BRIDES IN THE SKY
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IN MARCH 1854, KATE and Olivia Christopher lost their parents to illness and inherited the family farm in Augusta County, Virginia. At one time, there were over a hundred acres, but whenever the Christophers needed money, they’d sold land to a neighbor, Mr. Cole. About thirty acres were left, much of it steep and rocky.

They couldn’t get the winter out of their lungs, was how Kate thought of her parents’ deaths. The shock of losing them left her unable to cry.

In the burying ground, a light snow was falling.

Mr. Cole approached the sisters. He wore a long black coat. Up close, with his round cheeks, he looked younger than Kate had thought he was. A breeze spun his hat away. He ran to retrieve it and smiled at her.

“If you want to sell,” he said, “I’ll buy.”

She’d been afraid he would ask for her hand, or Olivia’s. A bereaved woman, whether widow or daughter, could find herself affianced before the earth was spaded over the coffin. She was eighteen, Olivia twenty, and they had no money. Mr. Cole was a widower and wealthy.

“We don’t want to sell,” she said, and Olivia didn’t contradict her.

“What are you going to do now?” asked Mrs. Spruill, an old friend of their mother’s.
“We’ll work the farm ourselves,” Kate said.
“We’ll help you,” said Mrs. Spruill, but she and her husband had their own farm and five children.

The next morning, Kate hitched a mule to the plow, and she and Olivia took turns tilling the earth. Their father had hired men to help with the planting and harvesting, and the girls and their mother had put up food for the winter. This was so much harder. How could there be so many stones, when the ground had been plowed before? It was as if rocks grew out of the dirt. Over several weeks, Kate and Olivia planted potatoes, onions, cabbage, radishes, and peas. At night, they stripped off their soiled clothes and crawled between icy sheets. There was no time to keep house. They waited until the middle of May, when there was no chance of frost, to plant squash and beans. Corn was last. They counted groups of four kernels into tiny hills of earth and recited the old rhyme: “One for the blackbird, one for the crow, one for the weather, and one to grow.”

The harsh, sloping land filled Kate’s vision even in her sleep. Would she and Olivia find husbands, or would their family line simply end? The thought saddened her, but she vowed to be grateful for the life she had.

It was a dry spring, and many of the vegetables failed to sprout. Varmints ravaged the radishes and peas.

“I can’t bear it,” Olivia said.
Kate took their father’s gun and managed to shoot a groundhog. She put it in the stewpot and was glad for the meat. Occasionally, in the spring and the sweltering summer, Mr. Spruill came over with his son Billy, who was thirteen, and they helped hoe the weeds. Those days were easier.
Kate tended the beehives her father had established. One day she and Olivia woke to a great buzzing. A dark mass tapped the window-panes. The bees were swarming. The sisters gathered tin pots and spoons and rushed outside, making a racket, hoping the noise would cause the bees to return to the hives. Instead, they flew away.

“No getting them back,” Olivia said.

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The harvest was scant, with corn so tough only the mule could eat it. Neighbors left a ham and sacks of meal on the porch. At Christmastime,
two young men appeared at church—Andrew and Martin Sibley from Henrico County.

“We’re heading west,” said Martin, with a smile for Kate. “Plenty of free land in Oregon.”

“And gold in California,” Andrew said.

“Nobody gets rich in a gold rush except the people who sell things,” Martin said, and Kate saw that even though he was the younger brother, he had the cooler head, and they’d likely talked about this before. “We’ll be better off farming in the Willamette Valley.”

Yet Sunday after Sunday, they showed up. They had found work with Mr. Cole, and they promised to help the sisters at planting time. Kate prayed her thanks to God. When Andrew walked Olivia home from church, it was only natural that Martin would fall into step with Kate. When Andrew and Olivia vanished into the brush, Martin drew Kate into his arms.

“Why shouldn’t we?” He kissed her.

Later, when the brothers were gone, Kate faced her sister on their porch. Courtship was flattering, and the blue-eyed men were as handsome as princes. Olivia had high cheekbones and dark, winged eyebrows, but Kate was plain as a biscuit, and uneasy.

“He’s better-looking than I am,” she said. “Is it us they want, or the farm?”

“Who’d want this?” Olivia swept her arm toward their bleak acres.

It was a double wedding. The Sibley brothers fidgeted at the altar as the sisters stepped into church, wearing their best dresses. After the ceremony, neighbors wished them health and long life. Mrs. Spruill had baked a cake, and everyone had a slice, along with blackberry cordial.

That night, Kate led Martin to the room she’d had since childhood. She felt shy, although they’d been together those times in the woods.

“Are you mine?” he said.

His embrace was as warm as a rug. She fell in love with him at that moment.

RIGHT away, Andrew started saying, “It’s not enough land.”

