

Roots

The only open door is the one you can't see.

Her eyes were open, trained on the window across the room. Curtains fluttered in the late summer breeze, the chill of autumn a whisper in the distant mountains. She was in her last clean shift and there was more to wash than her own clothes.

The hens clucked in the yard and her fingers veered in the direction of his shoulder as he leaned across the table to pick up his lunch sack. "Eloise," he said, "don't."

"I'm sorry," she said, her fingers curling at the last. He was something like curdled milk, used to be sweet but maybe the temperature rose or maybe he just got old but no matter, thing was now he was different. Can't stir curdled milk into fresh coffee and expect anything worth drinking.

I miss you, she said, but not out loud.

The door slammed. The hens clucked, indignant. The breeze, ever forgiving, felt the weight of the cotton curtains through its fingers.

She stood, and pressed her fingers to her eyes, and went to the washbasin in the corner and pulled the first shirt into the water, too hot but she couldn't feel it.

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One day – that day, the day he first noticed her, she had her hair in a long plait down her back. The end was an old frayed thing because she hadn't cut it for the summer yet, but he didn't seem to see the imperfections then. His hands were like ice when he took her fingers between them and asked her name.

His shirts were made out of simple muslin. She sewed them all herself, two new shirts every autumn that would serve through the winter and be worn thin by the time the summer heat came around. He wore his shirts out the way a toddler wears out his mamma. He ran them ragged.

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His heart, which was once a map she knew the exact topography of, was marred by a heavy fog she could not explain or deny.

They used to speak. At night in their bed, he would tickle her stomach lightly and sigh promises in her ear that curved her lips and shivered her insides. She might laugh and say, this is enough, Henry, but it didn't stop the words from coming. He was filled with them, promises that might add up to something someday.

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She remembered the way he used to be, his easy smile and the way he played with her, like the world was one big joke he couldn't wait to tell. He used to love telling her jokes even though she only laughed half the time. The things he thought were funny were everything, but she was more selective in her laughter. Perhaps that was the most terrible thing.

He washed his hands and then his face in the water bucket with disdain now, like the life he lived was too heavy and promiseless to care. The hair at his temples curled, droplets of water sparkling in the sun. Sawdust no longer danced around him or clung to his arms and he was just a man, tired and hungry.

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In the morning, the bed was cold. From where she lay she could see snow on the very tips of the mountains. Their bed was carved from an old oak tree that had stood and died in front of Henry's parents' house. His brother made it for them, an endeavor that took several years. He worked on it in the winters when the only thing to do was bring the cows in and out and wait for the snow to melt. Before it was finished they slept on a lumpy blue and white striped mattress stuffed with ticking.

Henry had left the window open overnight and she shivered. It wasn't unusual for him to be up and gone when she woke up. Maybe it was the open window or the chill in the air – she pulled her arms under the covers and shoved her fingers underneath her. But the wind blew and burrowing didn't help the cold.

He came back in the evening, spent. He seemed thinner than ever and when she placed the grits and loaf in front of him he picked up his fork with a sigh that was more of a groan. He lived all of his moments in his own head these days. When they married, under the jammy blue June sky on the open prairie, promises floating around them like flower petals, he wanted to share a life with her. She believed him.

"Henry," she said. He didn't respond. "Henry, I need you to talk to me." She kept her voice level and patient.

He lifted his head but his eyes were dark and tired. "There's nothing to say."

"There's something to say but you just don't want to try."

"Eloise." His face was red and strained. He threw his fork down.

“Are you trying to scare me, Henry? Because it isn’t going to work. Maybe you think you can keep me out of this. Whether you like it or not, I’m just as much a part of it as you are, and you’re making it worse with what you’re doing.”

He sat back. “I don’t know what to say, Eloise. We have to be out of the house in three weeks. I’m trying to change things.”

She pulled her hands into her lap. Well, it wasn’t what she had expected. It had been a hard year for them, she knew that, and it could have been any number of things. She took a deep breath. “Well, we’ll figure it out. We can rent a room in town. We don’t need all this space, Henry.”

