



Ella thrusts out the upside-down, struggling hen, clamping its scaly shanks in her red fist above its curling toes. She just dragged it out of the haybale-insulated coop. The fat Rock clearly disapproves of its humiliation, flapping and squawking, blizzarding us with fluff and body feathers that look white, until they gray on the snow glaring under our feet.

"I couldn't," I say.

Truth is, chicken sounds tasty now, with nothing in my cabin but some stale bread and cheese, and that only if mice haven't found them. Yet, I'd rather not. Ella needs the eggs for her children, and if this hen is my payment, she won't get a new one until April, when the sun thaws open the St. Vrain Creek Valley.

My cabin stores are running low, but I've those gold fillings in my pocket, the ones I tied up in my mother's handkerchief. That grateful miner told me to keep them after I prized out his rotten, aching teeth.

"Dr. Maeve, I can pay," Ella protests, and I see I have almost insulted her, a pain surely worse than her blackened eye.

"Thank you." I slip my hand in over hers as she releases the Rock, which makes a play for my wrist with her spur, but misses.

"Besides," Ella says, brushing a feather off her cheek, "she's a cannibal. Eats her own eggs. You best fry her or boil her into soup."

"Well, then." I look up at the saddle, figuring how to manage an angry hen through drifts, over ice-coated boulders, and back home without spooking Justice into snapping a leg. Shrugging, I dodge the bird's beak, grab its neck, release its feet, and stranglehold it with my other hand, too. Twist, snap, and that bird flaps and flops, then falls limp in my hands.

Ella presses a flat half-smile and sniffs. "I guess she's yours now."

I stuff the Rock into a gunnysack, wipe my hands on my skirt, dig in my saddlebag, and press a cold blue jar into Ella's hand. "Rub this on the boy's chest. It'll clear his sinuses and ease his cough."

She nods. Before she could dose the children, her husband guzzled the cough remedy I left last week, so she pops the wide cork, sniffs, and dips a finger into the mentholated grease. "Too thick to swallow, I figure."

"Only a miserable dog would try," I say.

"I best set it on a high shelf then."

I laugh, then cover it with a cough.

Ella's wearing a full smile now.

Justice drops his head and snuffles the snow for grass, then snorts at the impossible situation. To fortify him for the ride home, I dig out two handfuls of oats and hold them in my threadbare gloves.

"You get on inside," I tell Ella. "I'll be gone before you know it. And thank you again for the hen. It more than covers everything."

When she opens the cabin door, a rattling cough and a gruff complaint roll onto the icy stoop. I shiver for her, but she raises the jar like a toast and grins back at me.

After my four days of rounding the valley to see patients, the tabletop, iron woodstove, and wedding ring quilt on my bed are

tufted with frost. Justice ducks his head to enter through the low doorway and dips to the frozen water pail, then eyes me.

"I'll see to it." Peeling off my gloves, I try to curl my fingers, but they're stiff, just short of frostbite, so I tuck them under Justice's blanket. After a minute,

they throb and bend enough to lay the wood and strike a match.

I swear to Justice that come summer, I'll set a trap and stitch some rabbit-fur mittens. I complain to my horse with great satisfaction about the cold, my hunger, and the depth of the drifts outside. After two years of loud, unhappy marriage, Justice is all the

listener I need, and more sympathetic than a husband. I tell him so, and not for the first time.

When I pull off my wool shawl, my hair stands out and crackles, dry. The flames lick up the kindling, but the smoke doesn't want to climb up the cold pipe, so I cough and my eyes water until the warm updraft wins the flue. It's only January fifth, and we've had three weeks of lazy snow, with this being the first day of blue sky. But Ella's boy broke his fever and that patient up Button Rock way, he survived his leg amputation, a first for both of us. And that profitable miner beat all. Now I've got a fat hen ready for plucking as soon as I can pinch fingers to thumb. My mouth waters as I ponder steaming, fat-blobbed chicken broth and dark pink meat falling off the bone.

This is a good day.

Or so I'm thinking when I hear juniper limbs popping out back, as if something's foundering through that hip-deep snow. I picture a bear, which



I doubt there to be, or that mountain lion, which I know from scat and tracks has been circling my cabin.

Shoving my fantastical notions aside, I take a deep breath. Maybe word's gone around about the new lady doctor on St. Vrain Creek, that she's not so bad, and that commotion is no wild creature, but somebody coming for help. First having taken up doctoring for the money, I have earned a solid reputation, mostly by seeking out the sick and injured up and down this valley.

