

*In late 2000/early 2001—a bit more than a year into my time at Zendik—I was told that I needed to drop my boyfriend of four months or leave. To convince myself that I had to choose tribe over love, I wrote the following story.*

20 February 1892

Two days after the wedding, and Owen and I have just moved into our new log cabin. It is between a forest and a hill. On the forest side, a creek runs by it. Frost this morning, but sunny by afternoon--I washed Owen's shirts and breeches in the stream, and dried them on the line he strung for me, between the big elm and the oak tree. In the oak tree there's also a treehouse, left by the folks who lived on the land before us. It's a little rickety, but Owen says he'll fix it up for me.

I do love Owen so. He is such a loving boy. Today he came in from chopping wood and hugged me and rocked me and I felt his warmth run all the way through me. And such a handsome fellow, too--his golden hair and angel face--I do believe he was born in a state of grace.

3 March 1892

Mother came for a visit today--she's been quite lonesome, since Father passed away. She hung the laundry and made lunch and bustled about as if this were her house. I don't mind, really--she's a dear lady--but I was relieved when she left.

Owen in a snit this evening--Mr. Waters at the mill said he has to move quicker, or he'll get fired. He doesn't take kindly to orders. He'll do the work of ten men, if nobody asks him, but once he's required to do something he'd rather slit his throat than come through. He bristles at my requests too.

I made him some tapioca pudding, and kissed him, but he would have none of it--went to bed still grumpy. I hope the Lord gives him a good slap on the bottom before morning.

14 June 1892

Owen's family over for a picnic lunch this afternoon--his pa fired his shotgun, and raised us up a pole, with our very own stars and stripes, for Flag Day. Says when the kid comes we'd better teach him the Pledge of Allegiance, and make him say it every day.

Owen seems angry at his pa--saw him clench his jaw after his pa said something about me being pregnant so soon after the wedding. His ma knew I was pregnant when we were married--I thought his pa did too--

When they left Owen took me up to the treehouse--it's a hike for me now, with my belly so big. He's fixed it up nice, with velvet cushions and a skylight--you can see through the branches to the stars, at night. We kissed a lot, and then he took me, but what I really liked was him holding me, and I forgot all about the kid, and his job at the mill, and his anger today--I just wished we could stay there, and never come down. He is so beautiful when we are alone together--so gentle, and his hair a halo, and I so love to stroke his forehead, and press the thin bones of his body against me-- I hope he'll always love me.

9 September 1892

Sat on the back steps this morning, peeling apples for sauce, thinking about Owen, and the baby. He's due in a week or two. I was looking down the valley and felt sad somehow--Owen's been distant for a few days now. I think he's worried about being a father, and I am scared milkless of being a mother, but he won't tell me because he wants to be strong. I look at his face in the evening sometimes, when he's sitting by the fire and reading the paper, and lament the truth that this boy--who used to leap stone to stone in the creek with me--must become a man-- Already his face is harder. His cheeks are stiffer. He doesn't grin as quick as he used to. Oh my little boy Owen, where are you?

4 October 1892

I've been a mother two weeks now, and I'm tired. Mother comes over to help care for the baby every other day, and I appreciate all she does, but I also wish she would go away. Today it was just nag nag nag--Thelma, you really must fold the laundry like this, if you don't want it to wrinkle--and you really must not let the sink fill up with dishes--only indecent folk do that. I want to scream at her when she's here, but I want to scream at the baby when she's not.

And Owen? I don't know where he's gone, these past two weeks. Out with his friends from the mill, maybe? Drinking? I don't smell liquor on his breath, when he gets into bed. I'm not angry with him, I just miss him. He seems sad. Maybe today I'll press him--make him tell me where he's been.

