Moses Walk on Water

The ash took things away—the engines of our parents' cars, some of them new and newly washed; the suits from our playing cards, one suit after the next. But it also made things new again. My father demonstrated this with a tarnished penny, which he pulled from beneath the vending machine in Expo Room A. "Watch it, Clare," he said, and rubbed ash from its face until the penny was shining. I spent the rest of the day collecting pennies in my worn Idaho hat, going around to show the trick to the other kids who were stranded like me. "Twenty cents says I can make this old penny look brand spanking new," I said. The others laughed. "You have a new one in your pocket," one of the boys said. "Oldest trick in the book." But when the penny changed in front of their eyes, their faces changed, too. I smiled, holding out a dirty palm. "Pay up," I said. "Twenty cents. Each."

I sat in the bleachers and counted my money. Then I went to the concession stand, which was run by a man with a big round belly called Vince, and bought a Three Musketeers and some Twizzlers. My parents were with the other adults, trying to figure out what the hell to do next. Me, I only took small, mouse-like bites of my prize and watched the gray outside slowly turn black.

It was Andy who told us that St. Helens blew.

At first, I thought it was a church nearby and the ash was God's fury.

My mother said no. "*Mount* St. Helens. You know, the one near Seattle. Remember that time we crossed over Snoqualmie Pass? The one that still had all the snow on top of its peak like whipped cream on a cupcake? It exploded. It's not there anymore."

But I was even more confused. How could a mountain go from being there to not being there? How could it simply blow up?

"It was a volcano," she explained. "People said it was only a matter of time. And now the wind is blowing everything this way. What are a dozen people at a horse show against a volcano? Probably lucky it came toward us instead of Seattle."

"Are we gonna die?" I asked. What I knew of volcanoes was lava and fire. Not gray fluff like snow. Not perpetual darkness. It seemed like the start of something much bigger. The oxygen-deprived air. A bright red flame flickering from the horizon. The first plague.

She laughed and drew me close. "Oh, no, honey," she said. "You don't have to worry about that. The debris will clear in a day or

two and everything will be back to normal. Lucky we're not alone."

It was true. We weren't. There were twelve others, to be exact. At first. By day two, twelve became nine. By day three, nine became six. The last few we saw off were the Fosters—Edward, Sarah, and Beck. They managed to get their car up and running and waved a quick goodbye. The Foster's horse, Trailblazer, stood like a statue in the horse trailer.

"Before it gets really bad," father Foster said.

My own father told them it was already really bad, that it would be too much stress on their engine. "Better to be stuck here than somewhere else," he said. "Besides, that horse might not make it."

Still, we watched them go from the windows of the front door. Like we watched two-dozen others as soon as it was obvious that something was wrong. They were the smart ones, I think. After the Foster's car sputtered off, for good, into the blackness, kicking up clouds of dust and ash, everyone sighed and went back into the expo room.

I'm not going to lie: I wished I were in the car with them. I could tell that my mother did, too. She stayed behind longer than the rest of us, staring quietly into the dark.

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We had gotten to Moses Lake, Washington, on Friday afternoon. May 16th. We had driven up from Lewison, Idaho, where my father worked at the paper mill. There isn't much to say about Lewiston except what everyone says about Lewiston: it smells.

"Like money," my father used to joke. He didn't say it so often anymore.

Times were tough in Lewiston. Not that I could tell the difference back then. But the *Lewiston Tribune* wrote often about people losing jobs and leaving for places that sounded like they'd be even smellier. Butte. Bozeman. Spokane.

A few people, though, left for places that sounded otherworldly: Walla Walla, Richland, Moscow. There, I pictured rolling hills of money. People singing and caroling in the streets. Horse tracks twice as wide as the river.

My friend Anne was one of those people. Her dad got a job in Omaha—far, far away. My mother said if I saved up enough money from selling bottled water at the county fair that we could visit her one day and even share one of their Omaha steaks. In my last letter I asked Anne to find me the best steakhouse in Omaha. The thing I forgot about is that neither of her parents eat meat.

