

AMITY  
&  
SORROW

A NOVEL

PEGGY RILEY

"A beautifully nuanced story about the nature of family and the power of faith."

—LORI LANSENS, author of *The Girls*

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## Two Sisters...

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Two sisters sit, side by side, in the backseat of an old car. Amity and Sorrow.

Their hands are hot and close together. A strip of white fabric loops between them, tying them together, wrist to wrist.

Their mother, Amaranth, drives them. The car pushes forward, endlessly forward, but her eyes are always watching in the rearview mirror, scanning the road behind them for cars.

Amity watches through her window, glass dotted by chin, nose, forehead, and calls out all she can see to Sorrow: brown fields and green fields, gas stations and grain elevators. She calls out the empty cross of the power pole. She is watching for the end of the world. Father told them it would come and surely, it will. They will see its signs, even far from him. Even here.

Sorrow has her head down and her back curled over so she cannot watch. She cups her belly and groans.

“Carsick,” says Mother.

Homesick, thinks Amity.

Their mother is taking them from their home and all they know, and they have no idea how they will ever get her to turn around and take them back.

When their mother took them, she ran them from the fire and the screaming, down the gravel path to the car, and Amity could see for the first time ever where the gravel path led, how it met a rocky trail, how it plunged through a band of evergreens to join a jostling potholed road that only smoothed when it came into town, the town she had heard tell of but never seen for herself.

But Mother said, “Heads down, daughters. Hide.”

Amity did as she was told, so she never got to see the streetlights or the shop fronts, the dark, quiet streets of evening, or the small families in small houses, doing whatever it was that ordinary town families did. She didn't see the metal shutters roll up at the volunteer fire station or the squat red engines emerge, though she did hear the sirens and see their lights flashing through her shut lids. She didn't see that the engines drove back the way they had come, covering the old car's tracks with their own toothy treads. She didn't see them struggle to get up the rocky trail and the gravel path, or try and fail to put the fire out. For there, in the car, there was only driving and darkness, the watching of their mother, the roads behind them and the sound of her sister, sobbing, as home stretched away from them, mile after mile.



MAY

## *The Red Country*

Amity watches what looks like the sun. An orange ball spins high above her on a pole, turning in a hot, white sky. It makes her think of home and the temple; it makes her feel it is she who is spinning, turning about in a room filled with women, their arms raised, their skirts belling out like moons. She thinks how the moon will go bloodred and the sun turn black at the end of the world. She is watching for it still.

“Amity!” Her mother calls her back to earth, back to the gas station and the heat and the hard-baked ground, beckoning from beneath the metal canopy that shades the pumps. “Did you find anyone?” Amity walks back to her, sees that there is dried blood on her mother’s face and figures she must have some, too, but neither of them can get into the bathroom to wash. The door is locked.

“I found a man,” Amity says. “I talked to him.”

“It’s okay. I told you to. What did he say?”

The bathroom door is marked with a stick lady wearing a triangle dress. Locked behind it is her sister. “He said it locks from the inside. There is no key. It’s a bolt she turned.”

Mother slaps the triangle lady with the flat of her hand. “Sorrow, you come out of there right now. We are not stopping here!”

Amity pulls on her sleeve to cover her wrist, its bareness, the bruise blooming on the bone. All of this is her fault. If she hadn’t taken the wrist strap off, her sister wouldn’t have run.

“Where did the man go?” Mother asks.

Amity points at the flat of fields, where heat and haze make them shimmer like flu. She points to yellow field, violent yellow, like yolk smeared across the land.

“You didn’t go out there!”

“No!” says Amity, shocked.

Four days they drove, until Mother crashed the car.

Four days they drove from home to here.

Four days and the seasons have changed around them, the dirty ends of snow from home melting and running to make rivers, mountains flattening to make plain land, then fields. Four days Amity has been tied to her sister, to keep her from running, until the car hit a tree and spun over a stump and Amity took the strap off and Sorrow flew out of the car and ran.

The sky is spinning orange when the man comes from his fields. Dirt rides in on his overalls, spilling down from his turned-up hems. With every step, it scatters like seed. “Hey,” he calls to Amity and he raises his hand to wave. Then she sees him see her mother. She sees him take in Mother’s clogs and long, full skirts, her apron and her cloth cap, as if he hadn’t noticed Amity’s own. His eyes follow the stripe of blood down Mother’s face. “Hey,” he says again and Mother nods to him, primly. “Closin’ up now. Was there somethin’ y’all needed?”

Mother looks at Amity. “I thought you told him.” Then she points at the bathroom door. “My

daughter," she says.

"Is she still in there?" He pounds his fist on the stick lady, calling, "Come out of there, hey— what's her name?"

"Sorrow."

"Sorrow?" He squints and bangs harder on the door. "Sorrow!" He turns to Mother. "Maybe she's unconscious?"

"She's stubborn. How can you not have a key?"

"It's a bolt. Jesus!" The man rushes into a little shop and crashes around inside it, then he runs back out to his fields, darkening beneath the fiery sky.

Mother watches him go, saying, "Has he just run away?"

But he does come back, pulling up in an old Chevy pickup, its red paint turned pink from hard sun and clambers down with a noisy box of tools. A boy jumps down from the truck bed to follow him, brown-skinned and lanky with a long tail of black hair that reaches halfway down his back. Amity steps behind her mother and grabs hold of her skirts to watch him.

