

ONE

There is no death,
only a change of worlds.
—*Chief Seattle, Duwamish.*

Memories are tricksters. It impressed me if folks were able to recite their first memory from when a very young child. The rabbit out of a hat. I liked to hope, for their sake, that for the greater part they were good memories—perhaps the gift of a wooden toy carved by an indulgent father, or the warm press to the breast of an endearment-murmuring mother. Certainly, nothing more distressing than punishment meted out for gleefully dropping the prized possession of a sibling into the roiling privy, or leaving the gate to the hog pen unlatched.

One of my first memories was not only an incident. It was a feeling. Blinding, all-encompassing, this feeling could singularly be described as pure, unadulterated terror. Intervening years had not diminished it. Under different circumstances the expulsion of superfluous liquids from my body—what little remained to inch down my legs in a warm, slug-like trickle to plop into fine dust at my feet—would have seen me mortified into silent embarrassment. As it happened, I barely noticed the indignity. My older brother Ben

might have teased me pitilessly as only a brother does, if he had observed me, but by then he lay on the edge of my vision, slight body sprawled atop the earth, skull cleaved by a flying tomahawk.

A face devoid of expression stared into my own, dark skin painted with symbols barely discernible in the muted hues of a new dawn. Nature entwined with man. The scents of dew-laden grass and pungent odors foreign to me were a strangely compatible mix. As I was a farm-raised child the sweet, coppery odor that hovered almost tangibly like low cloud above the ground was a recognized, familiar presence, but my unconscious mind fought it tooth and nail. It was a very long time before I acknowledged the truth behind the smell that weaved through my pores, and into my streaming veins. Nature, so indescribably cruel at times, became protective of a mind that witnessed something so disturbing, so incomprehensible, it pushed the experience into the far-flung recesses of a small child's overburdened brain.

I was six years old. Or thereabouts. So I was told. Pliable as warm wax, I later surrendered to examination by the town's doctor. The warm puff of his whiskey breath blew softly across my dimpled skin, his gentle, probing fingers at odds with low mutterings against evil that punched with the force of bullets from below a scraggly moustache. This certainty that thunderbolts of divine retribution should strike those who performed such violent offences on innocents were simply a backdrop to my distress.

Someone tried to pry a corn dolly from my rigid fingers in order to better locate the origin of blood dripping down my arm. Perhaps the dolly was my own prized possession. I could not recollect if this was so, unable to release the toy even if I cared to. The ability of my mind to transfer instructions to my limbs seemed to have evaporated, however I do remember faint, vague relief when a low-pitched voice

behind me said, “A cut ain’t gonna kill ’er. Leave the dolly for now if she needs somethin’ to hold on to. Lord knows, it’s all she’s got left.”

My mind then folded in on itself, starbursts wild as gunfire exploding behind my eyelids as I gulped compulsively, lips dry, thin legs dangling from the hard, wooden table.



The batwing doors thudded when someone entered the saloon, returning me to present day with a start that jolted my entire body. On any given occasion, all it might take was a smell, or flash of color, to catapult me back in time to that morning. Unsure how long I had been poised at the top of the stairs, I struggled to collect myself and looked down at the scene that lay before me, surveying what had long been my domain.

The Fleur-de-lis. Cathouse, bordello, house of ill repute, den of iniquity, place of solace.

Now known as Hennessey Reed, I owned the Fleur, my premises dedicated to the quenching of a variety of thirsts, and my preference undoubtedly edged toward bordello. There was something rather fitting with the manner in which the word rolled across the tongue—round, full, and ripe. A voluptuous word and most suited, I believed, to describe the purpose of the house that rested upon my unpretentious patch of Idaho Territory dirt.

The view of the general populace, however, depended entirely on whether their inclination rose piously toward the heavens, or slanted into a downward spiral leading to Hell’s molten core. Human nature being what it is, and human needs being what they are, those who publicly embraced the former were not above sliding through a rear door hoping to avoid the latter, foreheads damp, hands squeezed into fists, eyes darting with anxiety and guilt-ridden anticipation.

