

## Easter in the Apocalypse

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My mother said to wait by the tree. That was three years ago. I waited for two sunsets and sunrises and still she did not come. I was nine years old and I understood. In the beginning it was hard. She had taught me and Miguel to set traps, fish, pick weeds you could eat, and cook with boiling water. Miguel had been with her and he didn't come either.

Sometimes I think that they were taken in and killed and sometimes I think that they are still hiding, though she is dying. No matter what, I will try to find them.

I am going north. I follow the stars. She told me that if she wasn't at the tree, I had to go to the territory of Old Canada and find people who are called the Ten Thousand. She had made it her goal to find and live with those people. Every day when she prayed to San Cristobal, she asked him to lead us to the Ten Thousand.

My mother had a disease that took all she had. She did not tell me or Miguel what it was, but she had a hard time walking and then talking and her skin was covered in rashes that would open up and bleed. Even if she had been at the tree, I don't know if San Cristobal would have led her to Old Canada. I think the three of us would have died.

Even if I know she is dead, I will still look for her.

The first year after she left, I traveled alone. I was sick a lot and hid at night. I was cold. There were times when I couldn't find good water and I peed brown. I thought I would die. Then I found a man and a woman who pretended to be my parents. It took a long time for me to trust them. Their names were Ted and Sandra. They came from Tennessee. They loved it there but couldn't stay in their community because the people knew there was something wrong with them

that the government would not like. Ted had growths in his stomach and Sandra's feet were deformed.

Sometimes Sandra would say, "Speak Spanish to me, Easter Bunny." I had told her that my name means Easter. She loved this about me. She remembered the stories her grandmother would tell her about Easter and trying to find chocolate eggs and eating until your belly near exploded.

Ted and Sandra taught me more English. Ted was really good with a fishing hook and saved us many times from not having food. I picked weeds and Sandra made things with them that almost tasted good. We were happy, traveling north and thinking of all the things we would do when we found our way to the Ten Thousand in Old Canada. These people were going to liberate us all from the new government.

"We are going to the land of the great north, little guy," Ted said on a night with a moon as big as a cut watermelon. "When me and Sandra got hitched, we went to Niagara Falls to sneak a peek at all that water. It was beautiful and scary as all things I've seen. Only that was nature."

He told stories from long ago. I think he wanted me to sleep.

"Going to the falls was mighty risky. We were so close to the border there. We would have crossed right into Old Canada but thirty years ago there were the Apaches still catching folks like us. That was right before the last revolution. A guy named Lewis Green, or another name he was sometimes called that I can't remember, went ahead and did a one-eighty on the Apaches and captured them for a change."

"I see where you going and don't you dare go telling this boy those tall tales of yours," Sandra said as she scooped soup into bowls for me and Ted.

“That woman there has the right vision of a hundred heads. I tell you, Easter boy, nothing gets past my Sandra.” He patted her on the back and took out his harmonica.

“I want to know about the Apaches,” I said. I knew that Ted would tell me because what he liked best was to tell stories and play the harmonica.

“You take care of his nightmares,” Sandra told Ted while she fixed the shawl around her shoulders.

“All right,” Ted said. He put his fist on the ground and pushed himself up to sit better. The aches were coming. I could tell. “A long, long time ago before white people came to this land and before some of these white folk brought their own brown folk, there were people all over this continent who were called Indians and Redskins and Natives and then, finally, after the second revolution of 2094, they were called the “lost ones” because all of that native blood was running out, diluted with other people’s but also killed off by the Wheat Disease.

“I’m getting ahead here. Before they were the lost ones, they had nations and names like Blackfoot, Iroquois, Nez Perce, Micmac, Seminole, and plenty others, too. There were the Apaches, a people near the southern border of the Old Country. They were known to be tough. They fought the Mexicans more than one time and sometimes they won. Well, for some reason, when the government started to pay bounty hunters for the capture of people like Sandra and me, one of the biggest groups called themselves the Apaches. Nothing to do with the lost ones, but I guess it sounded mighty fearful to them.

