, "We would abandon her? When we left, we left her with no one to mourn. We owe our mother this much."

"We owe her nothing," I say. Anne's eyes are clearer than they have ever been, but I cannot feel why.

We stare. This has never happened before. A profound emptiness roars in our brains, and we--Anne lays her head on the bed and breathes deep of the dust that permeates it. It is as though she is trying to replace the dust with her tears.

"He should not have taken us away," Anne says. "We could have been here for her, happy and well-fed here in Elder. We could have carved her grave marker ourselves. These flowers could be our daisies."

"We would never have learned to make our daisies without Mr. White," I snap. My arms cross over her abdomen and I feel the empty pocket where we keep our flowers. Where I keep my flowers. "We... you are being a child."
"We hate him." Anne pushes herself up from the bed and the mattress creaks. "We hate him for doing this to us."

"We do not hate him," I say. "We should be grateful, and we are."

"I hate," Anne says. She tries the word again: "I." And another: "Hate." Her tongue moves slowly, explodes sounds against her teeth. And then a sound builds up from her throat, a sob that she tries to keep down, tries to swallow. Anne stands, coughing to cover the cry.

She is my sister, and so I reach to steady her, but Anne brushes me away with almost the same motion, our hands colliding and stinging.

"There is nothing here for us," I say. "Please. Let us return to the wagon."

"We should leave tomorrow," says Anne.

"I... we... that is for the best." I turn to leave our childhood house. "Mr. White will understand how... you... feel."

I look over my shoulder to see if Anne will follow. Before she comes, Anne stomps hard on the magnolias, grinding them into the dry floorboards.

#

"You're aware, of course, that you won't be able to come back?" Mr. White says. His hat shades his eyes from the morning sun, but we can still see the blue staring back at us under furrowed brow. In his hands we see the money from last night's sales. He always counts his income at least three times: once the night of the show, and twice in the morning. We appear to have interrupted the third.

"We know," we say. It leaves my mouth slightly before Anne's.
Mr. White is silent for a moment. He looks down at our shoes, shifts his jaw to the side, and says, "Then it's settled. We leave today." He casts a glance and a salesman's practiced smile at Dwyn. "Right now, in fact."

Dwyn heaves out a breath, rolls his eyes, and marches to secure the wagons, as is his duty. I believe that we hear him grumble something about his sore behind and the rough road, but I am not certain.

Mr. White always says that if there is one thing he is certain of, it is that certainty is the worst invention of mankind.

Soon, the horses pull the wagons from Elder's center square, down its bumpy streets, and out towards the incessant desert. Nobody comes to see us off, and we feel nothing in our stomachs as we cross its border.

But Anne's gaze remains on Elder for hours. She watches Elder until it disappears over the horizon, its green, fairy glow lost in the sun's all consuming orange. I wonder if Anne's mind forms the same thought as mine: if the world is round, and that is why we lose sight of Elder from the bottom up, as though the stones are eating it bite by bite, does that mean that our home will soon be on the other side of the world?
CHAPTER 3: WARREN MEETS SOME OWLS

Prudence's got a scar on her forehead because when she was born, there were two slim fingers growing out of her skull, and nobody had any idea what to do with them except to cut them off. The little thing cried and cried, sure, but I have to imagine her parents thought anything would be better than having to clip those fingernails without poking the poor girl in the eye. So now she has this deep gash of a scar, and when she was young she used to cover it up with her bangs, but now she's over forty and she tells me she doesn't much care, so she pulls back her graying hair to show the whole world where her extra fingers used to be. But what I think is that she finds it helpful for her job. When you travel with a guy like Mr. White, sometimes being odd's the best thing for you. I'd tell you "just ask those two twins, Anne and Belle," but they haven't said two words since we up and left Elder in a hurry. That's probably for the best. They used to talk in unison, you know. I spent nearly a year with that troupe and even after the ghosts and the moving town and the couple of times I could swear I saw a mountain following us, that was still the most uncomfortable part.

When Mr. White hired me on to drive the wagons, after I'd been wasting around Kansas for a couple of months, he told me, "Warren, this lady here, Prudence, aside from being lovely and kind and a fine enough cook, is our navigator. She always gets us where we need to be, so I want you to listen to her first and foremost, you understand?" And I told him yes, I did understand, and he said, "Just to clarify, I do mean first and foremost. I mean if she tells you one thing and I tell you another, you should do what she said."
Those steel eyes of his flashed at me, like they were smiling. It's how he always talked to me, with smiling eyes. I hated those eyes.

Mr. White had to be firm on me at first, because Prudence has never used a map in her life. What she would do was sit beside me, shuffling a deck of crisp playing cards, and once in a while she'd close her eyes, and whisper, and she'd hold a card up to that scar of hers. And then she'd just point, and it was my job to turn the front wagon, the one that we'd turn into a stage at every stop, in exactly the direction she pointed.

The system worked fairly well, all told, though we never seemed to make much money wherever we went. That rarely stopped Mr. White from paying us, so not even grumbling Dwyn complained much.

Prudence would always say things to me as we drove along, and that morning, my last morning, as we trundled south though the scrub-littered Utah desert, she said to me, "Jack of Hearts tells me you're a bad person, Warren."

"Jack of Hearts can go to hell," I told her. The card, of course, was right, as Prudence's cards always are. When Mr. White found me in Kansas I was doing my best to flee the scene of a particularly bloody robbery, but Prudence doesn't need to know that. It isn't as though it'd bother her, of course, it's just that it's a conversation I'm not often in the mood for.

"Yes, well," said Prudence. She slipped the card back into her deck and started shuffling again. Even now I can't imagine the sound of wagon wheels without cards shuffling over top. It's in my ears now. "Do you feel right about the kinds of things we peddle, Warren?"
I corrected her, of course. "We do no such thing," I said. "That was all Mr. White."

"Yes, well," said Prudence.

"Work's work, Prudence. You and I, we just drive the wagon. Well, drive it and guide it. Are you trying to say we should quit?"

"The Hearts say we should," she said.

"You should stop listening to Hearts. They're traitors, all of them. You ever gotten a straight flush with Hearts?" I knew better than to try to snatch the cards from her hands. Her nails were short but sharp. "Always lets me down, that suit does."

She kept shuffling, then, as she always did, and I could hear behind me Mr. White telling a story to the twins two wagons back. Mother always said I had witch ears. Father always slapped her when she said so.

"And maybe you and those cards should stop talking about me when I'm sitting right here," I said. "It's downright rude."