I didn't know much about Moses Lake before we arrived. But I did know about Moses. We learned about him in Sunday School. When we followed signs off the highway to Moses' Lake, just to take a look, I expected a Sea of Red that would part itself down the middle at fifteen-minute intervals like Old Faithful, the water lifting above the hood of our car, glistening under the sun and daring us to cross. What we found instead was a stagnant grayish reservoir with a few sand dunes and the same flat-top hills we had in Lewiston. We got out of the car and walked the rest of the way. There were three fish upside down on the shore, which my father pushed back into the water with a stick.

My mother was born near here, about fifty miles away. She lived on a farm with cows. All she really said about it was that once it was so cold the cows' water tank froze and she had to chop through the ice four times a day just so they could drink. Sometimes even the houseplants would freeze. As we drove, she pointed off in the distance as if she could see something we couldn't. "Your nana broke both legs once," she said, lowering the radio's volume knob. "But still walked because someone had to milk the cows."

I asked what was so important about milking the cows.

My father shook his head. "Nothing. Nana's a mental case, that's all. You want to know what unreasonable expectations look like? Try crawling on broken legs to milk the cows in a blizzard. Tell me that's healthy."

"Hey," my mother said, snapping her fingers at him. She turned to me. "Think about it, Clare. They can't milk themselves, right? I mean. Can you imagine?"

"Oh, I can," my father said, laughing.

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With Beck and the Fosters gone, there was only one kid left. His name was Clyde. He was fourteen, two years older than me yet two inches shorter. He had blonde hair in a kind of bowl and these tiny little teeth that were tucked clean into his pink gums. He had been the one riding when the mountain blew. We all heard the boom. Like a smoke bomb without smoke. The announcer said, "That boy's moving so fast he broke the sound barrier." The funny thing was that my speed was higher than his. Clyde was also from Idaho. Boise.

He and I didn't have much to talk about. It was mostly him who talked—about all his friends in Boise who were probably out fly fishing, about the time they ate frogs, about dirt bikes and movies like *Apocalypse Now* and *Jaws 2*. He said I wasn't like most girls. I was taller

than most girls, for one. I asked him what else he knew about most girls. He admitted not much. He and his friends didn't talk to the girls in Boise. Or maybe the girls in Boise didn't talk to them. He didn't even know girls rode horses, which I thought was funny because I didn't know boys rode horses.

"And what do the girls in Boise do for fun?" I asked.

He did this thing where he licked his gums when he was trying to be clever. "You make it sound like Boise is on a different planet," he said, rubbing dirt from his arms. "Like Mexico or something. Clare, we live in the same state. Just up the road."

"But have *you* ever been to Lewiston?" I asked.

"Doesn't mean I never will," he said. And I liked that answer because it felt like he was saying it more about me than Lewiston.

I was glad to have Clyde around. It was nice talking to somebody close to my own age. Somebody who didn't seem to mind that we couldn't shower and probably smelled as bad as the horses, our hair greasy and disheveled. Together, we watched from the windows as the days changed and the ash grew. Three inches. Five inches. Seven inches. We watched as our mothers relentlessly swept the dust from the floor and our fathers drank the beer the Fosters left behind. Soon, it felt like we were underwater, under Moses' gray lake itself. I asked Clyde if he got to see Moses' Lake before all this but he thought I was talking about the town.

"You mean there's an actual lake?" he said.

"When we get out of here I'll show it to you," I said. "Wait until you see it."

Of course, as if jinxing us, our fathers turned around right then and locked the doors to the expo center so we kids couldn't venture outside. Not that we would have gone to Moses' Lake anyway, but we might want to check on our horses, who were kept in a stable just down the hill.

It felt like the worst thing that could have happened to us. Little did we know the worst was yet to come.

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My horse was Tico. He was an Appaloosa with thick brown hair and a white blanket of spots. He had been a gift from my nana, which is why I named him Tico, after her father, my mother's grandfather. He was the fastest, friendliest thing on four legs. My father would check on him twice a day, like, I imagined, my nana heading out to milk the cows. The only cause for concern, he said, were a few boils that had appeared on the white spots of his butt. My

mother suggested he treat them with wet towels and soap. "I know how to treat boils," my father said. I begged my parents to let me see him one more time but they said no, not until the ash clears. I was a good listener back then, so when Clyde wasn't looking I would stand by the window and face the stables. "You're a good boy," I would tell Tico, sure that he could hear me.

