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The World by Night

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The World by Night

Sadie was sixteen when her parents died, and the gravedigger told her he would charge her less if she would help him. Typhoid had killed so many people in town that he was tired of digging.

“Can we do it at night?” she said. Her skin could not weather long hours in the sun, and in the glare of day she would be nearly blind.

He agreed, and so there they were, twilight till dawn, shaving slivers of hard-packed earth from the walls of the graves. They had the coffins lowered by morning, and the gravedigger looked at Sadie’s flushed face and said, “Go on and get inside now. I’ll finish this. I’ll do it proper. You can have your own service tonight.”

“Aren’t you afraid of me?” she said. She’d been wanting to ask all night. When she was tired or nervous, her irises often jumped back and forth uncontrollably, as though she were being shaken, and she knew they were doing so now. It unsettled people, and more than one preacher had tried to cast spirits out of her, to no effect.

The gravedigger looked at the earth for a long time, the pits with the bodies resting at the bottoms. “I saw another girl like you one time, at a freak show in Abilene,” he said. “White skin and hair like you have, eyes like I never saw, almost red. They called her the devil’s bride, but I think she would’ve liked to’ve been married to a good man, tending chickens and baking biscuits just like anyone else. Anyhow, you’re a fine digger.”

Now Sadie is twenty and it is June and her husband Zachary has been gone for two months, southeast across the Ozarks and maybe farther, to look for work. She is not afraid of being alone for a while. She was alone for two years before she met him and thought she would spend the rest of her life that way. It is sickening to think of that time, and just to know he will come back sooner or later is enough.

She sleeps in the sod house through the bright hours of the day when most women do their chores, saves her work for early morning and dusk. When the dark has settled, she walks across the prairie, making her way by scent and feel. She finds some clumps of grass that smell like onion, others like sweet basil, others covered in silvery down that tickles her fingertips.

As the days pass, she saves up things to show Zachary when he comes home: A patch of sweet blackberries by the side of the pond where she

draws the wash water. A hollow where a covey of grouse nest. Most important and mysterious of all, a hole in the ground with nothing but darkness inside, about the size of a barrel top. The grasses there move even when there is no breeze, and the hole breathes cool air. Once she lowered a lantern into it at the end of her clothesline and saw a slope of jagged stone leading down. She stuck her head into the opening and breathed, and the air smelled like the walls of her parents' graves.

When Sadie first met Zachary, it was dusk and he was drunk. She was sweeping the front steps of the house she had lived in with her parents, and had elderberry jam boiling on the stove inside. A man stopped at the gate and said, "Appaloosa." Sadie kept sweeping, but the word brought to mind the horses, stark white with a dappling of dark spots, that the Indians rode across the plains. "Appaloosa," the man said again. "Appaloosa, I'm talking to you." He sauntered up to her and took her face in his hand, whiskey and turpentine exhaling from his clothes. He had straight black hair to his shoulders, fingers that were strong and callused. Sadie stood very still as he rubbed her chin with his thumb, then showed her the dark purple smear of elderberry juice that stained it.

"Not real spots at all," he said. "You're in disguise. You must be one of those Arab horses like the kings and queens ride, white from head to shoes." He licked his thumb clean. Sadie didn't say anything, just tightened her grip on the broom handle, but the man dropped his hand and stepped back and bowed to her lightly. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

She finished sweeping the steps and went inside. Looking in the glass, she could see her whole pale face spotted with the dark juice, her hands too. She wiped herself clean with a damp cloth and went back to the canning, not thinking she'd ever see the man again. But he did come back the next day, and knocked on the door like any gentleman. The sound startled Sadie awake in her parents' old feather bed, and she crept into the living room in her nightgown. Through the curtains she could just make out the shape of a man walking away down the front path. When she cracked the door open, there was a handful of dusty flowers on the stairs and a note. The grocer read it for her later: "My name is Zachary Pollard and I live at the boarding house by the bank and this is a gift for you."