Prudence stopped shuffling quickly, ripped a card from the deck, and snapped it against her scar. Before I could decide if that was quicker than usual, she was pointing, frantically, wordlessly out into the desert to the east. "You're sure?" I said. "Mr. White said we had an appointment in Arizona we had to meet."

But she kept pointing.

And what had Mr. White told me? Follow Prudence, not him. So I did. We changed course, and the drivers of the wagons behind us followed suit. Prudence just kept
pointing straight ahead, jabbing her finger forward, so I squinted into the rising sun and drove those horses as hard as I could.

I saw the horse--and the two slumped riders--before I saw the railroad they were following. It didn't look like that rail had seen a train in years. My gun, an old ivory-handled revolver, felt heavy on my belt. "This doesn't feel right, Prudence," I said.

She never responds when she's navigating.

On the back of the horse was a man, narrow and lean, a growth of scraggly beard fighting to enliven his slack face. I thought he was dead, but he was just asleep, or unconscious. Resting. And in front of him holding the reins was a woman, much more alive, thin and drooped over like a mule that's been driven too hard, but much prettier. As we got closer I called out to her, "What are you doing all the way the hell out here?"

She swung her head around like a startled buffalo--no, too thin to be a buffalo, she was a deer--and immediately started snapping the horse's reins, hissing to him that he should start running, start galloping.

I recall saying to Prudence, "She clearly knows who we are."

Prudence kept pointing.

"The bad guys," I said. "Jack of Hearts, right?" I stopped the wagon, leapt down to the scrubby ground, and paced my way over to the lady and her wobbly-kneed horse. "You got nothing to fear from us, ma'am. You're illusional from lack of water."

"You mean delusional," Mr. White mumbled from a yard away.

"Delusional from lack of water."
She didn't look at me, just kept her dry red eyes locked on the railroad like it was some kind of shimmering path straight to paradise.

"See the man behind her?" said Mr. White. He was right behind me now. The man moves silent as a dead tree when he wants to.

"That's that... reverend from the ghost town, isn't it?" I said.

Mr. White glanced over at me and cocked an eyebrow. I've been a poor liar, but it isn't as though any of us really thought that man was a preacher to begin with. "I think we've done these people a disservice, leaving them in that town like we did," Mr. White said. He stepped past me, extended a slim hand to the woman, and said, "Mrs. Everett, I think our little band has done you a disservice. Please let us give you some water."

Mrs. Everett--Sophie, I remember her name was--slapped old White's hand away limply. Even her fingers were cracked and dry.

"How long have you been thirsting?" I said.

"I won't drink any of your concoctions," said Sophie.

"My concoctions are why you're still alive," Mr. White said. By now I gathered I ought to shut up, so I did. "Your friend, though, the good reverend, he's on his way out, no? You let me help him, maybe have a drink yourself, and I'll let you go on your way. How's that sound?"

"Like hell."

I watched the horse's legs. No matter how hard she kicked, the animal trudged along like it was walking through a mix of mud, molasses, and Prudence's biscuits. I grabbed the "preacher" by his hanging arm and pulled him down off the horse, and when
Sophie tried to grab him away, the horse wobbled and fell, and Sophie rolled away, just barely avoiding the horse's falling weight. Even with my big hands, I had a hard time keeping the preacher up. Dead weight, but he was still breathing.

Prudence kept pointing, but I think she was pointing at the horse. Dwyn shot the poor creature after we dragged the riders away.

#

Prudence took over for me piloting the front wagon as I'd volunteered to watch over the good Reverend and Sophie while they slept in our middle cart, the one with our torn bedrolls, our dry goods, our barrels of water, smelling of wheat and dust. Sophie was a problem: it took a double dose of some kind of sandy powder that Mr. White asked Anne to slip into her water to finally knock her out. "For sleeplessness," Mr. White had said. Sophie was weak from her journey, from her thirst, but I don't think I've ever seen a lady fight like that.

We really must've done her a hell of a disservice.

So as I sat on the floor of the wagon, hearing the stones under us more than I felt them, and watched my old associate the Reverend sleep. His beard was wet with the water that splashed out of his mouth when we tried to resuscitate him.

That was how it was: preaching was his new game. I failed to see where it would get him. That town where he was preaching last month wasn't exactly our usual kind of mark, but there he was, waist deep in his role, growling out Bible verses and old sermons I just know he couldn't have come up with himself. But the man had a very fine memory for detail. I expect he was reciting sermons from memory.
One hell of a long con.

What was it this time? What name were you going by? I thought John Cypress was always his best work. Didn't he use that one when we got nabbed for grave robbing, after we lost ninety dollars to a huckster better at counting cards than me? Mr. Cypress, indeed. It had been a long time since we were the bad guys together. I felt my abdomen, that growing gut I'd been nurturing, right around where the stab wound was when we tried to skip out on our gambling debt that time. I'd almost forgotten about that scar.

Back when we were the bad guys.

I lazed there, staring at him for a good, long time, trying out his other names. Jack Fennel. Alexander Gideon. Listened to the Reverend's lungs expand and contract, his ribs making barely noticeable sounds as they moved to make room. Heard my own heartbeat fall in rhythm with his.

And then Sophie stirred, turning over, with an insubstantial moan. "I never knew White's medicines to wear off that quick," I said. I reached for what was left of her drugged water, but she kicked it out of my hand and tried to scurry away on the floor. I sucked on my struck finger, hissed, and said, "Calm down, girl. I'm not here to hurt you. I'm a friend of that man, there. The one you were riding with."

"He never told me about any friends," she said, practically spat it out. The woman was coming around fast, but she was still too wobbly to stand. As she came to a stop, backed into a full sack of flour, she said, "Stop this thing right now and let us go."

"You really think the good Reverend's in any shape to move?"
From the wagon ahead of us I heard Mr. White say, "He isn't as resilient as she is. I think she knows that, though."

The only man whose ears are as good as mine.

So I said, "Mr. White just wants to make sure you're both okay before he... releases you from his care."

"Does that mean more of his infernal *medicine*?" Sophie pushed on the top of the bag of flour, trying to lift herself from the ground, grunting like it was the fight of her life. She looked so young. "Hasn't he done enough?"

"If I'm being honest, Mrs. Everett, I don't think he ever feels he's done enough."

"So what did he do to me, then?" She huffed as she settled to the ground, leaning her head back, the fight draining from her limbs right into the floor. "Why's the Reverend flat on his back and I'm not?"

I kept my eyes on her, my hands ready to grab her if she lunged, but she looked exhausted. After a pause, I said, "Never seen him do what he did to you before. Usually when we see ghosts he just talks to them and moves on."

