

The Things We Did In Texas

by Nina Varela

I pick him because he looks like he could walk away from all of this no problem, just up and run, and I like that in a person. All bones, too—gaunt face, jaw like a knife blade, collarbones thrusting up through the skin. I got a soft spot for bones, always did. So I watch him for days, propped up in the darkest corner of the bar, hiding my face behind my hair. I ask around town, prod the stubborn bartender until he talks. They all say this man, this skinny man with the silver flask and the deck of cards, is the best guide around. Knows Texas like a bird knows the wind.

He's sitting by the batwing doors today, slats of late afternoon sunlight falling across his hands, the rest in shadow. I toss back the rest of my whiskey, a line of heat from throat to belly, and hop off my barstool. There's only seven creatures in here total: me, him, the bartender, two old men smoking in a gloomy corner, a painted lady, and an ancient dog. It's not late enough for the evening crowd, not early enough for the whiskey-breathers, the drunks who spent the night.

He can definitely hear me coming toward him, but he don't look up until I'm standing right over his table, stripes of sunlight turning my dress into a jailbird's costume. Then he raises his head and looks me dead on, his eyes darker than a moonless sky. I gesture at the cards. “You playin' Patience?”

He's silent for a moment, just looking at me, and then his mouth twists into something like a smile. “Nah. Only card game I ever learned is War.”

“Well goddamn if you ain't the worst Texan I ever heard of,” I say, “and I ain't

even heard of you.”

“You gonna sit?”

I sit. The chair scrapes against the wooden floor, and the painted lady glances over lazily. Nobody else bats an eye. I pull the deck of cards toward me, shuffling quickly and stacking them up even. “You gotta at least learn how to play Patience.”

He watches me quietly, eyes in shadow. The bars of sunlight slide across the table. Twilight falls fast in this town, the sun sinking to its knees as if shot.

“Patience,” I say, dealing out the seven columns of cards to face him. “French call it Solitaire. All you wanna do is make four piles, king at the top, ace at the bottom. Black, red, black, red.”

“What do I get when I win?” he asks, turning a card over. His eyes flick over my face.

“A job.”

“Well now,” he says, flipping over the king of spades, “that's interesting.”

#

When the world ended I was laughing wildly, stumbling down the icy street, drunk out of my mind. Jessamine's arm was draped across my shoulders, her skin cold and damp with New England fog, smelling like smoke, booze, burnt sugar beneath it all. She was telling some story she'd told a hundred times before, her breath rushing hot against my neck. The fog dusted my hair, my eyelashes, glittering on my skirts like tiny stars. My ears still rang from the noise of the barflies hollering, singing, women shrieking and whooping with laughter, all propriety forgotten. But the streets in this part of Boston were hushed, the windows dark, the storefronts cracked and yellowed like old teeth.

Jessamine and I were the loudest around. We always were. Men saw us, the pretty girls with the wide, pretty mouths, and got all hushed.

“Flora,” Jessamine said, tongue thick, words slow as molasses, “Flor, I just thought of the funniest thing,” and I said, “What’s that?” and she started to say something but pulled up short. Her mouth snapped shut with a click.

“What’s the funniest thing, Jessie, tell me,” I said, patting her face. We were twenty years old and looked like we’d been dipped in starlight. When the world ended.

#

“Name’s Thatch,” he tells me, slapping a red ace onto the third pile. Either he lied about not knowing how to play Patience, or he just picks things up quickly.

“Flora,” I say.

“Flora,” he repeats. “Well, Miss Flora, you gonna tell me about that job?”

I raise an eyebrow. “What do you think, Mister Thatch?”

“I think you’re clever,” he says quietly, focused on the cards. “Cleverer than me. I think you been on your own for a while, which is why you was drinkin’ straight whiskey. And I think you know exactly what you want from me. So, Miss Flora.” He looks at me. “Where do you wanna go?”

I lean forward on my elbows, my hair brushing the table. He keeps his eyes above my chin, doesn’t steal a glance at the curving neckline of my dress. I appreciate him for it. We sit there in silence, haloed in gold by the setting sun, until he’s got four neat piles of cards. The dog sits up, stretches, scratches its fleas. Thatch takes a pull from his flask.

“I need a horse,” I tell him.

“I can get you a horse. Where do you wanna go?”

