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**HATTIE:**  
**A TWIN TERRITORIES MATRIARCH**

By

Madison Brown

B.S. Baker University, 2018

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2023

Advisory Committee:

Hollie Adams, Assistant Professor of English, Advisor

Heather Falconer, Assistant Professor of English

Lisa Neuman, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Native American Studies

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**HATTIE:**

**A TWIN TERRITORIES MATRIARCH**

By Madison Brown

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Hollie Adams

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts

(in English)

May 2023

“Hattie: A Twin Territories Matriarch” is a creative novel of vignettes in the vein of historical fiction set at the turn of the 20th century in Oklahoma/Indian Territory exploring the complexities of love and betrayal through generations of one Muscogee family as they battle the legal and personal implications of white-settler encroachment. With societal criticisms and Indigenous methodologies, this thesis aims to explore land ownership, resource allocation, and the complex governance of Oklahoma tribal reservations. The research of this novel focuses on primary documents from National Archive probate records, Dawes Commission enrollments, newspapers, and a familial collection of photographs, letters, and documents.

## **DEDICATION**

For Nanny, Mom, Aunt Kim, and the women who raised me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MVTO! Massive thanks to all my friends and family who believed in me. This work would not be possible without their unconditional love. To Muscogee Nation and the financial and symbolic support of the Higher Education Department and the Scholarship Foundation. Special thanks to the Geospatial Department and Frank Harjo for understanding my need to chase dreams.

Thank you to my advisor for the tireless guidance and feedback, Hollie. To an invested and attentive committee: Heather, Lisa, and Morgan. I so appreciate your time and mental bandwidth. And to every UMaine faculty member—shout out to Margo and Greg—and English student peers—Sarah especially—that gave me invaluable feedback and read even a piece of this work. This book is better because of you.

Special thanks to my family at OIRA for helping me find a sense of belonging on campus and giving me an Orono home filled with affirmation. Thank you, Mandy!

Mom, for teaching me how to read. Dad, for turning the page. *Dink!*

And Matt, for a lifetime of love. You are my favorite plot doctor.

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## Critical Introduction

### The Conception of a Novel

On Highway 69 between Miami and Quapaw in the northeastern edge of Oklahoma, I vowed to never let Hattie Barnett die in oblivion. I've learned everyone has two deaths, the first being when the bodily manifestation extinguishes and the second when the last person to have known you succumbs to the former. As if the memory of you is buried in a graveyard with everything else that was your very essence. Five years ago, I hadn't found Hattie yet. I didn't know she was buried in an unmarked grave on her now-privately-owned allotment, the very piece of land the Dawes Commission awarded for her citizenry to the Muscogee Nation and America and the devastating US policy to undermine tribal values and customs of community. I didn't know she was murdered at the time. My grandmother told me in the fall of 2021, the first time I asked her about Hattie, that she had been killed with such confidence and certainty I knew it was a skeletal closet I had uninvitedly opened. I didn't know that Hattie's father, David, was a prominent judge and one of the last to practice Muscogee law under true tribal governance and sovereignty. I didn't know what a probate was, let alone what one incomplete from the 1920s nestled in the National Archives in Fort Worth, Texas meant. There's a lot I found and a lot I didn't. I have named this work in her honor, so that her name and her memory will not be forgotten, and her story will be rewritten. I am not much younger now than she was when her life ended. Janet Campbell Hale captures my feelings impeccably in her work, *Bloodlines: A Native Daughter's Odyssey*: "I was with those people, was part of them. I felt the presence of my grandmother there as though two parts of her met each other that day: the ghost of the girl she was in 1877 (and that part of her will remain forever in this place) and the part of her that lives on in me, in inherited memories of her, in my blood and in my spirit" (152).

This story came to me in pieces. Its truth is fractured, wedged between the pages missing in



*Acey Judson Smoot & Hattie Barnett, 1909*

Oklahoma History textbooks and stuffed inside shoe boxes under my grandmother's kitchen island. I liken it to a stray thread I pulled at then yanked and couldn't let go. I held on to the fraying edges so that it could be compiled into some modicum of cohesion. Each untethering led to another finding, each connection made the truth more maddening. I like to think I didn't write this story, it wrote me. I am grateful I can share it with you now in an experimental form that felt most authentic.

Genre: A Novel of Vignettes

I've often wondered and been asked if this work is creative nonfiction, but I assure there were generous liberties taken. As dialogue was a strong propellant of the narrative, it couldn't possibly be nonfiction. I've imagined scenes and interactions I have no means of validating. For example, I've found personal artifacts of Daisy's to suggest her relationship with Renie was far less intimate than this story would suggest and conversely her relations with Myrtle much more sympathetic. These scenes, perhaps better described as vignettes, are designed to give momentary insight into the lives of this one prominent Muscogee family and into the changing traditions and culture of the time. As I was balancing between the unknowns, vignettes made the most sense for this work. I treat them as plot-thickening agents with sprinkles of characterization. With a story of this magnitude—ripe for confusion with its historical breadth and multi-

generational characters—the vignette simultaneously allows for the balance of clarity and curiosity enticing the reader.

Anthropologists Anna Bloom-Christen and Hendrikje Grunow discuss vignettes in great detail in their publication “What’s (in) a vignette? History, Functions, and Development of an Elusive Ethnographic Sub-genre.” Their work explores the etymology of vignettes in Anthropology as a discipline, first appearing in early American colonization ethnography, and further delving into the subgenre as canonical to female writers and writing. They describe characteristics of a good vignette as follows:

A good vignette sheds light on the complexities of a given situation from a particular angle. Like a signpost or an index finger inviting the reader to peek into a specific direction, a good vignette asks a question rather than answers it...They cannot be reduced to sharing one essential feature, but share overlapping similarities, while no one feature might be common to all of them. (10)

My hope is that this novel of vignettes is a novel of good vignettes where the focus on showing with scene rather than exposition is apparent, where the glimpses of these characters’ lives create reader investment. A matriarchal story fits well within the genre of vignettes as it navigates the time and space of motherhood against the backdrop of colonial imperialism. Despite knowing Hattie dies quite early in the text, I wanted the journey of these women to be the plot propellant. I wanted to take the reader to every high and low of their story and through the insurmountable history of Oklahoma.

The headers of these vignettes were a conscious decision to create connection for the reader. With respect and recognition of Indigenous people’s relationship with land, the vignettes were anchored in seasonality and county. The month gave a time stamp that wasn’t as confining

as one day, allowing for some flexibility but gave a general connection to time as the reader would understand the Gregorian calendar. Similarly, counties were reflective of Indigenous geographic naming conventions present today. For example, the state of Maine echoes the legacy of the Wabanaki tribes with counties like Penobscot, Piscataquis, Aroostook, Androscoggin, and Sagadahoc. This is also the case with the counties of Oklahoma.

Additionally, the counties served as an homage to the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Geospatial Department as my former employer and first introduction to Muscogee history. The map included at the beginning of this story is from their office. I used their work as a guide in more ways than one. It was from my work with them that I learned most U.S. tribal reservations contain less than 25% of the original lands and the death sentence that is federal unrecognition for smaller tribes. As reservations continue to shrink and tribal sovereignty is undercut by the federal and state governments, I wanted to highlight what has not changed and what remains ours regardless of policy though I recognize the continuous fight for sovereign respect.

Some historical contexts would benefit this work but are unessential to reader enjoyment and engagement. The Twin Territories was a name for Indian Territory and Oklahoma during the early twentieth century, a time when the duality of the place reckoned with the similarities and differences of its inhabitants. When the identity of what would become Oklahoma was grappling with the Five Civilized Tribes' promised land post-1830s removal era and the establishment of Oklahoma as the 46<sup>th</sup> state of the union, the belonging of Indigenous people was uncertain. Historian David Chang summarizes Oklahoma history best in his work, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929*: "The history of Oklahoma is a history of movement, possession, and dispossession. It is American history told in fast-forward. It captures the dynamics of global history in the middle of a continent" (2).

The Twin Territories can be better thought of as a microcosm of American History as it reflects ideals like Manifest Destiny and gendered domestication. For example, the differences between Mary, a traditional Mvskoke matriarch who survived the relocation from the southeastern homelands, and Daisy, the daughter of Hattie who embodies the modern twentieth-century housewife without Story is meant to strike a curious and stark comparison. A lot was lost in those four short generations, and the death of Hattie was pivotal in cultural disconnection. This work is not dependent on a thorough understanding of the Trail of Tears, the Allotment and Dawes Commission, the journey of Oklahoma Statehood, or the Crazy Snake Rebellion. My goal was to write a work complementary to that history but not independent of it. Instead, the reader disorientation informs the experience much like the Indigenous families felt in the Twin Territories.

### My Literary Influences

Reading brings a compelling grip that suspends reality so we may freely dwell in the thoughts of another where we may encounter persuasion, passion, and pluralities. Books that affirm my love—my reckless abandonment of logic, all-consuming compassion, and fiery obsession for the written word—were paramount in the birth of this work. I came to graduate school to read more. There were many published authors whose work I encountered before and during my thesis that greatly influenced this work. I strongly believe we, as readers and writers, are the culmination of everything we've ever read. Each and every turned page built the foundation of my writing. However, there is not enough space in this introduction to sufficiently name every writer and instead I opt to highlight a few that molded my understanding of

literature, that encouraged my exploration, and that ultimately contributed to the creation of this novel in one way or another.

Eden Robinson's *Trickster Trilogy* taught me how to compose empathetic characters. Robinson's protagonist, angst-y teenager, Jared was equal measures likable and believable. He made disagreeable choices and despite his irresponsibility at times, I was sympathetic to his plight as a reader. I was feeling what Jared was feeling. I was invested in his outcome and his survival. The peaks and valleys of teenage heartbreak, the battle with substance abuse, the constant financial stress all made for a never-ending, realistic story. I was never bored with Jared. Robinson crafts impeccable characters with sustaining dimension, humor, and unique dialogue. These full persons emerge from snippets. She makes short chapters work and inspired me to let go of any idea of page length requirements. Robinson's inclusion of Haisla/Heiltsuk folklore, the hints of Jared's half-magical father, Wee'git, a terrorizing and talking crow made me suspend belief, both sparse yet notable in its appearance throughout the work. The balance of real-world drama, magical intrusion, and inter-character conflict balanced incredibly well for me, and I emulated her writing in my own work with the inclusion of clan animals in this story. As my understanding of nonhuman relatives developed, I knew I wanted this work to be conscious of the creatures that lived on this land, that were impacted by colonial imperialism and natural resource extraction. I gave them agency in their actions and chose to highlight the impact white-settler encroachment had on them. Their choices are meant to give insight to the relatives who dwell on this earth with us and who are not always considered in policymaking but are central in the Muscogee creation story.

The first polyphonic novel I read was Tommy Orange's *There There*. To give voice to more than one character was a consideration I hadn't made for my own work at the beginning of

its crafting. Originally, the entire story was to be from Daisy's perspective but there were significant limitations with this approach given her age during certain vignettes and the impracticality of her presence in some scenes. During a BuzzFeed interview, Orange said,

One of the reasons I wrote a polyphonic novel is that I come from a voiceless community...And in a similar way, with IAIA (Institute of American Indian Arts), I want to usher in as many new voices as possible. We're just trying to get to the baseline of humanity, and not be a textbook image that's remembered and spoken of in the past tense.

Making space for multiple voices proved a welcome challenge. To honor Hattie, and the matriarchs before and after her, I felt relying on their perspective for most of the story was truest to the art. Especially given the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), I wanted to restore what had been stolen, at least in sentiment, and challenge that which had been silenced. Hattie speaks to me, and my hope is that she will also speak to the reader. However, I also knew I had to give voice to perspectives I was hesitant to amplify like the white settlers and institutions.

By institutions, I mean the imperialism of the U.S. Government and State of Oklahoma. To recognize this voice and include it, I opted to showcase it with public record—a voiceless perspective of artifacts. The humanized perspectives of clan animals, Muscogee people, and even guardians left the artifacts of colonization as embedded archives of state-sponsored disenfranchisement, from the legalese of records and court petitions to that of land and mineral extraction with oil checks. Thus, the reader gained intimacy with the people who were there and experiencing it at the time, rather than the diplomats who had distanced themselves in offices away from the “Indian Problem” in the Twin Territories.



Another polyphonic novel I felt inspired by was Jenny Ferguson's flash fiction novel *Border Markers* which brought greater clarity to my vision. Ferguson constructs a familial tale with flash chapters from various family members' perspectives while grappling with the challenges of rural life and an incarcerated loved one. Ferguson is careful with the revealing of every piece of information as the committed crime is hinted at but never outspoken. A book that opened doors, peered down hallways, but never returned or fully informed the reader was a certain cognitive puzzle I couldn't resist. Ferguson would give such visceral details from each characters' perspective that a reprisal was never necessary. I made the conscious effort to end most vignettes with a cliffhanger because I wanted uncertainty to settle upon the reader, much like *Border Markers*. I wanted the reader to ask themselves if they really wanted to know what happened next and to question that inclination.

Liberties I thought essential to the narrative were inspired by Percival Everett's *The Trees*. Time is a writer's playground to induce existentialism or, in the least, contemplation. Everett's *The Trees* was a marvel at time and speed. The novel read quickly, the short chapters, even one sentence chapters, challenged my conceptions of a chapter—the required length, content, function, and fit. Everett writes a heavy and comical account of the black experience in America. *The Trees* is a play on the classic detective trope following two black FBI agents as they navigate the racist corruption of Money, Mississippi. Curiously, Everett writes scenes from the perspective of Klansmen. Initially, I found this to be an unnatural choice for the narrative but quickly admired his delicate dance. He dealt with such a traumatic topic with care and generated laughter with his absurdity but gave insight to both the racist perspective and those fighting for justice. He gave his reader permission to subside any unfamiliarity and feel the weight of black American history and experience in all its complexities. I, too, found my story would benefit

from perspectives outside of the Muscogee matriarchs and opted to include the interiority of the guardianship systems from the office of the guardians. To have the reader glean more from their presence in the narrative, they had to have their own vignettes. While giving them voice was a difficult decision, the result was a fuller picture and greater recognition of those culpable. With their inclusion, I was able to lower the waterline of my work.

During thesis hours, my advisor mentioned the idea of a waterline as withholding information from the reader. This idea that a novel is like an iceberg where the waterline shows only a small bit of ice visible while a significant part of the whole remains unseen. This balance, or imbalance, of exposition and scene fostered my understanding of plot and action development. I like to make my reader work, and maybe too hard sometimes, but I think leaving so little visible often caters to the reader, allowing them to bring and take away from the reading whatever they approach with. Come as you are, I ask. We approach texts with implicit bias and preconceived notions that should be challenged, but also, I firmly believe a novel is reflective of life in that certain circumstances never have complete answers or reasons for happening. A pivotal work in understanding my own waterline was Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*. After reaching the midpoint of Lai's work, I became acutely aware the author had no intentions of revealing the mechanics of the world. The grimy details that made Lai's fiction palpable were missing. While some of my peers found this intolerable, I was quick to relinquish my desire for control as the reader and accept whatever Lai was prepared to give me. I buckled in for a ride because the prose was delectable, because the writing was good enough for the suspensions of my beliefs and expectations. My hope for my own work is that the writing is good enough for a similar reader relinquishment of control. Trust me, I ask of you, dear reader.

## Stylistic Choices: Recipe for Rapport

To induce the reader's trust, I elected to include nonfictional documentation including, but not limited to, oil checks, traditional recipes, postcards, newspaper clippings, photographs, songs, and more. Some are inspired by texts like the Pioneer Papers, a 1929 address at the American Bankers' Association by Cherokee humorist and cowboy Will Rogers, and stories I



*Tulsa Tribune Newspaper Photo feat. in April 1924 vignette (from L to R, Top: Daisy, Kizzie; Bottom: Jud, Chief, Renie, and Lillie)*

learned from tribe-sponsored summer camps during my youth. My aim was to both give voice to the public record and entice the reader with strategic amplification of Indigenous voices. Some artifacts are results of state documentation and others are inheritance of tribal custom

and values. Hattie's retelling of the creation story is an adaptation of the text on a 2018 Mvskoke Language Program bookmark handout. After pulling at this thread, it began to feel like a web and the interconnections were so exciting to me as the writer, I wanted to share some of those revelations with a reader. There is such a rich history to the Twin Territories that I didn't get to learn as a young person in Tulsa Public Schools. I don't know why and I grow angry when I think of how many people, my family included, don't know this history, this culture, and this artistry of tribal nations.

My translational choices were conscious in that the inclusion of Mvskoke words were often contextually defined or not at all. Children counting is directly translated and the Christian song 'Jesus Loves Me' but clan animals themselves are contextually described with distinct characteristics. With this risk, the reader may or may not catch every translation. It's important to

remember that some space is not for every reader to occupy, just as I wrote every detail knowing I may be the only one to ever see them. For example, renaming the North Canadian River to the Oaktahutche is an homage to the late Mvskoke poet Alexander Posey. He drowned in that river when he was just thirty-four years old. He was a member of the Dawes Commission and his work is my novel's epitaph. As he was critical of the federal government but felt his participation in the breakup of communal lands was a means to protect his people, his short life is not easily understood just as the decisions of tribal nations are often ones of lose-lose scenarios and broken treaties.

Additionally, the non-chronology adds a certain reader discomfort as it subverts expectations of historical fiction. A linear history would make sense, but I elected to value and build thematic parallels in lieu of regurgitating the tale in order. Some vignettes end and are revived with the following match-cut years apart. This is an homage to the spiralic temporality of Indigeneity and the idea of folding history, past and present into one. As coined by scholar Glen Coulthard, "Spiralic temporality refers to an Indigenous experience of time that is informed by a people's particular relationships to the seasonal cycles on their lands, and which acknowledges the present generations' responsibilities to the ancestors and those not yet born" (quoted in De Vos 2). This echoes a major tenet of Indigenous methodologies in the consideration for connection between past, present, and future. I leaned on incredible Muscogee scholars, artists, and creators to produce this work as well as many other Indigenous persons. One remarkably influential writer to my work is Thomas King. His book *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* was an invaluable guide to my writing as he taught me the weight of this sort of work. He reminds me of my responsibility as a descendent and ancestor: "For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the

stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told” (10). This was at the forefront of every vignette’s composition. This story was handled with great sincerity, and I readily take all responsibility for any faults.

With this novel, I sought to handle Hattie’s legacy with care and to untether myself from western ways of thinking. I pursued an ambiguous nebula of ideas from taking real lives and merging them with literary tools while refraining from displaying them on the pages for trauma. I veiled them in fiction with brevity. I view the study of humanities and creative writing as the practice of empathy, the power of persuasion, and the lyricism of language. It’s where we rediscover, reinvent, and redefine ourselves. It’s the iterations of self-reflection necessary for spiritual, emotional, and intellectual growth. The sort of growth I needed at this stage in my life so I could find the purpose and interconnection I desperately wanted. Ultimately, this novel gave me answers to questions I’d asked my whole life.

### My Positionality as Author(ity)

My indigenous identity has long been a source of inauthenticity for me because of my white-passing body and lack of cultural connectivity. This master’s program and thesis has made me feel as though I am making strides toward a more authentic living, a reclamation of who I am. These steps to authenticity are not only exhilarating, but they’re also empowering me. I can only describe the research process as a never-ending thread. I pulled at something that pulled at me. From the National Archives housing Hattie Barnett’s incomplete probate records to Daisy’s personal effects filled with uncashed oil checks and handwritten letters, I couldn’t escape it. I cataloged hundreds of documents, desperately trying to piece together a truth. I met distant relatives. I found old family photographs. And I began to carry my indigeneity with pride.

I recently wrote a seminar paper on Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* and while I collected scholarly sources, I found Daniella Zalcman's World Policy Journal piece titled after the infamous words of Carlisle Indian School founder, Richard H. Pratt: "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." Zalcman collected the stories and photographs of Canadian Indian Residential School survivors. She writes, "Indigenous communities continue to grapple with the same cycles of abuse and poverty that have been present since the beginning of the colonial era" (84). A notion I am all too familiar with. To add, Zalcman quotes survivor Grant Severight: "All of this residual stuff is still here...The drug addiction, the alcoholism, the assault. It might take another seven generations to restore our dignity as a nation" (84). This resonated with me because I am the seventh generation. From Mary Barnett to David Barnett to Hattie Smoot to Daisy Belle Richards to Herman Mikel Richards to Bridgett Lynn Brown and then myself. I wrote this story to understand the weight of it and my responsibility with it. I took great care to enact strategic amplification of Indigenous scholarship and knowledge.



Daisy Bell & James Plumlee Richards, 1957

It also resonated with me because I don't know of a male figure in my life not struggling with a form of addiction. The impoverished conditions I grew up with instilled in me a resilience I rarely encounter in the classrooms of higher education. I am the only grandchild of Betty Sue and Herman Mikel to have graduated college, let alone pursue graduate school. I am often stuck between worlds that never collide. This is why I've chosen to include vernacular and simple

language. Not because my audience needs it, but because that is authentic to the people and place I come from.

The research for this novel began in the Spring of 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic when we shut ourselves in. I found a whole world I'd been carrying with me. At the time I was a newlywed in New Brunswick, Canada filling my days with cooking and hiking and reading. I knew I had ancestors who had walked the Trail. I'd written about my grandmother's Cherokee side in school many times before. Her family still owns their allotment. The story I didn't know belonged to my mother's father. As an enrolled member of the Muscogee Nation, I felt I owed it to his memory to understand his story. My grandfather, Herman Mikel Richards, Sr. died of a massive heart attack at the age of fifty-one just three months after my second birthday. It was a traumatic and earth-shattering loss for my family.

This isn't my grandfather's story as much as his mother's and her mother's, but I learned so much about him in this process that I felt close to him for the first time in my life. He was a beacon of hard work and love. I dream of conversations we'd have, the challenges I'd present him. I think we're more similar than I'll ever really know and for that I owe him and his memory



*Herman Mikel Richards, Sr. & Madison Paige Brown, 1996*

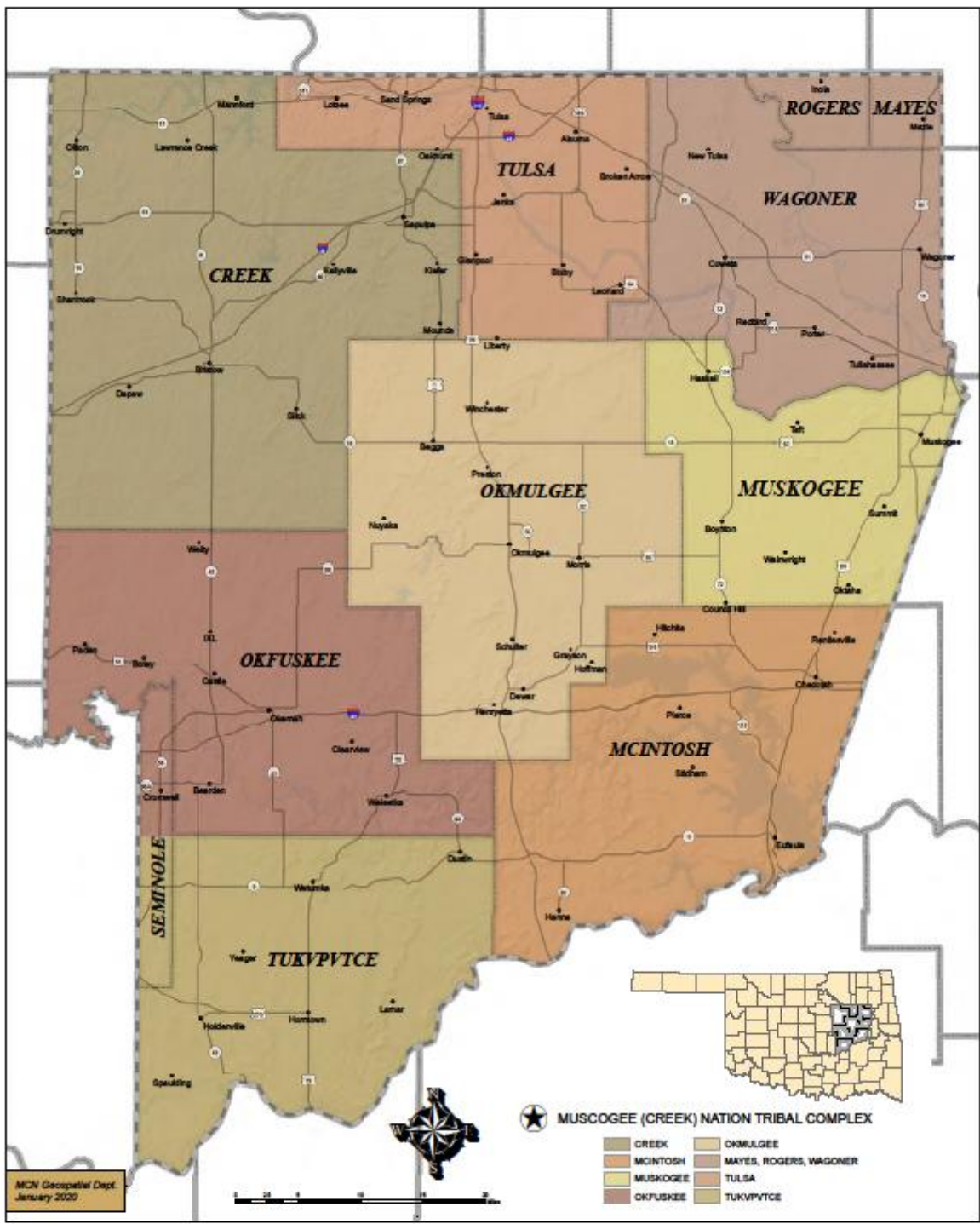
the utmost respect. He wasn't proud of his indigeneity, so I wrote this story for him, because I am.

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Map of Muscogee Nation Reservation



MCN Geospatial Dept.  
January 2020



# MUSCOGEE (CREEK) NATION

ELEVEN COUNTY TRIBAL JURISDICTION

PRINCIPAL CHIEF  
DAVID HILL  
SECOND CHIEF  
DEL BEAVER

## Epitaph

To allot, or not to allot, that is the  
Question; whether 'tis nobler in the mind to  
Suffer the country to lie in common as it is,  
Or to divide it up and give each man  
His share pro rata, and by dividing  
End this sea of troubles? To allot, divide,  
Perchance to end in statehood;  
Ah, there's the rub!

-Alexander Posey, 1894

## Prologue

Daisy Bell Smoot was born with one eye, the left one. Ma always said it was the damn curse.