"He doesn't do repeat performances, then." She looked at her right palm, all calloused and bleeding, and blew on it.

"Afraid not." I reached to my side and unhooked my water skin, held it up, and said, "Thirsty? I promise, no medicine in this one." She nodded and I tossed it to her, watched her gulp at it, the water making lines through the dust on her face. "You might've guessed this, but Mr. White generally likes to talk," I said. "If you ask him what he did to you, you just might get an answer."
"Yeah? He's not just going to spout some more song-and-dance about some sorcerer in the mountains out east?"

"Well, I didn't say that," I said, "but knowing him, it'll probably be true."

"The man is a liar," she said. "You can't possibly expect me to take him at his word."

I took the water skin from her hands, felt its lightness, and drank the last few drops of water from it. "If I'm being honest, Mrs. Everett, I think Mr. White finds lies to be boring." The skin was empty--a few upside-down shakes proved that--and so I tossed it in the corner. "I need to go make sure Prudence isn't running us into every damn rock she can see. You promise you won't try to jump out while we're moving?"

Sophie jerked her stringy-haired head towards the sleeping Reverend. "You were right, what you said earlier. He's in no shape to go anywhere and I'm not going to leave him. I owe him better than that."

I found myself thinking that man isn't usually the one being owed something, but I bit my tongue and ducked out of the wagon. By now the sun was setting, and we'd be stopping to make camp within an hour or two.

After I caught up to the front wagon and hopped on, I could hear Sophie chatting away, to herself and to the good Reverend. As I took the reins from Prudence, I said, "So why do you think that card sent us after these two?"

Prudence shuffled away in her big-knuckled hands. "I don't tend to ask why," she said. "I don't think Mr. White was far off, though. Maybe the cards agree we've done wrong to these folks."
"Your cards have an overactive conscience," I said. "But I'm not arguing that Sophie and that man didn't deserve better. Just seems specific, is all, that we should go miles out of our way to pick up a couple of riders following a dead rail line."

"I don't tend to ask why."

By that time I'd figured out when Prudence repeated herself, she was done talking about a thing, so I leaned back and lazily steered the wagon in the direction she'd been heading. Over the sound of Anne and Belle mixing medicines two wagons back, and Mr. White on the roof humming to himself, I listened to Sophie talking to herself.

"I haven't thanked you yet, Reverend," she said. The term "Reverend" just rolled out of her mouth easy as anything, like he actually earned that name. "For not leaving me behind. I know you just did what any decent man would do. I suppose I'm just surprised that you're decent, that's all."

Mr. White's tune sounded like something classical, something like my sister used to play on her violin. Mozart, perhaps. His voice went up and down and up and down, every which way. I realized I'd never heard him sing before.

"You hear that singing, Reverend?" said Sophie. "You're going to spit when you wake up and see who we're with, aren't you?"

#

As usual, I couldn't sleep that night. This one was particularly worse because Mr. White insisted we allow Sophie and the good old Reverend rest up in the wagon while we slept under the stars, two bedrolls short. So I leaned against the wheel and smoked and watched the stars and listened to the rustling from the small stand of trees to our north.
Mr. White tipped his hat at me and disappeared into the medicine buggy, where he said he had some mixing to do. Over the sound of his clattering vials, I listened to the scrub grasses rustling in the breeze, the ashes on the tip of my cigar smoldering away, an owl calling a mile away. My mother always told me I'd never be bored with my "witch-ears." She wasn't strictly right, but there I was, entertained at least for that moment.

You know, to this day, I think Mr. White's always got some mixing to do.

Anne stopped by--her feet dragged some, I noticed, more than usual--and she offered me a vial of Mr. White's patented sleeplessness medicine in her pretty little hand. I smiled and held up my own hand to refuse, and she shuffled away, back around the wagons where her sister and Dwyn slept. I immediately felt bad about it. Her mother just died and she was just trying to be nice, I reckoned, but I refused her. That poor girl doesn't know how to move without her sister by her side.

I heard a cough behind me, turned my head, and saw Sophie in a cloud of my cigar smoke. "Care for a puff, Mrs. Everett?"

"No," she said. Then, "Thanks." Sophie waved her hand before her face to clear the smoke away. "Just need some fresh air."

"He woken up yet?"

"No. Not even stirred a bit."

"Shame."

She stood behind me, arms around herself in the cooling desert night. Eventually she stopped coughing from the smoke. "Does Mr. White sleep?"
I damn near dropped my cigar laughing, then stopped myself. If I woke Dwyn or the girls or Prudence, I'd never hear the end of it. "What kind of a question is that?"

"Well, he doesn't seem... right, is all."

"No, I mean to say, does he strike you as the kind of man who sleeps?" I jerked my head toward the wagon where I could hear old White crunching up some kind of stone or maybe just salt with a mortar and pestle. Some kind of granular, scratching sound. "He's in there."

Sophie stepped down the stairs, stood barefoot on the rocky ground, and stared over towards the wagon. "How'd you ever end up working for him, anyway? You seem a nice enough fellow. Out of place."

I took a long drag on my cigar, blew a thick smoke ring, and said, "He liked my ears."

That was as good as anything for her. Sophie coughed out a single short laugh and padded over to Mr. White's wagon. She entered without knocking.

I wasn't nice enough not to eavesdrop, but after I heard Mr. White turn to face her, his linen clothes rustling in time with his precise movements, I heard a strange hooting call. It sounded like, "And thus we fly."

A strange call, not like any other bird I knew. I glanced under the wagon to the other side where my companions slept, and none of them moved except to snore.

And then I heard, "And thus we live."
Try as I might, I could only barely hear Mr. White and Sophie talking. I dug around in my ear with my finger, but there was no blockage, nothing stopping me except a silence I could almost feel.

So I followed the one sound I could hear, out towards the northern stand of juniper trees, at least half a mile away. As I trudged through the brush, stiff and scraping against my legs, the call just got louder. It screeched, "And thus we fly." I heard a rustling sound--was it leaves or wings? When I reached the stand of trees, the rustling grew louder and louder, a swell in the wind, and there sat three snowy owls on the branches; one was before me, the others perched to my left and right.

"And thus we meet," said the center one. It flapped its great wings three times, and a cold wind rushed towards me, making a sound in the trees like a sarcastic applause.

"So we do," I said. I could hear every tiny shift of their feathers in the breeze.

"What are you? The three of you."

"You are the bad one?" said the owl to my right.

"That depends." I looked to the one to my left, next. It pays to recognize patterns in these sorts of situations. "Why am I here?"