I shift in my chair, swallowing hard. It feels like I got something buried in my chest, something sharp and hot. “Well,” I say, “problem is I been lots of places, but I only *really* know West Texas.”

“Right,” he says. “So where do you wanna go?”

“Coast.” I take a deep breath. “All the way across the state. I got eighty dollars. All yours.”

Thatch raises his eyebrows, and I know what he's thinking—girl like me shouldn't have that kind of money. He's wondering who I robbed, who my daddy is, how many times I whored. But he don't ask. He just says, “You got bags?”

“Just the one,” I tell him, and we stand up together and push through the batwing doors, out onto the empty street, silhouetted against the purple dusk.

#

We went to Boston because she wanted to see snow, and I wanted to see her see snow.

When you grow up in the desert of Texas, you gotta be careful. There's something about the bigness—the pale dirt, the endless cornflower sky, the dry brush and dust storms and the blistering sun—that catches hold of you. Licks across your skin, swallows you and all your broken pieces like a snake swallowing an egg. If you ain't careful, you'll get stuck. The desert will never let you out alive. So Jessamine wanted to see snow.

We left in November, took the railroad from the bone-dry flats to the wet winter of New Orleans, from New Orleans to Virginia, and from Virginia to steely New York, where the men dressed in sack suits and black bowlers. We stayed a few nights in each new city, drinking the men under the table in a dozen different bars, Jessie slipping her

hand into their pockets while I ran my fingers through my hair and bit my bottom lip. We ate beignets in New Orleans, powdered sugar clinging to our chins. Biscuits and gravy in South Carolina, where a woman with silver hair and a moon-shaped face loaded our plates over and over again with fat strips of bacon. In New York, we ate German sausages smothered in onions, our tongues tasting of charcoal and sweet smoke. The ice turned gray beneath our boots. We got on another train.

In Boston, Jessie and I laid on a thin mattress in the spare room above a bakery, drank thick black coffee and shared a bag of saltwater taffies. Our back teeth stuck together when we chewed. We stayed up until dawn two nights in a row, and I remember how the watery sunlight fell across the floorboards, the air so cold it hurt to breathe. We mixed our coffee with Southern bourbon, and Jessie stumbled to her feet, wrapped in a blanket, her smile slow and sticky. When she leaned against the icy windowpane, it looked like she was leaning against a slab of that white winter sky.

I squinted up at her. “Baker says it's gonna snow again tomorrow. Says his leg aches and that's how he knows.” I felt straw poking me through the mattress but was too lazy to move. The room kept tilting, balancing itself out like a set of scales.

Jessie slumped back a little bit. I watched her dark hair, the pale line of her throat. She said, “We could stay.”

“We don't belong up here,” I mumbled. “Ain't Texas.”

“Texas got nothin' for me anymore.”

I looked up at that. Jessie's mama died that past summer, just up and died, and that was about when Jessie started chasing snow. “Stay,” I said, testing the shape of it, the weight.

“Stay,” said Jessie. She smiled so big that I had to close my eyes and hang on to that damn straw mattress for dear life, because if I looked at her for one second longer I'd fly apart.

#

Six days into our three-week ride, somewhere in the Western half of Edwards Plateau, Thatch and me stare into the glowing coals of our campfire. We lay on worn blankets, listening to the singing crickets, the wind rustling the long prairie grass, the crackling, snapping fire. Thatch's horses make their quiet horse noises, tails flicking. The moon hangs big and heavy in the black sky, a ripe fruit ready to fall.

Thatch hums quietly and rolls over, facing out across the dark swells of grassland.

I hug my bag tight to my chest.

He hasn't asked me why. I think somehow he knows.

#

Jessie and me were thirteen the first time it happened. We were sitting in the shade behind her house, our backs against the slats of gray wood, skirts pooled around us in the dirt. It was the tail end of a Texas summer, the kind nobody escaped without burnt, peeling skin. My mama worked at Cotrell's in town for the months when my daddy and Jessie's daddy were away with the cows. Jessie's mama was already sick. That whole long, dry summer, Jessie and me just had each other. We played hide and seek in a land where scrub brush was the tallest thing around. We stuck our skinny arms through the gaps in fences, trying to make the horses eat parched grass from our palms. It stormed one day in late July, the sky cracking open from the weight of it, and we stripped down to our white underclothes and dirty bare feet, tilting our heads all the way back to taste the

warm rain. Jessie reached out for my hand, muddy water snaking down her arm. I remember the slick mud between our fingers.