“Those Apache bounty hunters roamed around the North Midwest and Northeast for over fifty years. I once heard that they caught over twenty thousand people during that time and sold them off to the government. I don’t know if that’s true or not. I just know we were scared. So when Sandra and me went to the Niagara, we took an awful risk. We did it because we were

young and stupid and we had never seen anything outside Tennessee. Back then we could move around a lot better. The most daring thing about us was the difference in our skin. For a while skin did not matter and then it started to be important again.”

Ted was a tall man with big shoulders and a big belly. His skin was brown and he told me stories of his people who crossed the waters from Africa. I asked Ted and Sandra in the beginning if people would think I was their son. They said no. My hair was too straight and black and my eyes, nose, and skin like people from the southern borders. They said that we were a family but that we would have to pretend that I was adopted. I didn't understand the difference. So that's what we did.

When we went into some towns, we were always careful. We didn't speak to anybody unless we had to. The last small town the three of us went to was called Winner. It was a funny name. There were signs of the revolutions there. Some houses had no windows and no roof. People were inside the good houses but not outside. We saw curtains moving. They were watching. Ted said that was a sign that the hunters were close. We had to leave. We filled our empty plastic jugs with water from a pump and I stole two boxes of dry food from a store. I also took pain pills for Ted.

I was good at taking things. We only did this when we had nothing left.

I would go in from the back, usually a door that was locked. Sandra had learned to pick doors open. There were no detectors there, no electric currents to make us dance to death. The bigger towns were rigged with nasty things to keep us away. And there were soldiers and bounty hunters, too. Even Ted and Sandra didn't know what was going on. They lived from place to place and they had been hiding for over ten years. They told me they didn't know who was at the top of the government anymore and who was bad and who was good. All that was left was the

cold wind of winter biting into their skin or the hot rashes of summer and sleeping in the woods. Sometimes when the winters were hard and they thought the end was near, Ted and Sandra would think of heading back south and hiding there forever. Old Canada and the Ten Thousand seemed like a long-time away. Sometimes I felt like we should hide forever, too.

Ted continued to tell me about the Apache hunters.

“The way I heard it was that the Ten Thousand’s leader, Lewis Green, started his own manhunt. Only he didn’t capture or sell the hunters he found. He killed them. One by one. He was offered some money for the release of the big names. He was offered power and he was offered some of his own captured people in exchange for not killing theirs. Story is he said no to everybody. That’s why they call it the Cult of the Ten Thousand. They pledge to die for the greater good.

“Remember almost two years ago when you, me, and Sandra came upon those two brothers in the south of Nebraska? There was the rickety old man and his crotchety brother with the missing leg. We hid in that pretty house with the pink walls for a few weeks with them. Remember?

“I’m the one who called them Rickety and Crotchety,” Sandra said, holding her spoon close to her mouth and blowing on the steam.

“I remember them,” I said.

“Well, it was Old Rickety who told me that he heard that Lewis Green was killed over the kidnapping of a small boy. One of the Ten Thousand, though by then he said they were more like the Cult of the One or Two Hundred, had taken the son of two of Green’s best soldiers, and one of the bounty hunters—they weren’t called the Apache no more, those were long gone when

Green was still a young man and killing them off—from another clan tried to trade the boy for a favor but the Cult said no.

“What happened to the boy and Lewis Green?” I asked.

“Green is dead. That much we know is true. Sandra and me been hearing that news from all four directions. The boy, I don’t know. Chances are he’s dead, too.”

“Well, may the good Lord be with them both,” Sandra said. Every night, she made us say prayers to the good Lord. Sometimes she would pray to Jesus and sometimes to baby Jesus and I knew that we were really in trouble when she would say, “Oh, sweet, good Lord, baby Jesus, bless us now.”