Daisy rarely looked straight ahead, perhaps that's why she never saw it coming. She'd tilt her head, favoring the sight. Like there was a kink in her neck, as if she was beckoning you to lean down, to listen in as she whispered a secret.

---

July 1910

Okfuskee County

Holding her swollen belly, Hattie waddled through her routine on the family homestead. The morning sun was already scorching the earth. She could feel the heat between the soles of her shoes and the red dirt. Amidst the rustling of distant wheat and the midsummer din of insects, she could hear the creek's rushing sounds. She read the clouds like a map and predicted a stunning sunset where the blue would give way to blazing orange and soft purple, but the day was still left to spend. Where the blue expanse met the green plains, as far as the eye could see and just above the crisp horizon, she could scarcely make out the silhouettes of a few machines extracting oil. Like hens plucking for grain. Slow with blinding repetition until the very last morsel was collected.

It was farming land. Wet soil after a heavy rain was her favorite smell. The occasional tree and rooftop littered the pastoral scene. Time for the summer harvest was nearer, and the work was as tiresome as the days were long. She started with feed for the chickens. Then, she flushed them from the coop and collected their morning prize. A tune from the camphouse filled her memory and had her humming along while working. As she straightened herself and counted her collection, a dark shadow flashed overhead, followed by a screeching call. She looked up and caught a glimpse of the large wingspan painting the sky. Moving with such speed. She was mesmerized by the contracting wings flapping in the wind. She watched as an eagle landed in the pine just beyond the pasture and settled on its nest. Disgruntled and ruffled. She felt uneasy but watched it closely. Its talons wrapped around the waning bark of the highest limb. Its head snapping back and forth between observations. She could just barely see its crazed eyes absorbing the scene.

Just then, she noticed the rooster. The red, green, and orange feathers fanned with pride. He was the only cock of the coop, and he was ornery. In between finishing the feed, collecting the eggs, and catching sight of the eagle, she'd missed the hen. A smaller-than-usual white chicken that always seemed a little off. The hen strayed from the crowd, often forgetting food and direction. It would aimlessly roam the yard without rhyme or reason. Hattie called it her special girl. Something about her was endearing and hard not to love. A quirky little chicken with no sense. The dozen birds flocking and pecking for their morning meal were joined in a commotion. Unusual to have strayed far from the coop, she started towards the hen, to corral her back when the rooster appeared. He seemed to be squaring off. Circling the hen like prey, the scene chilled her. Something was amiss. Inching closer, Hattie wished to disrupt any confrontation.

Clutching her unborn child as if to shield her, she winced in reaction to the rooster's attack. Red dirt droplets encircled the hen. Like a pendulum, the rooster flapped an intimidating retreat and returned again and again until the hen began to weaken. Picking and prodding with its talons, the rooster continued the assault. Blood marred its white feathers like a speckled gown. Once fallen, the rooster mounted the hen and released an onslaught. Mindless and enraged, the rooster relentlessly plucked and pecked. Rearing its beak deeper and deeper until an ocular carnage ensued. Where the hen's right eye had rested now was a ravaged cavern. The hen lay in agony, clucking and squirming to regain her footing. Oozing crimson from the right socket, a swollen and stolen abyss met Hattie's gaze. The hen couldn't regain herself and collapsed from exhaustion or trauma, Hattie couldn't tell. But she could plainly see the hen was now dead.

Hattie's reaction was instinctual. She fell to her knees, clasped her hands together, pressed them to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut. She pleaded with Him to spare her

daughter the same fate because what she had witnessed was a medicine man's curse upon her and her family. Hattie's baby girl was doomed. After finishing her prayer, Hattie crumbled from her bow, cradled her unborn daughter, and wept. Grief stricken and sick to her stomach, Hattie knew more than just an eye would be lost. She knew the ground beneath her was crumbling with betrayal.

"Whas th'matta!?" Jud's voice echoed through the fields. He was shoulder deep into the wheat when he heard Hattie's cries. He could see her crumpled figure.

She looked up. Wiped her tears and tried to gain composure.

"Rooster kilt the hen!" she hollered in response.

"Chic'n for suppa then!"

She gathered herself, smoothed her skirt of the dirt and distraught. Hattie collected the swollen body of the hen and began to make her way to their home. She left the hen on the porch to ready their meal later when the wailing cries of Kizzie Anna Smoot called to Hattie from inside. And she walked into the house to tend to her firstborn knowing her second, still in the womb, was in grave danger. The unease built a home in Hattie's heart and never dissipated after that day.

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June 1921

Okfuskee County

The Oktahutche will eat a man whole. The lurking undercurrents, sharp river rocks jutting like shrapnel in a sheet of glass. Forging the river is a daunting invitation. The Smoot children found no better adventure in their backyard. Renie and Chief would race down to the singing river, clutching rods and chasing laughter.

Lillie begged Daddy to let her go down to the river. “Chief is gonna catch all the big ones wit’out me!” she whined. A makeshift rod bobbed with mirrored excitement. A stick fashioned with string. They would no doubt dig up worms for bait.

“Darlin’ yous is too young, c’aint swim,” Jud said.

“Ma would let me go,” she mumbled in defeat.

Daisy and Anna did not care for the mud frolicking their siblings embraced. So, Lillie was stuck with her unexciting sisters. Pouting with rejection, she found her seat next to them under the shade of an oak. Lillie was desperate to be included with her older brother.

A hair-raising scream unfurled from the direction of the riverbank. Daisy, Anna, and Lillie shot up and began running as fast as their feet would take them. With blood pumping, hearts racing, and eyes wide they saw what elicited such terror from Renie. Engulfed in the rapids, flailing with panic, they could just make out the silhouette of Chief.

Quickly, Anna began to scramble down the bank, into the icy water.

“Wait!” shouted Daisy. She pointed at the disturbed waters.

A shiver stole their spines.

Hvlpvtv was resting on the riverbank. His long tail stretched out on the dirt. The girls caught sight of the scaly beast and clawed feet as it waded into the waters, headed right toward Chief. The rapid currents were no match for its tail's dexterity. They'd heard stories of Hvlpvtv's death roll. The Smoot children were struck by its size. Hvlpvtv swam as if one with the river. His flattened snout with nostrils above water, breathing through the currents.

Chief flailed in the water, unaware of the looming creature. Kizzie Anna was first to shout.

"Watch out!" she screamed.

"Look! A 'gator's comin' fo'you!" Renie hollered.

The girls panicked, uncertain what to do, when Hvlpvtv had almost reached their little brother. Their hearts collectively stopped.

"Chief!" Lillie wailed from the riverbank.

Hvlpvtv was nearing Chief's small frame, the wake of its tail echoing in the water. With a sudden splash, Hvlpvtv opened its wide jaws with jagged teeth and clamped down on the boy's leg and began a deadly barrel roll. Spinning and spinning, Hvlpvtv was ripping Chief free from the whirlpool he'd been consumed by. The two disappeared underwater and the girls were left watching the chaotic currents, wide-eyes desperate for signs of life.

Then, the two resurfaced and the grips of Hvlpvtv's jaw were softer, gentler. Almost a caress, he brought Chief to the bank. Emerging from the angry waters and floating to shore, Chief was delivered undisturbed by the roaring river around them. And just as he'd appeared, Hvlpvtv was gone.

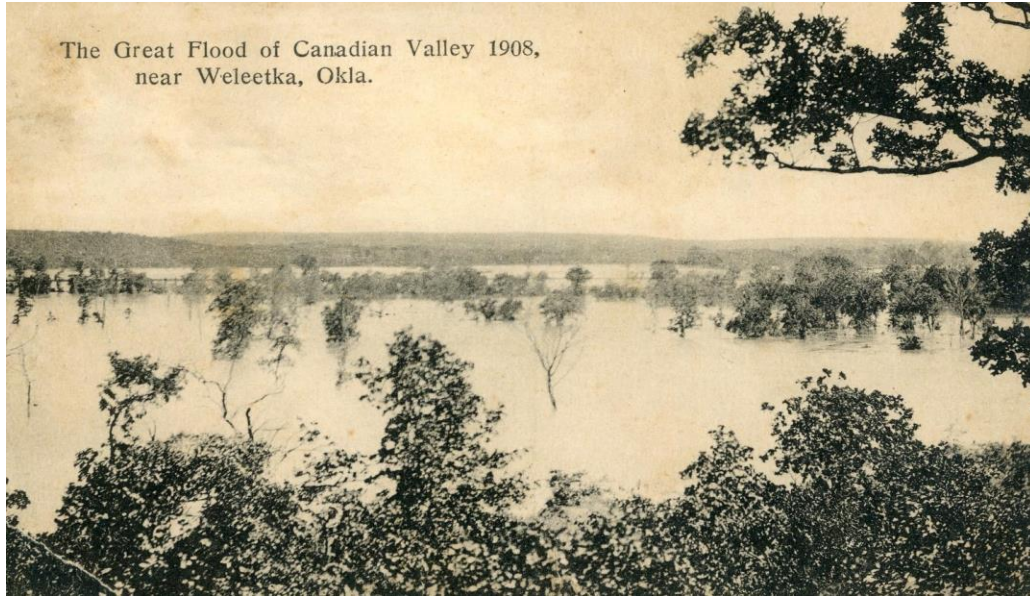
The Smoot children huddled around Chief. They looked at each other in bewilderment. Desperately trying to make sense of the scene.



“That was an alligator!” Chief sputtered between mouthfuls of water and coughing fits.

“Your leg!” Kizze Anne pointed to the tattered pant leg. Through the tears and holes, they Smoot children saw something that surpassed logic. Tooth marks and bloodless punctures reversed. The impressions on Chief’s leg were returning to normal, as if the whole incident had never happened. The wounds were healing before their eyes. It was like he hadn’t been bitten at all.

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April 1908

Okfuskee County

Water. The world started there. In the water, under the currents. Hattie remembered the story so many times. It was one of her grandmother Mary's favorites. The creation of our world, the beginnings of our time. Where we came to be on turtle island.

"Oktahutche." Mary hadn't been herself recently. Whispering and muttering, as if someone were speaking to her.

"Whose voice do you hear, puse?" Hattie asked.

Mary furrowed her brow. The crinkle around her eyes deepening, the pursing of her lips. She was thinking. Or listening. Hattie couldn't decide.

They were spared. The waters only reached the far edge of Hattie father's farm. A few oxen and cattle may have drowned, and the fields were saturated but the trees were standing. The waterlogged roots holding strong. Which meant there were gains to be made. The rushing of

water escaping, searching for steadiness, resounded for days. The rain finally stopped three days ago but the water kept coming, kept flowing, kept rushing.

Hattie fell asleep to the sounds of the Oktahutche nearing her window, but the waters never came. Best to stay put in those instances, her father had said. The road was flooded and there was no sense in leaving now.

“We’re together,” he reassured them.

His wives, Hattie’s mother Patsy and Patsy’s sister Nancy, consolidated households for the storm. The sisters hadn’t lived together in years but still knew everything about each other. Most of their children were either living with their own families or dead. Patsy and Nancy were best friends. They were the ones to teach Hattie about the three sisters. When in the garden, they would explain how the crop grew best.

“They will sustain us,” her mother started.

“But only together,” Nancy added.

“The three sisters will always provide for us,” Patsy said.

They dug holes in the earth, gently sifting soil aside. Preparing seeds from last harvest.

“The cornstalk will grow strong and tall. She must reach for the sky,” Patsy said.

“But she must grow alone for now,” Nancy said.

They buried the seeds. As they watered them, Hattie asked, “When will her sisters come?”

“Soon, my daughter.” Patsy leaned down and hugged Hattie.

“Corn must grow steady and strong because the beanstalk will follow her.” Nancy bent down and winked at Hattie. Nancy’s fingers tickled up Hattie’s legs, imitating the crawling vines of a beanstalk. She giggled. Her auntie was fun like that.

“They need each other. The corn will be strong so that the bean may be ever growing,” Pasty explained.

“What about the third sister?” Hattie asked.

An elaborate gasp erupted from Nancy. “Sister Squash! Yes, of course.” Nancy laughed at her own joke.

“She is the shade. The relief that Corn and Bean need. Her big, beautiful leaves are umbrellas for the roots. The water will linger longer, and the sisters will grow stronger, but only together.” Pasty kissed Hattie’s forehead.

“She will be planted last,” Patsy continued.

“But she is just as important,” Nancy had said.

And now their garden was under water. Completely submerged. Hattie sighed. What would they do? A flood. She worried about her family. Her brothers and sisters down the washed-out road. There would be losses, certainly.

That’s when she saw it. Mid-morning when the exploded river had stilled. A shimmering in the water, a wake echoing in the ripples. Hattie walked toward it. Enchanted by its summons. She found her way through the cattle gates and around the barn, down to the water’s edge.

“Hesci Hattie,” the slithering split-tongue hissed.

She bent down to meet the voice. Instinctively, she reached her hand out.

Cetto bore her fangs and sunk them in.

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June 1863

Kansas-Cherokee Nation border

Mary was tired. The sort of weary that wears down to the bone. At least they'd made it across, not without peril. The Cold Country Indians were certainly cold tonight. For fear of discovery, they waited in the dark of night. Messengers were sent to the Indian Agency in Kansas, desperately seeking President Lincoln's audience and aid. He needed to know there were Indians in Indian Country who wanted the treaties upheld, who believed America would win this war.

The small forest nearby their camp was dense for the plains, a looming oak every few paces. It was dark apart from the bleeding moonlight between silvery leaves in the canopy. Moonlight made everything sparkle.

It made Mary think of a story she'd heard as a girl while she strolled from tree to tree. Allowing her palms to glide along every passing trunk. Feeling the roots beneath her feet when a noise made her jump. It was a whimper. Not quite an animal but certainly a frightened sound.

She tilted her head, listening.

"Hecsi," her voice greeting the dark. A sweet, comforting, and welcome tone. Mary reached her hand out, palm open.

"Mary Cvhocefkv Tos," she said, introducing herself. Her soft voice sending calming waves into the hollowed oak. Its bark warped and insides gone after lightning struck. Maybe years ago, it looked ready to collapse. Creaking ever so slightly in the occasional night gust, its spiderly silhouette signaled death's arrival.

She could hear a shifting inside the tree. Small twigs bending and dried leaves crinkling, like a bed disturbed. And very slowly, a small hand emerged from the tree, gripping the corner of the split trunk. One small girl's face was illuminated from the edge of the hollow. She was pretty. Her skin looked silky and her eyes wide. She seemed frightened but curious. Trying to be brave, Mary deduced. So, she smiled warmly and reached out, offering her hand. The girl looked at her then eyed her hand. She was deliberating.

Another small hand came up from the darkness and curled around the first girl's hand. Mary realized not one, but two small girls had taken shelter in this hollowed oak. She marveled at their steadfast connection. They must be sisters, she thought. They were so small, and the first girl was a little older. Not by much as the two had similar facial features—brown eyes, straight dark hair, and olive skin. Their delicacies mirrored in the eyes, the nose, and cheekbones. Mary knew there was no good reason for their hiding. Their own thought them dead to leave them here inside this tree.

“Look what I found,” Mary announced to the camp just as everyone was settling in for the night. Her children's moonlit faces turned in unison, curious eyes watched her approach with the two girls.

They quietly sat down; the youngest half hidden behind her sister. Clutching to her tatters. Both girls were dirty and frail. The oldest was alert, her eyes darting among Mary's family. Gauging the threat, Mary sympathized. She crouched next to the dinner pot's glowing coals, ladling from the pot itself into a wooden bowl.

“Cepan,” Mary called to her son and handed David two bowls filled with soup, steam rolling from the brims. Before he could get within two feet, the elder hollow sister quickly snatched the bowls and brought them closer for inspection. The delectable aroma was irresistible,

both dug in. Spooning hot liquid, overfilling their mouths for the first time in what seemed like awhile.

Mary asked their names. They didn't remember. She asked how long they were inside the hollow tree. They didn't say. And she asked if they understood her. They stared and looked as if they were fighting sleep after eating.

There was no meaning of leaving them girls in the woods, they knew that well enough. Siah had long ago rode off into the night to fight with Yankees. Mary was left to tend her children with the families of other Cold Countries. Her sweet and stubborn David, the loud and laughable Mariah, shy and smart Ellen, and her baby Hannah.

Quickly, Mary watched her other children take to the girls. David was close in age to the oldest and the second, much smaller, could've been five or six years old.

"Patsy." Mary looked at the older girl. "And Nancy," she said to the younger. And from that day on, that's how the Barnetts addressed the hollow girls.

The coals darkened and died with embers fading and dinner was gone. Mary got the children huddled together inside their make-shift camp. Their warm bodies snuggling together, readying themselves for a story.

"Long ago, before the sun and stars," Mary started.

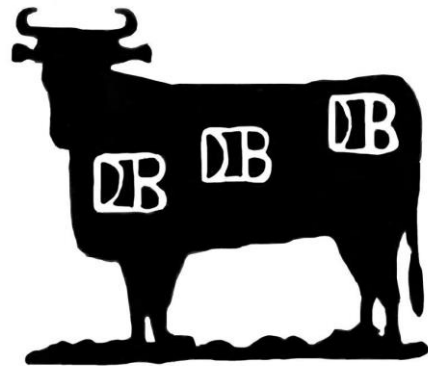
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January 1910

Tvkvptce County

It was only the Wetumka Gazette. She'd insisted they buy it at the general store. Hattie recognized the brand first. Three replicated sets of initials, the first letter of his first and last names stitched together. So, the metal was one piece, no jutting points of an R or W. Of course, the cartoonish depiction in the paper looked nothing like the real deal. All of her father's cattle were branded and usually with great care.

The black and white photo made the silhouette bull look like it'd been branded all over. Look for my initials on my shoulders, my hind, my stomach, the cartoon said. Of course, that would be silly, all Dave's livestock were branded in the same spot. Hattie had helped her father many times down home. *Stolen or strayed?* The article read. Signed Dave Barnett. She rested on the ad. Chewing on the words.



Hattie was aware Jud didn't like it when she read. "We dont need the dam paper," he'd sneered at her before they collected their items and paid. She wouldn't do it in front of him much but he got mad once. Said she wasn't better than him. Should she get to thinkin' so, he'd put her in her place. She'd asked what he meant, he didn't say. She waited to read it until he was out mending the fence, busy tending. She remembered her lessons in the Barnett School. She remembered the summer Jim built it. All her cousins were learning there now, too. She smiled at the thought.



Those hot summer days where it seemed like their sweat would erase all their work. They learned to read and write, both English and Mvskoke. They'd need it, said Mary. She was usually the one leading the lesson. Hattie was nearly full grown when they built the log-split structure. Naturally, she helped with those lessons for all her younger family. She'd plan to teach Kizzie Anna all the same. She knew her baby girl would be brilliant.

She looked again at the paper. Dave was offering a substantial award. Then she realized his cattle don't stray, didn't stray.

"Cattle thieves," she gasped.

"Jud!" she shouted from the porch, abandoning the washing. He hadn't heard her.

"ACEY JUDSON!"

"What?!" he hollered from across the field.

"I'm going down home!" Hattie shouted at him. "Back soon!"

He seemed to hear her as he paused mending the fence. Gave her a full-arm wave that was more of a swat, shooing her then went back to work. She went back inside to gather Kizzie Anna. The babe was only nine months old and couldn't manage the day without her. She swaddled Kizzie firmly around her own body, knotted the fabric taut, and began the walk to her father's house.

Dave was in a mighty fury when she arrived. All her young cousins were outside playing and working, avoiding what was inside. When she walked up the road, the littlest girls ran to hug her. Crowding around her skirt, fussing over her attention.

"Auntie Hattie! You're here," cried Ida.

“Hesci hokose,” greeted her other sister to their bundled niece on Hattie’s back. She missed being home with her family. All the fussing was nice in a way. Although it hadn’t quite been a year since marrying Jud, she felt nostalgia for what it was she’d left behind.

“Someone stol’em!” Hattie heard her father roar from inside. She kissed each of her siblings and promised to cook for them later. Then entered the house.

“Come sit,” Mary said.

Hattie greeted her grandmother and she unbundled Kizzie Anna for Mary to hold. They sat together and the old woman cooed over the child.

“Erke, please,” Hattie began.

“Got t’find ‘em.” He resisted her calming. Determination plain on his face. Hattie knew she could say nothing, and he’d search everywhere for the cattle. He hugged both his daughter and mother and promised to return soon. He’d find a whole party to help, that was the power of a tribal town judge.

Hattie held hands with Mary, and they breathed together, in unison. Morning sunlight bathed their weathered skin. Mary was getting older. The winter of her life, they’d tell her. Hattie could almost see the aches in her grandmother’s joints. She told Hattie she could barely see and her back hurt all the time. Mary didn’t know it, but Hattie could hear her calls for Creator to take her home every night.

“He fusses over that damn fence,” Mary said.

“Probably how they got in,” Hattie mused.

“When I was a girl, nobody would think to fence the land.”

“Times are changing, puse,” Hattie addressed her grandmother.

They sat in comfortable silence. Hattie always loved the way her grandmother radiated calm.

“Another?” Mary asked. Seemingly out of the blue, Hattie eyed her. Mary had this way about her, as if she knew things better, sooner.

“I wasn’t sure.” Hattie’s hand reflexively held her stomach. If she was, she couldn’t be far. It was as if Mary’s question confirmed its existence.

Mary reached her weathered hand and placed it atop Hattie’s. They held her stomach together and Mary closed her brown eyes, the crows’ feet dancing along her lashes as she did.

At first Mary seemed peaceful, almost asleep. Then, suddenly, she gasped and blinked her eyes open in surprise. Retracting her hand as if she had been bitten.

“Hattie,” she said, slowly and seriously. “This child has bad medicine.”

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March 1920

Okfuskee County

When Hattie died, the household was in disarray. Without her, their world was chaotic and confusing. The Smoot children were lost, Daisy especially. Jud turned to drink. And then the court proceedings began. The filings would span the remaining years of their adolescence.

Once, Daisy peered over the cherry-stained partition of the courtroom and overheard their exchange. On her tiptoes, she careened to catch a glimpse of the ruckus. Disgruntled men argued with such fury and haste but for all their poor behavior, they dressed in the nicest suits she'd seen. Briefcases and papers littered the desks. These men were upset and in heated dispute. Incomprehensible words flew through the air in angered, accusatory tones.

*Guardian.*

*Bond.*

*Petition.*

*Unrestricted.*

*Incompetent.*

An authoritative man sat in the highest seat in what looked to her like a bathrobe holding a wooden hammer. He decreed in a loud and booming voice, silencing the others.

“Order! Order in the court!”

Quiet spread throughout the room. The filtered sun from the windows shone on the man.

“We now hear case number 1352 for the appointment and bond of the Smoot minors.

Attorney Douglass, take the floor.”

“Your honor, we are gathered here to confirm my appointment as the guardian of the Smoot minors, inheritors of Hattie Barnett, Roll Number 4954, estate. In the interest of these children and their father, I hereby declare myself caretaker of their accounts,” A.T. Douglass said.

It was Jud’s turn to address the court. Sometimes he spoke, but most often he sat in solemn silence.

“Your honor, I want to send my motherless children to a good Catholic school. We could use the funds for tuition, clothes, and food,” Jud pleaded. His statements were always followed by A.T. Douglass.

“We defer the matter to you, Honorable Judge Duling, and the approval of my \$1,000 guardian bond,” A.T. concluded.

A distant expression marred Jud’s elegant features. Wrinkles seemed to appear hourly, his scrunching brow never lifted, and his grimace set in permanence.

“Don’t spy.” Renie tugged on Daisy’s skirt. They always had their Sunday best on for court.

“Okay,” Daisy huffed and shrunk to her seat.

“You always get us into trouble,” Anna chastised.

“Why c’aint you mind your business?” Daisy challenged.

“I’ll mind mine when you mind yours.”

“Be civil!” Renie hissed.

Daisy longed to be outside, watching Chief and Lillie tussle while she and Renie practiced their letters. They’d been in the paper for their perfect spelling scores. Daisy liked school; it was always better than the courthouse.

The Smoot children sat and waited. And Jud would always be in a mighty fury after spending hours there. And when it was over, like beetles exposed to the light of day, they scattered with great haste until next time.

“It’s my money! They have no right to keep it from me,” he would roar.

“It’s alright Daddy,” Anna soothed.

“It ain’t! I c’aint afford to feed all these mouths. We need money!”

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December 1897

Okfuskee County

Mary did not eat when Siah died on a cold winter night. And Mary cried for a long time. She cut her hair to the scalp and sat silent, after the four days and four nights of mourning, she refused to leave his side.

It had been days since the wake, since the burial by hand, since the fasting ended. Since they sent Siah to walk on dressed in his best with a set of traveling clothes—the worn stuff, sun kissed and broken in. The everyday shirt and shoes, the one pair of work pants that hadn't needed stitching. Mary included his favorite dessert; Pvr'ko Af'ke, the sweetest grape dumplings made from the possum grapes plucked and preserved this past fall.

Hattie was so desperate to cheer up her grandmother. Thinking the only thing that may work would be Story, she asked for her favorite. The one that Mary always liked to tell.

“Puse, how did you find Mama and Auntie Nancy again?”

“That one, huh?” Mary murmured but didn't look at Hattie.

Hattie knelt beside her grandmother and began tending to Mary's feet. She started at the ball of Mary's heel, rubbing the most tender parts with care, and kneading the calloused ones with more pressure. A foot rub usually got Mary talking and she smiled down at her granddaughter.

“My sweet Hattie.” Mary reached a palm to Hattie's cheek and rested it there. Her eyes wide, their dark gazes met with a mixture of adoration and pride. They were at home here.

“The hollow sisters came to me in a big ol’ oak,” Mary started and took her hand away. Hattie nodded for Story to continue as she moved to massage the arches of Mary’s feet. Her toes wiggled and her foot flexed under the attention.

“They had long hair when we met.” Mary instinctively touched her scalp. The black stubble almost smooth and silky.

“It was raining the night after I found them in Cherokee Nation,” Mary said.

“They had slept soundlessly with full bellies.” Mary caressed her own stomach, pushing it out to look full. “Just like you when you eat my grapes.” They shared a laugh. It was small and brief, but it was there between them.

“Your mother was very precocious. She took to Dave early, but her sister was attached to her hip.” Mary smacked her hip.

“The two were inseparable.” Mary held up two fingers then twisted them together, crossing them and two became one.

“Siah treated those hollow sisters like his own daughters when he came back from the war.” Tears started to well in her eyes again. She looked off, lost in another place.

“Marry a good man, like your grandfather.” Mary’s tone took a serious turn. She looked into Hattie’s eyes, a stern look freezing her expression.

“Promise me, Hattie.”