We were thirteen. It was August. Desert dust on our skirts, our hair, our holey shoes. You can't wash away that kind of dust. Even if you get out of Texas, it rides along in your lungs.

Jessie said, "Gimme your hand." I didn't question it. Just held my hand out. She said, "Close your eyes."

I closed my eyes. Something small dropped into my palm, and my eyes fluttered open to Jessie's toothy grin, her whole face crinkling up like wax paper. She had another piece of candy in her fingers, a twist of sticky brown horehound coated in white sugar.

She looked kinda surprised when I beamed at her. I didn't smile much, not even as a kid. Jessie was the bright one, the one who laughed at every joke, who cried when her daddy shot a cow. She'd always steal one of its bones once they'd sold off the meat, and we'd bury the bone under a prickly pear. Make a little cross out of rocks. We laid every one of those cows to rest, Jessie whispering a prayer over a small white bone, her eyelashes sticking with tears.

I dropped the candy on my tongue, the sweetness sizzling through my whole body, the best thing I'd tasted in months, all thick and heady. The two of us sat there until the last bit of sugar melted away. I drew in the dirt with my finger: a lopsided moon, some scattered X-mark stars.

When I looked up, Jessie was watching me. She had these big dark eyes, the same color as her curling hair. My eyes were the gray of old cloth.

"Thanks for the candy," I said. She didn't look away. "Well, what d'ya want from

me?”

She shifted forward, bracing herself on the side of the house, and pressed her mouth to mine. I closed my eyes, out of instinct and vague memories from the one boy I'd kissed, so I just felt the dry softness of her lips, her fingers brushing the edge of my jaw. It only lasted a couple moments before she pulled away and we stared at each other, eyes wide.

That was the first time. And if there is one single thing I could be remembered for, one single thing I could put down in the history books, it's that Jessamine Lloyd tasted like dust and horehound candy and August heat. There are so many things I know, but I will never know anything more important than that.

#

On the eighth day, Thatch says he's got something to show me, only a few miles out of our way.

I say it's all right. We're in no hurry. We ride south all afternoon, keeping at a slow trot. The horses whicker at each other, big nostrils flaring, and there's a Godsent breeze against my sweaty skin. I never seen this much of Texas before—you only get so much from the windows of a train. I never seen this much green grass, bowing and stirring with the wind, or these many hills dotted with short, stubby trees.

Thatch rides in front, leading me up a small hill. He pulls at the reigns and turns to face me, his skinny self blocking out half of the setting sun, black gambler hat casting his face in even darker shadow. He smiles at me, cheekbones jutting out above the beginnings of a beard.

“I'm gettin' eighty dollars, right?” he says. “Well, this here's worth every penny of

it.”

I start to ask, but he just turns away again and disappears over the hill's crest. I dig my heels into my horse's side and we leap forward, my spine jolting with the force of it, following Thatch over the hill and toward the valley below.

When I see what he wanted to show me, I almost drop the reins.

At first I think the whole valley is purple, but that can't be right. I blink sweat out of my eyes and look again, and I know my jaw drops, but I can't help it. Millions of bluebonnets blanket the valley, stretching in all directions, every single one the rich purple-blue of summer twilight. The clusters of tiny buds sway like silent bells on their long green stems, dipping toward the dirt under the weight of bobbing honeybees. I breathe in deep, filling myself with the smell of them. Like the fresh soap from Cotrell's and like spring rain, light and sweet.

Thatch pulls his horse up beside mine. “You ever seen these before?”

“A few times,” I say. My voice comes out raw. “Never this many, never like this.”

He shrugs. “Figured with your name bein' Flora, you'd wanna see 'em.”

“Well—thank you,” I say quietly. “They're real pretty.”

He nods, studying my face for a long moment, then kicks his horse and trots ahead of me, leaving a path of crushed flowers in his wake. I bow my head, trying to will away the hot burn behind my eyes.

I stopped school when I turned fifteen, but I'm smart. Always been smart. I know people turn to God when they can't explain things, when they're looking at destruction or creation and got no idea how it came to be. We talk to God most when we're holding another person, dead or just born or shuddering into our hands at night, and I know it's

because that's a strange and terrifying and beautiful thing, the life and breath and loss of us, and nobody got any explanation for it, for everything we're made of and everything we become. I got no explanation either. But there are some things that bring me just to the edge of understanding, and the sight of these Texas bluebonnets, spreading over acres of land beneath the soft pink sky—well, that comes pretty damn close.