The man and the boy jangle through the tools. They try ratchets and hooks, rasps and claws. They hit the door hinges with chisels, but they cannot lift it out of its frame for the bolt.

"Sorrow," Mother pleads. "Open the door." But not a sound comes from her.

Finally the man takes a sledgehammer to the doorknob. He batters away until he smashes it off and then there is only a hole in the door. The man calls through it, tries to stick his hand into it, but it won't fit. "You go," he tells the boy, but his hand is too big, too.

"You," he says to Amity.

Amity cowers until Mother pulls her out of her skirts. Then Amity creeps toward the door and bends to look in, sure she will find Sorrow staring back at her or her finger aimed to give Amity's eye a poke. But there is only darkness. She slides her hand through the hole, slowly, craning her wrist to find the bolt. "I'm sorry," she whispers. She turns it with a click.

And then she is being pulled back, out of the way, and the man and her mother are yanking at the door and it is opening. And only then is Sorrow revealed, there in the bathroom, there in her awful red glory.

The man goes inside to pull her up from the floor, as if he doesn't mind the blood on the tiles, the blood at her hem, the blood on her skirts, or the blood in her hands. He catches hold of the bloody strap hanging from her wrist. "Jesus, girl, what you gone and done?"

Mother screams then, "Don't touch her!" And she rushes in to Sorrow, clogs slipping on the blood and she grabs hold of Sorrow, to push her from the man. And the man grabs her mother, shaking her and shouting, "What's wrong with you, woman? What's wrong with you people?" And Amity is saying, "She's all right, she's all right now," and the man's saying Jesus, and her mother's saying don't, and then there's only Sorrow, rising up from the tiles and coming slowly to her clogs with her palms open, bloody, to quiet them all.

"Behold," she says. "Behold."

Two sisters walk, hand in bloody hand, through the darkness, following a man and a boy they do not know, being followed by a mother. They walk the path that loops away from the gas station and the dirt road and the stump where the car crashed, the path that leads them between piles of trash and junk and the far, dark fields. They cannot see what these things are, these shapes beside them, these washtubs with no bottoms, these bentwood chairs with no seats, these window frames and paint cans and stacks of tractor tires. They might be anything in this darkness. Maybe low, metal monsters,



crouching in clumps and clusters to snatch at passing skirts with rusty claws. When they see them they'll know that this is a land that throws nothing away, a land once made of small family farms like this one, a land now surrounded by industrial-scale cropland, a highway, and hog farms. When the wind blows from the right direction, you can smell the stink of them; you can hear the squeal.

When they reach the house, the three females fear it. Not for the look of the place, a gap-toothed, rough-hewn, clapboard two-story, painted white a long, long time ago. Not for the four windows, up and down, dark and empty as sockets. Not for the porch that sags beneath it or the old, scabby tree that grows to the side of it, branches arching over to smother the roof. They would fear any house.

When the man pulls open a screen door it groans on its hinges. When he pushes in the front door, so that all of them can see inside the dark mouth of his house, they shiver. They are forbidden to go in. It is a rule.

The man invites them inside, but they all of them shake their heads. To his offer of a bath or a coffee Mother will say no, but she will accept a couple of his blankets, a tin bowl for washing, a plastic pitcher of fresh water. When the man says he can run Sorrow into town, see a doctor in the morning, she tells him, "She's fine."

"She ain't fine," the man says, head bent to look down the bloodied front of Sorrow and the wrist strap, dangling. "Why's that thing on her?"

"It hasn't hurt her," Mother says.

"I see you bleedin'. I see this strap on your daughter and I see all this blood. You can't tell me she ain't been hurt."

Mother shakes her head. "I haven't hurt her. She hasn't been hurt. It isn't the strap. There was—a... there was a child. And she's lost it."

The man takes a step toward her, hands out. "Sorry."

"No," Mother says. "Praise the Lord." A small cry escapes Sorrow.

"Jesus!" the man spits out and he goes into his house with the squeal of the screen and the hard door slamming. Mother stands, holding his blankets and shaking, until Amity takes them and makes a nest of them, there on the porch for her sister. Then Mother slumps down onto the steps.

Amity settles Sorrow down and lies beside her, to pray. She whispers, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." She waits for her sister to say the next line of it, but her sister only turns away from her, to hold herself in her own arms, as if she knows what Amity has done to her.

## Marriage Bed

*Where are you, woman?*

On the porch step, Amaranth sits upright. She blinks into the darkness, then whips around to check that her daughters are safe in their blankets, all flung limbs and linens.

She shakes herself. She must not sleep.

Four days and nights she has driven and every mile, every hour, made them safer. She did not dare to stop. Every town they passed took them farther from home, but she cannot let her guard down now. He is right behind them. She knows it. Every car, every headlight behind them, was him.

*I will find you.* She hears him and her hands fly up to her cap, to cover her ears. She looks up, expecting to see him thundering over her, but finds there is only a leaf-bare tree and a thick spread of stars between its branches.

The voice is in your head, she tells herself. He is not here. The voice comes because she has stopped, because her eyes keep closing, sliding shut so that the world tilts her toward sleep. He is not here. He has not found them.

And yet, she must stand, pace the dirt yard before the house, and scan the dark for him, again and again, searching for the small red flash of brake lights, the sweep of his headlights, come to take them home. She has been watching for him so long she can't stop herself.

