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FICTION.
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One

AIR

Unam est vas.
—Maria Prophetissa



Daniel Pearse was born on the rainy dawn of March 15, 1966. He didn't receive a middle name because his mother, Annalee Faro Pearse, was exhausted from coming up with a first and last – especially the last. As near as she could figure, Daniel's father might have been any of seven men. Annalee decided on Daniel because it sounded strong, and she knew he'd need to be strong.

At Daniel's birth, Annalee was a sixteen-year-old ward of the Greenfield Home for Girls, an Iowa custodial institution administered by the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin. She had been placed there by court order after attempting to steal an ounce bar of silver from a jewelry-shop display case. She told the arresting officer she was an orphan of the moon, and told the judge that she didn't recognize the court's authority to make decisions about her life. She refused to cooperate beyond giving her name as Annalee Faro Pearse. The judge sentenced her to Greenfield till she was eighteen.

Her second month at Greenfield, Annalee confided her suspected pregnancy to one of her roommates. The next day she was called before Sister Bernadette, a small, severe woman of fifty with an office as meticulously spare as her heart, though not nearly as dour.

'Sit down,' Sister Bernadette said. It was a command, not an offer.

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Annalee sat down in the straight-back wooden chair in front of the desk.

Sister Bernadette stared at Annalee's face for half a minute, then shifted the gaze to her belly. A muscle twitched in the Sister's flaccid cheek. 'I understand you are pregnant,' she said evenly.

Annalee shifted her weight on the hard chair. 'I think so.'

'You were raped,' Sister Bernadette almost whispered. 'The child will be put up for adoption.'

Annalee shook her head. 'I wasn't raped. I was fucked by a man I loved. I liked it. I want the baby.'

'And *who* is this *loving* father?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know.' Sister Bernadette blinked slowly, folding her hands on the desk. 'Is that because you never got his name, or because there's too many names to remember?'

Annalee hesitated a moment, then said firmly, 'Both.'

'So,' Sister Bernadette nodded curtly, 'you're a slut as well as a thief.'

Blue eyes flashing, Annalee stood up.

'Sit down, slut,' Sister Bernadette screamed, slamming the desk top with her open hands as she jumped to her feet. 'I said *sit down!*'

Annalee, just under six feet tall and a little over 130 pounds, broke Sister Bernadette's jaw with her first punch, a round-house right with every bit of herself behind it.

Annalee spent three months alone in what the girls called 'the blocks' – a row of tiny cinderblock sheds that had been used for smokehouses when Greenfield was a pig farm. Except for the series of ventilation slits high along the roofline. Annalee's room was windowless. Nor, with just a saggy cot and a toilet prone to clogging, were her quarters particularly well appointed. She received two meals a day, invariably thin

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soup, stale bread, and a withered apple. Once a week she was allowed a shower, and once monthly a visit to Greenfield's doctor, a retired physician deep in his dotage whose main diagnostic technique was having patients do jumping-jacks naked in his office.

For the first time in her life Annalee began a program of daily exercise, which did not include naked jumping-jacks for the doddering doctor. The exercise helped burn off the rancidity of confinement and answered some faint maternal intuition that she needed to be strong for this birth.

Annalee's regimen occupied about two hours a day. The rest of her time she daydreamed, long spiraling reveries. A week later she felt the baby move inside her for the first time, and her entire attention began a slow pivot inward. Using the spoon that came with her meals, working in the few minutes available between eating and the retrieval of her tray, she scratched what she'd learned into the cinderblock wall: 'Life goes on.'

When she returned to her dorm, she was welcomed as a heroine. Sister Bernadette was still eating through a straw, and it was rumored she was being transferred. Annalee didn't particularly care about Sister Bernadette's fate. She was worried about her own and her baby's. The new Mother Superior – Sister Christine, who the girls said was 'cool' – told her that Sister Bernadette had decided not to press charges for assault.

'Why not?' Annalee demanded.

Surprised by Annalee's aggressive tone, Sister Christine sat up straighter at her desk. 'Perhaps Sister Bernadette found some compassion in her heart.'

'Only if you could find some in a mustard seed. And if there is any, it's not much.'

Sister Christine said softly, 'It saddens me to hear you say that. I've given my life to Christ because I believe in His

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Divinity and His Wisdom. Central to both, in the heart's quick, is the power of forgiveness.'

Annalee leaned forward, conscious of her swelling girth. Just as softly, she said, 'Sister, I've devoted half my life to survival because I've found life mean. Forgiveness is a waste of spirit because there's nothing to forgive. I believe in the wisdom of *what is* and the power of *right now*. I'm pregnant. I intend to keep the baby. It's my life and the only real power I have is taking responsibility for it. If you deny me that power, we go to war, hopefully on front pages and the six o'clock news. "Pregnant Waif Sues Catholic Prison." "Little girl orphaned by murder/suicide of parents prays every night in tears: Please God, don't let them take my baby, she's all I have left." Forgive me, Sister, but that's how it is.'