5 October 1892

Dragged Owen into the orchard this morning, while Nathaniel was sleeping. I asked him why he'd seemed so sad lately, and just as I finished asking an apple dropped on his head and he exploded--he said he didn't want to be a father, didn't even want to marry me--he'd had dreams of being an actor, and going to New York--dreams he'd never told me, because by the time he loved me enough to confide in me it was too late, the baby was already tiny inside me. He cried--Owen cried--I'd never seen Owen cry. For a moment the tears dissolved the glaze over his eyes.

I told him I loved him, and wanted him to be happy, but what was I to do with the baby? He said it was alright, he'd make up monologues at night, and maybe someday he'd put on a play in Colm County.

12 October 1892

The baby cries too much. I give him rags soaked in apple juice to suck on, but even that doesn't shut him up. The up-to-date books all say babies shouldn't be touched.

19 October 1892

Woke before dawn this morning, and walked out to the orchard by moonlight. It was a cold light, and it made the last of the apples glow. I felt the hills rising around me, and the trees, and I wondered, will life ever be bigger than these? I feel safe in this valley--Owen does his best for me--and I love the deep beauty of my life here. But some days I wonder--what's beyond the forest? What's past those hills? Will my baby grow suddenly stiff like his father, and work till he's old at the mill? This afternoon--peeling apples again, and rocking Nathaniel--I tried to corral my thoughts, but they kept wandering off.

31 October 1892

Owen announced today that he's becoming a preacher--he's starting a ministry, called the Church of the Far Flung Spirit. He wants to set out on foot tomorrow--the Day of All Saints--and travel the county, preaching in tents and churches and wherever else people will gather and listen. He's restless, he says--needs to move, and expel the fire within him. At first I thought I'd miss him--but he doesn't touch me anymore anyway. He'll go; Nathaniel and I will stay.

7 November 1892

Owen came home tonight, from preaching, and he was drunk. He cried and told me he loved me and said he was sorry for leaving me. Said he'd been possessed by the spirit while speaking, and confessed right there before all those people that he's been a wayward husband. He was very sweet to me, and kissed Nathaniel, and took us both up to the treehouse and sang us a lullabye. He was cuckoo and the song was cuckoo--a story about a man on a horse who sees a pretty lady running by, doesn't see a posse of Indians swoop down from the hills and scalp his baby, who dies--but I liked being with him--just the three of us, and the disconsolate trees, and I mad for his touch, and he made for me.

23 December 1892

Something's happened to the baby. He won't wake up. Owen's not here. Mother's with Cousin Madge in Stark County. I can't call the doctor. Nathaniel. What happened to Nathaniel? He was sitting on the window ledge and I was dreaming of Owen, when he first wooed me, how fine and handsome and loving he was, and then I reached out to water the roses and Nathaniel was lying on the ground and his little neck was twisted and his skull was cracked and I tried to get it back how it was and he wouldn't even cry I don't know why where's Owen? Home from the mill soon. Maybe he can breathe the Holy Spirit into him maybe he can help me. No! Owen mustn't know. If he knows he'll hate me. His child-- his firstborn child-- I shall bury him under the rosebush. Owen mustn't know.

24 December 1892

Owen hasn't come home. He must know. I will sit out here on the back steps and wait for him. If he comes and he knows I will shoot him. If he doesn't know I won't say anything. I'll be so sweet to him he won't notice there's no baby.

The view is beautiful from here. The hills rise beside me, the forest surrounds me, in the distance the creek disappears. If Owen threatens me the trees will protect me. The forest will swallow his flesh and the sun will bleach his bones and I will leave this valley in a hearse and no one will ever know.

25 December 1892

Owen is buried beneath the treehouse. It was a hard deed, but I did it in good spirits. Now it is my time to pass on, and I gather my courage. I bid farewell to this valley--its dawn and its moon--I thank it for being my home and my tomb. To my baby I tender my fondest regrets--if only your father had loved you as much as I did.

And Owen--my angel--my beautiful love--I trust we will meet in the regions above. As in the treehouse--no child and no care--just a dark sky of stars, and your hands in my hair. In a moment and forever I'll be there.