Even on her feet, sleep tries to take her. The ground rises up as if he has taken hold of a corner of it, pulling it toward him, hand over hand, like a rope or a bedsheet. *I won't ever let you go.* Once, it was all she wanted to hear. Once, she wanted to be so kept. His voice growls, hushed and soothing, so close she can almost feel his breath in her ear. She has to crawl back to the porch steps to keep from falling. And then she cannot help it; she falls.

She lies back on the hard porch steps. She feels herself rolling backward, curling into a ball, and her arms rising, as if reaching for branches. Her hands open, as if to catch its buds. She feels herself sinking, folding and falling, into the porch that sleep makes her marriage bed, where five hundred fingers coax her and claim her, pulling her flat onto clean, white cloth. She reaches for him and finds the brittle-boned arm of a woman. The plump hand of a young woman holds her own. She feels hair unspooled across her face: a blond braid, a gray curl, a chestnut hank that smells of wood smoke and of home. Long, slender arms wind about her to hold her. There are tears in her eyes and lips in her palms and she is cradled between them, snug and molded, rocked among women in their wagon of a bed. Safe. Silent.

And then he is there. Axis to their circle, pole to their spin. Center of the bed.

Husband.

He comes for her and wives part like waves. He feels down the length of her and holds her down. He rips her open before a hundred eyes. He breathes his heat on her skin and she unfolds for him, unbraids for him. Seen in the eyes of fifty wives, she unravels before him, coming undone in a tangle of thread.

*Mine,* he calls. And Amaranth is home again.

## *The Bluebottles*

The room where Sorrow bled hums with bluebottle flies, eating. They cover every pool and shield every smear, turning Sorrow's red to an iridescent blue and black. Every stain of hers is transformed, vibrating and shimmering with a million wings and eyes.

Amity watches from the threshold of the bathroom door.

Is this a sign, she wonders—the end of the world, revealed to her at last? She knows you may not ask for a sign, for even the king of Judah was told that he might ask and he did not, and Father said it was for God to test man and not the other way around. She can only watch and wait for whatever she is given and even then it will be Sorrow who will pronounce it sign or no.

The fourth plague of Egypt was the plague of flies, but there are no flies in Revelation. She knows the world will end with the scroll that is opened and the seals that are broken. She knows her father will open them, every one, the white horse and red horse, the black horse and pale horse, the martyrs and saints and the stars dropping down. She has seen the martyrs and the saints, wrapped and spinning in the temple. She knows the timeline for the end of the world, but she doesn't know if they missed the signs that would come with the seals being broken, because Mother drove them so far and so fast. The flies and the blood might be a sign, but Sorrow is too sick and too sad to interpret and Mother has told her to wash them away.

The boy comes loping to the gas station with a hose and a plastic bucket. "What you doing?" he asks her.

Amity can only point at the bathroom and the hum of the flies in the blood.

"I got told to clean it, too," he says, nose crinkling. "Guess we're the ones who work 'round here." He drops the hose and takes an end to the side of the gas station to hook it to a spigot. She watches him working, how his over-big blue jeans hang off his skinny hip bones, how they pool over-long onto greasy-toed boots. When he hands her the spout end, she watches his dark brown hands and arms, how his sleeves have gone see-through from overwashing and his arm hairs are gold in the sun.

"Watch out," he calls, and he turns the hose on.

Amity takes aim at the bathroom door. She points the water at the walls and the floor, the corner sink and the metal toilet. She washes away the flies. She washes away the blood until the water goes pink then runs clear down the tiles, out the doorway, and into cracks in cement where the dry dirt drinks it down.

When the boy turns the hose off, it hangs limp as the wrist strap in her hands. "She okay now? Your sister?"

Amity can only shrug. She cannot speak to him.

"I was standing there," he reminds her. "I saw it."

"But you don't know," Amity says. Then she clamps her hands over her lips, aghast. Another rule broken already. She had talked to the man because she was told to, but Mother didn't say she could

speak to the boy.

“What’s your name, anyways?” he asks her.

Amity stares at the boy, deciding if she might answer. He crosses his eyes at her. He sticks out his tongue. He pulls off his cap to waggle his ears at her while she wonders if every word spoken was like breaking a rule, over and over, or if a rule, once broken, was broken eternally. “Amity,” she finally says.

“Amity? Like that horror town? What’s it called?”

“I don’t know about towns.”

“You don’t know much.”

“I know plenty.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

“I know my sister’s not having a baby now.”

“Jeez Louise,” he says. “You don’t tell people stuff like that.” He whips the hose out of her hands.

“You said you saw.”

“Yeah, but it’s private, that stuff. Family stuff—girl stuff. You don’t talk about it after.”

“Okay.” Amity nods, absorbing the new rule. “What’s your name?”

“Dust.”

“Dust? Dust. Dust.”

“Don’t wear it out.”

“What kind of a name is Dust?”

“What kind of a name is Amity?”

“It’s an attribute,” she tells him. “We’re all attributes. What’s dust? You can’t be dust. I’d call you Honor, Honesty. Grace.”

“Grace? Jeez. I’m Dust,” he says. “It’s a joke.”

“What’s a joke?”

“Polvo. I’m Pablo, but they called me Polvo. Means ‘dust.’ ”

“What language is that?”

Dust squints at her. “Are you serious?”

Amity shrugs. She is always serious. “I don’t think it’s funny.”

“No,” he says. “Neither do I.” He starts winding the hose back onto his shoulder, the water rolling out to write onto the cement. “Where do you all come from?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Well, you’re learning something, anyways.”