He came every day after that too, though once he learned better, he came in the evening, and they sat on the porch steps with a candle between them and talked. Her parents had been dead two years, and he was the first person since their death to speak to her about anything

more important than the weather or the cost of flour. He was, he liked to say, mostly orphan himself. His mother was a Chinook Indian, but she had died when he was a boy and now he had nothing left of her but her songs and her language and a fine-beaded bangle that he kept wrapped in a handkerchief at the bottom of his trunk. His father was a Scotch-Irish trader he had not seen in a dozen years. None of this seemed to sadden him; though he was only twenty, he had a hundred thrilling stories to tell, had traveled much of the country and met all manner of people. "But none like you, Appaloosa," he would say. Sadie had often wished she looked like everyone else, but after she met Zachary she stopped wishing it. He drank her in with his eyes, as though the very sight of her were delightful.

She worried it would not last. During the months when she and Zachary were courting, she was convinced every day that he would change his mind, that he would leave her. When they got married, she held his arm so tight she left crimps in the fabric of his shirt, and to put the ring on her finger, he had to pull her loose.

By the time the last hot days of summer come, she is restless. Even the weather seems impatient. Great masses of blue-black cloud gather above the prairie, and lightning cracks sideways at the horizon while the wind sets her hair whipping about her face. Times like these, the world feels more alive than at any other, like she is only a mosquito resting on the hide of some great beast.

But when the storms end, the stillness is intolerable. She opens Zachary's trunk and ruffles the pages of his few small books between her fingers, wishing for the thousandth time that she could read them. She left school at eight; the schoolmistress had complained that she was too much of a distraction to the other children and still had not learned her letters in any case. When Sadie failed to learn them even from her mother, her parents took her to a doctor, who said her eyes were weak in a way he could not fix, that she was oversensitive to light and farsighted; she would not learn to read and probably would not be much of a seamstress. He gave her a pair of dark glasses and sent her home. Standing on her front porch, Sadie had hooked the glasses over her ears and looked at the people and horses moving through the artificial dusk the glass created. Brilliant bits of light still stabbed in from the sides of her face, and though she could see better, people stared at her even more than they had before.

She sets the books aside and carefully unpacks the rest of the trunk. Here is the shirt Zachary was married in, a spare horse blanket, a

bundle of coins, a wrinkled handkerchief folded in neat quarters. And a long coil of rope. Sadie unwinds it and feels the whole length to satisfy herself that it is sound, and finding it so, she coils it again and takes from beside the stove the stout iron bar she uses to stir the fire. She slips a handful of matches into her dress pocket. With the iron bar in one hand and the lantern and rope in the other, she goes outside.

She moves as quickly as she can to the cave entrance and ties one end of the rope to the iron bar, then hammers the bar into the earth with a stone until she is satisfied it will hold her weight. After one last tug on the rope she steps gingerly into the mouth of the cave and begins the steep descent, balancing against the rope.

Once she has reached the floor, the opening to the cave blazes above her like a jagged red sun, but around her all is cool and dim. The lantern light does not go far in darkness this profound, but by moving around the perimeter of the space, she soon gains its measure.

At one end of the room she finds a tunnel, big enough to scuttle through at a crouch, and decides to see where it leads. As she goes farther, the passage angles steeply downward and grows narrower, until there is barely room for her to crawl and none to turn around. She has a sudden urge to stand up, though she knows she can't. The stone floor cuts her knees. She has no sense of how far she has come, and for all she knows the tunnel might end in a blank wall, and if it does she will have to crawl the whole way backward, if she can even do such a thing. The panic makes her muscles twitch; she has to force herself to pause and breathe deeply to stay her own frantic motion. She imagines she is at home, in the little corner of the house where they store the potatoes, where the earthen walls squeeze close around her. At last she is calmer and moves forward again, and soon the tunnel widens out into another room. She stands and stretches, claps her hands. To her right the sound echoes back, quick and sharp, but to the left it fades away into nothing. She sings out a line from her favorite hymn, *Glory, glory, praise His name*, and the stone walls sing back to her in weird chorus. Laughing, she sings to the end of the song and holds her breath as the echoes fade. This is her reward for pushing herself forward when she might have turned back. She has never been anywhere so strange and apart from the world. It feels as though this place belongs to her alone, and before she has even begun the crawl back up through the tunnel, she knows she will return.

All through autumn, she visits the cave almost every day. Most times she only goes to the room at the bottom of the rope and lies in the cool

darkness, breathing in the moist air. She daydreams, thinks sometimes of her parents, but most often tries to trace Zachary's progress in her mind, imagine where he is and what he might be doing.