It has been a hard year and a half, but after my first few unfortunate months of practice I don't so often feel faint over guts or blood, a considerable accomplishment, and most of my patients live. The doctoring books, while they taught me how to set bones, stitch, and mix remedies, never instructed me to breathe through my mouth, whistle to distract myself, or lean back on my heels to duck a punch. Yet, it has always been my way to learn life's hard lessons from experience.

Or, as my dear mother would say to me, "Nobody could never tell you nothing, nowadays."

Justice and I stare as if we can see through the cabin's back wall. The cracking is all but on us. Preparing for man or beast, I take my shotgun from Justice's side, pat his withers, and whisper for him to wait. With one hand on the door handle, I hear that voice caterwauling,

*As I came down through Dublin City,  
At the hour of twelve at night,  
Who should I spy, but a Spanish Lady  
Washing her feet by candlelight?*

Swearing under my breath, I can't figure how John Mullins found me, a thousand miles from where I left him.

Throwing open the door, I round the corner, raise my shotgun, and point it straight at his nose. I tell myself it doesn't matter if his teeth are a string of pearls and his hair soft as black goose down—he is the devil, and I'll not go back to hell.

"Sweetheart," he says, "it's been too long."

I'm telling him to walk away when the wind kicks a soft drift off the roof, down my collar. My husband takes advantage of my confusion to shove his way inside.

Instead of shooting John, I invite him at gunpoint to pluck the hen. While the soup simmers, I stir, roll, and bake biscuits, filling my cabin with their feminine heat. I eat two and feed the rest to Justice. When the soup is ready, I ladle for that man a taste of broth, but no meat. I torture John Mullins this way because a part of me loves him yet.

This one, who promised to love and cherish, then drank and chased women of the night. This one wheedles and cajoles and slips his fingers into the waistband of my skirt, tugging, and when I slap him away, he pulls a flask from his vest pocket, claiming he must warm himself with something, after all. So I claim my shotgun from by the bed, and then his flask. He won't be drunk in my cabin, not if I can help it. Yet, there's only one of me, and Justice is no help at all. I'd swear he's rolling his eyes at the foolishness of men and women.

There's not room for man, woman, and beast in this little ten-by-twelve cabin, and no matter how I threaten or beg, John won't go. So with sincere apologies, I lead Justice outside.

"Don't let John Mullins' bonny face and charms beguile you, my friend. He's surely the Nuckelavee, the sea monster in my Scottish grandfather's stories. Those creatures can't abide fresh water, and they can sicken good horses like you, so I'll tie you here, safe across the stream."

I sing, "Unto the hills around, do I lift up my longing eyes," my mother's favorite hymn, as I stake Justice out of the wind by a juniper hedge in an aspen grove. After pinning my spare blanket over his back and spreading hay and oats, I promise to visit three times a day. When I wish I could trade places with him, that I'll get John out somehow, I see in his shining dark eyes that Justice believes me.

Trudging back, I break through the river ice, numbing my feet. I could have saddled and run, but the snow is like blinding white sheets flapping on a clothesline, and the night crackles cold as sparks. I'd not get far.

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Darkness  
and snow creaking  
on the tin roof  
press John and  
me together in this  
tight space. It piles  
another four inches  
outside, drifting up  
to my cabin's high  
windows, casting  
us first into eerie  
lavender evening,

then into thick blue night.

I keep one eye on John, lighting a kerosene lamp that yellows my cabin center and casts the corners into tintype browns. My eyes water from the sharp fuel and smoke, and from memories of the things John did to me—his honey sweetness on my skin, his hard pressure in my body and his acid on my heart. I ache ten, sweet-burning different ways.

How could I let this happen, once I was gone and free? I should have expected he'd come looking for the money I stole.

Once John falls asleep and can't hear me caring, I curse the day I left my mother's kitchen to marry this Irish scoundrel, who cunningly disguised himself as a preacher. Mother warned he was false, that he'd prove to be a

Papist, but he swore on her Bible to be no worse than a Baptist. I believed.

Vowing faith and love, John Mullins took me to church, to bed, and then to Chicago. There, in a seedy hotel and among his dishonest friends, I learned he was a card player, a pickpocket, a would-be prospector, and no man of God.

It was a sin, but I was at first relieved in my heart, having reconsidered the long sentence of piety I faced as a Baptist preacher's wife. John soothed me with promises of gold and adventure out West, so I still thought I might have done well in my choice of husband.

Some of his faults I might have forgiven, but he proved a hapless gambler who truly believed in luck, betting high stakes on bad hands and ever able to bluff only me. A careless thief, he left a trail to our battered hotel door after every crime. He made plans and never kept them, while borrowing money he didn't need. None of these sins could I abide, as my mother raised me as a strict Presbyterian, to forgive any sin but mediocrity.

