

## Wayfaring Strangers

by Edward R. Tyndall

The pasture was green like grass in a storybook. It sloped down the side of a long rolling hill. As the hill leveled out the grass gave way to dark pines where the forest was reclaiming unused pastureland. Behind the pine forest were more hills that drifted into the distance, turning purple then dark blue and forming a long ridge against the horizon like a brush stroke disappearing in the golden light of dusk.

Into this pasture blood spilled from the womb of a brood ewe. It stained her wool and covered the grass blades. A cry broke the sun-dappled field and interrupted her labored breathing. The cry was not that of sheep or human but some pitiful place in between. The ewe would not look at the thing she had birthed, gazing instead toward the distant hills. The

cries became desperate, the newborn's body shivering, but she would not touch it. A mocking jay perched on a fence wire looked on, agitated by the piercing sounds of the wriggling thing. Soon the callused hands of a man reached down and plucked it up. He bit the cord with his teeth and looked into the soft, round eyes of the creature he had sired. Thus, the Sheep Child was born and spirited away to the carnival, having never seen the soft eyes of its mother.

Six years past that time and many hundreds of miles away, a two-room wooden house sagged in the flat expanse of the Texas panhandle at the height of the Dust Bowl. In the first room lay Lucius and Magnolia Carter on a bedspread Magnolia's mother had given them when they headed west. The second room was reserved for a child that would not come. A cradle that Lucius had ordered from a catalog sat in the corner of the room under a picture of relatives from back east. In it the family stood starkly in front of a dogtrot cabin somewhere in the hills of the Shenandoah. A ghostly blur in the photo was Hampton, a rambunctious goat that would meet his end the day after in a mysterious mauling that remained unsolved.

In the evenings Magnolia would sit on the steps at the front of the house and look over the Texas plains. She would watch the gusting wind spin tempests on the desolate prairie, and she would curse the deepening sand that choked the dying

corn crop and covered the wheels of the Ford pickup that had long since rusted into useless junk. Now though she lay naked next to Lucius, a thin layer of dust coating their pale bodies and dulling whatever blush was left in her gaunt cheeks and unused nipples.

The two stared at the ceiling and contemplated sex, but the notion was painful now that the baby wouldn't come. Eventually Lucius worked up his nerve and placed his hand on Magnolia's breast. She moved toward him, still looking up at the bare rafters and watching the dust float like river silt in a shaft of light. Lucius rolled over and was inside her. He did his best to be tender, but this was an act of mourning, and they both knew it. At dawn they ate their food in silence and listened to the wooden door of the empty smokehouse clacking against the frame in the barren wind. Magnolia figured they'd be dead of hunger by the end of it all, and even the offering of their long-suffering bodies would not make the broad sky deliver rain.

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Black smoke from the firebox of the carnival train poured from the engine's stack and drifted over the prairie like a tiny storm strung out to die. The long line of cars carrying the performers, freaks and animals rolled across the plains and arroyos, heading west. Inside the first car the Man in the Tall Hat, the Whore and the Henchman sat playing dominos with a game

set alleged to be made from the bones of Yankee soldiers. Like everything in the carnival, no one knew if it was true or a lie, but the Man in the Tall Hat liked the meanness of it and so related it as fact.

His game companions, the Whore and the Henchman, had been carefully chosen for their unique stupidity, which allowed them to participate in the cruelty necessary to keep a carnival running during these desperate times. There is the meanness of the very smart, and the meanness of the very stupid, and the two need each other. Accordingly the Man in the Tall Hat saw to their needs and so they saw to his, as is the way of the world, whether it was a swift beating to a rebellious beast or the Whore's painted lips relentlessly sucking the poison from the Man in the Tall Hat's whiskey-dead cock.

A few cars back the Sheep Child lay in his cage slowly dying. If he could have seen into his own heart he would have known that it was never meant to work long, and that it was a miracle it still beat. Tending to the oddities for the last ten years had been the job of the Bearded Lady, and she sat now at her vanity in the corner of the car smoking her pipe to tamp down the piss smells of the Three-Eyed Goat and the Mermaid, dragging her slime covered body on the wet rocks of her tank.

The job of tending to the oddities came with an extra dollar a month, and it got the Bearded Lady away from the

barkers and the performers. This, in her mind, was worth sitting amidst the smells. She was no elegant dame anyway, and in truth everyone suspected she was a breasted man. Her lean muscles, iron grip, and thick red beard were betrayed only by her heaving breasts, and she bound them up each morning in a tight corset to the curious delight of every drunk on the train. It was exhausting to deal with their violent advances, and year-by-year her anger built like a storm.

