

The Town That Lost Its Name

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There was a town built at the edge of the known frontier where there wasn't supposed to be a town. There weren't even supposed to be people – the land didn't want them there – but human stubbornness endures. Mr. Henry Wolcott, for whom the town was named although it shouldn't have been, believed that a journey west sounded like cracking good fun. He packed up and set off with all his possessions including a wife and three sons. His friends, deceived by his gusto, unknowingly followed without so much as a map, a plan, or a prayer. He claimed he could hear the water buffalo and by following their trails, migratory patterns, and mating calls, their journey would be met with ease because, as everyone knows, water buffalo only live in fresh water near plentiful food. It wasn't until the party had crossed twice through the same mountain range, buried a baker's dozen including Wolcott's two younger sons, briefly resorted to cannibalism, ran out of ammunition and lost a collective six toes to frostbite that Wolcott learned there were no water buffalo in his part of the world.

Relying on an old brass compass – a family heirloom of no real significance – they descended past the base of the mountain where the compass refused to point West and spun in pointless circles. Mr. Henry Wolcott dropped dead from frustration, or dehydration, or a combination of the two. His son George, for whom the town wasn't named but should've been, saw the endless expanse of land and

couldn't, or more rightly wouldn't, go on. He figured it was as good a place as any to wait for death and in that spirit the town was founded.

It was a small island surrounded by knee high grass that swayed and rippled in every direction, a sea of off-gold – the kind immortalized by patriotic songs. A mountain stream lined with trees in sad huddles ran past the town. It would've been wrong to call it an oasis, though some did. It was a pocket of civilization, or as close to civilization as the backwoods ever got. It was a town where nothing happened, except surviving.

In its initial construction, the town was built with a gallows at its edge. They'd planned to hang the body of Mr. Edwards, who'd been kicked to death by his horse, as a warning to all who might enter the town, but Mrs. Baker said it was morbid and Mr. Edwards' brother, the other Mr. Edwards, thought it was dishonest. The gallows stood unused, beetles chewing through the support posts. When Little Margret Anne was baptized, officially giving the town a dozen children, the town decided the wood should be put to better use. They torn down the gallows and built a one room school house with a leaky roof in its place. The school teacher, Mrs. O'Conner, told herself that she didn't believe in omens or portents and when no one else would fix the leaky roof, she took it upon herself to do so. With hammer and rope, she climbed to the top. No one saw her fall through the beetle chewed wood or could figure out how the rope had wrapped itself around her neck, but however it happened, the gallows had claimed their only victim.

Mr. Castlerock thought he was a genius; a common symptom of insanity. He knew the future of finance was in the railroad, and he was going to get himself a piece of that action. He'd go down in history buried in a solid gold coffin if he built the center of the Transcontinental Railroad that joined the East and the West. In secret, just outside of town, he worked with a nameless immigrant, unaware that he was more than five hundred miles South of where the railroad would, eventually, pass by. He'd already built thirty-nine of miles of track before he realized his costly mistake, leaving a stretch of unusable steel like a sutured wound on the earth. The track led from nowhere to nowhere.

The boys of the town used to jump from rail to rail and dare Little Margret Anne to join them, but she was afraid of falling. Charles Humphrey used to say he could hear a train whistle on that unfinished track, 4:18 in the afternoon every Monday and Thursday. Claimed he could set his watch by it, and often did. Twice a week, he would walk to the track and stand there like a traveler without his luggage. In the end, Charles' body was found, laid across the rails. He would've looked peaceful, if every bone in his body hadn't been forcefully broken. The official report said it was due to natural causes; he must've fallen.

At night, the wolves howled a lonely ballad in harmony with one another, but no one ever saw a wolf. They only saw what one could do to a herd. Just bones and panic left of their domesticated prey. A wolf hunter with a curly moustache and a big voice came to claim a great prize offered by some nameless locals in exchange for the hides of the singing wolves. He wasn't the first and he probably wasn't the last.

He laid out poisoned meat in a large circle around the town, but the next morning found all the meat piled in its center, covered by cowpats. For months, he drank restlessly at Miss Rita's through the night and laid traps all day long, losing more of his mind every morning when he found the traps sprung and the bottles empty. The last time anyone saw him, he was crouched on his roof echoing the long low cries of the wolves in the distance. Some said he went back East to become a naturalist, arguing against the fur trade, arguing that animals had minds, arguing that he had seen their souls. Others thought he stayed out there on the plains, howling at the reverberation of his own calls and that there never were any wolves in the first place, just other lost hunters shouting at the moon. But most assumed he found the wolves, or maybe they found him first, and his bones were scattered for miles, cracked open with the meat sucked out.