“I like it here,” Martin said.
Andrew pulled out maps and reminded Martin about the thousands of acres out west, free for the taking. Kate was terrified by the fate that had befallen white settlers. Everyone knew about Dr. and Mrs. Whitman, missionaries whose Oregon compound was attacked by Cayuses.

“The Cayuses was hung,” Andrew said, “and the army’ll send out more soldiers.”

“I won’t go,” said Olivia, her face like stone.

One raw spring day, Mr. Cole came over. He stood on the porch in his long black coat and made an offer to the four of them. Kate looked to Olivia, who hesitated.

“You used to talk about going west,” he said to the brothers.

“We’ll think about it,” said Martin.

“We’ll take it,” said Andrew.

Olivia went into the house and banged the door behind her. Kate’s heart beat like wings. This was what change felt like. Mr. Cole counted out money into Andrew’s palm. The porch needed paint, and winter snow had warped the railing. Why notice these things now, when the place was passing out of her hands?

“I’ll live here,” Mr. Cole said. “I like it better than my house. Will you leave the beehives, Kate?”

She read his solemn eyes and straight mouth. If she’d waited, he’d have asked her to marry him. The realization filled her with regret. It would have been all right. At her parents’ funeral, she’d been afraid he would ask, when she should have been encouraging him. She should have gone to him the day the bees swarmed.

“Oh, yes,” she said, as she might have replied to a proposal. The passion she was finding in the nights with Martin—would she have found it with Mr. Cole? Maybe not, but still there’d have been children, and she wouldn’t have had to leave.

“We can’t take beehives in the wagons anyway,” Martin said. He put his arm around her.

“Good luck to all of you.” Mr. Cole went down the porch steps.

“Look after the barn cats,” Kate said.

He turned with his hand on the railing. “I will.”
ANDREW and Martin used the money to buy oxen and extra-strong wagons made of cypress, with hickory bows and waterproofed canvas covers.

“It’s April. We’ve got to hurry,” Andrew said.

Kate and Olivia bundled clothing into trunks. They packed cooking supplies and food.

“I wish I hadn’t married him,” Olivia said. She was crying. “Aren’t you sorry?”

“No.” Kate loved Martin too much to believe the brothers had plotted to get their farm and sell it, but she also believed that in marriage, some sort of bargain was struck. “It’ll be fine. We’ll all be together.”

THE Spruills went with them, the farmer and his wife and their five children, Hannah, Billy, George, Constance, and Ella. At the last minute, a taciturn carpenter named Zachary Willis joined the group. By the time they reached St. Joseph, Missouri, Kate felt they had traveled as far as the moon. St. Joseph teemed with emigrants. Most were from Illinois, Ohio, and Arkansas, but they came from all over, even England, Ireland, and Scandinavia.

A young couple from Kentucky, James and Susan Edmiston, asked to travel with them. The Edmistons were headed to northern California, and they would take the Oregon Trail until it divided into two main routes. Susan was beautiful, and Kate felt a dart of envy. James Edmiston had a banjo, and Kate was glad there’d be music.

The first company to set out for the Oregon Trail, back in 1843, had consisted of a thousand people. Now that the trails were well worn, groups of any size could go. Theirs was only four wagons, each hauled by four oxen, with a spare pair of oxen, a few horses and mules, and a cow.

They caught up with others as they traveled, and Kate loved swapping treats. For the first time, she ate pickled cauliflower, duck sausage, and Swedish almond cookies. There was talk of President Pierce and slavery. Everyone expected there’d be a war back East. There’d been very few blacks in Augusta County. Kate didn’t think slavery would long be a part of the world, nor should be.
The first time she saw an Indian, dark-skinned in leather breeches, her throat closed in fear, but her curiosity was stronger. He knew a little English, and the others they encountered—Arapaho, Crow, Pawnee, and Assiniboine—only wanted food and tobacco. Scarred by smallpox, they hung around campsites. Mrs. Spruill doled out bread and glass jars, which they prized.

Occasionally the party met a go-back.

“I’m wore out,” the person might say. “I miss my home folks. You’ll go back, too.”

Some emigrants pulled or pushed carts themselves, tugging or trundling their loads and crossing the continent on their own two legs. This was the “Foot and Walker Company.” Kate was amazed.

She was sore all over from the jouncing wagon, but she loved fording rivers. In Kansas, the Little Blue was shallow but had a quicksand bottom. She held her breath as the water reached the center of the wheels. Moments later, the wagons rolled up on the banks.

Except for Susan Edmiston, who was pregnant, monthlies were a misery the women endured as best they could. Kate and Martin rarely talked about bodily processes. She didn’t know many words for them, and he didn’t either, except for the vulgar, childish ones. When would she start having babies? She’d heard of an old trick: put a wedding ring up inside. But she didn’t, afraid it would hurt a baby or herself.

