

Revelation on the Flint
by Annabella Opiari

The blood flows sluggishly over my hands like the Flint River. The comparison pops into my head before I can stop it. It's hard not to think about when the river is gurgling mere feet from us.

Sam sees me glance at the water and smirks. "I wouldn't have minded a swim." He shifts his leg with a grimace. "D'you think I'll heal up quickly enough for us to take a dip later?"

"Shut up." At least he's feeling well enough to make foolish jokes. I'm rooting through my knapsack and silently thanking Mother for insisting we take some spare cloth with us. After a few seconds, my fingers hook around the roughly hewn fabric and pull it out. It unspools in my hands, its creamy cotton shading red in the setting sun. There's a low hum in my ears. From the stress, but I try to block it out. I breathe deeply and try to call up Father's instructions for cleaning a gunshot wound. He told us so many times I stopped listening, but they drift up to the surface.

"Straighten your leg," I order. "And take off your pants."

"Oh, great idea, Lizzie." Sam rolls his eyes. "Then hypothermia can kill me before the blood loss does."

I grit my teeth. He can be so *exhausting*. "It's only autumn, and it's a shallow wound. Neither of those things is going to kill you. I just want to see what we're working with before I take you home." What I'm really worried about is getting the bullet out. I don't want to risk infection setting in on the way back to the cabin.

"What if I don't want to take my pants off?" Sam folds his arms and stares at me, a challenge in his eye.

I can't believe this. You'd think his own idiocy hadn't gotten him shot. I'd warned him countless times not to spin his hunting rifle as a trick, but since when have younger siblings listened? Maybe now Father will see that giving him a gun was a stupid idea. "Fine. Then cut the fabric off your leg so I can clean the wound."

"But I like these pants," Sam whines. "I don't want to ruin them."

I let out a snarl. "Can't you just do what I tell you for once?"

"Why should I?" He cocks his head. "You're not the boss of me."

My cheeks burn, and the hum in my ears has grown to a buzz. I'm so mad I could spit. "Listen—"

"Wait." He's gazing beyond me at the glowing horizon.

"No!" I snap. I hate when he refuses to look me in the eye. "I'm done waiting. You need to realize—"

"Elizabeth!" Sam's tone is unusually urgent; it startles me away from my oncoming tirade. "Look behind you."

The buzzing in my ears swells to a thrum. The thrum blooms into a roar. Something else is making that noise. I turn around slowly. A dark cloud is rising up and over the trees and bearing down on us.

Passenger pigeons. Thousands, maybe millions. I've never seen so many. Wings furiously beat and churn at the air. Iridescent feathers glisten in the dying light. And the eyes. Unquantifiable eyes all staring down at us. They blot out the sky, erasing the sweet pinks and oranges of the sunset and replacing it with their frenzied bodies. Looking into the mess of wings and feathers and eyes and rainbow gleams, I am struck by the horrible clarity of what it must be like to see a true angel.

Minutes pass. The mass of birds still roars, but a strip of orange deepening into indigo is now visible behind them. With each second, the strip widens until at last, the sky is clear above us and the rumble of the birds echoes into the distance. I look at Sam. His eyes are stretched wide, and his head is tipped back at the darkening sky.

“Do you want to cut the cloth or take the pants off?” I prompt him. After a second, he meets my gaze. The wonder still shines in the abysses of his eyes. Silently he reaches for the scissors in my hand and snips through the fabric.

And it's awful, but I can't help thinking, *if seeing a flock of birds was all it took to make him cooperate, I should have taken him hunting years ago.*