She nods. It isn’t only that she isn’t entirely sure herself where they’ve come from, but because she is certain it is a secret. “Where do you come from?”

He looks out at the fields then. “Dust,” he says. Then he goes back to them, boots clomping, jeans flapping. When he turns back to look at her he can see she is watching and only then does she turn away from him, to look at the bathroom. Any signs that might have been here are well and truly gone.

Amity walks the looping path back, around the piles of scaffolding, the broken-toothed saws and wagon wheels, until she can see the house and the porch, where Mother waits on the steps for her, swinging the wrist strap. Sorrow sits bunched in her blankets.

Amity sets a bucket of water on the dirt.

“You took your time, daughter.” Mother hands Amity the strap.

“I had to wait for the boy,” she says.

“You don’t talk to boys.”

Amity hangs her head. Too late.

Mother turns to Sorrow, all smiles. “Are you ready?”

“For what?” Sorrow scowls.

“To get in the car. It’s time to go.”

“The car?” Amity gasps.

“Where else?” Mother says. “There’s no magic carpet. There’s no chariot of fire and horses to take us away.”

“But the car, Mother,” Amity starts.

“I’m too sick,” Sorrow complains.

“No, you were sick. You’re fine now,” Mother says.

“I’m sick, I tell you. Sick!” Sorrow burrows into a blanket.

“Mother?” Amity says. “The car—”

“We can’t stay here. We can’t stop.” Mother grabs Sorrow’s blanket and tries to wrest it from her, but Sorrow clings to it. She dives for Sorrow’s arm, to wrench her up, but Sorrow curls herself in, like a turtle tormented.

“Can’t we stay?” Amity says.

Mother snaps around to her. “Of course we can’t stay. What makes you say such a thing?”

“She says she’s sick... and the car, Mother—”

“Didn’t you see me?” Sorrow yells. “Didn’t you see I was sick?”

Mother lets go of Sorrow. She puts her hands to her face and winces. She sinks onto the porch step and takes her cap off, fingering the cut at her hairline and pulling on her pile of chestnut braids as if she wants to open her head. “I saw you, Sorrow.”

Sorrow pokes her head out. “I’m still sick.”

“Mother,” Amity whispers. “Don’t you remember the car?”

“Would you stop going on about the car?” Mother says.

Sorrow sits up. “You don’t even know where we’re going. What would Father say, dragging me halfway around the world when I’m so sick?”

“I don’t know, Sorrow.”

“I do.”

Mother ties her cap back down, good and hard. “It isn’t safe here, girls. We cannot stop.”

“But how will we go?” Amity asks her. “You crashed the car and Sorrow ran. Don’t you remember?”

Her mother tilts her head at her.

“It’s a wonder you didn’t kill us all,” Sorrow says.

Mother looks from daughter to daughter, then she steps off the porch, wavering a moment, shaking her head as if to dislodge something, then she runs away. Runs away.

Sorrow watches her go, then she kicks off her blanket. She takes hold of her bloody skirts to flap them in the air, like a sheet on the line, until Amity can smell the meat and metal of her. “Did you clean that room out?”

Amity nods, sadly.

“I didn’t tell you to.”

“Mother told me.”

“What about what I tell you? You should listen to me.”

And that is her life, Amity thinks, suspended between the two of them. She wonders what would

happen if Mother kept running. What would happen if she just left them here? And what would Amity do? ~~Would she run after Mother or run away in the opposite direction? Would she run away from the~~ both, or would she stay and wait with Sorrow until Father came, as he will, as he must?

“I’m sorry,” she tells her sister.

“It isn’t your fault,” Sorrow says. “You’re too stupid to know what’s what.”

“Maybe it’s a sign,” Amity says, thinking of the sea-red floor.

“You don’t know what signs are. I tell you what signs are there.” Sorrow lies down and Amity hears her say, “I was the sign. Me.”

Amity wonders if her sister can remember what she did in the car, how she rubbed her hands together and put them onto Sorrow’s belly, to boil up the pain within her, to still whatever was hurting her, to try to heal her if she could. She would do anything in the wide world for Sorrow. She slips her hand into one loop of the wrist strap and puts the other over Sorrow’s, to tie them together, making her choice again.

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*Chickasaw Plum*

Amaranth runs from the house on the hard red earth, around the pile of bedsprings and car parts, washing lines and aluminum siding, and along the fields where a farmer works a chemical sprayer, insecticide hanging in the dry air like a cloud. She doesn't stop for him.

She runs for the gas station, though their clothes are not made for running. Skirts twist and tangle, jam between legs. The bindings they wear beneath blouses are too tight to allow for deep breaths. Clogs rock over stones. She passes the gas station and the canopy's shade, the wet front of the bathroom, and turns onto a long dirt road that she can't remember driving down. She can only remember being followed, pursued by her husband and speeding to break free from him, his car bearing down on them, faster and faster. It is all she can remember.

Strips of wild scrub sit on either side of the road; beyond them, fallow fields grow grasses, tall and thistle-headed—spikerush, prairie threeawn, devil's grass—baking brown beneath the vicious sun. She pulls her collars open as a bead of sweat rolls down from beneath her cap.

The car, she thinks. It is all they have—until she sees it.

The car, caught up on a black-bark tree, upside down and lying hoodfirst in its red-cherried branches. The trunk and back bumper have slammed into the ground. The four tires are upright and the undercarriage splayed, so the car is like a dog on its back, wanting rubbing. A branch has pierced the windshield and her hand goes to her head again. Glass sparkles from the road.