The day before he left, the two of them had gone out for a ride in the early evening, the prairie still pale green and tender then, and if she tries, she can sometimes conjure the feel of his arm around her waist, his chest against her back as he let the horse wander through the tall grasses.

"Will you be all right?" he'd said. "It'll be a long while."

"I can wait."

"Go to the Burkes if you have any trouble."

"I won't. She always looks at me like I'm a bug. I'd rather starve to death."

"Well, I'd rather you didn't. I'm worried about leaving you."

"Don't go then. I'm the one with cause to worry, with you so far away."

He laughed, but it was a sad laugh. "I used to be a wild thing, you know, before I met you. I've drunk toasts in places that would make your stomach turn. I can take care of myself."

"I can take care of you, too," she said.

He sighed and kissed her neck and turned the horse gently back to home.

Some days she ventures through the tunnel into the larger room and beyond. She takes with her cloth scraps that she ties as markers so she will not lose her way, and the farther she explores, the more wonders she discovers. In some places, streams of icy water cut through the caves, and after spending many long minutes staring into the current, she notices the darting movement of small white fish and crayfish throwing back the light of her lantern. In other places she finds chimneys in the rock that seem to drop down forever, and empty river beds where the stone feels like melted glass. Pale crickets chirp from hidden niches. Every room holds some new wonder, and the joy of discovery stokes in her a boldness she has never felt in the world above. Her only regret is that Zachary is not with her. She knows he believes he has seen everything the world has to offer, but he has never seen anything like this.

But then, too soon, the first snowfall comes. Sadie presses her nose against the tiny frosted window of the sod house and watches the flakes cover the bleached prairie. Within a day the snow reaches her knees, and soon after it is covered by a crust of ice. The glare of sunlight on

the vast expanse of white is blinding at any hour of the day, and Sadie can't find the entrance to the cave now that the snow has erased all the features of the land. Bound indoors, she cleans or cooks or sings to herself. Despite what the doctor told her parents, she has learned to sew well enough, feeling the stitches and the way the fabric comes together with the tips of her fingers, so she busies herself patching the holes in her winter coat. Nights are so bitter she can't bear to be outdoors very long, but when the sky is unclouded she wraps herself in her quilt and lies looking at the riot of stars that fill every inch of the sky, stars so clear she feels she could prick her face against them if she stood up too quickly.

Still, this is not enough to take up much time, and she begins to feel she may go crazy in the little sod house. The winter before, Zachary read to her through the long hours, and sang when she played the guitar, and sometimes held on to her silently in their little bed, so quietly that she thought he was asleep until some slight movement made him hold her more tightly. Without him the days are too long. She does not care to visit the Burkes, and the next homestead past them is ten miles distant. Soon she begins to sleep long portions of the day and the night too.

At last some travelers come by, a man and a woman and a baby. Sadie sees the shadow of their wagon move past the window and goes quickly to the door to call to them. The couple comes in, stamping the snow from their feet and smiling, but a stricken look passes across their faces when they see her clearly in the firelight.

"Would you like something to eat?" Sadie says quickly. There is little enough to spare if her stores are to last until spring, but she is desperate for their company. "Maybe it's been a while since you've had a hot meal."

"We can't stop long," says the man.

"Just a cup of tea and some bread then?"

The couple huddles together at the table as Sadie adds wood to the stove, sets the bread to warm, and boils water for the tea. There is one jar of blackberry preserves left, and she puts that on the table as well. She slips her glasses on. They are more of a hindrance than a help inside the house, but she can hear fear in the travelers' voices and knows the smoked glass will hide the shaking of her eyes.

"I can hold the baby while you eat," she says.

"Oh, no," says the woman. "She doesn't take well to other people." She leans the baby against her shoulder and eats hastily with one hand.

When the food is gone, Sadie sees that they mean to leave immediately, and it fills her with a sense of dread so keen she nearly grabs the

woman's hand where it rests on the table. Instead she says, "I wonder if you would write something for me?"

The woman nods and hands the baby to her husband. Sadie takes a pen and ink and paper from Zachary's trunk and sets them on the table. "Only write, 'Dear Zachary, I will be back soon. Love, your Sadie.'"

The woman writes, and when the ink is dry, she folds the paper in quarters and hands it to Sadie, looking always at the tabletop.