I chose to take a neutral stand, for each disposition contributed to the wellbeing, or otherwise, of my account in the newly opened town bank. My attitude held to forgo wasting time on passing judgment, convinced everyone holds their demons close, maintaining the idea certain flaws merely bubbled closer to the surface of conscious thought than others. With my history comprising a stark wilderness of the considered norm, I looked upon myself as the last person in an extremely long line to comment with authority on the lives of those whom I did not know.

Although still reasonably early in the day, figures supported the bar that ran almost three-quarters the length of the room. Square, weather-worn faces and bottles of various heights and colors were reflected in the mirror behind it. Groups, ranging in size, sat at round tables scattered across the floor. A few men played cards while others regaled companions with stories embellished with each telling, and attended to the serious business of drinking rather than endeavors to relieve acquaintances of their hard-earned money.

Shakey was already firmly ensconced on his favorite stool at the bar, his right hand stroking a pelt pinned to where his left arm was once attached. As I watched he attempted to scratch a phantom itch, then closely examined the motley fur when his fingers failed to make contact with his missing limb.

The old soldier appeared as though he had rolled through tumbleweed and somehow managed to entangle his head in a large bundle of it, from which he could not extricate himself. What little of his face that showed, encompassed within this ungovernable mass of whiskers and wild hair, conveyed mild surprise that had not lessened over the years when he realized he yearned to scratch an arm no longer there.

Shakey listened closely to his drinking partner Doc Tolliger, who

I guessed rambled, as his tendency, through a diatribe aimed toward an unsuspecting subject. The elderly doctor balanced his considerable bulk on his perch through pure luck; combined with intimacy his broad backside held with the stool after many hours of association.

A swarthy man sat at an upright piano opposite the bar picking notes from a classical piece well-known to me. I once overheard an old cowboy say he would rather lie down in the path of the Concord heading north than listen to what he called “fancy stuff”. I did not believe Mr. Mozart would have appreciated his opinion, but allowed the stranger to play whenever he felt inclined during less busy times, reserving my regular player for more lively sessions or when my girls put on a show.

The figure on the narrow piano stool was a peculiar stretch of man, thin to the point of snapping—a character who gave the impression an unknown force had pinched either end of his body between thumb and forefinger, and pulled. His limbs appeared to follow commands several seconds behind their inception, the resulting movements stiff and abrupt, but this lack of grace belied the magic that bled from his fingers when he played.

I remained ignorant of his name. History followed some, whereas others emerged from nowhere as he had done, and there was no doubt in my mind he would return there, just as quietly. He rarely spoke or acknowledged anyone, including me, and possessed the facility for seeming unmindful of anything that happened around him. The previous week a fight had broken out near the gaming tables. When the antagonists jostled the piano his hands paused, mid-phrase, until the upright rocked gently into place and he continued to play. At no juncture did he remove his eyes from the keys.

The sharp nip of spilt beer rose to meet me. As long as it had been paid for, before spilling across pine planks and through sawdust, I

had no issue. Combined with the scent of horse and working men, it came up hard against a rare barricade of liberally applied cologne. A tall man who scanned the room from behind the bar looked up to me, his condensed nod affirmation he considered everything under control.

The wolfhound at my side moved, restless, claws clicking on the wooden floor, her yellow eyes bright and intelligent.

“Come, Raven.”

I slowly made my way down the stairs to the main floor, taking note of Polly’s red velvet dress as she flounced around tables toward the piano.

If anyone knew the name of the piano player, it should be Polly. The girls were needling each other good-naturedly one evening when Polly happened to glance toward him, then rose to her feet, pointing dramatically, playing to the gallery.

“Ha! I saw you smile, Mr. Piano Player!” Arms akimbo in triumph she stood, her face clear as moonlight, and employed to full effect what someone once upon a time named “Pretty Polly’s pretty pout”. It was a mannerism that earned me, and the owner of the face on which the pout resided, a mountain of money. “Was just a tiny smile, but a smile nonetheless!”

“Nah.” Bleached eyes centered on her face. “Jes’ like a baby.”

“How do you mean?” Polly swayed languorously from side to side, head tilted, petticoats swishing across slender ankles.

Intent on the girl in front of him the man stilled. “Gas,” he drawled, before bending his head to attend to his music.