Before Hattie could respond, they heard the shouting and whooping come through the evening air by open window. Both Mary and Hattie jumped at the sound. Startled for the disruption but knowing it was likely family. A patriarch like Siah never falls silently.

Outside, the Snakes and other locals were all awake at the Barnett homestead. Gathered around the ceremonial fire. Remembering the town Mekko, their chief. Though the Five Tribes



had outmaneuvered the Dawes Commission sweeping Indian Territory to the west, the threat still loomed. The Curtis Act crept closer to Congress' ratification. Soon, there would be no more sovereignty. Soon, there would be no communal lands. Soon, they would be swamped by the white man.

The scariest stories on this cold December night were reality. In blazing color, the United States sought every avenue to undermine and dispossess the Indian, at least that's what Bill said. It's what Siah would say, too. That these lands belonged to us. That we should fight for the promises they made. The treaties they signed.

How they would continue without Siah, where they would go from here was how they filled the evening with scheming. They'd come from all over the nation to help dig Siah's grave and some of them spoke to the gathering around the ceremonial fire the night before they returned Siah to the earth.

"If only we could get the council to listen to us," said Wilson Jones. All his friends called him Bill, but the law called him an insurrectionist.

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March 1921

Okfuskee County

“For an undivided half of all oil and gas and rights and other minerals in, to, or under the south half of the northwest quarter, and the northwest quarter of the northwest quarter of section twenty-five, township eleven, range eleven.

“Bidding starts at \$5,000!” bellowed the auctioneer.

“Five-tothegentlemaninthepinstripesuit-SIX-Igotsixfromthemissusintheback!

DoIHearSeven?!”

“Seven!” A hand shot up from the crowd. A collection of folks stood in front of the Okfuskee County Courthouse. A sweaty white man with a microphone spoke so fast he sounded like a squirrel.

Oklahoma was an oil prospectors’ haven. The crowd was full of well-dressed, fortune-hungry white folk. Daisy mused over the scene while Jud scampered up the courthouse steps. Afterall, he was the owner of the land, on a technicality. Daisy crept towards the crowd. Her small frame undetectable amidst the billowing skirts, looming parasols, and clunky briefcases. Fine leather shoes with pristinely clean socks on what she imagined were well-groomed feet met her downcast gaze. She thought they smelled like money but the greedy sort. The kind that never lasts. The kind that makes them frenzy for more. The kind that don’t care for people like Ma.

“Igotseven-doIhearEIGHT!”

“Eight!”

“Nine!” Another voice interjected. An outright bidding war was electrifying the crowd.

“NINETHOUSANDfromthegentlemenwiththefatcigar--doIhaveTEN?!”

“TEN!”

“ELEVEN!” The two men were in a showdown.

“Eleventhousand--goingonce--”

“Fourteen Thousand Nine Hundred,” a stern voice crackled the electrified crowd into sudden gasps. Eyes turned to a sharp-dressed man parting the sea of people. He emerged holding a briefcase no doubt filled with cash.

“AnyoneToMatchMisterPharoahsBid?! GoinOnce–GoinTwice.”

“SOLD! To Mister O.J. Pharoah for fourteen thousand nine hundred dollars!” The auctioneer banged his gavel, and the deal was done.

On the homestead, squarely in the spring, a commotion was alive. Lyons Petroleum Company had workers day-in and day-out. Daisy saw large machinery hauled in and men working like ants on a hill. Drilling for oil on a quarter section of Ma’s land. The frenzy only heightened after the first pump jack. Striking was luck but striking again was fortuitous.

“Let’s play Snakes and Robbers!” Chief exclaimed.

“S’ake! S’ake!” Lillie cried. She was just shy of six years and the most rambunctious of the crew. For her sake, they agreed.

“As long as I ain’t no Robber,” Renie said.

“N’body want to be Robber,” Chief retorted.

“Not it!” Anna cried and hightailed it into the green expanse. Dandelions wisped in the wind as she raced ahead. Renie followed as quickly as her feet would allow with an echo, “Me neither.” Lillie scrambled after her sisters. Sides had been chosen. The imitation war had begun.

“Cheater!” Daisy cried. She was always left to Robber. Chief sized her up and together, they closed their eyes.

“Hvmken.” *One.*

“Hokkolen.” *Two.*

“Tuccenen.” *Three.*

“Osten.” *Four.*

“Cahkepen.” *Five.*

“Epaken.” *Six.*

“Kolapaken.” *Seven.*

“Cenapaken.” *Eight.*

“Ostvpaken.” *Nine.*

“Palen.” *Ten.*

They uncovered their eyes. And so the hunt began. Daisy crouched low and scoped the landscape. Robbers were meant to find the Snakes, to hunt them down for liberating the land.

Lillie was the first to stumble upon the working crew. Anna and Renie soon followed. Various men were sweat-soaked and dirty, scrambling around the metal pillar, growing from the ground like a massive mechanical oak. Struck with awe, the three sisters couldn't tear their eyes from the scene.

“We're at 2600 feet, boss!” The drillers were clamoring around, crazed with greed. It was a gusher. Hattie Barnett No. 2 proved to be the most productive of the year—one thousand barrels in the first twenty-four hours.

“Y'all no good at hiding!” Daisy chided once she'd spotted her sisters. Chief was only a few paces behind. Though he would catch up soon.

“I do declare you Snakes are relieved of your land,” Daisy recited the game-ending verse. But then she, too, was stopped dead in her tracks. The Smoot children gawked at the oil extraction installation.

“Mister Douglass must be a busy man,” Anna said, low enough only Daisy’s ears heard. Daisy scoffed, “You mean he must be a rich man.” Anna turned to her sister with a questioning look.

“You don’t think it strange? How come our money only good at his family shop?” Daisy said.

“And Daddy don’t like Douglass much,” Anna seemed to ruminate on Daisy’s words.

“Ma didn’t want it like this,” Anna said.

“Ma didn’t want a lot of things, Anna.”

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September 1919

Muskogee County

When the commission came to town nearly twenty years ago, Dave had to enroll Jackson himself. First, he had to find him, wherever he was. Dave's half-brother had waited so late that he couldn't choose anymore. Commissioners would assign him a parcel at random, the undesirables. Hard, rocky, infertile soil misshapen by the ephemeral weather. Dave had assured Jackson he'd want the land later, it might be worth something.

"Nah, Land ain't mine." He'd dismissed the idea altogether. Allotment, individualism, land ownership made no sense to him or any other traditional Indian. That wasn't the way.

"They'll take it no matter what." Dave's blank stare didn't carry its weight to Jack's beady eyes. His brother, like the Snakes, didn't care for allotment. They yearned for the old treaty when the homelands were exchanged for sovereignty in Indian Territory.

Dave and his sisters had gotten their homestead and surplus at the homeplace. They enrolled early, got lucky and meant to keep the places they were living. Crazy Jack wasn't interested. And he didn't live with Dave exactly, they didn't grow up together. Siah didn't claim Jack, not in that way. But Dave didn't disagree with Jack. Once the oil was struck and the land run happened, all bets were off. Dave had managed to convince Jack and he was assigned a plot in Drumright, a place Jack never stepped foot and nearly two hundred miles from home. He was thinking of all this the moment Hattie burst through the door and showed him that damn paper.

"Did you know, Erke?" Hattie's shrill voice caked with concern.

Her father stood at her arrival. Dave scowled and snatched the headline from her hand.

**RICH INDIAN GIVES \$25,000 TO CHURCH**

Dave wouldn't describe Crazy Jack as benevolent or generous, but certainly stubborn. He didn't value the dollar the same as these grafters. But it was the byline that struck him, that addressed him. He'd written letters to Jackson, of course. They went unanswered. And Crazy Jack was caught up in the courts. His guardians fought tooth and nail with the State, with the Federal Government. When Anna Lowe napped Jackson and fled in the night for Kansas, she married an easygoing and painfully naïve Indian. Whether Crazy Jack knew better or not wasn't the question he was asked. Folks showed up with empty pockets and outstretched hands. And when you've got a wealthy relative doling out funds to Churches and colleges, Dave thought, why not ask? The byline read:

Jackson Barnett's Next Gift Goes to Brother Who Fed Him When Poor

"Is it true?" Hattie pleaded with her father.

"You know he's restricted. I didn't think they'd approve it." Dave sank into his chair and absorbed the words printed on the page. "Just because it's in the paper doesn't make it real," he admonished Hattie's hysteria.

"Why though?" Her brow crinkled with hurt.

"Damn lawyers stole the land."

"The farm?" Surprise captured her features as questions streaming through her mind were almost visible. He sensed she thought he meant the homeplace.

"No." Dave couldn't look her in the eye.

"Oh. You mean..."

"The kids, yes."

"The land meant for Ida, Wesley, George, Robert, and Mossie?"

Amos, too?" she asked.

“Yes. I asked Jack for money.” And a small part of him wished it true, wished his brother’s naivete would finally find him fortune. The article delved into a tale of Dave inflating his woes and weaving Jackson into them.

“Ha! Says here Jackson wants to see that Dave’s daughter receives a good education. If you’d stuck around, that might’ve been you.” Dave pointed a finger at her and lifted his eyes to meet Hattie’s. A coldness settled between them. Thickening the air with tension.

“Young Mary will love that.” Hattie’s smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“You could’ve been the one to help. There’s oil on that land of yours, girl.”

“I won’t have it.” Hattie’s sharp tone cut the conversation. That growing abyss returned, and she breathed deeply.

“Those men are always comin’ round. I seen ‘em.” The stress that spread along her features was unsettling.

“Hattie, be careful. White men get what they want,” Dave warned. “Whether you like it or not.”

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November 1921

Okfuskee County

Off Broadway Street, between the brick edifices of downtown, the men were huddled in the law office of Rowe, Phillips and Douglass. Moses Shuggs Douglass was the center of attention, even though his eldest son, Frank put their name on the sign. The father was leading a discussion on pressing political matters. The lights in the office were dim, pouring from only a few oil lamps. Puffs of cigar smoke filtering the light further. The plush leather chairs were inky in the dark office. Frank Douglass sat behind a massive mahogany desk with a placard reading: Attorney at Law. The edges of ornate carvings on the desk and the curves of the wall's wainscoting danced to life in the flickering light. It was a large and comfortable office for the small, and growing, town.

“How many do we have?” M.S. Douglass asked his audience of sons and accomplices. They were mulling over the books. Checking and re-checking the accounts.

“Nuthin.” Frank shrunk from his father's gaze, the desk swallowing him.

“We've acquired two new clients this week,” Philips said after a pause.

“I've got five minors,” A.T. Douglass offered and earned a smirk from his father. He wasn't the disappointment Frank had been. Frank was growing soft on the job.

“Newly rich?” Douglass arched a curious eyebrow and chewed on the half-smoked cigar.

“Newly orphaned. Mother's dead,” A.T. said and flipped through his files.

“Name?” Douglass asked, now interested. His eyebrow arched with curiosity.

“Smoot, mother was Hattie Barnett.”

“Good,” Douglass muttered, “The Barnetts have lots of oil monies,” he said while gripping his chin between his fingers. Turning something over in his head. Plotting his revenue.

“What we really need is what they done n’Tulsa,” Barber offered. The three Douglass and Philips rolled their eyes at the suggestion.

“Ain’t nobody gonna send us the national guard to shoot a bunch of niggers and injuns,” A.T. said, throwing his hands at the idea as if sweeping it out of the room, out of their heads.

“Of course, you know best, Arphaxed.” Frank sneered at his younger brother. “Don’t you?” The two shared a rivalry glance.

“This here is Okemah, gentlemen. Be reasonable.” M.S. Douglass looked each one of them square in the eye.

Then a sound like floorboards creaking and a vase titling on a table the righting itself, accompanied by a subtle movement from the doorway caught M.S. Douglass’ ears and eyes. He paused and stared at the door; the men followed his gaze. Perhaps it was the wind. Maybe one of those vermin looking for food. Or was someone eavesdropping.

“I’ll check,” Barber said, reading Douglass’ face and readying himself for a scuffle. He was the muscle in the office, no good for much else let along cooking the books. Barber rose from his chair, the leather sighing with vacancy and headed into the dark hallway. Douglass and the others listened intently as his footsteps retreated. Growing distant in the dark. The rug running along the dark wood in the hallway kept his steps quiet and made the walls look bleaker in the dark, less vibrant, less cherry red.

The old floorboards moaned under his weight at the end of the hall and the oil lamps were fading as they ran low. Only a dim glow cast his shadow, elongating his figure down the hallway floor.

Barber met a familiar figure facing away, looking out the window of balcony doors. The silhouette outlined in the full moon, it moved to open the doors. It was Judge Rowe, the other partner. Barber followed him into the cold, night air.

“Rowe,” Barber said in a cautionary greeting.

Judge Rowe was a pot-bellied man, bald and short, but his stand for justice was remarkably tall. With a reputation for protecting all community members, he was considered one of the fairer arbiters of justice in Okfuskee.

“Did Douglass put you up to this?” Rowe asked, letting his words slip into the evening wind.

“Rowe, we all know what’s going on h-”

“It’s robbery!” Rowe snapped.

“It’s legal,” Barber whispered in reply. He wasn’t looking for trouble between the partners as he was just a notary, officially speaking. The lawyers weren’t seeing eye-to-eye, that much was plain. And they never do.

Rowe turned away again frustrated. He braced his hands against the rails. A moment of silence spread between the two on the balcony. They hadn’t heard the Douglasses’ sly approach.

“Judge Rowe, whites and mixed breeds are on the same page,” M.S. Douglass said. Now standing on the balcony with his sons.

“You mean mixed blood?” Rowe corrected. His shoulders sank. This lot could pass for a gang, standing in the dark night, crossing their arms, and blocking the doorway.

“It’s for the best, Rowe,” M.S. Douglass said.

“Is this why we established this firm?” Rowe seemed astonished. He looked up, then turned around to meet their eyes. His partners, the men he’d chosen to build his life with, chosen to share his honor. His face bewildered with betrayal.

“For your sorry family to get rich?” Rowe sneered in accusation, spewing the words at Frank, A.T., and their father. Frank Douglass quickly lunged and grabbed Rowe by the shirt, in fistfuls of fury. His sudden movement with unexpected momentum.

“You—” Frank stepped toward the balcony’s waist-high railing, their faces inches apart.

“Will not—” He pushed Rowe’s back into the banister.

“Wait!” Philips rushed forward.

A sudden crack and Frank’s fists unclenched around the wrinkled fabric. Rowe’s balance was stolen as his arms flailed, his hips teetering at the top of the banister, searching for the railing. His eyes bulged in surprise and regret. He reached for them as his body began falling. Falling toward the pavement. Falling toward the silent. Tumbling from three stories, Rowe’s body slapped into the dead silent cobblestone street.

They could hear his bones break and his skull fracture.

“Help! It’s Judge Rowe. He’s fallen!”

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April 1924

Okfuskee County

The Tulsa Tribune

April 29, 1924

WHITE MAN VICTIM OF GUARDIANSHIP LAW FOR INDIANS

OFFICIALS CLAIM

By Roy J. Gibbons, NEA Service Writer

Okmulgee, OK - A.J. Smoot, a white man, has five children. Their dead mother was a full-blood Creek Indian.

An outside guardian has been appointed for these children, leaving the father no voice in the management of their estate, valued in excess of \$1,000,000.

Appointment of the guardian is in accordance with a law passed by the congress in 1908. This law transferred control over all Indian probate matters to the state courts of Oklahoma. Under it thousands of guardians have control of the wealth of Indians made rich by oil.

Federal Indian service officials are now protesting this law. They say it works hardships on the Indians.

In Smoot's case, these officials say, the father should be the logical person to look after his own children's fortune.

Indian service officials charge that the Smoot guardian refuses to buy furniture, clothes or provide a house for them unless the Smoot family moved back into the guardian's county and spent the money he allowed them from their estate in his home town.

All of these charges the Smoot guardian denies. He maintains he has always acted in good faith and for the best interests of his five wards.

He also says that his appointment as guardian for the Smoot children was originally requested by the father, who considered himself incapable of managing his children's fortune, inherited from their mother. The Smoot case is one of the alleged abuses recited by federal Indian service heads in their war upon state court-appointed guardians handling Indian estates in Oklahoma.

One of these guardians, a lawyer in Muskogee, who requested that his name be withheld, told the writer:

"Long before 1908, when the state courts were given jurisdiction over the Indians of Oklahoma and no

guardians were about, the Indian was in worse shape than he is today.

"The Indian service never adequately protected these people. It has always been the Indian service policy to keep the Indians on books and do little else.

"The guardian system is working out to the utmost satisfaction of all fair-minded people in the state.

"Abuses may have crept in here and there as is always the case with any human and man-made institution.

"But merely because a few guardians have proven unworthy of trust is no reason why all guardians should be branded as dishonest".

It was on the front page and what caught Daisy's attention was the photograph. She remembered sitting still before the camera. Jud had Chief on his lap, just a toddler wearing a dull expression. Eyes big and mouth agape. Lillie, too, was innocent with youth. Jud had been angry with the photographer. It was taking too long, and he was irritable. Of course, Anna looked like some type of model. Hair curled into perfection and her dress collar pressed just right. Even Renie looked like she was meant for the camera. Their solemn expressions were pale in the black ink. Daisy couldn't help but notice her face, whiter and asymmetrical. No matter how hard she tried, she was never more than one-eyed. Her right eye was a white orb, open but empty. Her jawline bore an uncanny resemblance to her father seated just in front of her. She was hypnotized

by the photograph. Her face was published for the world to see, for these spectators who gobbled down stories of oil-rich but money-poor, motherless half-Indians.

Jud was muttering the news article to himself when his voice started to grow louder, dripping with anger.

“SonofaBITCH! Who is this goddamn lawyer?!”

Exasperated, Jud exclaimed without looking up, “Indians better off than before 1908!? Find me one redman that agrees!” Jud huffed. The paper had plainly sided with the State. Painting the father as clueless and Indians as helpless. The sympathy he thought it would garner was surely nonexistent now. No mention of an investigation at all. How would he ever escape the crooked A.T. Douglass’ guardianship? He stroked his mustache, pursed his lips. He slammed a fist against the table, rattling his mug.

“Ain’t nothin’ but legalized rob’ry!” he roared.

Daisy jumped backward, startled. She realized how close she had gotten reading over her father’s shoulder. He slid further into his seat, bringing a mug to his lips. The bittersweet scent of whiskey tickled her nose. She took a few steps back. He slammed his mug on the table, sloshing the liquid as he did. Daisy watched with hesitation and curiosity as her father dislodged his anger and filled with disappointment.

“That damned Douglass,” he huffed.

Daisy remembered the first time she met Douglass. Only a couple years ago did he show up unannounced on their porch. Less than a month after Ma’s passing.

“Arphaxad Tatum Douglass at your service!” A tailored-suit white man stood before Daisy.



“Clients call me A.T.” His rehearsed introduction reduced to an empty platitude when he looked eye level only to realize the one who answered the door was a few feet shorter and decades younger than him.

Daisy’d answered a knock at the door, expecting to receive relatives and condolences.

A manicured man, free of calluses, thrust a business card into her face. “Attorney,” he declared. The road he’d disturbed on his way was still a growing dust cloud disrupting the drive. His recently polished black leather shoes were discolored with a thin layer of reddish-brown dirt.

“Is your father home?” He leaned to peer over her.

Perplexed, Daisy took stock of the man. Saying nothing, she stared.

“Oh! You’ve only one eye,” he observed. The two shared a silent look—his of confusion and hers of challenge. His eyes filled with pity, but not sympathy. She could tell the difference by now. The way their brows would furrow with displeasure. The uncertainty on the tip of their tongue. Some abruptly apologized for staring at what would never stare back and others visibly shuddered in discomfort and downcast their eyes. The longer he stared at her scar, the more unsettled he became.

“Er-Hm. Your father?” He fixated on his suit jacket, avoiding her piercing eye.

“DADDY!” she hollered but stood still as a statue continuing to eye the creature before her.

She heard a shuffling and disgruntled Jud rustling from another room.

“Fine weather for a March morning,” Douglass mused, still avoiding her eye.

She continued to stare him down. He was an unwelcome sight, and she wanted him to know it, to feel it. She couldn't pinpoint the feeling, but his presence made her tense. She was skeptical of Douglass; she didn't know why he'd shown up at their door.

"What did I say about hollerin' like that?" Jud pestered before he saw the guest. "Oh. Daisy, go outside and play with your sisters." He dismissed her with his hand outstretched for a proper introduction with A.T. Douglass.

Daisy sunk into the shadows of the house as the two were engulfed in conversation. It didn't appear they were strangers, but it also didn't seem the man was expected. She closely observed their exchanges. Douglass handed Jud a few papers, asked for their return with a signature, then collected his business into a leather briefcase and headed back down that dirt road. One word they exchanged echoed in her ears.

*Guardian.*

Daisy would set eye on A.T. Douglass again at the Muskogee County Courthouse. He'd sit next to her father and occasionally lean in and whisper in his ear. She wondered about these men. Their power. Their families. She wondered if they would ever leave hers alone.

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September 1923

Muskogee County

In Muskogee, Renie, Anna, and Daisy started at Sacred Heart Catholic School. Together, Jud drove them down the road three miles for their good Christian education. The nonsense of the Barnetts was not to be tolerated in the Smoot household. Freed from Hattie's memory, Jud saw Muskogee as an opportunity. It was best the girls saw it that way too. They needed everlasting salvation, he told Daisy one night.

Since Chief and Lillie were too young to start school, they stayed home. The three eldest girls went from their new home to their new school in this new city with their new clothes. Everything was so new. Daisy was beginning to wonder what was so special about new. She'd hoped Muskogee meant a reprieve from Douglass. His incessant calling on their home drug the Smoots away from home and into the courthouse. It didn't matter whether Daisy would find solace in Muskogee. She wanted answers.

Sister Susan was the least holy woman Daisy'd ever met and it only took looking at her for Daisy to decide so. Sister had a fixed sneer. Her beady eyes peered down her upturned nose at the Smoot girls. Kizzie Anna wanted to be liked and sucked up whenever possible but that didn't help Sister Susan see past their skin. A ghost-white alcoholic for a father and a dead Injun mother was a damn shame, Daisy overheard once. She never understood why people assumed she couldn't hear their whispers. I'm missing an eye but they're missing half a brain, she thought.

"Take your seats, girls," Susan crooned from behind her desk, pointer in hand.

The girls took their seats in the rigid wooden desks, spread across the room as no vacancies were together. The school children scribed in mimicry the shapes, letters, and words

Sister Susan recited in the front of the schoolroom. It didn't take long for Daisy's mind to wander. She thought of down home. The Oktahutchee's cool reprieve on summer days. The garden Ma tended to day in and day out. Soon, she thought of Ma entirely. So, she thought of the guardians. And she began to write.

"And what do we have here?" Sister Susan loomed over Daisy's desk.

Hopelessly, Daisy attempted to conceal her journal from Sister Susan's intrusive presence. Before Daisy could smudge the ink, Sister had snatched the journal and was reading the prohibited content aloud--the punishment for failing to be on task. Daisy eyed the paddle beside Sister's desk. It was engraved with flowing script, Sacred Heart with a crucifix.

"The Guardians," Sister Susan's voice echoed from front and center. Daisy's classmates were eyeing her with skepticism.

"Tsk, tsk, Daisy Smoot," Sister sucked air through her teeth and shook her head. Eyeing Daisy's shrinking shoulders. Everyone was staring at her.

"You know the rules, Daisy."

Sister Susan strode to her desk and reached for the paddle. Beckoning Daisy forth, in front of everyone.

"Beg for His mercy. May the Lord forgive you," Sister said and grabbed Daisy's shoulder, pushing her to bend over the desk.

"Tsk. Tsk. Daisy. If we spare the rod, then we spoil the child."

*Thwack.*

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October 1867

Tvkvptce County

Patsy and Nancy, that's what Mary had named the hollow girls. They were quiet but quick. They picked up Mvskoke fast. No one ever came looking. Mary suspected there wasn't anyone left to be looking. By the end of the war, the girls were family. Part of the Barnett matriarchy. And they were inseparable.

Mary watched Dave fall in love with Patsy first. As a young boy, he'd gather the shiniest stones for her to carve into beads and he'd desperately search for the least frayed grass for basket weaving. He hadn't taken his eyes off her since that night in Kansas. Mary'd long known they might make a family together since those early days when her son was so enamored with them. As were his younger sisters, Sissie, Ellen, and Hannah. The girls were thrilled to have more sisters. Because the war had taken Siah from home and from Mary for years, all her children were consecutive in birth apart from newborn Lizzie.

Siah had accepted the Loyal Creek misnomer and all its benefits. That's what they called it, benefits. His family, with nowhere to go after the war, was told there'd be promises fulfilled in Creek Nation. Land for his people to prosper again. The United States honored his loyalty to the Union.

They chose to settle near Bryant. A place not too far from their pre-war home in Fort Gibson. Things had changed but a lot was the same. They attended the Arbeka Indian Church where Dave sang as loud and beautifully as he could. Stealing looks at Patsy through every verse.

Cēsvs vcvnokēcēs. *Jesus loves me.*

Cokv rakkot cvkicēs. *The Bible tells me so.*

Hopuetake enaket's. *Children belong to him.*

Yekcvkekis, ent yekcēs. *They are weak, he is strong.*

Vcvnokēcēs. *He loves me.*

Vcvnokēcēs. *He loves me.*

Vcvnokēcēs. *He loves me.*

Nakcokvt cvkicēs. *The book tells me so.*

Cēsvs vm ēlvtēt os. *Jesus died for me.*

Encuko vnhvokvrēn, *His house to open for me,*

Holwvyēckvn vslēcen, *He erases sin,*

'Mestucet ecēyvrēs. *His little child will enter in.*

Vcvnokēcēs. *He loves me.*

Vcvnokēcēs. *He loves me.*

Vcvnokēcēs. *He loves me.*

Nakcokvt cvkicēs. *The book tells me so.*

Dave looked to Patsy and sang his heart out, as if the words were I love you. You, Patsy, Dave's eyes read with the foolish passion of a young heart. Mary watched her son totally oblivious to the congregation, to the Lord, to anything that wasn't Patsy. She knew her son would have to wait to marry the girl, wait at least until her blood moon. And she was inseparable from Nancy. Her little sister would never leave her, not since the day they emerged from that tree. There wasn't no way the two would ever part, even if Patsy's feelings reciprocated Dave's. There was time. Time for change. Time for living. Time for everything in Bryant.

Then Culley Johnson opened his blacksmith shop. A stone throw from the all-black settlement of Boley. He was popular among the freedmen and full-bloods. Indian Territory was still theirs. Community emerged again after the war and Mary was starting to feel a sense of home. Down the road from Culley's shop and back at the homeplace after the church service, Mary's attention was called by a wailing from the swaddled bundle in the woven basket at her feet.