He shook his head but said nothing.

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With empty mornings she came to notice sounds that never seemed apparent before. Henry was a man of grunts and snorts and scuffles, no louder than any other man but a constant source of noise nonetheless. When they were married, it was the thing she noticed about him within the first week.

He grunted when he was content, leaning back with one hand on his stomach and one hand behind his head. He would give her a wanton smile, beckoning her to him from the dish bucket. It was her practice to ignore him until she was finished. He appreciated the teasing although it didn’t always suit his fancy.

Sometimes he would rouse himself from his chair and cross the room to her, winding his arm around her waist and brushing loose strands of hair away from her face. It was rare she let this sway her. The moments she did, she could see the glint in his eyes of a man having won his prize, and it delighted her to be pleasing to him.

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She was not what anyone would call a beautiful woman, and she knew it. In her dresses, her hips were wide like a mare's. Her shoulders had a tendency to hunch forward, no matter what she did to pin them back. Maybe she never would have noticed anyway, except that her mother scolded her about it whenever she had a chance. So it was one of those things that, when she considered the varied and multiple faults that could drive away a man, her hunched shoulders and wide hips were at the top of the list.

There were days now when she wondered if she was the thing he grew tired of. If that was the case, there wasn't very much she could do about it. A donkey can't make itself a horse, and she knew that if a man changed his mind and wanted a horse, he was the only thing that could change it back to be content with a donkey. Had he grown tired of her already, then? How could anyone promise a life to another person when a man and a woman are such changeable creatures? But she kept her heart for him because she had promised it to him.

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It wasn't the first hard year. Even before he came to her father for his permission, she knew what it meant to go to bed hungry and wake to the failed promise of an empty kettle. On the prairie, the sun meant a new chance to survive if the previous one had failed. She watched her father rise morning after morning, her brothers too when they were old enough, to pull his suspenders over his shoulders and shrug out the door. They went to the fields hoping they would find something to

harvest in the fall, hoping for something to grow even when the rains hid themselves in passing clouds.

Later, she learned to dig for wild parsnips in the forest and climb the mountains looking for berries and anything else that could be boiled or ground for substance. Her legs grew strong and her back straight as she came to know the wide expanse as more of a home than the walls she slept within.

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There was no bluer sky than the sky out her window. The window sat above the dish bucket, where she had asked Henry to put it when he built the cabin before they were wed. She thought of him every morning and evening and every other time she stood there washing something, whether he deserved her thoughts or not.

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Their marriage bed smelled like him. Her shifts and stockings and dresses and underthings, everything smelled like him. This was how she knew she no longer belonged to herself.

At the first, his smell was a gift. It was the surprise of a spring rain and the warm hesitation of a forgotten memory. She caught it first when he walked past her at the mercantile. Her arms were full of her mother's hopes and dreams, and when he walked past her she thought she may have found a dream of her own.

It wasn't him though – her dream was something else, something she couldn't describe or name. It felt like walking through the north pasture under a full moon or cresting a high peak in a tired dress. Her face lifted with the exhilaration of it, and that was the moment he glanced over and saw her for the first time.

The curse of woman is to belong to a man who does not know what he holds. Or maybe the truth is: the blessing of woman is to belong to a man who does not know what he holds. A man will never be able to completely grasp what is in his fingers, and he will either strangle it or caress it. They usually do not know what to do with us, her mother said once, in a moment of rare and easy honesty. That is why we have to help them see what they are able to see and wait until they are ready to see what they are not.

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She woke with her mother's voice in her ears to a room that was warm with smoke. She coughed and tried to open her eyes but they smarted something fierce and then she was crying, from fear or emotion or just the physical nature of smoke in her eyes she didn't know. "Henry!" she shouted, but no answer. She tripped as she fell out of their bed, landing on the dull wood of the floor. It was still cool down there and she opened her eyes just a tiny bit, to see what she could see. The smoke was less and she saw that the flames were on the north side of the house, where she washed dishes and clothes. The nook holding their bed was on the south side, in the back corner, and she tried to see a clear path to the door but the smoke was too thick.

