

Cottonwoods

Greta sat among the cottonwoods by the river, dreaming of a man. Sometimes she imagined him emerging from the neighbor's wheat field, hungry and sudden as a fox. At other times, especially when a hot sun burned all the blue from the sky, she envisioned him rising up out of the river to stand naked on the muddy bank. He would not be like her brothers, neither in body nor in spirit. He would be as unlike Ralph and Freddy as any man could be.

At the end of a day's work in the fields, Ralph and Freddy always stripped off their shirts to sluice away the worst of the dust under the spigot near the kitchen door. Red as fresh beef,

their necks and arms seemed to throb in contrast to their suet white backs and bellies. The man Greta dreamed of was all one shade, a warm Mediterranean copper from head to toe. He was lithe rather than thick, fluid rather than solid, and just a little bit frightening. Instead of Freddy's sandy stubble or Ralph's sweaty red ringlets, he had long black hair that smelled of honey and cloves.

On the day her dream became flesh, Greta was not especially surprised, nor did she hesitate to enjoy what fortune offered. He appeared neither from the wheat fields nor from the water, but came whistling among the cottonwoods, following the path along the river. When the tale came to be told, some said he was from a traveling carnival, but that was pure guesswork. Greta never asked, unwilling to encumber their brief time together with pointless questions.

Summer ended and autumn flickered by. Winter was long and cold. Rose was born in the spring, the only dark haired baby for a hundred miles. Greta nursed her down among the cottonwoods, and told her long stories that others never heard, and gentled her with songs that were not from the radio.

The summer Rose was six years old, Greta climbed aboard a Greyhound bus and rode away. "She said she had to go," Rose told her uncle Freddy and her uncle Ralph. "She said to tell you both goodbye."

Ralph married Annie Lundgren, a kind and sensible woman who sewed little dresses and baked enormous pies and never had a

child of her own. Freddy stayed single. Fields were plowed and planted, crops were gathered in, and the leaves on the cottonwoods rattled in the breeze. Rose listened to the leaves and waited. She could not say what might be coming, but she would not be surprised when it came.

The summer she was ten, Rose kissed Peter Pedersen. She did it on a dare, nothing more, but poor little Peter fell in love. He loved her steadfastly for years, and it was for Rose he cried when his family lost their farm and had to move away. Peter was the first, but not the last to succumb. As she grew from a girl into a woman, Rose was forced to recognize that she had a very special gift, a gift which demanded that she be very careful with her kisses.

Ellis Murdoch was not a lovable man. Knowing this to be so, he had hardened his heart. Love, he believed, must be greatly overrated. After all, he managed quite nicely without it.

Without love, he rose up each morning. Without love, he ate his breakfast and went to his office at the bank. Reading down long columns in large black books, he pursed his lips and shook his head over certain names and figures. Sometimes he copied a name and some numbers into a red ledger. Families whose names appeared in that ledger lost their farms, said their brief goodbyes, and went off to far places.

One year, when the harvest was in and every farmer in the county had paid down his debt as far as he could, Ellis Murdoch

took out his red ledger. Among the names he wrote that year were Ralph's name, and Freddy's. Without love, Ellis Murdoch went home for his dinner, read the evening news, and took himself to bed.

Ralph and Annie sat in silence at the kitchen table. Freddy stood at the kitchen door, staring out across the broad, flat plain. Rose busied herself with the breakfast dishes, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

"Uncle Freddy," Rose asked as she spread the damp dish towel on the rack to dry, "will you drive me into town?"

Annie looked up sharply. Could she tell, somehow, what Rose had been thinking? Did she know what Rose planned to do?

It was her uncle Ralph who answered. "I'll take you," he said. "I have to see the auctioneer."

In her bedroom, Rose changed into a skirt and low-heeled shoes. She dabbed a drop of powder on her nose and a touch of lipstick on her mouth, and gave herself one last chance to change her mind. An image of her uncle Freddy passed through her thoughts. He stood at the kitchen door, his back to his family, hiding his tears.

Ralph parked the pickup in the lot behind the food market. He and Rose went off on their respective errands, agreeing to meet back at the truck later on. He never asked her what she meant to do in town that day, and she was glad of that. It would have been hard to explain.