"Ah. Shhhh, Lizzie," Mary cooed to her daughter. Leaning down, she scooped the small one into her arms.

Dave, as her eldest and lost lovebird, was tenderly curious about his new sister. He was nearly a man now at thirteen and would likely father his own children soon.

"She's so small," he said with wonder.

"You were, too." Mary smiled at him. She nodded to the bundle and held Lizzie out to Dave. He carefully took hold of her and watched his sister. She yawned and closed her eyes.

Dave seemed to like babies quite a bit. He scuttled off between the corn stalks to make her another doll of husk. Siah said all these women were making his son soft, but Mary thought him sweet and tender. He was taken with Lizzie. He loved all his sisters with tender fondness.

To keep the hollow girls together and to satiate Dave's teenage lust, Mary would suggest he marry Patsy and Nancy in a few years. Siah would hear her reason and it was best to keep them close to home. There was no need to run off Nancy, she was already family. With Siah as a prominent community member, the idea wouldn't alarm the council. It was an older custom, but not entirely extinct.

"They have no other family" she would say to him.

"That you know of," he'd respond. She could challenge him just as well.

“They’ll be together. They can take care of each other. The three of them.” And Patsy would bear Dave’s first daughter in five years’ time.

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January 1920

Okfuskee County

“Many, many moons ago the earth was dark. ‘Fore you or me, ‘fore Life ev’r lived on this earth, there was darkness.”

Hattie cuddled Lillie in her lap and took stock of her children, gathered on a cold night. Cluttered around the fireplace, the Smoot children’s dark eyes fixated on their mother and the soft flames warmed their bodies.

“You see, seeds o’ life were buried deep ‘nside that darkness. Water covered all o’ Mother earth, and the seeds were left to mix wit’ soils n’ waters n’ sun. Together, the mixins of first life came t’be.

“The need for warmth sent Life in search o’ light. Confined to the center o’ earth, Life searched for a way out. First, Crawfish broke through the mud, only to git stuck between the inner and outer worlds.

“So Life sent Turtle next. ‘Cause he was fit to straddle the muddy inbetw’n. Turtle brought allo’ Life into the next world on its back. Together they met a dark, dense fog. Sun was lost n’th darkness. When the water slipp’d ‘way, Life left the Turtle’s shell for dry land and began to dwell upon earth in the cold.

“Humans and animals wandered the earth. They became frightn’d. No one could see.” She closed her eyes and searched the air with her hands, balancing four-year-old Lillie in her lap.

“Our people searched near ‘n far.” She spread her arms wide.

“They could not find each other.” She hugged small Lillie tight. And Anna, the eldest, only eleven years-old, gasped.

“They were alone?!”

“Yes.” Hattie nodded.

“They were alone and began to wander in search of one ‘nother. They began to drift ‘part. Gathering’ in groups, animals and people comforted one ‘nother. Together, they prayed and chanted to Hesaketamese for help from the fog.”

“Hees-va-das-mee,” Lillie echoed.

“He-saw-key-duh-me-see. The maker of breath.” Hattie paused and soaked in the attentive eyes of her children. She took a deep breath and looked at each of them. A reflection of herself and the very thing she loved most.

“Hesaketamese answered their prayers. Wind came from the east and began to blow agai’st the fog. And for the firs’time, the animals and people saw ‘nother. Their bonds of kinship would only grow stronger n’time. When the sun emerged, they found themselves in far western lands where the mountains met the sky. These peaks were known as the backbone of the earth.” Hattie leaned down and gently drew her finger along little Chief’s spine. A shudder-induced giggle escaped his lips. Legs-crossed and blanketed in patterned wool, he snuggled up between his older sisters, Daisy and Renie.

“The grass grew green and the waters ran fast. The land was beautiful and vast. It was our guides, our family who found ‘em. Each group of people was rescued by a different animal. Deer trotted to the people and coaxed them out.” Hattie mimicked trotting with her feet. *Duh-thump, duh-thump, duh-thump.*

“Snake slithered to the people and led them to light.” She wiggled and shimmied in her seat.

“Beaver scurried by and signaled for the people to come, Turtle moseyed by and shook his shell as invitation, Alligator snapped his jaws and swung his tail to encourage followers.” She snapped her arms together like alligator jaws.

“Bird flew circles in the sky leading people into the new world.” Hattie flapped her arms as if taking flight.

“And Bear stood upright to alert the people of our new beginning, all animals found their people and saved them.

“When Life emerged on Mother earth, after the fog disappeared, twelve envliketv bound our people. Every one belongs to the envliketv of their mother.”

“What clan are you?” Chief piped.

“Well...Well...Well... are we havin’ a kumbaya at the fire?” Jud’s liquor-laced voice broke their reprieve as he waltzed in from a night out.

“Why wasna I invit’d?”

“Jud,” Hattie cautioned. “I was gettin’ the kids ready for bed. Come on now, skoden,” she urged and ushered them as quickly as their tired bodies would move. It was late into the night now. She knew better than to keep them up when he might return. He was intolerable in this state.

“No, no, no.” Jud waved them all to stay. Hattie froze with fear.

“Let’s hear this here story,” Jud said.

“Ma already finished,” Kizzie Anna quipped.

“I’m tired,” Chief echoed.

“I. Said. Sit. NOW!”

They fearfully found their seats on the floor, huddled closer together. Apprehensive of their father and eager for their mother.

“The story?” Jud looked expectantly at Hattie.

“Just an ol’ tale. The creation myth,” Hattie tried placating him.

“Listen ‘ere. God made man. I’m your master ‘round’ere.”

“I know, Jud. It was only a story,” Hattie said.

“You think you can fill them with that injun nonsense? You think I don’t know what yer doin’?”

“I know exactly what you are.”

He stood up and towered over Hattie. He grabbed her, threw her against the wall. Slammed her head once more and screamed, “I’ll show you a taker of breath!” He was choking her now. Her hands clawed at his. Her face turned a darkening purple. Even in his drunken state, he was stronger than her. He would always be stronger than her. Her words were lost in croaked noises and little gasps. Her pleading was gurgled and wordless. Lillie was wailing and clinging to Daisy. Renie and Chief were holding each other on the floor. Anna was struck with a mixture of horror and disgust.

“I know what you are,” he roared in her face.

“A dirty, good-for-nuthin’ squaw,” he spat the words into her face and released his hold.

She dropped to the floor. “And don’t you f’rget it,” he spoke over her crumpled frame.

On her hands and knees, she coughed and coughed. Shaking, gasping, and crying she crawled to her children. His footsteps echoed across the floor until he was out the door. Taking another swig and he stumbled away.

“Don’t cry m’babies.” Her hoarse voice filled their ears as she hugged all five. She smoothed their hair, rubbed their backs, and comforted their fears in vain.

“I’m okay. S’okay. S’okay.”

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April 1930

Adair County

The first time James hit Daisy she wasn't surprised. He said she deserved it. Why did you make me do that, he'd shout at her. But she saw it coming a mile away. Getting married was Daisy's ticket to finally accessing her money without a guardian—without A.T. Douglass or Harry Smith.

They bought 100 acres near Wauhillau, in Cherokee Nation. As residents of Stoney Point, James and Daisy were welcome newlyweds. All that harmonious bliss lasted about two days. When they moved, his father came with them. Old Man James was more rotten than his son. Daisy couldn't stand the way he'd call her a dirty squaw, telling her she needed to stay in the kitchen.

They started going to Stoney Point Community Church. Daisy could sing her hymns there and be something else other than Mrs. James Plumlee Richards or maybe that's all she'd ever be. And it wasn't long before Daisy's belly started to swell with life. Her first child. Their first child. She was terrified. When her youngest sister was born, Daisy was only six. There had been a lot of commotion and Grandma Mary had been there. Her father Jud always hated when she came around. Old coon, he'd call her.

Most days, Daisy doubted marrying James at all. She was only nineteen, and she was certain it wasn't love. Such a thing was for movies and music. She wondered if she would ever be loved again. But she couldn't help caressing her belly. Maybe *she* would love Daisy. Maybe Daisy would love *her*.

Doubt crept into James and Daisy's bed. It festered into betrayal and once the trust was gone, the marriage was hollow. Daisy decided he couldn't be trusted. She must love this baby because James never would. Not the right way anyhow. It used to be heartache she'd feel. Then the sorrow decayed, anger blossomed, and she wished him dead. Eventually, all white men were the same. Marriage was a child-rearing business. Nothing more. Nothing less.

It was there, on the eastern edges of Oklahoma, nestled between the ends of Route 4, where Daisy became a mother. James didn't hold her hand as she labored through the birth. Really, he let his absence crush her spirit, that numbing effect never left her. But he'd done her wrong well before then.

She figured it out on an overcast Sunday morning, the discomfort of spring humidity was weighing on the church congregation. Her realization dawned with the jeering looks of the congregation, robbing her attention from scripture. Women were staring at her. Whispering about her and James. She stole a glance at him, with the Lord's Good Book in his lap and his hands to himself, and she knew he'd done wrong.

They'd only been married a few months. That's all it had taken for him to find another's bed. Daisy was fuming on the drive home. Ready to explode upon arrival.

"We're supposed to be partners! You gon' round on me! Making a fool o' me!?"

"Daisy, it ain't like that," James cooed.

"In front the whole congregation!" Her fury was uncontainable.

"Daisy," James tried.

"I'm carryin' your child!" She whirled from the car seat, slamming the door in his face. She stomped up the steps to their house, fuming with rage, passing Old Man James on the porch

swing. He'd fallen asleep waiting for their return. He'd never join them but would always wait up.

"Now hold on." James scampered after her. His dad gave him a warning glance—don't go in there, his eyes screamed.

Inside he was met with an airborne ceramic plate. It splintered, broke into a hundred pieces, and sprinkled the living room floor.

"It was only one time!"

She threw whatever she could find at his head. A book whizzed past. A vase shattered on impact with the wall just to his right. His look of bewilderment could not deter her.

"Woman! You lost your damn mind!" He attempted to escape out the front door, giving Daisy time and space to cool.

She followed him outside. Free of things to throw, she resorted to insults.

"You good for nothin', waste of space! You, James Plumlee Richards, are a rake!" She pointed an accusatory finger in his face. Her finger jabbing his chest, forcing him backward down the porch steps. He tripped then hurried for the truck's cab, fumbled with the keys, dropped them. She walloped him across the back of his head as he straightened.

Old Man James let a loud cackle escape from the porch swing.

"Oof!" James' hand reached for the mark. He cast her a wild look and hastily entered the cab, started the engine, and slammed on the accelerator before the beast was even in gear. A backfire shot cut across the empty farmland.

Old Man James cackled a toothless grin from the swing and watched the show continue.

"You sold me out, sonofabitch!" she screamed after him as James peeled away.



“He don’t know no better,” Old Man said as Daisy sat on the step.

“Neither do I.” Her whisper was lost in the wind.

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June 1921

Okfuskee County

Myrtle threw herself onto the floor. Her pale face was bright red from all her wailing.

“I won’t do it!” she hollered.

Daisy tried diverting her eyes from this pitiful show. She snuck a glance at Jud, his fury pulsing in protruding veins—on his forehead, down his arms and curling into his fisted hands. He looked like an overfilled sausage link, and he acted like an overfilled heifer in need of milking. All prickly around the edges and sensitive. The girls sat still, holding their breath. Breakfast was done, appetites perished. Daisy tried not to stare.

“Young lady.” Jud’s voice was a chill warning. The scorching heat of summer could feel like the dead of winter under that gaze.

Myrtle curled into herself. As if trying to disappear through the dirt floor, down into the earth, swallowed by nothingness. Daisy could almost hear her thoughts, if only she could shrink away, bit by bit until whatever was left—her soul, her essence, her air would simply drift away. Caught in a summer breeze and taken far, far away from here, away from this homeplace.

Little whimpers escaped Myrtle’s crumpled form. She continued to softly cry. Daisy wasn’t sure her stepsister deserved this, but she couldn’t feel sympathy for Myrtle.

“I don’t give tha’ man my blessin’. No reason for all this here hysteria,” Jud sneered. Then he leaned down. His clean-shaven face only inches from Myrtle’s ear. Daisy could still see the razor blade grazing his jaw from earlier in the morning, the almost-silent trimming of his beard where the hairs were only a shadow. Where his pale skin darkened under the silver blade’s gleam. How he started to look ominous, then he’d caught her eye in the reflection.

She watched now as his lips moved and curled at Myrtle's ear. Daisy caught the small smirk on the corner of his mouth when he stopped whispering and stood. He straightened himself. His Sunday Best, as Ma called it, was a crisp white shirt and a pair of brown slacks, black belt. The pointed toes of his only pair of leather shoes were polished to perfection. Daisy knew it was perfection because Kizzie'd snatched the shoe out of her hand when she was polishing it wrong. To do it right, of course. To get them gleaming, of course.

"Yer a woman now. Best act like it." He stepped over Myrtle and headed for the door. There was a finality in the air. And ever so slowly, Myrtle lifted herself from the floor. Kizzie Anna ran over to her, helped straighten her dress and fix her hair. She fussed over Myrtle's attire.

"We all getting married one day," Kizzie offered.

"At fifteen?" Daisy's sarcastic comment had slipped her filter. With that, Myrtle walked out the door behind her father. They all knew he was a man who didn't like waiting.

Seats became uncomfortable. Everyone shifted under the absence of tension, the air unfroze like the way water does under moonlight. Illuminating every ripple, every disturbance. Kizzie stood still in the spot Myrtle had left her. And Daisy thought of womanhood. She thought of Ma.

How the moons came to shine on her. She'd told them they, too, would have red moons like hers. How every month, like a hard-earned reprieve, Hattie would find her way to the special place. That's what she'd called it. How she would meticulously gather her eating utensils, bedding, clothes—everything she needed for the week. Her unique set of everything. She'd stay away from the main house, apart from all the children and Jud. Though the girls could visit her any time they wanted. A place just for us, she'd told Daisy once.

Ma would work the farm like usual but when it came to the house, she never stepped in the one-room, dirt-floor wooden structure. She'd stay away—from their food, from their washing, from their sleeping. It was important she bleed alone but Daisy couldn't quite remember the story.

“Hvresse.” That's what Hattie'd called it. Daisy remembered now. The moon is a woman. Lost in the dark sky but alighting us all in the night. But Daisy couldn't quite remember it all right.

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November 1929

Muskogee County

There were women in between all the wives of Acy Judson Smoot. Daisy swore she would remember every last one of their ugly mugs. The last of them was the only one to outlive the ass himself.

“Lois, why did you marry my father?” Daisy asked.

“He’s a generous man.” Lois had her back to Daisy, standing in front of the stove.

“A real charmer, that one.” Lois waved the wooden spoon about, like a flirtatious wand.

Daisy cracked a smile at the woman. She was knowingly absurd. Daisy instantly knew how Jud could be drawn to such an eccentric woman. Lois suddenly turned around. Facing Daisy, who sat at the kitchen table across the room.

“Wanna know a secret?” Lois swayed back and forth, as if teasing rich gossip.

“Certainly.” Daisy let her smile reach her eye.

Lois crossed the room, sat across from her at the table and leaned in so close Daisy could smell the onions on her hands and see the splotches of flour on her pastel apron. Such a housewife he’s found, Daisy mused.

Lois brought an open palm to the side of her mouth, feigning an exaggerated whisper.

“He’s not my first.”

A pot bubbled, rattling the lid behind Lois. Steam coiling toward the ceiling. Daisy looked at the boiling mess. Lois shot out of the chair.

“Oh my! Oh shoot.” Lois stamped her foot. Daisy thought she saw flour fall from her apron, like snow in the desert. The burning smells stung her nose.

The pot was never the same and Daisy was married three months later.

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May 1908

Okfuskee County

Jud was a widower when he met Hattie. His first wife Dulah died in childbirth. At least that's the story Hattie retold to Mary when gushing over the white man. Hattie had wanted nothing more than to tell her mother about this new beau, but Patsy had been gone. She died and no one was the same. Not her husband Dave, her sister Nancy, or any of the children. Hattie knew how important a mother was as she was mourning the loss of her own. So she understood why Jud had hoped he'd find a mother for his girls. He needed someone to help shoulder the burden of rearing those kids and his future ones, Hattie said. With his few belongings and two toddler girls, he survived in the endless plains, tallgrass prairies, and undisturbed bedrock with nothing more than his charm and luck. A Texan searching for his own fortune in Indian Territory. He and his girls had boarded with an old widow, Mrs. Margaret Smith and her son-in-law's family. Mrs. Smith cared for and taught the girls whenever Jud was working the farm or courting Hattie. Her infatuation with Jud made Mary uneasy. She didn't like seeing Hattie so smitten with someone so white, so outside their world.

It was hard on a man's heart, raising children without his own roof or feed, Hattie told Mary matter of fact. Tenancy farming is dangerously inconsistent, she parroted what he'd told her.

"I'm his blessing," Hattie said.

"Oh, puse. I wish you'd meet him," Hattie gushed. The girl was in love, it was plain as day on her face, Mary eyed her granddaughter with skepticism.

They were to see each other again. Every Saturday night at that dance tent down in Bryant. Hattie was giddy for Saturday to come sooner.

“Why you want to care for some white woman’s kids?” Mary asked.

“Their mother died. His two girls are sweet.” Hattie smiled.

“When’d you meet ‘em?” Mary’s lip curled.

“I saw ‘em in town last week. He introduced me to little Myrtle and Pearl.”

“Why don’t you marry a red man?” Mary admonished.

“Puse!”

“He kill his wife?” Mary grunted.

“What?! No. Every baby needs a mama. You taught me that,” Hattie said referring to her own mother’s origins in that hollow tree.

“You love ‘em?” Mary squinted her eyes at Hattie. Her confusion plainly painted between her crows’ feet and sunken cheeks.

“He’s a good man. Make me a fine husband,” Hattie said with finality.

The conversation was over, but Mary didn’t like it one bit.

“Best get down to the school. Lessons to be learnt,” Mary said as she lifted herself from the ox-hide chair and walked away to collect the grandbabies.

Mary should’ve known that man was up to no good. She cursed herself later but one Sunday morning, after Hattie had missed their dancing date, Jud couldn’t help himself and showed up on her doorstep.

Mary had answered the door and hollered in surprise. “Estehvtke!” alerting everyone to the intruder. She scuttled the children out of sight. She hadn’t greeted Jud but Hattie had heard the commotion and went to the door.



“What are you doin’ here?” Hattie asked. She didn’t look displeased to see him, but she wasn’t smiling. Her apron was wet with washing work and kitchen doings.

“Come to see you.” Jud fiddled with springtime flowers, a handpicked bouquet. Hattie wiped her hands on her apron.

“Oh, how nice,” she said.

Mary had mastered the art of listening, hearing what she wasn’t meant to and collecting intel from everyone and everything. She had gathered her grandbabies and sufficiently distracted them with corn husk dolls and was watching from her front porch rocking chair. She was in plain view but didn’t care, she sat for the show. Most folks didn’t think she could hear these days cause her cataracts were bad. But ears and eyes ain’t got nothing to do with each other. Her youngest grandson had asked why she had ears on the back of her neck. Surprised, Mary barked at him to scram. Without answering, he snickered and ran off to play with the other kids. Hattie had laughed, too. Jud glanced at Mary, then set his gaze on Hattie.

“These are for me?” Hattie held out a hand and Jud’s fingers grazed her palm as he rested the stems in hers.

“Yes, there somethin’ I wan’ ask you,” his voice wavered with nerves.

“Somethin’ the matter? Your girls alright?” Concern furrowed her brow.

“Nah. They’s alright. Everythin’ alright.”

“Thank the Lord.” She smiled at him. Mary could see the blush in her cheeks and rolled her eyes. Since when did this girl get so silly, Mary thought.

Jud fumbled with his now-empty hands. Took several deep breaths but couldn’t meet Hattie’s eyes. Nervous fella, he was.

“How’d you find me?” Hattie asked. Mary knew with a name like Barnett, there was bound to be some relation blabbing about Hattie’s whereabouts to this lovestruck white man. Mary didn’t tell Hattie this and simply shrugged her shoulders when Hattie looked at her for answers. As if to say she’d never divulge their homeplace to this redneck fool. Hattie’d never had a man call on her like this, let alone with a bouquet of flowers. Mary thought it strange, most prospective lovers brought food. That's what the aunties always said. Wait for the one who’ll feed you well, they laughed in agreement.

“Asked ‘round. People like to talk.”

“Not you,” Hattie retorted.

They shared a small smile at her snarky joke. Hattie was teasing him through his shy facade. He seized the moment, dropped to one knee, and took his hat across his heart. Mary gasped.

“Hattie Barnett, will you marry me?”

Oh no, Mary’s hand fluttered to her heart.

Hattie met Jud’s eyes again.

“Yes.”

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August 1925

Okfuskee County

Growing up in Okfuskee meant tending to the garden. Day in and day out, Daisy would help her family. It was really Ma's garden, but it was important they kept it going. The late summer heat bore through her linen dress. The stooping and picking, plucking and collecting caused beads of sweat to run down her face. She could feel her clothes growing damp as their chores carried through the morning. Her stench growing pungent even to her nose.

She huffed as she picked the beans, inspected the pumpkins, and shucked the dried corn. Sorting them into the appropriate piles in her baskets. She would keep some of the husks for her next doll, so she snuck them into her apron pocket. Jud didn't like the dolls much. He always snatched them away when he saw them, and she would never see them again. This time, she would be careful. Be sure to make it only a pinky tall this time. An old thread for the cinched waist would do just fine. Tuck the doll between the folds of her blanket, not under her pillow like last time. Well, it was her and Renie's bed and blanket and pillow which meant Daisy would have to tell Renie about the doll. And Renie couldn't keep any secrets. She liked talking too much for that, but only the whispering kind under the covers at night, with her eyes at the kitchen table, and between the towering stalks in the garden.

"Look," Renie whispered through the leaves. There was a rustling from the thick of greenery. Their eyes focused on the moving leaves. Out hopped greedy little Cufe, hurriedly munching on carrots. Carrots from their garden!

"Shoo!" Daisy chased away the vermin. Then they both heard it. Voices, this time. Men talking but it was far away and indistinct.

Instantly, they both crouched, hiding between the elephant ears of the pumpkin plants. Daisy swayed with the leaves in the wind, trying to spot the source of sound. The voices were coming closer. The girls looked at each other through the rows of vegetables. Daisy lifted a finger to her lips and glanced at the direction of the approaching sound.

“Now, Mr. Smoot, I want you to know I’m a fair man. I do my business above table.” Daisy caught sight of the man gesturing with his arms, as if taking something beneath an imaginary table and bringing it above. They continued walking in her direction as they spoke.

But Jud’s voice carried the opposite direction. His response was lost to the wind and her ears strained. They were getting closer and Renie had slipped further away in a slow retreat. Daisy would be spotted if she tried to run now. She fell from her crouch into a crawl. Her palms flat against the damp soil. The smell of soil and her sweat swirling in a heady mix. She inched closer, crawling toward the pumpkins, shadowed by their natural umbrella. She was careful and curious.

“Douglass can be difficult,” the voice affirmed. It was a man, a clean white man. He was dressed nicely like the sort of men they’d seen at the courthouse. His face was in deep concentration. Thinking about whatever Jud was saying. Listening, or at least pretending to. Daisy concentrated on his face. The details of his fair complexion. Surely, he’ll burn out in this sun, she thought. She realized if she stretched out her hand, she could grab Jud’s pant leg.

“If I can speak plainly, Mr. Smoot,” the white man said as if asking permission.

Jud nodded and the man continued.

“If I were you, I’d move the estate to Muskogee.”

Jud seemed to shift his weight between each foot. Daisy rarely thought him speechless. Maybe he was thinking. Lot of good that’ll do us, she thought.

A branch snapped nearby and caught everyone's attention.

"Damn rabbits!" Jud exclaimed.

"I better take my leave, Mr. Smoot. Think about what I've said and give me a call," he offered his card. The man began to collect himself with his briefcase and buttoned suit jacket.

"Of course. Thank you, Mr. Smith," Jud said taking the offered hand. "Sir, let me walk you to your car."

Daisy caught the end of their conversation and knew it was her chance. Jud would be back after seeing Mr. Smith off and she'd be in real trouble then. She carefully crawled out from under the garden hideout and broke into a sprint. The garden was surrounded by a sizable clearing so she had to run a few hundred feet before the trees would swallow her from sight though she was certain the house obstructed Jud's view.

Daisy's depth perception was awful. Her right foot kept tripping on small rocks and roots. Not to mention she had zero peripheral on her right so any approaching threat wouldn't be seen until it was too late. She crouched as she ran, throwing her center of gravity. She wobbled, and stumbled, cursing at her clumsiness. Daisy nearly skidded down the hillside and into the creek.

Right as she reached the tree line, Renie's hand reached out and stopped her. They dropped to the ground. She lay on her stomach as she breathed hard. Slowly, she raised her head above the grass and looked around. She spotted her father and Smith but now they were joined by Will, Myrtle's husband. That man was nearly ten years older than their stepsister and every bit as rotten as their father.

"I thought they'd got you," Renie sighed.

Daisy swatted her hand away. "Shhh," Daisy hissed. "They might find us still."

"Sorry," Renie mumbled. "Theys too far anyway."

“Thanks for distractin’em,” Daisy said and gave her sister a nod when the coast was clear.

“Wasn’t me,” Renie met Daisy’s eye with a confused look. Then, a small smile spread across their faces, and they shared the secret. On the other side of the clearing, they could just barely see Cufe hopping away with a bright orange prized carrot in his mouth.

“So, whadya hear?”

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July 1922

Okfuskee County

The Okfuskee County Courthouse was in Okemah, which meant they had to ride twenty miles from home. Jud was packing all the kids into the wagon and readying the horses for another hearing. They had to wear appropriate attire which was an incredibly itchy dress for Daisy. The collar was made of lace and flared out. The sleeves were full length even though it was peak summer. The fabric was dark and unforgiving, so she overheated like a furnace. Her face would flush red, and her sisters would laugh at her rosy complexion. She found herself pulling at the neck, eager for more space to breathe—more room to exist.

“Quitit.” Kizzie Anna slapped Daisy’s hand from fiddling with the collar.

“You’ll ruin it,” she scolded Daisy.

“Cain’t ruin sumthin’ thats already ugly,” Daisy mumbled and gave up stretching the collar.

“Just cause your neck’s fat, doesn’t mean the dress at fault.” Kizzie turned her nose up and rolled her eyes at her sister’s complete lack of fashion sense.