By unspoken assent, the leader of their company was James Edmiston, lithe, a little arrogant, with a prowling stride made for walking west. He could make everybody laugh, even the silent Zachary Willis. James had a way of holding Kate’s gaze while his eyes crinkled and he waited for her to laugh. Martin was quiet and thoughtful, given to chewing his lip. She couldn’t help comparing them.

Susan Edmiston had long red hair that Olivia and fifteen-year-old Hannah Spruill took turns combing. Her pregnancy made it thicker.

“She already lost two babies,” Olivia told Kate. “James won’t leave her alone. She asked me to help her.”

Kate felt some darkness fall, and it had nothing to do with the night. The men were playing cards and smoking by the fire. Sunset lit the sky like a red bowl over the prairie.
“Help her how?” asked Kate. 
Back home, Olivia would have answered right away, and the answer would have been, *Sew baby clothes. Help her lift the pots.* But she didn’t say anything, and Kate felt oddly reluctant to press her.

A clear night came on. The Milky Way bristled across the oceanic darkness.

“There’s heaven,” said Ella, the youngest Spruill child.

More stars blossomed as they watched, great folds and curtains and cobwebs of stars. Everyone picked out constellations: the Big Dipper, the Herdsman, Berenice’s Hair, the Dragon, the Twins, and Taurus the Bull.

“See that cluster of stars on the bull’s shoulder?” asked James Edmiston. “It’s the Pleiades. The Seven Sisters.”

The name charmed Kate. She did a quick tally: herself, Olivia, Susan Edmiston, Mrs. Spruill, and the Spruill daughters, Hannah, Constance, and Ella.

“That’s us,” she said.

After that, she looked for the Pleiades every night. Two of the stars outshone the others. She imagined they were new brides, herself and Olivia.

Was celestial space any more strange and vast and distant than the land they were traveling across and the unknown place where they were heading? What awaited them all? God moved above them, an invisible shepherd, the stars his knowing eyes. The diamond sky brimmed with leviathans—monsters, animals, and giant symbols, a clock, a sextant, a lyre. Kings and queens capered among them. Surely the ancient stories playing out in the heavens foretold what was to come. The stars’ courses paralleled that of Kate’s party, following the sun. Night after night, the glittering Seven Sisters sailed west, while the mortals crawled below.

\[\text{AGAINST}\]

Against her will, she felt attracted to James. Sometimes he and Olivia were both absent. *She asked me to help her,* Olivia had said, but she couldn’t have meant what Kate was thinking. That was absurd: trail madness. Olivia and James would return to the evening campsite from
separate directions, James with kindling, Olivia with a pail of water, and they might have, must have, Kate corrected herself, been on innocent errands. Olivia set down the pail. James told funny stories. Andrew laughed, and Kate felt a rush of pity for her brother-in-law, who looked so young in his dirty clothes.

James brought out his banjo and sang a ballad about two sisters who loved the same man. The man preferred the younger one and gave her gifts. The older girl led the younger one to a river and pushed her in, and she drowned.

What a horrible song. James crooned on and on. Did he know how Kate felt about him? Was he poking fun at her and Olivia? He finished with a flourish of strumming, turned the banjo over, and showed Kate a fancy design on the back of the fingerboard, a spray of white flowers.

He handed it to her. “It’s mother-of-pearl.”

He traced the pattern, his hand touching hers. Embarrassed, she gave it back.

“Why not sing something a little more cheerful?” Susan said.

“How about ‘The Wayward Boy’?” Andrew said.

James obliged. “Well, I walked the street with a tap to my feet.”

Martin and Andrew joined in. Kate knew the song, a bawdy one about a man who met a maiden in a tower, and soon she had many babies. Martin caught her eye and winked, their signal. They stood up, left the others, and found a place away from camp. He put blankets down. A pair of birds flew up into the beech trees. There was just enough light for her to recognize them as thrushes.

He fumbled at her buttons. “I think about it all the time,” he said.

“I do too.”

“Does everybody?” he asked shyly.

She buried her face in his neck. If anything ever happened to him, she would have to take another man to bed, and fast. She knew it as she clutched his shoulders and panted into his hair.

“I’ll plant an orchard,” Mrs. Spruill said. She had brought saplings wrapped in burlap. “I hear the Willamette Valley’s grand for fruit trees.”
The men took turns riding ahead and staying back, seeing that the women and the wagons were all right. When a horse or mule stumbled, they looked to Mr. Spruill. At fifty, he was the oldest, with a long beard his children liked to play with. They wrapped the ends behind his neck while he pretended to wonder where it had gone.

“Did it take a notion to run away?” He picked at the empty air. “If you see it, will you tell it to come back?”

