

In The Valley of the Six-Armed Cross

By Dave Carlberg

It was a dry summer in the San Luis Valley, and there wasn't much that had the heart to grow. Most of the earth had come to cracked dust; the sun poured into the wide expanse and sank quietly into the dirt, yellowing the grass until it crunched underfoot. It was a poor meal for the cattle that lived there: in the valley that spread itself like a stubborn elliptical rut right in the thicket of the Colorado Rockies.

In the afternoon, long lines of cloud wove themselves between the range of peaks on the eastern side of the valley. They hovered for a moment over the wind swept dunes before climbing upwards, but the rain never reached the valley- the clouds only went up and over the crest, deeper into the Sangre's. That's where the water fell- in the mountains where no one needed it, and in the valley on the opposite side where the rivers ran strong.

The Anderson's farm was over a century old, and was built in the northwest corner of the Valley outside of Saguache. It was the western most parcel of land there

was before the fence, which cut through the valley and marked the furthest reach of the Rio Grande National Forest, and the low stretches of the San Juan Mountains.

From there, it was nearly seventy miles to the opposite side of the valley, so the Sangre's looked small and insignificant. Three peaks stood the highest from there: Humboldt, Kit Carson and Crestone Peak, but too often the clouds and heat rose up against them, and then they were gone.

The narrow dirt road leading up to the farm shared itself with several others. The Millers', The North Star and the Rumblerow Ranch all shared the western tip, with several small acreage farms spacing them out. The alfalfa grew stronger there than anywhere else; from the sky it looked hardly like the rest of the valley with its brilliant golden yellow. The North Star was buying up most of the land; it was almost at 2,000 acres and wasn't looking to slow down. So slowly those tiny lines were becoming harder and harder to find, and mailboxes began to disappear one by one.

After the final turnoff, the road lined itself with rows of sage and rabbit brush, which grew thick and gray and crept all the way up to the bordering fences. The road was straight, and thin, and after another mile it slipped between two columns of narrow leaf cottonwood. They stood forty feet at their lowest, opening like wide crowns towards the top and branching out in desperation. There were seven on one side, and six on the other, and in that open spot was the black stump as the only remaining proof of the great lightning storm two years prior. But those trees that once stood so mighty and vibrant on the horizon had begun to wither. The Andersons couldn't afford to water them for several seasons, so they lived off scarce rain clouds and John Anderson's silent promise to one day turn the drip back on. But their look was still strong; in the morning they reflected the

sun's light as liquid silver, as if there was still a small measure of life in them, deep behind the bark, waiting for the water to return, waiting to come back to life. The only other tree on the property was the old Juniper on the far side of the fields, but it was long dead.

The house was a small affair. It was a single story ranch house, white, but forever caked in dust and pollen, with a wide red porch that wrapped entirely around it. The sun had cooked the paint, and the cherry red had just begun to peel into the dull, despondent gray that slept beneath.

Across the lot was the barn. It too was once a cherry red- that was Millie Anderson's favorite color- but not much was left of it. The forces of time and neglect saw to that.

The barn's structure was tired. The old wood had warped itself into a frown, and the frame of the place had begun to sag under its own weight. The gaps between the planks began to stretch, and that summer the wind blew through them with a faint whistle. Just beside the barn was an old tin grain silo- now considerably rusted and ill, which clung to the barn and seemed to hold it up. Together, the silo and the barn formed a weary sway against the green backdrop of the San Juan Mountains.

But the barn stood- and until it decided to stop, the Anderson's would use it to stack Alfalfa bails until they were properly cured. There was also a corner kept open for Dante, the young Palomino stallion, but the Anderson's were so distrustful of the barn that they rarely let Dante inside unless it was deep winter. The Anderson's agreed that it needed to be replaced- a new aluminum storage shed wouldn't cost more than a few thousand- but it would have to wait until the harvest season was over.

“Its so romantic,” Millie had once said, staring out at the barn while John flipped through a shed catalog. “Like something from another time.”

“Sure, it’s beautiful.” John replied, “But one day that thing is going to collapse- and how pretty would that be: a pile of rotting wood in the sun.”