For half a heartbeat Polly had fixed on him, then a shrill, appreciative bark of laughter burst from the bodice of her favorite red dress, followed by a belly laugh so loud and genuine it startled most from their reverie. Men hid behind bemused smiles that tugged jaded

faces as they raised their heads, considered her briefly, then returned to their musing.

This marked the beginning of an unusual relationship. I watched them, sometimes, when Polly slid beside the man to share his stool and began to talk without let-up. Although his contribution to their interaction appeared nonexistent, there was a set to the piano player's body that left an observer with few reservations he did not listen to every word Polly uttered.

"Afternoon, Miss Reed," a discordant chorus greeted me.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," I replied as I approached the bar. "Bring a whiskey through to my office, please, Nate."

The barman nodded assent, his hand already reaching for a bottle.

"And, Joseph?" Those nearby quieted in anticipation when I apprised a stocky man who moved from foot to foot as though a rattler had crawled up his trouser leg and decided, rather inconveniently, to make its home in the region of his crotch. I did not hurry, accepting wagers undoubtedly rode on my response. "Unless your mare intends to buy the next round, I suggest you get her out of my saloon mighty fast before she makes a mess of my floor, because it certainly will not be *me* cleaning up without a shovel."

"How'd you know she's mine?"

"Well, there is an obvious give-away sign."

"A sign? What sorta sign?"

Winnings were already changing hands around me, drawn reluctantly, but with good humor from the depths of numerous pockets.

"It looks to me there is more than a passing resemblance between your ugly mug and her rear end."

The wink I bestowed upon Joseph saw him blush to the roots of his

lank, dirty hair. I left him to backslapping and jeering, and to move his mare outside to the hitching rail.

“And I noticed her grazing in his summer pasture,” I murmured when passing Nathan at the end of the bar. “Make that drink fast, Nate, and make it large. I have a powerful feeling I shall need it.”

“Lord, please save me from bored cowboys,” I grumbled to the wolfhound while walking down the hallway to my office. There, I found the door open, the windowless room illuminated by a lamp turned low which threw the corners of my sanctuary into shadow. Relaxing into my chair, I swung my legs onto an antique desk that dominated the space, and leaned forward to draw a wooden marquetry cigarette box toward me. After selecting a cigarette I placed it between my lips, crooked a leg to haul at my petticoats, and flicked a match against the sole of my custom-made boot. Raven grunted as she wound in a tight circle, then flopped to the floor to imitate a large furry rug alongside the desk.

“Your teacher at that fancy finishin’ school back East would be havin’ a faintin’ fit right ’bout now if she could see you.” Nathan placed an amber glass in front of me, before moving away to prop himself against the door frame.

“Then it is just as well she cannot see me.” I drew hard on the cigarette, hauling smoke deep into my lungs, enjoying the euphoric lift that never failed me. “If she saw me now, and where I am domiciled, I believe my method of lighting a cigarette may be the least of her concerns. Perfect.” I lifted my glass to toast him. “Thank you, Nate, and take a drink for yourself.”

“Already have.”

Mother Nature had been neither kind nor fair in her distribution of features when it came to my head bartender. A pugilist’s flat nose and lumpy skin marked him an ex-boxer with the surety of that label

chalked across his forehead. For a man whose face would benefit greatly from the cover provided by a full beard and moustache, he was remarkably clean-shaven. The most meticulous person I had ever met with regard to bathing habits, he embraced a sentiment I found curiously touching. Nathan alleged facial hair unsanitary. I was not the only person with self-preserving reluctance to disagree with this opinion—or any other he held, for that matter. Even so, every now and again a cowboy rendered cross-eyed by liquor, and with judgment impaired, attempted to further rearrange those features. Suffice to say, it seldom ended well for them.

At odds with his previous profession, unless riled Nathan was the kindest man it was my privilege to know, and if the situation arose I would have no hesitation in trusting him with my life. I had in fact done so, on more than one occasion.

He made to leave, throwing over his shoulder: “Marshal’s here.”

“Send him in.”

“He’s in,” Nathan replied.