That one narrowed its eyes at me, and the others followed suit. My feet felt cold, like I was standing barefoot on frost.

"You don't like that, do you?" I said. "Being questioned."

"And thus you fail to understand," said the center owl. Its orange eyes widened again, and it spread its dappled wings. "We are questions. You are an answer."
"You have the ears of a wolf yet you follow the cards you are dealt like a man."
The left owl dug its talons into the branch it perched on, which cracked and creaked under the strain.

"And orders like a dog," said the right owl. Its voice was a clear, punctuated screech thudding against my eardrums. It stung like needles, and I ground my teeth to avoid cringing. My nose twitched. My gun didn't feel right.

"Did you call me here to scold me?" I said. "I get enough of that from Prudence."

"The prudent one is deaf," said the left owl. There was something hollow about its voice, nothing like a snowy owl's clarion screech. "Her scar is not an ear. Which do you trust, your scars or your ears?"

I felt my old belly scar then, the one on my gut, gritted my teeth. My ears burned.

"The ones I was born with," I said.

"And thus you do understand," said the middle owl. It screeched an echoing call into the air, and it seemed to bounce off every sparse leaf in this little circle of trees before diving right into my ears and crashing against my mind.

"We will give you a new scar," said the left owl.

"This one is a scar you should follow," said the right.

With that, the three swooped towards me at once, slashing their talons into my right shoulder, carving three intersecting lines--an X and a line to bisect it. I spat and cursed, twisted to the side and pressed on it, trying to stop the bleeding. But when I took my hand away, there was no blood, only a star-shaped scar, and when I looked up, the
owls were gone. The sound of the trees slowly crept back into my ears, and the wind, the
grasses, the dirt beneath my boots, the barely audible groan of the old leather.

Off in the distance, I heard, "And thus we fly."

#

By the time I returned to the camp, I could hear Sophie and Mr. White having
t heir conversation. Sophie's voice was low, like she'd been scolded to keep it down, and
she said, "You still haven't explained. How'd you bring me back? How've I been
resurrected?"

"You haven't," Mr. White said. He shook some sort of fine powder inside a glass
vial--it sounded like sand. "You better than anyone ought to know people don't come
back from the dead. I mean, think of your poor husband." Their conversation had barely
started, it seemed. How long had I been away from camp? It had felt like at least half an
hour, but they couldn't have been chatting that long, could they?

Sophie laughed, a dry sound. "I'm standing here, Mr. White, even though I was
dead a month ago."

"Dead, sure, but not gone."

"Dead's dead," said Sophie. "So what is this?" She clapped her hands together. "I
couldn't do that as a spirit. No hands to clap, you see. Why do I have them now?"

"You haven't so much been resurrected as... reincorporated," said Mr. White.

"That's probably a better word for it. Always strive to be precise, Mrs. Everett, that's one
of my many mantras."
There was a sudden flurry of sound, a dropped glass vial, and Mr. White gagging.

She said, "To hell with your precision. What happened to me?"

"I think you want me to be precise, Mrs. Everett."

"Talk!" Mr. White made a choking sound, and there was a hollow smack against the back wall of the wagon.

"Easier to explain if you let go of my neck."

"Funny. You're talking just fine now."

"Fine." He coughed, trying to clear his throat of what I assumed was Sophie's hand around it. "Your body's still where you left it. You can go check if you want, if you can get through the ghost lake."

"Then what's this?"

Sophie grunted sharply, and Mr. White just laughed. He said, "That's your fist, dear. Not your old one, but a new one. Your whole body's new. It's your ghost pulled back into this world. I don't think it's strictly 'flesh,' but what do I know? I'm just a peddler, you understand, and this is all terribly complicated."

I heard a thud, then, the sound of skin on skin, and then something percussive, a body hitting the floor on the knees and elbows.

"You're very strong," said Mr. White. "For a person. Maybe you're something else?" As Sophie left the wagon, her boots scraping harsh on the wooden steps on the way down, Mr. White said, "You made me drop my mixture. And my feather."

"To hell with your feather." Sophie slammed the door behind her.

As she stomped by, kicking up dust, I said, "How did it go?"
"I think I would've preferred lies," she said, and ducked into the wagon with the slumbering Reverend.

#

My new scar, my owl-scar, was there in the morning, and I poked at it with a finger, leaning up against the wagon where the Reverend still slept, and Sophie still waited. It was raised and tight, red like a raspberry. While she tended the biscuits over the morning's campfire, Prudence tapped her forehead and said, "Where'd you get that?"

"I met some owls," I said. "In those juniper trees to the north." I jerked my head towards where the owls had been, but when Prudence and I both turned to look, there were no juniper trees, just an old, dead cottonwood tree all alone in the scrub, barely visible against the mountains behind it.

"Seems about right," said Prudence. I could hear the biscuits burning on the bottom--they crackle like embers--but I didn't say anything. She could probably smell it by then, anyway. "Does it hurt?" she asked.

Before I could respond, I heard a groan and a choking cough, and Sophie said, "Reverend. Reverend, are you awake?"

She called him Reverend.

I shot Prudence a smile--she never returned my smiles--and ducked my head into the wagon. And sure enough, there was my old friend, the Reverend Jackson Fennel, or John Cypress, or maybe just the Reverend.

He didn't see me, just looked up at Sophie, eyes all bleary and wide, and said, "Where are we? Sophie, where are we?"
Sophie's smile turned sad, and she said softly, "I'm sorry, Reverend. They were the only people around."

"Who?" He was blinking around the room, shifting his gaze from the flour to the dried meats and fruits, the tapped water barrel, the jug of whiskey on the shelf above it. I was suddenly aware of where we were, this cramped food wagon, musty and dank, creaking with an almost deafening volume every time one of us shifted.

And that's when Belle walked by the open door and stuck her pale little head in at the Reverend. He looked from the girl to me, and something like recognition shot into his eyes. I wasn't sure what made him do it--the knowledge he was in the care of one Mr. Alphonse White or the sight of his old pal Warren--but he cracked up, then and there, with a dry laugh that sounded like stepping on an old branch underfoot, and grinding it into the dirt.

#

While Sophie finally slept--she swore she didn't want any of that sleeplessness medicine, but she was snoring just a little too quickly--the Reverend stood out behind the wagon, scraping a sharp knife across his wet face. "You've always had that beard," I said. I sat beside him, leaning against the wagon, drinking from a jug of whiskey. "People won't even recognize you without it."

"It itches me," he said. I could hear the knife shearing through the hairs on his cheek, sliding smoothly over his skin. The good Reverend always kept his knives sharp.