Ellis Murdoch emerged from his office and came to the wooden rail where the young woman waited to speak to him. He felt sure he knew what she wanted, and for that reason chose to meet her in the bank lobby. When the wives and daughters of dispossessed farmers came to plead for mercy, they generally showed far more restraint in the bank's public space than they would in the privacy of his office. Dealing with them was one of the more distasteful aspects of his profession, but he had honed his skills over the years.

Nevertheless, he was not prepared for Rose. As he shook her hand in his usual businesslike manner, she pulled him a drop closer and quickly kissed him on the cheek. Murdoch jumped back as if stung, staring at her with disbelief. Rose just smiled, wished him a good day, and went back out onto the street.

In four days, the man from the auction house would come to sell the livestock, whatever farm equipment they owned outright, and most of their furnishings. The day after that, their neighbors would come to help them on their way with a few dollars for an old china teapot or a hooked rug. Mostly they would come to say a last uncomfortable goodbye, wondering how long it might be before their own land became part of some giant corporate farm, or just a weedy wasteland.

On the first day, and on the second day as well, Rose worked at accepting what would be her new life. It was something like a bargain, as she saw it, and she would keep to her part of it even if the banker had no idea that a bargain had

been struck. Murdoch was not a lovable man, but if it meant that her uncles could keep their farm, she would do her best to return his love.

On the third day, though, Rose began to worry. Perhaps, she thought, the magic doesn't work anymore. Perhaps she'd tried to use it in the wrong way, for the wrong purpose, and lost it forever.

On the fourth day, the day of the auction, Murdoch still remained aloof. By the end of the fifth day, the farmhouse was nearly empty, and still there was no word. On the sixth day, they packed whatever they had left into the pickup and Annie's old Plymouth. Just before noon, they drove out onto the highway and headed west.

Ellis Murdoch stood among the cottonwoods, listening to the rattling of the leaves. His eyes seemed fixed on the river, but he did not really see the brilliant flashes of late sunlight on the surface of the water, nor did he notice the swallows darting through the air to catch an evening meal. All he saw was the face of young woman, framed in dark hair, tilting upward to place an impossibly sweet kiss on his cheek.

Why had she done that? It made no sense. He was more than twice her age, and in no way a lovable man. Never before had they exchanged so much as a simple hello. He had signed the papers that forced her family off their farm. Why had she kissed him?

Was it forgiveness, understanding? Did she want him to know that she understood why he had to do what he had done, and that she bore him no ill will? A kiss seemed such an unlikely way to say those things.

Then again, he considered, it might have been a kiss of gratitude. She would not have been the first young person to feel trapped on a remote farm in a rural county. Perhaps he had given her a chance for freedom. Still, a kiss?

Whatever the reason, the kiss had an uncanny effect. Years of internal discipline were swept away in a moment, and a flood of unfamiliar sensations coursed through his body, entirely unrestrained. It was impossible to think, to work, to be the man he had been for so many years. He left the bank early that day, and remained at home the next day and the day after that as well.

When he returned to the bank on the third day, he meant to cancel the foreclosure. How could he bear to let her go away, now that she had uncovered all the pain and yearning in his heart? Sitting at his desk, he revisited the fantasy that had taken root in his thoughts. He saw himself "taking an interest" in one small family farm, quietly pulling strings to turn failure into success, so quietly that only one young woman ever would know what he had done.

She would feel appreciative, grateful. She might even come to love him in a way. When eventually he asked her to be his bride, she would say yes. They would live together in his

large, comfortable house, and he would find ways to make her happy.

The only problem with this fantasy, this plan, was that it was impossible. It was impossible because he loved her.

He loved her too much to exploit her gratitude. He loved her too much to tie her to an old man in a small town, to steal her youth and her spirit, to let her friends and neighbors think she had sold herself for the sake of a little comfort and security. He loved her too much to keep her, so he had to let her go.

He returned to his home and stayed there. He stayed there while the auctioneer sold off the machinery and the livestock, and while the friends and neighbors picked through what remained. He stayed there while the woman he loved and her uncles and her aunt formed their small caravan and headed west. Only then did he drive himself out to the vacated farm to have a look around.

There was something in the cottonwoods, something that remained among those graceful old trees that drew him back, over and over again. He would go there in the early morning, or late in the afternoon, and he would wait. He was not sure what he waited for, and far from certain that it would come, but he waited there with his newly awakened heart.

And when it was time to leave, he would silently say thank you to the young woman who touched him once and then was gone.

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