Sister Christine, eyes bright with tears, reached across the desk and gently squeezed Annalee's shoulders. 'Oh, I wish they were all like you. There are so many who must seek God; only a few whom God must find. I'll do what I can, but beyond Greenfield my influence is minimal. And I do think you should consider adoption, because you have no way to support the baby once you leave here – assuming by some miracle you're allowed to keep it here – no skills, no home, no family. If you think life is mean so far, try it with a kid. You'll end up a thirty-year-old waitress with hemorrhoids and a third husband, so depressed that drugs don't help, and a kid who hates your guts.'

'How would you know?' Annalee said sharply.

'Because I've seen it so many times I can't even feel the heartbreak any more – or not until I meet someone like you, so strong, so real.'

Annalee covered Sister Christine's hands with her own. 'I'll make you a vow of my own: If you don't break my ass, I won't break your heart.'

* * *

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At the beginning of her last trimester, Annalee radiated a powerful and vital tranquility. Her roommates held her in awe. Their attitudes and touches softened. They made sure she had extra pillows and any food she desired. They asked her excitedly what it felt like. Annalee told them it felt like she was becoming someone else, and that it was the most amazing thing she could imagine.

The birth was without complications. Nineteen hours later, after the nurse had brought Daniel for his third feeding, Annalee swung out of bed, dressed quickly, and left the hospital with Daniel bundled in her arms.

It was drizzling outside, cold but not quite freezing. Annalee turned left and started down the street, looking for keys in ignitions. The drizzle thickened. She pulled the blanket closer around the child. 'Okay, kid,' she said, 'here we go.'

Letting the road rock the baby against her breast, Annalee sang along with Smiling Jack Ebbetts, the Singing Truck Driver, as they roared down I-80 West in the tuck-and-roll cab of his '49 Kenworth. Annalee had stolen a car five blocks from the hospital, but, deciding it was too risky to stay with for long, had ditched it near the Interstate and put out her thumb. In less than a minute Smiling Jack pulled over, and they were fifty miles gone before the engine had cooled on the stolen Ford.

Smiling Jack Ebbetts didn't haul freight. He made his living singing at truckstops and bars across the country, performing as it pleased him or finances required. He lived in the long-box trailer the Kenworth hauled. The trailer had a small kitchen, cozy living room, cramped shower and toilet, and two tiny bedrooms in the rear. The rig, Smiling Jack explained, represented a compromise between his homebody heart and his vagabond soul.

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As good-humored as his name implied, Smiling Jack was in his late thirties. He had a faded IWW button on his Stetson's band and a pair of rolling dice on his belt buckle. Annalee liked him immediately. When he asked what she was doing on the road with such a young baby – 'looks like he's barely dried off' – Annalee told her story. He sounded two long blasts on the airhorn when she recounted breaking Sister Bernadette's jaw.

'Well *all right!*' he crowed admiringly when she'd finished. 'You got it straight as far as I'm concerned.' He reached over and patted her shoulder. 'You'll do fine. You got heart, you got brains, and you got the spirit to keep 'em glued together.' He turned his attention back to the road. 'You got any idea where you and this newborn fellow here are going?'

'California, I guess. I want to be warm.'

'Got people there?'

'No.'

'Any money?'

'No.'

'I'm a mite depleted myself at the moment,' Smiling Jack said, 'but when we hit Lincoln I want to buy li'l Daniel here some duds for his birthday. Shirt and jeans and stuff. And some diapers.'

'That's kind,' Annalee told him, 'but please don't spend what you can't afford.'

Smiling Jack smiled. 'If I don't spend it, how do I know what I can afford?'

Smiling Jack taught her some of the songs in his bottomless repertoire, and they practiced them together as they crossed Wyoming, down through Evans and Salt Lake City. They worked out harmonies as the big diesel hauled them across the salt flats into Nevada, Daniel asleep between them on the seat, or nursing.

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Annalee and Smiling Jack sang together three nights at a bar in Winnemucca, followed by a weekend gig at a small club in Reno. Smiling Jack gave Annalee forty percent of the take and paid all expenses. When they crossed Donner Pass and dropped into California, Annalee had a used bassinet, an old stroller with bad wheel bearings, and seventy-five dollars in the pocket of her Salvation Army jeans.

They stopped that afternoon east of Sacramento, Annalee washing diapers at the laundromat while Smiling Jack changed the oil in the truck. Back on the road, Smiling Jack said, 'I was thinking back there, all scrunched up under the rig and watching oil drip in the pan, that I might have a proposition for you and the boy. You see, I got this half-ass ranch way the hell and gone out Spring Ridge, which is about a hundred and fifty crow-miles north of 'Frisco, couple of miles inland from the coast. My uncle won it in a card game back in the thirties – four deuces against aces full. Not the dead mortal nuts, but like Uncle Dave said, good enough to take it all. Uncle Dave willed it to me when he cashed out five years ago. It's about two hundred acres, big ol' redwood cabin, clean air, good spring water. Nearest neighbor is seven miles of dirt road, so it's bound to cramp your social life, but it might be just the place to hunker down a spell till the wind drops, if you know what I mean. I can't stand the ranch because it's always in the same place and the taxes come right out my tank, so if you're interested, I'm in the mood to deal. Rent would be taxes and caretaking; stay as long as you want. The taxes are \$297 a year, and they're already paid till next January. If you want to give it a shot, country life is great for kids. And if you're still there next time I come through, I might have a job that'll make you a little money. Till then, you'd be on your own. What do you say?'