"Well, they do itch sometimes." I ran my hand over my own beard, which had begun to grow long, curling around my jaw, tangled with dirt. "I like it. Reminds me I'm
a man." The Reverend kept shaving, flinging hairs from his blade into the scrub at his feet. Most men look younger when they shave, but the Reverend looked older. His face was sunken and sunburned, his cheekbones pointing out like the tip of his knife. But his eyes--I've never seen a pair of eyes as alive as his, watery and shifting, his attention darting from one object to another, mountain to brush, like a honeybee in the spring. They were alive, but I don't think they were happy. No, looking back, I was watching a pair of eyes looking for something to be sad about, and I think at that moment I realize that he wasn't pulling a con, not this time. This was a man looking for a new life who didn't quite know what a life looked like.

So I did what I always did when a man was sad: I offered him my jug. But he shook his head and just kept shaving. His face was almost clean. I said, "How long has it been? Since you've had whiskey."

"Too long," he said.

"That's not an answer. It's been too long for me and I had some last night."

"About a month," he said.

"Jesus. No wonder you were almost dead when we found you." I lifted the jug to my lips, but started laughing before I could take a swig. "Sorry. Probably oughtn't take the Lord's name in vain around a Reverend, huh?"

The Reverend stopped mid-swipe and his mouth curled upward just a bit. He was trying not to grin. "No, you probably shouldn't. Damnable heathen." One more scrape of his blade, and his thin face was smooth as a new boot. "So," he said, sheathing his knife on his belt, "where'd you get that scar?"
I tapped the star shape right in the center and said, "I met some owls."

"So you did," he said.

"Will you come with us?" I was surprised that I said it. There was something desperate in my tone, I think, thin. I think I was lonely.

"With this crew? Another medicine show, Warren?"

My scar felt warm under my finger, warm and silky. "It's a strange world, the one that follows this little troupe. I think you'd fit right in. And I think I could use a friend."

"What about Sophie?" He walked over to me, his legs still moving stiffly after his long ride, and slumped to the ground beside me, breathing out hard. "I'm not going to leave her behind. Poor woman lost her husband and her home in the same day. And it's your boss's fault, for that matter."

"My fault too," I said. He looked at me, thick eyebrows raised in surprise. I said, "I'm one of the bad guys, you know. No point in trying to shift the blame."

"And what about me?" The Reverend reached out and took the jug from my hands, took a swig, and wiped his mouth with the back of his threadbare sleeve. "You're asking me to be one of the bad guys, too."

"Yes, well," I said. "I suppose I am. Aren't you used to it by now?"

We sat together, passing the jug back and forth, listening to the sounds of Dwyn and the girls feeding and watering the horses, Prudence shuffling her cards, Sophie snoring. The Reverend, after a while, laughed quietly, like he just got a joke that he heard weeks ago. "I'll talk to Sophie," he said.

"Thank you. Reverend."
And then he laughed again, and took a swig.
I hate to think that Everett, my Everett, that he's still out there somewhere, milling about in old Grantstown, wondering where I went. Or worse, he might know exactly where I went: that I left with the Reverend, that we nearly died in the desert, and that we took up with the very freak show that dismantled the rotted shell of a town that was our home. That would be worse, yes. If he doesn't know what happened, at least he can wonder, question, dream; but now, he can only resent. Seethe. But maybe he's not there at all. Maybe he's a drop of water splashing down in a lake. He protested, made his presence known in a tiny ripple, and was soon part of the whole.

That would be for the best.

They say that ghosts are angry, that's why they stay around, but that's not true. We, the dead of Grantstown, were never particularly angry. We had no call for vengeance or vindication. That wasn't why we stayed. That's not to say we wanted to. We stayed because we had to. But we weren't angry.

But if there's anything left of my husband, I expect he's rather angry now.

I don't much like gin, but when Warren offered me some, I took it. I gathered he was trying to be nice, and that this wasn't easy for him. He's patient, sure, slow-moving, you might even say gentle, but kindness is something you had to do without being asked, and nobody would ever accuse Warren of doing that particularly often. We'd stopped at a roadhouse--I'm sure it had a name, but its sign was scratched and beaten to hell-- and Warren, the Reverend, and I were sitting outside, leaning against the wall next to the
swinging doors, passing the gin back and forth. It's a bitter concoction, gin. The first man to taste juniper berries must have thought they were poison. The first pot of gin in history could only have been distilled on a dare. I wasn't surprised the Reverend liked it. You could see it in his face, the deep lines. The man couldn't have been older than thirty, thirty-five, but he didn't look a day under fifty. When he had his beard he looked his age. I told him he should try drinking water sometime, to which he just laughed and raised his jug.

This Warren was a bad influence. We'd been with this group for four days at this point, and already the Reverend was drinking gin instead of whiskey. It was almost like I didn't know him at all. He smiled. He joked, and not just his usual sarcasm, the kind he'd wield against my husband now and again. Around Warren, the Reverend wasn't a golem of dry sandstone and granite wit; he was a person.

We watched the sun set over the Great Salt Lake to the north and west of us. "In the morning," said Warren, "I'd wager we're headed northeast, to Salt Lake City." He took a swig of gin, exhaled with some kind of boozy satisfaction, and said, "Of course, I can't be too sure. It's all up to the Ten of Spades. Or maybe the Ace of Clubs." Warren stared at the wagon Prudence was leaning against, shuffling her cards again and again. Every time she executed her signature cascade finish, uniting both halves of the deck in one swift wave, Warren's ears would perk up like someone had just called his name. I couldn't hear it from where we were sitting, but as much like a brown bear as Warren looked, he got his ears from a dog.
"Do you go into the city often?" the Reverend said. He waved off the gin jug Warren offered; Warren shrugged, smiled at me, and took another drink. "Can't imagine he does well selling his wares in places like those."

"He doesn't do well selling his wares anywhere," Warren said.

I reached out and snatched the jug from Warren. "Then how does he pay you?" I lifted the jug, just let the gin lap against my lips, and passed it back.

The side of Warren's beard inched up in a crooked smile. "If you'd like something else to drink I'm sure they have water inside."

"I'm fine out here."

"It is a great view," said the Reverend. He lifted the brim of his hat to look out over the lake. Nothing but flat land between us and the lake, and we could just see the twinkling on the water as the sun swelled and sank. "Been a long time since I've been here--this far west."

"It has, hasn't it?" said Warren. "Last time we came out this way we went all the way to the Atlantic. Only time I've ever seen an ocean."

