

A young girl stands in the center of the frame, wearing a white lace dress with a matching headband. She has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the left. The background is a dark, textured wall. The text 'EUTOPIA DAVID NICKLE' is overlaid on the image, with 'EUTOPIA' in orange and 'DAVID NICKLE' in white.

EUTOPIA DAVID NICKLE

A NOVEL OF TERRIBLE OPTIMISM

Eutopia

A Novel of Terrible Optimism

David Nickle



ChiZine Publications

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To Tobin, in hope and love

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Dr. Charles Davenport
c/o The Eugenics Records Office
Cold Spring Harbor, NY
August 15, 1910

Dear Charles,

The infant is safe.

I want to set that down before anything else. I shall write it again, and swear to it, and underscore it, so there can be no doubt:

The infant is safe.

I trust this will set your mind at ease. After the communiqué that you will have doubtless received from Garrison Harper by now, I can only imagine you must be gravely concerned. We have had words here in my library, Harper and I.

I believe that I have answered his accusations, primarily concerning my methodology in dealing with the Trout Lake investigation. But I am under no illusion that he went off satisfied. No doubt he is sitting at his desk in that vulgar mansion of his on the hill, composing his libel as I write this. He will send his letter off with a rider this evening. I must wait until morning. Thus will you receive Harper's account before mine.

I might predict what it will tell you: that the doctor, in a fit of depravity, abandoned his scientific observation of the mountain people, against the express orders of Harper, and invaded the community—plied them with drink, beat a young mother with a walking stick, snatched her baby from its cradle, and ran, like a madman, into the deep mountain night.

The doctor (Harper will have written), in so doing, violated the very principles of Compassion, Community and Hygiene, upon which the fair Eliada rests.

Harper will beg you to agree to the doctor's dismissal. He will insist that you send a physician who will content himself seeing to those principles—a physician who does not preoccupy himself with matters of science—who understands the practicalities of administering society take precedence over all. He will question the doctor's—my—fitness. He will tell you that I have harmed an infant.

These are lies, Charles. I did not feed liquor to mountain men. I did not strike a woman with my stick.

The infant is safe.

If all goes well, shortly I will provide you with the testimony of the men who had accompanied me: Mr. Bury and Mr. Wilkens. They will attest as true, that when we found the infant, it was abandoned—left in a bed of dried needles and sap at the base of a pine tree.

Really, can one be surprised? The people of these hills are degenerate. They are the flotsam of the wagon trains of the last century, left here to fester in their immorality, for generations.

Bury found it. He was scouting the edge of our camp at dusk. Bury came running back as Wilkens and I were heating tins of stew on the kerosene cook stove and admiring the view of the Kootenai River Valley in the vanishing light.

He was in a state of near hysteria, which was unusual—for Mr. Bury is as hard a man as Eliada sustains. At first, he was unable to explain what it was he found. It was a fire that produced no heat; a great bird, that cried out in song, with a voice like a woman's; a beast; and some other things also which he could not clearly describe.

I did feed Bury a small jigger of whiskey then, but only to calm his nerves such that he could lead us back to the spot, where I might observe this thing he'd found firsthand.

It was some distance from the camp—further than Bury ought to have ventured in a simple patrol. He intimated that he may have been following the song, which caused him to stray, and he became

quite apologetic.

~~The pine tree where the infant rested was part of a small copse of them, growing from a flat ledge near a stream. Facing the east, it was in growing shadow. The infant lay on its back there, staring up into the pines. It cried out, pitiably, as we approached. Bury pointed, his hand shaking, and I confessed that I scolded him.~~

"It's a baby," I said. I crouched beneath the branches and finally approached the infant on hands and knees, met its eye for the first time. "Nothing more."

And so I ordered Wilkens to give me his coat. Folding it into a makeshift blanket around the infant, I lifted it to my chest and made my way back to my men. Then we returned to the camp, and took the infant inside the tent.

This, Charles, is what transpired. The infant was abandoned. I saw to it that it came to no harm.

When we returned to Eliada, I brought the infant straight to the hospital. It sits here at my side now, in a cradle brought up from the nursery. I do not even entrust its care to the nurses here. I will not so much as permit them to see this child—and I shall not let it out of my sight—because here is the truth of the matter:

This infant that we found in the woods—on the side of mountain . . . it is magnificent. Where the indigenous folk here are bent and degenerate, subject to the gigantism and the harelip and criminality which is a consequence of their breeding . . . this child is, how shall I say? It is perfection. It is the height of nature. It is a Mystery, or—dare I say it—a Miracle.

Rest assured—no matter what Harper suspects, now or later . . . this child will come to no harm. I will not allow it. The infant is safe and I shall ensure that safety with my life—with all the life I have.

Were I so equipped, Charles, I swear that I would suckle this child myself.

Yours in Service

Nil

Dr. Nils Bergstrom
Chief Physician-in-Residence
Eliada Hospital
Eliada, Idaho

PART I

Nurture

1 - Mister Juke

APRIL, 1911

Not ghosts.

Although their owners might have pretended otherwise, Dr. Andrew Waggoner knew it. The sheets that loitered and whistled and kicked at the mud on this dark hillside in northern Idaho tonight were not ghosts; nor were they devils, nor duppies, nor spectral things of any kind.

When Andrew was a good deal younger, his Uncle Elmer had told him: ghosts were what the Klux Klan originally intended with those sheets they wore. They wanted to make the poor Negro think they were beset by the implacable spirits of the dead, Devils straight up from Hell—and not merely small-souled white men with lynching on their minds.

Maybe on some other Negro, the evil light of the kerosene flame in the twilight would make mix with all those flapping sheets, that eerie un-musical whistling noise they were making, and that would be enough. But Andrew Waggoner was not that kind of Negro and he knew.

These were not ghosts.