And always the whiskey, cruel hands, and bad temper behind closed doors.

After six months, John denied he ever promised to make me a Colorado miner's wife. He condemned me to life in Chicago, a city so big it swallowed every horizon, its skyline as jagged and stained as a drunkard's broken teeth. Cockroaches skittered across our rented floorboards, and bedbugs teemed in the hotel mattress while John snored off his drink.

I'd only seen mountains in paintings and tintypes, but I touched and walked them, rocky and evergreen, through my dreams. The night of my twenty-first birthday, just nineteen months ago, I made up my mind. While my scoundrel husband slept, I took his ill-gotten coins and bills from the cherrywood box he stashed under our bed, considering them a sort of dowry redeemed.

With some of the cash, I bought three books on doctoring. With a little more, I bought some lavender soap, a black widow's dress, and netting for my hair. That very evening, I boarded a train on the new Chicago Burlington & Quincy line to Denver. While the locomotive chuffed out the miles, I listed on a scrap of brown paper what tools and medicines I'd require. The last of John's dollars left my hands in Boulder, where I bought Justice, a fine stallion with legs too long and lean for his own good and more spirit than sense. In short, he is much like me, with attributes that serve well in this hard country.

Now, with that man asleep across my bed, I accuse myself of a foolish lack of imagination. I all but drew a map for John Mullins to track me down. A smart girl would've lit out for a farther western territory, but as my father would say, you can't chew what you've already swallowed.

When I feel myself lost to exhaustion, I tuck my shotgun shells in my bodice and fold my coat around me, to sleep in my chair.

Startling awake in the soft light of morning, I smell more whiskey than that pocket flask could hold. Such a fool, I failed to search John's bag. A clever woman would have shot him on sight, but my beloved Nuckelavee is extraordinary in his beauty, and I have had more than a year of feeling both safe and lonesome. More than a year of guttering desire, with no man to touch me, and now the empty curves of my body recall how his muscles filled them. He breathes so near that my breaths fall into rhythm with his. Watching John sleep, I feel a sorrow over my marriage that might have been had he been one degree more honest and one less cruel.

I hear trees and ice popping outside as the temperature plunges. Maybe the snow will stop soon. Pressing my gloved hands deeper into my pockets, I finger the little nuggets there and wonder what the assayer down the valley will give me for them. My teeth chatter. I should get up and stir the coals in the stove's belly, but I don't want to wake John. It's peaceful without his singing and talking and reaching for me, so I huddle inside my coat. Soon I've drifted off again, dreaming of being warm and wearing gold.

Irritable from last night's drink, John yanks me awake and demands a fire. His charms exhausted, he finally calls me the thief and liar I am. He shouts, and as if it had never been free, my body remembers how to be hard, tight, and quiet, how to move as little as necessary to cook, to wash, to feed. It's as if I never left Chicago, never set a bone, cooled a fever, or staunched blood. I don't look at this man who reminds me he's my husband, because I know what he is. All I have left now is to look strong and remember who I am.

I make coffee and fill his cup. I bake biscuits and hand him every one. He intentionally scuffs his boots against the log wall, then makes me blacken and shine them until he sees his face gleaming there. He says I will repay him, one way or another. The Nuckelavee is wild in my cabin now, infecting my life with its breath, and I want to run. I wish I'd stayed on the other side of that fresh water with Justice.

John insists I play poker with a marked, dog-eared cheater's deck, then laughs like a child when I lose. He tells me I'm beautiful, to take him to bed. When I won't, he throws the cards at me. He tells me I'm too stupid, too ugly to love.

I tell John that the wife of the miner who built this cabin murdered him and then froze to death, their bodies not found until spring. How her ghost, a Banshee, wails through the valley, washing her bloody hands in the creek. John, a superstitious Irishman who pretends to fear nothing, drums his fingers on my little table, his nervous knee bouncing, which I enjoy with a most un-Christian satisfaction.

Our pails are dry. I could melt snow, but the fire is slow from a downdraft and John's too drunk to think straight, so he agrees to let me walk to the creek. "Don't go far, my sweet Maeve," he calls after me. My heart beats hard, thinking of seeing my horse. I tell myself not to panic, that it's too cold to try to run with no supplies.

The world outside the cabin is dead-lips blue, with charcoaled evergreens stabbing up like serrated blades. This new landscape, re-chiseled with icy drifts, confuses me. I can't place the creek until I hear it chuckling under the snow, as if nothing is wrong.

I crane my neck to look up the mountain. Gray. Down, the same. The sky isn't blue and the clouds are snowbanks. I feel dizzy and think I may fall, but which way? Finding a hollow between drifts, I let my knees bend to find down, then dig. Clawing one foot deep, then two.