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'Thank you.'

Smiling Jack laughed. 'Hell's bells, you deserve it, sweetheart. Don't feel obliged.'

Smiling Jack's Kenworth was too much for the narrow rutted road, so they walked the last mile to the ranch, taking turns carrying Daniel. Four spread deuces were nailed to the cabin door, the cards so sun-bleached they appeared blank. The cabin was festooned with spider webs and littered with woodrat droppings, but nothing a broom and scrub brush couldn't fix. The woodshed roof sagged under the weight of a thick limb a storm had torn from a nearby apple tree, but the shed itself contained three cords of seasoned oak. Smiling Jack showed her where the kerosene was stored and how to fill and trim the lamps, instructed her on using the woodstove and propane refrigerator, produced bedding from an old seaman's chest, and generally squared her away. Out on the back porch, in the warm sunlight, they shared a lunch of sourdough bread and cheese they'd purchased the previous evening in San Francisco. After lunch, Smiling Jack waved farewell and headed up the road toward his truck.

Daniel started to cry. Annalee unbuttoned her blouse and offered a breast. Daniel pushed it away and cried louder. Annalee was sixteen; Daniel, barely two weeks. It was April Fools' Day. She was somewhere in California, in a drafty, shake-roof cabin built by some shepherd in 1911, with nothing to eat but some bread, cheese, and a few rusty cans of pork and beans in the cupboard. She had sixty-seven dollars in her pocket. 'You're right,' she blurted to the bawling Daniel, and started crying, too. Then she got to work.

The cabin caulked and spotless, water hooked up, Annalee hitched to San Francisco with Daniel in her arms ten days later. It took them three rides and twelve hours. They spent the night in a Haight Street crash pad where a woman in her

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early twenties, who called herself Isis Parker, offered her a joint and the use of her father's American Express Card.

The next morning Annalee checked the *Chronicle* Want Ads under baby-sitters, made a few calls, settled on a woman with a sweet voice, caught the bus and delivered Daniel, then headed downtown to abuse Isis's father's credit card. She bought Daniel a whole shopping bag full of clothes. For herself, she chose a stylish tweed suit, matching bag and shoes, three pairs of hose, and a gray silk blouse.

That afternoon a middle-aged broker coming out of Bullock & Jones was stopped by a tall, lovely young woman – a girl, really – wearing an impeccably tailored suit. The young woman was clearly distraught. 'Ex-excuse me,' she stammered, 'but . . . but my purse was just stolen and . . .,' she faltered, blushing, then continued bravely, 'I have to buy some sanitary napkins.'

Bam. A hundred dollars an afternoon. She generally worked the financial district, taking care to choose well-dressed men in their fifties because they tended to cover their embarrassment with generosity. A few declined, usually just walking away without a word. One fainted. She never tried it on other women. They were too smart.

In all, it was the perfect nick, so good that even its clearest failure proved its greatest success. One crisp October afternoon she approached a tall, dapper man with graying hair as he left the Clift Hotel. He listened attentively to her plight, immediately reached for his wallet, and handed her a hundred-dollar bill. Annalee had never seen one before. She counted the zeros twice. 'I'll bring you the change,' she managed to say, thinking somehow she would.

'Nonsense.' The man grinned. 'You keep what's left after the Kotex – which I imagine will be a hundred dollars. It's an excellent hustle. Talent's rare these days, and deserves

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encouragement. Besides, I just won eight grand in a poker game and I like to keep the money moving.'

'Well, go get 'em, cowboy,' Annalee laughed. She was still laughing when she picked up Daniel.

She usually worked the city once a month. At first she just worked an afternoon, but after Daniel was weaned she'd leave him with a sitter for two or three days while she hit Montgomery Street and spent the evenings and nights with the young artists and revolutionaries in the Haight, smoking weed and drinking wine. She was attracted to poets and saxophone players, but hardly confined herself to their company. She never took any of them home.

Annalee and Daniel spent the rest of each month at the ranch. She'd bought a single-shot .22 with her earnings, and she occasionally killed a deer or wild pig, freezing what she could cram in the refrigerator's tiny box, drying or canning the rest. There was a large garden and a dozen chickens and ducks. The old orchard still produced, and nearby Cray Creek held small trout year-round, with salmon and steelhead arriving in the fall. She worked hard, but they lived well, buying the few things the land didn't provide.

