

## Locusts

Jesse thought it was the apocalypse, and he told Rose as much. Only when he said the word it sounded more like “apple licks.” His sister tried to correct him. “Repeat after me,” she would say, but when he tried to form the word his mouth felt like it was full of cotton. Rose gave up and said, “Maybe when you’re older.” Rose also knew it was not the apocalypse. Maybe God was punishing them for something, but the world was not coming to an end.

The Pearson farm sat in a valley with hills to the east and west. The cart path ran from the house up into the eastern hills, and Rose liked to follow it up to the first ridge, where she could look across at the mountains in the distance. When the locusts began to appear several days earlier, Rose and Jesse were returning from a walk and caught one to show to their father.

“It’s just a big grasshopper,” Mr. Pearson had said. Jesse laughed, but Rose could see the worried creases in her father’s forehead. She took the writhing insect and had a closer look. Mandibles frantically opened and closed just out of reach from where her fingers held the locust’s body. They seemed almost mechanical, like the blades on the big combines her father would look at skeptically in town. She tried to fling the creature across the yard, but almost as soon as it left her hand its wings flared out and it shot upwards into the darkening sky. Another locust landed on the porch and before Jesse could grab it Mr. Pearson’s heel landed on it with a crunch.

That morning when Rose tried to walk to the outhouse, locusts swarmed in through the crack in the door. She screamed and slammed the door closed. Mr. Pearson set a pot in the corner, and hung a curtain around it. He killed the ones that had already

made their way in the house, holding his boot by the toe and swinging it like a hammer. He found some already eating away at the flour and cornmeal in the pantry. Her father's silence scared Rose, and she hoped he wasn't angry with her for letting so many in the house.

“Just like I said, it must be the apocalypse,” Jesse said.

“Hush,” said Rose, “Where did you hear that word?”

“At church,” Jesse said. “What do you think we're going to do?”

Rose didn't answer. Mr. Pearson was crouched in one corner, using a mallet to hammer a thin wooden plug into a chink between the floor and wall. The dull thud of the mallet had filled the farmhouse for the past hour or so. The sun was just beginning to rise when their father finished around the front door. Out the window Rose saw locusts flying through the pale morning sky in long, unsteady arcs.

Rose boiled water for oatmeal, and when she was finished her father stood on a chair and used the last of his plugs to seal the gap between the copper stove chimney and the roof. After this he found his children in the kitchen scooping honey into their hot cereal. He took the bowl Rose had left for him on the table and stood behind Jesse's chair.

“Once you're done,” he said to Rose, “pack our clothes together in your mother's trunk. Jesse, help your sister.” Jesse nodded, trying to force a question out around his half-chewed oatmeal. Mr. Pearson continued, “I think we'll visit your uncle for a while.” Jesse grinned, and even Rose felt a little excited about staying in town, despite everything. Mr. Pearson ran his hand through his son's hair, and then slipped out the back to ready the horses.

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The locusts thinned out when they reached the hills. Until then Rose was busy pulling them out of her hair and off her dress before they started eating through the fabric. She had to help Jesse too, who wasn't as quick; he arrived in town with several dime-sized holes in his overalls. Mr. Pearson remained quiet as they followed the cart path out of the valley. Whenever he caught a locust he crushed it between his fingers. Rose and Jesse stared at the dark oval of sweat between their father's shoulder blades.

When they reached the road he broke his silence: "Your uncle will be happy to see you two." He turned around to address them, and his face softened into a smile. The locusts were mostly gone here, only occasionally darting past in front of the cart.

"How long will we stay with Uncle John?" Rose asked.

"I don't know, Dear. I've heard of swarms like this, but never seen one myself."

The town of Creede was roughly twelve miles down the road from the Pearson farm. The schoolhouse, where, as the oldest student, Rose acted as the schoolmistress's unofficial assistant, was much closer to their farmhouse, as was the country chapel. Mr. Pearson went into town about once a month, for supplies, and his children only went along sometimes, though he always brought saltwater taffy or some other treat back for them.

They arrived in Creede a little before noon. It was clear the locusts had been here. The shrubs lining the main street were leafless skeletons, and some boards were still visible in windows that didn't close flush. When they pulled up in front of Uncle John's store, Rose noticed it looked different than last time she had seen it, a couple months

back. A fresh coat of white paint covered the front of the building, and the sign, “Pearson’s Supply,” had been re-carved in a flowing script.

