

I

The Badlands

I still see her, our Liz, sitting on a plank, dangling over that well. She held on to the rope that hung from the pulley, her bare feet pressed together so tight that the points on her ankle bones were nearly white. She was six. She had on her brother's castoff pants and earlier, when I'd given them to her, she'd asked if wearing pants made her a boy. I'd told her we'd wait and see, and that had made her giggle.

The plank Liz sat on swayed and twisted in a wind that blew stinging grit. Her bandana covered her nose and mouth. The rope around her waist was knotted to the one that held the plank. Isaac, my husband, called it a harness. He said it'd keep her from falling off.

'We're right here,' I said to her. 'Daddy's got you.'

She looked at me, her coppery face frozen up with fear. The wind gusted, and Liz flinched, her eyes slits. Isaac and our oldest girl, Mary, stood side by side as they gripped the well handle. They dug in their legs and pushed the handle up.

The rope jerked. Liz dropped a handful of inches. She sucked in some air and then let out a sharp, piercing cry.

My knees buckled, but I steadied myself against the well. ‘You’re our brave girl,’ I called as she sank into it, her eyes closed.

The sunlight caught the top of her head. Her brown braids tied up with scrap rags went rusty red. Her shoulders shook. She made a gurgling sound and then she was gone.

I wasn’t one for calling on Jesus and asking for favors. But that day I did. *Merciful Jesus. Sweet merciful Jesus. Be in this well with my child.*

Isaac and Mary held on to the well handle, turning it, keeping it steady as their neck and arm muscles bunched and shook. John, our ten-year-old son, did what I couldn’t bring myself to do. He leaned over the top of the well and watched Liz. Above him, hanging on a second pulley – a makeshift one that Isaac had put up this morning – was a bucket. Four others were on the ground by the base of the well.

I coughed and spit out some dust. I tightened the knot in the back of my hair kerchief and then pulled my bandana back up to cover my mouth and nose. I’d pushed it down earlier; I wanted Liz to have a good look at my face. I didn’t want her thinking her mama was hiding behind a ragged piece of cloth.

Hold her hand, sweet Jesus. Hold her tight.

Yesterday the water pump by the house blew nothing but air. Later, Isaac tried the well at the barn. The bucket came up empty but the bottom was wet. When I saw Isaac knotting a plank to the well rope, my blood ran cold.

‘Not that,’ I told him. ‘Not that.’

‘Have to,’ he said.

‘But the White River’s still running. Can’t you—’

‘It’s down to a trickle.’

I looked at him.

‘Liz,’ he said as if I had asked.

‘Lord.’

‘She’ll be all right.’

‘You could drop her.’

‘I won’t.’

‘Don’t do this thing.’

Muscles pulled around his mouth. ‘I have to.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘no,’ but there was nothing behind my words and Isaac knew it.

‘At ease,’ he said to Mary now, their hands still gripping the well handle. The rope was played out; Liz was at the bottom. Mary let go of the handle and shook out her hands and shoulders. She ran her palms down the sides of her skirt. She was almost thirteen and tall for her age. She took after Isaac that way, but like me, she was dark. When Isaac had told her that he couldn’t turn the handle without her, her back straightened and her chin went high. Isaac could do that to a person. He could give a person the worst chore and make that person feel honored to be chosen. I’ve had fourteen years to try to understand this about Isaac, about how he made this happen. This was what I’d come up with. It was because his eyes admired you for bearing up, and when he looked at you that way, there was nothing finer. And there was this too about Isaac. He didn’t shy away from any chore. He knew what had to be done, and he did it.

Being Isaac’s wife, I knew this better than anybody.

‘Send the bucket,’ Isaac told John. ‘Slow. Call down, tell her it’s coming.’

John did and then, his cracked lips tight, began turning the makeshift handle. The wind tossed the bucket sending it in circles. The metal cup inside the bucket clinked from side to side.