Daisy fumed but did nothing. She would get Kizzie back later when there weren’t witnesses.

Jud was never happy to head over to the courthouse, but he said it was important everyone be there.

“This is our money, we deserve to spend it,” he would say as if they could ever forget. Daisy was jostled left and right as they trotted down the road. Some folks had cars already, but most were still using livestock and wagons for travel.

Out of boredom or curiosity, Daisy was keeping mental notes on the court case. She recalled two months ago, making a similar trip. That time Jud had convinced some outside lawyer to file a petition for the removal of Guardian Douglass on their behalf. Douglass had given his friends and family access to Ma's estate funds, approving loans from the minors' account for real estate all over Indian Country. At least that was what Jud was accusing him of, but it seemed impossible to prove.

"You shouldn't scowl like that," Kizzie admonished.

Daisy gave her a deathly glare.

"It'll give you wrinkles," said Kizzie.

"Just ignore her," Renie offered.

They were all in matching dresses with slight variations—different collar designs, varying sleeve lengths, occasional accents of white, but all were black and thick. Daisy thought they looked as though they were headed to a white man's funeral.

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July 1935

Okfuskee County

When an Oklahoma storm rolls in, you can taste it in the air. The hairs on your neck and arms will stand at attention. Everything becomes electrified. The rain will start slowly, pittering and pattering against the dried dirt. It'll seem endless within minutes. The clouds unforgiving, the crashing cacophony of lightning and thunder unnerving. Everything will be fresh; everything will be washed anew. Cleansed of its sins.

Locv observes the gullywasher from the trunk of a fallen tree. There are only a few trees lining the perimeter of the farm, but there's good cover here. His shell will protect him, and he can always slip inside for respite. For now, he keeps watch. Resting atop the decomposing bark. There, in the middle of the hayfield, he watches as Acey Judson Smoot gathers his fencing post. Jud knew better than to repair amidst an oncoming storm, but he didn't want the heifers escaping. Earlier, over the phone, Chief told'em to stay inside. Told his ol'man there wasn't a need for working in such conditions. They'd sort it all in the morning. It wasn't like his son didn't appreciate his efforts, but his dad was fifty-nine now. And it was time to slow down.

"Wait for me, Pa." Chief had dismissed Jud's impatience. "Storms rollin'in now. We can sort it t'morrow." But, of course, his warnings went unheeded.

"Don't be stupid," Chief said. Normally he wouldn't speak to his father that way, but he was grown now. And his dad had made some wayward choices over the years. Chief thought his liver would give out before his mind, but you can't ever really know how you'll go.

On that tree, Locv called upon Hesaketvmese for strength and Ibofonga for wisdom. Gradually, Locv watched the sky begin to change. Bulging grey discs sunk and exploded as the clouds grew angrier. The air was growing denser, more humid with saturation. There wasn't much time now.

Jud hadn't seen Locv or the clouds' transformation. He raised the post driver above his head, used all his might from within his chest, and in a gust of breath brought the driver down with a blow that echoed with a clap of thunder. The skies darkened. He raised the driver again. Breathing deep, he glanced up to see it.

"Sonofabitch," he breathlessly gasped.

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August 1893

Bryant, Creek Nation, I.T.

Underneath some thicket, Jim Barnett wrestled another felled tree to his makeshift shop. He'd been building the split-log structure as a school. For the locals, for the young, growing minds. Jim was working away on making new benches. There was a high demand for seats. All the children in Bryant wanted a chair in the Barnett School. It was an integrated place of learning—mixed blood, full blood, black, and white students would populate the room.

“Hesci! Estonko?” Tom Harper's greeting resounded from the road. He was walking up the pathway. Jim set down his ax and raised his arm to shade his eyes from the beating sun.

“Ah-ho! Estonko?!” Jim bellowed in response.

“Ehe, estonkon aris,” Tom said, affirming his wellness.

They took stock of Jim's progress. The Barnett School had come so far in a few short years. The aftermath of the Civil War opened the floodgates on Indian Territory. It was more important than ever to establish another roundhouse. Building it had taken Jim nearly the whole summer last year. It was a lot of long days. He'd had help, of course.

“Where's dem kids?” Jim faltered into their blended Mvskoke-English conversation.

“Any minute,” Tom said. Looking toward the road to indicate their imminent arrival.

Not ten minutes later, Mary Barnett and the train of children skirting around her were walking up the pathway.

“Hesci!” The children squealed and scurried around. She'd brought along Nancy Barnett with her—and several of her toddler children, Jimmy, Robert, and George. And baby Hattie, of course. She was Patsy's youngest and growing so quickly.

Jim walked over to greet Mary. The two caught up on the growing children. Mary said Hattie was a reflection of her own mother and their similarities transported her back home. He watched the fondness catch all her features. The way she smiled. He knew back home like she did. Back before removal. Before the canoes, before those great waters, before the great sinking, before the screams, before everything was so different.

Mary had collected the children into the log-split structure and Jim followed to share the progress. The schoolhouse was an extension of Siah's property. Of course, Siah never said it was Jim's because it was both of theirs. All of ours, he'd told the family, his wife Mary and the children too. We do not own this land; we cannot own this land. We learn from this land, and we listen to this land. We care for the land and the land will care for us. Jim thought Siah was good at that sermon-like talk.

Jim and Siah Barnett had built the Barnett Store together on the backend of the house. The same house Mary had found so much solace in after the war. They couldn't return to Fort Gibson where they'd been before the war. Where she'd birthed her first babies. Their umbilical cords buried there. So, in Bryant, there was a need for a social scene, a gathering place.

Mary had known Jim as long as she'd known Siah, going on forty years. Jim was Siah's half-brother, but he didn't own half the store. You see, Jim Barnett ran the store, but Siah Barnett owned it. Not the land, just the property and proceeds. Times didn't account for a black man to own much, no matter how hard he worked. Mary'd always taken a liking to Jim Barnett but thought the arrangement a little unfair.

“Puse,” a small voice caught Mary’s ear and Jim’s attention. She was good at hiding in the shadows. She looked down to see a wide-eyed, arms outstretched Hattie. Mary reached down and lovingly lifted Hattie into her arms.

“Hoktuce.” *My girl.*

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November 1929

Muskogee County

Euzziel Decayce Ferguson smelled like leather. His hands were worn like the soles of a faithful pair of shoes. He operated the shoe shop on West Broadway. And Euzziel loved Anna. Anna loved fine things. They made a good pair, like shoes—worn in, comfortable, inevitable. It was this shoe shop where Anna brought Daisy to meet her match, as Anna called him. Reluctantly Daisy joined her for a shopping spree where Anna did all the spree and Daisy looked forlorn out the windows. The red brick storefront in downtown Muskogee had been a hopping place. The entrance bell rang like a phone and the ladies entered.

They found a display and quickly busied themselves discussing the intricacies of the penny loafers of penny loafers.

“They’re stylish,” Anna scolds Daisy’s lack of fashion sense.

“Well, I’d trip with danglin’ things.”

“It’s meant to look like a slot for pennies.” Anna smiled at the leather shoe.

“Smells stale.” Daisy crinkled her nose in disgust.

The entrance bell robbed their attention from the leather fringe and fine shades of brown and black. Anna’s breath hitched in anticipation. A new customer walked through the door. Anna smiled and shared with Euzziel, who was meandering from the back, a knowing glance. Daisy turned to see a man of no more than twenty-five walking toward them.

“Daisy, this is my brother James,” Euzziel offered, gesturing one hand to the tall, blue-eyed farmer.

“James Richards.” His hand extended. He looked at her. He didn’t seem to take note of her missing eye.

“Richards?” Daisy asked.

“Half-brother,” Euzziel quipped from over his shoulder, as he and Anna had retreated to the back to give Daisy and James space.

“Makes sense,” Anna mumbled after eyeing James then Euzziel. The likeness lost on her. Euzziel had dark hair, long enough for small curls. With dark eyes and a lean build, he was incomparable to the lanky and pale James. Freckled and pasty, he looked like a stranger next to Euzziel.

James eyed the pair, stole a glance at Daisy.

“Not buying any shoes, are you, mista Richards?” Daisy toiled with the leather fringe in her hands.

“No, miss.” He shuffled his feet in dirty, worn boots and downcast his eyes.

“Shame. Looks like you could us’em,” she snickered.

A lopsided smile spread along his angled jaw and he leaned down and whispered, “Let’s get out of here.” She smiled and nodded in answer. He smelled of wet earth and smoke. His crystal blues pierced through her every wall.

“Let’s go for a walk. Weather’s co’peratin’,” he says loud enough for the pair behind the counter to hear. He offered Daisy his arm and they linked up. The fresh air did wonders after the suffocating leather.

Once outside, he reached for his tobacco and began rolling himself a cigarette. She unlinked her arm and watched his dexterous fingers sprinkle the brown groundings onto the thin paper. His hands didn’t tremble, and he seemed unfazed by her curious gaze. He massaged

the makings into a delicate cone and leaned into his mouth into his hands almost like he was about to play a harmonica. His tongue darted out to lick the paper, sealing its edges. She watched him carefully construct what she considered the most beautiful cigarette she'd ever seen, and she'd never smoked in her life.

He plopped the thing in his mouth, struck a match and for a moment, everything was ablaze. The fire between them burning so hot and heavy she'd forgotten to breathe. Daisy had unconsciously stepped closer to him, so close she could almost taste him.

“Want some?” he mumbled, and the cigarette bobbed, and he mused at her proximity.

She shook her head, instinctively stepped back, looked away and breathed deeply for fresh air.

“My sister is somethin' else,” Daisy said while taking in the view of the downtown bustle.

“She is...persistent,” James added with a smirk. “But so is Euzziel.”

“They're perfect together.”

“Made for each other,” James answered with a smile.

Daisy rarely defended Anna, but she found Anna's matchmaking to be forgivable. Daisy liked James. He sauntered like the world was his. She found herself wanting to be a part of it, of his world. She caught sight of the dirt under his nails and on his boots. He was a working man. Good thing, she thought.

They continued their stroll of the Downtown and he told her of his childhood, explained how his mother had run off and his daddy married Euzziel's mother. He spoke of his farming experiences, the hay baling and cattle wrangling. She thought him charming in a stoic way.

“I'm not always talking so much,” he confessed.



“Really?” Daisy’s sarcastic tone teased him.

“Yes’m” he blushed. The red seeped into his cheeks like welcome wine.

“If I can be so forward to say,” he paused and shuffled his feet with nerves. “I think our sibli’n’s knew somethin’. I like you, Daisy.”

“Hmm.”

“Can I see you again?”

“Yes.”

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March 1908

Muskogee County

Nellie Barnett was keen on having fun, whether or not their Erke knew. It was Nellie's fault Hattie found herself in this dancing tent on a cool spring evening. The cicadas hummed a soft symphony of night as the illuminated tent. They lived far enough away they knew no one there. To keep the fun from bein' spoilt, Nellie told Hattie matter of fact. She just had to go and Hattie had to chaperone because she was near twenty and hadn't had a lick of fun.

"It's high time we do sumthin' for ourselves," Nellie declared. "All yous do in stay in n' care for them kids," she admonished.

"No, I do not."

"Yes! You do."

"I took care o'you."

"I know! Now, take care of yous and me at this dance!" Nellie squealed with excitement knowing Hattie would fold. And she relented.

The banjo and fiddle filled the air with a fast-tempo folksy tune. A tall man blew into a harmonica, his cheeks puffing with the growing sounds. The swaying bodies of good time music made a heady, heavenly mixture. Nellie immediately hit the dance floor upon arrival and wouldn't let Hattie sit until they got a few numbers in. Hattie obliged for a bit then found a seat and nestled in. Content to observe and watch her sister swirl and stomp to the sounds.

"Dance wit' me." A Texas drawl and extended hand greeted her. As if beckoning her toward the moving bodies. Hattie looked up and saw him. He had the bluest eyes and sweetest smile. A jawline sharp enough to slice through butter. His nose was splendid, strong and angled

to perfection. His porcelain skin camouflaged under the dim lights. His brown hair peaked from under his suede fedora. His hand brushed along the brim and nodded in greeting, “Miss.”

She couldn't resist and when she stole a dance at Nellie, she saw her sister whooping with affirmation. There wasn't any way her sister would let her get out of dancing with this man. But boy, he *knew* how to dance. Not the hesitant shuffle of most partners but the twirling, breathless nature of a dosey-doe. Hattie thought his feet quick, his hands firm, and his balance impeccable. He could navigate the floor like a snake in the grass, smooth and effortless. His arms wrapped around Hattie's waist and he drew her close, so close she could smell the hay, sweat, and sweetness of his day.

“Ne'er seen you here 'for.” His dazzling eyes settled on her face.

“First time,” she timidly replied, avoiding his glance and catching Nellie's wild smile from across the room.

“Name's Jud.” He smiled.

“Hattie,” she murmured in response.

“Well Miss Hattie...” Jud started, stepped back and twirled her around, drinking her in.

“You the finest woman I e'er did see.”

He brought her back to his chest, a closer embrace than before. And he winked. To Hattie, Jud was exotic-foreign and forbidden.

“What're you doin' here 'tnight?” he inquired, loosened his hold on her.

She could feel her heart flutter. He was mighty handsome. Full of himself, certainly. His calloused hands held hers in such a delicate way. She felt alive. He was more different than any white man she'd known. But then again, she'd never been held this way. Surely, it wasn't proper, wasn't right. But her thoughts seemed jumbled and chaotic. She found difficulty trying to think.

“Wit’ my sista, Nellie.” Hattie nodded in the direction of a slender beauty swaying to every strum of the guitar. Jud followed her gaze and saw Nellie. She thought he’d find her preferable, being young and rambunctious with such vivacious taste for excitement. Hattie, though, she was fuller, softer. Her voice was low, melodic, and sweet as apple pie. Her presence was gentle yet unmistakable. Her olive skin and jet-black curls brilliantly complemented her dark eyes. She was something to behold. Jud looked away from Nellie before Hattie did. She caught his stare and her cheeks flushed.

“Let me see you a’gin.” He pulled away.

She met his eyes once more.

“Yes.”

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January 1924

Okfuskee County

“Yo’kay?” Renie asked.

“Trouble sleeping,” Daisy said. But she knew Renie’s eyes saw right through it, through her.

“I miss her, too.”

They were walking outside, the usual path from the back door, down the fence line, spreading the chicken feed as they went around the coop, filling the troughs with fresh hay, and gathering the pail for morning milking. They’d rub their hands together as fast as they could, warming their frail fingers with friction.

Toward the steep hill and around the corner to the creek, distant shouting traveled toward them. It was a cold morning. Seeing their puffs of breath dissipate in the morning air, Daisy knew the water would be too cold today. Too cold for Echaswv and his flat tail. Too cold for bark chewing and dam building. Too cold to do much of anything, Daisy thought.

The shouting grew urgent and louder. The sisters looked at each other then ran in the direction of the commotion. They knew the best hiding spots like the back of their hands. Under some thicket, between two bushes they found the perfect vantage point.

The oilmen worked endlessly on Ma’s land. When the oil rights were auctioned, the very next day equipment was delivered. Daisy and Renie made it their ritual to spy on the men who visited their home and stole something deep out of the ground. Daisy would recall the darkness that shrouded the Earth before Hesaketamese, the story of creation Ma had taught her. She

couldn't help but wonder if these men were recovering that darkness. If they liked that black sludge so much, why did they need to destroy pastures to get it?

The crew surrounded just one of those jacks. There was a field of them, like unwanted corn stalks jutting into the horizon. But on this jack, was a number painted in white. Number eleven.

“Take cover!” a reddened white man bellowed at the crew.

They started to scatter like grub bugs under a lifted rock. Renie and Daisy were at least a hundred feet away, close enough to smell the disturbed dirt but too far to make out much of the working men. On a steep hill, the rig's continuous pumping and jacking of the oil had shifted the clay, compromising the foundation.

They watched the towering machine begin to lean, as if tilting down the hill like the tipping point of a sled race.

“Switch the engine belt!” the same man hollered.

“Elmer! That's craaaaa-zy!” But the startled workers began to move, nearing the derrick to begin shifting the houses, swapping the mechanisms. To do so meant separating the engine house into pieces. Each man grabbed a piece and began heaving it to the other side of the derrick. Enticing physics to play their game.

“Sonofa—” A crewman dropped the engine section after losing his footing. The man tumbled backward and rolled in awkward bumbles down the hill. That very hill that Daisy and Renie had raced up and down in the summer. And Renie always won because she had the longest legs and was the fastest.

“Move! Move!” Elmer commanded. The men scampered to collect the remaining engine pieces and restore the pumping machine. When the final piece was nearly ready, another man stumbled and rolled down the hill.

The two were hysterical to watch. Daisy and Renie had clamped their hands over their mouths to quiet their laughter. And held each other’s free hands in a fierce grip. The drillers’ rolling bodies came to a halt at the bottom of the hill, feet shy from the frosted creek.

“Put the Bull Wheel in the post!” Elmer commanded. And the men shifted around the mass again.

“And the Samson Post, boss?”

“Switcheroo!” After a few uneasy minutes, the derrick was stabilized. A cheer erupted from the men and Daisy could tell, even from afar, they got what they wanted.

“Look!” Renie pointed. “There,” she whispered. Just along the tree line, where the bank met the bottom of the hill, a flat-tailed, buck-toothed Echaswv scampered toward the water, turned once more to look at the crumpled men. He seemed to point a paw and chortle at their tumbled bodies. Shoulders ricocheting up and down with laughter, Echaswv spotted the girls and immediately dove into the icy waters.

“Not a drop lost!” Elmer celebrated with the team. It took Daisy a moment to realize, in all the commotion, not once did the jack ever stop its up and down, up and down, up and down. Despite its slippage on the hill, the derrick was producing oil. She knew enough to know that meant it was making these men money.

“Those men falling was pretty funny.” Renie smiled at Daisy. They collected themselves and slipped away unnoticed. “I think that beaver did it,” she said.

“Yeah,” Daisy mindlessly agreed.

Her face was vacant of any smile and her brow furrowed. Daisy was thinking. Thinking about those men, thinking about their work. And then she realized the truth of the matter. Hattie was more valuable to Jud dead than alive. And Daisy knew it now, too. Sell the damn mineral rights, Daisy'd overheard Jud say to Ma, more than once.

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June 1930

Muskogee County

Henry S. LaCroix received his summons while working for a now-very wealthy Osage man. The payday was nice, he was pleased. He didn't know what they had in store down in Muskogee. He'd heard rumors. Yes, lots of rumors. Lots of oil down there, too. It was a shame the Bureau wouldn't do more. Commissioner Rhoads was shitting the bed in Indian Country. LaCroix had hoped for a bigger paycheck cause his darlin' was tired of being dragged all over kingdom come. The Osage were so rich, whites were jealous, angry even. Tensions were palpable in the street. Indians in fur coats were met with ghostly sneers. Everybody wants a payday. Oklahoma's got the most millionaires per capita now. Oil money was everywhere. Underneath his very feet, he thought. That black, liquid goddess that had little indication of letting up for those deranged enough to look for her. She would take the meanest man as her mistress, entice him with the thrill of striking, then leave when he'd spent himself silly. A bad lover on all accounts. This oil business was lucrative, and he'd been invited down here after all to take part in the riches.

Muskogee was teeming with people. Not all white men, but mostly men. Stores in a bustle, office fronts alive. It was an up-and-coming metropolis and he promised his wife it would be different this time and Muskogee was different. The drinking would stop. He'd dedicate himself to their marriage. He'd taken a job on a favor from the BIA because he'd done well up north. They thought he could help clean up the mess here and he'd take the promotion that followed, and they would head west like she always wanted.

“Good morning, Mr. LaCroix,” a sweet voice greeted him at the front.

“G’mornin’.”

“Let me show you to your office.” She worriedly glanced at the phone. She caught his eye, smiled small, walked around the desk and he followed her down the hall.

“Here we are.” She opened a frosted pane door to the most cluttered mess. Henry balked at the mound of files on his new desk. There must’ve been at least thirty cases. This was a mistake. This couldn’t be his office.

“So sorry for the mess.” She blushed. “The man before...you...well he... these are hi–your cases.”

“Where’s your supervisor?” he asked. Stern, narrowed eyes, he decided meant business. She visibly shuddered under his gaze.

“L-l-lunch.”

“When will he be back?” Exasperation creeping in.

“S-s-soon.” She scurried from the doorway and back to her desk as the shrilling ring of the phone filled the hall.

Henry released the tension in his shoulders and took stock of the office. Small, not quaint. The piss-paint-color walls looked dingy in the filtered, artificial light. The chair was worn with stress marks, aches of support striped in the strained fabric. The wooden arms had faded with friction, constant touching rubbed the enamel thin. The desk was a monstrosity. Thick, heavy drawers and looked impossibly heavy. It would have to be, to support this mess of files, he thought. His chair creaked and moaned under his weight. He took off his hat and began reading.

IN THE COUNTY COURT WITHIN AND FOR THE  
COUNTY OF MUSKOGEE, AND THE STATE OF  
OKLAHOMA.

In The Matter of the Estate of  
Wilburn Howard Smoot, and Lillie Smoot,  
minors,

No.4569.

Harry Smith, Guardian,

ORDER.

NOW, On this the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of April, 1930, comes  
Harry Smith and files herein his notice of appeal, and  
his appeal bond in the sum of Two Hundred (\$200.00)  
Dollars, with J. H. Sawy, and  
Irene Sticker, as sureties therein, and  
the Court after an examination thereof finds the same  
to be in due form and in sufficient and proper amount.

IT IS THEREFORE, ORDERED, ADJUDGED AND DECREED, That  
the said Bond be and the same is hereby approved, and the  
appeal of the said Harry Smith from the Order of this  
Court made and entered on April 21, 1930, wherein the said  
Harry Smith was removed from his office as guardian of the  
said Wilburn Howard Smoot and Lillie Smoot, aforesaid, is  
hereby granted and transcript of the proceedings in this  
case is hereby ordered transmitted to the District Court  
of Muskogee County, Oklahoma,

O. A. D. Brewer  
County Judge of Muskogee  
County, state of Oklahoma.

Page after page, case after case, it was clear he had his work cut out for him.

“LaCroix!” A burly voice boomed from the front. Henry heard the heavy footfalls as the man approached. A greasy, slick-looking man popped his head in. His eyes were an unsettling green and his mustache looked manicured like a garden shrub.

“Come to my office.” He bopped his head in the other direction. Inviting Henry to follow him, out of this small, sad office and into his much larger and cleaner space. The mustache man gestured to one of the chairs sitting in front of his desk and took a seat in a less squeaky chair. Henry could hear the constant trilling of the office phone and the young girl’s eager response, “Hello, Muskogee Indian Agency. How can I help you?”

Mustache man offered his hand. “So glad you’ve made it Mr. LaCroix, I’m Joseph Fox. I answer to Fox alone.” They shook hands, Henry nodded and took a seat.

“God’s honest truth, we need your help managing these Indian probates. Mostly women and children the state has deemed most incompetent and appointed these guardians that are robbing them blind.” Henry sensed Fox was trying to get a read on him. To see how he was taking it in, all this information. Fox was fishing and Henry’d seen enough with the Osage to know what sort were attracted to this chaos, but these Indians in Muskogee didn’t have headrights. And those oil and mineral rights were worth killing for, at least that’s what it seemed like—unofficially, of course.

“Can you help?” Fox asked.

“It’s why I’m here, sir.”

“Great!” Fox leaned back and clapped his hands. “Do you have any questions? The initial work will be petitioning the court for guardian removals. Judges here...” He whistled and shook his head.

Henry watched Fox but kept his face straight.

“Dot your i’s and cross your t’s on these cases, alright? We don’t need dead Indians haunting us from the grave, now do we?” Fox chuckled with sarcasm.

Henry nodded but knew this wasn’t a joking matter.

“You get it! You’re...uh...” Fox waved a hand in Henry’s direction, prompting Henry to finish the sentence.

“Lakota.”

“Yes, that’s right! You’ll fit right in.”

It’s going to be a long three months, Henry thought. “And sir, my compensation?”

“Oh, yes! Of course. Lisa will take care of that for you. You will receive a guardian surety bond upon every final report you submit and the customary Agency wages.” Fox eyed Henry, then slyly smiled.

“We’ll make a great team!” He stood up, gave Henry a supportive clap on the shoulder and guided him out of his office. Just as Fox started to close the door and Henry began to walk away, “Oh, LaCroix?” Henry turned.

“The court prefers we put these probates to bed—”

Henry barely caught his last word as the door swung shut on the final syllable.

“Quietly.”

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April 1937

Adair County

The purple Cadillac was beaming in the sunlight. It looked ridiculous, Daisy thought. What an ostentatious girl. Kizzie Anna Ferguson is one hell of a hustler. Now, she was a kept woman. Mrs. Euzziel Decayce Ferguson, she'd correct whenever Daisy addressed her.

"Okay, Kizzie," Daisy said, smirking.

"Daisy, what in heaven's name brought you out here?"

"James," she replied with her back turned. Kizzie stepped through the screen door as it creaked shut in objection.

"Right." Kizzie's eyes lifted around the room, taking in the view. Daisy kept a pristinely clean house, but it was unbearably plain. No extravagances afforded.

"You should visit me in Muskogee," she said. As if that same old house would wash away their problems.

"What brings you down?" Daisy rolled her eyes.

"A proposition." Kizzie settled into a kitchen chair opposite Daisy.

"What sort'o prop-po-zi-shun?" Daisy dragged the syllables, dripping sarcasm in every one. Their sisterhood had waned over the years.

"We gotta sell Ma's land." Kizze figured pulling the band-aid fast was best.

Daisy scoffed and shook her head. Disbelief as thick as the tension in the air between them.

"All of us need money. You know Daddy didn't want Myrtle havin' it?"

"Daddy's dead."

“So is Momma.” Kizzie downcast her eyes and shrunk into the chair.

Daisy eyed her. Was it all for show, she wondered.

“What’s you need money for?” Daisy asked.

Kizzie sighed. “Things, Daisy.”

“That flashy car say otherwise.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“’Splain it.”

“You never understand,” Kizzie whispered.

“Explain how selling their graves will save any of us?”

A silence grew like an ocean between them. The sounds of evening began to creep in. The rhythmic cicadas, the gust of occasional wind, the distant creaking of an unlatched barn door.

“Lillie could use the money. You know Renie could, too,” Kizzie said.

“Huh, they never said nothin’ t’ me.”

“So could Pearl and Myrtle,” Kizzie added.

“Why ain’t they husbands workin’?” Daisy hissed.

Kizzie scoffed and looked away.