Marshal Rafael Cooper backed against the wall in the hallway to enable Nathan to pass, then moved to take his place in the doorway.

“You nearly finished that drink, Hennessey? Get her another, Nate.”

The barman replied with a curt nod, ran a quick, unreadable eye over Raff and me, then wandered toward the bar.

“And a glass for the marshal,” I called after him.

“Not for me, thanks.”

“What is on your mind, Raff?” I rearranged my petticoats, spent an inordinate amount of time choosing another cigarette, and plucked it from the box. “I am busy.”

Cooper pointedly inspected the paperless desktop that held my

glass, a rarely used silver letter opener, the cigarette box and nothing else, but refrained from comment.

For someone who usually embodied economy of movement, he was uncharacteristically restive. Broad, long-fingered hands holding a sweat-stained Stetson twisted the hat around by its brim as his pose became a study in nonchalance. He cleared his throat and his dark eyes ceased roaming, settling dead to rights on my face for the first time since he arrived. I knew then that whatever Raff prepared to tell me, it was going to be news I did not wish to hear.

“There’s somethin’ you need to know, Hennessey.” He straightened, black hair brushing the door lintel when he did so. “Remains of a girl were found yesterday ’bout a mile north of the junction. We think she must’ve washed down the canyon, or been dislodged by spring rains, though with the state of her it’s hard to tell exactly.”

“Why on earth do you consider a dead girl might be of interest to me, Raff?” Bile rose in my throat when the room began to dip and churn in disconcerting waves. I sensed what he was about to reveal, for it featured regularly in my nightmares. Blinking rapidly, I attempted to clear my vision. “Do you suppose me a type of ogre? Did you think I might enjoy hearing this?”

“Hennessey, be quiet!”

“What is it, Marshal?” When his expression shifted, I knew my fears were about to be confirmed. Ridiculously trying to stave off knowledge already in my possession I asked: “Or rather, *who* is it?”

“I’m sorry, Ness, but we think it’s—”

“Heidi Claarsen,” I finished bleakly and slid my feet from the corner of the desk, allowing them to land with a most unrefined thud on the floor. I sat as stone, my heart pounding so fiercely I expected it might explode from my body and be propelled across the room by

anguish. Staring at the gold symbols that formed an elaborate border for the desk blotter, I concentrated on their lines and twirls, traced the pattern with my forefinger, and tried to maintain calm.

“How’d you know it’s Heidi?” Raff sighed, and threw his hands before his face. “No, don’t tell me.”

A weight suspended in my throat dropped to wedge against my heart. If I had worshiped a god I may have begun to question his existence, however any residue of faith was a lifetime gone, dead and buried in a town as far away in distance as in memory. Feeling an overwhelming desire to move, I shoved my chair back and rose to my feet. The wolfhound, ever sensitive to a change in atmosphere, and my mood, emerged from beside the desk, growling softly.

“I want to see Heidi. Where is she? With Amos Adams?”

“Sweetheart—”

“Do not *sweetheart* me, Raff. If you know what is good for you, please keep quiet and damned well get out of my way.”

He took a step back as I sidled past him, then fell in close behind me when I marched down the hallway.

“I’m comin’ with you. She’s been, ah, exposed some time. The Claarsen homestead was raided ’bout this time last year if you remember.”

“If I remember?” I came to an abrupt stop mid-stride and whirled to face him. I made no effort to contain the bitterness in my words, releasing them to slam hard as a door against his chest. They brought the marshal up fast in his tracks. “If I remember? It was June fifteen, Raff, it is imprinted indelibly on my being. Yes, I remember!”

I turned from him and kept walking, shook my head at Nathan’s wordless enquiry, and crossed the floor of the saloon to the batwings.

“Why are you assured they are the remains of Heidi?” I asked once outside.

“We found somethin’ with the body. You recall Heidi’s twelfth birthday?”

“I visited her on her twelfth birthday. I presume you refer to Adams and yourself with your use of *we*?”

“Soon after Heidi’s birthday there was a fair in town.” Raff did not answer my question, and continued steadily: “Met Heidi and her parents there. She was real excited and havin’ a fine day all dressed up in her Sunday best. Noticed a silver chain she was wearin’. A silver chain with a shamrock hangin’ from it. Said it’s a present. From you. It’s with the body.”