There was a man that came by every couple of months on a perpetual pendulous path from East to West. Sometimes he said he was a businessman, other times a gypsy or an Indian. Whatever his origin, he was nothing more than a traveling man with trinkets. He had bits and bobs, things that sparkled and entranced, and useful things like spigots and nails. He had a pet bird, like a small yellow finch, that whistled tunes for pennies or string. Little Margret Anne used to give the bird her hair ribbons just to hear its call. His pockets were filled with beaches and wherever he stood for long enough, he left a pile of sand behind like a broken hourglass. The adults used to say he was magical, but what they really meant was mysterious, but in those days, that was the same thing.

There was plenty of grazing land for the cattle, and the ranches went through hands quickly. Young men full of pluck and vigor moved on to something more challenging, more comfortable or more profitable. Most never stayed for long and the cemetery was full of the rest. The last young man gored by a bull didn't live long once his organs were outside of his body. He spoke English with a thick accent that no one could place. He seemed surprised about how much blood there was, surprised that it had all, until recently, fit inside him. He used his last words to say that the bull had the disapproving eyes of his father, but the priest didn't know what that meant and kept it to himself. The surviving ranch hands killed the bull and served it hot with gravy the next Sunday after church. The priest, with his pencil fingers, couldn't find the stomach to eat, dwelling on the man's last words, and Little Margret Anne nearly choked on a finger bone that had found its way, inexplicably, into her portion. Everyone had the good sense not to tell her it was human. Brian put the bull's skull above the dead man's grave, with poetic sentiment, where it sunk into the ground, took root. No one could pull it up again.

It was decided at a town meeting that Mrs. Conrad should rightly be called the Widow Conrad, because no one knew what had happened to her husband, but he was as good as dead. At that time, when they decided she was to be the Widow Conrad, Mr. Conrad had been gone for three years and they figured it was better for everyone to just move on. He, the probably late Mr. Conrad, went off to find fame and fortune when Mrs. Conrad was too weak to travel. He'd promised to write and

to see their child turn one, but the baby girl died and Mr. Conrad never wrote. Mr. Bell, an eel of a man, who tended cattle and who spat tobacco to punctuate his point, said that Mr. Conrad probably found some sisters named Fame and Fortune and was too busy entertaining them to look for gold or remember such trivial things as a young wife. No one wanted to agree with Mr. Bell in public, but the vote passed unanimously. In the mind of the town, Mr. Conrad was never returning. The Widow Conrad didn't remarry and sat on her porch in a rocking chair that had an uneven runner that made the whole chair wobble, telling stories without ends to Little Margret Anne and knitting baby blankets out of twigs and tumbleweed and cactus spines because there wasn't any wool.

No one ever struck it rich, that only happened elsewhere. But that's not to say there wasn't any gold. It trickled down in flakes from a peak too distant to be seen. Old Man Fletcher was a prospector by trade who'd once dreamed of making it to the coast. With the thick calloused hands of a real man and knees that needed replacing, he spent every day up to his waist in the freezing river water, shifting dirt side to side in a small pan, intent on his work. Years ago, farther back than anyone could care to remember, back when Old Man Fletcher was much younger, small fish began to peck at his legs, stripping off his numb flesh. He filled the missing chunks with his gold flakes, malleable with the heat from his hands. Everyday, Old Man Fletcher lost a little of himself and every night he replaced it with the gold he'd found. Over time, his legs became more metal than flesh, each leg worth more than his land, each leg weighing him down so he limped from his house to the river every morning. When

the sun reached its peak, Old Man Fletcher could be seen sitting on a rock at the river's center eating turkey sandwiches and warming his legs, his homemade repairs glinting in the sun light like fireflies.

Ian, who was not much brighter than a candle and had once set the church on fire with one, used to fish downstream from Old Man Fletcher because he thought that women liked a man who could provide. In ten years, they never shared a word. Ian would only catch a few fish from time to time and although it didn't attract the ladies, it didn't stop him from trying. One day, he came to the sudden realization that the fish had grown to like eating Old Man Fletcher and didn't care much for worms, so he chopped off his own toe and dangled it in the stream. He caught more fish, to be sure, but he also caught some infections, turned green and died.

They said that Miss Birch poisoned her first three husbands and two of her suitors back East with a mysterious herb, but there wasn't any proof. It seemed to Little Margret Anne that things were always breaking in Miss Birch's house. The window, the door, the roof. Single men were always bringing her firewood and the married men seemed to find excuses to invite her to tea. It seemed like Mr. Wolcott, who claimed to be descended from the town's founders even though there was no evidence to support his claim, was ready to propose to Miss Birch when he died. The next day, Miss Birch left town much to the disappointment of all the men who'd fixed her house over the years. None of the women in the quilting circle could honestly say they'd miss her.