Thatch and me ride southeast through the rippling purple waves, and I think,
Someday I'll bury a cow bone here. I swear.

#

We stayed in Boston. Of course we did—Jessie asked for it, and I was so gone on her. Nobody else could've understood it, how gone on her I was, ever since we were thirteen, maybe before. I didn't ever make a habit of running my mouth. Wasn't very friendly in general, actually. I mostly relied on Jessie to do the friendly for me. She'd sweet-talk anyone—men in bars, old women in general stores, strangers with spare rooms. I'd just stand there and look as pretty as I could, smiling big and dumb until my cheeks hurt. It worked every time. In Boston, we told everyone we were sisters. We didn't look much alike at all, but that was the power of Jessie.

It snowed all winter, December tumbling quickly into March, until I thought the whole sky might as well fall down on our heads. We worked at the bakery, living on leftover bread. The baker's wife gave us their dead daughter's old clothes, so we slogged through the snow-choked streets wrapped in the heat of a ghost, bought bacon fat and coffee and jugs of hard cider. At night we dipped chunks of bread into the pale brown fat, passing the cider back and forth until our bellies burned and laughter came easily.

One night, Jessie grabbed my hand and pulled me to the window. She breathed a

warm circle onto the icy glass and widened it with her palm. We peeked out at the dark street, fingers still curled together. I remember the falling snow. Men stumbling home from bars. A lost scarf, a fingernail moon.

Jessie grinned into my neck. “Let's learn all the stars. All the”—she tripped over the word, just on the drunk side of tipsy—“con-stell-*a*-tions.”

“How'd we go about doin' that?” I asked, tipping my head sideways, her hair brushing my cheek.

“I'm sure somebody in this city's got a book,” she said. “A map. Somethin'. But imagine that, Flor. Imagine bein' anywhere in the world, and you look up, and you know exactly where you are.”

“Anywhere in the world!” I laughed. “Where you gonna drag me next?”

“Well,” she said. “We could sneak on a boat. I always wanted to see the ocean.”

“Jess—,” I started, but she cut me off, saying, “*Flora*,” and nobody said my name like Jessie did. Like it really meant something, like it was maybe a bit more important than all the words around it. I looked at her then, and she was half silhouette, moonlight playing across her face. Gripping my hand so tight. Her lips quirked up in a sloppy smile.

We went to bed after that. When we were finished and Jessie collapsed to sleep, I stared at the wood rafters, drifting through my own head.

I remember wanting, that night, to tell Jessie we were different. If she was the moon, warm and round and glowing, then I was a falling star. I was a wild creature, something rough and fast, with hard edges and bruises and oftentimes a bloody lip. I was built messy, from whiskey and iron and the baked rocks of Texas, but thank God, I was also built from her. Softened by her, like a rock in a river. And still I was so selfish. And

still I loved so crookedly: I wanted to swallow her whole, live inside of her, until there was no space left between us, until our hearts fit together and our breaths came fast.

But I couldn't. So instead I curled around her, the blankets gritty with that inescapable dust we'd carried all the way here, and I whispered those things into the darkness, quietly taking apart my ugly insides and placing each piece on the mattress, one by one, between me and the sleeping, breathing shape of her, me and the river, me and the collection of ghosts, the swell of bare skin, the seed stretching upward, searching for warmth in the white New England sky.

I wanted so hard to be her sunlight.

#

One week's ride from the East Texas coast and Thatch asks, "So who is it?"

I stare at my horse's twitching ears, pretending like I don't know what he's talking about. He raises his eyebrows at me and says, "I know why you hired me. Who is it?"

"None a your business," I say smoothly.

"It is my business," he says. "I'm takin' you all the way 'cross this Godforsaken state, so it's most certainly my business. If you didn't want it to be my business, you woulda took a train."

"No trains," I tell him without thinking. "On horse or on foot, but no trains."

"Why's that?" He doesn't look back at me. We're making a steady pace through brush country, with its red dirt and rough bushes, and there are enough cactuses that he can't glance away from the path. But I can feel his question hanging in the air like a mosquito, buzzing around my head.

I swallow hard and say, "Rode the trains with her. All the way up North, then

back down here alone. So—never again.”

“Why the coast?” Thatch asks.