My God, she thinks. Sorrow was right. She is lucky. And she can remember it, all of it, swinging off the highway onto the thin road below it, sun in her face, and the road turning and churning into dirt and hedge and speeding to get away from him. Her daughters were screaming. She must have lost control somehow. She remembers the feeling of flying.

When she took his car, she hadn't known if she could drive it, remember the dance of pedal and clutch, of stick and steering wheel. She hadn't driven in so, so long. And now she could have killed them.

She crouches on her haunches in the road. She plants her hands on the dirt and feels certain she will be sick, from fear, from relief. She pants until she retches, shutting her eyes and hearing him, laughing.

She looks over at the trunk, upside down. She can't see how she'll open it, but she must. There are things inside that she must salvage, all she hoarded and packed. The full weight of the car rests on the trunk, but she tugs at the frame, uselessly. Beneath the car, flour dusts the dirt. Honey oozes, pooling onto dirty oats, and she thinks of the jars inside it, shattered and spilling now, soiling their bedding and clothing. She sifts the dirt for anything she can salvage: wooden matches, small bits of paper. She remembers that her wedding ring is in there, knotted into a handkerchief, the last thing she would have to pawn or sell when it came to it. She has to get inside.

The roof of the car, now the floor, is covered with metallic candy wrappers, bargain gas station treats on the road, for sweet mouths are silent ones. She jabs her hands between the seats to see if she can reach through to the trunk, but she only finds more paper, small white squares stuffed into every

crack. She pulls them out of her way. And then she sees them for what they are.

Small white envelopes. Tithing envelopes.

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The backseat is full of them. On each one you could read her husband's name and their address. You could see the sketch of a small, plain, barn-shaped temple, as it was before the fire.

Her throat tightens. Had her daughters found them? Had her daughters thrown them? Did tithing envelopes litter roadsides everywhere they'd been for the last four days and nights? Had they been tossed at borders and crossroads like crumbs for birds, for fathers, to follow?

Amaranth builds a fire beside the car from plaits of dry grass and a precious match. Into it, she feeds the envelopes, watching their church burn again and again. When the smoke is high and all the paper churches become ash, she sees a truck coming, heading straight for her. She stands and waves her arms to flag it down, to get help, to escape. And then she stops waving. Her hands drop. The truck is pink, a faded red.

The farmer swings down from the cab, engine running. "What the hell?" he says, rushing at her fire, kicking dirt at her flames. "What the hell, woman?"

"I'm sorry," she starts.

"Damn right you're sorry. Saw your fire four fields over. Take just the one spark to burn every damn crop of mine down. We have drouth here, woman, look about you. What you thinkin'?"

She looks at his tinder-dry fields. "I'm not thinking. Clearly."

"I'll say." He stomps the fire flat with his boots. Then he sees her car and gives a low whistle. He juts his chin at the tree. "Chickasaw plum there. Only tree on the whole goddamn road and you found it."

"Can you fix my car?" She puts her hand into her apron waistband and pulls out all the money she has in the world now. Her unfolding and counting have made the few bills left as supple as leather. She holds it out, but he shakes his head. "You have to fix it," she tells him. "You're a gas station."

"Maybe. Ain't a service station. Hardly even pump gas, now the highway's gone in. No one comes. Only folks like you, lost."

She squeezes the money in her hand.

"Where was you headed?" he asks her.

She cannot tell him. She doesn't really know. Turning away from him, she says, "I must have fallen asleep."

"Well, that's why the good Lord invented motor hotels."

She laughs. Of course she had slept, she must have. She would find herself suddenly awake at an intersection and wonder how she had come to it. She had woken at a suburban stop sign, roused by a car's insistent honking from behind. One time it was a long-haul truck that only narrowly missed her asleep where she was in the middle of the road. Its lights full on in the darkness, the truck was an avenging angel, delivering justice. The driver stormed out, leaned his beefy face into her open window to tell her off, tell her she wasn't fit to drive and all that, but she only asked him what state they were in. The trucker stared at the sight of her two girls, tied together, honey smeared across their lips.

"Where you come from?" the farmer asks her.

She shakes her head. She dare not tell him. She shows him her money again. "Please help me. I don't know what to do."

"I'll tell you," he says. "Go home." He starts for his truck.

"But how?" She stares at her miserable handful of money. She stares at the last curl of smoke going out, drifting over the wreck of her car and his tree and out to the flat of his fields.



No one knew who fired the first shot.

No one knew who started the fire.

For weeks they had been fasting and watching, praying and waiting. Because of the patrol cars. When they arrived, the countdown for the end of the world began anew. Fear twined across their land and looped around the wives, pulling them tight to their husband, tight to their rituals.

By day, patrol cars idled on their gravel path. Officers drank from Styrofoam cups, radios crackling. By night, red and blue lights spun across the front of their temple while within it women were spinning like hoops, like wheels. Women spun in solo orbits, lost in chanting, lost in prayer, then they spun together in a wide circle that swung around the room, around the altar, and the hole in the floor that led to the room below them. When they spun they could forget patrol cars, forget that they were being watched and judged. When they spun they only thought of how the heavens turned above them and how God cupped them all in His wide, white hand.

“Who will be with me at the end of days?” he called from the center of the temple: preacher, father, husband.

“I will!”

“Me, Father.”

“Me!”

“Who will see the might of the Lord against the fallen?”

“I will, husband.”