"Thank you."

"No trouble in it," the woman says. "Thank you for the food. We'd best be going."

Sadie watches the wagon disappear against the horizon, though it hurts her eyes to do it. As soon as they are gone, she begins to fill Zachary's old knapsack. She takes the lantern, candles, matches, a shawl, a fat bundle of cloth scraps. She fills the rest of the space with food and a flask of water. Last, she slips her coat on and grabs her broom from the fireside and heads out into the prairie, where she stabs at the snow with the broom handle for more than an hour, until at last she finds the spot she wants, where the handle plunges deep into the ground. She kicks the snow aside and looks at the iron bar, the icy rope. It is a wild idea, she knows, but she feels wild, trapped in the confines of the house day upon day with no sound except the screaming of the wind.

She reaches the floor of the cave and waits to catch her breath. Already she feels better, more at home. The cave is warmer than the prairie above. Her bag lies at her feet. It holds enough food to last her a week; she can do some real exploring without having to worry about getting back for supper. She lights the lantern and moves carefully to the tunnel that leads to the larger room. Once there, she tries a passage she has not taken before. It proves to be a short tunnel, and after a few minutes of crawling, she steps into another vast rock room. The wall to one side is encrusted with a brilliant white froth of minerals that glitters in the light of her lamp. She stands for a long time just looking at the light winking back at her before she brushes the stone. Her fingertips come away coated in a powdery residue.

She has been exploring for a few hours and has investigated a handful of rooms when she decides to retrace her steps and finds that she cannot locate her marker. Standing at the entrance to the tunnel that she is almost sure she came down, she moves the lantern slowly, patiently, around its dark mouth, but does not see anywhere the strip of bright red flannel that should confirm her way. She takes a deep breath and

starts again at the base of the tunnel, feeling the rock with her fingers this time, waiting for the welcome softness of the cloth. Nothing. So she must be mistaken. The room is large and there are a number of tunnels branching from it; she moves to the next one and starts her search again.

Perhaps an hour has passed by the time she has checked all the tunnels she can find, and still there is no marker anywhere. She cannot believe she has forgotten to leave one, but it is just possible, with her excitement and her eagerness to move ahead. Or else she has not found the proper tunnel. Or else the marker was not tied securely and is lying somewhere on the cave floor. None of which tells her what she should do. She has returned, or thinks she has, to where she started, that first tunnel that she initially felt confident in. She checks its perimeter one last time and then decides she must give this one a try. Soon after she enters it, though, she becomes convinced she has made a mistake. The ceiling is lower than she remembered, the tunnel more twisted. Frustrated, she calls out, and the echo that answers her promises an open space close ahead. As she emerges, impatient, into the next room, her foot plunges into empty air and she falls headlong onto the rock, her lantern rolling ahead of her, the candle quickly extinguished.

Lying with her face to the rock, she feels the floor around her with shaking hands, finds it solid, pulls her knees to her chest, and sobs. There is no way for anyone to find her unless they were to come across the iron bar and the dangling rope and become curious, and there is little chance of anyone roaming across the land in the winter. Her right knee is scraped raw where she landed on it, and her hands are shaking. She has been foolish, and now she will pay for her foolishness.

Eventually she stops crying. She feels the floor around her until she locates the lantern, gingerly touches the glass panes, and finds them unbroken. Her matches are still in her pocket, and she strikes one, relights the candle, and draws a shuddering breath.

She imagines what Zachary would say and feels ashamed of herself. She has not even looked for a way out. She could cry for days and do nothing more than make herself thirsty. Better to take stock: she has been in the cave for half a day and has food for a week. So she will have to find another exit. There are small streams running everywhere for water, and she will be sparing with the food until she is sure of her escape route. When she gets home, she will tear up the note she left, and Zachary will never even know she was gone.

For a while, a sense of certainty buoys her—she finds another passage leading from the room and follows it, confident that she will soon be on the surface. But that tunnel branches into another and another, and soon she can no longer say which direction she started from.

