

One: Maggie

Darkness seeped through the house, silence ebbing in its wake, as the first light of the first evening star flickered and hid behind my reflection that danced in the candlelit pane. And a certain anxiousness grew. Behind that reflection waited a much larger world than the one that shows itself in the day. And tonight just might be the night I would finally embrace it.

She used to say to me that I was the stars and all their dust, a shimmering glimpse of God in Heaven. But...stars fall.

I never understood why Mother was so angry all the time. Hurt and bitter would flow from her stern face, beautiful and black, but not dark enough to hide the crimson rage. And as the words spilled I would look down and shut up except to repeat “yes, ma’am” as often as necessary to plug the leak. And then I’d retreat to some small space inside myself, and then to my room, where I’d wait for night, wait for that anxiousness, and pray...just pray that the night would be that night.

She would work soon. And Janelle would sleep, after cleaning the kitchen. I grabbed my bag, threw just enough clothes into my suitcase as I could reasonably carry, carefully stepping over the creaks of the third, fourth and sixth floorboards. And I stared through my reflection and waited. The face staring back in and out of silhouette looked more like Mother than me. Frustrated and expectant, dark. In the daylight my skin is so pale that most folks assume I’m white. But I’m not. Or, rather, I’m much more than that, and for that, something much less.

That was supposed to be a secret, but not one I felt much worth keeping.

My hand trembled on my bouncing knee as I sighed and swallowed, and that anxiousness decided, finally, that that night had indeed, finally come. A quick, thankful glance about the room landed on my favorite Dolly Varden, the black hat with the faux pink roses that stuck out

from the back. I tied it on while haphazardly tucking my long hair underneath. Wherever I was headed began with a step out the window. I snuffed out the candle, carefully opened the window, tossed out my bag and suitcase and paused, listening to see if their thumps had stirred any curiosity. I knotted the hem of my dress up over my waist so I wouldn't tangle myself in the oak's branches that reached out for me. I leaned into their embrace, greeting them with my left hand while my right clung to the window frame and I lowered myself slowly until the tip of my right toe reached the doorframe below. I climbed out and down, dug my thumbs into the knots, and gathered my bags to the street lamps into town. Where to sleep the night was likely a moot question, but I would have to catch the first train out or else Mother would have me home again.

What would happen in the morning? How long would she wait at breakfast before she'd send Janelle to fetch me? Would she panic when Janelle reported back that I was gone? Would she curse my name? Fetch my cousin Ike, or Jefferson maybe? I wish I didn't have to leave Ike. He was the only one who ever understood just how much of an ass Jefferson was. But he tolerated him as much as he could, seeing as how Jefferson and I were engaged to marry. And he tried, rather fruitlessly, to show Jefferson how to act like a man instead of the pompous twit he was. Too much money and education I suppose; Jefferson was from perhaps the only other wealthy black stock in Norfolk, foolish enough to never realize we were only tolerated as a bit of a curiosity more than a people.

More so than anything, Mother understood this. It was like a game to her and she was the master strategist. Possum playing, she called it, though she never did explain it. Perhaps that was why she was so disappointed in me. I never played by the same rules. Didn't keep the same secrets. I wish she understood that...that I love her enough to be her daughter. Of course I do. Love her that is. Hate her just as much, I suppose.

Two: Mary

If you was listening fer it, you could hear it over the church singing. Normally, I'd be right there, too; not singing, just listening. I don't sing much, and I don't reckon I sing good. So why spoil the music? Normally, I'd be right there, but only because I work for the Ursulines who run St. Peter's church. I don't like church much. Ain't ever done me a whole lotta good.

Normally, I'd a punched that joker out cold. Teach him a lesson he wouldn't forget anytime soon. He's the fool who insisted on settling our differences *the frontier way*. Damn fool. If you was listening, you'd hear is stupid laugh, drunk and lazy, going up and down the boardwalk laughing, "Black Mary's gonna kill me." And I was gonna, too, but only because the fool insisted, you see. And he was a fool, my land...with his vaquero hat, checked shirt and chaps. Chaps. What the hell? Damned dime store cowboy. Chaps.