They'd got Andrew just outside the hospital—done the deed as the last of the sun fell toward the pine-toothed edge of the Selkirk Mountains, west of Eliada. If he'd been paying better heed, not been smoking and brooding and keeping to himself, Andrew might have seen who they were. He didn't think anyone would be caught wearing their mama's bedsheets that close to town.

It didn't really matter much, of course. The truth of his predicament was awful in its simplicity: five men in sheets. One Negro, tied and on his knees. How does something like that end well?

Andrew did not think of himself as a religious man, but as one of those sheets bent down in front of him, he thought about praying.

As matters resolved, however, he didn't have to pray or even make up his mind on the matter. God was paying any attention at all, He spared Andrew the indignity of supplication by tossing down the bone.

"You are going to watch this, Dr. Nigger."

The man in the sheet spoke in a voice Andrew thought he might recognize.

"It is Waggoner," said Andrew. "Dr. Waggoner."

He said "doctor" slowly, because he wanted to make that part of his name especially clear right now. Andrew Waggoner was a doctor, trained by some of the finest surgeons at Paris Medical School, graduated with honours, Class of 1908; he had been a resident here at Eliada's hospital for nearly a year. He was not some hog-tied vagabond nigger that these men could feel right about killing.

"This isn't right, Robert," he said. "You got to know that."

The sheet rustled like it was in the wind. The two eyes peering out through holes in it narrowed. "You don't know names," said the sheet. "You don't know nothing."

Andrew let himself smile. He was right. Robert Vernon was the man behind that sheet and that gave him something to grasp.

"Robert," Andrew said, "you sweep floors at the hospital. You got a sister in Lewiston with a wedding coming up—it's Harriet, am I right? Harriet Ver—"

Andrew didn't get the last name of "Vernon" out, because at that moment the sheet drove its fist into his gut. He wished he could have stood up to it, but it was a vicious punch and it sent the air whooping out of his lungs and made him bend and fall hard on his behind.

For an instant, looking up at the sheet, he hated himself as much as the rest of them hated him. Getting on a first-name basis with white men in whiter sheets wasn't going to get him anything. He

was going to die, die twitching at the end of a rope, and there was nothing he could do about it—and he had it coming, stupid weak nigger that he was.

It was only for an instant. As soon as he heard the whimpering, wheedling sounds coming from behind that sheet, he remembered how Vernon slouched and limped behind his broom and wouldn't meet a man's eye in the light of day. Andrew had a fine idea who the weak idiot was in the conversation. And it sure as hell was not the one with the medical degree from Paris.

“You don't know nothing! You don't know my family name you dirty God-damn nigger!” Vernon hollered.

A foot came out from beneath the sheet and caught him in the side. That hurt worse than the punch—it might have cracked a rib—but Andrew held on. He still had a chance. A slim one, but things were not as bad—not yet—as they were for poor little Maryanne Leonard.

§

It had been an awful day for the poor thing, started bad enough and ended up as bad as it could get. She was pregnant, with a child that no man in Eliada owned up to.

There was talk that she'd been raped by one of the bachelors who worked the mill, or maybe by one of the hill folk passing through. Maybe someone nearer.

Her brothers said they'd found her that morning in the privy, bent over herself as she squatted over the hole, just weeping and crying and cursing Jesus who she said had come one night and done this to her. There was blood coming out of her middle parts and they reported an awful smell coming up from the pit. So they brought her to the hospital on Sunday morning, hoping to find Dr. Bergstrom maybe. But when they got there, Dr. Andrew Waggoner was the only doctor in the house.

He should have been more wary of the sick girl. Even in New York, a Negro doctor touching a white woman's privates would cause a problem. But in New York, it would never get that far because the doctors wouldn't be so scarce that there was any need for a Negro doctor in the hospital. That was what sent ambitious young Dr. Andrew Waggoner here to this little Idaho mill town of Eliada, improbably blessed with a decently equipped hospital where he might learn and develop his craft.

He should have stopped. But listening to the story they told him, and looking at the girl, he couldn't turn her away.

Doing so would mean leaving Maryanne Leonard in the care of her brothers, one of whom like as not was complicit in giving the poor girl what Andrew was pretty sure was an outhouse abortion.

So Andrew smiled deferentially, told them: *Bring her in*. And he got ready to do what he could, which as it turned out was nothing much.

§

“Leave him,” said another sheet. “He's got to be awake to see how he's going to die.”

This sheet was taller, and wider too. Andrew did not know who this one was by his voice, and as he looked up at it he realized: he had been gone a spell. The boot had come again and again, in the ribs and in the back and the chest, and there had been a forest of pain, and it had hit in his head, and he must have fallen unconscious. Now he was back.

Through swollen lips, Andrew asked the new sheet: “Who are you? You the Grand Dragon or something?”

“Quiet,” said the new sheet. He leaned in very close—so close that Andrew could smell his breath (not liquored, but ugly, soured as it was with coffee and seasoned with tobacco) and see the flecks around his eye (it was lined, used to squinting at sun, and tufted with a thick black eyebrow whose hairs poked out through the torn-out eye hole in the sheet) and feel the heat off him.

The stranger in the sheet stood up.

“You are one unlucky nigger,” he said, aloud. “Yesterday, we might have just put the scare in you—run you from town. But after what you done to pretty little Maryanne . . .”

Andrew started to protest:

~~He hadn't done that thing to her abdomen. He hadn't done anything but try and give her some~~ comfort with a shot of morphine; try and find the source of the bleeding and make it stop; look at the opening like a caesarean cut (if the blade that had made it were blunt, and handed to her baby who used it to cut itself out from the inside) and tried to clean it, cover it, stitch it. "Jesus done it to me she'd screamed, thrashing on the table in the hospital's operating theatre. "Jeee-Sussss!" She said that again and again, even as the morphine took hold, even as the life went out of her.