Evelyn’s feet fell with quick, soft snaps as she crossed the alfalfa field. The sun was low in the sky, and from its perch in the west lit Evelyn’s small round face in burning ochre streaks. Her long brown hair followed silently behind her, streaming off of her shoulders like foxtails. The recent harvest made it easy for her to cross- and there ahead of her, past the final patch, was the old Juniper.

The trunk was hard and thick, but smooth to the girl’s touch. She could remember what her uncle Michael had said about the old cattle drives- before the alfalfa- when thousands of cows would walk by the tree and rub their hides along its side, until the bark was smooth and polished.

Evelyn reached towards the lowest branch and took hold. She swung her legs up towards the trunk, pressing them against a knot, and from there was able to hop up into the tree. The branches were sparse now, but close enough for her to climb. She made her way towards the top.

An irrigation ditch cut its way through the ground directly behind the tree, but there hadn’t been water in it for decades. Evelyn’s uncle explained that the ditch is why the juniper grew so much larger than it should have, but without water, it slowly died and shed its needles, providing an easy climb. But it was all the climbing that made it so untrustworthy to Michael and her father John; they knew the thing was old and there

wasn't a drop of life left in it. They had warned Evelyn several times not to climb it; that it was just waiting for the chance to shatter and send someone tumbling into the ditch.

Evelyn stopped on one of the higher branches and stood there, wrapping one arm around the trunk for balance, looking out into the west. Another thirty yards and the Anderson's plot ended; it was the long, barbed fence that cut from north to south. It was there that the San Juan's began to rise, very slowly, and the Rio Grande National forest began to grow, though it was miles before the trees thickened into anything resembling a forest. Even then- there was little more than short, twisted piñon that grew in thin bluish patches.

The wind came softly and brought the scent of Alfalfa into a whorl in front of Evelyn's face. It had been a week since the harvest, but the cut crop remained in stubborn yellow bails strewn about the fields, offering their scent to whichever breeze would carry it. It was sweet and earthy, and when the breezes left that scent would fall heavily back to the ground.

Evelyn enjoyed a deep breath as she followed a car along its solitary path to the north, snaking slowly into the mountains along with the highway. Her eyes lingered on the horizon after the car disappeared, then crept slowly upwards to the higher branch. She found a small green twig growing from the highest branch, decorated with small, bright juniper berries and she smiled, thinking the tree wasn't as dead as everyone had thought.

Evelyn stood carefully, and with her free hand she reached up and above her head towards the twig. It wasn't her intention to take the only remaining life from the tree, even she recognized that it would have been sin- but the desire grew within her, and it was overwhelming, to simply reach out to the new growth, to touch it and hold it softly.

She was a few inches short, so she had to stand taller up on the tips of her toes. With a slight hop she clasped the branch, and a few small berries with it. She landed softly, but there was a terrible crack. The old grey limb failed under her feet, and in an instant the girl's body fell through the aged and mangled branches and towards the earth. She hit the ground and rolled right into the empty ditch where lines of sage grew like violent carpet. And there she lay, with a small trickle of blood escaping from a gash in her forehead, clutching her hand tightly around the small juniper twig.

Evelyn waited for several hours before her father arrived. She could hear Dante's agitated scoffing as the horse made its way through the darkened brush, and she called quietly out for him. The stars had begun to appear earlier, one by one and slowly. Evelyn sat under an entire bowl of them before she was found.

Evelyn watched as her father knelt by the ditch and reached down for her. She extended her arms and was silent, but grinned slightly so her father would know she was okay. She climbed up into his arms and onto the horse. And it was just then that Evelyn began to cry- not from the pain or the fall, or in fear of punishment, but because the safety of her father's arms was so overwhelming and there was nothing she could do to help it. It was the coarse flannel of his shirt and the way it rubbed against her face as they rode.

Evelyn's uncle rode out the next day and chopped the rest of the tree down. It had a thick hide and took several hours to cut, but eventually it toppled with a deafening creak and then rolled to complete its slow decay in the carpeted shelter of the ditch.

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The Anderson's farm was nearly ten miles outside of Saguache, a sleepy little town that proclaimed on its billboard 'Gateway to the Valley'. Most of it was comprised of farm supply shops, and there were a few small tourist traps, but the town was generally dead and mostly forgotten.

The drive was short, but following behind the large flatbed truck was tedious business; it was stacked three rows high with the square alfalfa bails- each row secured with its own system of straps. The massive tires had to pass grudgingly over the unkempt country road, and it was slow, an extra thirty minutes.