Annalee spent the evenings reading library books her poet friends had recommended or playing the old guitar she'd found under the bed, making up songs for Daniel's amusement. *Song*, in fact, was his first word. But he was talking well enough to rush in excitedly and announce, 'Mom, someone's coming,' when Smiling Jack, three years late, finally returned.

Annalee and Jack greeted each other with whoops and hugs on the front porch. Smiling Jack had hardly changed – a touch more gray in his hair, the smile-wrinkles around his eyes perhaps more pronounced. But Annalee had changed immeasurably: At nineteen she looked strong, solid, and wild. Her

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movements carried a sense of ease and grace, and her eyes looked right at you. Smiling Jack was impressed. He held her at arm's length, declaring, 'Sweet Lord o' God, girl, but if you ain't lookin' about nine hundred forty-seven percent better than the last time I seen you. You must take to this country living.'

Annalee laughed, tossing her hair. She said to Daniel, who was standing in the doorway, 'This is Smiling Jack Ebbetts, the man who let us stay here.'

'Hi,' Daniel said.

'It's a pleasure, Daniel.' Smiling Jack offered his hand, which Daniel eyed hesitantly before shaking. 'Doubt if you remember this crazy ol' double-clutcher, 'cause you hadn't made a month o' life when I swept you and your momma off the cold shoulder of I-80 right outside Des Moines and hauled you on out here to look after the Four Deuces, but I sure remember you and our long, sweet ride to the coast.'

'I don't remember you,' Daniel said.

'Not many folks remember very much from when they were babies.'

'Yeah,' Annalee said, 'but when most people say they'll be back in a few months, they aren't three years late.'

'Had to see if you were serious about making a go of it here.'

Annalee folded her arms across her breasts. 'We're still here.'

'Naw,' Smiling Jack waved dismissively, 'I was joshing on that – never had a doubt. What happened was I got involved in all sorts of family stuff back in Florida, and then on my way back out here, I found a monster three-card monte game in Waco. Lost my truck seven times.'

Annalee nodded. 'And how many times did you win it back?'

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'Eight or nine,' Jack smiled hugely, 'plus enough money to burn a wet mule.'

'Well come on in,' Annalee said, gesturing toward the door. 'I'll help you count it.'

Smiling Jack broached another proposition to Annalee when they'd finished lunch. 'Me and some friends have a notion to use this place as a safe house, and—'

'What's a safe house?' Annalee interrupted.

'Just a fancy term for a hideout, I guess. A safe place.'

'Running from the law?'

'Generally,' Jack nodded. 'Not always, though. Sometimes just resting.'

'And the proposition?'

'I want you to run it. Take care of the people.'

'Do you have eight or nine trucks really?' Daniel cut in, tugging at Smiling Jack's sleeve.

'No, pardner, just one. A '49 Kenworth diesel.'

'I'd like to ride in it,' Daniel said.

'You're on, but you're gonna have to wait a little bit. Right now your momma and me are doing some business negotiation.'

'Okay,' Daniel said. He went outside.

Smiling Jack turned back to Annalee. 'You'd get a thousand dollars a month, plus free rent, whether the place is used or not – and most often it won't be.'

'What sort of people will I be dealing with?'

'The very best.' His voice promised it.

'What happens if somebody finds these people they're looking for? I don't want Daniel at any risk.'

'I can't guarantee that. All I can tell you is that they won't be coming here till they're very cool. This will sort of be the next to last move, a staging stop while the final move is being set up.'

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'How much am I supposed to know about these people?'

Smiling Jack shrugged. 'Whatever they tell you.'

'And "take care of them." What exactly does that mean?'

'Shop, cook, keep 'em company if you feel like it.'

'Mostly men?'

'I don't know.'

'What about children?'

'Possibly. I really don't know.'

'I couldn't do it for long. Daniel should start school in a few years.'

Smiling Jack quit smiling. 'You ain't gonna send him to school? There's nothing he's gonna learn there but how to get along with other kids under completely weird conditions. Right out that door is the best education in the world. But hell, you do what you think's best – don't listen to me. I'm a tar-ass reactionary on the subject. Had my way, no kid would learn an abstract word till they was ten years old. Wouldn't get their minds so gummed up.'

'I'll think about school, but I can't promise we'll be staying. I'll do it for a thousand a month, two years for sure – but after that we're free to go.'

Smiling Jack's smile returned. 'Or free to stay. We can work out the details later. Just needed to know if you were interested. Wasn't presuming you would be, but I brought a load of lumber to build a little guest room down the hill. Three in here is a tad close.'

'What would you have done if I'd said no?'

'Leave you be and find another place.'

'And what makes you think I wouldn't betray these people in a cold second for two thousand bucks?'

'If I thought you'd sell 'em out for *two million*, I wouldn't be talking to you.'

'Jack, if your criminal friends are half as sweet as you, I'll

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give you back the grand a month and call it even.'