Sometime back the Sheep Child had learned to eke out wavering, childlike sentences. This was a secret only the Bearded Lady knew, and she kept it for the Sheep Child, aware that its divulgence would lead to more misery from the Man in the Tall Hat who assumed the Sheep Child nothing more than a deformed sheep. Oh, but if the sheep could talk, the riches would be endless. The Bearded Lady hated the Man in the Tall Hat with such seething passion that the thought of adding to his cruel power was unbearable. She often lay awake at night and imagined the most barbaric tortures for him. Many times she had thought of stealing away with the Sheep Child, poking and prodding him until he spoke for crowds and lining her pockets with the proceeds, but it wasn't in her heart, and she reaped the rewards of this fantasy only in the darkest parts of her imagination.

The Bearded Lady had cut a small window low in the side of the train car for air and to empty her piss pot through. It was open now and the Sheep Child lay in the hay of his cage and watched the land change and felt his heart weakening with each mile. He tried to remember his mother, but he couldn't. He thought of his birthplace, the rolling hills of the Shenandoah, but he couldn't make the images clear. He thought about his first memories of the carnival. He remembered the Baby Elephant that had come into the possession of the Man in the Tall Hat by some great tragedy. He remembered its large round eyes and the soft thin fur shrouding its wrinkled body like a rumor.

Disoriented and mourning the loss of its mother the Baby Elephant would not take to training and sat with his knees folded under his body for two days straight, refusing to budge. The Man in the Tall Hat grew so frustrated that he ordered the Henchman to beat the elephant to death under the hollow gaze of the mountain lion, who looked on from his cage, then rolled over and drifted back to sleep with the buzzing flies drinking their fill from the corners of his eyes. This haunted the Sheep Child. He wished he could have caught the elephant's eye and guided the poor thing into death, but he knew the elephant had only seen the mountain lion's stony indifference. The Sheep Child vowed then to die away from the carnival, perhaps on the open plains

rolling before him now, but preferably within sight of the hills of the Shenandoah.

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Magnolia sat in the dust outside the house and held her sheep Molly to the ground, sheering off her wool under the hot sun. The huge blue sky reached to the earth on all sides like a dry dome placed over the flat and barren land. When she was finished shearing she collected the wool, cleaned it, and placed it in a cotton bag with the likeness of a man and wife embroidered on it in red and blue. Afterward she hugged Molly's neck and kissed her. She slipped a leather lead around Molly's neck, and the two started off for the Curandero.

In the distance four dolomite hills rose conspicuously out of the vastness. Magnolia made for these, following the bone-white caliche road that cut through the withered pasturelands. Around noon she stopped at an arroyo and scrapped down into the sand until a hint of brown water emerged. She let Molly drink before laying her own body prone and sucking at the water until her mouth was moist.

A few hours later she arrived at the mud and stick jacal of the Curandero. A weathered figure of the crucified Christ hung beside the door, ancient white paint flaking from its cracked wooden contours. Magnolia tied Molly to one of the cedar rails of the porch and knocked on the thick wooden door. When the

Curandero opened it, Magnolia presented the wool as an offering and entered the smoky darkness.

Inside was sparse and hot, a single bed in the corner. Some kind of meat stewed in a Dutch oven hung over the open fire in the corner, sweet and greasy smells filling the room. Magnolia had thought there would be more. She had imagined the apparatus of magic filling the room on tables and shrines. The Curandero offered her a seat and drew up a chair beside her. He asked her why she had come as he examined the wool. Magnolia explained that she wanted a child but could not conceive. She had been to a doctor, to a priest, but no one could help. The Curandero placed his dark, leathery hand on her shoulder and looked into her eyes. He breathed deeply. Magnolia looked at his gray beard and thick hair, the deep crow's feet at the corners of his pale blue eyes. After a while he instructed her to rise and stand next to a low, hand-wrought table. The table's surface was covered in layers of wax.

The Curandero placed three candles on the table and lit them. The glass jars containing the candles were covered in paintings of angels and saints and words in Spanish that Magnolia couldn't read. These, the Curandero explained, were the right candles to restore her womb. Next, he lit a bundle of rosemary and Mexican sage and passed it in front of Magnolia's hips. The sweet smoke drifted up, and she inhaled it. The

Curandero placed the burning herbs in a glass vase. Magnolia watched the smoke drift off the cracked and blackened wall and felt the Curandero's body press close to her from behind. She could feel his breath on her neck. In the distance she heard a train's whistle and the sound of the engine and cars approaching.