We was hired hands at the mission. I was tall and stocky, like a ox. He was short and scrawny, and somehow moved so much slower than me. I worked. And he was content to let me do his work—hauling freight, chopping wood. I was fine with it, really. Nobody ever drowned hisself in sweat. The nuns knew this, too, but they was all about God and turning cheeks and telling me to find lessons in working with him. The only thing I learned was how much the fool bugged me. "Black Mary" this and "Black Mary" that. And one day I says, "Don't call me that." And he says, "What am I gonna call you, then, *Ugly Mary*? 'Cause you shore is ugly." He didn't know just how fast a hand could move 'til right then. I slammed him up against the wall by the throat. And I would'a settled accounts then had Sister Helen not walked into the kitchen to check on dinner.

"Black Mary!" she says, in this tiny little voice. She reached out to my arm as she stomped across the floor—her dingy white dress dragging behind her. "What *are* you doing?"

“Turnin’ cheeks is all,” I grumble. Well she knew what I meant and she got all on about God and forgiving and patience and such. Got me a heap o’ patience, normally, but it done run out with this fool. After she left, he went and says we ain’t done; gonna settle it Sunday, high noon, so the sisters won’t interfere.

So, Sunday come, high noon. My shotgun, Chester, looked like a yappy dawg at the door. I grabbed him, hobbled my thick legs through the garden, through the gate and into the dusty street. The fool stumbled from Marcus’ saloon like the ground was quaking under his happy and stupid feet. How Marcus found hisself in Montana all the way from Ireland I never knew. But on Sundays he baby-sat the drunks who gambled and cussed instead of went to church. That’s where I spent my Sundays before I got my job. Can’t speak much for gambling on Sabbath Day, but as for cussing, we knows we ain’t picking any grapes in the Lord’s vineyard when we cuss...it jes sorta sets on the tongue as easy as a hoss fly ridin’ a mule’s ear. And we can shore cram plenty o’ grammar into it.

Marcus stood at the door and called in over his shoulder, “Boy’s check yer cards. Some deck is shore shy a joker.” He then huffed on a glass and polished it against his apron. Threw a nod my way as the fool took his place at the other end of the boardwalk.

Dime store cowboy suddenly came serious. Wiped the sweat from his brow, and I think he realized he’d done made a mistake. He reached for his pistol, though, and in a quick move Chester leveled at my hip and fired. His pistol clicked. He fell over. Dead. Dead. Dead. The church singing stopped and the parishioners came from the mission. I headed back inside to get back to work, feeling bad as I done spoiled the music anyhow.

One of Marcus’ gamblers picked up the fool’s gun and started laughing. “Look, he got no beans in the wheel!” And then the other gamblers and the parishioners laughed, too.

Somebody pointed at the St. Peter Mission sign and joked that Dime Store Cowboy was shaking hands with the saint himself.

Well, the nuns and the bishop weren't happy much with me. But, you'd a think that fer all their talk of God and cheeks and forgiveness they'd done cut me some slack. The nuns were fine, I s'pose. The bishop, though, the only lesson he give out was that he can't have his help holding shoot outs at the mission...especially on Sunday. He axed me and this made the nuns all sorts of sad to see me go. Surprised me something awful. Never thought I made much for an impression there, but they was all boo-hooing and hugging and what-not. I don't hug much. Makes me squeamish. Makes me fat, too. Nobody ever gets their arms all the way around me...especially the tiny little nun arms. It's like they just pattin' me on my sides or something. Hate hugging.

Sister Helen asked me to make one last delivery for them, and I says I would. I weren't mad at them after all. And if God were watchin maybe he'd a see something to make him turn cheeks for the shoot out. I had nowhere to go anyway, so I may as well run the delivery and plant myself someplace else.

Sister Helen was all crying and fidgety watching me tie up the tarp over my coach and patting my horses. She tole me that I's gonna overheat with my stocking cap and wool coat, but you know, you can't let the sun on you. She thanked me for running this last delivery and hugged me again with those tiny little nun arms. I climbed onto my coach, checked Chester's barrel and headed out with a "gee up!"

She chased after to the gate, all sad and shouting, "God be with you!" *Huh, he says.* I don't think he was listening much.

Three: Clara

I had never really thought of my story as extraordinary, but I always understood that my life as a slave was atypical. I was born a slave; had always only known slavery. It seemed as normal to me as the sun and moon. Stars. I wish I could say that I just sprang out of nothingness like Heaven and Earth, but that would be a lie. I honestly never gave much thought to my father, and I only met my mother once in passing, as it were—she on the way out, me on the way in. Ole Miss said when it was time for me to be born I was stubborn as a mule and by the time they pulled me out, I had yanked her life out right along with me.