A crying sounded from the other room. Daisy sighed and stood up. Kizzie’s judgement plain on her face, a crinkled nose downturned at Daisy’s home. She knew she looked like she hadn’t slept well and her sister would find her appearance unforgiveable.

She came back to the kitchen table cradling baby Judson. He was two months old now. Daisy didn’t feel that warm and glowy aurora of new motherhood. She felt like a dirty dishrag.

“He’s precious,” Kizzie said, reaching out. “Can I hold him?”

Daisy eyed her with skepticism.

“Daisy, I am his aunt,” Kizzie scoffed with disbelief at Daisy’s refusal.

“Okay.” Their spat was cooling. Daisy supported his head and body with each hand then passed the bundled baby to her sister. Family was family.

“Hi there, my handsome nephew,” Kizze cooed at the boy. He gurgled with awe and his eyes squinted open.

“Where’s James?” Kizzie asked Daisy but didn’t look away from Judson.

“Out yonder, working on the barn.” Daisy sighed and readjusted her faded apron.

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“Adding to the workshop, I guess. Says he’s gonna teach Judson all the tricks o’ the trade,” Daisy smirked.

“I didn’t think you’d name him after Daddy. You and Lillie both.”

“How is she and her boy?”

“The birth was long but she’s doing well. Jesse’s a darling to her. Their little boy, Acee is a dream. Sleeps well, too.” Kizzie rocked the baby. She was humming a lullaby to him.

“You know Leota is due in a few months,” Kizzie said. “Chief says they think it’s a boy, too. They’ve already got a gaggle though.”

“So do you,” Daisy said.

“Oldest is ten and the youngest is three now, ya know?” Kizzie beamed. That girl was born for motherhood, Daisy thought and envy flooded her.

After a moment, long enough for them both to slip into deep thought, Kizzie whispered, “Her babies are buried out there, too.”



“I don’t care ‘bout Myrtle,” Daisy scowled and took Judson out of Kizzie’s arms. The spat resumed.

Kizzie let her arms fall empty and looked up at her sister.

“This hatred don’t serve you, Daisy.”

“I think it best you get on home now.” Daisy turned away. She held Judson to her chest, rocking him back and forth. Trying to ease her own anxieties, but she couldn’t and he began to cry.

Kizzie collected her purse and fur coat. She didn’t lean in to kiss her sister goodbye, she didn’t even reach to kiss Judson. They’d never see eye to eye. They hadn’t all their lives and weren’t going to start now.

Kizzie slid a white, notecard on the table. A business card.

“He’s offered us a good deal. Promised to always let us visit them.” Kizzie turned toward the door. Stopped just before the threshold and said, “She’d forgive us. That land is no good to any of us.”

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July 1919

Okfuskee County

“Grudges rot from the inside, Daisy,” Hattie had told her daughter when the feuds between the sisters became too much. Hattie found Daisy under an old oak, wallowing in the grass, kicking at the jutted roots. “We have to forgive each other. We’re family,” Hattie reminded her. But there was no salve for her daughter’s wounds. Daisy was disheveled from the brawl. And Hattie felt sympathy because she knew Daisy couldn’t imagine ever really loving Kizzie. Not how she acts and how she is. Hattie knew because she had feuded with her sisters, too.

She took a seat on the ground next to Daisy. Her daughter now sitting cross-legged, curled up in on herself, eyes downcast and the fresh weight on her shoulders. She wasn’t in trouble, but she sure knew to act like it. Jud would’ve gotten the belt. Spare the rod, spoil the child is what he always said. Like a threat that oozed from within the walls, witnesses to it all.

Hattie looked at Daisy. Paused and waited for her to look back, to look up, to look at all.

“You know where you got your name?” Hattie asked Daisy.

“From the flower,” Daisy huffed. Her small frame exuding annoyance. It was unlikely Daisy would ever see eye to eye with her older sister, at least not in the next few years, Hattie thought. They were just too different. Daisy questioned everything. Kizzie could kill with a smile. Not even grown and they both lived worlds apart.

“No.”

Daisy looked up now. “Not the flower?”

“Your second name,” Hattie said.

“Belle?”

“Yes, it’s my sister’s name. Melviney Belle.” A tender smile spread along Hattie’s features. The memories flooding in.

Daisy perked up. Listening now.

“She’s older than me, just like Kizzie is to you.” Hattie nudged little Daisy. “We did everything together.”

“Even shared the same bed?” Daisy’s nose crinkled at the question. Hattie knew Daisy dreamed of a bed to herself. Where Kizzie’s cold ankles didn’t creep along hers in the dead of night. Where her sister’s long beautiful mane stayed on her own pillow. Where her soft snores wouldn’t choke Daisy’s slumber. Hattie knew because if Daisy ever complained of anything, it was her sister.

“We shared everything,” Hattie chuckled. And then slowly, her smile fell. “Until we didn’t.”

“Melviney didn’t like sharing... just like Kizzie.” Daisy slumped into dramatic disappointment. Hattie read the defeat plain as day, as if it was all inevitable.

“No, she married a man and moved away.” Hattie paused. “Now, Daisy listen. One day your sisters are all going to marry and move away, too.” Hattie carefully watched her daughter, the changing expression, the dawning realization. Maybe she was too young, Hattie worried. Maybe there was never going to be enough time.

Daisy took this with gravity. Hattie watched as her face settled on confusion—flickering between anger and disappointment.

“Even you will have a husband one day,” Hattie said.

“Ugh. GROSS.” Daisy stuck her tongue out. “I don’t even like boys, Ma.”

Hattie laughed and she felt light again. Like everything would be alright.

“But I don’t want to live without you,” Daisy whined. A world that didn’t revolve around her Ma seemed like a world she didn’t want to live in or without and Hattie knew this because she felt the same when she was Daisy’s age. A mere child, just shy of nine years. Her world still had so much changing to do.

Hattie answered her daughter with a smile then opened her arms for Daisy to crawl in. They embraced for a moment.

“Forgive her, Daisy.” Forgive me, she thought.

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July 1922

Okfuskee County

Pearl Crum was half Jud's age, and Daisy did not approve. She was squirrely thing. She was blonde and blue-eyed. She looked like she could be Jud's daughter with her angled facial features. Daisy hated her. She slept where Ma used to lay. She'd moan through the night in the single room cabin all the Smoots shared.

Creaky bed boards kept Daisy's nightmares alive. She rolled away from their bed and squeezed her eyes shut. Calling on the creator of breath.

"Hesaketvmese, guide me," she mouthed under the covers.

Ever so slightly, Daisy began to feel weightless as the feathered cot beneath her faded away. She hadn't remembered falling asleep. Was this a dream? Her sleeping siblings were undisturbed as she sunk deeper and lower. She started to slip through the wooden bedframe, then beneath the wooden floors. In the crawlspace, she lay facing her family, observing their nocturnal routine. Then gradually beside her, an unusual chittering stirred and a panic began to bloom in her.

Daisy was looking forward to her twelfth birthday in September and she wasn't for what was to come. She figured the spirits were calling her home, but she wasn't ready to die. Surely this was all a dream, right? This couldn't be the end. She had missed Ma so much and wanted to be with her again, maybe this was the only way. Her heart raced and blood pounded in her ears. Breathe, she thought. Ma's been gone two years. If they didn't take you then, they're not taking you now, she reassured herself.

"Wotko," the chittering voice said.

“Huh?” Daisy jolted.

“Shhh. You’ll wake them,” Wotko whispered. They both looked above at the floorboards. Jud was softly snoring now, and Pearl had fallen quiet, finally.

“Follow me.”

Daisy caught sight of a bandit’s face and ringed tail as Wotko slipped out from under the cabin. She rolled onto her stomach and began to inch her way. Crawling on her stomach, she reached the edge of the foundation and wiggled through the opening. Scrambling up, she managed to catch sight of Wotko just as its tail flickered into the meadow.

“Wait,” Daisy shouted in a hushed whisper the wind refused to carry.

In her dirt-stained nightgown, she raced after Wotko with bare feet and warm summer air in her short, wild hair. She knew where Wotko was going. She wasn’t sure how or why but she reached the water just as Wotko turned back at the river’s edge. Meeting her eyes, Wotko began to submerge itself in the Oktahutche, one paw at a time.

Daisy watched in awe as the moonlight reflected on the water. A gentle breeze rippling the water ever so slightly. Daisy wondered if Wotko would drown. Wondered if she should go after him.

“Daisy,” Wotko’s voice blended in the slow current, luring her forward. She put one foot in front of the other. She neared the water’s edge and her toes sunk into the mud. The water covered her feet, then ankles. She continued. The hem of her gown absorbed the wetness. Her hair in disarray, her nightgown stained, and her hands scraped with dirt and debris. Her small frame illuminated under the stars. She kept her eye on the very spot Wotko’d disappeared. Just under the surface, the riverbed began to glow. She froze. She could feel the bubbles rippling along her body when her skin met the water.

The river's gurgling quickened. A figure was emerging out of the water. She could barely see it even with the moonlight as her aid. She wasn't fearful but an uncertainty consumed her. Her skin prickled and the hair on her neck raised.

And then it was gone—dark and bubbleless. And she was gone, too. Dry and returned.

Back under the floorboards, Wotko had returned with Daisy to the crawlspace.

“What happened? Where?” Daisy panicked, looking around her for answers.

“Watch this,” Wotko smirked at Daisy and scampered up through the floor by lifting a single panel of the floorboard. Slowly creeping toward her father's bed where Pearl laid with an outstretched hand. Flopping off the side, completely unconscious, her fingers twitched as Wotko crept closer. With tiny hands and teeth barred, it grabbed her arm and gave a quick, vicious bite.

Pearl's screech could be heard around the county, Daisy was convinced.

“Owww!” she hollered.

Jud woke with a mean start, ready to fight whatever invader had attacked. He quickly realized there was no invader. At least not anymore. She knew that was her cue to return to bed but the floorboards were impenetrable. She didn't want to make a sound. She wanted to avoid unwanted attention, or an accusation.

“What happened?” Jud demanded, still trying to make sense of the midnight scene.

“Someun' bit me! I'm bleeding! Cain't yo'see?!” Pearl was hysterical. And violent. She hit and slapped Jud every time he tried to touch her swelling hand. By now, the rest of the Smoot children were awake and huddled in the corner. Daisy had snuck back around and decided to pretend she was using the bathroom and trying to figure out what all the commotion was about.

Pearl gave Jud a tooth-rattling slap across the face.

“You piece o' SHIT!”

She angrily gathered her things and when she slammed the door behind her, Jud hollered, “And don’t you come back!” As if it was all his choice. He took stock of the scene, surveyed his blurry-eyed children, but Daisy slipped back into the house unnoticed.

“Bitch,” he muttered and fell back onto bed. Out cold in minutes.

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October 1892

Okfuskee County

Jackson sat with his back braced along the trunk of the largest oak near the Barnett Store. His fingers spread into the blades of grass around him. He listened to the afternoon symphony of cicadas and rustling leaves. The canopy casting a shade saving him from the sun's heat.

His father Siah and Siah's black half-brother Jim opened a store when they realized there wasn't anywhere near to trade and barter. The Bryant area had been established for some years now. Small towns hadn't surfaced yet. The oil hadn't been discovered. The roads were fewer and the services slim.

"We could build a store onto the house," Jackson overheard Siah say.

"Easy enough to do," Jim replied.

"McDermott's is twelve miles north and Proctor's is thirty-five miles east," Siah rationalized. It made more than sense to build a store in Bryant.

"And Culley Johnson's blacksmith shop just up the road," Jim offered. Nodding his head northward.

"We'd surely get business. Think folks 'round here could benefit from our building it." Siah had convinced himself it would be worth the hassle.

"Yessir. Folks could use a store here," Jim agreed.

To the brothers, it was obvious a trading post was in order. Together they fixed up the back half of the log-split cabin and stocked the place. It didn't have any windows, nor a service counter. But the Barnett Store had everything and nothing, the stock waxed and waned like a monthly moon. Sometimes they had it and sometimes they didn't. It was only a matter of asking.

Flour, the regular seasonal produce, whiskey on occasion, and when weather permitted, it wasn't as much a getting place as a gathering place. They'd got the store running smoothly and some years had gone by since that conversation between the brothers, the conversation Jackson recalled from under the oak's shadow.

Around the store, Jackson hung out in his rags. He was a static fixture in the always-bustling space. As he grew older, his head would be wrapped in a tattered shawl and his crooked grin would sit lopsided on his face. Patrons would notice him, but he never spoke much. Not that he couldn't, he just didn't have much to say. Not where there was so much to watch and hear. He hid around corners and played in the fields. Climbed trees and rode horses. Chopped wood and built anything with his hands. He'd make furniture which led to leatherworks of experimental custom-fit harnesses. He made a tree house once and repaired fences. He repurposed the old and stayed in his head. Age never swayed his heart. His family said he was forever young, said he hit his head wrong when he fell off that horse. They said he would spend his days out in the sticks. He adored the livestock and had little care for the socialization his father's store brought home. By all accounts, Jackson was Dave's brother. People called him Crazy Jack. And maybe he was.

And Crazy Jack would be around, though no one knew for how long. He was much like the wind. Sometimes he worked the ferries along the Oktahutche. Sometimes he was back home in the rundown shanty clear across town. Sometimes he'd see his father but most times Siah would never see him. Eventually, fortunes would find him in Los Angeles, directing traffic on Hollywood Boulevard as the richest Indian in the world.

Saturdays were particularly popular at the Barnett Store, just like today. Indians came from all over the settlement to enjoy company. They'd smoke together and tell stories.

Resistance blooming. That's when Jackson first heard of the Snakes, when he first heard of the Four Mothers.

“Jack,” Dave called for his brother. The high sun of a decaying autumn day.

“Yessir,” he muttered. Hat rested over his face, propped along the big, red oak's embrace.

Dave had awoken the sleeping man and, as if on cue, heard his stomach roar to life.

“Hompvkets.” Jackson's stomach answered affirmative with intense rumbling.

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September 1923

Okfuskee County

Jud pilfered through the house in a mad fury.

“I c’aint take no more!” Grabbing whatever he could find, remnants of Hattie’s life. Her clothes, photographs, even her pillow on their bed. Daisy watched, struck still by his violence, as he stormed through their childhood home and collected their woven baskets, stuffing them with the ribbon skirts and all their beaded jewelry. Daisy and her siblings followed him from the shadows of the house into the front yard where he dumped the contents.

“You’ll haunt me no’ore!” he shouted into the dark, star-splattered sky. Swaying and slurring in his drunken state. And with angered haste Jud darted for the barn. Anna, Daisy, Renie, Chief, and Lillie were all spell-bound on the porch silently listening to Jud’s noises of frustration. He grunted and cursed, causing a mighty ruckus until he emerged with his trophy like a man readying to escape judgment day. He stormed over to the undisturbed pile of valued belongings. He looked dead into the eyes of his half-Indian children and poured gasoline on their mother’s things. He pulled a matchbook from his pocket. Struck it with finality and set it aflame.

“No!” Lillie croaked. Young Lillie clutched and whimpered at Daisy’s side. Instinctively, Daisy crouched and lifted her crying sister into her arms.

“Shhhh,” Daisy consoled her. She managed to tear her eye from the scene to steal a glance at Anna, the eldest full of composure and the one who doted on Jud most. Anna’s tear-stained cheeks reflected the orange rage of the growing fire. The crackling of the burning fabrics pierced their ears and the billowing black smoke stung their eyes. Daisy then looked at Renie,

only sixteen months her junior but Renie looked less like Daisy and more like Lillie. The two could've been twins, even with their four-year gap. She, too, was crying in front of the blaze.

Daisy caught sight of a small movement on the far side of the fire. Out of Jud's eyesight, there it was. A bandit in the night, a white-tipped tail and russet fur. If she hadn't caught the flames alighting its silhouette, she would've guessed it was a cat or dog. But it was Culv. Lying in wait between the garden plants and treelines, she snuck along the shadows.

Daisy squeezed Lillie in a telling hug, a silent signal to look. Lillie followed her gaze and saw the critter. In a quick dash, Culv rushed toward the fire, stopped just at its outer ring and dipped her head into the flames.

Lillie gasped, with shock and worry. But just as she had disappeared, Culv reappeared with something dangling from her mouth.

"She saved my doll!" Lillie exclaimed.

Daisy shushed Lillie and smiled into her shoulder. A small savior had visited them and no doubt would Culv deliver the doll to Lillie in her sleep. The other siblings didn't catch sight of the doting Robin Hood. Kizzie Anna was unexpressive, adamant the betrayal would never show. And Chief stood in silence, next to Jud.

He was the second youngest but as the only boy, he was Jud's pride and joy. He was born Wilburn Howard but Jud always preferred to call him by the unshakeable nickname.

"Put that fire out when it done burnin' boy," Jud spat at Chief without looking for confirmation. And he strode past them and into the house. Chief would clean up this mess, this time.

"We're leavin' in the mornin'!" Jud hollered over his back to them.

Strangely no grass had grown over Hattie's grave, but Daisy would watch the soil for hours. Nothing would grow the same again.

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April 1922

Okfuskee County

When Judge Duling arrived as the late Judge Rowe's replacement, the Douglasses sighed in collective relief. They remodeled the office sign, overlaid the mismatched font to read: Douglass, Philips, and Duling. And because Judge Duling was a reasonable man, the ruse would continue, unfettered and unnoticed—at least by those who could, or would, do anything.

“How does this work?” Duling asked.

“Simple!” Frank responded. “Let me grab my brother and we'll explain.”

“Welcome to the firm, Judge.” A.T. shot Duling a knowing smile. “The best and easiest way is mortgaging the first piece of real estate on a parcel. Doesn't have to be a parcel the Indian owns, doesn't even have to be in this county!”

“A guardian, like A.T. here, will find and draw up the petition to loan funds belonging to the Indian's account,” Frank continued.

“Then I'll bring the petition to court, where you'll approve it by authorizing an order,” A.T. added.

“That's it?” Duling asked. “What about the loan? Interest? When do you collect the principal?” he inquired.

“That's just it, we don't,” Frank whispered like a flirtatious schoolgirl, giddy on the high of their riches.

“I thought guardians balanced the accounts.” Duling scratched his head, uncertain of the scam.

“They’re Indians. They don’t know anything, and no one is checking the books. The state department doesn’t care.” A.T. laughed at the ridiculous ease of their ruse.

“You’ve done this before?” The Judge’s voice was tightening with excitement. Riches on the horizon so certain, he could almost spend it now.

“Already done it. Ready to start approving some loans, Judge Duling? We got one for our father on the docket later this month, then Frank after that. Start looking at lands, see if you find anything the misses will like.” A.T. smiled and gave an exaggerated wink.

“Here’s one!” Frank said.

“Let’s hear about it!” A.T. Douglass grabbed the nearest pen and readied his notebook.

“On the east side of Weleetka. It’s a grand parcel. Lots of trees and natural light. Helen just went on and on about the sunset yester’ evening.” Frank’s eyes glowed with excitement. It was high time these Injuns started paying him back, after all these years. It was time to cash in on the oil boom monies of Indian Country.

And Duling approved it the next day.

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November 1928

Muskogee County

Harry Smith was the Smoots' second guardian. The one who convinced them moving the estate to Muskogee was in their very best interest. His office was unremarkable, just like him.

Dreary with faded furniture and peeling paint.

"Where is your father, Miss Smoot?" Harry Smith asked. He looked around her, for someone more authoritative. As if this office was too nice, this space too sophisticated for such a woman. Daisy knew rolling her one eye didn't have the same effect but how dare he, she thought.

"He ain't here." Her cold stare bore into Harry, though he wouldn't meet her eye. He was one of those squirmy types, couldn't look at anything imperfect. Didn't care much for the very thing that made him rich. Nice suit, she thought. And she knew what he thought of her. That was the thing about these types, he'll tell you what you are, what you're worth or not, then discard you when he's full and plump.

"Well, he should be," Harry mumbled into his desk. Daisy stood, refusing a seat. She'd been summoned here by some court order or other. She stopped worrying about the law long ago. It was never on her side.

"I got that letter, now tell me why I'm here," she demanded.

Harry sighed dramatically, filed and flipped through the papers on his desk. Daisy hoped she unnerved him.

“It’s your final report,” Harry said. “You’re entitled to it, by law,” he enunciated those last words like it made a difference. I’m sure there’s a lot more I’m entitled to, she thought. Daisy scoffed and didn’t bother to hide the indiscretion.

“Ms. Smoot, please take a seat.” Harry gestured toward the worn chair opposite his desk. An open palm meant to disarm her. His patience plainly wearing thin.

“No.”

“Your eighteenth birthday was last month, is that correct?” He knew this and she knew that he already knew that. They had countdown calendars for these minors, for their parents’ money. She scanned his desk, eyeing the culprit calendar. What a terrible birthday it was.

Her deadpan expression was her only offered response.

“Well, happy belated birthday. It’s customary to balance the account when you age out.” He paused. “Do you understand, Miss Smoot?”

“Kizzie got hers last year,” Daisy said.

“That is correct, your sister accepted her final report without issue.” Harry started to stand from behind the desk. He was taller than Daisy and she kept her eye on him, holding her head high as he rose above her.

“Here is your balance.” His extended hand offered an envelope.

Daisy snatched the envelope and wrenched the thing open. She took out the paper, read the number, abandoning all decorum.

Very carefully, she curled her fingers around the edges, aware Harry now had his eyes on her. She pinched opposite sides and began to rip the check in two. The slow tearing sound of paper fibers separating into finality. Harry’s eyes watched her, ablaze and angry. She was

beginning to taste the very freedom withheld from her since Ma's death. The system holding her captive was finally releasing its decade-long grip. There was nothing she wanted from him.

Nothing he could give her.

“Fuck you.”

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April 1949

Adair County

James stumbled through his morning routine. Buckling his overalls over his shoulders, grabbing his pack of cigarettes, and shoving his feet into work boots. The audible squelch and gasp from James caused Daisy to let out a snicker from the other twin bed. Across the room, Daisy lay on her side, back against James' cold stare.

"Goddam't, Daisy!" James said.

She persisted in her ruse of slumber, challenging James' anger. Retracting his left foot from the boot, slowly pinching off his soaked sock. He carefully scooped the rotten, now-squished, egg and bits of cracked shell out of the sole. The soured smell invading his nostrils. His socks and boots would stink for days. He cursed his stubby fingers that spread the pieces instead of collecting them.

"What'm I'ccused of now?" he mumbled.

Daisy reactively scoffed at his audacity.

"Huh?!" he challenged.

"James Richards!" She sat up and threw a pointed finger at his direction. Eyes squinting with accusation.

"Today you walk on eggshells! You know damn well. Get yourself cleaned up and get to work!" She huffed out of bed, marching into the hallway, a beeline for the bathroom.

"Next time it'll be on your head," she shouted over her shoulder before slamming the door.

James finished sloping up the egg bits out of his boot. Got dressed and hesitated at the bathroom door before leaving the house for work. Daisy had watched the shadows of his boots recede and heard the front door open, then close. A tension left her shoulders when she heard his truck start and reverse down the drive. She could almost hear the dust in his wake down Route 4.

She thought they were past all that. The boys were getting older now. Bernadene was nearing eighteen, Judson was thirteen and Mike was six. She told James and each of her children they were accidents. She'd never wanted to be a mother. And it wasn't like she didn't know what the folks in town were saying. A woman who can't keep a marriage bed, certainly can't keep house. Daisy's knuckles curled around the bathroom counter. That gossip they were spreading meant he deserved to trudge in rotten eggy boots all day, for the rest of his life. But Daisy knew she couldn't justify wasting so many eggs. There weren't enough rotten eggs in the world to turn a rotten man right, she thought.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Best clean up, she thought and began taming her curled bob into form, an ebony halo framing her round face. Just as she started to feel normal again, she heard the front door swing open and command her attention. What now? Her fury reignited. Not expecting visitors, Daisy trudged down the hallway and to the front room. Her pace quickened immediately when she realized who was there.

"Bernadene?" Daisy saw her daughter standing in the doorway, distraught and disheveled. Her typical straight black mane was ratty and unwashed. Her eyes were swollen from crying and her clothes were wrinkled from too-long wear.

“Come sit, come sit.” Daisy ushered from the door and onto the sofa. Looking both ways, down the road to see if anyone left a trace or caught sight of her daughter’s unkempt appearance, before closing and locking the front door.

“Mama! Mama! Breakfast!” Mike raced down the hallway still in his PJs.

“Mikel! Go brush your teeth and get dressed.” Her voice was clipped and commanding. He froze instantly and began retracing his steps but not before noticing his older sister, crumpled on the couch. Daisy’s stare zapped the curious question off his tongue and he ran to the bathroom, certain to wake his older brother along the way. Judson would be up soon, Daisy needed to find out what had upset Bernadene.

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January 1934

Muskogee County

Lillie was the baby in every way. While Hattie never told Daisy what her fifth pregnancy was really like, there were suspicions. Lillie wasn't the same. Jud always said she wasn't right, but Daisy figured that meant she was different. Like herself, missing pieces. Incomplete, somehow. But Lillie's missing pieces were inside, not outside like Daisy's right eye. You couldn't always see where Lillie wasn't right.

Her learning never came quickly, speaking was seldom, and she was painfully shy. She'd be scared of her own shadow if her sisters didn't hold her hand in the sun. Daisy thought her sister would end up alone, just like her. She thought Kizzie Anna would be the one married off in a whimsical fairytale. She constantly bragged about her beauty and future family. The riches they'd have and the big house they'd live in.

When Lillie turned eighteen, the Smoot children's third state-appointed guardian ordered a Final Report. Henry S. LaCroix showed up on their doorstep with a check for Lillian's fifth of the account. She was the last of the Smoot minors on the probate case. Her siblings had all mostly moved on. Daisy had married James and settled in Stilwell. Renie was always in between things, staying at the homeplace these days. And Kizzie Anna was just about ready to take over the Muskogee mansion in her fantastical remodeling, to update the place and keep it modern. Such a beautiful home should never fall into such disarray, but Daisy was always quick to remind her anything bought with blood money never lasts.

"Goodday!" Henry smiled at the door when Jud answered before a second knock.

“I’m here on business with Ms. Lillian Smoot, Mr. Smoot.” Henry had met Jud before to his great misfortune, but he intended for this to be a short visit.

“Lillie!” Jud shouted not taking his eyes off LaCroix.

She sauntered down the stairs at a colossally slow pace that must’ve maddened Jud’s already thin patience.

“Girl, get your ass down here!”

She stumbled down the remaining steps and landed in the entry. Lillie nodded and offered a curt smile to Henry then downcast her gaze. “It’ll be Mrs. Woodall next month,” Jud pipped like some proud father. A sly smile creeping along his sun worn face.