Warren handed me the gin, and I held it for a moment and tried to peer into the dark jug to see how much was left. The smell of juniper stuck to my nostrils. "What's it look like?" I said. "The ocean, I mean." Of course I knew. I'd seen paintings, even a photograph or two. But I liked to hear them talk.

"Massive," said Warren. His voice sounded like the bottle smelled. "Makes you feel small. Like you don't matter at all. All that space."
"No, it doesn't," the Reverend said. He was grinning. "Doesn't look any different than this lake right here. Can you see the other side of this lake, Sophie?"

I obliged him, staring out into the distance, shading my eyes with my hand. "I don't believe I can," I said.

"That's exactly what the ocean looks like. A big, blue lake you can't see the other side of." He took the gin from me, took a drink, and then jammed a cork into the jug. "That's all."

Warren eyed the cork, then sank back against the roadhouse wall. "He's a real romantic, this fellow."

"I am," the Reverend said. "I just don't think a big tub of water's something to get excited about. It's a place for fish to live."

Warren shook his square head. "Are you this eloquent when you're preaching the Gospel?" He pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes as the sun's glow moved down his forehead.

"He's got a great sermon on forgiveness," I said.

"You liked that one, did you?" The Reverend stood, pushing against the wall to heft himself up.

"I hear there's a town south of here where the sun hasn't set since August," said Warren. It didn't seem like he was talking to anyone in particular. "How's that? The part that really surprises me is why we're not there. Seems like it's just the kind of place Prudence and old Whitey like to drag us to."
"Does seem to be his style," I said. The very top of the reddening sun dipped below the waters, leaving nothing but a glow like a smear of paint from a dropped brush. "How do they sleep there?"

"How should I know?" Warren said. "Maybe they just get drunk."

"Always helps me," the Reverend said. He lifted his hat in my direction, smiled, and slipped through the doors into the roadhouse. Only a half dozen people were inside, give or take. Mr. White had gone in, and the twins. I thought I heard Mr. White's voice--his storytelling voice, that grandiose crescendo and fall he's such a fan of--and the laughter of a few men. The twins didn't make a sound. I realized then I'd never heard them speak.

Prudence's cascade startled Warren again, and without a word he lifted himself up to his feet and plodded inside.

#

The next morning I sat on the back of the last wagon with one of the twins. She kept glancing over her shoulder, through the cracked door at her sister, who looked like she was weaving something light and glassy together in her hands. "What's she making?" I asked. "Your sister, I mean. It looks hard."

The girl just looked at me, tried to smile, and shifted her gaze down to the trail below us.

I let her have her silence for a while, but three days with Warren and the Reverend make you take notice of silence as a sound of its own. "I'm sorry. Are you
Anne or Belle? I can't tell yet." When she didn't respond, I said, "Nod your head if you're Anne."

She did.

"It's nice to meet you, Anne. I'm Sophie." I waited to see what she would do, if she'd respond to me at all, and when she didn't, I extended my hand to her. She glanced at it, then at my face, and then shook my hand. Her skin felt warm, soft, smooth like a fresh leaf. Anne let her hand drop to her side, to rest on the platform we were sitting on. While her sister worked almost mechanically inside the wagon behind us, Anne behaved like a slice of wet bread. "Should've had more coffee before we left. You look like you're about to fall asleep."

Anne shrugged and made a sound in her throat--almost a laugh.

"So why aren't you talking?" I pulled a pipe from my pocket and a pouch of tobacco. "I understand you've had a hard time of it. So have I. I find if I keep talking I don't have time to think about how awful everything is." I turned the rough, briarwood pipe around in my hand and sniffed it. "This pipe used to be my husband's. Used to be it smelled like his breath did. Been a long time since anyone's smoked it."

Anne was watching the pipe and something like interest lit up her green eyes.

"You smoke, Anne?"

She shook her head.

"Would you like to?"

When she didn't answer, I smiled and started tamping a wad of tobacco into the pipe. I'd seen Everett do this before, many times, but I'd never done it myself. Never even
smoked, myself. But I had new lungs, new lips, a new tongue. I wanted to taste what he'd loved for so long. When I thought it was packed in enough--or too much?--I struck a match, waving the flame in a circle over the pipe, trying to draw the smoke through, like Everett had done. I coughed when the smoke went down my throat, faster and hotter than I expected, dropped the match and almost dropped the pipe, and Anne laughed.

"That's funny?" I said, and Anne shook her head quickly. "I'm joking, girl. I'm joking." I started lighting it again with another match, and a crackling orange glow danced along the edges of the leaves. The taste was thick, almost sweet. "Care to try?"

She took the pipe from me and stuck it between her teeth with a speed I didn't think she was capable of. "Don't inhale," I said, but by this point she was breathing in, and the tobacco lit up like a fireplace, and she coughed and hacked and spat on the ground as it rolled below us. "I told you not to inhale," I said.

"I know," she said, with a voice strained and dry.

"Hey, how's that?" She handed the pipe to me, smiling sheepishly. "I was starting to think you couldn't talk at all."

"I know," she said. Her smile faded a little and she leaned back against the wall behind us. "I was unsure, for a while." Anne turned her head to peer through the door, where her sister kept working. If she noticed Anne was talking, she didn't let on. Anne turned back to me and said, "Sophie. You are from Grantstown, yes?"

"I wouldn't say I'm from there. It was my last home, though, if that's what you mean."
Anne nodded and swept her long hair back over her shoulder. "Yes. That is what I mean. I am sorry about Grantstown. I thought it was a sad place."

"I suppose it was," I said. The tobacco burned away in the pipe, and I held it tightly, felt its warmth in my palm.

We were silent for a while. Anne looked more comfortable that way—not talking. The Great Salt Lake passed by to the west of us as we wrapped around it towards the city. For a moment, I thought I'd seen the ocean.

The caravan slowed to a stop by the side of the road, and Anne and I jumped down from our perch, stretched our legs on the solid ground. I set the pipe down on the back of the wagon. The Reverend came around to us holding a burned biscuit in his hand.

"You a good cook, Sophie?" he asked. He tossed me the biscuit, which was hard and rough and smelled like burned up charcoal.

"Better than this," I said.

"Good, because I think Warren's going to eat a live squirrel if he has to deal with Prudence's cooking one more time."

Chucking the biscuit over my shoulder, I said, "I would too," and Anne laughed.

Out the corner of my eye, I saw Mr. White approaching the horses that pulled our wagon. He looked short next to them, and thin, even if his white suit seemed to glow in the sun. He swung an empty bucket in each hand as he walked, and he set them down in front of the horses, who bent their thick necks and started to drink water from them.