'Outlaws,' Smiling Jack said. 'Not criminals: *outlaws*. My friend Volta says there's an important difference. Outlaws only do wrong when they feel it's right; criminals only feel right when they're doing wrong.'

That night, after Jack had left to sleep in his truck, Daniel asked Annalee, 'Can we still live here?'

'Sure, and as long as we want. But we'll be having some company occasionally, friends of Jack's who'll be stopping by.'

'He said they would be hiding.'

'Well, *resting* really, waiting to move on.'

'Why are they hiding?'

'Because they're outlaws.'

'Are we outlaws?'

Annalee thought about it for a moment. 'I suppose *I* am. As for you, that's something for you to decide when the time comes.'

'When does the time come?'

Annalee slipped her tanned arm around Daniel's slender shoulders and hugged him against her hip. 'You're a good kid, Daniel, but you've got to stop beating on me with all these questions that I can hardly answer for myself, much less you. There's all kinds of things you just have to figure out for yourself. That's half the fun of being alive.'

'What's the rest?'

'Changing your mind.'

'Is it as much fun as riding in Smiling Jack's truck?'

'Hey,' Annalee said, tightening her grip, 'fun's fun.'

Four months after its completion, the guest cabin remained unused. Annalee, as promised, received a one-thousand-dollar check at the beginning of each month, drawn on the account

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of Orr Associates Trust Fund in Nashville. She cashed the checks in San Francisco and always stayed a few days to party. Such leaves from the post were permissible, Smiling Jack had assured her, providing she left a time and number where she could be reached. Smiling Jack gave her a 'location line' to call when she planned to be away and a confirmation code for their calls.

Annalee used the kitchen phone at an all-night coffee shop on Grant, paying the cooks twenty dollars a month for the service. She happened to be there dunking doughnuts and discussing Japanese tea ceremonies with Japhy Ryder, a young poet of considerable charm, when Louie stuck his head out of the kitchen and called her to the phone.

'Hello,' Annalee answered.

'Mrs Ethelred?'

She recognized Smiling Jack's voice. The married name was the beginning of the confirmation code. 'Yes, this is Mrs Ethelred. And Daniel.'

'Where did we buy the diapers?'

'Lincoln.'

'Was I late getting back to you?'

'Thirty-two months.'

'That's actually pretty quick for me. But I hope you can make it home a helluva lot faster than that. There's a duck on the pond. Sorry to do you like this the first time out, but things got screwy somewhere else and we had to make a hot switch. Your friend may be there waiting, or already gone.'

Annalee had a vehicle now, an oil-guzzling '50 Ford flatbed, and she immediately picked up Daniel from the sitter's and drove back to the Four Deuces, jolting the last two miles to the cabin. The house was dark when they entered.

'Why don't you just stop right there and relax.' The woman's

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voice was soft, but carried the unmistakable authority of a person holding a gun.

Annalee and Daniel stopped.

'Who we got?' the voice asked. Annalee could make out the woman's shape against the far wall. She was indeed holding a gun, some kind of short rifle.

'Annalee Pearse, and my son, Daniel.' She felt Daniel pressing against the back of her leg.

'Good enough, gal,' the woman said, some boom in her voice. 'Didn't mean to throw ya a shit-scare, but I've had a mean day and a hard night and for all I knew you might have been looters or the law. Light a lamp so we can look each other over.'

Annalee lit the two lamps on the mantel. As the light flared, the woman lowered the sawed-off shotgun. 'My name's Dolly Varden.' The woman looked bloodlessly pale in the lamplight, but her clear blue eyes, her voice, and her short, sturdy body erased any sense of frailty. She was wearing a gray cotton chemise and grimy tennis shoes.

'I was told you might be here, Dolly,' Annalee said, 'but I was still startled.'

'Hardly blame ya,' Dolly grunted. She looked down at Daniel, still pressed against his mother's leg. 'And your name's Daniel, right?'

Daniel nodded once, quickly.

'Did I scare you, too?'

Daniel answered with another nod, this one even quicker.

Dolly Varden squatted down in front of him and smiled. 'I got to admit that when you two came driving up, scared me so bad I almost jumped plumb outa my skin and shimmied up the flue.'

Daniel buried his head behind Annalee, who reached down and lifted him into her arms.

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Dolly stood up. 'Well, now that we all had a good scare, I want you to get ready for another one.' She turned around. The bottom half of her shift was soaked with blood. 'You any good at first aid, honey?' she said over her shoulder.

'Not really,' Annalee said, shuddering faintly at the sight.

Daniel felt the shudder, and twisted around in her arms to look at her face. 'That's blood,' he said, as if reassuring her.

'Well, don't stand there gawking, you two. Boil water and tear petticoats. I don't think it's much, but I haven't got a good look yet, seeing as how the bastard got me in the ass. Damn but my ass has taken a ton of punishment. Men, motorcycles, general kicking, and now buckshot. Fucking guards don't use rock salt like the farmers did when I was just a freckle-faced filly raiding the pumpkin patch.'