Sandra was also a big woman and bigger than my mama. Her hair was puffy and the color of happy flowers with some white in it. Her eyes were sometimes blue and sometimes green. She always put her feet away from me so I wouldn’t see. I told Sandra that I didn’t care what her feet were like because my mama’s skin was covered in boils that would bleed and then open up with yellow pus.

It was later than usual for dinner. We had to keep going and stay out of the way of the men who were looking for us. We heard things many nights, like people on the hunt. Around nine o’clock we finally found a place to hide behind a house with cardboard windows. Sometimes we kept away from houses. Ted was afraid there might be people hiding inside who would trade us to men for goods. Sometimes people did that. Ted said we could never trust no one.

Ted and Sandra loved each other for over forty years, Sandra told me. Life was hard and they couldn’t always hide Ted’s stomach problems or Sandra’s feet. Almost every night Ted

played the harmonica and Sandra sang songs of Old Tennessee. She also sang Outlaw Country and a song called “Flesh and Blood.” It was her favorite song.

We were together, the three of us, walking and talking and eating for almost two years. It took us a long time to move because Ted was sick and would lie curled up for a while and Sandra couldn't run because her feet hurt so much when she did. I would have stayed with them forever, if it meant being old by the time we got north.

Months ago, we reached the Dakotas. We came up through the Missouri River to Lake Sharpe. We stayed by the river, even though some of it was bad. Parts had no fish and no good water to drink. Ted and Sandra said it was easier to hide near the water because people thought it was like poison. That's when we found the old house with cardboard windows. The house was close to the river with lots of trees. We were hidden between the house's back porch and the trees.

“We are like the old slaves from our story books. We are going north by the stars and the rivers. There's freedom up north for us.” Sandra said this as she looked at Ted and gave him her special smile. She was missing a tooth in front so she always tried to hide it unless she was giving her special smile.

“Did you know, my Easter boy, that one hundred years ago they tried to say that the history of my people was not what it was? One hundred years ago they said that when the slaves were brought over it was nothing but a misunderstanding.

“It was easy to say that because after the second revolution they tried to transfer all our paper books to digital format. Only the rich had readers and they knew the hunted wouldn't carry books around. Control what people know and read and control history. Simple as that, sweet boy.

That's what they did to the slaves, too, way back then. They couldn't read and most didn't know where their families had been taken to. Divide and conquer.

“Only thing is, disease took care of everything. Disease took care of the government members' plans, and now look at them scrambling to divide people between the sick and the good. They think they will get the better hand but I don't see much hope in our future unless all the fugitives get a chance to make it right. It will be boys like you and girls like my Sandra who will make the world a better place.”

Ted looked back at her and took her hand. There was a sound of leaves being crushed like someone was walking on the other side of the house. Ted took handfuls of dirt and ash and put them on the fire. He got up and kicked the wood from the pit and stomped on the last flickers of red.

“Sit, baby, sit,” he whispered to her.

I heard the noise, too. It came from the trees on the other side of the river. First, a whistle, then, a shout. There were men in the trees. On our side there was the sound of steps on leaves.

“Don't you be scared,” Sandra whispered in my ear. “You are so, so smart. You are all Ted and I ever wanted and never could have. You made us so happy.”

We stayed close together and Sandra combed my hair with her fingers the way she did when we could rest. It must have been no more than five minutes. The shouting on the other side of the river stopped. We couldn't hear the steps.

Ted put his harmonica in my hand. “Keep quiet,” he said, “and listen to me.” He had a large rock in his hand. “You remember your mama and Ted and Sandra.”

Then he hit my head with the rock.



I woke up to the sound of flies buzzing around. My head hurt. My hands and my face were covered with mud and big leafy branches were on top of my body. Ted and Sandra had made a hiding place for me. I knew they were dead.

My mother often said that before the biggest storms hit, there was always a moment of quiet. When we didn't hear the men in the trees, it wasn't because they left. It was because they knew where we were. I don't know what happened to Ted and Sandra, but I think I know.