Fifteen-year-old Hannah just grinned, but the younger children bubbled over with laughter: fourteen-year-old Billy, eleven-year-old George, and Constance and Ella, ages eight and six. Sometimes they walked alongside the wagons, pulling at switches of grass, and everyone’s face, even Ella’s, was lined and red and hardened from the sun.

On Sunday mornings, they read the Bible, prayed, and sang hymns, sometimes joined by other groups, their harmonious voices rising on the ceaseless grassland wind. The women kept Monday as wash day. They hung the wet garments from the sides of the wagons. The clothing and bedding streamed like pennants and dried fast in the wind. Even when the wash water was muddy, the sun bleached out the white things so they were snowy again.

Thank goodness the Spruills had brought a cow, which gave enough milk for everybody. Leftover milk was placed in covered buckets, and in a day or two, the motion of the wagon churned it to clumps of butter.

“Yankee Doodle went to town, a-riding on a pony,” sang the Spruills. Kate rode ahead with Martin, Andrew, and Zachary. The land rolled out before them in paint-box colors.

A mail carrier approached. “Letters for back East?”

A pang went through Kate. She hadn’t written any of her friends or neighbors. Olivia waved a sheaf of letters, and the carrier put them in his leather pouch.

“We’ve crossed into Nebraska,” Martin said.

A bird spun up from the bushes and flaunted long, fluted feathers: a scissor-tailed flycatcher. Kate urged her horse into a trot across the green prairie, for the joy of it.
She steeled herself for the sight of graves. There were all kinds of markers, from wooden crosses to finely chiseled stone. A packing case protruded from the ground, a makeshift casket that had been unearthed and rifled. The body had been tossed aside, a child’s, no longer recognizable as boy or girl, the face eaten away. The men dug a grave and reinterred it.

Kate wished she could climb into her old bed and pull the covers over herself. Virginia would be lush with June showers. Mr. Cole had gotten a great bargain—beehives, barn cats, house, and that lovely, rainy land.

Her tears flowed. If the others saw, let them think she was crying for the reburied child.

The trail was full of death. Emigrants died from fights, lightning strikes, and accidental drowning in rough rivers. They were run over by wheels or kicked by draft animals. Whole parties strayed from the trail and expired from hunger or thirst. Kate averted her eyes from animals’ bleached skulls and ribcages.

One day they heard a bell tolling and came upon a funeral. A man was striking the bell with a hammer. Susan gave the mourners a pan of gingerbread. Olivia chided her, and Kate felt it wasn’t the gift Olivia begrudged them, but Susan’s sympathy.

“Are you all right?” Kate asked Olivia, when they were alone.

Olivia gave a little laugh. “I feel like I forgot something, like I need to go home and get it, but I don’t know what it is.”

“Don’t drink alkali water,” warned the seasoned travelers, “and don’t let your animals.”

For now, there was enough water and game—pronghorn, deer, and sage hens, which were delicious when roasted over the fire.

Sometimes wild mustang ponies thundered past. One morning, a buffalo wandered near camp, shaggy and enormous. Martin aimed his gun but missed, and it shambled away.

“The army wants them all gone,” James said, “because that’d get rid of the Indians.”
Fifteen, twenty miles a day they covered, yet they needed to move faster. From Missouri, the journey to Oregon or California took at least four months, usually five. It was already July, and winter would come early on the trail.

Kate believed they were charmed. To others came the mishaps and misfortunes—broken axles, capsized ferries, soured potatoes, and bouts of dysentery, typhoid, and measles. People often had themselves to blame for their perils, and illness could strike anywhere. Those who sickened might have done so at home. Her party enjoyed health and well-being.

They bathed in rivers, men and women separately.

“Goodness, my hair’s turning white everywhere,” Mrs. Spruill said.

“Oh, Ma, don’t say that,” Hannah said.

Olivia kept charge of the medical supplies. There were clean needles and silk thread to sew torn skin, a bottle of laudanum for pain, sassafras root for catarrh, peppermint for upset stomach. They had pooled their food and bought more, so they had plenty—hams, bacon, apples, onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes, pickles, jam, and dried beans, peas, and pumpkin slices. The Spruill children found Kate’s last few jars of honey, packed in straw.

“Let’s save that for later,” she said. Its scent would make her homesick.

Olivia gave each child a spoonful of molasses instead. Olivia was wise, a sister to be admired. Kate could almost believe the conversation about the Edmistons hadn’t happened or she’d misunderstood. She was ashamed of her suspicions.

At night, white-throated sparrows sang in moonlit trees along the rivers, and the Milky Way arched above, magnificent and deeply silent. One night, when the others had gone to bed in the wagons, Kate stayed up, stargazing. Someone brushed her elbow. James.

“In the Greek myths,” he said, “Orion chased the Seven Sisters.”

“The hunter chased the girls?”

“Yes. They were scared, and they asked Zeus for help.”

“And what did he do?”

“He changed them into doves and put them in the sky.”