Miss Rita Redford – for she had never married and had no plans to – ran the only saloon in town, frequented by everyone from the priest and the town council to the local drunk and the farmhands. She didn't approve of prostitution or fighting, but never seemed to stop either. It was said that it hadn't been a good week, if there wasn't at least one brawl at Miss Rita's. Miss Rita's hands were covered with scars from cleaning up the broken glass. Folks said that her brother, who none of them had met, was a bandit, the kind that robbed trains. They said that's why she knew how and when to break up a fight, and after a whiskey or two, that logic started to make sense. She was strict about the age limit, for she believed that children shouldn't drink, but always let Little Margret Anne fetch a bottle for her father with the promise that he would receive it full. Ale ran from the taps in the bathroom for the town had no running water and Miss Rita served brunch on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Once, Mr. Iron claimed he could taste black oil in his beer and spent six months digging up the land behind Miss Rita's because there must be a fortune out there. In the end, no oil was found and Miss Rita made him fill in the hole because she was tired of staring at piles of dirt. Unfortunately, Mr. Hurley, who was the town drunk at the time and had the official papers to prove it, was resting his eyes in the hole when it was filled, turning Miss Rita's back garden into an unmarked cemetery.

Little Margret Anne's sister was bitten by a rattlesnake. She was pulling flowers off bushes because none grew on the ground. It didn't move, didn't shake its tail as a warning. It watched through narrowed slits in its triangular head. Coiled

like a spring, it snapped forward. They found her with two holes in her ankle and the snake draped decoratively over her waist like a belt. Both were dead; she bloated, the snake dried.

The cowboys and the farmhands didn't carry weapons. Guns tended to misfire and spook the animals. Stray bullets could hit workers or the much more valuable livestock. The last man foolish enough to strut around with a loaded piece died slowly with the lead spreading through his stomach and veins. He'd been a prize shooter, or so he said. His gun was named Liona and his pride prevented him from going anywhere without her. The doctor didn't see any reason in trying to get the bullet out, the boy was dead anyhow. They didn't even move him from the field, just leaned him up against a fence post. He started to shiver and someone lit a fire and cooked some beans for the other workers. Mrs. Harper brought them a tray of cornbread and some kind words. She coughed blood into her handkerchief, but the boys had been raised not to contradict a lady. They didn't leave his side until he was buried with Liona in his hand in an L shaped coffin, on account of the rigor mortis, because they were as scared as he was. Someone remarked that if a bullet doesn't get you killed, a woman will. But usually consumption does the job.

The priest, a man who called himself Father Edwards, knew everyone's secrets. Not because of confession; that tradition died somewhere on the Atlantic. Father Edwards was one of the few literate men in town and he had lovely, curly penmanship, the kind they teach at Bible school. Anyone who wished to send a letter

back home, those who had someone back home to write to, came to Father Edwards in his room behind the sanctuary. He would listen and write in quiet contemplation by the light of dozens of candles, his face never revealing his inner judgments.

Father Edwards knew about Mr. Matthews's mistress, and Mrs. Daly's dead sister, and Mr. Parker's money troubles, and how Little Margret Anne loved a boy who raised horses and always smelled of straw. He never said a word in his small back room filled with the slight smell of incense, but the Sunday after he received or sent a letter, Father Edward's sermon always shifted slightly toward adultery or grief or debt or distant love.

The supply wagon with sugar and gossip from the East was due every other month, and no one had high hopes for its arrival. None of the others had. Mrs. Harper made due without sugar, mixing pine sap in with her world famous cornbread batter for sweetness. Mr. Harper wouldn't eat supper without cornbread, so every evening Mrs. Harper could be seen through her kitchen window bent over that stove, inhaling the woodchips and the steam from the cornbread. Her recipe was the best in the town and though she'd never share her secrets, she would always bake an extra pan to buttery golden perfection for a neighbor. They never felt any guilt until she died, her lungs filled with blood and cornbread crumbs, and even then the grief was more for the lost cornbread than the lost woman. After Mrs. Harper's death, Mr. Harper probably would've starved to death – refusing to eat supper without his cornbread – but Little Margret Anne learned to make something that superficially resembled cornbread and delivered it every day.

No one quite knows what happened to the town or how it lost its name, for no one knew quite where it was or where to start looking. It's likely paved under the asphalt of a parking lot outside a big box store. It's unlikely that the Earth swallowed it like some land-locked Atlantis, but anything can happen. Skeptics and believers argue that the town still exists, outside of space and time, or maybe that it never existed in the first place. The kind of people who found a pair of legs made out of gold and claim that the genetics would match Old Man Fletcher, if only they had a sample. Those who follow train tracks hoping that they'd find an end or stir sap into cornbread and are disappointed that it's not sweet.

For in the end, it doesn't matter whether Little Margret Anne grew up to be a prostitute or a school teacher, whether she married the boy next door or if she headed further West, whether she lived to be one hundred or if she was beaten to death before she was twenty. Because one way or another, she never made a big enough mark on the world and faded through the history pages like dirt kicked up by galloping stallions.