I don't ever remember ever, not even once, having worked the fields. I don't ever remember sleeping in the cabins with the other slaves. I was always supposed to sleep with the other house slaves in the attic, which was supposed to be better than the cabins. But it was still a crowded room with a single small window that was just hotter than summer, just colder than winter, and always humid. The only thing nice about the attic was the company of Ole Miss, and the sketches she made of the animals and mountains and plants she ached for from home. The zebras and giraffes and other animals looked magical, the mountains strong and lonely, and one of the flowers in particular looked lovely...a lily, with just one long elegant petal that grew out and wrapped around itself like a draped hug. Ole Miss said it was a special flower, born of rage and grace at the time of the stars in Heaven. They glow with stardust. It was home.

Though I was supposed to sleep in the attic, I usually slept with Lorraine, much to the ire of her daddy. There were a few obvious things about that man. He had tons of money. He was a tyrant. And he loved Lorraine more than all the money and power he could ever get. To be sure, I think the only thing he ever loved more than Lorraine was his wife...and when she had died he surrendered all his love for her over to Lorraine. Lorraine was like me in that she never

really knew her mother—she was only a few years old when her mother died giving birth to Lorraine's brother, who also died that night. Having children is such an odd thing—seems the chances are that if the baby lived the mother wouldn't, or vice versa, and the babies that lived were lucky to live all that long. I swore I'd never be a part of that nonsense.

Anyway, once Lorraine and her daddy were left alone, he was too busy and too heartbroken to take another wife. He turned to Ole Miss to help raise Lorraine and then Ole Miss turned to me to help keep Lorraine out of her way. After all, they had a plantation to run, and then business called Lorraine's daddy out of town more often than not. He sure did love Lorraine something fierce. You'd have thought that when she was born, all the angels in Heaven came down to give him this magical blessing that was Lorraine. She was so pretty, with fair skin and long blond hair...tall and strong, as strong as any boy in town and she weren't afraid to knock some sense into their heads when necessary. She wasn't like most white folk, and she didn't hesitate a bit to show compassion for us slaves. It drove her daddy mad how she would challenge his ways...and he loved her so much that he had no choice but to resent *me* for *her* behavior. Slavery was as normal to her as it was to me...but she had the mind to ask things like *What makes the moon change shape? What makes the sun shine? What keeps the stars in Heaven? Why does Clara belong to us?* I think, in some ways, being constantly surrounded by the house slaves helped develop that compassion that would lead to some interesting developments later on in her life. Why her daddy felt that I, specifically, was responsible for any of this was beyond me.

Lorraine used to say that if I were white, I'd be just as pretty and ornery as she, but later she'd come to realize we were both pretty, and both pretty ornery. And we were a lot alike. Maybe that's why her daddy blamed me. Lorraine would joke that we were a bad influence on

one another...and her daddy would agree. Said Lorraine was responsible for making me the most useless and worthless slave imaginable...and that if he didn't know that there would be hell to pay he would have sold me off long ago.

Lorraine went to school and learned to read and write, do numbers and what-not. And then when she came home she would make me play school with her. It was miserable, sitting in her hot bedroom out of earshot from her daddy, Lorraine with her slate board and me sitting at the table pretending it was a desk. Two plus two is what? Two plus what is four? What plus two is four? Four minus what is two? And so on and so forth. I'd whine that it was all the same problem, but she'd insist it wasn't. "If I know how to add two and two, then I know how to add two and three, and five and ten, and a million billion and four. It's just numbers." Boredom consumed me as she pretended to teach me reading and writing...which didn't come as easy for me as numbers. I'd rebel, and she'd make me write over and over again, "I will pay attention in class." I swear I knew how to write those words before I ever learned the alphabet. And writing those words over and over again never got me to pay attention any better, but in shuffling the words around I figured out how simple words could manipulate meaning. Such as "Pay attention in class, I will!" or "Will I pay attention in class?" (More often than not, not likely.) One day, while Lorraine pretended to teach me multiplication, I shrieked and stormed out of the room. She chased after, yelling for me to get back in my desk. But it was a beautiful spring day, almost summer, and I didn't want to. I must have been about seven or eight, maybe nine. And the day...it called.