“Oh. I’m not sure I’m acquainted with Mr. Woodall.” Henry was surprised someone would marry the girl, but it really wasn’t any of his business.

“Everett Woodall be his name.” Lillie’s quiet voice was almost inaudible. She let the hair fall into her face and made no move to brush it away as if hiding from Henry. Or from Jud.

“I’ve brought the balance of your account,” Henry said, offering her an envelope. He reached around the screen door, careful to not enter the house. She reluctantly reached a slow hand forward.

“We spoke on the phone, you remember?” Concern trickling in his voice. Jud greedily eyed the envelope.

“She can manage herself. You best get going, Mr. LaCroix,” Jud interjected, enunciating the silent x into a cacophonous insult. Henry knew Jud remembered his name, how it was pronounced.

“Goodday,” Lillie mumbled after accepting the document, and Jud closed the door without another word.



Balancing the books of the youngest Smoot meant doling out the remaining funds of Hattie's estate. Over 50,000 barrels of oil later and worth more than a million dollars, Lillian's final report included a check for \$3,665.71. A fraction of the wealth made in Hattie's name. But it wasn't the payout they'd all wanted. Henry S. LaCroix was a bandage on a gaping wound. Bringing some hotshot Lakota from Arizona to sort the messes of Douglass and Smith was futile at best.

The Final Report did mean the last of the Smoots had been released by the court system. The very machine that had eaten through every family tie and stole any semblance of memorial for their mother. The court system that quantified their value and their loss with a dollar sign.

Lillie stood there with the ends of her lifelong court battle. Her entire childhood was spent in the walls of those courthouses. Every sibling felt the same and not one wanted to see a guardian or courtroom another day, until Kizzie brought the lawsuits.

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July 1938

Muskogee County

Daisy rarely came into town since moving to Stoney Point. The old family mansion on Tenth Street was full of nightmares. She didn't want to remember, not really. So, she stopped at the Piggly Wiggly down on Broadway. She sat in her parked car. Taking deep breaths. She'd meant to get a nicer gift for her new nephew or make something maybe, like knitted booties for his tiny feet. She thought long of babies, of her own baby brother's baby. Chief grew up faster than her own babies. She thought of the passing of time for a long while.

Then she sighed and opened the door to head inside. She was able to collect a card and some diapers. Best to be practical, she thought. As she headed for the check-out registers, the newspaper stand caught her eye. It was the Legal Record. Her grandfather would pour over those. It's one of the only things she remembered about Ma's dad. His intuition told him this was the white's man legislation and if he didn't keep an eye on it, their whole world would be taken away right under their noses.

And there it was. She couldn't believe it. Her mother's name in black and white. Nearly two decades later and all this was still unresolved. The Muskogee Legal Record read:

**Supervision relinquished 7-6-38**

Case No. 38374 Hattie Barnett now Smoot.

No one to watch over any of it anymore. No one to check under the bed at night for all those monsters. No one to look for justice. No one to look at all. Not a single failsafe left. That was it, this was when the land and Ma's grave would become unprotected. No more legal rights.

She gasped and dropped the diapers. The weight of it all finally settling. All the letters faking visitation rights to Ma's grave. All the petitions, the loans, the withdrawals. All the spineless weasels who wormed their white asses into Indian Country just to steal what they wouldn't earn. All of it left her empty.

She left the diapers where they were. Put the paper back and placed one foot in front of the other. The grocery store linoleum squeaking under her hurried steps. In a daze, she left the store, clutched her handbag, and shoved her key into the ignition. The engine roaring to life. She'd write to her sister, congratulating Kizzie on the newborn.

She drove back home and never set foot in Muskogee again.

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May 1933

Muskogee County

Henry LaCroix was counting down the days. His final case had aged out. Most of these guardian cases were unmarried women and orphaned children. But these past three years had felt like a century. He was ready for that damn promotion and more than ready to get the hell out of dodge.

“How’s it coming, LaCroix?” Fox’s voice arrived before he did.

“Good, Fox. I’m wrapping up the final report on the rest of the Smoot minors.”

“Oh excellent! Glad to hear that one’ll be out of our hair. That Smoot man is something else, I tell ya.”

“You bet,” Henry chuckled in response.

“Let’s be sure to grab a drink when you finish up. To celebrate!” Fox cheerily walked away and into his own office.

Henry returned to his files. Trying to settle these accounts was a nightmare. He’d been told by the higher ups to just finalize the reports, don’t work on balancing the checkbook. Each case had two or three corrupt guardians, at least. That meant years of unpaid mortgage loans, poor bookkeeping records, unauthorized payouts to strangers, and severe—sometimes fatal— withholding from the minors. Indian children had died of starvation when guardians refused payments. It was hard enough keeping up with the tidal wave, let alone ensuring every case was given due process. But Henry knew, just like everyone else at the Indian Agency, there was no such thing in Indian Country.

Henry did not consider himself a corrupt man, at least not at first. Serving as an interpreter of Lakota for the government was a nice, steady income. He missed it. Because it didn't take long for Henry to realize things weren't as they seemed within the Muskogee Indian Agency.

A knock at his office door withdrew him from the reprieve.

"Yes, come in."

A thirty-something farmer opened the door. His calloused hands reached for a worn and holey hat. He had a pointed nose and square face. His sun-kissed skin shadowed along the worry lines in his face. And he was white, an unusual sight here.

"May I speak with you, sir?" the intruding man asked, polite but firm.

"Certainly," Henry responded.

The man entered Henry's office and said, "name's William Herschel Hammer. I got bus'ess to 'scuss wit' you."

"Nice to meet you, my name is Henry LaCroix, Mr. Hammer." Henry gestured toward a chair, welcoming the farmer into his office. Where the hell was Lisa? What sort of receptionist doesn't escort a visitor, Henry wondered.

"I pr'fer Herschel. And I know who you are," Herschel said.

"Then you have me at a disadvantage. I'm not sure what I can offer, please take a seat. My business here is with the Indians." The office hadn't grown in the past three years, but it was much tidier. Henry has grown almost proud of it.

The man sat down. "I farm for livin', sir," Herschel said.

"Yes," Henry said, eyeing the dirty overalls and crusted work boots.

“I’d like to keep the farm my wife and I are living on,” Herschel said, matter of fact. But Henry was confused. His work didn’t have anything to do with land deeds or tenant farmers.

“I’m not sure I’m following.” Henry furrowed his brow.

“My father-in-law won’t sell it,” Herschel said.

“Ah. Well, land is valuable.”

“Valuable?”

“Like an asset. With oil and mineral rights selling for thousands at auction, I can’t say I know many men eager to sell a parcel. I can put you in touch with someone though,” Henry offered, reaching for his contact flip folio.

“No, my son is buried on our farm.”

A quiet fell between them. Henry wasn’t sure what this man truly wanted. A creeping pit in his stomach spread unease through him.

“Mr. Hammer, I’m sorry. I’m not sure—”

“What do you value, Mr. LaCroix?”

Surprised, Henry didn’t know how to respond and sat silent.

“Surely, you ain’t staying here in Muskogee.”

“Uh—no. My wife and I are leaving for Scottsdale in a month.”

“Never been there ‘fore,” Herschel mused.

“Me neither.” Henry’s skepticism was growing like wildfire now.

“You got everything you need to make the trip?”

“Not yet. Still need a few supplies for the move.” Henry was uncertain of his own honesty but above all, he didn’t find Herschel threatening, just desperate.

“I’ve got wagons, horses, cows. What sort’o supplies you need?”

“Oh. I—um...”

“Let’s make a deal, Mr. LaCroix.”

So, Henry sold the land to Myrtle’s husband, without the Smoots’ knowledge. He got 2 horses, a wagon, harness, cow and its calf all worth \$275 for the deal and Herschel got Ma’s land tax-free.

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April 1930

Muskogee County

Daisy hated white men. All of 'em. The tall and skinny ones, the gray and wrinkly ones, the smelly and drunk ones, the stiff and smart ones, all of them. Bunch of no goods. Thinking they own the earth they walk on. She could go the rest of her life without seeing another, even with her one eye!

Well, she hated *him*. But he was all of them in one.

Her father was toxic. Drunk and mean. She had to get out. She was getting older and Jud didn't want nothin' to do with her. Nineteen was too damn old to be 'around anymore, he'd told her. If you don't find your way out I will.

She became Mrs. James Plumlee Richards on a cold Saturday. James was the whitest man she'd ever seen. He glowed in the sunlight, it almost hurt to watch him work. He was of German and Irish descent, pale and freckled. His nose was large and protruding, the most pronounced feature of his face. He didn't tan, he burned. When he was angry or overheated and wasn't sun-kissed, that nose would become a brilliant, glowing red. He carried his rolling papers and tobacco in his breast pocket. If the man wasn't working, he was smoking. And he was mean spirited only when drunk. Daisy never *really* loved him, but then again marriage wasn't about love.

Daisy had certainly liked James once. He was rooted in the soil, like her. Unafraid of dirty work. He looked her in the eye, not at her disfigured scar, not at her nose, and not down at her feet either. He looked at her. Without a hint of disgust or pity, which was rare for Daisy. So, at the altar, he did the same. He took Daisy by the hand and looked her in the eye.



The went down to the Muskogee Courthouse. It took about twenty minutes before the two were hitched. She signed the papers, as did he. And Jud was their witness. James in his overalls and Daisy in an old, faded dress. The anticipation so great, nothing else was given thought. Kizzie would've died if she'd been there, Daisy thought.

"Welcome to the family." Jud embraced James outside the courthouse in an unwelcome hug.

"Thank you, sir," James mumbled.

"When are you leaving?" Jud asked.

"Week after next," Daisy's curt tone cut in.

"Not soon enough," Jud scowled under his breath. She still heard him. She always heard him.

Daisy was unsure about marriage until death. Widows could love again, well, really they could remarry. Jud had found another wife and Daisy knew he didn't love the woman. Ms. Lois Florence Walker Isles. What a name, a damn mouthful if you asked Daisy. At least this one was closer to his age, she thought. He was nineteen years her senior. This would be Jud's fifth marriage. Lois wasn't a mean lady, but Daisy had had enough of his shenanigans. These gold-diggers were a waste of time and money. She had to admit, if Jud taught her anything, it was how to work a marriage to your benefit. Daisy thought she could handle James.

She promised James 'til death and she'd meant it. Neither believed in divorce. Daisy thought she could trust him. He was a God-fearing man. Not a good one, but a decent one. One that would do. And he wasn't her dad. She couldn't live under Myrtle's or Jud's thumb no more, especially with Lois' arrival. But it was Jud's white daughter that Daisy hated with all her might.

With ceaseless wants, Myrtle ran the house as if it were hers. And when Myrtle married off, the Smoot children expected a reprieve from their half-sister. Instead, she and her newlywed squatted on Ma's land, making their intentions clear—they were there to stay, so Daisy had to leave.

Marriage was about money, a business transaction. And Daisy had all she needed. To dip into Ma's oil monies, she needed to be married and she was. It didn't matter if Daisy thought they were rich, in practice they weren't. She would visit the shop on West Broadway and fall in love with the polka-dot purple dress that looked like Ma's and would've complemented her growing curves exquisitely but couldn't afford it. All of it, everything was out of reach.

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December 1925

Muskogee County

“Daddy, s’cold out. Stay in. We’ll make sumthin’ warm,” Lillie pleaded, timidly tugging on Jud’s sleeve.

Without hope of being persuaded, Jud clutched the keys and grabbed a jacket. “Be back soon,” he muttered.

The door slammed shut with a gust of frigid air. Muskogee was unusually cold the Sunday after Christmas. The single digit temperatures were seeping through the walls. The Muskogee mansion was bought with blood money, that’s what Daisy would say. The three stories loomed over the neighborhood. The crisp white paint blended with the cold vacant yard. The hardwood floors lost their adventurous touch after the first day. It was an immaculate house, grand and inescapable but it could never calm the storm.

“He gone for the drink,” Daisy dismissed Kizzie Anna’s look of concern.

“Why you always suspect the worst of him?” Anna turned on Daisy, accusatory.

“What else to expect?” Daisy spat.

Anna hurled herself at Daisy’s turned back, tackling her to the living room floor.

They tumbled into a scrappy fight. Sisters pulling hair and scratching each other with talons of jealousy. Throwing punches and insults at each other, they rolled around. Daisy pinning Anna, shoving her face into the hardwood.

Lillie shrieked at the sight of her sisters in commotion. Chief raced down the stairs just in time to rip the two apart before they inflicted serious damage.

“What on earth?!” He pushed each across the room, spacing their anger for dissipation. Both girls looked unruly, hair disheveled and red scratches, bruises were already forming.

“She started it!” Daisy hissed.

“I did not,” Anna corrected, regaining her decorum. Brushing the ruffles and dirt out of her dress and smoothing her hair. A real drama queen, Daisy thought.

“Listen. Y’all can’t be fightin’. Dad’ll kill us all for makin’ a mess in the house,” Chief pleaded with authority.

“Dad don’t care ‘bout us,” Daisy spat at her sibling and marched up the stairs. Dismissing herself from the family gathering.

“Damn car,” Jud muttered as he twisted the key for the up-teenth time. Battling the cold, the Buick sedan rattled to life. “Thank you, Jesus.” He grasped the steering wheel. “Damn thing been givin’ me more trouble than’s worth.”

“You should care for it,” Hattie replied.

“Ca’int,” Jud instinctively answered.

“Won’t,” Hattie corrected.

“Shut it!” He pounded his fists on the steering wheel of the Buick. The cold seeped into the interior and made the leather seats frigid.

“Oh. Because you says?” she challenged unaffected.

“Yes! ‘Cause I say. ‘Cause I am their father!” Jud roared.

“Some father.”

Anger swelled in his face. “Why are you here?” Jud sneered. “What do you want?”

“I can’t answer your questions.”

“Then leave me be!” Tears welled in his eyes.

“Leave the bottle.”

“NO!”

“I need it,” he murmured in defeat.

“Drink only brings you pain.”

“YOU bring me pain!” His glassy eyes fixed on her muted form. She was as he always remembered but fainter. Less vibrant and less solid. He couldn’t feel her weight in the seat. He glanced away in time to see there in the middle of the road was the largest bear Jud had ever seen. He instinctively swerved.

*THUNCK!*

“Nokose,” Hattie gasped.

Jolted by reality, Jud whispered, “I’ve hit something.”

“Someone,” she corrected and turned her dark eyes away from the open field where the bear had scurried off after the near miss. She turned her eyes from him and to the road’s edge where the headlights illuminated the bar ditch.

“What in tarnation?!” a crumpled figure moaned from a pool of grass and dirt. Wiping dust from his clothes as he rose, crumpled over in pain.

“Shit!” Jud clamored out into street.

“S’cuse me.” Jud’s tone sour and sloven.

“You’re drunk!” accused the crumpled man as he turned to face Jud. “Of course. You are, Jud Smoot.” The man knew him. They were much closer to town than Jud realized. A few onlookers began to assemble, watching the exchange with a mix of curiosity and concern.

“Well...why you in the mid o’the road? Ain’t even a blind bat gonna spot you out her’!”

“My back!” The slumped man clutched his spine and doubled over.

“You walkin’. You talkin’. Yous fine. Quit that moanin’ n groanin’ now, ya hear?” Jud slurred.

“You will pay for this!” The man shook a pointed finger in Jud’s face and retreated to the nearest storefront seeking aid.

“You will pay for this,” Hattie’s voice echoed as Jud returned to the now-empty cab and headed home.

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*Sofki*

- 3 quarts hominy
- 5 gallons of water
- 1 pint ash lye

*Place hominy in a large iron pot with water and ash lye. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and let simmer for 3 hours, or until tender. Serve warm or chilled. Let stand for 1 day for Sour Sofki.*

July 1903

Tvkvptce *Hughes* County

The women were beating the husks. They'd dried the corn days earlier, soaked the husks and finally they were at the stage of taking their sticks to it. At the homeplace, the preparations were in full swing. A barbeque with fresh cuts and abundant foods. The mid-summer harvest was fruitful, and the cooking would be splendid.

"Your erke is out, getting the game together," Nancy told Hattie as they leaned over husks, powering down on them. Sentences escaping between the thwacks. Tatters of husk falling behind.

"They play so serious." Hattie nodded at the men, battling for the ball, sticks in hand.

"It's tradition," her mother, Patsy chimed in, collecting puffed kernels from their smashings. Stick ball could be an unpredictable game. There would be injuries but all in good fun.

"I can't believe the news about erke's job," Hattie said. Dave had been the best damn judge in Wetumka. Hell, in the Nation. She looked across the field, instinctively searching for him. She watched his aging figure hustle down the field, stick in hand, ball in net, and wind in his hair. He was maniacal with the impending score. Hattie could just make out his wild look—bulged eyes and tensed shoulders—greedily running toward the goal, shoving any contenders along the way.

"Don't mention that Curtis political nonsense tonight." Mary winced as her arm cramped around the stick.

"Ah, puse. Let me." Hattie leaned down to collect her grandmother's puffed kernels.



Just then a girl came rushing toward them. A cloud of dust following her and the evening twilight falling behind. “Momma!”

“George and Robert won’t let me play with them,” Ida whined. She ran into Nancy’s arms.

“Oh. What fun are they anyway?” Mary scoffed. “Come child, let’s hear a story.” And with those few words, it seemed as though the young Barnett clan descended around Mary’s sitting place.

“This is the story of corn.” Mary raised the husked corn.

“Long ago, a far ways from here—” Her arms sweeping around, gesturing to an elsewhere place. She continued.

“There was a woman. From the Tamalgi clan of the homelands.

“She would invite friends and neighbors to her home and feed them.” Mary reached her upturned palms to the members of the crowd as she spoke. To Ida, to young Mary, to George, to Robert, to Amos. Even their older siblings watched her story. Hattie, Tom, Melviney, Nellie were all enthralled.

“She made them sofki. From hominy, water, and oak ash.

“Her neighbors loved it so much, they loved her so much. They ask,

“Tamalgi woman, how do you make this sofki?” Mary’s voice boomed and echoed as if spoken by a hundred men.

“They watched her.” Mary leaned forward, along the semicircle, meeting all their eyes.

“And one day—” Mary perked up, sat straight and held one finger up.

“They saw her dip her feet into the water.” Mary mimicked lifting one foot and easing it into water, then the other.

“They watched as she scrubbed and washed her feet.” Mary lifted a foot into her hand and mimed massaging her wiggling toes clean.

“And they saw corn! Falling from her toes, into the water.” Mary rippled her fingers from her toes, then showed them outstretched to the crowd, as if kernels were floating toward them in the air.

“The woman said this was no way to eat corn, so build me a corncrib,

“And leave me there, lock me inside for four days and four nights.” Mary held up four fingers.

“So they locked her inside and the thunderous sounds, like a storming sky came from the corncrib.

“On the fourth day, they opened it and found the Tamalgi woman inside the corn filled crib. There was so much corn!” Mary grabbed the basket of puffed kernels and shook them about.

“She showed them how to plant corn—” Mary’s upward palm pointed toward the garden.

“And they had plenty for all the sofki. For bread, for other corn, forever.” Mary stood as she finished the story.

“Hompvkets.” *Let’s eat.*

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July 1934

Muskogee County

Five months old and in constant tears. Lillie and the baby girl didn't seem like each other much. She didn't find herself suitable for motherhood. She'd begged Renie to visit, to help. To ease all the tensions and troubles away, but Renie's new husband Marvin wouldn't have it. His wife needed to stay put as far as he was concerned. And Lillie had been conned from the first marriage to a man with a name that didn't exist. The sort of scam common in Indian Territory when rich Indians outnumbered the poor, white farmers. The heartbreak alone kept her bedridden for months. And then there was Jesse Dumond. Lillie thought she was finally in love.

But Marvin believed husbands should keep their wives in line, Renie'd said over the phone excusing her absence.

"I'm sorry, Lillie. Did you try Kizzie or Daisy? I'm sure they'd want to see little Katie," Renie desperately tried to console her sister.

"They can't!" Lillie wailed. Her own cries echoed by her daughter's.

"Have you tried rocking her? I thought Jesse got you that new chair," Renie tried again.

Lillie sniffled into the phone. Either she hadn't heard the question or already tried it without success. It was plain Lillie did not inherit that magical maternal trait.

"Have you called Daddy?" Renie asked.

"Florence won't answer," Lillie whispered. A forbidden secret between the lines of their call as their father's new wife kept him on a short leash. It wasn't like he cared before, but he cared even less now. Lillie heard Renie's breath hitch through the line, she knew her sister's heart had dropped to her stomach and a lump in her throat kept silent. Lillie knew because she

felt it too. They both grew quiet and listened to each other's breathing. Lillie's hiccupping sobs had calmed a little, but little Katie continued to scream.

"Somethin' wrong, Renie," Lillie said.

"Now, I don't like Daddy's newest wife any more than you but she's Mrs. Smoot all the same." Renie's tone was firm, insistent. She'd grown intolerant to criticisms of Jud. Lillie knew her sister as cold and distant from that day on. "Lillie, I've got to go now."

"Please," Lillie whispered.

The line went silent. Then dead.

And two weeks later little Katie was dead, too. Jesse and Lillie buried their first born in the family cemetery next to her grandmother, Hattie.

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March 1872

Okfuskee County

They buried a piece of Lucy's umbilical cord the day she was born. David had wondered if the hollow sisters would have hollow daughters. He had wanted a son, but Patsy had given him a daughter.

Lucy's first breath was surrounded by aunties. Though she would be dead by twenty-seven, she was the firstborn of David Barnett's children. Dave had yet to know the world where his children were poisoned. Where twelve of his fifteen children would be dead before he found the grave himself. He'd know the sorrow of small coffins and lost grandbabies. The stain of stolen daughters and slaughtered sons. He'd sit awake at wakes and then awake at night. He'd know it all soon enough.

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		<b>Sunray DX Oil Company</b> TULSA, OKLAHOMA		86-1 1062	
NUMBER	DATE	PAY		AMOUNT	
1726971	05-18-67	TO THE ORDER OF DAISY BELL SMOOT NOW RICHARDS 1928 N COLUMBIA PLACE TULSA 10 OKLA 74110		\$ .05	
TO THE FIRST NATIONAL BANK AND TRUST COMPANY TULSA, OKLAHOMA				Sunray DX Oil Company CRUDE OIL & GAS PURCHASE	
TO THE FIRST NATIONAL BANK AND TRUST COMPANY TULSA, OKLAHOMA					
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May 1967

Tulsa County

“Right on time,” James muttered, tossing the mail so it splayed across the kitchen counter. Daisy snatched it up and hurriedly collected a mason jar from behind the lazy susan in the bottom left cabinet. She meticulously folded the check, creasing the corners like a paper crane. The wrinkles on her hand, smoothing and crinkling as her fingers carved the edges. She then stuffed it inside, crowded with the rest. Interest on the oil in the form of a monthly check. From the day they stole Ma, Daisy swore never to take a dime. She was just fine without it. We don’t need any blood money, she would say.

“You could cash ‘em,” he said.

“Hush now. Ain’t a lick of your business,” she admonished.

“If it’s in this house, then it’s my business.”

“Ain’t your house.”

James stood up. Bore into Daisy’s eye with hints of anguish. “Listen here,” his voice grew sinister, “you cain’t talk t’me like that.”

“A’right,” she said.

James took his seat and fished a smoke from the pack, struck a match and brought the tobacco to life. There was no meaning to arguing with Daisy. She had made her mind long before the two spoke another word. Clutching the jar, she found her way to the rusted green trunk under her bed. Hooking her fingers around the cold metal buckles, she opened the creaking lid to reveal fourteen other paper-filled mason jars. She rested this one with the others. Closed the lid, locked it, and returned it to its proper place. The twin-sized quilt was wrinkle-free and undisturbed. As was James’ across the room. Daisy lingered in the bedroom. Soaking in the sight of separate beds. Once, she had been affectionate. Thirty-seven years had passed, and a lot had happened. Children, even grandchildren, don’t fix marriages.

They had three children who gave them eleven grandchildren. Each with their own life.

“Is Mike coming by with the kids later?” Daisy joined James in the living room.

He ashed his cigarette in the amber-colored glass sculpted tray on the side table.

“He ain’t called to say so.”

“Them grandchildren are too loud. Children should be seen and not heard.”

Daisy collected herself from the seat, strode into the kitchen and busied herself there.

Four days later, James Plumlee Richards died of a massive heart attack. In the same ol’ mustard sitting chair where he smoked a pack every evening. Right in the front room. His hand tore the pristine doily on the armrest. The intricate lace spoiled beyond recognition as he collapsed on the floor. Vacuumed carpet caressed his flushed face. He drew his last ragged breath in his dirty overalls and holey socks. The hell he gave Daisy never accounted for much. She thought a marriage that survived so much was made out of something tougher than love.

Even filed for divorce once in '63 but that wasn't the way. The Good Lord doesn't account for uncoupling. So, they persisted, 'til death did they part.

Doctors said nothing could be done. Daisy blamed the curse.

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February 1919

Okfuskee County

Lillie grew restless in Hattie's arms on the fourth and final night. Mary had been waiting to die. At least that was the joke she always toted along, especially when taking long naps. The grandchildren would giggle under her snoring, snickering at her throaty purr. In a moment, she'd cease all noise and suddenly jump at the children. Startling them all into scattering giggles.

Young Mary was wailing in the corner. Hattie could sense Lillie's growing unease. On the fifth day they buried Mary, the matriarch. It wasn't in the place her umbilical cord was buried, that was back at the before place. The place Hattie dreamed of when Mary swooned through stories of water and mounds. Of arrowheads and riverbeds. Of mekkos and war and peace towns. The white and the red. Of the old ways that never really age.

"Wetumka means tumbling water," Hattie whispered in Lillie's ear.

She rocked the young girl against her chest. Back in the very same house, down home. As it always would be.

"Can you hear the tumbling water?" Hattie crooned into the nape of Lillie's neck. The gentle rocking brought no rest for little Lillie. Hattie took her shawl and swaddled her baby tight then wrapped her around, so Lillie peeped over her shoulder. Soon, her baby girl was sound asleep.

"Kizzie Anna, Daisy Belle, Renie Mae. Come now," Hattie summoned her girls. They scurried from different corners and crevices of the old Barnett homestead. The whole place smelled of sage. Family, what was left, stayed up through the night. Storying Mary to each other, keeping her company.

“It’s time.” Hattie told them.

On the western side of the homestead, the Barnett-Fisher burial ground had been established. With too many residents already.

One by one the family members stomped and sang together. Voicing their cries of love for Mother Mary and the mothers before and the mothers of creation.