When everyone was asleep on the fourth night, Clyde convinced me to check on our horses. He said he had a bad feeling that it was getting bad in there, that it was probably the reason the Fosters left.

Maybe being stuck in an expo center for four days was getting to my head, but I agreed. I put a jacket over my sleep shirt and followed him out the door. I was so excited to see Tico that I didn't bother to ask Clyde how he got a key to the front door. When he pulled it open, we held our breath and put wet towels over our faces. Then we counted to three and ran. It was like being caught in a blackout snowstorm—white flakes of ash were everywhere, in every orifice, lifting from the ground as if weightless. I didn't recognize a thing. Clyde grabbed my hand and led me to the stables, slamming the gate behind us. He clicked on a flashlight and held it up to the gallows, where pieces of ash were floating in the air like fine dust.

"Jesus, it's like being on the moon," he said. He tossed his hair and rubbed ash from his sleeves.

I took a deep breath and blew flakes into the air.

"You think we can get cancer from this?" I asked. "Or is it too late to worry about that now?"

He scratched his nose. "I've never heard of it."

"Cancer?"

"No, volcanic cancer."

"Yeah, but I've never heard of volcanoes in Washington, so."

He shrugged, probably because it was a good point.

"Light," I said.

He gave me the light and I shone in on Tico. He was pacing back and forth, his head lowered, his nose sweaty. He wasn't the same happy Tico, who sashayed as he walked and snorted with laughter whenever he saw me. I hurried over and put my face against his. He trembled as soon as I did, his ears twitching. I rested the wet towel on top of his nose to prevent him from breathing in the ash. "You're okay, buddy," I said. "I'm here now. I'm here." He snorted and started pooping. I closed my eyes, trying to be strong. I pictured my mother back in the expo room, reading a book she had found while cleaning.

"A little distraction," she said. "Sometimes that's all it takes." That's why I didn't see the gnats. I only heard Clyde hollering. "Oh my God, do you see this? Clare, look." Then, they were everywhere. In my hair. On the floor. In big black moons on the wall. I watched as Tico's tail whipped like an out of control hose. Clyde rubbed Tico's back to get his tail slowed and took a good look at the boils on his butt. "You know what, I bet that's from swatting all these gnats," he said. He grabbed the light. "Let's look at Macca. See if he has them, too." Macca was Clyde's horse. He was in even worse shape. His movements seemed labored, desperate, and his whole body was covered with boils like bloody blisters. Clyde had a hand in his hair as he was walking around to inspect him. He used the wet rag to swat at the mound of gnats, his teeth clenched as if he were swallowing something sour.

I was busy soothing Tico, telling Clyde about the time Tico broke his leg when he was a baby when I felt something sticky beneath my feet. I couldn't figure out what it was. Then I heard the hissing.

"Clyde, light," I said.

"Huh?" he said.

"Shine the light at my feet," I said, louder now, pointing to the ground. "I hear something. Hurry."

"One second," he said. "I'm checking Macca."

"Please. Now!"

So, he did. And would you believe it? There were a brown snake wrapped around my leg, sliding up to my face. I liked to consider myself fearless and all, but then I had never dealt with a snake coiled around me as if I were some kind of lamp post. I screamed for dear life. The snake hissed. Clyde dropped the light, it's shadow bouncing from floor to ceiling and back again.

He grabbed a broom and tried swinging it. I literally ducked to avoid getting socked in the head, all the while shaking my leg in a kind of improvised dance until my skin felt loose again, free.

No more than two minutes later, our fathers were there and the snake wasn't. But the thought I couldn't shake was that the snakes were there to hurt Tico. I was sure they were poisonous. I didn't care about cancer anymore. I didn't care about the flies. I wanted so badly to take Tico out of there and get him somewhere safe. I hated the fact that there was nothing I could do for him. My father wrapped me tight in his arms and carried me back to the expo center, back to the bleachers, where he passed me off to my mother. She rolled up my shirt and pants and checked my body for bites. Clyde's parents were

doing the same. Nothing. Not even from a fly.