Andrew had wanted to go out to the brothers after that, and ask: *Any of you boys named Jesus?*

"It wasn't me. She was gone," Andrew said. "She'd lost too much blood. Her womb was *ripped*. Somebody did it . . . but nobody could have—"

He stopped before the sheet's raised hand could come down in his face.

"You know," said the sheet, his voice low now, "that's the first true thing that came out of your nigger mouth since we brought you here. It wasn't you that did this to her. We do know that. We ain't fools."

"Then why—?"

The sheet looked over his shoulder, wagged his head. "Get him up. And bring out the freak."

Andrew almost screamed in pain as two of them hoisted him up to his knees. Two others walked around behind him, to the wagon. He tried to look but his head wouldn't quite turn the way it should, so he had to listen to the rustling of the tarpaulin, some grunting, and a sliding sound.

As he listened, he realized:

They're not taking out a picture book here. They've got someone else in there.

The person had been quiet when they'd hauled Andrew along, thrown him in the back—but Andrew didn't have a sense about how he'd have missed him even so.

Andrew turned his head just a little, and watched as he came into his view.

The sheets were hauling a tall man, thin as sticks. White or Negro, Andrew couldn't tell because he was not only tied like Andrew, but had a sack pulled down over his head. His legs moved strangely, like they'd been broken at the calf and had a joint added there. The high whistling noise that Andrew had thought was coming from the Klansmen got louder, and Andrew worked it out—it was not, had never been, coming from one of them. It was coming from under the sack.

"So what," said the sheet, "can you tell us about this fellow here?"

"Will it make a difference?"

"May it might."

The two others pushed the second captive to the ground in front of Andrew, while another brought the kerosene lamp closer. One of the men pulled the hood from him, while another held the lamp up.

Andrew squinted. There was something wrong with the light, or maybe his vision had been fouled by the blow to his head, or maybe he was just losing his sanity in the course of staring down his own death. The man's face didn't seem right. It had an odd bend to it at the forehead, and the mouth seemed too wide, and the eyes . . .

The eyes couldn't have been that black. They seemed like they were all pupil, no iris. Eyes didn't work that way.

That wasn't the end of the strangeness, though. The hair sprang like winter-dead branches from his scalp and he was true, boneyard white. If the Klansmen were looking for their ghost to frighten even an educated Negro, they'd hit near the mark with this one. Andrew had seen queer things in Paris—pictures of hunchbacks and feeble men and women; dwarfs and giants—even photographs of one John Merrick, the Elephant Man of London.

But there had been nothing quite like this face.

Andrew blinked, and looked again, and swallowed hard and painful as he looked.

~~It must have been the scrambling of his brains, because when he looked again, the face seemed to have changed.~~

It was suddenly very beautiful, fine-featured; the face of a pale-skinned girl, black hair floating above her head like she was underwater. Her lips were not wide, but puckered into a rosebud aperture from which the lovely whistling music came. And he blinked again, and when his eyes opened, the man pulled the captive away.

“Recognize him?” said Robert Vernon, who by now had pulled his own sheet aside. “You don’t recognize him, nigger. You do. You brung him here. And he did that thing to Maryanne. Fuckin’ rapist, and you brung him.”

“I—I’m not seeing right,” said Andrew. He felt as though he was spilling out of himself; he heard his voice hitch, in that weak, begging way. “You hit me on the head and I can’t see right.” And he added, hating himself: “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry,” said Robert. “That’s right, you’re sorry.”

“Tell us,” said the tall man. “No point playing stupid. We know you been keeping this freak under guard. Robert found him a week ago.”

Robert nodded. “In the quarantine,” he said. “Livin’ like a king. The cause of all our woes are livin’ like a king.”

“In quarantine,” said Andrew.

The quarantine was a barn-board outbuilding almost as big as the hospital itself, that he had only visited once—the day he’d arrived and Dr. Bergstrom was showing him around the whole compound. He’d never been inside, because there’d never been any need.

“Nobody,” Andrew said, “is in quarantine.”

“Callin’ me a liar, nigger?” said Robert.

Andrew swallowed and took a breath. If he kept himself just so, the pain wasn’t too bad. He kept his breathing right, the fear could be pushed away. So he did and he did.

“Look,” he said. “I’m telling you what I know. That quarantine’s been empty since autumn.”

“Before you were here,” said Robert.

“Before I was here.” Andrew said. “I’m sorry. I’ve never seen anybody in there. And I’ve surely never seen—that. You think he raped Maryanne? Or—cut her?”

The tall sheet made a throat-cutting motion to one of the others. “That’s enough,” he said. “He doesn’t recognize him either. Let’s get on.”

With that, the hood fell back over the head of the poor fellow and they hauled him back to the tree.

It was a maple, and over one thick branch that extended out and swooped down to nearly touch the ground, someone had slung two lengths of noose-tied rope.

The sheets went to work. Robert wrapped his arms around the man’s legs and with a crackin’ sound from his own bad knees, lifted as another took the poor victim by his shoulders, and a third helped guide his neck to the noose while the last two held the other end of the rope where it crossed the tree branch. Andrew thought there would be more of a fight, but the fellow had an odd calm to him as the rope went over his head, and pushed down over the sack and around his neck. There was a stillness, a terrible quiet, as the men stood there, holding their captive aloft, delicate, like they might be thinking about the right and wrong of what they were doing.

It didn’t last long, that moment.

Robert Vernon let go of the legs and the others let go of the arms, and the maple branch bent somewhat as the rope went tight. The two on the rope’s other end hauled the rope over the branch, and the lynched man rose in the night.