In the constant darkness, the passage of time becomes impossible to calculate. She knows only that the food in her pack is diminishing, though she allows herself only a bite or two at a time and stretches the hours between bites as long as she can. How much time has it been? Days, certainly. Weeks, possibly, but more than that she can't say. The uneven ground and the danger of falling force her to move slowly, and she eats so little that she grows tired easily. After a while, she begins to crouch by the icy rivers and swipe at the white fish there, flipping them from the water to the cave floor, where they thrash desperately until they die and she can rinse them clean and eat them. Their skins are soft and scaleless, their bones fine as grass, but they are small and not much nourishment, and she is plagued by constant dull hunger.

Sometimes she thinks she hears sounds: snatches of laughter and a low, hollow whistle like a distant train. There are faces, too, in the dim light of the lamp, looking at her from the corners of the ceilings, and sometimes the sound of something scuttling behind her, something she is never quick enough to see. She tries to call out, to talk to these fleeting forms, but never receives any answer. More and more often she takes refuge in sleep, the darkness of her closed eyes blending seamlessly with the darkness of her waking hours.

She wakes again, and it is just like the last hundred times she has woken, except that when she tries to rise, the effort feels too great. Her body hurts all the time now, and sometimes it's hard to remember what she was looking for. *A door*, she thinks. *I'm looking for the door*. If she stops paying attention for one moment, she might find herself plunging into some unnoticed hole in the floor, but attention is hard to come by with the great heavy silence of the cave in her ears and the darkness constantly changing the shapes around her. At last she turns over and pushes herself up on her knees. She crawls through a low slot in the rock wall into a new room and sees against the far wall something like a snowfall of stars, soft blue streaks of light drifting down against the blackness. She laughs and holds out her hand, then realizes that the light lies on the other side of a chasm some six feet wide that begins just past her fingertips. She could jump across it, perhaps, but if she misses, she is done. So she kneels at the edge, feeling the cool air across her face and watching the drifting pattern of light on black.

It must be nearly Christmas, she thinks. *Maybe today.* Zachary will be somewhere in a saloon along the road back to her, drinking beer with strangers. Or at a boarding house filled with lonely men, all sitting down to roast goose and feeling grateful for a moment of warmth. And maybe not just men. Maybe some pretty young widow is smiling at him, carving a helping of meat onto his plate and setting her hand on his shoulder, leaning too close.

Sadie lies on her belly at the edge of the chasm and holds out the lantern to look down. At the bottom, there is a distant glow like candlelight. Sadie thinks she can hear voices, and as she listens harder she is sure—a throng of people conversing. Some are laughing, even, and their voices seem to get louder the more she listens. She can almost tell what they are saying, but the walls of the cave distort the sound, keep it barely unintelligible. “Hello!” she calls, but they don’t answer, don’t even seem to pause in their conversation. Maybe they can’t hear her. She has noticed that sounds sometimes come from very far away in the cave. Once she thought she heard a lark singing just over her shoulder, but there was nothing around her but blackness.

She calls out to the distant people again, but again there is no response. Where did all those people come from? What are they doing here? Maybe they live here. Maybe they have never seen the sun in their whole lives and their skin is as white as hers. She imagines a whole dark room filled with white-skinned men and women, children, babies. White foxes and cats thread between their legs as they stand talking, white birds sing from the crenellations in the walls. There is a long table laid with candles and heaped with food. One of the women is singing, a soft, clear melody that Sadie’s mother used to sing to her when she was a child: *And the stars fell through my fingers, Lord.* What is it called? She can’t remember the name or the rest of the song. “Zachary,” she says, “you are missing the most wonderful party. You are missing so many things. You should be here at home with me.”

She wakes hours or minutes later, her cheek resting against the sharp edge of the chasm. A cool updraft still blows past her, but the raining blue light is gone, and the candle she left burning in her lantern has melted away. Where the people were, she hears only the muttering of water at the bottom of the crevasse. She feels too tired to move. In her shrunken pack are only two candles and a hard lump of brown sugar. *I will stay here until those people come back,* she thinks. *Maybe they’re looking for me.* Some part of her knows she is starving, that if she does not find a way out soon she will die here, that she cannot live on icy water and

thin-boned fish for much longer. But it is difficult to care. The darkness feels safe, the hard rock embracing. With the lantern extinguished, her eyes trace luminous patterns against the black, carnivals of moving light more beautiful than anything she can recall from home.

But then she remembers Zachary. He may have been waiting for days, for weeks, however long she has been gone. He may have come home as soon as she left, may even now be standing with her letter in his hand and scanning the snow for her long-erased footprints.