“I.”

“Who will rise in glory? Who knows now, in their hearts, in their bones, that the end of time is coming? Who will watch to see it come?”

“I will, I will,” the wives called in response.

“Who will bear the Lamb?”

Her husband had been looking for signs of the end for years now. Gossip from wives and news reports from the car radios that still worked only confirmed it. Millennium bugs and the towers collapsing had started a chain of evil, with earthquakes that split the land and unjust wars that split its people. They felt safe together and safe on his land, hidden like jewels. But more dark stories came with every woman. He told them the end was coming. Couldn't they feel it, every one? Soon, it was all he could preach or even think about.

He read them Revelation from memory. By then, it was the only Book he would speak, pouring the words of God out in hot, steaming bowls of wrath, while his face flickered red and blue, red and blue.

That last night in their temple, he called them to prayer and told each wife to wake her children, to bring them to the temple. “Husband,” Amaranth said. “You have had them at prayer all day. They are terrified and tired. Let them sleep.”

He gave her a look that rattled her teeth. “I will have my children at the end.”

Women roused children from their motley assortment of sleeping places, from the cars and trailers and yurts and sheds that stood across the frozen early spring land. Sorrow was up, child no more now but Amaranth had to shake Amity awake in the attic bed. “Bring down a change of skirt and petticoat

she whispered. Amity did as she was told. Amaranth ran through wives and baffled children and into the kitchen to pop spelt rolls into her pocket, dropping them onto the key that sat there.

In the temple there were candles lit in bobbins all across the planked altar, blazing in jam jars in each rough-hewn windowsill. Women brought their children in and all grew hushed when they crossed the threshold, stepping from the red and blue to the soft, pale light inside. Wives formed a ring about the room, encircling their husband and the altar and Sorrow.

He roared his Revelation. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock! If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come!"

There, from outside the temple door, there came a knock. Wives screamed out. Children whimpered.

"This is a holy place!" he called. "No law or government will defile our church!"

Another knock came.

"Will I answer it?" Amaranth asked him, stepping into the circle. She saw how Sorrow gripped the edge of the altar with clenched fingers. "Husband, I will answer." She walked toward the door.

"Don't do it!" called a wife from the circle. "Lock it!" called another. The wife from Waco began to scream, uncontrollably, "It's a trap; this is how it happens!"

A baby began to wail and a mother bounced it, shushed it.

Amaranth reached to open the door and her husband called out.

"Stop! Hide the children. Hide them below. They will not take my children!"

Amaranth's hand froze on the door. Children were their glory, their purpose. How should they be hidden from police, as if they were shameful, as if they were not made, all of them, in their holy love?

He dragged the altar table back from the hole in the floor and lifted the hatch. "We must keep them safe," he said.

Women clung to their children, then bent to soothe them and explain. They dropped them, child by child, down into the hole, down into the dark of the room below. As for the children, they were happy enough, for down below there were piles of blankets, quilts to lie in and to jump on. There was food to last them for months of Armageddon, should it come to that.

Amaranth watched toddlers handed down by older children who swung in to follow them, but when Amity started down to the hole, she stopped her. "Stay with me," she said, and Amity nodded. She pulled her daughter toward the door to hide her in women.

The knocking at the door was a pounding now and Amaranth ran back to open it even as her husband shouted, shutting the hatch and moving the altar, candles swaying, "We will pray! You will pray!"

The women joined hands to make their circle. They began to spin their circle about the room. Amaranth opened the door on a chubby female officer in a navy polyester uniform. She had spoken with the officer before, but she did not smile or greet her.

The officer looked into the temple, to see inside the thing they had been watching from the outside: the plain wooden interior and the candles, the circle of women rushing by. She saw the officer startle at Sorrow's open-throated, guttural cries and her husband's upraised hands.

"That the girl there?" the officer asked her, pointing at Sorrow.

And then she heard a shot ring out behind her. One single gunshot and women began to spin in a frenzy. Only the wife from Waco was still, gun in her outstretched hands. The officer crouched and grabbed for her own gun, shouting into her radio over Sorrow's prayers and the pounding of clogs, "I need backup!"

Amaranth scanned the room for daughters, for Sorrow, clinging to her father, for Amity, pressing

herself against the wall. Amaranth forced her way through the spinning women, weaving among them crashing into them, while her husband shouted, "I will break the seals!"

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And then there was only grabbing and clutching and dashing and rushing and hands in her hands, hands pulling away, and the screaming of women, the silence of children, and the smoke and the flames and the driving away.

## *Stitches*

Go home, he said. As if it were that simple.

Amaranth scoops the last pathetic handful of oats from the dirt beneath the car. She searches the scrub for something she can feed her daughters, any edible weed she might boil into a gruel. She looks for wild sorrel or chicory, picks dandelion and horehound. She snaps the pinkish tops of henbit. She pulls a Chickasaw plum cherry from the tree and rolls it between her fingers. When she nibbles it she finds it bitter and throws it down.

Go home, he said, when she has risked their lives to leave it, when she has hidden and lied and left her family and home and all the world that her daughters knew. This was her one chance and she has ruined it, squandered it. Less than a week from home and she has failed, utterly and completely.

He narrowed his eyes when she told him she couldn't go home, that there was no way of driving now and no one they could call for help. "No one?" he pressed.

"We have no phone," she explained. No phone, no electricity. They cooked with propane and heated their house and outbuildings with wood from their forests. They weren't on the grid and no local government knew who lived there or under what circumstances. That was how her husband liked it. She had liked it, too.

