

1873 Texas

(Olive, face veiled, is standing by a bonfire)

It's ready.

I shouldn't-a told him nothing.

Though I was bare twenty, with little mind to stay in Oregon Territory.

And all Rogue Creek was saying, the new Reverend sure can preach up a storm.

1857. Rogue Creek, Oregon

REVEREND 'Are any here friends of sin?'

Ain't no takers for that in Rogue Creek, though some folks are looking hard at their neighbours.

REVEREND 'Are any here friends of slavery?'

Not me, Reverend. I've been a slave myself a while.

REVEREND 'Then let us all strive to set the negro free.'

Rogue Creek shouts amen to that. 'Course they won't be letting no black faces coming here, free or slave, but that don't make them bad folks. Most speak to me.

The Reverend's waiting at the chapel door.

REVEREND 'Miss Oatman. I hear you've had an interesting life.'

That's a new word for it.

REVEREND 'You should write down your ordeal. It has lessons that will profit us all. If you need assistance, I flatter myself I have some ability with words. The royalties, of course, will be yours.'

'Royalties?'

I hope I can ask that much without showing no ignorance.

Payments? Folk will buy my book?

Well, now, it's a man's world and I sure ain't going to find one, not with the devil's mark on me. Cousin Hervey's kind to me - it would shame me to say different - but charity's still charity. To be earning my own corn... Maybe enough to get back east again.

'You've a deal, Reverend.'

Where to start though? I guess back in Illinois, the year '50, when the Saints were all a-quarrel about who was their true leader.

(She removes the hat and veil)

1850. Illinois

(Olive is sewing)

There's going to be words spoke soon. Lucy says pay no mind, but I ain't no child no more.

Pa's praising Mr Brewster. That man's a bully preacher sure enough. Found the lost book of Edras, which tells us judgement is coming, which is mighty bad if you're a sinner. But the righteous will do fine if they gather in Bashan. Bashan, where the Gila meets the Colorado. And we'll be there with them. Every true Saint will be. That's what Pa says.

But he shouldn't be preaching that to Granpa Sperry. There ain't no-one in Illinois stronger for Brigham Young. Bashan is the Devil's gospel, that's Granpa's thinking, and he ain't shy saying so. Which ain't a good idea neither, 'coz Pa sure gets mule-headed when the mood's on him.

Granpa's a stooped little man but when he's roused...

GRANPA

(Waving arms) 'Utah, Son, Utah - that's where the Saints will gather, and you'd best gather with them if you want salvation.'

Ma's clearing anything breakable quick. Pa looks the calm one, sitting there rigid as a poker. But I know Pa and sure enough he says what he never ought.

PA 'Father Sperry, if you set off to Utah I tell you in the name of the Lord, Indians will cut your throat and your family will starve.'

We all look at Ma. Her face has her blank look which says I ain't going to cry, which is worse than if she upped and did it. Maybe if I cause a different fuss...

(She pricks herself with her needle)

'I've hurt myself! Look.'

It don't make no difference. Maybe if I pricked Mary. They'll come running for her quick enough.

But Granpa's already getting up. Real slow, like he's waiting for Pa to take his words back. Which'll be snow in summer, and he knows it.

GRANPA 'Son, be careful how you prophecy in the name of the Lord.'

And he's out the door. He don't even say goodbye to Ma. I know Pa's no prophet and it's sinful pride to be one when you ain't. But Granpa won't see Ma ever again. He should have given his daughter his blessing, that's what I think.

1850. The Santa Fe Trail

I've been ticking the days on the Santa Fe trail. Except the first, which I wrote out in full - August 6 1850. I was going to add 'left Independence, Missouri', 'cept I don't want to spell Independence wrong in my bible. We're God's Israel journeying to our promised land, so it can't be no sin to use the back page.

Else you lose track of time out here. Sunrise, pull on our dresses, tie our aprons and out of the tent to bank up the fire. Ma cooks us beans, bacon and burnt corn bread while the boys hitch up and we girls pack away.

Ma counts us all afore we roll.

MA 'Lucy - we'll be marrying you soon, I'm thinking, the way you're look at Charlie Thompson. I'll miss your help, that's for sure. Lorenzo - thinking you're a man already. You're mule-headed enough, I

guess. Oh, Olive, you look like you've been dragged through a corn field. Lucy, tidy her up, will you? And no face, Olive. Royce - stop pretending to shoot Indians and stay in line. Mary - take your nose out of that book for a minute, darling. Maybe it is scripture, but read it on the wagon. Charity, Roland. Where's Roland? Lucy, find me Roland. No, Charity, Lucy don't need your help this time. Found him? Those ain't walking, get yourselves in the wagon.'

You can't believe what you find by the trail. Folk load up more than their team can pull, so they have to drop the heavy things one by one. Like that there piano. Lucy gives us a hymn on it, like she's a regular preacher.

He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy follow the Master.

No time to finish. We're last in the train and Lucy don't want us left behind, 'coz Mary can't run fast. Royce says she should have stayed on the wagon, which I agree, though I don't say nothing as everyone loves Mary, even Lucy.

Royce wants to beat me back to the wagon aside of Pa. Instead of scrambling in the back like any a-one with a dime's worth of sense, he goes jumping up the front. On the nigh side too, where there's a bare foot of room. He'd have gone under the wheel for sure if Lucy hadn't of pulled him clear.

But he's too bruised to be looking for buffalo chips to feed our cooking fire.

'Mary can do that.'

No, she can't. Mary's so tired from running, she has to be resting, 'coz of Ma thinking she's delicate, so it's my task. What's under this pat? Mary found a scorpion once. It set her squawking, you'd think the whole Comanche nation was after her. Ugh. Centipedes. A whole slather of them.

Sunset. Long streamers of red and gold. Royce and me settle down and scare ourselves talking about Indians. Thick as hops on the trail we was told, though we ain't seen none yet, bar the odd one.

Lorenzo tells hush it - we'll be giving the little ones bad dreams.

Another fifteen miles marked in my bible.

But day after day of it, jolting along on a creaking wagon, nothing to smell but oxen sweat, tasting nothing but dust... And mosquitos - Lord, save me from the mosquitos.

It ain't pianos we're finding now. Only bedding. Nobody says nothing, but I know there ain't any a-one leaves their bedding behind them.

Nothing like that can happen to us. We're heading for Bashan.

All the same. The land's drying up. Look at the buffalo grass - all yellow - and we ain't even reached desert. Folks said back in Independence we were tarrying over long. You know for why? Mr Brewster had to go back for his cat. God's truth. Now we're seeing the fruit of it. Some folks are saying lost scripture is mighty fine, but it don't water oxen. Someone practical should be leading us. Someone like Pa.

Specially when Comanche come riding up. Pa says a war band. You can tell by their feathers. I'm wishing he hadn't said that, 'coz that gets Mary squealing. But they don't scare me none, 'coz we circle the wagons quick and the men show their guns. The Comanche can't do nothing but gallop round us a bit, just for the show of it, afore breaking off to ask if they can come in to trade. Pa says yes, 'coz it don't do no harm treating Indians fair, 'stead of provoking them.

Next morning we're eight oxen short. Some blame Pa for letting in the Comanches without asking and some Mr Brewster for saying God would protect us 'stead of doubling the watch. You'd think Mr Brewster would be preaching a kingdom divided is brought to desolation, to calm folks down a mite. Not one piece of it.

BREWSTER 'Many are rebellious and full of empty talk and deception.'

Looking hard at Pa. Well, Pa ain't the man to take that.