Striding down the boardwalk I studiously avoided warped boards crouched ready to trip an unsuspecting or distracted pair of boots. Folks we met raised their chins in greeting, only to hesitate and let those greetings drop when they noticed the tension between us. The more astute clearly gauged our mood in advance, and dodged out of our path in arcs wide as the boardwalk allowed.

We walked by the storefronts of the tailor, the bootmaker, who stitched everything from hand-tooled footwear to saddles, a tiny bakehouse across whose windows the owner had written *Robbie’s Baked Goods* in uneven, transitory script, and the barber’s shop.

A quick glance through the barber’s door found a young man waiting stiff-backed in a chair positioned for customers. He appeared to have availed himself of the bathing facilities in the room at the rear of the building, and now entrusted Cullen to bring his ragged mane of hair and bristly face into a semblance of order.

“Slow down!” Raff caught my elbow before I paraded in front of a wagon drawn by a team of straining bays, their hooves beating a dull tempo against the ground. “No need to go gettin’ yourself killed as well.”

“She took a liking to you, Raff.” I regarded his handsome, closed

face while he scouted the street watching for a more opportune time to cross and wrenched my arm from his grasp, consumed by regret at the loss of a life now beyond Heidi's reach.

"Please, Ness. Don't."

"It was plain as the nose on Nathan's face. The poor girl. Although I guess I can understand what appealed to her. You being so personable and all."

I made a point to look carefully up and down the dirt road that served as the northern entrance to town, then ducked between heavily laden wagons traveling in opposite directions, dust blooming.

When Raff followed me I fired annoyance his way, and imagined a cheek twitched in response to my comment. Convinced he felt amused rather than irritated by my words, I suspected he would deny the former if challenged. Instead, he remained mute, familiar with my practice of resorting to often ill-timed humor when upset.

When we reached the opposite boardwalk Raff proceeded to ignore me—a practice he had honed to perfection over the years—and matched one easy stride to two of mine as we carried on to Amos Adams's front door.

"Ness, you'd best be prepared." He finally broke our silence. "You sure you wanna do this? Why not remember Heidi as the fun-lovin' girl she was?"

"Platitudes, Raff. I trusted you were above them. Who are you? My keeper?" I stopped when we reached the building that formed Adams's home and business, and ran a needlessly tidying hand over the front of my dress.

"Hello, Amos." Raff spoke past me to the rangy, cadaverous figure that had appeared to populate the doorway. "Couldn't rein her in."

"Do not apologize for me, Marshal. I am perfectly capable of

speaking for myself. I am here to pay my respects to Heidi, Mr. Adams, so if you can take me through?”

“Takes a brave man to waylay a woman when she has on a head of steam,” the undertaker said, eyes wary, fastened on Raven as he inspected her from either side of the aquiline nose that spliced his face.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake! The hound stays with me.”

Admittedly, my dog posed a formidable sight. When on her hind legs, front paws on my shoulders, she towered above me, and at a weight of just over a hundred pounds she invited attention wherever we went. Those who came upon her for the first time invariably responded with the degree of fear generally associated with coming face to face with the *prey* Raven’s ancestors traditionally hunted. Wolf and bear. Despite this, I had absolutely no patience available to pander to Adams’s insecurities.

He shrugged and took an outwardly nonchalant step back.

“Marshal’s right, Miss Reed. You sure you want to see her? She’s a jangle of bones.”

“And here I was thinkin’ I saw a tear in your eye the other day when you got the telegram sayin’ you’re a grandfather,” Raff said.

“Ah, yes. You knew her well.” Adams tapped absently at his balding head. “I’d forgotten.”

My belief was he had not forgotten anything at all his entire life, and infrequently displayed any form of empathy or sensibility; albeit too late, and with prompting. You old reprobate, I ruminated, and a wry grin arched in my direction as though my judgment were spoken aloud.

“Can’t offend the dead.” Adams started down the hallway. “It’s the living I have troubles with.”

“Never would’ve figured,” Raff muttered from behind me.