Annalee set Daniel down and went in to start the stove. Dolly turned her back to Daniel and pulled the chemise over her head. Daniel stared. Dolly's back and thighs were covered with tattoos, her panties torn and blood-soaked.

'My mommy has one,' Daniel said.

'One what?'

'Tattoo picture. A little one.'

Annalee, following the conversation from the stove, said, 'I did it myself. It's not very good.'

'You must have been in deep to do it yourself.'

'I was,' Annalee said.

'What is it? A lover's name, a flower, an animal?'

'A cross.'

'Would've never guessed,' Dolly said. She sounded faintly disappointed.

'No, no – it's not religious. It's a twisted cross. They tried to humiliate me.'

'Me too, honey,' Dolly said with sympathy. 'And now they shot me in the ass. How's that water doing?'

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'Pretty soon.'

'Does it hurt?' Daniel said.

Dolly turned to face him, her large breasts swaying as she moved. 'Some, but not terrible. Kind of a steady ache.'

'I hit my leg with the ax one time. Not the sharp end, the other end. That hurt a lot.'

'I bet it did.'

'I cried and cried.'

'I would too.'

'You're not crying now.'

'Well, I probably will be in a few minutes,' Dolly said.

'You're supposed to,' Daniel said solemnly. 'It helps it go away.'

When the water was ready, Dolly slipped off her panties, wincing, and laid face down on the bed. There was a narrow, ragged furrow across her left buttock.

Examining the wound, Annalee said, 'Doesn't look bad at all. But you appear to have lost a tattoo.'

'My cherry,' Dolly groaned.

Annalee giggled. 'You're kidding.'

'It was my first and my favorite. Made me feel young and salty, know what I mean?'

Dolly's buttocks clenched when Annalee touched the wound with the clean, wet towel. Daniel watched, fascinated.

'Where'd you get it?' Annalee said, hoping to distract her.

'Going over the wall,' Dolly said, her voice tight. 'Wasn't a tower guard, though – it was one of those bull bitches off the yard.'

'No, I mean the tattoo.'

'Oh. Had it done when I was about your age. In Oklahoma.'

'That where you grew up?'

'Yup. Near Carver, down in the southeast corner. In the thirties, that was still outlaw country. Never forget my first

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day in school the teacher told us, "If you come runnin' and tell me about somebody doing bad, I'll give him a fair switchin' 'cause he did wrong, but I'll *whup* on you till I can't lift my arm no more, because the one thing I can't abide is a snitch." It was the kind o' place—' she flinched and quit speaking as Annalee reapplied the towel.

'Well, you still have the stem and two green leaves,' Annalee said absently as she wiped away blood.

'Had a gal friend in the joint, Doris Kincaid, who said it wasn't so bad if they got your cherry as long as they didn't get the pit.'

'What did you do down there in Carver?'

'Mostly robbed banks. I rode with the first motorcycle gang in the country, the Bandits of Vermilion. I mean, we had class. We were like family. It wasn't like it is now. Bikers these days got no heart. Take drugs and beat on the weak, dress grubby and act stupid – most of 'em are defectives. Look how they treat their women! You don't treat *nobody* like that if you got a drop o' class.'

'What's vermilion?' Daniel asked.

'Brilliant red,' Annalee answered.

Dolly lifted her head and looked back at Daniel. 'We wore these long vermilion scarves,' she explained. 'Looked good.'

'Did you kill people?'

Annalee cut in on Daniel's question, telling Dolly, 'I'm going to pack this with antibiotic ointment – it's all we have – and then just tape a gauze pad over it. How's that sound?'

'You're the doc,' Dolly said.

'Did you kill people?' Daniel repeated impatiently.

'Dammit Daniel!' Annalee snapped. 'Don't harass us during surgery.'

'It's a fair enough question,' Dolly said, sounding more resigned than irritated. 'We were bank robbers, Daniel, not

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killers. We had guns, but we never loaded them. We did have to hurt a few people, but we didn't like to do that – it was a matter of honor among us never to cause anyone pain if we could help it. That was my boyfriend's idea, never loading the guns.'

'Where's your friend now?'

'He's dead. Wrecked his motorcycle on a frosty road.'

Daniel didn't say anything.

Annalee ripped off two strips of adhesive tape and secured the gauze pad. 'There it is,' she said to Dolly. 'I don't have an M.D., but I'd say you'll pull through.'

'I reckon,' Dolly said, her voice muffled against the pillow.

'Let me see if I can dig out some panties to help hold the bandage.' Annalee gave Dolly's unwounded buttock a light pat as she rose and headed for the bedroom.

Daniel stepped closer to the bed and put his small hand on Dolly's back, gently rubbing.

Dolly lifted her head and turned to give him a smile, her eyes glistening with tears. 'My, ain't you something,' she said, quietly beginning to cry.

As they sat down to breakfast the next morning, a small blue plane buzzed the house.

