

CATE O'TOOLE

OH MY DARLING



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Clementine

At the last dusty town in a line of dusty towns, her father stops for supplies. Clementine unfolds from the back of the creaking wagon and follows him into the general store. Pa says, *Don't touch anything.*

When his back is turned, Clementine strokes a bolt of blue muslin, stains it with her fingers. Disgusted, she rubs her arms, dirt and skin flaking away like fish scales. She shakes the dust out of her skirts, spits on the worn floor. They've been traveling more than a month, filth their constant companion. Clementine wants a bath, a bed, an end to her journey. Heavy red dust and a deep, desperate yearning fill her days.

Pa, arms full of tools shining sharp and savage, comes on her picking apart knots in her long blonde hair. He frowns. He says, loud enough for everyone—miners and farmers, women with baskets and babies—to hear, *Clem, honey. You wait outside.*

She drags her feet over the threshold, cheeks burning. Fifteen and still being scolded—as though her father set any kind of example for decorum, weeping day and night for his dead wife and lost babies and sick, scabby farm. Such a small man, she thinks. Weak-hearted. Clementine was glad to leave the farm, to leave her mother behind with her brothers and sisters. She didn't trouble to grieve at the time and she won't spare grief now.

Clementine watches a man with a black mustache roll a cigarette, finish with a twist. He leans against the porch rail as though he has never known trouble or hurry or gone without. His clothes are neat, only the barest crust of dirt on the hem of his pants, clinging to the heels of his boots. He catches her staring and tips his hat. He has thin lips, a round chin. His eyes dance a slow circuit over her. She feels his gaze on her hips, her breasts, her mouth. The man with the black mustache doesn't speak, but he is asking a question that Clementine knows she must answer.

Pa, coming out of the store, says, *Clem, honey?*

Something inside her, the heavy pit of badness she has carried west, begins to sing.

The Man with the Black Mustache—turn to p. 3

The Gold Claim—turn to p. 25



Cate O'Toole was awarded a Rachel Carson Fellowship and earned her MFA in fiction from Chatham University. She is the author of the chapbook *Big Women, Big Girls* (Stamped Books, 2011) and her stories have appeared in *Six Sentences* and the *6S Vol. 1* anthology, *Wanderlust Review*, *the Linnet's Wings*, *shady side review* and elsewhere. Cate was the 2012 recipient of the Poetry & Prose Winter Getaway's Jan-Ai Scholarship. She lives and writes in Seattle, WA. You can find Cate online at lifeaftermfa.wordpress.com.