Wolves’ howls reached her ears. The eerie, discordant music gave her a reason to move closer to him. If he tried to kiss her, she’d let him.

“It’s my turn to keep watch,” he said, and was gone.
Day after day, she followed him with her eyes. He could turn her into a bird. He could turn her into anything he wanted to.

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The streets of Fort Kearny were full of soldiers. Susan stood up in her wagon, her calico dress straining over her belly, and a dozen hands reached out to help her climb down. What would it be like to be so pretty?

“Don’t you think you should stay here until the baby comes?” Kate asked.

“James wants to keep going,” Susan said.

Babies were being born all along the trail. Mothers would brandish a newborn and yell out its date of arrival. Other women were sick in the backs of their wagons or dead in childbirth. The trail belonged to men. Wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, and grandmothers were tugged along like the Spruills’ cow.

Olivia and Susan posted letters while Kate shopped at the fort’s store. At the counter, a woman ducked her head, trying to hide the purple bulges around her eyes.

Why were some beaten and others treated as queens?

Feeling bold, Kate met the soldiers’ gaze as she passed them in the streets. They numbered about six hundred under General Harney. Everyone knew their mission was to wipe out the Indians.

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When they left the fort, Kate rode backwards in the wagon, holding paper and pencils on her lap and teaching Constance and Ella Spruill how to draw, a bumpy endeavor. Just past a grain mill, a dot appeared and grew until it became a man running toward them. He was covered in flour, and he kept looking over his shoulder. Kate couldn’t help but laugh. She read his face and found nothing to fear.

“Come on up,” she said. “Is somebody chasing you?”

“My boss, but I think he gave up.”

He swung himself on board. His name was Hank Charles. He helped with the animals and paid for a ferry crossing, and as they moved deeper into Indian country, where the natives wanted guns, he pacified them with wire and gunpowder.
One day, several Sioux blocked the trail and pointed to Susan Edmiston.

“They like your hair,” Hank said. “They want it.”

Susan untied her ribbons and offered them. The Indians held up a knife. James stepped in front of her.

Hank spoke to the Indians and said to James, “Bring out the whiskey, quick.”

Peace was maintained, and later, Susan joked if her hair was going to be that troublesome, she should cut it off. She trembled as Olivia braided it. Kate’s own hair was light brown, long and shiny, but nobody would ever crave it as a trophy. That was one advantage to being plain.

One morning, Hank spotted a wagon train in the distance. “Think I’ll run up ahead.”

“You’re in a hurry, aren’t you?” Kate was sorry to see him go.

“Reckon so.” He jumped off, and that was goodbye.

They traveled through long hours of summer light, stopped at noon, and moved again until day’s end. Sharp stubs of dry grass irritated the feet of the oxen and the cow. Mr. Spruill cleansed the wounds and applied ointment, and the party lay by for three days so they could improve. Kate felt overwhelmed with anxiety. She tried to talk to Olivia, but she was silent and withdrawn, exhausted, Kate figured. She was glad when they set out again.

A towering landmark became visible at the horizon. For days, it beckoned, seeming to float above the flat earth. This was Chimney Rock, 250 miles past Fort Kearny. When they finally reached it, they joined other travelers milling around in hushed awe. A single pyramidal hill rose from scoured earth, topped by a three-hundred-foot rock pillar.

“Pointing to heaven,” Martin said. Kate was surprised. He rarely spoke of God.

“The Indians call it the elk’s cock,” James said.

After they left, they kept looking back. The youngest Spruill children cried when they couldn’t see it anymore.
One evening when Kate and Olivia were fixing supper, a woman approached, her face flaring into the firelight. Gray hair snagged at her shoulders.

“I lost ’em,” she said, “them I was with.”

“Eat,” Kate offered, “and come with us tomorrow. We’re bound to catch up with them.”

“I’ll just stretch out a while.”

The woman lay on her back. The toes of her boots made black peaks against the sunset. Kate set a bowl of beans near her, and biscuits with honey. They were using all their supplies now. In the morning, the woman and the food were gone.

“If she can’t find them,” Kate said, “what’ll she do?”

“You can’t worry about everybody,” Olivia said.

When had the glory seeped out of the days? Beneath the endless sky, Kate felt like a mouse hunted by hawks.

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THE land soared as they entered the Laramie Range. Dust caked their mouths, eyes, and noses. The horned skulls of cattle and buffalo littered the cracked earth. Farther on, they passed Independence Rock, which looked like a giant stone turtle. At Devil’s Gate Canyon, where the Sweetwater River flowed, they drank and filled their casks. Next was the South Pass. A steep descent followed. The oxen slipped on the rocks, and everyone was out and walking.

“Only eight hundred miles to go,” Martin said.

On a level stretch, the oxen broke into a run. The horses and mules ran too, and the cow, until they reached a shallow pond.