Andrew didn't know when he'd started work on the rope around his wrists. But he knew as the poor man's legs twitched and shook and bent, and the keening whistling started up again—far louder this time, almost like a tiny scream—he'd managed to loosen a knot. Nothing dramatic—it was just looser, not untied, and there were other knots after this one before he'd be free. But although his fingers were numb and fat with his own blood, they were still a surgeon's, and they knew what to do. They would get those knots, because if they didn't—well, their doctor would end up on that rope. That was not how Dr. Andrew Waggoner was meant to leave this world. Even if he was slow to realize it, his fingers knew.

Luckily, the sheets seemed to have no idea.

Their victim raised high enough—maybe three feet off the ground—they tied off the rope, and came back to watch him die. Behind him, the cart-horse whinnied.

Andrew slipped the knot free. The second was not so tight, and he got that one going much more quickly. What was he going to do when he got them free? None of the men seemed to have guns, at least none outside their sheets. So he might just be able to run for it. Except he was cramped and so his rib felt like it could be broken. He could probably still outrun Robert Vernon with his bare knee. But the rest?

Andrew set his teeth. It was hard to think, with that whistling getting as loud as it was, so he just kept at work. How could that whistling be getting louder? The hanged man's airway should be about shut. The noises he could make should have changed, become more strangled and quieter.

The sheets were thinking the same thing. One of them had his hands over his ears, while the leader was shouting something else, something like an instruction. Two of them moved to obey—that is, they'd been told to grab the dying man's belt-loops and pull him down to break his neck. They grabbed tight, threw their own knees from under themselves and dangled.

The final knot slid undone and Andrew slid out of the ropes. He closed his eyes tight and gritted his teeth, blinked and pushed himself up. On hands and knees, he turned around, and with the fire on his rib making him want to weep, made for the wagon.

He didn't get far.

Andrew gasped, and his arms slipped from under him, and he thought: *I've been shot*. Then he found himself rolled over. He was looking into the face of Robert Vernon. The sheet was off him now and he held a stick—no, a handle for an axe. Instinctively Andrew raised his hand to ward him off. The axe-handle hit him in the elbow with a sickening *crack!*, and he clutched it, as Robert Vernon raised his club again.

There was another *crack!*, and Robert stood there for what seemed like a long time, weapon raised. Then Robert fell backwards into the dirt. The axe-handle fell against Andrew's hip. The sky was empty but for early evening stars and a fat yellow moon rising on the horizon.

The high whistling continued, but Andrew thought it might have been joined by another sound—the barking of dogs, and the *crack! crack!* of gunfire.

That would be good, he thought, if it were true. Then his eyelids slid shut and he let himself rest a moment.

§

Andrew's eyelids flickered as someone bent close. Not a sheet. Not a ghost. It had dark little eyes, though, a face bent the wrong way. It puckered its wide mouth, and leaned forward. It breathed out a awful smell, like formaldehyde, and looked up, started, and moved fast off to the right. Andrew felt the scant weight of it on his chest only then, by its sudden absence.

Someone screamed not far off, and Andrew blinked twice before he just gave up and closed his eyes.

§

“Dr. Waggoner.”

Andrew felt a sharp slap on his cheek, and another.

He coughed and blinked and opened his eyes.

This time the light of a kerosene lamp was nearer him, and there was someone else leaning in. Someone he recognized.

“Doctor,” said Sam Green. “You hear me?”

“I hear you,” said Andrew.

“Good. You know who I am?”

“Sure.”

Sam Green was the boss of the Pinkerton crew. He and Andrew went back—to October, when they’d met at the train station in Bonner’s Ferry some forty miles to the south of here.

Sam was wearing his bowler hat and what looked like his Sunday best. His normally ruddy face was crimson over the starched collar and tight-wound tie. Normally when he was on duty, Sam would wear something a bit more comfortable. But today was Sunday and unlike Andrew, he was a church-going man.

“That is good,” said Sam. “You haven’t been entirely addled by those bastards.”

“Those—” Andrew tried to sit up but the pain in his back and ribs was too much. “Those bastards,” he said slowly, “are Klansmen. They hanged a man.”

Sam might have smiled under his thick moustache, or he might have grimaced. “They are piss-poor Klansmen if that is what they even are. Anyone can pull a sheet over their head.”

Andrew coughed again, and winced. God, it hurt.

Green stood up. In his right hand, Andrew saw, he was casually dangling his still-smoking Smith and Wesson Russian revolver by the trigger guard.

“They hanged a man, Sam. They were going to do the same to me.”

“And we shot and killed three of them,” said Sam. “You stay put here a moment. Rest a spell.”

As he turned and stepped away, Andrew chanced to lift his head to see what he could see.

Andrew counted three lanterns casting beams here and there among maybe a dozen men and who knew how many dogs working the base of the hanging tree.

Nearer by, Andrew saw the bodies. The nearest belonged to Robert Vernon. There were another two further upslope toward the hanging tree, collapsed on one another, their sheets flowered blood. Sam stepped over them like they were fallen branches and joined the others.

“He ready to move?” Sam called.

Someone in the crowd answered, “He’ll move. None too pleased about it though.”

“Would you be?” asked Sam.

And with that, the crowd broke and two men hauled a stretcher out. On the stretcher was a figure bundled in dark cloth, and (Andrew thought) tied down. The stretcher tipped and twisted as the two men carrying it tried to manhandle it away. Andrew leaned his head back and shut his eyes.

They’d hanged a sick man and tried to hang a doctor, and earlier on they’d murdered a young girl and her baby.

Christ in Heaven, there was going to be hell to pay.

§

“Couple of things,” said Andrew when Sam came back to him.

“You have gathered your thoughts?”

“Yes,” said Andrew. “First. There’s been a murder. Not that poor fellow just now hung, either. Another. Maryanne Leonard.”

Sam Green raised his eyebrows. “The girl with child? I had been given to understand she died of . . . womanly troubles.”