They dug with their hand what would become her grave, along a crickish offshoot of the Oktahutche where it slithered down to a trickle at times. And still the water runs.

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October 1924

Okfuskee County

*<<Loan sharks and interest hounds>>* A radio static voice greeted listeners like an old friend. A rhythm so smooth, ears tilted closer.

A hand reached for the radio dial. Battling the static into submission for clearer sound.

“Settle down, gentlemen! It’s on! It’s on!” roared Frank Douglass. The friendly speaker continued.

*<<I have addressed every form of organized graft in the United States, excepting Congress>>*

*<<So, it’s naturally a pleasure to me to appear before the biggest>>*

*<<You are without a doubt the most disgustingly rich audience that I ever talked to>>*

“Damn straight!” guffawed Frank, the cigar bobbed up and down in his mouth. A bellowing laugh made his gut bounce. He settled into the black hide and red oak chair. Ornately carved to match his desk. The radio sound filled the cathedral ceilings of the law office, but the sinking sun cast a shadowy blanket over the space. And a growing aroma of whiskey and cigar smoke filled the air.

*<<Now I understand you hold this convention every year to announce what the annual gyp will be>>*

“The gyp is here, my men! Now!” Frank raised his glass.

“We may not be bankers!” said Judge Duling.

“But we are the bank of Indian estates!” the men chanted together. They all raised then tilted their glasses, the amber liquid racing into their blood.

The radio signal cleared.

*<<I see where your wives come with you. You notice I say come, not the word brought>>*

Scattered snorts from men in the room.

“Ol’ Will tryin’ to be po-lit-ick-ally correct,” chittered Philips, dragging each syllable.

“I heard women s’pose to have rights now!” Duling sneered.

“Agency. That’s what my Mrs. calls it,” M.S. said. They’d all gathered for the evening—Frank Douglass, Duling, Philips, the notary Autry, and Douglass’ brother and father: A.T. and Moses Shuggs. All well on their way to drunk. And very much wifeless on their evening of radio entertainment.

*<<I see where your convention was opened by a prayer. You had to stand outside your ranks to get somebody that knew how to pray>>*

*<<You should’ve had one creditor there. He could’ve shown you how to pray>>*

*<<I noticed in the prayer, the clergyman announced to the almighty that the bankers were here>>*

*<<It wasn’t exactly an announcement>>*

*<<It was more in the nature of a warning>>*

*<<He didn’t tell the devil as he figured he knew where you all were all the time anyhow>>*

*<<I see by your speeches that you're very optimistic of the business conditions of the coming year>>*

*<<Boy, I don't blame you. If I had your dough, I'd be optimistic too>>*

The brick walls vibrated with their thunderous laughter.

"We're som' rich sons'o'bitches!" Shuggs hollered.

"Cheers to that, gentlemen!" A.T. raised his glance and they leaned together for the clink.

*<<Will you please tell me what you all do with the vice president the bank has? I guess that's to get anybody more discouraged before you can be the main guy>>*

*<<The United States is the biggest business institution in the world. They only got one vice president, and nobody's ever found anything for him to do>>*

"Speaking of money, A.T. What happened with that Smoot father? The white man?"

Frank shifted in the chair, curiosity searing like his cigar.

"Ah. Acey Judson Smoot." A.T. nodded and leaned back.

"He's the one that moved those rich injun kids to Muskogee, ain't he?" Autry asked.

"He's certainly trying," A.T. said before downing the rest of his drink.

"Not if I have anything to say about it!" Judge Duling roared with laughter and stood up.

Sauntering over to A.T., he clapped the young man on the shoulder. Leaned down to his ear level with sweet whiskey breath. "We'll gridlock him in court," Duling whispered with a wink.

"Another round!" Duling shouted into the dark ceiling. Like an abyss, the office grew darker. The whiskey sloshed in the glasses. And the radio continued:

*<<You have a wonderful organization. I understand you have 10,000 here. And with what you have in the various federal prisons brings your membership up to around 30,000>>*

*<<So, Goodbye paupers>>*

*<<You were the finest bunch of shylocks that ever foreclosed a mortgage on a widow's home>>*

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June 1924

Muskogee County

Jud had long promised his children an adventure since their mother's passing. Guardian Douglass approved the road trip for \$1,000. Daisy could tell Jud wasn't happy with it. He was never happy with A.T. Douglass, with some other man's hands on his money. Hattie was his wife. This money was his, that's how he saw it. Plain and simple.

"We're going to see the ocean!" Jud declared.

"But Daddy, how will we get there? Surely the Buick won't make it," Kizzie Anna said so sweetly it made her father's heart melt. She was that tender teenage age now, keen on breaking hearts and stealing secrets.

"No. No. No." He shook his hands and waved his arms. Refusing her idea altogether.

"We will be taking the Buick—" He paused.

"To the KATY Depot." He boasted the news.

"THE TRAIN!?!?" Chief bobbed with excitement, his floppy hair dancing along. He clapped his hands and beamed the biggest smile.

"Papa, are we really taking a train?" Lillie swayed toward him, her shy voice almost inaudible.

"Thank heavens! I feared Daisy and I would fight for the front seat." Kizzie rolled her eyes and sighed with relief. Daisy shot her a glare of disdain but kept quiet. She and the other Smoot children turned their eyes on their father.

"Where are we going?!" Chief asked.

He looked around at them. A smirk grew along the corner of his mouth and spread into a wild grin.

“We’re going to Texas. To visit my ol’ man. Then Louisiana! And after that…” Jud was letting a smile stretch across his face. The look almost unrecognizable to his children. Lillie took the invitation and leaned into him.

“Yes, dear Lillie.” He bounced her small frame from the floor and onto his knee. She sat on his lap with comfortable ease. Lillie was near nine and Chief was only eight. They were squarely together, still stuck in the wonderment of childhood.

“Oh, Pa! Then where after that?” Chief whined.

Jud paused, gave his son a slow grin. “Cross the whole damn con’try.”

The KATY line, Kansas-Texas railway was a huge celebration when it first opened in Muskogee. The station was modest and the ceremony summoned freedmen, natives, and whites from all over. Rails to connect us to the country, said the conductors and engineers. There was drinking, celebration, and grand merriment all around. Ever since the rails had been laid and the first whistle whooshed through town, Lillie and Chief had begged their father to go.

“We really are?” Lillie whispered into Jud’s old overalls. She was hungry for affection since Ma died and to his credit, her father tried to fill the void. It wasn’t easy. And he feared it never would be but with teenage daughters growing more beautiful by the minute, he knew suitors would soon be at his own door, asking for his eldest’s hand.

“I’ve been telling you kids we’re rich for years now and we’ve got nothing to show for it,” he started.

“What about this here house?” Daisy waved a hand toward the high ceilings, ornately carved wooden staircase, the massive rugs, the growing collection of china in the cabinet. She



waved her hand toward all of it—all that had changed since Ma passed. Leaving the homeplace for a Muskogee mansion. The absence of their garden and the soot from the Buick felt like a tight grip around her throat. A pantry full of store-bought cans, the new and top-of-the-line radio as the living room centerpiece were reminders that they'd left Ma behind. They all moved on. To Daisy, it was like her old life, her life with a mother, never existed at all. She mourned for the fading childhood memories. The dusty floors, the preservatives, the beans that dried like britches and the wheat they milled by hand. She missed the way she used to be down home.

“When are we going?” Renie’s voice peeped from another chair. This whole conversation, Daisy thought, is taking place in a room larger than any house Ma ever lived.

“T’morrow,” Jud answered.

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November 1902

Fort Leavenworth Penitentiary, Kansas

Bill Jones emerged from the barbed fenced compound looking starved. He'd lost weight since his internment in March. They'd already released his co-conspirators because they weren't really interested in the other eighteen Snakes. Bill was the one in charge.

Dave waited out front with his wagon hitched to the hardiest oxen of his herd. He knew Bill would need a ride and thought it a good opportunity to gauge the Four Mother's resistance.

"Bill, next time they'll have your head!" Dave admonished his friend, shaking his head as they greeted one another and loaded into the cart. A hefty ox began to pull them along the countryside.

"I'm only asking them to keep their word," Bill said. "What good is a government that lies?" Bill paused and shook his head. The time for his crime hadn't swayed his stance.

"And they can't even do that right!" He turned his back on the penitentiary, on the federal system, instead facing the open green expanse.

"How did you fair in there? You hungry? Patsy packed some smoked meats and bread for our trip." Dave leaned back to rummage through the contents of a closed basket. The weavings intricately locking the lid in place. He untied the closings and handed the basket to Bill.

"Council is no better for it," Bill huffed as he hunched over the contents, searching then selecting his favorite offering. "State of Sequoyah, like the Estehvtke could stand it?"

"Now, mind your tongue. The Council is trying," Dave interjected.

"Not hard enough!" Bill retorted.

“Our people can’t handle another war. I’ve already buried five of my children.” Dave grew quiet. He tugged on the reins, coaxing the ox to quicken his pace.

Bill begrudgingly took bites of his meat and bread, looked out from the cart. The land looked like it would go on green forever as it should be. In that way Indian Territory looked like an ocean of wheat with islands of trees scattered about.

The two sat not in silence but with the symphony of nature’s din as their soundtrack. Bill’s body looked as if he missed fresh air. All his muscles relaxed, and his breathing elongated the further they traveled from the penitentiary. The breath of the land on his body ruffled his hair and freshened his clothes. He gave his blessing to Hesaketvmese. Being locked up, even for something so silly and ignorant, was not a punishment worthy of the crime. Indian Territory was infested with irreconcilable justice systems, striking just as the oil was booming.

“We almost did it, Dave. Just like Mvskokvlke did in the homelands,” Bill said excitedly.

“There was ninety-six of you Snakes arrested that day.” Dave had read the news report. All of them. “Young men with as few as fourteen years to elders with nearly eighty-nine years,” Dave continued and nodded with encouragement.

“I was there, Dave. I know. I could feel them,” Bill said. “Their energy, their spirit.”

And suddenly both men seemed overcome with a nostalgia for the homelands, a nostalgia they could only ever inherit and never revisit. A yearning for what once was even though they’d only heard stories of it.

“There’s been word,” Dave started.

Bill looked at him with an unnerving intensity.

“We’ll be stopping by a friend’s home. He’s Cherokee,” Dave said.

“Intertribal interest?” Bill’s voice was full of surprise. The stint in the pent was meant to bring attention to the issue. And then something curious bloomed, something a lot like hope.

“Next time it won’t be conspiracy to overthrow the federal government. Next time, it’ll be treason the United States charges you with,” Dave warned.

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July 1935

Okfuskee County

Jud hadn't seen Locv or the clouds' transformation. He raised the post driver above his head, used all his might from within his chest, and in a gust of breath brought the driver down with a blow that echoed with a clap of thunder. The skies darkened. He raised the driver again. Breathing deep, he glanced up to see it.

"Sonofabitch," he breathlessly gasped.

Standing across the field, Hattie was approaching. His heart began to race as she neared in quick, sure steps. He was frozen and speechless. She walked—no, she floated—as she approached. She was so uncharacteristically graceful. She looked as if she was a ghost, but he knew those weren't real. He wanted to reach out and touch her. Feel her again, tell her how sorry he was, for all of it.

Her black hair whipped in the wild winds, her eyes were ablaze with emotion, and her feet were bare under her white nightgown.

"Jud," she said.

"Ha-Ha-Hattie," he stuttered. Lowering the driver and dropping it on the ground. He felt lightheaded. He hadn't seen her in years. She stopped visiting when he'd stopped drinking. By then the damage was done, his doctor had said. And Jud thought he'd escaped her.

"What'n hell?" He staggered. "You's an angel?" Jud asked, almost inaudibly. Maybe she was here to haunt him, he deserved it, he thought.

"No," she answered. Her tone was sharp, accusing him of being foolish. Ghosts weren't real. Spirits though, that's different. And the spirits were angry with Jud.

She was within feet of him now. Standing in the field together as they'd done on their wedding day. Laughing and frolicking in the golden wheat. He would shout grand plans to her; this is where we'll put the barn, and this is where we'll have the cattle graze. And we'll rotate them to this field and always keep their shit downwind. She'd giggled at his foul mouth. And this is where you can garden with the best view. He wrapped an arm around her waist as they took in the endless view. Where it seemed like the land went on and on until it was the blue, blue sky. Blades of switchgrass bending and swaying with every gust. It was like the whole world was dancing for them. That's what he'd said to her; look how the world dances for you, Hattie. He remembered it all.

She looked behind him now. And the winds grew stronger. The hot and cold gulf airs colliding above them.

His heart quaked and he fell to his knees. Kneeling, he looked up at her. She was aglow in a shimmering dazzle. She was earth and wind. Her hair billowed like fall wheat in breeze. Her bare feet molded into the dirt and grass. Her skin was misty with the clouds, but she looked like herself. Completely the same, the very woman he'd shared a bed with all those years ago.

"I n'ver ment you nos harm. You knows that?" he croaked.

He had the good sense to be fearful. He held his hands up in defense. But when she moved her hand to his chin, holding his face, she caressed his graying stubble. His shoulders loosened and he dropped his hands. A calm overcame him.

"I am Wotkvlke," she said as her voice reverberated. "As my mother was. My father was Hotvlkvke." Jud's confused look. His dumb look of feigned innocence was enough to bring her closer.

She leaned down and whispered to him. "Cvyayvketv." She wished him quietness.

The low-hanging, grey monsters were eating the entire sky now. The warping formations of a funnel cloud beginning. She reached her hand out to Jud. His hand found hers like a perfect fit. The same old way it had been before he'd done what he did. She felt like she always had, firm and secure. He unsteadily managed to rise from the ground, standing up now. He finally looked up, toward heaven.

The snaking bend of the funnel elongated. It was a blistering white in contrast to the darkened grey. They watched, hand in hand, as the funnel stretched and flirted with the earth. Picking up debris that would be consumed by this beam of light. Bits of barns and old hay bales were tumbling in the sky and would be found miles from where they'd been picked up. The rain was horizontal now, pouring from the most improbable angles. It was like a train passing right in front of them, the piercing whistling and rumbling motion made Jud's stomach flip and twist.

Then, the funnel came closer. The tornado path had seemed random, but now, now it was headed straight for them. And the winds strengthened, their clothes were nearly ripped from their bodies. And ever so slightly, they began to rise. The funnel beam was defying gravity, plucking Jud and Hattie off the ground and into the air. They spun together and wildly in the sky. He instinctively grabbed at Hattie. A growing pit in his stomach lurched as they rose from the earth.

Jud held onto her hand with all his might. They were extended, head-to-head and hand-in-hand, as the air streams lifted them further. Over fifty feet off the ground now, they began circling the funnel in dizzying repetition. Stuck in the very eye of the storm. Then bits of Hattie's frame began dissipating into nothingness. Jud watched his wife disappear before his very eyes.

First, her feet were engulfed by the wild whipping of her white nightie, but then the nightie was flapping against itself. Her legs gone. Her torso gone. The fabric wildly jumping around nothing, no limbs, no body. Soon, it would be just a dress. Jud saw where the collar of

her nightie and the base of her neck was losing solidity. Before his panic could meet her eyes, she was everywhere all at once. And in that instant, a lightning bolt sparked the sky. Arched along the tornado's path, looking for him. Searching the sky for a scoundrel and found him. Electrified by the jolting shock of earth's atmosphere, Jud's heart exploded inside his chest. Rupturing every artery and cauterizing each blood vessel. And just like that, the storm ceased. In the silence, he fell to the ground with a thud.

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February 1921

Okfuskee County

Daisy spooned the hot broth from the bowl trembling in her hands. Ma had been sick for a few weeks. It wasn't as bad though. She'd complained of a headache the whole month but the house needing keeping, the children needing feeling, work needed doing. There wasn't any time to nurse herself. Daisy kept trying the spoon, but Ma was too weak. Her color was all wrong, diluted and fading.

"Kizzie, what are we gonna do?" Daisy's whispered voice cracked.

Her sister meant her concerned gaze with mirrored reflection. A terror spread in the room's tension.

"Ma. Momma." Lillie tugged on Hattie's sleeve.

"Yes, my baby?" Ma's voice was quiet and slow but still full of love.

Five sets of big, scared eyes looked at Ma and between each other.

"Come here." She motioned for her children to climb into bed with her. They scrambled into every empty space, tucked around her silhouette. Kizzie brushed the sweaty hair from her mother's brow and sat near her head. Little Lillie nestled into her mother's right side. Chief sat upright by her left leg in Daisy's lap. He wasn't but 3 yet. And Renie remained at the foot of the bed, taking it all in.

"Ma, you can't leave us," Kizzie pleaded.

"Shhh. How about a story?" Ma offered with a simple smile that brought on a coughing fit.

“Renie, grab that handkerchief” Daisy barked. The children relayed the cloth to Kizzie who held it by Ma’s mouth to catch the blood.

“Just rest, Momma” Kizzie cooed while petting her mother’s hair and cradling her head. Hattie’s breathing had slowed, and she wasn’t speaking. They were scared into silence. Tears welled and they held one another.

The Smoot children crawled into bed that night and carried Hattie home. She lived in their hearts forever, but she was gone.

When Daisy couldn’t breathe, she rushed outside. Fell to her knee in the nightlight and cried. She let everything come all at once. She wept until a grunting caught her attention.

Amidst the darkness, Daisy could make her father’s frame and the methodical scooping and tossing of dirt. At the side of the house, next to some stones Jud had collected all over the farm so they’d be out of the way. A place far from the garden and removed from the home, he was digging. He angrily shoveled, returning again and again. He was standing in the hole, not quite four feet deep when he stopped to wipe his brow.

The scraping of metal against earth continued and Daisy listened to her father dig her mother’s grave.

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July 1910

Okfuskee County

Fuswv flew above the same open blue skies as yesterday, as tomorrow. He flapped his great wide wings and soared above. Above all his earthbound relatives, but along his skyward cousins. Fuswv knew this land to be bountiful for his winged brothers and sisters. On the rocky bits, the hills hid divine grapes. Indian peaches: red purple freestone, clingstone. Gooseberries. Raspberries. Strawberries. Huckleberries. Dewberries. Blackberries. Crab apples. Persimmons. Cherries. Walnuts. Pecans. Hickory nuts. Every morning was a feast here. Of course, Fuswv was always careful to take only what he needed, what his family would need. Fuswv had awoken early and found a few worms among the dew, but a midmorning snack was always welcome.

The morning sun was already scorching the earth. Fuswv could feel the heat between the blades of his wings and the radiating winds. Amidst the rustling of distant wheat and the midsummer din of insects, Fuswv could hear the river's rushing sounds. He read the clouds like a map and predicted another stunning sunset where the blue would give way to blazing orange and soft purple, but the day was still left to spend. Where the blue expanse met the green plains, as far as the eye could see and just above the crisp horizon, Fuswv could scarcely make out the silhouettes of a few machines extracting oil. Like a sister hen plucking for grain. Slow with blinding repetition until the very last morsel was collected.

There. Along the wet soil and thick wheat, Fuswv spotted a field mouse. His eyes narrowed with hunger; his shoulders quaked with anticipation. Fuswv saw the rustling before he saw the black whiskers, long pink tail, and muddied paws. A quick dive and lunch would be served as Fuswv glided from the tree branch down to the prey.

The land reflected Fuswv's dark shadow as it flashed past, followed by his screeching call. The wind carried him back to enjoy the meal. Fuswv landed in the security of the hickories. His talons wrapped around the waning bark of the highest limb—head snapping back and forth between observations. Between gulps of skin and fur and bones.

Fuswv knew bad medicine came in many ways. Bad medicine. Curses. Omens. Whatever it was, ill wishes were rarely well received. This farm seemed prone to such bad medicine. Medicine was sent by bird. Different birds than Bird himself but all birds could carry medicine. Some birds were prone to carrying bad medicine. Owls are some of the most notorious. Here, on this farm, the bad medicine lives in the rooster Fuswv had come to watch again.

Fuswv favored the spot for its abundance of food. The last pasture to sell out to the oilers. Fuswv had observed the family on the farm for some time. A few years at best. Long enough to know they were hatching a family and the mother was on the brink of another. And just then, he noticed the rooster. The red, green, and orange feathers fanned with pride. Rooster was the only cock of the coop, and he was ornery. A smaller-than-usual white chicken that always seemed a little off. The hen strayed from the crowd, often forgetting food and direction. It would aimlessly roam the yard without rhyme or reason. The dozen birds flocking and pecking for their morning meal were joined in a commotion.

Rooster seemed to be squaring off. Circling the hen like prey, the chilling scene unfolded before Fuswv, and he knew something was amiss. The farm mother began clutching her unborn child as if to shield her, she winced in reaction to the rooster's attack. Red dirt droplets encircled the hen. Like a pendulum, the rooster flapped an intimidating retreat and returned again and again until the hen began to weaken.

Fuswv watched on from his perch as the bad medicine poured into the earth of the family farm. As he watched it lurch from the rooster's carnage, from the hen's innocence, into the land. As it breathed in and out with every exhale of wind. And from the land this bad medicine found its way to the mother's womb—to everything. And once again, the land bled.

The woman fell to her knees, clasped her hands together, pressed them to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut. Fuswv watched her plead and cry.

A man's voice echoed across the open field. And Fuswv took flight. Returning to the skies, coasting between the clouds. Fuswv would return and the family, like the next seven generations, would walk on.

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## Epilogue

Somewhere on Turtle Island, the clan animals held council. The growing threat to harmony and the sickening of the land.

“The land does not breathe as it once did,” Lokv said.

“It’s those machines!” said Eco.

“I see them dig, like brother prairie dog,” said Kono.

“Even at night, those pillars thump on!” cried Wotko.

“We must stop them,” said Fuswv.

“But how?” asked Culv.

Just then, a sudden hopping caught their ears and eyes.

“Who goes there?” said Hvlpvtv.

“It is me, Cufe! I can help.”

“What do you mean?” asked Echaswv.

“You are a trickster!” Nokose bellowed. Skepticism spread along the animals as they chattered with worry.

“I am much like the white man’s machine. I can thump.” Cufe’s foot ricocheted against the ground in demonstration.

When Cufe thumped, rapidly drumming on the earth, it was heard throughout the land. It sounded fast and angry, ricocheting the bedrock and vibrating the walls of nearby houses. Cufe was sending a warning—a booming, earth-shaking alarm. And it worsened as the machines grew more common. The digging and drilling of oil sounded just as Cufe’s foot did. The clan animals all agreed.

“We believe you, we believe you,” they all said together.

“And we can help, too!”

“I can swipe the levers to turn them off in the night!” said Wotko.

“I can constrict along all the lines and pipes to break them,” said Cetto.

“I can bite the machines with my jaws and take them into a death roll, scattering the pieces,” said Hvlpvtv.

“I can craft a pyre for what’s left of the machines,” said Echaswv.

“And I will carry a flame to it,” said Eco.

“I can flap the flames to burn the oil, destroy the machines!” said Fuswv.

“And I, Cufe will be there. I will thump and I will thump the land as hard as I can.

“As long as the grass is green.

“As long as the waters run.

“Like a drum!

“I will thump.”

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

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## NOTES

I have made every effort to accurately portray the historical record of Indian Territory and Oklahoma, however any and all errors are resultant of my research and fictionalizations alone. While I aim to represent characters reflective of real people, these events are best described as inspired by true happenings. All mention of names, events, locations, and incidents should be considered as coincidental or mere products of the author's imagination.

The postcard featured in the April 1908 vignette is from a collection accessed in The Gateway to Oklahoma History hosted by the Oklahoma Historical Society ([Source](#)).

The hollow girls story was inspired by the Milley Fish Gilroy interview on the 26 of May in 1937 performed by ethnographers working on the Pioneer Papers project housed in a digital collection at the University of Oklahoma ([Source](#)).

The image of Dave Barnett's cattle brand in the January 1911 vignette is edited from an article in The Indian Champion published on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of April in 1885.

Recipes featured throughout the work are inspired and borrowed from the book *Muscogee Creek Recipes: Cooking Tips & Lore* by Dean Tackett.

The recounting of Judge Rowe's death scene from the November 1921 vignette is a reimagining of a news article titled "Judge Rowe is Dead" published in the Okemah News on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of November in 1921.

The Tulsa Tribune article retold is quite like the original published on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April in 1924 under the title "White Man Victim of Guardianship Law for Indians Officials Claim" with minor editing for clarity and length.

The shortened rendition of the Mvskoke version of the hymn Jesus Loves Me in the vignette of October 1867 is brought to this text from the language conservation efforts of the



Muskogee (Seminole/Creek) Documentation Project with videos and transcripts of numerous songs ([Source](#)).

The drilling disaster described in the vignette of January 1924 is a fictionalized account inspired by the news article titled “This Driller Masters a Sliding Hillside” from the Okfuskee County News published on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of January in 1924.

All mentions of final reports, auctioning of the mineral rights, and the petition to remove guardian are informed by and borrowed from the 200+ pages of the incomplete probate record of Hettie Barnett housed at the National Archives in Fort Worth, TX ([Source](#)).

The deal made between Henry LaCroix and William Hammer in the vignette of May 1933 is inspired by the “Chattels” of the Muskogee Legal Record published on the 31<sup>st</sup> day of May in 1933.

The reported relinquished supervision featured in the July 1938 vignette is informed by the Muskogee Legal Record published in the same time.

The car wreck Jud experiences in the vignette of December 1925 is reflective of a news article titled “Aged Man is Injured When Struck by Auto” from the 28<sup>th</sup> day of December of 1925 published in the Muskogee Daily News.

The image of Daisy’s check from Sunray SX Oil Company is from my great grandmother’s collection of personal affects and is a real document.

In the October 194 vignette, the radio transcript of Will Rogers is heavily quoted from his 1925 address at the Annual Convention of the American Bankers Association ([Source](#)).

Dave’s retrieval of Bill Jones from the Fort Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas featured in the November 1902 vignette is inspired by the news article titled “Crazy Snake Back From the Pen.” published in the Holdenville Times on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of November in 1902.

The discrepancy between Hattie and Dave regarding Jackson's money was inspired by a news article "Rich Indian Gives \$25,000 to Church" published in the Muskogee Daily Phoenix and Times-Democrat on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of September 1919.

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Madison Paige Brown was born in the Claremore Indian Hospital and grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma where she graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 2014 with an International Baccalaureate diploma. She is an enrolled member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and descends from Muscogee/Cherokee/euroamerican ancestry. She was awarded a B.S. in Mathematics and Physics from Baker University in 2018 with minors in Creative Writing and Health Humanities. Madison arrived in Maine in the Summer of 2021 and fell in love with the trees. She is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English at the University of Maine in May 2023.