My father came back, arms crossed. "Go to your room," he said, forgetting, I guess, that I was already there, the six of us sleeping on bags beneath the bleachers. "Don't try that again. For the love of God. Do you hear me, Clare? I need you to use some sense. You have to know when enough is enough. Do you hear me?"

"Jim," my mother said, pulling me close to her chest. "She hears you."

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Time passed slowly. I could tell things were going from bad to worse because I heard my mother sobbing behind the bleachers. Clyde's mother was comforting her. When I walked over to see what I could do to help, they waved me off.

That night, the men were gathered around an empty hat playing cribbage even though their cards were ruined. I sat with the women, who talked about how much longer until we just gave up and made a run for it. I guess my mother realized the ash made it to Lewiston and she couldn't remember if the window in our den was closed or open.

"I can come to terms with the fact that everything we keep outside is a total loss," she said. "That's fine. That I can live with, make right. But not the rest of the house. Not everything else."

Clyde's mother told her not to think about it. It occurred to me that this was probably what they had been talking about earlier. But then why wave me away?

My mother let out a short breath and turned to look at my father. On a regular day, volcanic eruptions notwithstanding, she would have been working on the yard for hours—pulling the weeds, trimming the grass, planting tomatoes. Occasionally, I'd go out to help her, where she'd have a list of things that needed to be done. The list rarely changed. These were things she never stopped doing. Back inside, my father would be watching a show like *M*A*S*H*, angry that we weren't all together as a family. There's always *something* to do, my mother would tell him. *That's the problem. You want a yard? Then live with the fact that there's always something to do. I don't see you doing it.* To be honest, I was glad, at least, to be free of my chores. I was glad that we were all together, even if no one was talking much.

I tapped my mother on the shoulder and waited for her to face me. "We're stronger together," I said. It was one of my father's phrases.

"That's sweet, Claire," Clyde's mother said. "Nicely put."

My mother didn't say anything.

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The next day the news I dreaded most came. A storm was approaching, which Clyde's mother seemed to think would be good for us.

"A little rain might be all it takes," she said. "It can clear up just enough, wash this whole mess away."

I watched my father run to the stables to check on the horses. The air turned cool, and the sky went from black to purple. He was gone for longer than usual, which was the first sign that something was wrong. When he came back, he sat me and Clyde down at the bleachers and apologized.

"It's better they don't suffer," he said.

"Macca, too?" Clyde said.

My father nodded.

Clyde cried, but I didn't. I went back to thinking about the thousands of gnats in the stable, the snake sliding across the shit-covered floor, the ash flying like dust across the ceiling, the overpowering darkness, the boils, the itching. This emptiness settling inside me, making room for something I couldn't quite name. Now: a storm. Tico didn't deserve that. Or maybe it's what I told myself to feel better, what we all tell ourselves. He's in a better place, my sweet Tico. I'll find him there soon enough.

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The storm began with a roar of thunder so loud that it shook the entire expo center. Then there was hail.

Clyde and I were off in a corner, examining a cowboy hat that had been hanging on a wire. There was a hole where it had been hanging that was filled in with dust.

Neither of us could figure out how that happened, but we killed a lot of time thinking about it.

Eventually, we got to talking about what we'd do if we ever got out of here. It was the first time we used that word: if. Now that the horses were gone and we were sitting tired in the corner, rain and hail slamming against the roof, thunder rolling like sirens off of Moses' Lake, it seemed like we might actually be stuck like this forever, frozen in amber. That I'd be the only girl Clyde would ever get to know. It's the kind of situation that can really change someone.

I suggested we play cards, but he wasn't up for it. He just wanted to chat, but not really about anything. He said he liked my voice. That put me in an awkward spot. So I did the only thing I

could think to do: I started talking. I told Clyde about my friend from school who could juggle with her eyes closed, how she was doing it one day when another one of my friends pulled her pants down. The strangest part of it all was that she was wearing a bathing suit bottom underneath her jeans.

"Don't you think that's funny?" I said.

He shrugged. "Probably something you had to see in person."

"Yeah," I said. Thunder rattled the windows and we sat there silent listening to it. "I've gotta pee," I announced. "Be right back."