Evelyn sat quietly, and from the backseat in the 85 Suburban, the bail truck looked like a large yellow castle rumbling along the road. The cattle were disinterested on either side, but Evelyn hung herself out the window anyway, screaming loudly, "Hey COWS!" She slid back in and looked over to her brother Andrew, who sat quietly on the opposite side of the car. He was disinterested as well. She climbed back out the window. "Heeeeey COWS!"

John drove the Suburban carefully in the procession. It was mid-afternoon, but already he was wearing his faded leather jacket- the one that looked as if it was disintegrating slowly from the inside out. It smelled of dust and sweat- and sweet alfalfa- but so did John- and when the kids were young there was hardly a difference; either the jacket smelled like dad or dad smelled like the jacket.

Millie slumped in the passenger seat, grimacing against the bright sun, and fanning its rays from her face with a newspaper. She was sweating, first in beads and then in bullets- more and more eager to finally reach town.

“John,” Millie started, “Open your window.”

John’s eyes were fixed forward. He gripped the wheel tightly and leaned over it, as if looking at something in the sky. But the bails were safe, and he’d be sure to spot one if it were to fall.

“John” Millie repeated, with delicate urgency. “Roll down your window. It’s a furnace in here.”

John put his window down and leaned back in his seat.

“And don’t be so antsy” Millie continued. “Your brother has driven that thing a hundred times.”

The two trucks crossed the farmland to Saguache, over the river and pulled finally into lot of the San Juan Cooperative. They pulled in next to the warehouse on the far side of the lot. John parked the Suburban out of the way and grabbed his gloves from the dashboard.

“Come on, Andrew. I need your hands on this one.” He tossed another pair of gloves back to the scrawny boy, who quickly put them on and hopped out of the truck. John kindly greeted the warehouse receiver, and they went immediately to work at unloading the bails, Michael handing the forklift and John and Andrew stacking up against the wall as usual.

“Come on, Ev.” Millie said from the front seat. “Lets go walk in the grass.”

Evelyn waited for her mother to wipe the sweat from her brow before following her out of the car. They crossed the remainder of the dirt plot and wandered into the bordering grass, which was growing long and bold around a collection of abandoned tractors and tow trucks.

“Mom,” Evelyn began, following in the path of parted grass left by her mother’s long, slender legs. “What happens to all the alfalfa when Dad sells it?”

“The cows eat it, sweetie,” Millie replied. She placed a hand on an old John Deere Model A that had collapsed over its own rusted axels.

“Horses too.” Millie continued. “They like it better than regular hay.”

Evelyn grabbed her mom’s hand and climbed up into the dusty tractor-seat. . She didn’t know much about the crop. She knew only what she had been told: it was her grandfather’s farm, and his father’s before that- and the Andersons have always lived there in the valley and under the sun, and somehow they had always survived off of the golden grass that grew there.

Andrew was fifteen, but Evelyn was still too young to help with the harvests. She learned what she knew from the people at school and the people who spoke around her. They all had stories about her father- ‘Five-Cut Anderson’, they called him, for the season six years prior when he planted early and managed five harvests in a single season. But she wasn’t too young to see that the family was tired, to sense it in her parents and in the soil; when the sun got hotter, everything just got more tired.

The men finished unloading after an hour and a half, and once Michael had returned the flatbed’s keys and John had the bank check folded in his shirt pocket, they all piled back into the Suburban and rolled slowly off the Co-op’s lot.

They drove north on the highway, and as they came closer to the First Southwest Bank, the adults grew quieter. Evelyn could see a stern look on her father's face, and noticed her mother's hand as it squeezed nervously around her father's. All of them went in, Millie and John and Michael- and Andrew bit at his lip while he waited with his sister. When they returned, Ellie looked back to her parent's hands, but saw no tension there; both of them wore smiles, and everything felt much better.

The highway continued north, and there was a spot up there where the river opened up into a small lake. The Anderson's took their food to the bank of the water and unwrapped it on the bank. Michael and Andrew started eating. John and Millie clasped hands and went deliberately into the water with their subtle grins.