Water from air. I'd seen better tricks.
"Will you help me, Anne?" I said, and she nodded. "I'll make a fire if you can get me something to cook from the wagon. Anything, really. Except biscuits."

Belle stepped from the back wagon, translucent flowers in her hands, and watched her sister walk briskly away, skirt swaying widely. She stared for a while, breathing slowly, and the flowers seemed to melt away in her palm. I waved to her but didn't get any response. I didn't expect one anyway.

The Reverend and I gathered sticks and brush into a loose pile, and he handed me a tinderbox with a piece of flint and scuffed steel. "You know how to make a fire with these?" he asked. I must have looked incredulous, because he raised a hand and said, "It's been a long time since you've had hands, that's all."

"I can make a fire, Reverend."

"Fair enough," he said.

He settled down on the ground beside me and watched me send showers of sparks over the tinder, which lit and started to burn after the third strike of flint on steel. I saw the Reverend staring over my head, and turned to see what he was looking at. It was a slim, furred animal, several yards away, crouched in the brush with silver-gray fur and a tapered face like a toothy rat. But it wasn't a rat, its tail was too thick for that, its body too sleek. It seemed to make gaze right at me, and its nose twitched back and forth.

"Ever seen one of those before?" I said. "I think it's staring at me."

"Doesn't look like any rat I've seen," said the Reverend. "And I've seen a few." He stood and took a few steps toward the creature with the careful, slow stride of a hunter, his boots silent on the dirt. "Not a prairie dog, either."
"Some kind of cat?"

"No, no," he whispered. "Definitely not a cat."

The creature took no notice of the Reverend's approach, merely watched me, twitching its nose back and forth in a way that made it look like it was laughing. And then, as quick as anything, it dove into the brush and scurried away.

At that moment, the flames roared up from the tinder, engulfing my hand. The Reverend leapt forward and pulled my hand from the fire, throwing sand onto my burning sleeve. "Reverend," I said. "Stop. It's okay. I'm fine." And I was. Even as the flames danced along my hand, I only felt cold, and my skin stayed smooth and cool. We watched as my right sleeve burned away, leaving bare, untouched flesh in its path. "I'm fine," I said.

The Reverend said, "Just fine."

#

We arrived in Salt Lake City later that day. Anne lent me a shawl to cover my burnt sleeve. "No liquor here," I said to Warren. We'd stopped at a stable on the edge of the city, which looked from our vantage point to be a drab sprawl of brick buildings and wide streets, stiffly-dressed people milling about, busy in the midday. Nobody seemed to look up at us, at the sides of the gaudy wagons, just parted ways for the horses and wheels and continued on their way.

He smiled a little, shrugged his massive shoulders, and said, "Nobody needs to know, eh, Mrs. Everett?"

"Just Sophie now," I said.
The Reverend was helping Dwyn to stable the horses, and as Mr. White passed by, he said, "You sure you want to peddle your wares here? Quite a few holy rollers around. You're liable to find yourself hanged."

"It wouldn't be the first time," said Mr. White. He adjusted the owl feather in his cap. "Never been hanged by Mormons before, though."

"How different could it be?" Dwyn said.

"Executioners have a style, just like artists do," said Mr. White. He stopped fiddling with the feather, twisted his mouth to the side, and then shrugged. "You know, Mrs. Everett, ever since you knocked this hat off my head I've been unable to get the feather to stand up straight again. I hope you're happy."

I smiled at him, or at least tried to, and stepped out into the street, wrapping Anne's shawl around my shoulders.

"Warm day, isn't it?" said Mr. White. I turned to look over my shoulder, where he was leaning in the stable door, hat in his hands. His hair was short, impeccably groomed to the side, dark brown with gray at his temples.

"Get thee to a haberdasher," I said. "Then you can stop complaining about your damned feather."

"Hamlet," he said. "You're well-read for a cowherd's wife."

I turned away from him, staring across the street, where a few men sat outside a barbershop, smoking and staring at the ground. "Since when do you take your hat off in public, Mr. White?"
"I don't. Who's watching?" He waved his arm, and I noticed that yes, everyone was looking away. Families who passed by us seemed to consciously avert their gaze, looking down at the ground just long enough to pass us before watching where they were going again. "See? If nobody can see us, we're not in public. At least, that's my reading of the situation." He placed his hat back on his head with a flourish, letting the owl feather fall, floating its way to the street below us. "You look cold, Mrs. Everett."

"Must be the breeze from the lake," I said.

"Or maybe you're just used to the fire now," said Mr. White. He paced over next to me, taking care to step on the feather as he did, and put his slender hand on my shoulder. "Join me for a walk, Mrs. Everett. Let's go look at the Wasatch Mountains."

"I can see them fine from here."

"It's a short walk," he said. "You've had a hard day. You were almost immolated. Some clean air could do you some good."

"I take it you want to have a conversation." For some reason I felt like smiling then, even as something dark and hot sat in the bottom of my stomach. "If you're planning on dancing around the topic like last time, Mr. White, you can save it."

"Not this time," he said. He strode out into the street before me, and the people walking by seemed to part just for him, flowing around the sides of the road, around the telegraph poles, against the wall of Johnson's Black Oil, giving this slender, white-garbed figure as much room as they'd give an elephant. "Are you coming? The view to the east is really quite spectacular."
I watched him continue to walk across the street, then said, "Can the Reverend come?" Mr. White turned to look at me, narrow brow furrowed like he was trying to sort out a puzzle. "I'd hate for him to miss it, I mean. The mountains. That, and you'll have to forgive me if I don't trust you."

"But you trust him?" At this, he walked back towards me with a marching step, the crowd closing behind him. "Do you even know his name?"

I wanted to tell him that yes, of course I knew the Reverend's name. He'd preached in my town for over a month and I'd been traveling with him for almost that long again. If I knew any man's name, I knew his. But I couldn't.

"Didn't he tell you?" Mr. White was right in front of me now. That close up, his eyes always seemed to shine.

"He did," I said. He did tell us. He introduced himself when he first came. "I think I've just been calling him Reverend so long that I've forgotten."

"If you ask me," said Mr. White, "I don't think he has a name. Maybe he thinks he does, but he doesn't. And no matter how many times he tells you, it'll just float out of your brain like the seeds from a dandelion." He stood next to me, peering back into the stable, where the Reverend was strapping a feedbag onto a chocolate brown horse. "Goes for him, too. I bet he can't remember his own name, either. It's just that unremarkable."

"I don't think I believe you."