“Don’t let them drink,” James yelled.

The men kicked and spurred their mounts so they’d run around the water, but there was no stopping the oxen. They plowed into the pond, dragging the wagons with them. The cow plunged in, and they drank their fill while the men shouted and lashed with whips.

Within an hour, the cow strained at the rope that tethered her to the Spruills’ wagon, broke away, and ran. Zachary Willis gave chase but returned without her. James called an early halt, and the men searched in vain for good water.
In the morning, two of the oxen were dead. Thanks to the spare pair, there were still enough to pull the four wagons. In the searing sunlight, Kate looked at a map and felt sick.

“Should we turn back?” she asked Martin. “Can we?”

“No. We’ve come too far.”

When they stopped at midday, two more oxen sank down. The Sibleys would all have to share a wagon. To make room, Olivia and Kate discarded cooking things and furniture, but it would still be crowded. The couples would take turns sleeping in the wagon and underneath it, on a rubber mat.

One moment, Olivia was beside her, frying bread in bacon grease, and the next she was gone, and so was James. Kate blinked. Did no one else notice? Didn’t Andrew?

“Should we butcher them?” Martin asked, pointing to the two oxen, now dead.

“We need the meat,” said James, who was nearby after all.

Olivia and Susan were talking, their heads bent together. Jealousy struck Kate’s heart, sharp as a claw. She, not Susan, had worked with Olivia on the farm. Together they’d wrenched their backs and blistered their hands.

James turned the knobs on his banjo and picked out a tune.

ZACHARY Willis rode ahead all day and slept out in the open. He did his share of the work and more, and as grass became scarcer, they relied on him to scout it out. When the other men’s hair grew long, they asked the women to cut it, but he didn’t bother. From the back, he might have been an Indian.

Hannah Spruill turned sixteen. A long-legged tomboy when they’d started, she had grown womanly. Laughing, she twined daisies into a chain and slipped it over Zachary’s head. Ten years older, he protested but gave her a smile.

They made Fort Bridger and forged northwest into the Idaho territory, pausing at hot springs, where the burning water tasted like metal and did not slake thirst. Nearly everyone contracted a miserable fever, with sore throat and aching muscles. When Kate felt better, she craved
sausage and fried apples, but there weren’t any. The gristly ox meat had spoiled. They picked worms out of their bacon and rationed the rice, beans, and hardtack.

Kate and Martin no longer sought each other out for lovemaking. She felt too filthy and tired, and Martin fell asleep without reaching for her. What might be going on in the other wagons was a mystery. She felt empty inside, as if she’d been in the Rocky Mountains forever.

The oxen struggled up the steep, stony paths. Mr. Spruill complained of stomachache. As it worsened, his moans reached every ear. When night fell, Kate took a lantern to the Spruills’ wagon and offered to sit up with him. Mrs. Spruill burrowed into the wagon and soon was snoring. Hannah and Zachary joined Kate, Hannah’s eyes huge with fear, and they kept vigil through the night. Kate listened to Hannah tell Zachary about the food she would cook when they reached Oregon.

“Blueberry muffins,” Hannah said. “Would you like that?”
“I sure would,” Zachary said.
“I can make chicken pie. Ma taught me. Do you like chicken pie?”
“I sure do.”

In the morning, Mr. Spruill was well enough to sit up and drink tea, and they gave him the last of the sugar. In a stretch of well-watered country, Martin shot an antelope, and the fresh meat heartened them. As if drawn by the savory smell, a group of Iowans appeared, and Kate’s party offered to share. The guests contributed dried pears and cherry wine, and the food was passed from hand to hand in a welcome respite. They camped together that night. In the morning, the Iowans pushed off early. Some fear nagged at Kate, a sense her group had taken a risk, but the visitors had looked healthy, even robust, without contagion or infirmity.

Soon they would reach Fort Hall, the junction with the California Trail, where the Edmistons would leave them. Kate looked into her heart and asked herself if she could stop loving James. He was a mirage, like clouds that promised rain but were only dust.

When they stopped at noon, Olivia summoned Kate and Mrs. Spruill.
“Susan’s baby is coming,” Olivia said.
Susan labored for eighteen hours, until, just before daybreak, she delivered a little boy. Mrs. Spruill washed and swaddled him.
“Someday,” Olivia said, “we’ll tell him he was born on the Oregon Trail.”

Kate felt as tired as if she’d had a baby herself.

“I’ll go find James and tell him he has a son,” she said, but a pain in her stomach drove her to her knees.

It was cholera. For days, she lay delirious, barely aware of others offering water, her fever dreams haunted by the jolly supper with strangers. She must have drunk the water, because she began to revive. Recovery brought bitter revelations. Mr. Spruill, Hannah, and Susan’s infant had all died. Martin was sick. Kate held a cup of water to his lips and waited a long moment before he opened his eyes and drank. She kissed his forehead and thanked God it was cool.