“I don't wanna talk about it.”

“I'm just thinkin',” he says loftily, skirting his horse around a prickly pear blooming with orange flowers, “it seems like an awful lotta trouble. I don't got a problem with it. I'm just wonderin' why.”

“She always wanted to see the ocean.” I take a deep, shaking breath, my voice barely loud enough for him to hear. “Snow and the ocean, and we saw snow. We were in Boston, you know, we coulda done it easy, but—it was so cold, we could barely leave our room, and we said we'd go in summer, but then—,” I break off, digging my fingernails into the skin of my wrist. Hard enough that it leaves little red crescents behind.

Thatch don't reply for a long time, and I think it's done with. I close my eyes and trust my horse to follow Thatch's, just telling myself to breathe in and out, nice and steady.

Then he says, “Just an awful lotta work for someone who don't know it.”

“Because that's what you *do*,” I snap, suddenly wanting to lash out, kick him between the legs, make him cry and bleed. I want to scream at him: *Because that's what you do, don't you know that? You come back home, and you sleep in your old bed, and you learn the goddamn constellations 'cause that's what she wanted. You never go back North, not ever. You fix your own meals and eat them alone and go to sleep drunk and early, and your bed is so cold without her even at the height of Texas summer, and in the morning you still reach over to her side before you open your eyes, before you remember that she ain't curled up there anymore, never will be again, and—and—*

And you bury the dead for the rest of your life.

“It's somethin' I gotta get done,” I say.

“As if it'll make any sense outta this mess,” Thatch says, gesturing around us at the scrub brush and the horses and the clear blue sky, like it's more than what it is, like there's something broken and rotting beneath the surface. I realize he knows exactly what I mean. I was right, he's known the whole time. And I wonder who he's lost.

“I just gotta bring her to the ocean,” I tell him, because I can't tell him anything else. “And I gotta do it the hard way.”

He nods once, and I know he won't talk about it again.

#

She found me hollering beneath the noontime sun, my hair wild and dirty, blood dripping into my mouth from my busted nose. The boys were a hundred yards away and running fast, kicking up little clouds of dust, and I'm still proud to say they looked worse off than I did.

“Flora!” Jessamine yelled, and I swear for a second I thought she was her mama, even though we were sixteen and Jessie's mama hadn't gotten out of bed for a year.

“What in the hell d'you think you're doin'?”

“They *started it*,” I yelled right back. She ran up beside me and grabbed my shoulder, her other hand cupping my face. Her eyes darted across the blood and bruises, the mess I'd made of me. I tried to wrench away from her. “Jessie, they were—you didn't hear the kinda things they were sayin’!”

“All right, come on,” she said, and dragged me off the dirt street into the tiny, shadowed alley between the old bank and Cotrell's. She pressed me back against one wall

and fixed me with the hardest glare I'd ever seen. "Which one a them hit you?"

I didn't answer.

"Which one, Flor?" she demanded. "Who was it? They ain't *never* meant to hit a girl."

"I hit first," I said, staring at my shoes.

She blinked at me. "Now why did you do that?"

I was silent for a long moment, struggling to hold back all the furious thoughts in my head, a swarm of angry wasps just waiting for somebody to punch a hole in their nest. I spat half a mouthful of blood onto the ground, scuffed it out with my foot. "They were sayin' things."

"What kinda things?"

"About my daddy," I mumbled. "Said he's never comin' home, he found some other woman and he ain't comin' back." A bead of sweat rolled down my neck. "They were makin' fun of your mama, too. I can't even say it, it was so bad."

Jessie nodded, her chin jutting out. "So you hit 'em."

"It was a great shot," I said solemnly. "Kept my thumb out, just like your daddy taught us. Didn't hurt a bit."

She was fighting back a smile, I knew it, but she just took my right hand in hers, inspecting my scraped knuckles. "You sure this didn't hurt?"

"Sure I'm sure," I said. "Don't think they broke my nose, either. It's just bleedin' real good."

"What a baby," said Jessie, her eyes glittering. "You tell your nose to quit it. Nobody's got any pity."

“Nobody? Well, that's a damn shame,” I said. “On account of it hurts an awful lot, and seein' how it got this hurt when I was defendin' our honor—”

“Oh, no you don't,” she cut in. “I never asked nobody to fight for me, don't you go makin' me feel guilty—”

I kissed her then, on her mouth and teeth. She pulled back and wrinkled her nose. She said, “You taste like blood.”