Mr. White laughed, loud and sing-song, and the spell he cast, his bubble of inconspicuousness, seemed to burst. People looked at him, and the Reverend smiled over at me. "That's what makes us special, Mrs. Everett. We don't just believe things." Mr.
White waved at the Reverend and said, "We're going to go for a walk. There's a great view of the mountains over here. Are you coming?"

#

I came to learn that Mr. White was not a liar. Across the rolling green lands east of Salt Lake City we could see the Wasatch Mountains, their tips crowned with light snows. Our shadows stretched across the ground as the sun set behind us; the Reverend seemed more interested in that--the length of his narrow shadow--than in the mountains or the olive green plains.

"What you saw by the side of the road earlier was a mongoose," said Mr. White as we walked. "They're not native to these parts, of course, but I think they're one of my favorite animals. I don't think they're usually that color, though. They tend to be brown. Do you know, friends, that mongooses will fight and slay venomous snakes seemingly just for sport?"

The Reverend watched his shadow, and I shook my head at Mr. White. The ground felt soft under my feet, soft and cold, though the Reverend was rolling up his sleeves to cool off.

"No, of course you don't. You didn't even know what a mongoose looked like until I just told you." He laughed and came to a stop, wiping a light sweat from his brow. "You know, Reverend," said Mr. White, "I don't think I caught your name, after all this time. Isn't that funny?"

The Reverend just shot him a crooked smile, looked off at the mountains, and said, "Reverend's fine. I'm getting used to it, I think."
"Fair enough. Do you have a gun with you, Reverend?"

The Reverend's right hand shot to his side, resting on the handle of his revolver.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'd just like to do an experiment." Mr. White turned his gaze to me and tilted up the brim of his hat. "Mrs. Everett here wants to know what she is, and frankly, so do I. Aren't you the least bit curious?"

I took a couple of steps backwards, my fingers reflexively curling into fists by my sides. "Why do you need a gun?" I said.

"I just do." Mr. White swept his jacket to the side to reveal an ivory-handled revolver--Warren's pistol, with its unmistakable engraved grip. "Give yours to Mrs. Everett, Reverend. I think there's something she'd like to see, too."

My eyes felt dry, but I didn't blink--I couldn't. I only extended my hand, smoothly as I could, towards the Reverend. "I think I'd like to be armed," I said.

"I think I'd like you to be armed, too," said the Reverend. I felt the gun cold and heavy settle into my hand. "It's your husband's old gun," he said. "I took it before we left. In case we needed it."

"I recognize it," I said. The weight of it. The scuffed wooden handle. The way the hammer felt rough and tight as I pulled it back. The dull click letting me know it was ready to do what it was made to do.

Mr. White drew his own weapon, cocking it and leveling the barrel at my chest.

"You're not going to die from this, Mrs. Everett. That much I do know."

"You just want to see what I'm made of."
"What you're made of," he said.

The Reverend stepped toward me, saying, "You don't have to do this, Sophie. Just turn around. Do you really trust this man?"

"He's no man, Reverend," I said. And he wasn't, I knew that much. Mr. White was so much more, so much less, and nothing like me, no matter how many times he said we were one and the same. All you had to do was look at his eyes and you could see so much.

"He's just like me, Sophie. You and I, we bleed the same way," he said. "I didn't take you out of that town to watch you shot down in a field." His voice had the tone of a sermon, all hellfire and gravity.

"And you won't. You saw what the fire did to me."

Mr. White laughed. "That was quite a stunt, Mrs. Everett. Burning but not burning. You'll have to teach me that one."

"It wasn't hard." I raised my arm, aiming the pistol at Mr. White's chest. "The first thing you need is a mongoose." Deep breaths. That's what Everett always made me do before I shot this thing. Slow, deep breathing, to steady your hands, calm your nerves, but my hand wasn't shaking this time. It was as still as the Wasatch. "Stand back, Reverend."

He did. I swore I could hear his teeth grinding.

"Would you be so kind as to count to three for us, Reverend?" said Mr. White.

"Well fire on three, Mrs. Everett."
Three deep breaths. For good measure. Everything in good measure must come in threes. My ear was full of rushing wind, pounding blood vessels, and somewhere the sound of the Reverend's voice counting one, two, three.

The gun kicked back in my hand. The recoil is always stronger than you fear and weaker than you think. A kick. And Mr. White's bullet was the punch, tearing into my chest and out my back. Mr. White jerked backwards as well, dropping his gun to the ground.

I looked down and saw red flower petals floating downward from a ragged hole over my heart. Mr. White leaked ivory white petals from his stomach.

"Perhaps," he said, "that helps explain you, Mrs. Everett."

The Reverend held out his hand and caught a crimson petal, which melted into water and trickled through his fingers.

"It's just Sophie now," I said.

"Yes," said Mr. White. "I suppose it is."

#

At night the Reverend and I walked to the Great Salt Lake, which rested placid under a cloudy sky. The flowers stopped after a while, as any bleeding would, and my skin looked as though no bullet had touched it. When we reached the shore, we sat beside it, looking out over the lake. Over something that may as well have been an ocean. I reached into my pocket, feeling for Everett's pipe, but it wasn't there. I remembered that I set it on the back of the wagon before cooking lunch. It must have fallen off on the road.
The Reverend carried Everett's revolver in his hand the whole way, and as we sat he caressed its handle, staring at the barrel like he was reading a book. He said, "You're okay, Sophie? Really all right, I mean."

"Yes," I said. "I am. As much as I could possibly be." I thought.

The Reverend offered me the handle end of the revolver. I looked at him, then, studied his face, which was dusted with stubble and looking younger for it. He needed that stubble to look alive.

"It was an old gun," said the Reverend. "It's tired."

"Then maybe it could use a rest," I said. I took the pistol from him and held it in my lap, just for a few moments. "I didn't come with you because you asked me to, Reverend."

"I know." He took off his hat and lay back on the sparse grass. "What happened back there, in the field, you wanted that. So what now?"

"What now, indeed?" I smiled, and then with a wide swing of my arm I flung the revolver out over the lake, where it splashed down a dozen yards away, loud and hollow.

"I guess the next step is learning your name, Reverend."

He sat up with a start as he heard the splash. "Why in the hell did you do that?"

"It's like you said. It's a tired gun. Wouldn't you like to retire by a nice, calm lake somewhere?"

"I guess I would," he said.

"Yeah," I said. I stood, brushed off my skirt, and balled Anne's shawl up in my hand. I wondered, as I walked toward the lake, if that salty breeze was what the sea
smelled like. I stood there for a while, letting the cold water soak through my shoes and my stockings and my feet. "Me too."