Evelyn alone took up the shore towards the inlet. Just past a small hill of grass was a wide, shallow pool- secluded from the current and sight of the highway. She took off her shoes and ambled all the way in. The water reached up to her waist, and she stood in the center and closed her eyes. She drew breath, and enjoyed the feel of the breeze off the water, but before she could release it there was a soft splash in front of her.

She opened her eyes, and floating a few feet was a large Sandhill Crane. They had landed, one after another, completely ignorant of the girl's presence or perhaps unthreatened by the small girl. Their heads shone in a lovely red, where a blazing bright patch streaked across their face- and their wings went from a dark brown on their backs to a deep emerald along the tip.

Evelyn was laughed and crept further into the water. The cranes did not flee, and they hardly scattered, but lifted their wings to reveal the light chocolate hues underneath.

She reached out to the closest one, and the bird stretched its neck until its beak lightly grazed the girl's fingertip, before turning and floating further downstream.

Evelyn remained waist deep in the river, and watched as the sun's rays fell into the water like slow lightning and blood, until the whole surface burned in vibrant orange, and the valley itself drowned under a fiery lake with the decline of the sun.

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At the end of June, the sun got hot and held longer above the dry, crooked earth.

The riverbed was bordered by thick brush on both sides. To reach the bank, Andrew and Evelyn forged a low path between the peach willows, holding close to the ground beneath the thin gray branches that latched into one another above.

"Beauty, beauty, beau-ty." Evelyn chanted, running up to the waterside and dropping her pole in the dirt, mimicking the way their father chanted whenever he pulled a fish from the water. She looked up and down the bank for wild berries that hung from their vine and dipped into the water.

Andrew took a seat on a small stone and reached into his burlap creel. "Evelyn," he spoke, wrapping a fishing line around his index finger, holding the other end between his front teeth. "Give me your pole."

Evelyn stood from the riverbank and handed him the pole, squinting as the sun splashed against her face. Andrew grabbed the pole and took the line from it, as the small waves of brown hair pushed further into his face by a tattered green cap. He set both poles the same way, with a split float several feet above the sinker, and the hook splitting from the main line. He reached back into his creel and pulled from it a Styrofoam cup,

and out of it pulled a couple of live minnows to bait the hooks. Evelyn watched very closely and smiled.

The river emerged into the valley from a snaking canyon through the San Juan Mountains. In the spring, the snowmelt brought water nearly to the edge of the road, and it dyed the river a murky brown with all the dirt. In June, the water sank back into its place and the dirt filtered slowly out, returning the river to its tranquil transparency. It was then that the catfish, long and black, would glide up and down the river with their backs breaking the surface of the water. In the morning there were more of them, and the water would be decorated with the delicate 'V' pattern that followed from the fish's course.

Andrew cast both lines out into the water, and the sinkers broke the surface with small, delicate splashes. They lodged the poles between the lines of rock on the bank. Evelyn went immediately to look for skipping rocks.

"Don't scare the fish away with those, Ev." Andrew said, replacing the strewn contents of the creel.

"Andrew," Evelyn replied quickly, "What's it like working the harvest with dad and Uncle Michael?" She sat and hid her hands beneath the sand. Andrew stood and brushed a few ants from his pant leg.

"Its tough stuff, Ev. They got me doing most of the raking and stacking, but dad says he is going to show me how to use the swather next time."

Evelyn looked off into the sky. She thought fondly of those quiet, dark-haired men who her father had usually hired for the harvest, remembering the way their

calculated, solemn faces turned bright when they stepped off the field and joined the family for dinner.

Evelyn glanced to her line, then back down to the ground where she had mounded the dirt up in front of her. Andrew had always spent the summers with her. If they weren't fishing they were out at the Miller's barn with the twins that lived there, or wandering up into the mountains before the sun got too hot. But now he had to help with the harvest, Evelyn knew that, and said nothing more.

The sun climbed further into the sky and bounced playfully off the water. The heat thickened and rolled down into the river basin, soaking into the stones and willow branches. The valley cooked, and the sage erupted into that special scent it only had in the heat. But the river was cool- moving slowly but fast enough to escape the heat. Andrew and Evelyn sat for a few hours beside it and celebrated the cool whisps that came from its surface.