Andrew, James, and Zachary buried the dead. They weren’t strong enough to dig deep graves, so they hacked into the trail. Wheels would pack the earth and keep animals from digging up the bodies. They left no markers, not even rocks.

* * *

There was no remedy for the time they had lost except to push on. Everyone had lost weight, and their clothes hung off them, but no one looked worse than James and Susan. His eyes were sunken, her face was puffy, and her breasts leaked pitifully through her dress.

Billy Spruill shot three jackrabbits, so there was a good meal for the first time in days. The Edmistons sat apart from the others, with their own fire. Since the baby’s death, they had kept to themselves.

Olivia set down her tin plate. “Andrew and I are going with James and Susan,” she said.

Kate stared at her. “To California?”

“Yes.”

“But we’ve got to stick together.”

“Come with us,” Olivia said.

“We’ll take the Hudspeth Cutoff,” Andrew said. “It’s the fastest way.”

“What are you talking about?” Martin said. “We’ve said Oregon all along.”

“We changed our minds,” Andrew said. “After harvest-time, I’ll do a little prospecting.”
For a few minutes, they ate in silence. Kate couldn’t swallow.
“I don’t hear much good about the Hudspeth,” Martin said.
“Won’t be worse than what we been through,” Andrew said.
“You’ll have to go over high mountains, and there’s not much water.”
“We’ll take it quick.” Andrew dug into his stew. “What about y’all?” he asked Mrs. Spruill and Zachary.
“I ain’t changing horses in the middle of the race,” Mrs. Spruill said.
“I either,” Zachary’s first words since Hannah’s burial.
Andrew shrugged. I’m sorry I married him, Olivia had said before they started. Kate grabbed her hand.
“I’d worry too much.” Olivia looked toward the Edmistons, slumped at their fire.
“You’d pick them over your own flesh and blood?”
“You’ll be fine, but they might not be. I want to go.”
Kate jumped to her feet and stormed over to the Edmistons. Startled, their heads snapped up, their eyes shiny in the smoky light, and Susan flung out her hands, reading Kate’s face.
“We didn’t do anything,” Susan said. “It’s up to them.”
“You played on her sympathies,” Kate said.
Martin was right behind her. “Now is not the time to be splitting up. Come with us, and go to California later.”
“We just want to get there,” James said, “and the sooner the better.”
Gaunt and diminished, he was only a commonplace sort of man. His shrunken frame, his silence where music and song had been, awakened her pity, and she retreated, sick at heart. Martin took Andrew aside, and they argued. When Martin came back, he was shaking his head.
“They’re going,” he said. “I told him, at least get with a bigger group.”
Three days later, they reached the Hudspeth Cutoff, and the wagons veered apart—Andrew, Olivia, and the Edmistons in one, and Kate, Martin, Zachary, and the Spruills in the others, moving fast on a flat stretch. The two groups waved and hollered. The sounds were jubilant, but Kate couldn’t stand it. She leaped out and ran across the rutted earth.
Perched on the back of the wagon, Olivia didn’t budge. Kate kept running toward her until she eased down into the road. Kate clung to her, sobbing, while the wagons rolled away. Olivia’s neck and shoulder blades felt thin and knobby under Kate’s hands. Olivia wept too, but when the others slowed and came back, she went with the Edmistons.

IN November 1855, Kate, Martin, Zachary, Mrs. Spruill, and her four surviving children arrived in the Willamette Valley. Martin and Kate staked out a parcel of land, Zachary claimed land of his own, and he and Martin helped each other build houses. In the spring, they plowed and planted. Mrs. Spruill set up a lunchroom in Salem, and Kate and Martin ate there whenever they went into town.

Mail began to arrive, but none from Olivia. Kate wrote to newspapers and courthouses in San Francisco and Sacramento, to the makeshift post offices in the gold fields, to everyone she knew in Virginia, and to newspapers and churches in Kentucky, hoping to locate the Edmistons’ kin, but no one had heard anything. She put up a sign in Mrs. Spruill’s restaurant seeking word of Andrew and Olivia Sibley, James and Susan Edmiston, Hudspeth Cutoff, October 1855. There were many signs like that. Salem buzzed with tales of reunions. People might be lost or delayed for months, and then they’d show up somewhere. Kate tried to stay hopeful, but worry and guilt sickened her.

At Christmastime, 1856, she had a baby boy. In the spring, she took him to Mrs. Spruill’s restaurant. Chicken pie, Beef steak, Corn fritters read the chalkboard outside. She pushed the door open. In the noisy, fragrant lunchroom, Billy and George were waiting tables, and Constance and Ella swept the floors, working the broom around diners’ feet.

“They’re city kids now,” Mrs. Spruill said. She reached for the baby and held him.