“She did,” said Andrew. “But I examined her. I believe her troubles were brought on by an abortionist. An inexperienced one.”

Sam looked away at that, and Andrew let him be a moment. This was nothing for a good Catholic fellow to hear on a Sunday evening.

“You think,” said Sam finally, “that these fellows were hanging you in part to keep you quiet on the subject?”

“The thought had crossed my mind. Yes.”

Sam snorted, lowered his head to look at his feet, and said in a low voice: “Fucking animals.” Then he looked up, met Andrew’s eye. “Pardon my French.”

“It is important that they not be allowed to take the body away. It will need to be examined for proof,” said Andrew.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” said Sam. “Dr. Bergstrom is back at the hospital now. He has not released anything to anyone.”

“Bergstrom’s back? When—”

“After supper,” said Green. “We saw him at the hospital. These bastards left the place in a mess.”

“So he sent you after us?”

Sam’s moustache twitched. “So we found you,” he said. “That’s what’s important. And now you’ve told me about the murder you suspect. Anything else?”

“I think,” said Andrew, “I’m going to need some help out of here.”

“That so? Can’t imagine why. You feel all your fingers and toes, Doc?”

“Yes, I feel them just fine. But I think my back is hurt and I can’t get up right now. I think you’d better bring over that stretcher you used to carry off the body.”

“Body?”

“Yes,” said Andrew. “The hanged man. That other murder. I’ve got respect for the dead—but I’m going to need that stretcher more than him right now.”

Now Sam was grinning. He knelt down and patted Andrew on his shoulder. “Nobody died here tonight,” he said, “but some cowardly bastards. Old Mister Juke is fine as ever he was.”

“Mister—Juke?”

So the hanged man had a name.

“You, now . . .” Sam sat down on the ground, propping his gun on his knee and looking off over Andrew’s head. “You do look like you could use some help. But we got to get Mister Juke back to our own wagon. They’ll come back with the stretcher when that’s done.”

“Sam,” said Andrew, “don’t go changing the subject. He was hanged. He can’t be fine. He—”

“Hush,” Sam said. “You are a smart Negro, Dr. Waggoner. I don’t believe I have said so before, but I have a great respect for you in that regard. You managed to get yourself into doctoring school in Paris, France, and back out again with a medical degree. And now, you can set a bone and you can cut out a swelled-up appendix with your eyes closed I expect. But even you can’t expect to know everything on Heaven and earth.”

Andrew frowned and thought about that.

“Tell me something,” he finally said. “Did you come up here looking for me, or were you here to get that Mister Juke back?”

“Oh, we’re bringing you back,” said Sam. “But like I said, boy: ‘There are more things in Heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’ See now?” he said, winking again. “You ain’t the only one read a book.”

“How long,” said Andrew, “has Mister Juke been in the quarantine? Why did nobody tell me? And just precisely what—who—is he?”

“No, no,” said Sam. “You won’t get that from me, old friend. Not more from me. You can ask Dr.

Bergstrom when you get back. Not," he added, "that I am recommending it."

~~Sam Green leaned back. To show the conversation was done for now, he started to whistle.~~

2 - A Damn Germ

FEBRUARY, 1911

Jason Thistledown's mama was tall and beautiful and strong; stronger of arm than many a man and more powerful of spirit than any two. Yet in the end it was not a man nor two nor even a gang of them but a damn germ that killed her.

The night it happened it was just the two of them alone in the cabin as a terrible howl of blizzard ran outside. The blizzard was bad for the pigs, and as it turned out one of them died because Jason would not go outside and see to them. He knew the risk in leaving the pigs out like that, but sometimes a man's got to decide, and if there's no man about, the decision falls to a boy. To Jason's way of thinking, when the choice is between standing by your mama and a seeing to a sty of swine there's no choice at all.

He sat there and gave her water until she stopped taking it. He tried singing to her like she used to sing to him, but that felt foolish, so he said he was sorry but he was going to have to stop. He thought she might like to hear a story so he told her the one about Odysseus and Polyphemus, until he realized it became too terrifying in the middle part where Odysseus' men were one by one devoured by the terrible Cyclops. His mama (lying on her bed, unable to move or speak, with blood welling at the base of her fingernails; brown, putrid fever-sweat accumulating in her bedclothes) didn't need more terrifying. So he said he was sorry and tried to think of a less frightening tale. At length, Jason had to admit he didn't know many stories that weren't upsetting in some way or another, so he said he was sorry.

"I guess sayin' sorry's one thing I can do fine," he said and tried to laugh at his little joke but wound up crying.

He cried a long time, but managed to get his wits about him before the germ delivered its *coup de grâce*.

Later on, Jason was glad for that. He was sure his mama wouldn't have liked to have had the last sight of her son being him blubbering like a baby.

At that hour, however, Jason had not yet seriously entertained the notion that his mama was going to be having a last anything of anything. She was just poorly. She was quite poorly, sure, but she hadn't been that way for so very long. The coughing started up on the way back from the store Cracked Wheel, and that was just a day ago. It was probably a flu germ, she'd said, but she'd had flu before and always just walked it off. She was more worried about Jason coming down with it, and she ordered him to the far end of the cabin for all the good that would do.

Jason hadn't come down with a thing—not so much as a sniffle. That, to his way of thinking, meant that whatever it was, it wasn't much of a flu at all.

Still believing this, Jason dried his nose and got up from his chair and went to see to the wood stove, which was starting to cool. He dug around in the wood box and came up with a stick of birch that looked about right, and opened the stove's front and shoved it in. It raised a little flurry of sparks in the bed of coals inside. Jason blew on it a bit, and fanned it with his hand, poked it with his fingertips until it was just right. Then he closed the door and wiggled the flue to make sure it was properly open so the fire would take.

When he got up, that was it.