"Let's go to the creek!" I said, but she insisted that class wasn't over. But it was over because I wasn't going back to my pretend desk to pretend to learn real math. We threw words back and forth until she finally told me to get my black ass back in my seat. When I told her to

make me, she hit me so hard upside the head it shut me up. My eyes widened, but refused to cry. And though my mouth was just as wide, the only noise it made was a gasp. Lorraine looked at me with the same expression...I knew she wanted to cry as much as I did, but we were both too stunned, angry, and plain stubborn.

“Miss Lorraine!” Ole Miss called from the back porch. “May I please have Clara’s help shucking d’ peas?” Lorraine and I stared each other down a bit more until a ferocious voice quivered for me to go. She then turned and stomped up the grand staircase to her room.

I stepped out onto the porch and looked past to the cotton fields, to the old cypress trees that hid the creek I wouldn’t see that day. I sat next to Ole Miss, who quietly put a handful of peas into my lap and continued snapping. She was an older woman, pretty much ran the house. She waddled heavy when she walked, and when her deep voice sang it was like those angels that brought us Lorraine had come back for a visit. She usually sang on the back porch, in the morning and evening, so as the slaves in the field could hear. They would often sing back and pass along her song further into the fields. She once told me what her real name was, something from her homeland I couldn’t pronounce—something that meant *faith*. Or *hope* maybe? I wonder if *Clara* meant anything, or was it just *Clara*? When she was brought over, she was given a new name, Sipsey. Lorraine later changed it after struggling too many times to say “Miss Sipsey.” Came out sounding something like “Mississippi.” After getting corrected just one too many times, Lorraine said, “You know what, I’m just going to call you Ole Miss and be done with it.” And Miss Sipsey, she couldn’t argue.

A tear finally dropped itself into the peas in my lap, as if it saw itself one last chance to be useful and seized the moment.

Ole Miss took a break to tuck a loose end from her bright red and orange turban, frowning at me all the while. “Mind yo’ place, chile.” The way she’d frown was worse than a frown. She’d do so out of the corner of one eye, like she couldn’t be bothered enough with me to frown full on.

“Yes ma’am,” I said, wiping away another stray tear, and then I started shucking.

“If she wants t’ trick you readin’ and writin’ you let her.”

“Master says Negroes don’t need an education.”

Ole Miss straightened her back and crooked her neck, looking at me fierce. “Don’t call ‘m ‘dat,” she spat. “He ain’t ya’ mestah.”

“But I’ll get a whipping if I don’t call him Master.”

Ole Miss looked up through the door to make sure Lorraine wasn’t near. “Only when he in earshot.” She calmed me with stories about growing up in Africa. About the magical animals. I tried to imagine the elephants and giraffes and striped horses as real as Lorraine and I, but all my mind would allow was Ole Miss’ animal sketches running and hoofing through charcoal grass and vague trees, trumpeting and calling through wrinkled paper that had been rescued from the floor of Mr. Billing’s study.

“Sounds like Heaven,” I said, wondering if Africa was what she thought of when singing. She said it wasn’t Heaven; that it was filled with a hot stench and dirt and dry wind, but it sure beat life as a slave.

“Yer lot perty good here,” she said. “But it ain’t yer life. Not the life yer o’posed to have.” I blinked at her, unsure of what she meant. “You even eat at d’ table s’times.”

“Only when Ma-,” I caught myself. “Only when he’s away.”

“You think yer friends, you and Miss Lorraine?” she asked. I nodded. “Yer not. She think she own you, girl.”

“She does own me,” I said. “All of us.”

“She *think* she own you.” She nodded with a wink, and went back to the peas. So did I, trying to figure out what the hell she was trying to say. They only think they own us and yet I have to mind my place.

“You ever hear dem songs I sing?” she finally asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You ever *listen* to dem songs I sing?” I started to say that I did, but then I caught her meaning. “Well, then,” she nodded. “Start listening.” I could only remember bits about working, making stew, a white rabbit, something about eyes in the skies, storms brewing, possums. After a few more minutes of snapping peas she said that she needed me to help her with her songs. I told her that I didn’t think I could ever sing as good as her, but she said she just needed help with what to sing. “You un’stand what I’s saying?” she asked. I nodded a lie. “You believe me when I says that Miss Lorraine ain’t yer friend?” she asked. I nodded another lie. “Good,” she said. “I got a job for you.”

Lorraine and I kept on like always, but when we raced, I’d run a bit slower. When she wanted to teach me reading and writing, I sat down in my pretend desk and pretended to learn. When she raised her voice, I lowered mine. I minded my place. And Ole Miss—oh, them songs she sang!