“I brought a new sign,” Kate said. She took the old tattered one down and tacked the new one on the wall. Mrs. Spruill eyed it.

“Olivia’s strong,” she said. “If they got over, it’s because of her.”

“She didn’t owe them that. She didn’t owe them her life.”
Billy dropped a tray, plates smashed, and customers looked up and boisterously cheered. The scene barely registered on Kate.

“Her and Andrew wasn’t well-matched,” Mrs. Spruill said. “A guiding light and a little puppy dog.”

Her face showed perception, and Kate grasped at that. “They had a chance to part ways.”

“Some people can take on others’ burdens. She knew you’d be all right, and you are.”

On their knees, Billy and George were picking up broken plates and cups and stacking the shards on the tray, while Constance and Ella mopped the floor. They were laughing, and the merriment deepened Kate’s grief. She might have been sleepwalking all those miles, for all she knew of what was in the others’ hearts.

“It didn’t mean she didn’t love you,” Mrs. Spruill said.

Billy hefted the full tray and went back to the kitchen, his brother and sisters joined hands and bowed, and the diners clapped. Mrs. Spruill watched her children steadily.

“They never talk about Hannah or their father,” she said.

Kate and Martin could hire a search party, but it would cost so much.

“We’ve got to,” he said one night when they’d tossed and turned.

“How would they know where to look?”

“They’d go up in the mountains, past that cutoff, and look for things we might recognize. They don’t bring back every busted wheel.”

Her misery flared. “My sister. Your brother. How could they?”

“They changed their minds,” he said. “Thought California’d be nicer.”

“They deserted us. For the Edmistons.”

“Don’t be so hard-hearted, Kate. They weren’t trying to get away from us. They wanted us to go with them.”

“If only we had.”

“And then we’d probably be dead.”

They were quiet for a long time. The suffering the others must have endured, the likelihood they were gone, shamed the anger out of her.
“Didn’t you feel some way about him?” he said. “James?”
“No.” She swallowed hard. I didn’t love him very long.
“I always thought you did.”
“No.” And whatever Olivia may have felt, or the others, I won’t blame them for it.

MARTIN found a tracker who had a good reputation, and he and Kate provided a description of Andrew, Olivia, the Edmistons, and their wagon. The tracker and his crew were gone for months. When they came back, they lugged three big crates into the parlor.

“From different spots in the mountains. Animals scattered the bones.”

Kate and Martin tore the crates open. Bridle, kettle, box of fish-hooks. Gunstock, old boot, bent spoon, the ground-down detritus of the trail. Everything smelled of mud and char. Had the trackers just scavenged dumps and ditches around Salem? Dishonest searchers were known to do that. Yet the things did seem to give off the trail’s menace. As Martin examined a mashed saddle, dirt flaked off and stained the parlor rug.

“Nothing is theirs.” Kate allowed her dread to give way to a measure of relief.

Martin sorted through the last crate and lifted out a banjo.

“That was in a ravine,” the lead tracker said. “I clambered down for it.”

The strings were broken and curled. When Martin turned it over, a design flashed up on the back of the fingerboard. Kate gasped. He passed it to her, and it felt light and cold. She ran her fingertips over the shiny white flowers. Mother-of-pearl.

“It’s his, isn’t it?” Martin said.

He paid the men, and they left. Dry-mouthed, Kate sat down and cradled the banjo, picking at the strings. She could almost feel James’s fingers on hers.

“Well, now we know,” Martin said.

“It can’t be the only one like it.”

Their son ran in and started to play with the relics. Martin shooed him out and tossed them back into the crates. Clunk, clunk.
“Maybe they threw things away to lighten the load,” she said. “We did that all the time, remember? Maybe they’re fine. They got where they were going, and . . .”

“Don’t, Kate. Let this be the end of it.”

“But . . .” She bent her head over the banjo and cried.
He grabbed it and broke it over his knee.

† † †

The long-expected war disrupted the mail and put an end to emigration. She gave birth to a daughter and another son. As the children grew up, she told them about the trail’s hardships and beauty, but she was still trying to figure out the other stories, the ones in her heart.

Terror gnawed at her, even though it was years too late. At times, even with her new life unfurling before her, she was back at that fork in the trail, jumping off the wagon to run to Olivia. She would grow old with wondering, aching about the last time she saw her. No matter if she lived to be ninety, she would never get over it. How could she have let her go? There must have been something she could have done or said.

The trail ate a hole in her heart. She quit talking about it. She hated the trail and her younger self for not knowing how to hold on to the sister she loved so much.

The wagons had moved apart with surprising speed, churning up dust. The roads diverged and the gap stretched wide. Her feet pounded the earth. Olivia rode on the back of the Edmistons’ wagon with her legs dangling. Kate kept running, trying to close the distance.