'That's for us,' Dolly said. 'He'll drop something on the next pass.'

Annalee went outside, Daniel scampering in front of her. They watched, hands shading their eyes against the low sun, as the plane banked slowly to the left and came back over, dropping a small silver cannister that bounced along the road and finally rolled to a stop behind the flatbed.

'That was a great shot!' Daniel enthused.

Annalee picked up the cannister and handed it to him. 'You can carry it in to Dolly.'

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They read the message together at the kitchen table: 'H1M1142400. Beach. Walk. NoV.'

'I hope you know what it means,' Annalee said, "cause I don't have a clue.'

'Highway 1, Marker 114, at 2400 hours,' Dolly translated. 'That's midnight. Meet on the beach. Walk over. "NoV" means no vehicles. How far is it from here?'

'Two miles maybe – an hour at the most. There's an old saddle trail. But that's just to the highway. I don't know the highway marker.'

'I'll bet 114 is close to the trail. I guess I should leave around ten o'clock. You have a spare flashlight?'

'I'll walk down with you,' Annalee said. 'We hike over all the time for fish and abalone.'

Dolly glanced at Daniel.

'I carry him. One of those kiddie-carriers, sort of like a backpack.'

'It's fun,' Daniel said.

'There's no point, really. And if somebody caught up with me at the last minute . . .'

Daniel said hotly, 'I wouldn't tell! Never, never, never.'

Chuckling, Dolly ruffled his hair. 'I wasn't worried about that. You got so much face you could never lose it all. But I don't want them to take you hostage.'

'What's hostage?'

'Where they trade you for me.'

'I wouldn't trade,' Daniel said flatly.

'I would,' Dolly told him. 'That's why you and your mom are staying here.'

Dolly left a few minutes before 10.00. Annalee and Daniel walked with her down through the orchard to the saddle trail. Annalee gave her an old day pack that she'd stocked

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with a sandwich, the last of the large gauze pads, and extra batteries and bulb for the flashlight. Dolly lifted Daniel in her arms and gave him a huge hug, waltzing him around a moment before setting him down. She and Annalee embraced briefly.

‘Thanks for the help and hospitality,’ Dolly said. ‘You’re real people, both of you.’ She took a deep breath of the clear October night. ‘Damn,’ she sighed, ‘it’s so *good* to be loose.’

‘Stay that way,’ Annalee said.

Hand in hand, Daniel and Annalee watched as Dolly, limping slightly, set off alone toward the coast.

Shortly after Daniel’s fifth birthday, Annalee sat down with him and outlined the possible benefits and disadvantages of attending school as carefully as she could. She left the choice to Daniel. It only took him a moment. ‘Naw,’ he said, ‘school sounds shitty.’

However, while Daniel was unschooled, he wasn’t uneducated. Annalee – an excellent student herself before her parents’ deaths – had already taught him to read by the time he decided against institutional learning. On their supply runs to town, they spent half their time at the library as Daniel selected his reading material till the next trip – and he was always careful to determine from Annalee exactly when that would be. His reading choices were eclectic, but he had an abiding interest in animals and the stars. When he was nine years old, he ordered a color poster of the Horsehead Nebula. He rhapsodized over it for days, lecturing Annalee on the nature and mysteries of the seething whirl of gas and dust. Annalee had never seen him so entranced.

She said, ‘I bet I know why you like the Horsehead Nebula so much.’

‘What are we betting?’ Daniel said. She only made bets

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like that when she wanted to know what he was thinking. He liked the odds.

‘Dinner dishes.’

‘Okay,’ Daniel agreed. ‘Why do I like it?’

‘Because it’s beautiful.’

‘Nope.’

‘Well – why then?’

‘I like it,’ Daniel said, ‘because it’s as much as I can imagine.’

Annalee pounced. ‘That’s exactly what I meant by beautiful.’

‘Wrong,’ Daniel declared. ‘You have to do the breakfast dishes too, for trying to cheat.’

Like most teachers, Annalee learned with her student. Each New Year’s Eve they chose a subject to study together. One year it was rocks. One year, birds of prey. The year devoted to meteorology was the most fun. Each night they put their sealed forecasts for the next day’s weather into a jar, opening them after dinner on the following day as if they were fortune cookies. They plotted their relative accuracy and the day’s weather data on a wall chart that had become a mural by winter solstice. On New Year’s Eve, a few minutes before midnight, they ceremoniously rolled the mural up, tied it with a sky-blue ribbon, and stored it like a precious scroll in a fishing-rod case.

The toughest subject for them both had been plants. They’d worked hard, but the subject was simply too large. The living room worktable was usually covered with sprays of specimens and stacks of well-thumbed botanical keys. Wildflowers and trees weren’t too difficult, but the fungi were tough, and the grasses proved impossible.

Paradoxically, playing permanent hooky provided Daniel with a healthy diversity of teachers. Not all the safe-house guests took an interest in Daniel’s education, but most found his eagerness and aptitude irresistible.

