

MRS. HANSON
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MRS. HANSON'S APPLE ORCHARD AND GENERAL STORE HAD WAITED ON Round Valley and its farmers for many years, strengthening the fibers of this small frontier with supplies such as coffee, tobacco, overalls, and soap. But for all the bold, sharp-toothed peaks towering above and the well-built men and women who lived below, Round Valley's once flourishing green fields and rows of fruit had now dimmed. Newspapers decried an agricultural mecca in decline. Others, chiefly Paiute mothers and fathers and their eagle and coyote spirits, accepted this change from abundance to scarcity—the journey demanded it of them. Burdens once carried by brown people now belonged in equal measure to white people. Mrs. Hanson's neighbors had all sold out to the City in the fall of 1931, save for Mr. Stevens, who was about to. She didn't want to give in.

"God's on their side, not mine," Mrs. Hanson whispered and stepped onto the front porch to shake the dust from a rug. *The City needs more water, and they will get it every time they come for it*, she thought. She hung the rug on the wooden railing and walked around the back of the house, looking up at the chain of mountains. *If only God had given us more snow, the City wouldn't need my land.*

"They can have the fifteen thousand dollars. I don't want money, I want my home," she said aloud. She talked to herself frequently these days. She had also noticed that she often forgot where she was going and had to pause to recall what it was she was about to do. She shook her head as if to rearrange her thoughts and turned back. As she approached the front corner of the house, she noticed a piece of red wood from a child's toy lying behind a dying rose bush. She hadn't noticed it before—the plant had begun to lose its flowers and leaves to dehydration. A stained string clung to the wood—Busby's miniature red wagon, a toy that one of the customers had offered to him on his fifth birthday. Lolly had chased Busby in a jealous rage because she was not given a toy too. Mrs. Hanson smiled and then shook her head again. Today was no day for thinking about happier times.

The City didn't want her orchard or her general store. They didn't want the view of Mount Tom or the vista across the valley of pale-pink tablelands created from the eruption of an ancient volcano. The City would abandon her home to the desert rabbit brush and destroy the dirt road that led to her front porch. Bulldozers would ravage the storage barns and the grain silo, one of the first in the valley. Her trees and lawns and the paint on her white fences would weather and turn brown. The life that had existed here would be erased, and all reminders of backbreaking work and toil would become invisible on the horizon.

What the City wanted was simple—her water.

No one could say that Mrs. Hanson hadn't put up a fight. Mr. Thompson from Los Angeles had paid her a visit in the spring. Mr. Thompson, a small, elegant man with a thin, graying mustache and a blue suit with an off-white, silk handkerchief tucked carefully into the chest pocket, had been warned about the lonely old woman losing her mind.

"Mrs. Hanson, I am Mr. Thompson, a representative from the City of Los Angeles, and I am interested in buying your property," he said, tipping his hat.

"I know who you are, and I'm not interested, Mr. Thompson," Mrs. Hanson said. "I raised my children here. My husband and I built this orchard up. We constructed all the buildings here—the store, the silo, the barn. I'm very proud of the fences. My son Busby whitewashes them every season. And my daughter Lolly helps me in the store. Everyone buys from us. What are they all going to do if I sell? Where are they going to get their baking powder, their thread, their machine oil, the ladies their hose? No, I'm surely not interested. You go back to your Big City and you tell them the people here are not about to give up."

Mr. Thompson said, "But Mrs. Hanson, I understand your family is gone. And five of your neighbors are going to sell. You'll be here all alone." Mrs. Hanson had been preparing beef for a church dinner and was holding a butcher knife at her side.

"Mr. Thompson, I told you no. I'm telling you no one more time. If you don't kindly leave my property, I might have to use this knife on your throat instead of on my meat for the church feast."

“What church is that, Mrs. Hanson?”

“Presbyterian, just down the road.”

“Mrs. Hanson, that church closed two years ago.”

“You’re trying to steal my water and my land!”

“I am paying you a fair price, Mrs. Hanson! Giving you more money than you could ever expect to earn by staying.”

Mrs. Hanson hoisted the knife above her head and flashed her teeth until Mr. Thompson, dumbstruck, clumsily backed off the porch.

“There isn’t enough water for the both of us, Mr. Thompson,” she had yelled as the frightened man ran down the road to his parked car. “We were here first, it’s our water,” she screamed.

