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Brigid Amos
Blue Buttons

Travis took it as something of a blow when Elizabeth Yount appeared before him with her family's dirty clothes and announced that she was going with him to the river. Normally, this was a solitary job, and that was how Travis liked it. He had never been so much with people in his life as he was on this trip from his family farm in Missouri to the gold diggings of California. The emigrants walked together, ate together, and slept together. It was even difficult to bathe alone when the opportunity arose, as the mere suggestion of doing so always seemed to inspire several other young men to suddenly feel dirty also, so dirty that they were compelled to rid themselves of the previously unnoticed dirt at the precise spot that Travis had chosen for his solitary bath. Before this journey, Travis had thought that being with people was simply the opposite of being alone. But this constant deprivation of real solitude was robbing him of himself. Being always with others had become a silent but tangible presence which oppressed him with its demands on his time and attention, and the solitude he craved seemed like a lost love.

But Elizabeth would not be deterred. "Papa says I'm not to go alone. Seeing as you're doing your mess's wash anyway, I'll tag along with you." Elizabeth, though only twelve years old, stood eye to eye with Travis. The look she leveled at him said that the time for discussion had ended with her pronouncement, and to differ with the child was to question her father's orders. Her father was George Yount, a misanthropic and vindictive man. Ever since they had brought the wagons across the Missouri River on the ferry in St. Joseph and set out into the Flint Hills, George Yount had challenged the authority of the captain of the party, Raymond Hillerman. When their original captain was shot dead in a dispute at the ferry crossing, George Yount assumed he would be chosen to lead the party. But with the exception of the Yount family, the party unanimously chose Hillerman, and George Yount never forgave him for it. Travis had signed on as Hillerman's driver back in their little town of Larksville, where Hillerman had run the dry goods store. The two of them had had plenty of trouble from George Yount, and Travis wanted no more of it, so he hoisted his bundle of clothes over his shoulder and fell into step beside Elizabeth.

As the pair marched to the river, Travis looked up at the sky and wondered if this was such a good day for washing clothes. A dull grayish blue, it was splotted throughout with sluggish clouds that posed only a minor threat to their domestic endeavor. But to the north, they swirled and intertwined like vines straining upward toward an obscured sun, forming at their apex an immense orb of darkness. It was the type of cloud that might easily melt and disperse into harmless wisps of vapor in the warmth of spring, or it might engorge itself on moisture, eventually bursting and splattering its liquid flesh across the plains. Had he been on his own, Travis would have opted to wait for a decidedly drier day. As it was, he kept his reservations to himself.

When they reached the river, they opened their bundles and began submerging and soaping up the various articles. Travis gazed sadly into the murky water, thinking that the chunk of lye and tallow he rubbed

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against the cloth would never be a match for all that suspended dirt flowing by. At the very least, this attempt at washing would remove the rancid human smell from the laundry, thereby promoting harmony among the emigrants.

"How old are you?" Elizabeth suddenly piped up.

"I'll be seventeen in August." Travis didn't know why he didn't just say that he was sixteen. There was something about these Younts that made him feel defensive.

"My cousin Will says you're a squirt. I expect that's true, seeing as I'm only twelve and I'm as big as you."

"Maybe you're unusually tall for your age." Travis knew this wasn't the case, but he was starting to feel annoyed.

"I don't think so," she countered with a superior sniff.

They continued to work in silence, standing side by side, almost knee-deep in the river. At one point, Travis glanced by mistake in the girl's direction, and the sweetness of her profile so surprised him that he let his eyes linger there for a moment. Her hair was the color of young corn and lay thin and silky against her cheeks. Soft features with a child's flawless complexion peeked out of the caressing locks. At the moment she caught Travis' attention, she was also looking away from her work, but not at him. Her eyes were lost somewhere across the river, and even from the side, Travis could see their extraordinary color and clarity. They were pale green and transmitted light like fine crystal.

"What are you staring at?" Elizabeth broke the spell Travis had been under, her face now constricted by anger and suspicion.

"Nothing," Travis sputtered. He couldn't believe the metamorphosis he had just witnessed.

"Yes, you were. You were staring at me."

"No, really I wasn't. I was just looking in your direction. That's all." Travis felt panic flash through him like a wildfire. He was angry with himself for looking at her for so long.

"I'll tell my pa if you don't cut it out."

"I'm just going to look at the laundry now. Alright?"

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at him and went back to her own work. Travis made a conscious effort to keep his eyes on anything but Elizabeth. The very idea that he must not look at her seemed to draw his eyes in her direction, and they ached from fighting that impulse. Whenever he felt the urge to look away from the sebaceous water bubbling about his legs, he looked up at the darkening sky.

By the time they finished, the threatening clouds had gobbled up the whole horizon. Travis sadly acknowledged that the rain that was sure to come would be not only wet, but furious and unforgiving.

They walked back to camp in silence, Elizabeth returning to her clan and Travis to lay the clothes hopelessly out on the grass. When the sky began to spit rudely on his handiwork, he gathered them up again and div-

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vied them among their rightful owners, suggesting that they hang them from the wagons.

Hillerman seemed perturbed by the incident, as if something about it didn't sit right with him. "Odd how Yount sent his daughter to do the washing with you," he said.

"Yes, it was odd," Travis agreed. He could tell Hillerman wanted to hear more, but the rest of the words choked him, and Travis fell silent. It would have been nice to confide his fears to his employer, to tell him how the girl had suddenly hurled some nameless threat at him when he chanced to look her way, but he couldn't do it. To tell the story honestly would involve an admission of guilt on his part. After all, he did stare at her and lied when he said he hadn't. Though, it seemed terribly unjust that such a minor offense should bring an already hostile father's wrath down upon his head.