Aunt Esther came out of the store as they lowered themselves down from the wagon bed.

“Jesse,” she said, “Well, look at you.” Jesse walked up to her shyly and dug his face into her collarbone when she lifted him up.

“Hello, Esther,” Mr. Pearson said, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“Come in, come in,” Esther reached out and squeezed Rose’s shoulder. “John is at the post but he’ll be back soon.”

Esther took her place by the mechanical register, still holding Jesse. She pulled out a small bit of taffy from a barrel and handed it to him, at the same time motioning to Rose and her father to sit down on the stools across and down the counter from where she stood.

“Where is Sam?” asked Mr. Pearson.

“Didn’t you know? He’s an apprentice now down at the print shop, with Mr. Bowers.”

“I did know that I suppose. It just slipped my mind. You didn’t need him here?”

“No, John and I can still handle everything ourselves. We will have had the store for sixteen years, this autumn, you know.” Esther trailed off awkwardly, avoiding her brother-in-law’s eyes. “So the farm...” she said after a moment.

“We’ll lose the crop, probably have to borrow a little more from the bank,” Mr. Pearson put a hand on his daughter’s shoulder, “But we’ll be all right.”

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That night Rose sat at the top of the stairs that connected the store to the living area above, and listened to her father and uncle talking. Occasionally her uncle would ring the sale bell on the register, to fill an uncomfortable silence, and the sound shivered through the air for several long seconds.

“I knew it might take a while after Kate,” her uncle paused. “But it’s been almost a whole year now.” He sounded old, and looked it as well, with silver hair, neatly trimmed sideburns, and a substantial paunch. He was only her father’s senior by a few years, but almost looked old enough to be her grandfather.

“The kids do fine, and besides, what would I do if we moved?” said her father.

“Well, you could help me out here until you found something else.”

Her father sighed in response, and she could imagine him shaking his head.

“What will you do,” continued her uncle, “When Rose wants to go off and get married? Who’ll look after Jesse?”

“I can see after the boy, and Rose isn’t going anywhere soon.”

“She’s got nothing to keep her there...” said her uncle, quietly. “Maybe you should see this as a sign.”

Rose began to feel uncomfortable. She knew her father wouldn’t leave the farm, even if he lost the entire harvest this year. Some part of her also knew her uncle was right, as much as she resented what he said about her. Her stomach tightened when he mentioned her marriage, but of course she had been thinking about it herself now for some while.

All of a sudden a pair of hands grasped her shoulders from behind. Her body shuddered, but thankfully her breath caught in her throat.

“Rosie Posie,” whispered her cousin Sam. “I came in the back,” he said, grinning.

Rose tried to give him a stern look, but broke into a quiet laugh and gave Sam a playful slap on his chest. He grabbed her hand and they walked back to his bedroom, adjacent to the washroom.

“I suppose you’re kicking me out of my own bed,” said Sam, glancing down at the trunk on the floor.

“Jesse was so excited about camping out with you and Pa in the spare room,” said Rose. “Of course he’s fast asleep now.” They both laughed.

“I think you look even older than last time you were in town, Rosie.” She hated when most people called her Rosie, but Sam said it with a little, crooked smile and she didn’t mind so much.

“You sound like your mom,” she said. “But thank you. You look more mature as well.” Sam scratched at the dark stubble along his jaw-line.

“I’m thinking of growing a beard, you know.”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous.” Rose couldn’t help but smile, and Sam looked at her with a mock expression of pain. “So you’re an apprentice now,” said Rose, sounding appropriately impressed.

Sam tried to smile modestly, and said, “It’s nothing – hard work, but I like it.” He paused a moment. “And what about you?”

She stared at her feet. “I’m helping at the schoolhouse, and around the farm, of course.”

“It’s been too long since I’ve been out at the farm.” Sam paused and stared at Rose. “I can imagine you with your hair tied up, and a nice cotton apron on, picking vegetables in the garden.”

She laughed quietly. “I don’t usually wear my apron in the garden.”

“Well, you know what I mean. You’ll make quite a farmwife someday.” Sam nodded his head, as though in affirmation.

“And what if I don’t want to be a farmwife?” Rose asked with half-hearted indignation, placing her fists on her hips.