Ice crystals sprout on my lashes, stinging my eyes. The wind slaps my cheeks until I'm far enough into the snow-tomb to break through a bubbled glaze of ice. Strange how it's warmer under the snow's top crust, warm enough for water to run. I try to think of it as a sign that I can escape. Tying my muffler onto the wire handles, I lower, fill, and haul up the pails. Full, they freeze to the packed snow where I set them, so I kick them loose, nailing pain into my half-frozen toes.

I break through the drifts to Justice, who noses my pockets for the few oats I have left. He warms me, but I can't stay after I fill his pail. As I walk back to John, my shoulder muscles tear from the sloshing weight. The wind careens and erases my tracks, as if I never walked there. Stomping back into the cabin, I hear John singing again about that Spanish Lady.

Into the night, three, five, ten times, John demands his money. I tell him I spent it all, and he glares at me, then falls into a pout. A full whiskey bottle appears from his bag and he sets to work on it as night closes down on us again. He leaves his hands on me longer now and pinches me when I say, "No," before letting go. I don't tell him any stories of ghosts, because I'm the one afraid.

The whiskey takes him down fast, but dread traces my skin like fingers of lightning, keeping me awake. I fear that this, my twenty-third winter, may be my last. That before the valley clears, John will first see me under him, and then dead. There's starvation in his stare, as if I'm the meat he hungers for. He knows I have no money, so he stays to punish and consume me. His charm, his careless songs, his crimes and lies, I see them now for what they always were, an insatiability I mistook for love.

When he starts to snore, I stand up on a chair to look out my windows, placed high to keep out big cats and bears, if not men. I can't see it from here, but in Justice's clearing, the white-barked trees knit their branches into the sky like prayers. Below them, the columbine sleep in winter's womb, their lacy leaves curled like an unborn baby's fingers. Spilling its brilliance over the night's high edges is what my grandfather, in his broken Scotch-English, called the Fool's Moon.

I study it all as if I'll never see it again. The night valley and mountain hold up the sky like water in a crystal goblet. I grip the high windowsill, drinking in the sight until slivers draw blood from my thumb and fingertips. I slip them into my mouth sucking, gnawing the splinters and spitting them out. I taste the rust of my own life, and it makes me think about all the other blood, my own and other women's. I think of Ella, up the creek, and how if I could just get that far, she might help me. We might help each other.

I climb down. At my eye level, soft silver-blue, amber, and black bottles gleam on a shelf. Camphor, menthol, ether, chloroform, laudanum, iodine, mercurochrome. I kick to find my leather bag slumped in the corner, where John tossed it. My clamps and forceps clink inside. Silently, I wrap the bottles in gauze and add them all to the bag. My fortune, my future, as good as gold. Nestling them into their leather bed, the idea comes to me.

Setting that bag near the cabin door, I light the kerosene lantern, ready to wake my husband.

Drunk or sober, John loves nothing more than a wager. He's not happy I woke him up, mid-dream, but when I tell him I'm ready to settle up with him, his eyes clear. Sitting up on the bed, he rubs his chin.

I ask him why he figures I picked this spot, this one place to stay. I point outside, toward the stream, and explain how I found gold in the St. Vrain.

He laughs and says I found no such thing, but then he closes his mouth and studies my face. I pretend we're playing poker.

I hold out my hand and swear it, as if I had a Bible. I tell him I'll leave it all to him, the cabin and the land and the mineral rights. I'll stake my whole future on it.

My conscience does kick me a little, as I'm only squatting on the bank of this stream. But I remind myself it's a Fool's Moon, after all.

"If I can dip down into the stream and bring up gold, John, then it's all yours. All I ask is you let me go with Justice and what I can carry."

He gets up, pulls his suspenders over his shoulders, and studies me

from above. I stand still, terrified, as he traces a finger along the angle of my chin. His hand drags down my neck, to my bodice, while sweat trickles down my brow.

He laughs, then, and claps his hands.

Startled, I fumble the lantern and when its dome shatters on the wooden bed frame, it splashes

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kerosene across the wedding ring quilt. Before we can smother it, the straw-filled mattress roars into flames.

Ever the gentleman, John runs out ahead of me. At the door, I reach down for my doctor's bag, then turn to watch the sunflower-colored fire racing over the bed, a sight of horrible satisfaction because I know that whatever else happens, John can't keep me here another night. Looking down, I see yellow and orange flicker over my nightdress and coat. The smoke makes me wheeze, so covering my mouth, I go out, leaving my cabin to the flames.