Four: Mary

I weren't able to ride the last few nights on account of no moon. Stars may be pretty an all, but they don't do much to help a body see. But the moon finally come out, low at first...full and big and orange. Course, she got whiter and brighter and smaller the higher she climbed into the sky. I like the moon. How she moves all slow and steady. How she changes and yet she don't. Like how she can be just the little sliver of a crescent and yet you can still see most of her hiding in shadow. Makes a body wonder what she's hiding. I like how she makes things blue. I like how she goes away. Yet she does nothing, but be's the moon. Reminds me a the Grand Canyon. Makes me think on God.

My Pa and God were never much friends, but for Pa's part he were a mean som' bitch. The master done thought that a broke slave were a broke man, and though my Pa were a broke slave, he weren't broke too. With every "yes suh" and "no suh," with every beating and yelling to, and with every back breaking haul, my Pa just got meaner and meaner, not broke. He wanted to love us kids, I'm sure. Maybe he did. Ma always said not to take his yelling to heart on account that he was really only yelling at hisself. That if slavery ain't done and got him, he'd a been a much happier man. She said that seeing our faces made him sad and angry 'cause nobody deserved to belong to somebody else. 'Cept God. She tole me that even though the master could own our bodies, and break our spirits, that the only one who could keep our soul was God. And Pa, he said God could keep it.

Ma would drag us to church to keep faith and hope. Pa would go and cuss under his breath. He'd stand tall, head low and dripping in summer sweat, hands wringing at the brim of his straw hat; and he'd cuss at his feet as I s'pose cussing straight in God's face were a bit too reckless. And I'd hear his cussing more than I'd hear the words of faith and hope. Sometimes, we'd sneak off into the fields at night and have a different kind of church. Same words of faith

and hope, but there'd be a ton of dancing and singing too. And it were a secret. Pa would get caught up in the singing and dancing. Were the few times I done see him happy. I'd try to be, too, but all I'd do is get all caught up in his cussing in my head. "Black Mary," Ma would say, tugging me into the circle around the fire, "God wants you to dance fer Him." And I'd look to her dancing. And I'd look to Pa dancing. And I'd try to dance, but didn't feel it. You see, when Pa got up and dancing it weren't Pa. Something moved him to make his feet move and stomp, his arms swing and lift the moon, and his spirit rise and spin like hot ash. And when Ma sang you'd done swear she were possessed by something terrible and beautiful. The music she'd make brung tears to the crowd. Sometimes happy and sometimes sad, and other times just empty. And when they was sad, Ma would belt out a chorus that sad tears were fer yesterday and the hope and faith would swirl their way around the fire, touching the circle, nudging them into a happier beat. Ma and Pa, and the whole lot of them...something moved them.

Nuthin' moved me.

Once, the master and his family done took a trip to California. They took Miss Imogene with them to mind the kids, and she shared all sorts of stories about her adventures. Stories of the Indians they met. Of the Mississippi Rivier. The desert heat. Mountains. And the Grand Canyon. "Like looking at the face of God," she said. It was just a big hole in the ground, but she said when she first seen it, it done take all her senses to keep herself together. Felt like whooping and hollerin and carrying on in ways she knowed would make the master's wife throw her right into that hole.

I wished I had a gone with, but I weren't much use with kids. I wondered if I would ever get off the plantation like Miss Imogene. I wanted so much to be seeing other places. Made me understand my Pa just a bit more.

After Mister Lincoln and the war, word got out that we was freed. Pa didn't live long enough to see the day, and by then Ma growed up and into the master's house. She was set put. "Where's I gonna go to, chile?" she said. "We may be free, but we ain't white. And we shore ain't equal. Huh, he says, free...free to go where?" So, I went fer a walk alone and tried on this freedom thing. Did a few odd jobs here and there. Took up gamblin. And drinking. And smoking. And cussing...well, Pa made sure I had a good education in cussing right early.

After I won me a horse, I decided I wanted to see that Grand Canyon. Like looking into the face a God, she said. I needed to see that som' bitch.

Truth be tole, by the time I got there, I was downright angry. I was fixing to tell that God a few things I wished my Pa could a got to say. And God must a knowed I was coming for him cause he sure made the day all gray and gloomy and wet and cold. I walked alongside my horse, up the path through the pine forest. Cussing the whole way. "You som' bitch" this and "you som' bitch" that and just as I shouted "this better a been worth my ride!" the trees done parted and the dirt gave way to the rocks that gave way to the biggest hole in the ground I ever did see. "Wow," I said to nobody in p'ticular. My heart skipped. A hole don't describe it.