Evelyn smiled up to her brother, young and awkward with her long brown hair tucked behind a pair of ears that were growing faster than her head. It was all there in the look that she wore; she was very much in love with the place, and young enough that the evils of the valley hadn't yet found her, or maybe she was immune, and out of it all still managed to find those small and infinite measures of peace and beauty. Andrew smiled back, reaching down to ruffle his sister's hair with the palm of his hand.

Evelyn gasped sharply and let the stack of pebbles drop from her hands. The pole jerked slightly, and the reel began to spin with a loud clicking noise. Something had taken the bait downstream and was running quickly with it. Andrew took the pole up into his hands and set the hook with a quick jerk.

“Ev, here, you bring it in.”

Evelyn wrapped her small hands around the reel and began to crank. Andrew secured the pole from the bottoms and watched the river carefully. The surface broke with a splash, and a shadowy fish leapt out of the water like a serpent.

The fish came up to the surface, and Evelyn went for the net. They held the net in the water and the fish with it. Andrew wet his hands in the river before reaching for the fish.

“It’s a forty pound whisker-fish, I tell ya!” Evelyn said, mocking her uncle’s trademark bedtime story. Andrew laughed, and took the fish by the jaw. It struggled for a moment, but fell quickly into languid silence- until the only trace of life was the slow rising and falling of the fish’s jaw. Andrew took the hook from its lip and reached into his creel for a long, handled spike.

“Evelyn, why don’t you go over there and pull me some of that grass so we can wrap the fish for the walk home.”

Evelyn went over to the grass, and with her back to him Andrew secured his hand on the fish’s spine, causing it to flinch momentarily. With his other hand he drove the spike deep into the fish’s head. It was quick. The fish’s tail curved up towards the sky in an involuntary spasm, and then fell slowly back to the ground. The jaw pressed open wide and shuddered, but then it was still. He replaced the spike before taking the grass from Evelyn. They lined his creel with the grass and placed the creature inside of it.

“Come on, Ev. It’s getting hot out here. How about we go see if mom has something cold for us to drink.”

Evelyn smiled and collected up the poles. She placed them in Andrew's hand, and hopped up onto his shoulders as he kneeled. They ducked carefully under the wall of peach willow and made their way home.

Evelyn smiled and continued, "Beauty, beauty, beau-ty..."

The Anderson's farm wasn't too far from the river, but the land was often choked by the constant heat of the sun. The soil in that corner of the valley was also thin, blanketing a legion of sleeping bounders only about fifteen feet below. Alfalfa was really the only suitable crop; though a few miles down the valley there was a potato farm, and just beyond that was the start of the massive barley fields.

But the Anderson's Alfalfa was still a little skittish- the stalks were tall but they dried easily, and no cuts could be made in the day without breaking a good amount of them. But the evening brought moisture to the valley, and the heat escaped into the sky until mid morning. That was when they made the harvest. They were forty-five-hour workdays for John and Michael, three to four times a season.

Evelyn rode piggyback out to the barn, where her uncle set her down in the long grass that grew in a thick border around the building. The sun had fallen behind the San Juan's, and soon, the first stars would appear.

John was already tinkering with the swather's sickle blade. He stood, and checked the hitch between the swather and the tractor, clicking his tongue inside his mouth in anticipation. He pulled his jacket from the seat of the tractor and slipped it on. Michael tossed a handful of sunflower seeds in his mouth,

"Sky looks clear, John. Moon should be nice and bright, for us."

John wiped his oily hands against his thighs and came around the side of the tractor. The sky was wide open, and the air began to cool. It was a perfect night for the cut.

Evelyn and Andrew always liked to camp out on harvest nights, though on this night she was alone. Andrew was up sipping coffee with the other adults, getting ready to ride along in the tractor with his father. She set up a pad on the porch anyway, and Millie brought her sleeping bag and a few extra blankets. When the men left for the field, she crawled under her bag and stared up at the sky.

The tractor rumbled low in the distance. Evelyn didn't bother to turn her head to watch it- she knew that it looked exactly like a big green buffalo with tires taller than the rest of it. The sky was more interesting; the stars grew confident with the infant twilight and appeared one by one. The wind rolled down from the San Juan's, quick and cool, and in it Evelyn could smell the first faint traces of fresh-cut alfalfa. She would be bathing in the smell by the morning.