In the well, the rope holding Liz hung taut, turning some. Isaac, though I guessed that he didn’t need to, kept his hands on the handle. Off in the north pasturelands a dust devil whirled and skipped, picking up stray clumps of tumbleweed. Cows, knotted up by the barbwire fence, flattened their ears as the funnel blew past them. I watched all this but it was our Liz I saw in the darkness ladling water into the bucket cup by cup.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

But I did. It was my greed, my pride, my love of my wood house that drove us to do this. And land, that was part of this too. Land was everything to Isaac. Isaac. I was willing to do anything he wanted. Anything.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

The dust devil buckled like a bed sheet on a clothesline, gathered itself, and made for the house. It blew up onto the roofless front porch and then petered out, tumbleweeds sticking to the windows and the door.

He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.

Tears burned the backs of my eyes. The South Dakota Badlands wore everything down, even children. But I had my wood house. Just two years old and already it was scraped raw. Sprouts of prairie grass grew on the roof where the tin plates shifted and dirt had blown in. Dust sifted through the edges of the glass windows and the door, and no matter how many times in a day I swept, I couldn’t keep the grit out. Now there was

this tumbleweed mashed up against our house making it look shabby like nobody lived there.

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Sweat ran from Isaac's hair even though his hands were loose on the well handle. Dripping circles darkened the front of his shirt. It was so hot I was sure I felt the hard earth cracking under my feet. My mouth was swelled up as if I'd been eating grit. The cottonwood tree over by the dried-out wash swayed, most of its leaves already gone. My hand went to the back of my neck knowing the ache that must be pinching Liz's arms and shoulders as she scooped water.

Lord Jesus, have mercy. Lord Jesus, have pity.

A low-slung cloud, flat on the bottom and puffed at the top, slid under the sun. Its shadow spread out on the ground darkening the house, the barn, and the well. The coolness brought by the shadow set my heart pounding even faster. It'd been over two months since it'd rained; we were long past due. I waited, hoping, knowing I was foolish to expect anything from this cloud. It passed on, opening up again the hard-edged glare of the sun.

'Dad-dy,' a faint voice called.

'Pull it up,' Isaac said to John. 'Help him, Mary. Keep it steady.'

When the bucket was up, I willed the shaking out of my hands. I undid the knot and then tied the rope to the second bucket. John sent it down to his sister.

I let Rounder, our cattle dog, have a gulp before pushing him away. John said, 'What about me? Don't I get some?'

'No,' Isaac said. 'Not yet.'

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of—
I turned away from the well and looked up at our house.

It had been the winter of 1915 when Isaac figured it was time to build us a wood house. For twelve years I kept house and before it was all over, I birthed seven children – Isaac Two and Baby Henry were laid out in the cemetery – in a four-room dugout. Its walls were nothing but squares of sod. The ceilings sagged. The floors were dirt. Summers, grass grew on the inside walls and I'd take a match and burn the shoots to keep the prairie from staking a claim on the inside of our home.

Most folks in the Badlands that stayed longer than three years built themselves wood houses. These houses weren't grand, far from it. Most of the houses were low to the ground and not all that much bigger than a dugout. But Isaac held off for twelve years not wanting to spend money on lumber. I imagined that gave folks around here something to talk about. But likely they talked anyway. We were the only Negroes in these parts.

I will fear no evil for thou art with me.

The second bucket came up out of the well, and John sent the third one down. That morning he had begged to go down in the well. He was the boy, he'd said to Isaac. No, Isaac said. You're too big, son. I can't hold you. And the rope might break.

Mary came over and stood beside me. She took my hand.

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

It had taken me and Isaac all spring, summer, fall and part of the winter to build our wood house. We did it between tending to the wheat crop, the garden, and seeing to the cattle. When time allowed, Al McKee and Ned Walker, neighbor men, came by to help. That July, Emma was born. It was an easy

birth, not like some of the others. Four days later I was back helping Isaac. I held the lumber steady as he sawed and hammered our house into place. Mary and John handed nails and held tools for us. We tied Liz and Alise to the cottonwood so they wouldn't wander off and get hurt somehow. When baby Emma fussed long and hard, I sat under the cottonwood and gave her my breast. Sitting in the shade with my children, I watched Isaac and the other men, if they were there. It made me lift my chin. Our house was rising up at a place where once there had only been a rolling stretch of prairie grasses.

The fourth bucket came up and the fifth one went down. Dusty wind flapped our shirts, skirts, and pants making hollow flat sounds. I pressed my bandana close to my mouth. Grit vexed my eyes, but I wanted it to. I deserved far worse for doing this to Liz.