It were so big it didn't look real; didn't look deep at all. Looked flat like a squiggle paintin'. And then the rain stopped and some clouds parted and the sun shone down and reached right into the hole to show just how deep it were. And them squiggles stretched and twisted. And the colors! My land, the colors. The clouds started clearing. The heat started rising. The sun shone more and more, showing more and more colors and shapes and shadows. And something happened to me that never before happened.

Something moved me.

A tremble in my legs took my breath, and something happened that I didn't ever remember happening before—certainly not as a grown woman. I cried. I cried at the size of it. I cried at the smallness of me, and not just me, but all of me and my life. It felt bearable. I slowly rode my horse along the rim and finally found a waiting spot of rock. I climbed out onto the white-faced point jutting out into the canyon where three sides of me dropped straight down to the canyon floor. I sat there all day and it felt like I went to places I had only wished to go my whole life. The sun moved, chasing shadows...and the colors changed and danced—pastels got angry, and the angry colors all changed moods completely. I sat there, still, all day, and yet the canyon face itself changed afore me. Despite it being rock. Maybe it really were the face a God.

I started to cry again. Not a few tears like before, but all out boo-hooing—chest-heaving, sniveling and plain embarrassing. I couldn't place the 'emotion, but it felt like forgiveness. A kind of sense that nothing's changed 'cept how you feel about that nothing changing. And then a beautiful hawk rose up and hovered afore me. Her black and white feathers all stretched out like an angel. To her she was flying high in the sky, and yet I still could a reached right out to grab her. If I wanted to.

God talked to me that day, apologizin' for slavery. To me he was, anyway. I think he was showing me that sometimes a miracle is slow in coming. That maybe Mister Lincoln could be sent only when the time was right. That maybe the miracles we need most come when men are most willing to 'cept it.

I done made my peace with God that day. Mostly. My peace with men, however, well, some miracles are just slow in coming. If rock could be carved by wind and water, maybe time and patience could move me to faith and hope.

I'd done been thinking so much on the Grand Canyon that I hadn't noticed them moving through the brush. A pack a gray buffalo wolves. Must have hunted me and my horses for some time and dammit if I done missed it. They come charging through the brush, barking and growling and snapping. I grabbed Chester and shot the moon. The flash and boom scared 'em off for all about thirty seconds or so. They come back, though, and I snapped the reins harder over my horses' backs. "Yah! Yah!" I shouted as we raced on. "Som' bitches!"

My body jerked forward, foolishly trying to push the horses along faster. But the barks kept coming, and the wolves run past my coach and start on my horses. By then we was all racing on mighty fierce. The coach bounced all up and down. The truck rattling under the rope and tarp. The horses grunting. The som' bitches taking to they legs. I finally dropped the reins and put all I could get to keeping my balance and taking aim. Boom! One down. Reload. I'd a got the rest of 'em, too, had they not spooked the horses into a sharp left. When that happened, the coach bumped over a rock and then teetered along on two wheels. Never did let go of Chester. I scrambled up the coach to try and get some weight into it, but it were no use. The hitch broke free and the horses run off with the wolves giving chase. The coach wobbled along for a bit, but then gave up and tumbled. Threw me onto the prairie. "Som' bitch-es!" I hit the grass with Chester in my hand and then rolled, cussing all the while, head over feet, feet over head, arms everywhere. I hadn't time much, so I got done acting like a tumblewood, hopped up on my knee, reloaded, and waited for a wolf to come back. And one did come back. They say these are dumb animals, but they know how to get a meal. That's for damn sure. It broke off from the pack chasing my horses and raced back in a wide circle. As soon as I could see it moving at me through the grass I done fired. Boom! It yelped and fell over. Dead. Dead. Dead.

I hobbled back to my coach, which lay on its side like dead game. Pulled a knife from my boot and cut at the ropes and tarp, and then everything done spill out. A sack a flour knocked me on my back. I sat up and shook the dust from my eyes and hair. “Som’ bitches.” I dumped the sack and filled it with food and what-not and then followed the trail made by my horses.

By then the moon was high and bright. I love how she lights my way. Love the way she moves all slow and steady. I love all the things she does by being just the moon. How she goes away sometimes. What they say about absence making the heart grow?