

Maggots

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June 6, 1894

“Harley Gable!” Clyde shouted, entering their tent with his arms raised. “We have a job for you, sweets!” His breath stunk as he pressed his cheek to hers. She pushed him off.

They had been happy for a bit—a year, maybe—once she moved past the fact that her last name had been purchased off her like cattle at auction. She moved from town to town like a caged bird, migrating through the winter in caravans alongside circuses. She’d always been a good shot, hunting in the winter with her best friend, Betty, growing up. As the years drew on, she’d started joining Clyde’s men on their crusades.

Harley, formerly Charlotte, felt herself settling into this life. She had chopped off her hair and wore men’s clothes more and more often, liking the way they let her run. She used to make fun of Betty for the holes in the knees of her jeans, but it wasn’t until she fell, skidding across dirt and rock, running from the law, that she understood. The public didn’t know about her either, thinking she was just another one of Clyde Gable’s lackeys.

Once—she wasn’t quite sure the exact day—they’d spent the night together like they always did. He held her hand, kissing each knuckle. She was bruised and bloody from a fight in the saloon two towns over from camp. They’d made it to somewhere in New Mexico. She was drunk, her vision dusted. He stopped for a moment as if taking in all she was. With her warm flesh to his mouth, he bit down. She winced under her breath, but it wasn’t excruciating. She pulled herself closer to him. The ground was hard; they must have set up camp on a rocky spot. She looked in his eyes as he moved up and down, leaving marks across her forearm. She tilted her head to reach his neck, feeling his pulse beneath her teeth. She could kill him if she wanted

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to. She could bite down and rip him apart, and his blood would shower her. They laid there consuming each other until they fell asleep. She woke up the next morning scabbed and bruised, and him with dark flakes in his beard.

Some nights he got angry: angry she didn't give him another child, and angry she wasn't what he wanted. She'd poke and prod at her skin in the mirror. As she tugged, she looked at the darkness beneath her eyes. The sweet nothings he had whispered to her years ago rang through her mind. He had run his coarse hands over her cheeks, which were plump and red, full of life. Now, she saw something hollow. There was something else he wanted that she couldn't give him anymore. She saw the ways his eyes lingered on girls no older than fifteen. As she had grown up, he only grew further away.

The other men in the gang were worse than him. They stole and pillaged homesteads, rapping the women cowering in basement corners while their brothers and daddies laid lifeless in their kitchens. They'd hoot and holler above the sounds of girls screaming beneath their writhing bodies. She'd feel it in her stomach, sinking down to her core. They'd slit their throats if they saw too much of their faces or heard where they were going.

The men would come to her—to Harley—smelling of blood and musk. It would linger, and she'd offer to wash their clothes. She'd be a good woman, a good wife, and clean up for them. She'd scrub against the washboard as they watched her in their undergarments, her nails worn down to nubs. She'd know what they were thinking. They'd stay away from her, but only because she belonged to Clyde. Still, some nights when they sat around the fire, Clyde would wrap his arm around her, a bottle of whiskey swinging from his hand. He'd point out men in the group and ask them what they'd do to her. Their words would burn into her skin, but he protected her. He'd hit them over the head with his bottle or smack them across the face for

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thinking such things. He'd whisper it against her ear late at night—how she needed him, how he was the only thing keeping her safe—as he staked his claim on her body.

Finally, at the beginning of March, another girl joined the gang. Her name was Agnes. Her eyes were a dark green, her gaze piercing. Her hair was black, and she had freckles and moles dotting her cheeks like little kisses from the sun. Sometimes she and Agnes would take a bit of rouge on a brush and draw a line connecting them. Agnes liked it when Harley pinned her hair up and put it in braids. She was only sixteen. Faces from the past were leaving her memory, but she swore she looked like someone she knew long ago. She wore long skirts and only borrowed Harley's jeans.

Agnes had met the gang on a street corner: one that was dimly lit by light spilling from a saloon a ways over. She had crept her little fingers into the pockets of many passersby. She'd come up as a nasty pickpocket, and although Harley tried to protect her, those same sticky fingers landed her in a number of shootouts. At times, Harley felt it was a lost cause trying to protect Agnes, but someone had to try. She'd hear the words the men in the gang would whisper about the young girl and she'd reach for the knife tucked into a sheath attached to her belt.

It was at the end of May, just a bit before Harley's twenty-second birthday, when she noticed Clyde's eyes drifting while she washed Agnes' hair. She looked at him, the gray in his beard, and tried to pay it no mind. He didn't do that stuff anymore.

He hadn't always been faithful. He had been known to seek the services of a working girl when they paraded through small towns, and Harley had been known to smack him upside the head and make him sleep outside their tent upon his return. But he would always come back to her. He'd whisper to her how beautiful she was. He'd bite down on her chest just above her heart

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as he ran his fingers over her hips until they caught on a scar from a shootout. He'd frown, not because she winced, but because she was tainted.

"What's the job, Clyde?" She stretched her arms in the air, beckoning him over.

"Need you and some of the guys to go into town and find out the times of the trains tonight." He threw himself down next to her. "Jewelers' gala in the city over, lotta money in their pockets."

"I can do that. You want me to bring Agnes along?" She pursed her lips, a pit forming in her stomach.

"Nah, the girl can stay here. I've got some jobs for her." Clyde pressed a kiss to the top of her head; he wrapped a strand of her hair around his finger and ripped it out. She winced and watched him stare at the strand. In the lantern light she could see it glimmering, a dark silver shade. "You know, you really should dye it and grow it out again; people are starting to think poorly of me."

"Do you remember what today is?" She asked, her eyes pointed at the ground.

"June 6?" He shook the strand off his hand.