In my head, I see that Ted took Sandra by the hand and they ran to the river as fast they could, hollering bad words to the men who were hunting them. They stopped before going in the water and they kissed. Ted told Sandra she was beautiful. Sandra walked in the water with Ted and they sang her favorite song. The men shot Ted first. He was happy to die because Sandra had just given him her special smile. Then they shot Sandra and their bodies sunk in the water.

Ted's harmonica was in my hand. I felt it cold and silver. When my head was better and I remembered where I was, I went to the river. I washed the mud from my body. If there were still men hiding in trees, they would see me. I didn't care. I put the harmonica to my mouth but didn't blow. I sat near the edge of the river and watched the water swim through. There were things in the water—normal things—like rocks and green weeds and sand, and there were other things, too. I saw a big tire, a shoe, a broken brush, bags, cans, and broken glass. Maybe if I had taken the time, I could have found something useful.

I broke the door to the house with cardboard windows. I was hungry and thirsty. The house was empty and stunk of dirt and metal. There was nothing I could use. So I left. I went back to the river and filled up an old can. I knew the water was bad. I drunk it anyway.

Following the Missouri River, I made it to Lake Oahe in three days. I was going much faster without Ted and Sandra. I missed them. I missed my mother and Miguel. The Missouri is

much wider here. There are many small rivers and lots of places to hide. On a hot day, I put my body in the water with only my head sticking out. I slept like this for a few hours. My arms were floating. I forgot about the bad things that happened to me.

I ate a lot of weeds. I got one fish, too. It was small and didn't look like much but I ate it anyway. You learn to eat things without cooking them or cleaning them. I used the harmonica to flash light on the top of the water. The fish saw the light. Ted said a long time ago that I had become like a bear. I could stand still in the water and just catch a fish.

"You just swipe that old paw of yours, there, and you'll have yourself some fish in no time, little man," he said.

Now, I fished for Ted. I fished for Sandra and my mama. I fished to stay alive because that's what they would have wanted me to do.

When the men captured me, I thought how disappointed they would be. Then I remembered to survive and I let them take me to the witch woman.

"Follow me, Rodriguez."

The woman had small, evil eyes. I could smell the venom of the beast on her. She had no spirit. I wasn't scared anymore. There was nothing to lose.

The woman looked dry as a stick. She was empty. She had no soul. I knew about people with no souls. I had met them on the road to this place. They had captured me and beaten me. They had sold me to this woman they called Director Vance.

"He's not worth much," she had said to the hunters.

There were three of them and they said they were hungry. They smelled like blood and cooking fires. They smelled like dying fish.

"You gave us more for the girl," the biggest of them said.

“He’s already sick.”

She came up to me and opened my mouth with her gloved hands. She looked at my teeth and the whites of my eyes. She took out a metal square and put it near my head. It made a beeping sound.

“He has lice. He’s dehydrated. We’ll have to test him for worms. Tests aren’t cheap.” She looked at the men. “That’s my final offer and I’m being generous. If the next are as small as that, then don’t come back.”

The men took the money from Vance.

After they left, a man in a white uniform put me in a room. He took my clothes and put them in a bag. He took the harmonica. I tried to hurt him and bite his arms, so others came and they tied my hands.

They cut my hair. They sprayed my body with cold water and laughed. They tied me to a table and stuck a needle in my arm and took my blood.

I called them *chupacabras*.

I screamed, “*Hijos del diablo*.”

Then they gave me clothes and I cried. I was alone. I was afraid for the things that would come. I wished I had been shot and died in the water with Ted and Sandra. I wished we sunk down to the bottom together and danced in the river.

I wished I had my harmonica.

After some hours, Director Vance came in the room. She wore a white coat and blue gloves. Two people followed her. They didn’t have gloves or a white coat. The man was skinny and looked dirty. The woman was fat. Her hair was like the long tail of a cow.