Sam thought for a moment. “I suppose you would still look nice with a bonnet and a parasol.”

They both laughed, and Sam stood up to leave. As he walked past her to the bedroom door his eyes traveled down the length of her dress.

“It’s good to see you, Rose,” he said.

“Goodnight, Sam.”

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The following day Rose walked down the main street of Creede to deliver a package to Dr. Jones for her aunt. The barren vegetation looked distinctly out of place under the high summer sun. Of the people she knew in town, Dr. Jones was her favorite. He had visited their house several times when her mother was sick. She found him in his office, behind a large oak desk. Behind and to his left, a yellowed globe sat on its wooden stand.

“Hello, Miss Pearson,” said Dr. Jones happily.

“Dr. Jones.” She curtsied, and handed him the package.

Dr. Jones continued to smile, placed the brown paper parcel in one of his desk drawers, and said, “How are you, Rose?”

“I’m doing well, Doctor – healthy as a horse.”

“Glad to hear it. I hear you’re teaching out at the Old Mission School now.”

“Well, not exactly, Doctor. I finished all the lessons, so now I help Miss Hardy, unless Pa needs me to do something at the farm.”

He noticed her eyes on the globe. “A recent acquisition from my last trip to Fort Collins. Take a look”

Rose walked past the desk and gingerly spun the globe around its thin metal axis. Dr. Jones stood behind her and stopped it with one finger. She vaguely recognized the shape of the United States.

“Here’s where we are,” he said, “And those are the Rockies.”

She ran a finger over the lacquered paper, raised slightly to indicate mountains.

“Thank you,” said Rose, returning to stand in front of the desk.

“Of course,” Dr. Jones said. She began to walk towards the door. “Rose.” She stopped. “Wait one moment, please.” He walked into the back room. When he returned he was holding several books. “If you wanted to continue your studies.”

“I couldn’t, Dr. Jones,” she said.

“Please, I’d like you to have them.” She took them and mumbled thanks and began to back up once more. “One more thing...well, I don’t want to overstep my bounds, but your aunt asked if I might mention something to you. If you wanted to come to town and learn a trade, maybe midwifery...well, you could always stay with your family here, and I would be happy to help too, in any way.” Dr. Jones looked a little



embarrassed. “I suppose she didn’t want to tell you in the store for fear that your father might overhear and take it the wrong way.”

“Of course, thank you, Doctor.” Rose didn’t know what else to say.

“Think about it, Rose.”

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Rose sat in her cousin’s bed, reading one of the books Dr. Jones had given her. A candle sat on the window ledge above her head, and she could hear the moths flitting against the glass pane. The book was *Great Expectations*. She had trouble with some of the words – “derived” and “intersected” – but she continued to read. As she slowly turned the page the door to the bedroom opened cautiously and Sam walked in. Startled, Rose placed the open book across the front of her white nightgown.

“Sam...you weren’t at dinner tonight,” she said, for lack of anything better to mention.

Sam gave her a vacant look, and sat down in the room’s single chair without responding. He took a deep breath and finally said, “Some friends and I were playing cards.” Rose noticed beads of sweat on his brow, and the sharp scent of alcohol quickly filling the small room. She had seen her father like this, after her mother had died. It had only happened once, and she’d had no idea of what to do. Rose was less frightened by her cousin though. She stood up quickly and wrapped herself in the robe hanging on the bedpost. She set the book on the dresser near the door.

“Come on, Sam. I’ll get you some cool water and you can sleep. Why don’t you take the bed tonight, and I’ll sleep in the other room with Pa and Jesse.”

He continued to look at Rose, an odd smile on his face, which she found discomfoting. She walked into the washroom and poured water from a large pitcher into a ceramic mug. The wooden floorboards creaked when she went back into the hall. All the other doors were closed; it must have been later than she had realized.

When she reentered the bedroom, Sam was still sitting in the chair, but he looked less distracted. She sat across from him on the edge of the bed, took one of his hands and wrapped it around the mug.

“Rose?” said Sam.

“Yes?”

Sam stared into the mug, and sighed loudly.

“Are you all right, Sam?” Rose asked.

“I’m fine,” he said, looking up. “Hand me that book. Let me see what you’re reading.”