She crawls back from the edge of the crevasse and struggles to her feet, reaches into the pack for a candle, but thinks better of it and stands still, listening. *Tell me something*, she says to the cave, and the cave breathes back at her, its thousand thousand water droplets echoing against its stony heart. She puts the lantern in her pack and begins to move blind, sweeping her toes against the ground, reaching out with her hands to find the walls. There is a smell in the air, barely noticeable, that is different from the rest of the smells. She does not know what it is, but she follows it, into tunnels and down slopes and through a crack in the wall so small she has to empty all the air from her lungs to get through. And then she comes around a corner and there is a burning red slash above her head that makes her gasp and cover her eyes. When she has recovered from the shock, she can see that the ceiling is only a foot above her. She reaches up through the rent in the stone and feels a frigid wind against her fingertips.

She knows she must pull herself up, but it feels beyond her strength. She sits on the floor and eats her last spoonful of sugar, feels its energy flood into her blood in a way that makes her simultaneously strong and dizzy. At last she puts her pack on the ground, grabs the edges of the opening in the rock, and pulls and kicks, gasping, toward the light. Soon she is pushing through the snow-cruled skeletons of black-eyed Susans and rolling into the howling flat of the prairie. In the distance she can see the lightning-struck tree that marks the far side of the Burkes' property. She clutches her arms against her chest, turns her back to the wind, and sits a long while with her eyes closed.

When she nears her house, she sees smoke coming from the chimney and bursts in quickly. Someone looks up from the bed, startled, and for a moment her heart jumps. But she sees almost instantly that it is not Zachary. This person is fair-haired and slight, wrapped in her wool blanket. He screams and drops the piece of wood he was carving.

"Who are you?" she says.

He gasps and gapes at her. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'll go."

"Is Zachary here?" she says, but the man just shakes his head.

Sadie is shivering. She looks to the stove, where a pan of coffee steams. Not hers; she ran out of coffee before she went into the cave. But if someone sees fit to come into her house and use her things, she will drink his coffee without apology. She takes her tin cup from the hook and pours what remains into it, blows across the surface, and begins to drink. "Who are you?" she says again.

"My name's Robert Meecham. Are you one of them that lived here?"

"I still do live here. I'd like to know who you think you are, coming into my house." She glances around for her shotgun, spots it in the corner on the other side of the doorway, an easy stride away. She takes another sip of the coffee. The warmth moves through her body. Now that she is back in the house, she is aware of a ravenous hunger she has not felt since her first days underground. She opens the sugar tin and adds a handful of sugar to the coffee. "You wanted to get out of the snow, I suppose?"

"I was headed to Springfield, but a storm come up and I lost the track. When I got here there was no one about. I found your note, but after a while when no one come back, I figured you was dead."

By his voice, he sounds young, maybe only fifteen or sixteen, but the droop of his shoulders gives him a sad and desperate look. He stops talking and reaches out and grabs hold of her arm, holding on firmly but not painfully, watching her face. At last he lets go and sits back on the bed. He seems less frightened, more watchful. Sadie steps away and takes the gun from the corner.

"Youse a real woman, ain't you?" he says. "I thought you was a ghost. What happened to you?"

"Nothing happened. I've been away some time is all."

"Why's your face so pale?"

"Just is."

He stares a moment more, then says, "I've got a bit of salt pork, if you're hungry."

"All right."

The boy gets up from the bed, paws the grounds from the coffee pan, sets it back on the stove, and slices the meat into it. Sadie can smell the remnants of the coffee burning seconds before the bacon fat covers them, a smell so warm and vital she feels drunk on it. When the meat is cooked, he forks it onto a plate, and Sadie feels every second that passes until it is cool enough to eat, until the warm fat fills her mouth. When she has emptied the plate, she says, "My husband won't like you being here. You'll have to leave. I'll point you to the trail."

The boy nods. "S'pose I could wait until morning? The day's mostly gone."

She points with the gun. "You can take that blanket and stretch out by the fire for tonight."