Travis thought that his dealings with Elizabeth Yount were over, but several days later, she followed him when he walked off the trail to pick lamb quarters greens.

"Mama wants some for supper," she announced. "She says it wards off the scurvy."

"I suppose it does," Travis said. "It's also very tasty with vinegar."

"I don't know where to find it. You know where?"

"Yes. It grows mostly where the buffalo have corralled their young."

"How do we find those places?"

"Look for a lot of chips."

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose at the idea that dinner would grow from buffalo dung, but stuck to her purpose.

They found a patch of the tender greens sprouting from a concentration of flattened, desiccated lumps. Gathering in silence, they set about filling their sacks. Soon, a tension formed between the two young people. It was as if a length of twine ran between them, tightening itself as they swirled about each other in random paths, hunched over with their eyes to the fertile excrement.

Travis kept his eyes downward. Even with this precaution, he sensed that he was somehow in peril. He had the distinct impression that Elizabeth was watching him, but due to his previous experience with her, he was afraid to look at her to verify his suspicion. He felt that it was not a good type of watching, not the type that would be expected between a boy and a girl on a verdant plain. It was the vigilance of the coyote when it hears the soft scratching of a ground squirrel and crouches in hungry anticipation at the burrow.

When the sound of cloth tearing began, Travis had to look in Elizabeth's direction. He found her ripping her dress with absorbed determination.

"What are you doing?" Travis asked.

"None of your business, Squirt." She gave a violent tug at her bod-

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ice, casting its buttons like little blue seeds over the buffalo chips. Travis watched in bewilderment as she calmly squatted down to gather them up again, stowing them away in her pocket. Then, without warning, she took off running back to the encampment.

Travis picked up Elizabeth's sack of greens and started back to the wagons at a considerably slower pace. Perhaps the poor child was deranged, he thought. It was easy to imagine that the Yount family could produce its share of insanity. The stress of the journey may have bent her fragile mind. Although he wished her no harm, this possibility seemed benign compared to the cold dread of some obscure plot on the part of the girl's father.

When he reached the party, Travis was met by an array of figures standing motionless like statuary. Each carried an expression so grim, so focused on the boy, that he was left with no doubt that he was in serious trouble. The tableau was broken by George Yount, who rushed at him like a snake about to strike.

"I'll kill him!" he snarled.

Elijah, George's brother, was the one to react. As Travis watched George's feverish face hurtle toward him, Elijah's appeared behind it, then arms reaching around the man's shoulders to stop the angry father from plowing his intended victim into the ground like last year's corn stubble. Even rooted to the spot in mortal terror, Travis retained enough lucidity to judge the brothers' actions to be staged, like a scene from a melodrama.

He looked around at the other emigrants for some sign of reassurance, but was disheartened by what he saw. Most looked at him with outrage. Only a few faces expressed a measure of disbelief, most notably that of Hillerman.

"Whoa there, George!" Elijah said, patting George on the back. "Before any killing's done, you'd better let the boy tell his side of it. You don't want nobody saying that we lynched him without a fair trial."

At the mention of lynching, Travis felt as if he were suddenly being submerged in warm water. Everything took on a rippled appearance, and he couldn't hear clearly what was being said. He had the vague notion that people were asking him questions, but he could no more respond than if he had been floating at the bottom of a deep well. Left alone with his thoughts, he wondered if he had come on this journey only to die a sudden and senseless death. Was this all his little existence amounted to? What passed before his eyes were not the events of his life, but rather all the things he would never do if he were left dangling from a tree in this barren wilderness. The gold he would never find, the great university he would never attend, the books he would never write, and the countries he would never visit all appeared briefly before him, then sank into oblivion.

When he came to his senses, someone was saying, "His silence is as good as a confession. Anyways, how could a girl that age make it up?"

Travis focused on his accuser, who stood next to her father. Elizabeth's head rested languidly on his shoulder, her clear green eyes drifting aimlessly in vacuous contentment. She clutched her buttonless dress shut over her heart. Travis only remembered much later the one piece of evi-

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dence that might have exonerated him: the little blue buttons tucked away in her pocket.

"I didn't do anything to her. I swear. She ripped her dress all of a sudden and ran away." Travis offered this explanation in a faltering voice, which, if the looks of the jury were any indication, did nothing to further his case. Even to himself he sounded guilty.

"So, what are we gonna do about this situation?" someone asked.

"I say we string him up and have done with it!" Will Yount answered.

He had a hungry glow in his eyes that made Travis suddenly nauseated. Instead of the suggested rope around his neck, he could almost feel Will's knife against his throat. His tortured imagination pushed the scene a step further. The steel pressed harder and harder until it broke through the top layers of skin and plunged into the smooth muscle underneath. It was the wrong image to cling to, for it made it impossible for Travis to say another word in his defense.

Travis stood in the center of the discussion, only dimly aware of the negotiations that swirled around him. After some time, there was a general movement of bodies toward the wagons, then a similar movement of wagons, and finally a sense of desolation. A voice in his ear woke him from his trance.

"Travis, they're gone now."

He turned to see Hillerman's troubled face beside him.

"Gone where?"

"Just gone. We're on our own."

Travis looked around to see the truth of what Hillerman had said. There was their wagon, their oxen, their cattle, the horse, the milch cow, and nothing else. They had been abandoned by the rest of the party. More correctly, he had been abandoned and Hillerman had opted to stay with him.

"Can you walk?" Hillerman asked.

"Yes."

"Let's go then. But slowly. Frankly, I'd rather not catch up with them under the circumstances."