Rose walked to the dresser. As she reached for the book, she heard the chair scrape against the floor and the door close. When she turned around Sam was standing over her. In one swift motion he leaned forward to press his lips against hers. The book fell from her hands and landed with a dull thud. For a moment she stood still, the rough stubble against her chin and the metallic taste of whiskey forced into her mouth. But once she overcame her surprise she shoved Sam back and moved towards the door.

“Sam,” she said pleadingly, as she reached for the door handle. But Sam had moved forward again, and reached past to hold the door closed.

“Don’t worry,” said Sam, as he leaned down to try and kiss her again. She turned her head, but his strong hand gripped her jaw and he forced his lips on hers.

“I have to sleep.” She tried to pull away from him, but he easily took her by the shoulders and moved her onto the bed. Standing in the small room, Sam looked especially imposing. He crawled on top of her and began to push her robe and nightgown up her legs.

“No, Sam, not like this,” Rose’s eyes were closed.

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” he said quietly, and blew out the candle on the windowsill.

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Rose burst into Dr. Jones’ office, her face pale and eyes bloodshot, but otherwise composed. Thankfully he was alone again. As soon as he saw her he stood up with a concerned look. Rose paused in the middle of the room, staring at the center of his chest. She opened her mouth to say something but simply sobbed, once. Dr. Jones walked around his desk and reached out to take her shoulder, but Rose flinched and he withdrew his hand. She bit her lip as sobs began to shake her entire body, and finally she moved forward to cry into Dr. Jones’ lapel.

After several minutes he led her back into an examination room and helped her up onto a padded table and stood across from her.

“Rose, tell me who did this to you.”

There was a long silence before she spoke. “It was dark outside, in the alley behind the store. I couldn’t see.”

Dr. Jones lowered his eyebrows doubtfully, and said, “What were you doing out in the alley at night?” But Rose continued to stare at her feet hanging over the edge of the narrow table.

She didn't say anything more, and eventually lowered her head down and tucked her feet up into her dress. Dr. Jones covered her with a blanket and waited until she was sleeping before he closed the blinds and left her to rest.

When Rose emerged from the backroom, Dr. Jones was waiting for her at his desk. He handed her a paper parcel that felt as if it were filled with some sort of powder.

"Mix a teaspoon of this with a glass of water and take it every morning for the next ten days. Now you better get back to the store before your family becomes worried."

Rose nodded, her face blank. She began to walk towards the door. "Rose," said Dr. Jones. She turned back. He reached into a desk drawer, took something in his hand and motioned her to him. "Be careful. Don't get yourself hurt." He handed her the folded knife in his palm, not much longer than one of his fingers. She pressed a small trigger on the side and a thin blade flipped up.

"Thank you Doctor."

Later that night, Rose sat on her bed, gripping the switchblade in the pocket of her dress. She imagined using it, envisioned waving it in front of Sam's face when he came into her room. But when he opened the door, her hands began to shake and she let the knife fall to the floor behind the bed. She turned over, and unsuccessfully pretended to sleep. He walked to the bed and placed his hand gently around the nape of her neck, beneath her hair.

"I didn't tell anyone, Sam," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry, Rose."

Rose sobbed into her pillow.

“I’m sorry, Rose,” Sam repeated. “But you had better not tell a soul.” His hand tightened on her neck. He turned from her and left the room.

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Rose, Jesse and their father stood on a low rise looking down at the Pearson farm. The fields were completely desiccated. What crops hadn’t entirely been devoured were thin and tired, like patches of fur on a mangy dog. Mr. Pearson wiped his face with the back of his sleeve, and continued to stare at his land.

“Rose,” Mr. Pearson turned to his daughter. “Your Aunt Esther wants you to move back to town, learn something useful.”

“I know,” Rose said.

“Well, if you’d like, I won’t object.” He turned back to the scene below.

Rose was quiet for a moment, and then turned to her brother. “Who would take care of Jesse then,” she said, in as happy a voice as she could muster.

“I don’t need no one to take care of me,” Jesse said defiantly.

“Do too,” said Rose, sticking her tongue out at her brother.

“I reckon that settles it for now, then.” Mr. Pearson nodded, and an almost imperceptible smile creased the corners of his mouth.

Rose looked down again at the farm. There was nothing for her here. Indeed in its present ruin, the land didn’t seem to have anything to offer anyone. The world had not ended; but Rose knew, looking down at the wasteland, one world that might have been was instead lost to her forever.