He moves to the fireside and sits huddled in the blanket while she sinks down on the bed. Whatever power got her back across the prairie to home is quickly draining away; she feels as though she could sleep for days. She turns to pull a quilt from the shelf and catches a glimpse of herself in the square looking glass on the wall. Even she can see that her face is skeletal and dirty; she looks like the starved deer that sometimes wander by in the winter, all ribs and joints, nosing through the snow crust for something to eat. No wonder the boy was frightened of her. She settles herself on the bed facing him and spreads the quilt over her legs.

"Robert, did you say? Where were you headed before you fetched up here?"

"Out California way."

"You have family there?"

"No. Just somewhere to go."

He gets to his feet then and comes toward her, startling her, and she has the gun up before he has taken two steps. He stops and reaches for his pocket with a shaking hand.

"A letter came for you. I forgot about it until just now."

"I'm sorry," she says. She sets the gun down on the bed. "Would you read it to me?"

The boy nods. He crouches by the fire and begins to read, haltingly and without emotion, as if each word were a separate task.

"Dear Sadie, I hope you have been well and that the autumn has not been too hard for you. I have come much farther east than I intended and I am writing from...Pock—Pog—I don't know."

"Just go on."

"Where my father has been living these many years. He is a merchant now."

The boy stops speaking, but he looks closely at the paper and whispers the words to himself as he reads on.

"Skip the ones you don't know," Sadie says. "When does he say he is coming back?"

The boy folds the letter up. "I oughtn't to read this."

"Read it. I can't read." He looks at the gun on the bed, and she places it on the floor, pushing it beneath the bed frame. "All right? Read."

He exhales heavily and begins to read again, faster now. "He is a merchant now and has offered me a place on one of his ships that will go through the South Seas to take shipments of sugar. I know it is hard of me to leave you but truly the excitement of seeing such places is more than I can bear. I cannot say how many years I will be away and will not ask you to wait for me to come back. You will find a new husband quickly I am sure and you may feel free to never mention me or our marriage. I am sorry again and wish—"

"That's enough," she says. "Stop there."

The boy puts the letter down on the floor and sits looking at his stocking feet. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what it was."

"Course you didn't," she says. Zachary would have known, though, must have known that someone would have to read it to her, that his message would not reach her alone. She pulls the quilt up to her neck and lies very still in the bed. She feels like something is crushing all the breath from her chest. Outside, it is almost dark and the wind is picking up. For her, the whole world might be empty except for this one little house. At last she says, "You have a horse, don't you? In the stall out back."

"I do."

"I'll make you a deal, Robert. You let me use that horse tomorrow to ride to the trading post and get some supplies. And you help me carry them to a place a little ways out into the prairie. And in return, you can have this house and everything left in it. Stay here awhile and head on to California in the spring if you want. Winter's no time for traveling."

"Are you teasing me?" he says.

"Not a bit. That's a fair bargain, isn't it?"

"More than fair."

"And one other thing. You let me sleep in peace tonight."

"Don't even have to say that," he replies sulkily. "I'm not that kind of man."

"I didn't know it was a kind." She hauls the gun back up from the floor into the crook of her arm and lets the black exhaustion that has been tugging at her pull her under.

She is back in the cave, at the edge of that dark chasm where she saw the blue lights dance, and she holds in her hand a rope that is wondrously long and light. She ties one end fast around a rock and tosses the other into the darkness; it drifts down like a falling leaf. She begins to climb down slowly, hand under hand. Her arms are strong and her descent is steady. The deeper she goes, the lighter it becomes, but the light is

strange. It is bright white, but it does not hurt her eyes, and in fact she can see better than before. The rock wall in front of her is a whole world of facets and grooves, a lacy mapwork of stone. Her own hands are covered in a tracery of lines; her clothes are a collection of careful small stitches. Below her, faintly, she can hear music and the swell of voices, and the voices multiply until she is sure there must be hundreds of people. She tries to look down but can see only the light growing brighter, the walls beginning to glow white.

Then a man's voice calls to her from below: "Sadie."

He sounds closer than she expected, close enough almost to touch, but though she continues her descent, she does not find the bottom.

A moment later another voice, a woman's, calls out again, "Sadie!" and then another woman, and a man, and a child. The air grows warm with voices layered upon each other, bouncing against the rock. Sadie stops climbing and feels the bite of the rope against her hands, the nearness of the rock at her face.

She is not afraid. She will reach them soon.

"I'm coming," she calls, "I'm almost there," and she lets go of the rope to fall into their waiting arms.