I waited, watching her. Already feeling my left eye begin to swell up. Jessie sighed, the tiniest of noises, and leaned in to kiss me short and quick. Like I knew she would.

“Oh!” I yanked away from her, hands flying to my face. “Oh goddammit, Jessie, my fuckin' nose!”

“Not my fault either,” she sang, but she took me back to her house and sat me down at the table, washed all the blood and snot off my face with a wet cloth, and she was so gentle I almost cried. It wasn't the first fight I ever got into, and it wouldn't be the last. I was not a soft or tender thing. Sometimes it felt like my chest was a windowpane, and my heart was a clenched fist beating against it. All I could do was spit shards of broken glass, and she would catch them in her hands.

#

Thatch and me reach the ocean right before sunset, after two straight days of leading the poor horses through thick marshland, the mud sucking at their hooves, the wet heat slumping over our shoulders. To be honest, I don't even figure out we're close until we're already there. First I hear this odd sound, somehow like whispers and rolling thunder at the same time, and then we trot past the last line of swamp grass onto the

sandy shore.

Thatch says, "Like nothin' you ever seen, huh."

Like nothin' I ever seen, that's for sure. It's almost frightening—the unimaginable size of it. The ocean mirrors the sky, a curve of blue stretching out to brush the horizon, flecked with white where the waves break. I slide off my horse without a word, grabbing my bag and sprinting forward across the loose sand until my feet hit the tide. I feel it soaking my boots, but all I can think is that my lips taste like salt and the water is cool against my legs and it's time, it's time, it's time.

I reach into my bag and pull out a little ball of cloth. It used to be blue, but over thirteen years it faded to pale gray, the color of a snowy sky in Boston. The cloth unfurls like a flower in my hand, and there, in the center: a single pearly tooth. She gave it to me when we were eight years old and losing the last of our baby teeth. She pressed it into my palm like a secret, like a tiny shining promise.

This is all I have left of her.

#

"Flora," she said, tongue thick, words slow as molasses, "Flor, I just thought of the funniest thing," and I said, "What's that?" and she started to say something but pulled up short. Her mouth snapped shut with a click.

"What's the funniest thing, Jessie, tell me," I said, patting her face. We were twenty years old and looked like we'd been dipped in stardust. When the world ended.

"I—oh," she said, frowning a little. "I feel strange. I feel real strange all of a sudden."

"What kinda strange?" I asked. I was still half smiling, overcome with the glory

of it all. It was April in Boston, the snow mostly melted away, spring rain bringing fog and slick streets. Tonight, some burly man had bet a dollar that us two pretty girls couldn't outdrink him. So we were a dollar rich.

“No, no, Flor, I'm...I'm not laughin', I feel...,” Jessie was stock still, confusion written all over her face, one hand fluttering near her temple. Then, “Oh,” she said almost wonderingly, and she dropped to her knees so fast the ice on the street cracked beneath her, this horrible *snap*, and I just about stopped breathing.

Turned out Jessie's mama gave her a sickness. After that, we had eleven months, two weeks, and four days.

Never said the world ended quick.

#

I think Thatch walks up beside me, or maybe he tethers the horses. I'm not really sure. All I can do is stand there, the ocean licking at my skirts, holding Jessamine's little tooth as gently as I can, cradling it in my hand like a child.

“Dear God,” I begin, but my throat closes, and I can't get any further. I don't think she'll mind. She was always better at talking out loud, better at finding the right spots to bury those cow bones, better at crying for creatures and people and anything that needed her tears. So I just clutch her tooth, that last precious piece of her, and bring it to my forehead, my chest, my left shoulder and then my right. I kneel down right there in the shallow tide and dig her a little hole. I press her into the thick wet sand and cover her up, right as the breaking waves surge up to meet her.

Dear God, I pray silently, she kissed the blood off my mouth. Dear God, she did that for me. So I will love her. I will love her like a bullet loves a man's chest, all the way

down to the bone, hard and unforgiving. Pain in every breath. I have, and I will.

And Jesus Christ, it has counted for something.

I stare out at that wide expanse of ocean, gleaming gold beneath the sinking sun, the white- capped waves crawling forward across the sand over and over again, and I listen to the ancient rush and roar of it, and I think, *Look, Jessie. Here it is.*

END.