Later, Jason would think that it was better his mama saw him tending the fire as she died. His mama valued that sort of thing, that *self-sufficiency* as she called it. Self-sufficiency had seen her raise

Jason alone here in the wilds of northwest Montana—laugh at all the folks who'd said she, born and raised in the east and come out here only late in life, wouldn't last a year now that her husband was gone.

Yes, he would think, she probably took a deal of comfort in watching him see to his needs; more comfort than having him right there beside her as the life fled her flesh.

Yet there at the deathbed, Jason didn't even cry. He just stood, hands hanging dead weight at his side. He shuffled over to her bed, and fell to his knees, and died himself or so it seemed to him.

His mama was gone; taken from him by a God-damned germ.

§

It was on February 12, 1911 that she died.

Jason did not look at the clock when it happened, but sometime afterward he remarked to himself that it struck eleven in the night; so he surmised she'd died prior to eleven but past what might normally be the supper hour, although they had not had a proper supper, and he finally hazarded a guess and wrote this down in the front of their Bible:

8 OCLOCK (OR THERE-ABOUT) IN EVENING
FEB 12 1911
ELLEN THISTLEDOWN
LOVING MOTHER OF JASON
DIED OF FEVER
IN HER OWN BED

He wrote those words the morning of February 13, before he ventured outside to check on the pigs and found that one of them had died too—a young boar that Jason's mama was fattening for slaughter. The freeze had taken care of the slaughter, and by the time Jason had come out, the remaining four pigs were taking care of the carcass.

The whole homestead was snowbound—one side of the cabin was covered in a drift of white that went from the roof shingles to the ground in a smooth curve, like the snow that ran down the distant western mountain peaks, and the blizzard had left no path between cabin and pigsty. Jason started through the white anyway but it was tough going.

He was finally reduced to hollering, "Stop! You're eatin' your own! Damn cannibal hogs!" The swine paid him no heed.

Jason swore a storm, and waved his arms, and finally, in frozen exhaustion, turned back to the cabin.

With that picture in his head, he knew there was no question.

No matter how he loved her, Jason Thistledown could no longer live under the same roof as his mama—reduced as she was to nothing but soured meat.

When he composed himself, he found a shovel and began digging a path from the cabin. The snow was as high as it would get, casting a shortening shadow to the north by the time he'd made it to the side where the woodshed stood. There was a *good* half-cord of wood stacked within. But Jason looked to the braces. They were six feet from the ground, and spaced adequately for the task.

Against the wall in the shed was a stack of pine planks, bought by him and his mama that autumn past in hopes of setting down a proper floor in the cabin. He lifted two of those planks into the rafters, making a high platform that he reckoned would keep her safe from predation and wolves until the thaw.

"I am sorry, Mama," he said as he hefted her sheet-wrapped body over his shoulder and put a foot on the ladder. She was wearing the same sheet she'd died in, and he had not washed her, and even in the sharp February cold she gave a stink like a shallow privy.

"I guess," he said as he rolled her onto the makeshift platform and settled her on her back.

“sayin’ sorry’s one thing I can do fine.”

§

The winter finished hard, one storm after another hitting the Thistledown homestead in a succession of punishing smacks that blanketed the snow in thick layers. Jason fought back dully—each day clearing a path between the door of the house and the woodshed, and halfway along cutting off another path to the sty. He waited a few days but finally succumbed and became diligent in throwing feed to the cannibal swine, creatures he was coming to hate but could not bring himself to kill.

He told himself that when the thaw came, he would trade the sty of them for the finest of coffins and the churchyard plot nearest to Jesus, a tombstone carved with his mama’s saintly visage and words from the most eloquent preacher in Montana to send her Heaven-ward.

Toward such an end, the pigs would have to be fed daily, lest they ate one another to extinction before winter’s finish.

Aside from the daily feedings, however, Jason did not spend much time tending the pigs.

Most times, he sat bundled in the woodshed, the Winchester in his lap. As the days grew longer, Jason grew more certain that his mama’s frozen resting place was not so secure. Three years ago, during a winter not so harsh as this one, his mama had bent down and showed him tracks in the snow.

Dogs? Jason guessed, and his mama had corrected him: *Not dogs, Jason. Wolves. A pack of them. That’s what the gun’s for.*

Jason had not seen wolf tracks around the homestead this winter, but he was on the lookout for them all the same—particularly as the snow climbed higher, nearer the height of the braces, and his mama’s frozen body.

He only felt truly safe for his mama when another blizzard blew, and the cold came so strong that nothing—he hoped—could live outside shelter.

Otherwise, he guarded and he patrolled, to make sure no strange tracks came near. He thought of how he would kill a wolf if it came. He counted his ammunition and thought how he would kill five of them. He began to think how he might kill a man if it came to that.

He grew thinner. He felt a hardness come over his face, and when he looked at it in the glass, he thought he looked like someone else. It was worse when he tried to smile, so he didn’t.

Instead, he guarded. And he waited—for the weather to break, so he could get moving, begin the business of trading the lives of his swine for a funeral for his mama.

§

The sun grew brighter and the smell of old leaves and pine needles came up from the ground. The crackling sound of icicles breaking could be heard, and when in the early morning he stepped onto the stoop, Jason felt a near thing to joy.

Soon, he could be off to town. Soon, he could finish things right: trade the cannibal pigs for the best coffin, an eloquent preacher and the plot nearest Jesus.

He pulled up his coat and set off for the woodshed through the now-slushy path he’d dug for himself. He felt like he should tell his mama something—that everything would be fine, her soon would be soon on the way to Heaven. But having spent the days watching over her, he was fairly certain she was not there to hear it.

All the same. Jason wanted to see her. Maybe whisper it.

But he stopped before he got far, and cursed himself. This was, of course, the first time in weeks he had headed there without the rifle. And this morning was also the first that he had seen tracks, other than his own.