I took a flashlight to the bathroom and went into the stall. It was the only privacy any of us had. I waited there for longer than usual, thinking about Tico galloping in heaven, eating all the treats he could ever want. Thinking of my friends at school, wondering what they were up to, what they would think of Clyde. A part of the metal at the bottom of the stall door was loose and it scratched my leg as I slid out. The skin split slightly and some blood dripped down to my sock. I ran my hands under the sink to wash it but it only made things worse. So, I stuffed the sock with toilet paper and went to find my mother.

But when I was back in the main room, I found everyone standing at the front door, which was halfway opened, looking out.

I forced my way in to see what was causing the commotion. It was a man with a snow hat and a white beard stumbling through the storm. He was wearing a long corduroy jacket and stained jeans. A giant wooden cane split the ash at his side and formed a path that led straight to our door.

"Where's he coming from?" I asked.

"We don't know," my father said.

"Wherever it is, he might bring some news," Clyde's father said. Clyde was standing next to him, arm around his shoulder, and I was standing next to Clyde. Strangely, I could see how young Clyde looked. He might have been fourteen, a full two years older than me, but there next to his father his little teeth were like baby teeth. And so were his eyes. Like he was seeing the hard realities of the world for the first time. His father wasn't tall either, but he was a full head taller than Clyde, though even he was a head shorter than my own father.

The man with the cane limped inside and stared at us. He smelled like Tico, which was probably how all of us smelled, like he had burrowed out from deep within the earth. The wind outside whistled violently.

"What can we do for you?" my mother asked.

Instead of speaking, he ducked his head and stomped his wooden cane on the ground, filling the air with ash.

My mother jumped back. She asked for his name.

His voice was low, husky. "Moses," he wheezed. "From Moses Lake."

And that was all it took, apparently, for my mother to make a cross on her chest, trying to will away this stranger as if he were carrying a plague, as if he had come like that snake did to poison us. She looked as if she had been hit by a truck. At least that's what she told us it felt like later when we were back home in Lewiston, where the windows had been closed after all, where life carried on as usual until it didn't. That Lewiston smell, dependable as always, radiating from every corner.

"Don't you see?" she cried. "Don't you all see?"

"See what?"

As if reading from a to-do list, she counted with her fingers high in the air: the ten plagues of Egypt. This man—Moses from Moses Lake—had his hands covering his face like he couldn't hear any of it. I almost thought he would disappear in the cloud of ash around him. I was beginning to lose sight of reality myself.

Clyde's parents didn't say anything. My father looked irritated, as if he had dealt with this once before, though he hadn't. None of us had. "Are you crazy?" he said. "First of all, this isn't Egypt. Second of all, it's 1980. You think this man has come for your first-born? You think he's come for Clare?"

I thought of what I knew about the ten plagues of Egypt. Boils. Hail. Snakes. Darkness. The death of the first-born. It made me feel overwhelmed like my mother. Doomed. Still, there was one thing I kept coming back to: blood. Water turning to blood.

I could feel the dampness in my sock so I hiked my jeans. My mother was staring at me. I could see in her eyes that she had done everything in her power to keep it together. It was what she had always been best at. But everyone—even mothers—have a tipping point. It was what I had been trying to do myself, even if I didn't know it. Be strong. Be big. At least for Tico's sake. It almost felt like I had done too good a job. Like I had used everything I had and some things I didn't. Now I'd be in debt for the rest of time, catching up like a hamster on a wheel, like my mother in the yard.

Outside, there was another roar of thunder. The front door swung open, and we watched as an avalanche of water began rushing past us and down the parking lot, flakes of ash sticking to it like glue,

accompanied by broken fence posts and chunks of trees.

It's true what they say: when it rains, it pours.

With a huff, my father pointed at Moses. "Moses, walk on water," he yelled. I guess he had a point to prove.

"No, you're thinking of Jesus," my mother said. "Jesus." She stumbled forward to shut the door, but the wind wouldn't let her. Instead of helping, I ran outside to watch, stunned, as the ash was swept away by the wild river. Everyone was screaming my name from inside, but I stayed out there until the water, which rose to my knees, warm, turned red.