'Air,' I said to Isaac. 'Is there enough down there?'

'She's all right.'

It had to stink down there. Anything that deep in the ground always did.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.

When we were building our wood house, there was nothing better than the smell of the fresh-cut lumber. Isaac had gone all the way into the Black Hills figuring lumber prices were better there than in Rapid City. I'd never smelled anything finer than that wood. Growing up in Louisiana, my family lived in the shack where my father had been born a slave. That shack lost its wood smell years back. When we moved to Chicago, there was nothing to smell but the sooty stink of the slaughterhouses. But our Black Hills wood was filled with a raw

crispness that made a person think about the goodness of the earth. I used to put my nose right up to that lumber and fill my lungs with its smell.

Thou anointest my head with oil.

The fifth bucket came up. It wasn't even half full. 'No more,' I said to Isaac. 'Please. No more.'

'All right,' Isaac said.

Bearing down, him and Mary pushed the handle up, fighting to keep it steady when it turned down. Mary's toes curled and gripped the earth. Isaac's face glistened with sweat.

Sweet Jesus, sweet Jesus, sweet Jesus.

The top of Liz's head showed, then her face – grayer than I had ever seen her – and finally the rest of her. There was a long jagged rip in her left sleeve, and the hem of her pants dripped water. Her knuckles were scraped raw, and one of her toes was bleeding. Her eyes were squinted shut against the sun, but that didn't stop the tears.

'Mama,' she said, the plank turning in the wind.

John and I reached out, caught the plank, and pulled Liz to us.

My cup runneth over.

I worked at the harness's knot, my fingers all thumbs. When at last it came loose, me and John got her off the plank and onto the ground. Isaac and Mary let go of the handle, and it spun wildly as the plank dropped to the bottom making a cracking splash.

Liz pressed her face into my swelled-up belly and cried. I let her. I wondered if she was thinking how she'd done this thing for us – for Mary, for John, and for her two little sisters latched in their bedroom. I wondered if she knew there was a baby

inside of me needing that water, too. I wondered if she'd ever forgive us. I believed that she wouldn't.

Isaac and Mary slumped on the ground, their backs against the well, their legs out before them. Isaac glanced up at me, then looked away.

'What?' I said.

He didn't say anything. But I knew. He would do this again to Liz. We all would. Every day until the drought broke. Or until there was no water left to scoop.

I closed my eyes for a moment wanting to put a stop to this, wanting to say, 'Isaac. We've got to think of something better.' But I had to save it for later. It wasn't our way to talk over worries when the children were listening.

I pulled out my handkerchief that I kept tucked in my dress sleeve. Liz blew her nose. When she was done, Isaac got to his feet and put out his arms to her. She ran to him, and he held her high.

'You're a DuPree, Liz,' he said. 'Through and through. You too, John and Mary.'

Liz's arms were tight around Isaac's neck, her face pressed into his shoulder.

'She's bleeding,' I said. Isaac put his hand around her toes, the blood smearing on his fingers. Then he put her down.

'Let's get you fixed up,' I said to Liz. 'Get you out of those wet things.' I looked at Isaac. 'How much is for us?' I said.

'Two buckets.'

The rest was for the four horses, the milk cow, and the one hen still living. I said, 'Mary, you bring up one, John, get the other.' And then, I'm sorry to say, my voice turned hard. 'And don't you spill a drop, you hear me, young man?'

‘Yes, ma’am.’ John licked his lips, and looked at the buckets, the question showing on his face.

I glanced at Isaac. He shook his head but said, ‘One finger. Stick one finger in and lick it. That’ll hold you till supper.’ Mary, John, and Liz each put a finger in one of the buckets and then their cheeks pulling, they sucked their fingers dry.

‘All right now,’ I said. ‘There’s dinner to get on.’ What there was of it, I thought. I took Liz’s hand; she gripped it tight. I looked at Isaac but he was heading off to the corral carrying two of the buckets. There the horses stood near the railing, their nostrils quivering like they knew water was coming.

‘Come on,’ I said to the children and we began the climb up the rise to our wood house, Mary and John with the buckets, Liz holding on to me while Isaac went the other way.