Jason stepped back into the cabin, took hold of the Winchester, and with considerably greater care, crept around the cabin’s side to the woodshed.

§

How do I shoot a man?

~~The question suddenly became relevant, because the tracks he saw were not wolf tracks. They were boots, and by the look of them they were heading up from the direction of Cracked Wheel before they stepped down onto the path and disappeared.~~

Jason stood against the wall of the cabin, rifle held to his chest, heart hammering, and peered around. He blinked, and thought:

How do I shoot a woman?

She wore a black overcoat with a fur collar and a fur-lined hat; she was stout but not overly so and carried in one hand a carpet bag. In her other hand—her right hand—she held a revolver. She was looking up into the rafters, faced away from Jason.

Well, he thought, stepping out and lowering the rifle, *one thing's sure. I do not shoot her in the back.*

“Drop the gun, please ma’am.” He was surprised at how calm his voice sounded, even as the thought occurred to him: should she turn too fast, or jump away, or do anything dangerous, he would have to shoot her. Somehow, he would have to shoot her. “I have you covered.”

“Oh!” The gun fell from her hand, as did the carpet bag. She raised two small gloved hands. “Please don’t shoot. May I turn?”

Her voice made Jason think of easterners. Which made him think of his mama.

“You may,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

The woman turned, her feet making a sucking sound in the dirt. Jason judged her to be older than his mama had been, but not much. She wore eyeglasses, and he thought them to be very thick, because her eyes seemed very large.

“Is that Ellen?” she asked, motioning to the rafters.

Jason took a breath and lowered the rifle. He didn’t expect this strange woman would be trading gunfire with him. But that wasn’t to say he was ready to trust her yet.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said. “What’re you doin’ here, if you please?”

“I’m—” she looked back up “—oh my. That is Ellen, isn’t it? Oh, poor dear Ellen. Did she succumb too?”

“She’s dead, if that’s what you mean,” said Jason. He stepped toward the woman—keeping an eye on the revolver all the while. He felt a piece of him break off in his chest as he said the word. “My mama’s been dead—some time now.”

The woman looked down, and brought a gloved hand to her eye. “Oh. Your mama.”

“Ma’am,” said Jason, collecting himself, “who are you, please?”

She looked at him again, with those great big eyes. They seemed less sure of themselves than before.

“I am Germaine Frost,” she said. “I am, well . . . I suppose I am your aunt. Ellen Thornton was my baby sister.”

§

It was hard to credit it at first. Jason’s mama had been tall and blonde-haired, with a firm jawline and a lean, strong figure. Germaine Frost was in many respects the opposite. She was not as tall as Jason and the line of her jaw was obscured by thick jowls, and her hair was black as an Injun’s.

And leaving aside the glasses, there was the fact that Jason could recall no point at which his mother had talked of any aunts or uncles.

Jason wished she might have. But he supposed this was as good a time as any to meet one of them—he was in need of relations now as never before.

He gathered Germaine Frost’s revolver, her bag, and carried both to the cabin. Germaine—Aunt Germaine—followed at a respectful distance. As they came to the stoop, she asked him to stop

moment.

“Have you washed inside?” she asked.

“Washed—”

“Inside,” she said. “The house. It is a plague house, after all. It may still be infected.”

“Infected?”

“With the disease that took my dear sister. Although not you, young master—Jason, is it?”

“Yes ma’am. Jason Thistledown’s my name. And no ma’am. I did not wash. Not especially inside I mean.” He shuffled his feet. “It’s pretty ripe in there I guess.”

“Well, Jason,” she said, and put out her hand, “let’s have a look. Please hand me my bag.”

Aunt Germaine set the bag down in a drift. She took a little handful of snow, and scrubbed the handles of the bag where Jason had held it. Then she took more snow and rubbed it in her gloved hands before opening the bag. She rooted through some neatly folded cloth until she pulled out a small handkerchief, with strings coming out of each corner. Jason watched as she placed the cloth over her mouth, then reached up and tied it behind her head like she was doing her hair. In the end, the little handkerchief covered her mouth and her nose. Finally, she pulled off her hat and took off her coat, and set them down atop the carpet bag.

“Very good,” she said, her voice muffled by the cloth. “Now let us see how you have been getting by, Jason.”

Jason stepped aside to let Aunt Germaine through. She did not get far inside.

“Oh my,” she said. “Where does one start?”

Jason looked past her to see what she meant. The cabin was a simple enough place to his eye. One long pine table with a couple of chairs, the wood stove in the middle of it, a tiny windowsill and two beds at one end of it. All in one room.

“This,” she said, “is a breeding place for germs. The ground itself is your floor! Had you been staying outside all the time, Jason?”

“No ma’am.”

“Did you isolate your dear mother as she was ill?”

“No ma’am.”

She turned to him. Her eyes seemed very large behind the glasses. “And after she passed. You’ve remained here for how long after that?”

“Don’t know.”

“Weeks?”

“Months.”

“Oh my.”

She stepped back outside, and leaned close to him. “It is all right, my dear,” she said. “I am well trained. Open your mouth. And turn to the sun, please, so I can better see.”

§

Two hours later, Jason Thistledown was naked as the day he was born, up to his breast-bone in a tub of scalding hot water that Aunt Germaine had made him boil up on the wood stove and haul to a level spot in the lee of the house, and rubbing himself down with a black, stinging bar of soap from the carpet bag.

Jason tried to argue. “I’m not sick,” he said. “If I was carrying this germ, wouldn’t it make sense for me to be sick? It’s got to be gone now!”

“No,” said Germaine, “it does not. You clearly have an immunity.”

“How can you know that?” he demanded. “And how would it be on my clothes?”

She pointed back at the house. “Fetch the water, Jason. And get in it. This is not a discussion. She clapped her hands. “Hop to it.”

