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Unbroken

Late in winter the snow drifts high against the house, and the only sound is the moan of the rocker along the pine floor. Tildy rocks swiftly, up and back, up and back. She is a sharp-faced woman, thin. Her hair is not pinned up. Her face belongs to a woman done with crying. Her eyes are hollow and dry.

In her arms sleeps a limp baby unswaddled from her blanket. The baby is struggling, breathing shallow and high, and her skin is glossy with sweat. From the moment Elizabeth was born she'd been a beautiful baby, everyone had said so, the first white baby born in Cache County. The Indians from all around had come to Tildy's door to inspect the child's pallor. They would whisper that this was not a healthy baby Tildy couldn't understand their words, but she saw their pinched expressions, the pity in their eyes and for months she had wanted to tell them no, no, this one is a healthy one, you just don't know, you have never seen a white baby, they all look this way. Fragile. The color of milk.

But they were right. She wonders if there's something vital missing from her blood. How else to explain these deaths? But she's watched herself bleed – each time she gives birth there seems to be more of it – and her blood is scarlet and shocking and the same as all the blood she has ever seen: bright with life. So if not in the blood, then where is this weakness hiding? What is it she passes along to her children that dooms them so early, and without exception? She wants to know because explanations bring peace. People will ask her, How did your baby die! Froze to death, she wishes she could tell them. Rolled off the wagon, taken by diphtheria, choked on a button, bit by a rabid dog. She wants causes. Reasons. Answers.

The people who went on the wagon train from Salt Lake City to Cache County with Tildy and her husband were always asking each other questions about their children. How many children do you have? How old are your children? What is a mother to do with so many children? At first they took Tildy for barren. Who knows the timing of the Lord! they would tell her, and repeat the names of all the Bible women crazed with waiting: Sarah, Rachel, Elizabeth the mother of John. Being childless but pregnant, her secret, she let them believe. But then her stomach grew larger. People started treating her like a miracle woman, and she couldn't keep the truth from them any longer. It seemed to her too much like lying. She stated the truth, laid her hand on her stomach and said This is not my miracle, said In fact I've birthed four babies previous. Soon the-mothers of lost children came to her with their own stories (born blue, smallpox, thrown by a horse) and waited breathlessly for hers.

They get sick, she tells them. Don't know how. They grow to be a certain age laughing, rolling over, grabbing at their own toes and then they sicken and then they die. Four times. Boy, girl, girl, boy. All of them blonde, except the last one, who had red hair like my father and was strong like him, too. So strong I believed the Lord meant for him to stay.

Tildy's husband is a quiet man and doesn't like to talk of trouble. Past is past, he tells her. I can't divine the future, he also likes to say. He means this as a comfort but it is not. She can't be as he is, living each day as if it were a stone set along a path: one stone, then the next, then the

next, each never touching the one before it, but all of them together leading to some knowable destination. She envies him.

Her husband has gone back to Salt Lake City to stay with his dying mother, and when he left them Elizabeth was a healthy child. He would take her in his thick hands and stand her on his lap to let her bounce. She's a strong one, he would say, strong as they come! and Tildy believed him. Elizabeth had lived longer, already, than any of the others. Already taking to her hands and knees and rocking back and forth, ready to crawl. Her hair had grown into glossy ringlets that covered the tops of her ears. She still nursed two times a night and Tildy let her, loving her fat baby thighs, as warm and soft as new bread

But now the baby is hot and burning with fever and won't take the breast, won't even open her eyes, and her lovely golden hair is matted with sweat. Her legs hang wilted against Tildy's arm, and it's hard for her to believe that just a day before these legs had been sturdy and kicking, round with Tildy's milk.

Dawn is coming but the moon is stubborn, hanging frozen in the sky. The snow has stopped falling, and the silence is so deep that Tildy feels buried inside it. Outside her window she sees nothing but rolling undulations of snow, dipping and rising like waves, and she feels much as she did on her long voyage from England, looking out into the sea: overwhelmed by distance and emptiness and time. Alone. There are neighbors, yes, good people living a mile away in one direction or two miles in the other, but what is she to do? Pack her dying baby in blankets and trundle off into the frozen darkness? No, there is nothing to do but rock. And pray. Always there's the praying.

She can't help it. In England, as a girl, she'd always prayed, prayed so much her father said she was addled, called her Saint Matilda. And then she prayed her way right to the Mormons and their God of answered conversations – a God who talks right back! – and her father wasn't teasing anymore when he called her a lunatic, mad, as sorry a creation as he'd ever made, and ordered her directly out of the house. And so she prayed once more and was taken in by sympathetic Saints. She met a man, her quiet, kind husband, and together they prayed themselves onto a ship and away from England to a wide frightening place called America, which they commenced to walk across together until they stopped, exhausted and full of prayer, in Salt Lake City, in Zion, and beseeched their Heavenly Father for rest.