She brought her sleeping bag up tightly around her in defiance of the wind. It continued to blow, softly and swiftly, carrying with it the piñon and the sage and the alfalfa, and the tractor's low rumble and the men's laughter. She counted the stars while she could, but fell quickly asleep under that massive bowl of stars that lit the valley floor.

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It was morning, but a legion of darkened clouds made their prowl across the valley. The Anderson's old barn stood white below them, the old rotting wood getting lighter and lighter with time, and as those mighty winds battered its sides and pulled at its roof, the surrounding grass and sage swayed along with it.

Evelyn stood on the porch of the house, her forehead pressed up in between the posts of the deck. She watched intently as her father led Dante from the barn for the last time. She wondered to herself where he'd be living come winter.

Michael had been pulling away at the sideboards for several hours. They were bent and splintered, but gave easily to the man's force and fell into the cushioned grass. Andrew followed behind, using thick brown gloves to gather up the scrap into the wheelbarrow. He had started a pile towards the center of the lot like his Uncle had asked, and Evelyn watched him until he met her gaze. Andrew winked, and Evelyn smiled brightly; he would ask his uncle to make a bonfire of the scrap, just like he had promised.

The barn was dismantled side by side, and hours later there remained only a dismal frame and the sagging roof, held up by the old silo, and the creaky skeleton of the place thinned against the grimace of the mountains.

"It's kind of sad, when you look at it." Michael started, releasing a clump of sunflower shells out of his mouth and onto the ground. He turned to his nephew. "This old barn is older than most of the junk in this valley."

The barn was dangerous. Evelyn knew that, or at least that is what she was told and she didn't bother to disagree. But she would have much rather seen the thing fenced off than torn down, so much that she had actually been suggesting it for weeks.

The rest of the places on the road all looked so new to her. They stored their bails in long aluminum sheds like the one her father had just ordered. Their houses were all a brilliant glossy white and their tractors a brilliant green, and somehow they all stayed that way. In the harvest all those fields were crawling with brightly colored robots that cut all

day and through the night, and though she knew better, she could never make out any people inside of them.

Evelyn's thought of her father as a cowboy. So was her uncle, and now her brother as well. And in that westernmost plot of the San Luis Valley, they were the heroes that stopped that robotic march and guarded the mountains from it. The old barn held strong for the same purpose, but in the end, she knew it was dangerous. And like her father had always said, land is money. *"Every foot. Every acre."*

The clouds split their bellies and the rain came slowly. Michael pulled the cotton hood over his head, tucking his long hair inside of it. Andrew adjusted his cap and reached out into the falling water, which stained the pile of wood with small dark spots. It would make it harder to burn, but no one knew for sure how long that rotting pile would sit there. Evelyn looked to the clouds. The falling rain clung to them, and brought the clouds down to the earth in long, thin tails.

Andrew stepped to the center of the barn frame, and as planned, he connected the chains that were laid out there. He nodded to Michael, who hooked the opposite end of the chains to the tractor and hopped in.

"Alright boy- get clear of that barn. This beast is about to come down."

Michael turned the key and the tractor rumbled to life. Andrew started forward, but heard above him a gentle creaking noise. High above, one of the massive roof beams began to slide from its place, slowly and deliberately like an arm preparing to strike. Before he could take another step, the top of the beam slipped off the main support and fell downwards. The beam hit Andrew square on the shoulder and he fell to the ground.

Michael was hardly out of the tractor before the rest of the roof began to follow. Beam by beam it came down, each one smashing into the growing pile of splinter and shingle, each one with a crash louder than the one before. John emerged from the field. Millie emerged from the house in a panic.

Evelyn watched from the porch as her brother disappeared beneath the rubble. The final beam was loud and magnificent, enough to break the shock that kept her feet, and she leapt off the porch and took off across the lot. All that remained of the barn were the tired wall frames, which sagged inwards and groaned under the stress of their own weight. Before Evelyn could reach the barn, the frames collapsed into each other and all that stood was the old rusty silo and its splintered wooden anchors. Michael took immediately to one of the larger beams and screamed, and John and Millie appeared from behind to help lift it.

Evelyn threw herself to the top of the pile and buried her hands in the rubble, digging. She tore through the shingles and planks, through rusted nails and scraps of tin and steel, handful by handful until blood dripped from her palms and wrists and her arms were dark and splintered with the ancient barn-wood. She screamed as she dug, and she cried, and those tiny tears fell to the wood and stained it with small dark badges.