"My birthday. I'm 22 now."

"Oh—" He paused, took a second to think, and calculated his words. "I'll try not to pay it any mind. You best not either." He pulled himself up and out the front flap of their tent. "Don't rush back. Make yourself useful."

She sat there, pressed to the cold earth, with just a layer of canvas between her and the dirt. Harley pulled her knees tight to her chest and tucked her head in-between, feeling her bare bones indent her temples. She felt rotten. On her seventeenth birthday she had said yes to being

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ripped open by vultures, leaving her chest cavity, a hole in her breast, exposed to the western sky. He had left maggots in her womb that have been festering for forty years.

She stood up, pulled her jeans over her waist, wrapped a roll of bandages around her chest, and tucked her shirt in before putting on her belt. She picked up a bottle left by Clyde and took a swig.

Once she greeted the morning sky, she locked eyes with Agnes who was sitting by the unlit firepit with Clyde's hand on her knee. She left for town.

She hung around the saloon most of the day. One of the other men in the gang, a man named Otis, was leaning in the corner. He was drunk off his ass trying to get any one of the working girls to take his money. As she walked past him to get to the bar, he threw his hand on her ass. She stopped in her tracks and spun to face him.

"Can I help you?" She shoved him against the wall. He stumbled, throwing his arms up comically as he threw his head back laughing.

"Come on, Harley. Don't you want someone other than him to show you a good time?" His voice had a rasp that ripped through her. "Y'have to know he ain't always been faithful. Who says y'gotta be?" He smiled wide. His teeth were yellow and crooked, some missing. The stubble on his face made her think he'd been there for days.

"Not sure I know what you're talking about." She let go of him and brushed off the front of her pants.

"We've all seen it, girly. Don't act like you were the first. He's got a type." He coughed. "That lil' girl looks quite like you did those years ago—like you looked like Louisa, like Laura." He brought a bottle to his lips and chuckled. "He's gon' spit you out for us to slurp up like Jil' baby birds." She felt her stomach churn. She backed away from him and ran out the back door,

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hunched over, and vomited with one hand pressed to the side of the building and the other holding her hips steady. Her knees wobbled. Louisa? Laura? She'd heard those names before: women the men had talked about as if they were pieces of meat gone rotten.

It was already nightfall by the time she arrived at camp. It sat in a small clearing atop a cliff, just enough outside of town to stay hidden from the lawmen. There weren't too many men in Clyde's gang nowadays. He was getting old. The fire was already burning. Two of Clyde's men sat by it laughing and singing some song. They stopped when they saw her, and in the silence of the night, above the crickets, she could hear a noise: a grunting sound. As if her feet had a mind of their own, she thoughtlessly walked toward the tip of camp. As she passed by Agnes's tent, she noticed it was unzipped and empty. The moon was full and bright, shining just enough through the back of her and Clyde's tent to reveal a silhouette through the canvas.

The maggots were back.

She ran and told one of the men to have Clyde meet her by the tracks as soon as possible: a train would pass at midnight.

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It's 11:50 and she's sitting on a stump by the tracks alone. She hears a crack in a branch from the woods behind her.

"Harls?" A voice calls out—Clyde's.

"Over here." She rests her hand on the gun holstered on her hip. He walks out with a sack over his shoulder. He pulls out two bottles of beer and hands her one. She nods, placing it down next to her.

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“So, what’d you find about this one?”

“Headed to the city, should pass here just before midnight.” She pulls out a pocket watch:
It reads 11:52.

“Lots of rich folk on board, I suppose.”

“Right.”

“So, how are we doin’ this?”

“Hadn’t thought that far out yet.” She grabs a cigarette from her pack, striking a match on her boot to light it.

“Well, are we just goin’ to jump on board?”

“Why not?” She stands up. 11:53.

He pulls a mask over his face and starts pacing.

“Why don’t you love me anymore?” The emotion has left her voice. She stares toward the tracks.

He moves in front of her, staring her down. “Don’t think I know what you mean by that.”

“You don’t love me.” She looks up at him. “Did you ever love me? Or did you just want a pretty thing to fuck?”

He grabs her by the jaw, digging his dirty fingernails deep into her cheeks. “I saved you from him.”

11:56.

“You didn’t save me,” she hisses low. “You ruined me.”

He strikes the side of her face, sending her down into the dirt. She coughs as dust covers her tongue.

11:57.

She can hear the train coming down the tracks.

“Don’t you ever speak to me like that again! You hear me?” he screams. She turns onto her back and looks up at him. He looks like her father now. She can see the gray hairs spitting out on the sides of his face, a visual reminder of his forty years on this earth. “You were ruined when I met you.” He spits on her, kicking her in the side, and returns to pacing. She crunches into a ball on the ground, watching her blood mix with the dry dirt.

11:58. The train is getting closer now.

Slowly, she crawls to her knees, beginning to stand up.

The conductor blows the whistle. “If you ever—EVER—say that again, so help me God, woman, I will put a bullet right between—” She stares in his eyes. Time slows: She can see the wind rustling his hair and the dust and dirt on his cracked glasses. She’s grown taller than him since they met. Using all the strength she has left, she pushes him. He falls back, his foot catching the rail just in time.

The train hits his torso with a *whack*. Blood sprays back on her. She can’t look away. She can’t even blink. The train just keeps going, the wind whipping past her. Her hat is thrown off her head by the force, and there’s a bit of flesh caught between one of the notches in her braid. His legs, his waist, lay severed on her side of the tracks. A pile of mush and gore is left smeared between the rails. She bends down and pulls a small, golden crucifix out of the mess. She stares at it for a moment; it’s covered in him. She lifts it to her lips, wipes it clean, and fixes the clasp behind her neck.