I stand in my stocking feet, trembling in the snow. John moans over his lost whiskey bottles and swears at me, accusing me of setting the fire to drive him out.

"If I'd thought of it, I might have," I say. "But I didn't." I gag and spit some soot onto the snow. "Do we have a bet?"

He shakes his head. "You burned down the cabin. Looks like you got nothing to wager."

"The gold."

"There ain't no gold. It's just another lie."

I see he wants to believe there is, though, so I drop my bag and pick up a pail that sits by the smoke-belching cabin door.

He sucks on his eyetooth and sighs over the cabin, but I'm already at the creek, where I broke through earlier for water.

"All of this, John." I sweep my hand wide, up and then down the valley, where the stream angles like a buttonhook. While he studies the mountains, I tuck my fingers up under my hair, to warm them.

"But the cabin," he argues.

"That tin roof will cave in any minute and smother the fire. You'll still have four walls and the woodstove."

He hesitates. "And if there's no gold?"

"Then," I say, sighing, "I serve you as long as you want. As your good wife."

He grins, then. "Now that's a wager." For one second, when he shines that smile my way, I love him again and hope I lose, that we both might win. But only for a second.

He walks over and squats down where I'm kneeling. I unwind my scarf and tell him my hands are too numb to tie a knot. He obliges me and while he's busy, I fumble, one-handed, to untie that handkerchief in my left pocket.

"Only thing," he adds, "you bring up gold on the first try. No stalling."

I shake my head. "It may take more than one. I can only scoop a little sand from up here." I swallow like I'm scared, and I am. I hope that Fool's Moon above me will pick the right fool.

"First try or you're mine, you little thief." He glances down my nightgown, where my coat flaps open.

I shrug and sigh. "Fine, first try or nothing."

We shake on it. My hand is numb, so his feels like a stone. Suddenly religious, I silently send up a prayer that would make a Baptist preacher's wife proud.

After John hands me the pail, I scoot on my belly, break the drifted hole wider and ease myself into the violet half-dark. "Hold on to my legs, John."

He does, but his hands on my thighs bring on a nervous sweat as I slip down.

I didn't have a chance to look, so I don't know if the gold is in my numb left hand. I hold my fist in the pail and force my fingers open like a columbine blooming. I hear two soft taps on the tin.

John's hands range under my nightgown like scouts. Stretching, I tip the pail to scoop a little water and sand, wishing I'd waited to drop in the nuggets. It's shallow but fast here and the bucket sinks, then tips. Afraid the gold washed out, I yank on the scarf, my arms and legs trembling.

"Now," I call. "Pull me up." I wriggle backward as he drags me into the smoke and pinkish, pearly-gray light. It surprises how near we are to morning.

When I spill the pail, John kneels in the slush.

"There," I tell him, hoping it's so. "Your gold."

He picks out the two nuggets and settles them on the throne of his open palm. "Goddamn. For once you told the truth, Maeve."

Or near enough.

My knees are stiff, scraped and bleeding through my nightgown, but I struggle to my feet to fetch my doctor's bag from where I dropped it. It's as heavy as gold with the woman I am.

"You're a good girl," John says, smiling like a soot-stained angel over his greedy fist. "We could make a go of it here."

I shake my head, looking away from the blue of his eyes. "It's all yours."

I can't feel my feet. Stumbling, I push myself into a limping trot. If John was ever a man of his word, I hope it's this time, but I'm not betting on that.

Until the junipers filter out my fear of the monster, and all I hear is that man's voice calling my name, I run. The path I broke to Justice yesterday is drifted in. The snow shell cracks, and I founder in a ravine but pull myself up with a branch. The cold air knifes my throat, my chest. Across the fresh water, between the bare wrists and fingers of the trees, and under the sticky pine boughs, I break my own way. Behind me I leave a trail on the snowdrifts and boughs, from my bloody, stocking feet and torn fingers. That pain will come later.

Slowing down, gasping, I clutch at a hollow near my pounding heart. I think about sickness and love, how they are alike. How my hard longing

for John, a symptom of a deeper ailment, pains me still. And what will ever be the remedy?

Justice waits in his trampled, rocky circle of snow. On the second try, I heft my leather bag to his shoulders. I'd saddle him, but I'm wheezing and weak, so with a fallen tree for a step stool, I grasp his mane. He sidles closer so I can lean. He waits.

The smoke hasn't drifted up here to the clearing, and the ice-coated aspens raise their hands in hallelujahs. I press my face to his neck and Justice nudges me, then stamps and blows clouds of breath that diamond his whiskers, his lashes, and my tangled hair.

Tossing his head, he nickers, encouraging me higher.

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