The water that had irrigated her Winesap apples stopped flowing shortly after Mr. Thompson’s visit. All through the valley the City had begun tapping underground waters, leaving irrigation ditches dry, alfalfa crops and apples to rot.

THE SUMMER AIR FLOWED down from the chalk bluffs across the valley, coming on strong as an oven. Mrs. Hanson recalled her husband’s clever solution to the unbearable summer temperatures inside the house. The cottonwoods he had planted behind the house kept the parlor cool in summer. She remembered how proud he was that he could provide comfort to her during her pregnancies. As these fond recollections faded, the apples outside the window came into sharper focus. They were lying in disarray, putrefied on the ground.

Down the road she could see Mr. Stevens, a tall, wiry man with an uneven gait. A log that had fallen on him more than twenty years ago in the forests in Mono County had injured his left leg. Mr. Stevens served as an unofficial veterinarian. He was coming to help with her cat, Worthy.

Mrs. Hanson had acquired Worthy when his mother, a stray with black and gray stripes, had a litter of kittens some sixteen years ago. The children had begged her to keep a few of the kittens. Mrs. Hanson had refused, saying that they were not responsible enough yet, that she would end up taking care of them. The families adjacent to the orchard adopted the kittens. But one, a runt with a nose for field mice and rabbits, kept coming by the back porch.

Busby secretly fed the little tabby with white paws some of the chicken from his dinners and the cat returned. Mrs. Hanson finally relented and agreed that a cat might kill some of the mice present in the house.

Since then, Worthy had been her lap cat and constant companion. He slept in the crook of her neck at night and softly breathed into her ear. Mrs. Hanson would never admit it, but the cat had endeared himself to her, relieving her of the loneliness of the property without her husband and children. Busby had died of pneumonia before his fifteenth birthday. Mr. Hanson, sick with the death of his son, died of a broken heart a few months later. And Lolly moved to Palo Alto four years ago to join her professor husband. Before she left, Lolly begged her mother to sell out, abandon the wasteland that was Round Valley, and come with her to be taken care of proper.

Lolly's letter with train tickets to San Francisco had arrived two months ago. Lolly was to install her mother at the progressive and peaceful Agnews State Mental Hospital.

Mr. Stevens had agreed last week to chloroform Mrs. Hanson's cat. She had explained, "I can't take Worthy with me. The insane asylum won't let him in."

"Mrs. Hanson, you're not going to an insane asylum. I've read the papers and seen the pictures of the clock tower and the pretty palms. "There are music salons, gardens—shoot, even cows and sheep to remind you of Round Valley! I wish I was going with you, to tell the truth."

"And I can't leave him be to live on rats who have diseases or be killed by the hoodlums down on Line Street. You heard what those Smith boys done to the Woods' cat?"

Mr. Stevens nodded. He had removed the dead tortoiseshell cat himself from the Woods' mailbox. He'd given a stern warning to the Smith twins never to kill another cat unless they would like to be stuffed into a mailbox themselves. Then he forced the Smith twins to clean manure from his ranch for two months.

Mrs. Hanson permitted herself the small luxury of a memory of twenty-two years earlier, when Busby was two years old. Lolly wasn't even born yet. Mrs. Hanson had stood where she was now, feet planted firmly on the wooden planks of the steps, watching as her husband made calculations in his thick

red accounting book. It was harvest time and seven young men from Bishop were picking apples as Busby played beneath their ladders. She saw their old sheepdog, Maze, lick Busby's face. Her husband rose from his makeshift desk on their porch and walked past her into the orchard. He picked up Busby, grabbed an apple from one of the baskets, and returned to his wife, who was now mending one of his Sunday shirts. "This is the best one of the day," he said. She smiled and took it from his hands. Indeed, it was the crispest, tastiest apple. Each day Mr. Hanson would bring her the most superior apple for her to try. Fruit grown with one's own hands tasted full of life itself.

The sound from Mr. Stevens's lopsided walk interrupted her reverie. He called out a "hello there" from the gate to her yard. She sighed as her eyes followed the faded paint of the fence and the dust beyond it.

"Well, Mr. Stevens, did you bring the chloroform?" she asked.

Mr. Stevens had put to sleep many a sick pet rat, rabbit, hamster, and guinea pig for the neighbors. He had perfected the amount of chloroform to soak into gauze or cotton and had built a special airtight container out of metal gas tanks to do it quickly. He didn't like to see an animal, or its human companion, suffer. Children seemed to understand that, when it was time, Mr. Stevens would be there to comfort both the animal and the child.