"There's gotta be somebody you can call," he said. "Somebody who cares you all are gone."

Amaranth tries to lever the license plate off with a branch. Police might find it and run it against their records. The tags were hopelessly out of date. Worse was the thought that her husband would find the plate and know for certain that they were there. What would he make of a farmer who had tried to help his family, who had seen and dared to touch his daughter, a farmer who had shaken her and told her to go home? What would he do to him?

The branch snaps. She has only managed to pucker the metal. She throws what's left of the branch with a shout and stomps back down the dirt road, pausing before the small shop. There will be food and drink inside it, and she thinks of all the gas stations she stopped in to fill their tank, how she stared at the packets of food while she waited to pay, the foam-filled cake snacks, the cans of fizzy pop from her childhood. She could take something for her daughters. She could even set money on the counter inside, so it wouldn't be theft. But she does not. Not because her children do not know this chemical food or that she fears its effects on them, but because she has seen a pay phone.

There, on the side of the gas station, above a water spigot, is an ancient pay phone. Someone has cracked the receiver and attempted to graffiti it with a marker. It takes her a long time before she can lift it to listen for a dial tone, convinced that the farmer has already used it, called the police to tell them she is there.

But no sound comes. The phone is dead. She hangs it up, grateful. And worried.

She stands at the hedge edge of the farmer's field and watches him working. He is a low shadow, flying across his fields on the back of a tractor, plowing ruts into dirt. In the distance is a grove of trees.

trees, grouped around a dry wallow. Clouds of red dust rise and drift, coloring the sky. She waits until he comes in for water. "Have you called the police?" she asks.

He opens the spigot on the back of his neck. "Should I?"

"Your pay phone's broken. Do you have another phone?" Water spatters off him. It dots her skirts. She catches it in her hands.

He shakes the water from his neck and hair. "What's it to you?"

"I need to know," she says, "if you've told anyone we're here."

"Who would I tell? What would I tell 'em?" He moves to the shade of the metal canopy and pulls a box of cigarettes from his jeans. "I had a phone. Had it ripped out some years ago. Got tired of people callin' me up, askin' for money." He holds the pack out to her. "You married?"

"No," she says, to the cigarette. Then, "Yes, I am. Married. Are you?"

He scrapes a match on the side of a gas pump. "Yep. My wife took off. Don't know where. So I know what it's like for your husband, you going."

"You don't. He's not waiting at home for me, I can tell you that. He's coming after me."

"You think so?"

She nods, her throat tight.

"He drink?" he asks her.

"No."

"Hit you? Hit your girls?"

"You don't understand."

"What's he done that's so bad? What's he done you can't forgive? You think marriage is some picnic? It ain't." He takes a long pull on his cigarette. "Maybe you done somethin', somethin' you think he can't forgive. And maybe he can't, but I'm tellin' you, he'd rather not be alone. You either made a vow or you didn't."

"I made a vow," she tells him. "I made a million of them. Don't you dare tell me how marriage works when your own wife left you."

He blows out smoke at her but she doesn't turn away. He stalks back to his fields, calling back over his shoulder, "I want you gone."

She soaks dirt from oats and watches her children sleeping. In the dark of night, she listens to him, in his house. The scrape of his chair leg, the endless scratch of matches being lit, aluminum cans being scrunched and tossed. She is waiting for him to crash through the screen door and sweep them all off his porch, back to the dirt and the road and the wreckage.

Are you married? he asked. He has no idea.

Lights switch on and off inside. She hears a brief burst of static, white noise from an old television and a burst of recorded laughter before the volume is turned right down. And then it is silent, still, and dark. She can almost hear the house breathing with each breath that the man takes, inhaling and exhaling his smoke through window screens and the tree rapping on the roof.

She grew up in a small house like this, in a dark place with no streetlights, just like here. The land was hard and the people harder, but the sounds of night were of sand switchbacking beneath snake bellies, the cries of coyotes, the lonesome *who-who-who* of a horned owl from a Joshua tree. The rumble of her grandmother's empty-mouthed snoring, dentures foaming in a glass. In her bedroom, she would click her flashlight on and off, pointing light at the dark shapes of furniture and toys that she knew were creeping toward her every time she closed her eyes.

Her daughters have never known such silence and it makes their sleep fitful. The house she took

them from was a clamorous one. Women moved from room to room along hodgepodge hallways, clogs thumping, skirts swishing, following the skitter of tiny feet, bare on boards, constant as rain. Doors opened, slammed shut. Children whined and giggled. At the very end, at its fullest, every bed and every room was full and no one wanted to be alone.

She doesn't know what to do with this silence. It rings in her ears, this lack of noise. It makes this man's voice all the louder. Are you married?

Yes, she is married and married again. She is married fifty times, once for every wife. She was married to him first and last, married to him always. Each wedding is like a thread, sewing her down to him and to all of them—her family, their hard and strange ways—for eternity. She has had to run far and fast to pull herself loose from him, to rip those stitches, but still she can feel how bound she is how very, very married.

She hears the man turn over in his bed, above the porch. She hears him smoke and sigh.

## *The Day of Washing*

Come bright morning, Mother says it's time to wash. "Hands, clothing, hair, and faces!" she sings out. Amity sloshes back and forth from the gas station, hauling water and handfuls of grainy pink soap from the bathroom dispenser while Sorrow lolls on the blankets.

