

FIFTEEN

>> KIM MINKUS

Fifteen

Days up from the States and days to go, passing fields, I dream of lying with my head close to earth. I would lie in that field surrounded by grace. I look past him. He hasn't looked at me for days. Hypnotized by the road and the movement of the carriage, we've lost speech and just days married, gold banded. He stares ahead and I look to the side. We move together in his direction.

Fifty miles straight ahead and there's a crow for every mile left to go. This carriage is full of my wedding—bed linens, blankets, quilts. People only think of beds.

I am 15; he is 35.

There's something else that sits in this landscape, a blind-spot in my eye. Colour it white, paint it with flowers—roses for the day—lilac for the evening. On this morning as we approach, the grey-brown crushes. I can't breath in this house. Colour it. When we stop he takes down a trunk, his shadow reaches towards the door and he turns. He turns again to look at me. I step down and take the bed linens.

I make the bed first. It lies ready on a barren floor. It's summer and the air is cooler indoors. He is hard and never listens. He gives all his joy away to strangers. I take care of the horses, they are tired after the long journey. This is the one thing he allows.

I am 16 and it's time for something of my own. He says he won't touch me now. He is proud. This is as close to love as we come. As summer passes the child shifts with the clouds. White gods, I can feel the rain in them. The wind pushes and pushes, so this is what the child will be born to. At last it is a boy, a storming boy.

Empty white china, white milk, skin, days. Prairie winter as far as I can see. Then spring, seeds pushed into earth. The boy pushes into me, so does his father. So another is coming. This one will come with the Christmas oranges.

Then, soon, it's August and I'm 18 and 4 months along. The sweat rolls down my face, it's the peak of summer, yet the smell of fall hovers in the early morning and the evenings carry something of winter. I bake apple pies. The days pass into fall harvest. I am as full as the jars I have filled, but empty of him. At night he drinks until I find him on the floor. Piece by piece it is all gone.

At Christmas the oranges come and I eat them with juice flowing down my arms. He laughs and tells me I shall have a child the colour of pumpkin. This is a girl, she bubbles inside me, full of summer juice and light. When she is born I name her Merry.

At 31 I have 12 children. Giving birth is like shutting a door. It is too many, I know. They bring me joy, but they don't know it. The drinking is bad now. He's gone for days. When he comes back with nothing our screams slam against the walls. He's taken the gun down twice. I think I am young and still have a chance.

The first time the children see me cry I am pregnant for the last time. My son has been gone 18 hours and it is the dead of winter. Hunting. I am so tired of children I am surprised I can still love and fear loss. When my son walks in the door the tears have stopped.

When I have given him 15 children he dies. I cry, but the tears are for myself. Now I want someone to tease me wild.

Shift

The man with the oily hair makes her laugh. It's black and short and his eyes are amber. He is not pure and belongs nowhere. My friends say they are sinners She never stops laughing and he shakes me upside down. I'm the prettiest. He says, "your mother had babies til she got it right." I was the last one.

I have my grandmother's black eyes so my mother never looks into them. She is waiting for me to be gone. I wander the fields and lay in the stalks. Part of me knows I am only a child. At sixteen I climb into a car. I wave at the two of them laughing, even while I go. I am traveling alone.