The wind picked up, and as they dug the clouds separated above them. It was several minutes before they managed to move the first beam, and another hour before they could get to the body, but the men did not slow.

The air was clean, it rolled in fresh and swift, and from her seat atop the rubble she could recognize her favorite smell: the winds after a thunderstorm, wet and laced with sage and piñon, and dried grass and fern. The scent meant the same thing to her

every time: that the valley was cleaned under the storm and all was calm. But this time it was different. She could smell the salt running down her face. She could smell the blood rising up from her hands and the mighty cloud of dust and pollen that had kicked up from the barn's terrible surrender.

Millie appeared atop the rubble, and Evelyn went quickly into her arms. They walked slowly from the pile and wept, and as they walked she cried to herself "Andrew...Andrew..."

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The killing frost usually didn't come until mid September, or even later. That summer it came unexpectedly in early August, right before the third harvest. Most of the crop was lost, being young and not yet hearty enough to cut. John tried anyway, and the yield was little more than a few tons. Even that was almost too poor to try and sell, so they stacked it beside the house and waited.

Michael thought it had something to do with a hurricane that hit the gulf a few weeks before. Evelyn could not understand any of it, but he had it all thought out in his head, a long process with cold fronts and pressure systems and other grown up ideas. Evelyn listened, but didn't much care. She had worked it out for herself: the old barn collapsed, her brother was dead, and her father had lost the energy to be that hero that the valley needed. The whole place was in mourning, and had begun finally to collapse in upon itself.

The sun returned after that frost, and though most farmers in the area settled after the disaster, John Anderson trusted the warmth to hold out for another month so he could make an attempt at a fourth cut.

No one had told Evelyn, but the Anderson's had sold the deed to the North Star and were preparing to leave the valley. That much the girl could sense on her own; the family had grown quiet. Michael had never spoke much to begin with, but there had always been a smile there on his closed mouth. The smile dropped quickly off his face, and he and took to riding Dante every night into town, not to return until the morning after, stinking of smoke and beer. But he returned every morning, and worked every day for the rest of the summer.

It was early September. Evelyn was supposed to start school, but she didn't ask about it; she knew they would be leaving soon and she would be placed in a new school. So Millie spent her time wrapping their belongings in old newspaper, John kept to the constantly to the fields, and Michael kept mostly to himself, tinkering under the hood of the dying tractor. Evelyn spent her time alone.

The days had begun to get shorter and the sun, which followed a shorter arc across the sky, fell from its pinnacle and the air cooled off. Evelyn marched across the alfalfa fields, past the rotting juniper and the ditch and right up to the barbed fence. Andrew had driven in a series of wooden posts there, each one higher than the next so Evelyn could climb up them like a staircase and back down the other side. Evelyn crossed, and from there the path took off to the north. For two miles she followed the slow curve of the barbed fence, first along the remaining tracts of alfalfa and then along the farthest tip of the Rumblerow's graze land. On the other side it was two miles of sparse piñon and tangled greasewood, dotted with small rabbit holes and yellowing grass.

The path was well worn, and let her up to the thick wall of peach willow that guarded the riverbank. She ducked under and stepped up to the river. She studied the surface of the river for several minutes, but the water was calm and unbroken; there were no catfish. Evelyn took a deep breath and removed her shoes. She waded towards the middle of the river.

Things were quiet. From her stance in the water she turned, slowly in a circle, and there was nothing: no fish or birds or breeze. The mountains in the distance even seemed to be marching away and away; Humboldt, Crestone, Kit Carson- Andrew had taught her the names. Then she faced west, where the river emerged from the crease in the mountain range. The silence continued, but after several minutes, a group of birds floated around the bend and towards Evelyn. They were cranes- lovely, perfect cranes, and Evelyn waited silently for them to get closer.

One of them approached, and Evelyn extended her arms out towards it. The crane raised its neck and met her gaze, and stared into her eyes for a long moment. Its deep black globes excited Evelyn; her eyes widened and she shuffled her toes in the riverbed, and for a quick moment her palm met the side of the crane's head. The feathers there were slick and wet, but still they were glowing warm to Evelyn's touch.