"Come and be washed," Mother calls, but Sorrow won't.

Amity whips her cap off and tugs her braids down. She cannot wait for her mother's fingers in her hair. Once a fire is built on the dirt and the water boils in the tin bowl, she lies back in her mother's arms and wonders if she was held like this when she was a baby, back before there were so many other little bodies who needed holding.

Mother lathers the soap in her strong, wet hands, making the world smell of marzipan. She picks apart Amity's greasy plaits and scrubs her scalp clean as a sheet on washing day. Mother smiles down at her and Amity basks in it, shutting her eyes to hold the picture, and she is suddenly glad to have left home and come here, glad to be held and seen.

"You look like a little seal," Mother says with a laugh. She rinses Amity's head, then pushes her away. "Come, Sorrow," she calls.

Amity runs, wet hair streaming, back to fill the bucket, but when she gets there, the boy is waiting for her, cap turned backward. She grips the bucket, thinking she should pop it over her capless head, and cowers from him in sodden shame. "Shut your eyes," she says.

"This some game?" He shuts his eyes as she hurries to the spigot to refill the bucket. "Keep your eyes shut," she tells him.

"What you gonna do?"

She creeps toward him and his face follows her, eyes shut so she can study him, the curl of his dark lashes, the whorl of hair at the hinges of his jaw. She moves close enough to smell him, close enough to breathe him in. And then he opens his eyes. "Gotcha!"

She shrieks and grabs his cap, flapping it at his face then jamming it over her bare head. It smells of him, like ten of him, like engine oil and dry grass and hot, wet skin. "No, I got you!" she says.

"What you gonna swap me?" The bucket fills and spills over, flooding the concrete. They both run for the spigot, to turn it off, his hand on her hand.

"Swap you?" she stutters.

"For my hat? What you got?"

"What do you want?"

He looks her up and down, from the drips her hair makes under his hat to the drops down her dress and her clogs. She sees him take in the rough weave of her fabric, shoulder to elbow, neck to calf, lined and creased as each garment is, taken in, let down, worn by Sorrow before herself.

He smiles at her. "When you got something I want, I'll let you know." And he whips his hat back. She shrieks and crouches into a ball, arms over her head. Then she gathers the bottom of her skirts and pulls them up, to cover her head. There may be no rule about showing pantaloons, but hair must be covered at all times. "Girls," he says. "Sheesh."

“You can’t see me,” Amity tells him.

“I see London, I see France,” he tells her.

“Who are they?” And at his laughing, she runs back to the house and to Mother, blind in cotton, bucket abandoned, kicking and tripping over sawhorses and pitchforks on the path from the gas station. She runs straight to her cap and slaps it on her wet head.

“Where is that bucket?” Mother demands.

When the water is boiled, Mother calls again to Sorrow, but Sorrow won’t be washed. She wraps her arms around the porch post and revels in her dirty skirts. Amity thinks of the berry vines at home and the mothers who picked them, the mothers who worked the presses, all splotched red and purple, the making of their jams and pastes and leathers. She knows something worse than berries has been picked in Sorrow and harvested.

Mother tugs at Sorrow’s apron strings and Sorrow slaps away her hands, losing her purchase on the post. She scrabbles to regain it as Mother pulls open her overskirt. Sorrow twists away and Mother shouts at her, “Take them off!”

“No! Will you take everything from me?”

Mother calls for Amity to help her, while Sorrow yells for her to keep away. And then all Amity can do is take hold of her sister’s hands and bend her head toward her as Mother grabs hold of Sorrow’s skirts and pulls them down hard. Amity can see the blood caked on her linens, hard as scabs. Mother strips Sorrow, layer by layer, her overskirts and underskirts, her stockings and her bloomers, down to the stains on her skin. She doesn’t stop until Sorrow is bare, her chest bound flat like any woman’s, but naked below, whippet-thin with a thatch of red-stained hair. Sorrow folds her hands over her crotch and howls. She rushes back into the blankets, leaving Amity holding an invisible sister.

Mother scoops the skirts up and tosses them in the tin bowl. “More water, Amity,” she calls.

Later, Sorrow stands before the bathroom, cap on her wet head and wearing her blanket so her stained skirts can dry. She looks like she’s been skinned. She’s dripping and miserable, sorry to the bone for herself but clean as a stick.

“I hate her,” Sorrow says.

“I know.”

“I will get even.”

“I know that, too.”

Dust comes by, holding his hat down and grinning. Sorrow pulls Amity close by the wrist strap. “He’s okay,” Amity tells her. Sorrow lets the strap slacken.

“What you doing?” he asks them.

“Washing,” Amity says. “Mother says we’re leaving.”

“Yeah? I’ve seen your car.” He slips off his cap and brandishes it at her, daring her to take it. “You two eaten anything?”

Sorrow licks her lips. Amity shakes her head.

“We got food in there,” Dust says, pointing at the shop. “Come on.”

Amity starts to follow, but Sorrow pulls her back by the strap. “We don’t want you to get in trouble,” Amity calls and Sorrow yanks the strap again to say that wasn’t what she said.

“Nobody comes to buy it now. It’s called rotating the stock.”

Dust goes in and brings them back the wonders of the world, opening his arms in a tumbling harvest of yellow and orange, foil and plastic, an edible coat of many colors. He names each one as Adam did in Eden: Lay’s and Doritos, Sno Balls and Chocodiles, Cheetos and Fritos, Twinkies and



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