Where was Henry? She had to get out. What did she need? What could they not replace? None of it. It had cost a pretty penny to come out here in the first place, both of them working days and nights to build something that resembled the life they had dreamed about together. But they had done it. And now it was going to be gone in a matter of moments. Henry was already gone.

She grabbed the box under the bed, heaving it forward with all her strength. She yanked the coverlet off the bed and the Bible on the table and threw them all out the window that Henry had left open. For once she thanked him for his habits and pulled herself up and through it as well, tumbling to the ground and scraping her legs. Her skin burned but not from fire and she was filled with the relief of surviving what should have been her own death. She heaved a breath and dragged herself to her feet, casting about her for the things she had saved in the violent light of the fire that was now eating away at the roof.

Where was he? She was crying now, not just from the smoke or the shock of what was happening. But where was he? She was alone here, in nothing but a nightgown in the middle of what they had called a homestead but what was really just a field. She swiped at her eyes and worked to drag the box further from the house, her fingers and toes slipping.

Suddenly in the dark she heard voices, yelling and her name and Henry's name. "I'm here!" she shouted, but they didn't seem to hear her or see her. She abandoned the box and grabbed the coverlet, wrapping it around her shoulders as she ran towards them. But after a few feet she stopped short and dropped to the ground, heart stopped in her chest. They weren't calling her name or Henry's. They weren't even speaking a language, just whooping and hollering in that animal cry way the Indians did when they were in a war party. He was dead. Henry was dead. And so was she, if she stayed here. On her belly, she moved towards the forest at the edge of the clearing where their house burned, praying the men wouldn't see her,

praying they would be too caught up in the treachery before them to notice a half-dressed lump working at escape.

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“No one has seen him.”

A pause and a cluck of the teeth. “I think she knows. She hasn’t stirred for three days.”

“Probably can’t wake up after that.”

Five days after the fire, she opened her eyes. It was a deliberate choice, not an accident. She didn’t know where she was but she grew tired of snippets of conversation and hushed whispers. She wanted someone to tell her what happened without talking about her like she was a mare with a broken leg.

The room was white. It was so clean she almost cried. Being clean was something she had given up on the prairie. There was dirt everywhere here, and she told herself that being clean was one of her mother’s dreams, not her own.

She turned her head to look in the direction of the sunlight on her face. She could see a pasture in the distance, horses grazing behind a log fence. The sight caused something in her to curl up and hide its head, and she had the thought for a moment that maybe she would close her eyes and not open them again, no matter who said what. But then a woman bustled into the room as if she knew she was awake, totally unconcerned with whether she was disturbed or not.

“Well! There you are! Good to see your pretty blue eyes, my dear.” She came to her side and gently placed a hand under her neck to help her lift her head to drink. “Here’s some water for you. How are you feeling?”

She said nothing but drank the water because she had no choice.

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One day, when it seemed apparent he wasn't coming back, she took her tea in the back garden. The trees were full of the promise of new leaves, tiny green buds hinting at the promise of something predictable and uncertain all at once.

She pulled a piece of crumpled paper from her pocket and a rough pencil. There was something she had to write, so it was out of her, and then maybe she could leave it behind.

This is what love means. It means that when I see you across the room, my eyes catch on your figure. Your strong hands with your stubby bent fingers and your shoulders that carry heavy loads. Your eyes, soft and brown and your eyelashes, which are beautiful. It means that I think about who you were and who you are now and who you will be and I want to be with all kinds of you, even the kinds that are terrible and mean. It means that I see you, I see your softness and your tenderness and I love the raw parts of you just as much as the strong ones. It means that you are in my heart and I want you to never leave. But most of all, what it means is that I am yours, and yours alone.

She took one deep breath that shook a little. She folded the paper without reading it over once. She dropped the pencil back in her pocket as she stood, crossed the sideyard, and found the right place, burying her words in the roots of the oak.