“Well, well, well,” the man said. “Who we got here but the last of the Mohicans.”

“Shut up. You have no idea what he’s worth.”

She sat down in front of me. “Who are your parents?” she asked.

“Ted and Sandra,” I said.

“Have you been captured before?”

“No.”

“Where were you going?”

“North. I follow the stars.”

She looked at me for a long time.

“You have native blood. That makes you special. It is quite rare. There are maybe less than three hundred of you in the new countries.”

“Don’t fill his head with those ideas,” the cow-woman said.

“It doesn’t matter. He has no one to tell. Let him enjoy his own importance while he can. It won’t hurt. He won’t be here long enough.”

I hoped she was right. I wanted to run again. I wanted to be free.

Before the hunters found me, I ran and followed the Missouri. I continued for three weeks alone. I followed the sun and the stars. I found a stream of good water.

Sometimes I heard the howls of monsters in the woods. Sometimes I sang myself to sleep.

I was hungry and I was cold.

I had visions of my mother and my brother.

They stood by the tree as they had promised me. My mother said I was late. She said they had waited for me for two sunsets and two sunrises. My brother held her hand and he asked me to come with them.

My mother had on a beautiful dress. It was orange and white and red. There were pictures of dancing deers, roosters, and geoses. There were pink flowers, too.

My mother's hair was long and black without gray. Her skin had lost the look of disease. She was not sick anymore.

She smiled and called to me. She said she wanted to tell me a story. It was the story of a rabbit, a fox, and a wolf. The rabbit could run the fastest, the fox could trick other animals, and the wolf could kill them all. Madre Tierra asked them each for a gift. She would give precious seeds of corn to the animal who pleased her most. The rabbit made her shoes of lightning so she could run faster than him. The fox made her a mask of moonlight so she could watch her enemies and not be seen. The wolf made her a bow and arrow of sunrays so she could hunt and never be hungry.

“Who do you think Madre Tierra chose?” My mother asked me.

“The rabbit.” I answered.

“Why?”

“Because she can always run away. She can run to find food and she can run from her enemies.”

“We all choose the answer that is in our hearts. We can be the rabbit, the fox, or the wolf. Madre Tierra loves us all.”

My brother let go of my mother and walked into the woods. My mother held out her arms. I tried to go to her but my feet were stuck to the ground.

She turned to follow my brother. “You are faster than a rabbit, my son. So, run, *mi amor*, run.”

I don't know why I am here. If I stop thinking, I don't remember my name. I am alone. I am always alone.

I was left in a room for a long time. It was weeks. I don't know how many days. I could hear a girl on the other side of the wall. She was a prisoner of another faction. Sometimes I talked to her. Sometimes I heard her cry.

She talked to me. She said, "Put your mouth on the vent on the floor. Talk louder."

She said, "Remember your name. I am Ascane Tripp."

*Me llamo Pascual Rodriguez. Mi mamá es Celia. Mi hermano Miguel. No tengo padre. Él se fue.*

I had a harmonica. They took it from me. It was my special gift from Ted.

My mother said to wait by the tree. That was three years ago. I waited for two sunsets and sunrises and still she did not come. I was nine years old and I understood. In the beginning it was hard. She had taught me and my brother to set traps, fish, pick weeds you could eat, and cook with boiling water. My brother had been with her.

My mother wore a dress with flowers. She put powder in her hair. I liked to watch her when she painted her lips in red.

Sandra had a shawl the color of the sky. She put it around her shoulders when we walked and on Ted when he was sick. When it was cold, she wrapped it around my body. She said I looked like Mary, a boy Mary. It was the memory of Ted and Sandra that made the evil bright. It was the love they showed me that made me want to kill the witch woman Vance. When she will next come into the room, I will strike like a snake and run like the rabbit, full of lightning speed. If Vance's men decide to kill me, I will hollow out their bones with my voice. I remember the songs of my mother and Sandra and I am free. I remember my name.