The Curandero slipped his hands around her breasts and Magnolia felt her body warming and knew the magic must be working. The Curandero's hands moved down her sides to her hips. He smelled like cinnamon and leather, and she could hear the stew bubbling on the pot in the corner. The train whistle sounded and now the train seemed to be groaning to a halt somewhere very near the walls of the room.

When it was over the Curandero gave her a candle and instructed her to climb the tallest of the four hills and light it. Magnolia thanked him and stepped from the house into the bright light of day. She drank from the water bucket tied to the porch and gave some to Molly and headed for the nearby hills. As she rounded the corner of the jacal, she could see the carnival train stopped on the tracks blocking her way. Steam leaked from the engine's pistons and smoke rose from its stack.

Magnolia and Molly stood before the train and gazed up at the words "The Sheep Child" painted on the side of a car. Beside the words was a painting in silhouette of a man and a sheep, the

implications clear. Molly bleated and chewed at the sparse weeds on the ground. Magnolia looked at the small window cut low on the car. She led Molly closer. When she was within a few feet, a thin eggshell voice came from the darkness.

"Lead her closer", it said. The voice was like a child's, but something else was in it too, something animal but kind.

Magnolia was frightened, but she led Molly closer anyway, driven by some inescapable curiosity. "Closer", the voice said. Molly bleated again as Magnolia drew her closer.

"Who are you?" Magnolia whispered.

"The Sheep Child," the Sheep Child said, looking from the darkness at Molly. He looked at her soft, newly shorn coat. He tried to remember the hills of the Shenandoah.

"The Sheep Child?" Magnolia repeated. She reached out and put her hand into the darkness. She pushed it forward until she felt the cold bars of the cage. As she did, the engine's whistle blew, and Magnolia drew her hand back in fear. The train buckled forward and moved off toward the town. From inside the car, the Sheep Child watched Molly and Magnolia for as long as he could until the train curved north and the cars obscured them.

After the train was gone, Magnolia climbed to the top of the highest hill and lit her candle. She set it in the middle of an old stone medicine wheel used many years before by the Comanche. She sat among the stones and rested, looking out to

the north and to the glistening waters of a river in the distance. Beyond it the dusty prairies went on forever, and somewhere far to the east her family sat on the porches of their cabins in the hills of the Shenandoah. Magnolia longed for them now. She longed to be rid of this land where the rain would not fall and the dust invaded everything like the drifting thoughts of the devil.

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Magnolia returned to the farm at dusk to find Lucius standing at the edge of the field gazing out at the withering crops. She turned Molly loose from her lead and stood beside Lucius. He didn't look at her but continued to gaze over the field.

"We're going to starve out here if the rain don't come," he said. Magnolia was silent. Lucius looked at Molly grazing near the front of the house. "We're going to have to eat her."

"We can't," Magnolia said. Lucius turned and walked into the house.

Magnolia sat on the steps well into the darkness. Off to the west she could hear a pack of coyotes shrieking with excitement as they tore the life out of something. When Magnolia finally climbed into bed next to Lucius, the moon had already moved halfway across the sky and was visible through the bedroom window. The covers were cold from the night air. The dim light

came in through the window and made Lucius look like a dead man, his jaw slack.

In the morning Magnolia hooked the mule up to the buckboard wagon and drove the five miles to town. The mule's hip bones stuck out like rocky escarpments, and he strained and labored to pull the empty wagon. The leather tack creaked with each step, and the leaf springs of the wagon bounced such that Magnolia felt like a seasick passenger aboard a drifting and aimless vessel. Midway through the journey the sky in the west took on the eerie red darkness that often proceeded strange weather in that country.

When Magnolia arrived in front of the hardware store, she could see the carnival being set up at the edge of town. The tents were being erected on their posts, obscuring the men working beneath them, and the fading images painted on them sagged and billowed with the motion of construction. The garish scenes they depicted produced even stranger effect in their animation, here the undulating face of the Three-Eyed Goat rippling like some fever dream, there the collapsing and expanding bosom of the Bearded Lady.