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He studied penmanship with Annie Crashaw, a forger of considerable renown. Sandra XY, a revolutionary witch, instructed him in the delicate arts of subversion and sabotage, stressing the importance of analyzing whole systems for points of vulnerability, seeing not only the parts but how they were connected. The delicacy of Sandra XY's art stemmed from her commitment to nonviolent means, a conviction somewhat lost on Daniel. His only examples of violence had been supplied by nature and he was neither attracted nor repelled. Violence was a fact of life. When he pressed the point, Sandra XY said, 'Fine. As long as you eat what you kill.'

He received detailed lessons in structural engineering from Bobby 'Boom-Boom' Funtman, who'd developed his knowledge on the subject as a necessary adjunct to his passion for precision and efficiency in explosions. Boom-Boom knew whereof he spoke, for it was widely claimed that he could do more damage with a single stick of dynamite than a squadron of B-52s. 'It's not the size of the charge,' Boom-Boom constantly reiterated, 'it's the placement.'

A young poet named Andy Hawkins, a draft resister on the run, echoed Boom-Boom's lesson when he introduced Daniel to Japanese poetry, particularly the ephemeral density of haiku. Daniel's studies in Oriental verse were often frustrated by the absence of his teacher, who was in bed with his mother. She had seduced young Andy about three minutes after he walked in the door. She'd never slept with a guest before. When Annalee had said, 'Good night sweetie, I'm going down to the guest house and sleep with Andy,' Daniel was shocked, jealous, frightened, bereft, confused, and utterly delighted by his mother's clear happiness.

Daniel's favorite teacher among the forty or so who'd been guests was Johnny Seven Moons. Johnny Seven Moons was the closest Daniel had come to a father. Johnny Seven Moons

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was also the only guest who'd ever come back for a purely social call, though a few of the more incorrigible offenders had returned on business, the continuing thermal exchange of hot and cool.

Johnny Seven Moons was an old Pomo Indian who fervently believed that one of the highest spiritual pleasures available to human beings was blowing up dams. Early in March, just before Daniel had turned seven, he went out to feed the chickens and found Johnny Seven Moons sitting on the porch, comfortable, self-contained, as if he'd materialized with the sunrise. For both of them, it was love at first sight.

The old claim that great teachers have no subject was certainly the case with Johnny Seven Moons. Another pedagogical assertion – 'The great teachers don't teach' – also applied. Seven Moons just did things with Daniel – make a bow and arrows, build fish traps, paint the guest house, gather mushrooms, cook and clean – taking what the day offered and Daniel's thriving curiosity suggested. Like Annalee, Johnny Seven Moons treated Daniel more as a companion than a charge. Seven Moons, to Daniel's initial disappointment, didn't pass on much Indian lore. As he explained to Daniel, he didn't know a whole lot, having attended missionary schools. His hitch in the army had given him advanced training in demolition. After his discharge, he'd spent time in prison for applying his military training to man-made impediments of natural flows, such as dams, irrigation canals, and aqueducts. 'But don't worry,' he told Daniel, 'I know some Indian stuff. You see, I have the Indian mind, but not all the little details.'

If it was sunny Daniel and Seven Moons did something outside. Rainy days were devoted to marathon games of chess, played with a small set Seven Moons had carved from elk horn. The white pieces were done in the likeness of cowboys,

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the reddish-brown pieces as Indians. However, according to Seven Moons, when you played Indian chess, the dark pieces always move first, and only Indians can play the dark pieces – though in Daniel’s case he made a magnanimous exception. Seven Moons played shrewdly and without mercy, exploiting every blunder Daniel made, and crowing with glee as he did.

The most memorable lesson for both Daniel and Annalee occurred on a warm May afternoon. All three of them were cleaning the pantry, item number nine on Annalee’s list of spring chores, when the sky suddenly darkened with a mass of clouds. Within minutes rain began falling. Johnny Seven Moons went to the open door, inhaled deeply, and started stripping off his clothes. Daniel and Annalee exchanged anxious glances. ‘You going swimming?’ Daniel joked.

‘No,’ Seven Moons said, hopping out of his pants and tossing them aside, ‘I’m going for a walk in the warm spring rain. Join me if you like. Walking naked in warm spring rain is one of the highest spiritual pleasures available to human creatures.’

Annalee was already wiggling out of her jeans, but Daniel had a question: ‘Is it a higher pleasure than blowing up dams?’

Seven Moons shut his eyes and almost immediately opened them. ‘That’s a tough one, but I think they’d have to be the same. You see, if I didn’t blow up dams and keep rivers where they’re supposed to be, in not very long there would be no warm spring rain to walk naked in.’

It was splendid. Hands joined, Daniel in the middle, they walked naked across the flat and up the oak-studded knoll where, deliriously drenched, they sang ‘Old Man River’ to the clearing sky. The sun burned through minutes later. By the time they walked back to the house through the wraiths of mist lifting from the soaked grass, everything but their feet and hair had dried.