Now, sitting in the water, Jason wondered how in the course of less than an hour he could have moved from contemplating shooting a woman to hopping to it when she hollered.

Part of it, he suspected, was that she did seem to know what she was doing. She examined him like she was a doctor, and when he asked about that she said that back in Philadelphia she had worked as a nurse. She seemed to know a lot about germs, and when he asked about that she made a joke about them being her namesake. “The girls used to call me Germy behind my back,” she said and laughed.

It wasn’t all that funny, but Jason laughed too. He hadn’t done that in some time, laughing aloud and it felt good to finally clear the pipes.

“What girls?” he asked.

Aunt Germaine’s smile faded a bit. “Oh you know,” she said. “The other nurses.”

Jason hadn’t a chance to ask many more questions the next couple of hours, as he followed Aunt Germaine’s very precise instructions about how to heat the water, where to do the bath and most importantly how to wash his clothes and himself.

Finally, as he finished the last spot at the very back of his head, he started up again.

“Aunt Germaine,” he said, “how is it that I never heard of you? You and mama have a falling out?”

“Not precisely that,” said Germaine. “Let us say that we married into different circles.”

“That’s how come you’re called Frost, and not Thornton?”

“Yes. That is how come.”

Jason set down the soap in the snow. It bled little spider legs through the white. “How come you’re here now?” he asked.

Germaine turned around, glancing at Jason then away. “I was—nearby, when I learned what had happened here.”

Jason gave her a look. “How nearby? Nobody’s been here all winter to see what happened.”

His aunt pulled off her gloves, and wrung them together. “Nobody has,” she said. “And you haven’t left the homestead, and no one has come.”

“Too much snow,” said Jason.

His aunt didn’t say anything to that. She kept her eyes down, while Jason worked it out: news had come from here that was not about his mama, but still bad enough to draw relations nonetheless.

His hand fell back into the tub, and although the water was still quite warm, he shivered.

“What happened in Cracked Wheel? More people get sick?”

Aunt Germaine looked up. Her eyes might have been big and wet again, but the sun reflected off the glass so Jason could only surmise it by the tone in her voice.

“The whole town,” she said quietly. “It is gone.”

§

Jason would never set foot in the cabin again, of that he was sure.

As the sun set below the mountains, the flames were already reaching higher than treetops. He felt himself hitching to cry all over again as he watched the flames take it, and the woodshed, and his mama—who was going onward with no coffin, no tombstone, no sweet-voiced eulogy from the best preacher in Montana: a quiet recitation of the Twenty-third Psalm by Aunt Germaine, a lick of flame to kerosene, and then . . .

Fire.

Aunt Germaine stood beside him, her arm around his shoulder as the flames went higher. “Jason, this is something no young man should have to do, but so many do. You are very brave.”

Jason coughed, to hide that he was crying. “Not my idea,” he said, quiet enough that he’d figured his aunt couldn’t hear. But her ears were better than her eyes and she answered him:

“You wouldn’t know,” she said. “You haven’t seen the town yet. You haven’t seen what this ger-

does.”

“I know well enough,” he said. “Mama should be buried.”

“Why’s that?” Germaine raised her voice as the flames hit the woodpile. “She Catholic? Jewess?”

“You know she ain’t,” said Jason.

“Then cremation is still good enough for my sister. It was good enough for Mr. Frost, it’s good enough for Ellen.”

Jason swallowed hard. They had had a falling out, Aunt Germaine and his mama—that was a sure thing.

“If we do not do this,” said his aunt, “then what happens when some trapper comes by in the me starts rooting through the house and picks up that germ? What happens, I will tell you, is this: it is a epidemic. Like the cholera.”

“Is that what this is?”

Aunt Germaine put up her hand. “The flames are taking,” she said. “Let us pray for your mother’s immortal soul.”

“All right,” he said. “I will.”

And Jason bowed his head, and after a moment of sad quiet, he imagined a great celestial light descending over this infernal pyre. And imagining that, he thought up a prayer.

Oh Lord, he prayed, please see my mama to Heaven where she belongs. And Lord, see to it please, that should my pa ever wish to speak with her from where he writhes and burns in that Other Place—

Jason opened his eyes and stared into the flames that consumed the cabin old John Thistledown had built the year Jason was born.

—please, Lord: see to it he stays where he is and keeps his damn peace.

§

A month ago, shooting the pigs might have brought Jason some measure of satisfaction. Now—somehow, the act seemed capricious; low-down cruel. But Aunt Germaine insisted.

“They are probably fine,” she said. “But who knows if whatever it was that took poor Ellen is not also somehow attached to the swine?”

“It don’t seem likely,” said Jason. “And anyhow—those pigs have value at market.”

Aunt Germaine shook her head. “There is no market,” she said. “Not close by. Go on, young man. Take your shot.”

“Well,” he said doubtfully, “they *are* cannibals.”

In the end, Jason was down six bullets from the Winchester, having missed with one and been wounded with another.

He made sure to gather up the casings for reuse before he and his new aunt started off, in the dawn light, toward the snow-choked pass to Cracked Wheel. Jason wondered how they were going to do it. But as they crossed a rise that had been beaten down by Aunt Germaine’s footsteps, and rounded a tree, he saw it. There, sticking out of the snow, were two pair of snowshoes.

“Have you ever walked in snowshoes?” she asked.

“Course,” he said. “There was a couple pair that burned up on the back of the woodshed. Didn’t think of them until now.”

“Well, it is a good thing I thought ahead,” said Aunt Germaine. “See? I brought an extra pair.”

“In case of survivors,” he said.

“That is right.”

“That was good thinking, Aunt Germaine.”

Aunt Germaine reached out, tossed one pair of shoes onto the snow, and stepped onto them. She

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