The tabby was stretched out inside the parlor on the back of the couch, sphinxlike, watching a fly that had entered the hole in the screen door. His head jerked up, sideways, and down, following the fly's movements. Mrs. Hanson took a breath, gathered Worthy in her arms, and walked back onto the porch.

"I got him," she said to Mr. Stevens.

He said, "Okay then," and placed the container on a table between two wooden rocking chairs that had defined the Hanson porch for over thirty years. He took a small, rusty flask from his trousers, two pieces of gauze, and a pair of faded leather gloves. He didn't look up from the table, but he knew Mrs. Hanson was beginning to cry. He put on the gloves. Worthy tried to squirm out of Mrs. Hanson's arms, but she squeezed and cooed softly to him.

"It's going to be all right, Worthy." She sniffed back tears and began to bounce Worthy against her chest as though he were a baby. "I'm going to miss you. I don't know what I'm going to do at the Agnews without a cat to

keep me company. Lolly never loved me. That's why she's putting me away." She brought Worthy closer to her face so that she could wipe her nose with the back of her hand.

Mr. Stevens sat down on the rocker. He closed the flask and removed the gloves. He took his blue handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his brow. It was hot in Round Valley, nearly 100 degrees every day in the last week of August.

"Mrs. Hanson, you sure you can't take Worthy with you?"

"The Agnews said no and the railroad too. And I can't leave him here. You're leaving soon too, else I'd have asked you to take him for me.

"The dog pound would of done the same thing for Worthy, that's why I asked you to do it. I know it's hard. But I owe it to Worthy. He's been a good cat, and I can't bear to leave him, knowing the coyotes or Smith kids will get him." Her voice was shaky but she willed the tears from falling down her cheeks. Her face was set and her mind made up.

"All right, let's get this thing over with," Mr. Stevens said. He stood up, put the gloves back on, and opened the flask. He soaked the gauze and attached it to a hook inside the airtight container. He removed three sardines wrapped in a kerchief from his hip pocket and placed it on the floor of the container.

"Good thinking, Mr. Stevens. You know Worthy just loves those little fish." Mrs. Hanson put the cat on the card table, letting him find the fragrant fish. When he was inside, Mr. Stevens shut the door.

"Now we monitor Worthy. To make sure," he said. He took a breath and opened a long, metal flap on the side of the container that revealed a rectangular piece of glass soldered to the surrounding metal.

"To make sure everything goes all right, we can watch him from this side. Just look through the glass, that's all." Mrs. Hanson nodded and stooped next to Mr. Stevens to see inside. Worthy was engrossed in the sardines, oblivious to the tasteless and odorless gas.

"Won't take too long, I can assure you, Mrs. Hanson." Then the tabby stopped eating. Worthy could no longer stand. The cat lay on his side but struggled to get back up. He held his head for as long as he could manage until he let it fall, hitting the bottom of the container.

“He’s still breathing, I can see his chest move,” Mr. Stevens said.

Worthy raised his head one more time to look out the glass. His paws quivered and the orange-and-white fur bristled. Mrs. Hanson held her breath. Maybe Worthy wouldn’t die after all. Maybe the gas hadn’t worked. She felt momentarily hopeful.

Then Worthy’s head jerked back, and his body convulsed and shook. Mrs. Hanson shuddered. His head thunked one final time and, along with it, his slender frame stopped shaking. He was dead.

Mr. Stevens put his calloused hand on Mrs. Hanson’s back, pulled one of the rocking chairs over, and gently sat her in front of the table. He walked down the steps and around back to give her some time alone with Worthy.

“If only I could have stayed on, we could have lived here until we died,” Mrs. Hanson said. “I would have struggled, but I’d have made it all right. Instead, I was told to ‘Git’ and git’s what I’m doing. I’m leaving today, Worthy.”

The sun was getting high, so Mrs. Hanson rose from the rocking chair, wiped her cheeks with her apron, swung open the screen door, and went inside for her hat. She ran her hands along the empty walls inside the house. Then she unfastened her apron and tossed it in a bin. *No cooking where I am going*, she thought. She marched straight through to the parlor, opened the window that looked out on the cottonwoods, and watched Mr. Stevens dig a hole. Now she was ready.