It was in Salt Lake City she lost her fourth baby, the red-headed boy who resembled her father. On the day of his burial, she stood with her feet sinking low in the soft dirt dug for his grave and told God goodbye. Farewell, she said. You have taken everything, and you don't keep your promises. Three times she had prayed for her babies' lives – with faith! she was sure of it, mighty faith! – and three times he had answered her no, and three times she had wept in anguish but had also said God's Will Be Done and Soon We'll Meet Again in Heaven. She knelt beside her bed in prayer on the very nights she'd buried those babies and pleaded with God No More. Now her fourth child had died, and everywhere she looked she saw children: children running and shouting and pulling on their mother's sleeves, children climbing to the tops of trees without slipping, diving into deep water without drowning. Even worse she saw the sick children who'd been healed, the ones who tottered out of their houses ashen and shakv after being shut up contagious with illness Healed! Miracle children! All around her it seemed, children with the mark of God's infinite grace and mercy fixed forever on their countenances, rushing, full of life and chose, right into their mother's arms.

No longer, she told her husband that night when he knelt beside their bed to pray. She lay stiff and straight, the quilt tucked up tight under her arms. He didn't say a word, just nodded one

short nod and said a prayer himself then slid in bed beside her.

She kept her silence with God for many months. Then one summer day while feeding chickens in the yard, her mind wandered and she found herself talking to God like she once had, telling him her troubles in her mind. She spoke to God in an ordinary way, thinking thoughts like, Lord, this hen is not a good laying hen, I could use your blessing on this hen. Suddenly she realized to whom her thoughts had turned. What have I done? she thought. How could I be speaking to him again, so easily, as if nothing had happened between us? But she found she couldn't stop herself. She sat straight down on the ground in her skirts and said everything she had to say to him, telling all the ways he'd deserted her, how she felt hollowed out by tribulation, that she didn't understand what more could be expected of her. She dug her fingers deep into the dirt and sobbed. She raised her head and opened her eyes against the glaring blue sky and said, out loud, her voice ringing up to heaven, I've had all that I can bear.

And that's the prayer she prays as she rocks, over and over, as insistent as the Indian chants she hears sometimes at night, throbbing down from the mountains. I've had all that I can bear. She knows that he can hear her. She doesn't know if he agrees.

The sun comes up huge and soft, filling the room with a hazy yellow light. Tildy's stopped rocking and her eyes are closed, not in sleep, but in an exhausted fight against it. Elizabeth pants in her arms, her fever unbroken.

A gust of cold air rises up and over Tildy's body, and she feels the hair on her arms prick up. She breathes the taste of winter into her mouth. Before opening her eyes she thinks, Death has come, and I know it now so well I recognize it on my skin arid taste it on my tongue.

But she is wrong. As soon as her eyes open she sees her front door blown open. A dusting of snow skims across the floor and over her feet. She rises for the first time in hours to go to the door, aching, her hot baby clutched to her chest.

When she sees him, she's too frightened to release the scream from her throat.

Standing in the corner by the kitchen table is a man. He is not a large man – maybe as tall as Tildy herself – but his hair is terrifying, bright white and blown up on its ends. He stands with his palms open, facing her as if in surrender. I mean you no harm, he says, and his voice is tranquil and low. He looks directly into Tildy's face. His eyes are the darkest brown, the deepest eyes Tildy has ever seen, and his skin is as smooth as a boy's. But he is not a young man, she can tell, not only from his hair but from his look of weary calm.

I just called to see your sick baby, he says.

Tildy pulls Elizabeth in closer. I will not give this baby up to death, she thinks. But then she brings her eyes level with the eyes of the white-haired man and studies them evenly, and she knows he is not death. He is the opposite of death.

She's a very sick baby, Tildy says.

I know, says the man. He moves toward the baby and Tildy stays where she is, Elizabeth cradled tight in her arms. The man reaches out his hand and tests her fever, touching his fingertips to the baby's forehead, cupping his palm against her cheek.

Sister Stolworthy, you have had a lot of trouble, he says. He won't take his eyes from her face, and she can feel his warm breath on her skin. Your babies have been taken from you. But you have been faithful through it all, and God will bless you. Your little girl will get well and will marry and have a large family. She will be a leader among women. She will lead as long a life as she desires.

Yes, yes she will, Tildy says, her voice certain, unwavering. The man folds his hands over the top of Elizabeth's tiny head, covering her brow and her skull and the tops of her ears. He

whispers a blessing, says Elizabeth, be healed, then he takes his hands off her head and steps back. Tildy folds the baby in close to her body and kisses the top of her head and her cheeks and her neck, kisses all the skin she can find, skin still damp with sweat and warm with the fever she knows, now, will break. She closes her eyes and breathes in the smell of her baby: clean, sweet, alive.

Peace be unto this house, the man says. He stands in her open doorway, the cold air swirling past him.

Thank you, Tildy says, and he nods at her and smiles. Then he is gone.

Tildy studies her child's face, the shape of her nose, the height of her forehead, the line of her tiny jaw and chin. She feels as if she's known Elizabeth always: who she was and who she is and who she will be. You get to stay here, with me, she says. Her sleep seems smoother, already. Soon she will watch her wide eyes open.

She goes to the front door and steps out into the daylight. She doesn't wonder who the man is, where he came from, or where he has gone. Squinting out into the Winter sun, she is not surprised to find herself alone. There is no one around for miles. Just the unbroken snow, the glaring whiteness of it stretching away from her, crisp and glittering and calm. Her warm breath turns to vapor in the cold. It mingles with her daughter's and rises.