The crane ruffled its feathers, and Evelyn quickly retracted her arm. The bird took sudden flight, followed quickly by the rest of the flock until they were all airborne. They followed a long curve around the valley until they found their course: west, not south like the other birds from the valley. Andrew had told her that a lot of birds liked to spend the winters in California, and though he didn't know it for himself, he always added that it was very nice there.

Evelyn waited in the water for a few minutes more, waiting for something to come along to break the silence. Nothing did; the catfish had gone, the cranes had gone, and something had eaten all the wild berries growing alongside the bank.

Evelyn let the river run slowly across her stomach, She dropped her hands back into the water, and with open palms felt the pathetic current slip through her fingers. The sun dropped sheepishly behind the San Juan's. Evelyn began to cry.

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John and Michael didn't speak on the night of the fourth harvest. Already the winter was coming, and with a few more days the crop would be dead. And there was hardly any reason for a fourth cut, the brothers knew that. The money from the farm's sale would be much more than they needed. But for John it was something that simply had to be done, and even if the bails were left to rot on the parcel, if they withered or were forgotten under the valley's first snow, he would still feel better having made the cuts. For Michael, it was a simple matter of refusing to abandon his brother. So John slipped on his leather jacket and kicked the mud off the sickle blade. Millie brewed a strong pot of coffee, and Michael brought a hood up over his head.

There was no moon that night. Evelyn climbed out her window and onto the roof, and she fell into awe at the sheer number of stars that had appeared above. She noticed the flickers below: the tractor's headlights as it turned one way or another around the fields. But the air wasn't so moist. It didn't carry smells as well as it should have.

Still there was that pile of rotting barn wood. No one had touched it since the accident. It looked ancient and mean among the soil, and with the stars above it cast deep aggressive shadows about the ground. No one wanted to go near the frightening heap.

But a few yards from the pile was the Suburban and trailer. Millie would spend the rest of the night packing it, strapping boxes and bags as high as she could. For her, she couldn't leave soon enough.

The hours passed and she could feel them dripping away from her throne on the roof. The sky stayed dark, the moon hardly had the nerve to appear that night, but it made the constellations more visible. She always looked immediately to Orion- that was Andrew's favorite, and the dippers too. But most of the available light came from the San Juan's. Starlight always reflected off of them in a strange way, and thus they never really went out of sight, but burned always in the darkness like half of a halo around the valley. The Sangre's on the other side were distant, but completed that halo.

By the following afternoon everything was packed. John finished the cuts on the last acre of his property, and there they were, the great windrows that set themselves out on the field like small mountains of their own. John shut the tractor off and left it out in the field. All was silent, but Evelyn could hear her father's weeping lightly on the eastward.

It was an hour before he returned. By then Michael had already packed up Dante's saddle and said his goodbyes. He set out for Saguache to find work.

Evelyn, who waited patiently in the back of the truck, took a final look out over the fields. Her father was walking slowly through them towards the car, and as he approached Evelyn could see the lines of fatigue wrap around his face. He was a pale color and his breathing was sharp and struggling, but as Evelyn guessed, it was not because of the work- he had said goodbye to his son.

John climbed into the passenger seat. Millie took the wheel of the truck and pulled slowly past the tall, dying narrow-leaf cottonwoods. And thus they withdrew, and that which was most easily gotten was finally and painfully surrendered. Evelyn looked back, and saw the farm shrink into the distance. The dusty house and that heap of rotting wood sank slowly into the grass and disappeared beneath it. She imagined the slow decay of the land without the family; it would yield finally to the indomitable march of time, and the rabbit brush and greasewood would creep forward and make claim. Soon, those robotic machines would arrive, and the house would collapse just as the barn did. The dirt and moss would cover everything, and all would shatter or fall into memory. Like her brother. Like the old juniper.

Storm clouds came in. They scowled over the darkened landscape as the Andersons pushed further from the farm. The dirt road ended after several miles, and all the way Evelyn peered out her window at the cattle. They moved sluggishly away from the fence as the truck rambled by, but she could not find the voice to yell out them. Instead, she offered her arm slowly out the window, palm outstretched, to feel the first drops of rain before they fell and dissolved into the valley floor.

The road met the paved highway at Saguache, and from there the highway took them north, up into the hills and slowly into the wandering wilderness, until it vanished completely on its solitary way.