Through the window of the hardware store Magnolia could see the Man in the Tall Hat, the Whore and the Henchman as they played dominos at a table. Magnolia entered and walked over to the Shop Keeper's long counter. The Shop Keeper was busy

cleaning it, and Magnolia had to wait a long time before he looked up at her. She could feel the hard gaze of the Man in the Tall Hat, and it raised goosebumps on her arms. When the Shop Keeper finally looked up Magnolia spoke.

"We need an extension on our credit, sir," she said, her eyes full of the earnestness of the desperate. He looked at her for a long time, then sighed.

"As much as I want to help you, I can't", he finally said.

"I'm begging you sir. We just need food for another week," she said.

The Shop Keeper began his long church-like excuse. As he spoke, Magnolia looked into the mirror behind him at her own reflection. She was struck by her gaunt face and hollow eyes. Her hair was in a tangle from the prairie wind, and her chapped lips looked dry and cracked like the land outside. As she looked at herself, she could hear the wind picking up and the shutters rattling.

As Magnolia opened the door to the shop and looked to the west, she could see the vast wall of the black roller approaching. It towered above the landscape and dwarfed the tall carnival tents. Soon all went dark, and the sun was blotted out as the wall of dust engulfed the town. She thought for a moment to save the mule, but it was too late. She closed the door and

turned with a look of great anxiety toward the Man in the Tall Hat.

"Nothing to do but wait it out," he said as he took another drink of whisky. "Come over and sit with us."

The Shop Keeper lit an oil lamp, and Magnolia took a seat at the table with the Man in the Tall Hat and his companions. The dust storm swirled outside and all was night as the top six inches of the great plains blew in to punish them all for the sin of the plow. Magnolia took the drinks she was offered and felt her body warm as she watched the Whore cackle and lick her painted lips. The brutish Henchman laughed at the Man in the Tall Hat's jokes, and the Yankee shinbone dominoes were placed into long rows that looked like tiny lines of headstones made out of the men they marked.

To pass the time, the Man in the Tall Hat told a story about another man, a genius really, who had the foresight to purchase the only tiny hill on a vast section of the plains. He bought this hill, no bigger than a wading pond or higher than a sand pile, and erected a giant fence around it. He charged the clod-hoppers passing through ten cents apiece to look through a peephole and behold the miracle of rise and elevation. They lined up in droves to get a peek, and the man made his fortune and bought all the things he ever wanted. Before his death, he

had the hill destroyed, leaving only the fence as a rotting mystery.

As the storm wore on, Magnolia warmed to the company and relaxed her guard as the whisky calmed her nerves. Finally, the Man in the Tall Hat put his hand on Magnolia's, and the Whore's face went suddenly blank as if she'd been waiting for this moment since Magnolia arrived. The Henchman drew his lips tight in a slight smile that must have been seen often just before awful things. Magnolia tried to pull her hand away but the Man in the Tall Hat held onto it. She looked back toward the Shop Keeper, but he looked down at the counter and pretended to clean. Magnolia drew a breath just as the front door opened and Lucius walked in.

"The storm's over Maggie, let's go." he said.

The Man in the Tall Hat released her hand. Magnolia walked with Lucius into the strange light of the outdoors. By some miracle the mule was still alive. After Lucius shoveled out the cargo of dirt that had collected in the wagon, Magnolia rode back to the farm with him. The mule's mud-filled lungs struggled to power its body forward, and only the dumb loyalty of mules kept it going. Lucius would not look at Magnolia but instead looked off to the blood-red glow that covered the western horizon.

When they arrived back at the farm Lucius helped Magnolia off the wagon. She saw that Molly was tied to a fence post, and Lucia's killing knife and sharpening stone were propped nearby. Magnolia ran to Molly and put her arms around her. Lucius walked up slowly and tried to pull Magnolia away.

"I wanted you to be able to say goodbye to her," he said.

"Please don't kill her," Magnolia begged.

"It's not a child, Maggie."

Finally, he managed to push Magnolia to the ground. The knife was in his hand now, and he prepared to pull its steel across Molly's warm throat. Molly was bleating, upset by Magnolia's agitation. The sounds from the sheep and Magnolia's pleas were too much for Lucius. He let the knife fall from Molly's throat.

Lucius and Magnolia sat quietly in the gathering darkness. After a while, Magnolia spoke.

"It's her wool that's worth something, not her meat. We could sell her. We could sell her at the carnival," she said. Lucius thought for a while.

"Okay," he said and slid his hand over to hold hers.

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Deep in the recessed mazes of the carnival tents, where the inner workings of the operation were hidden, the Sheep Child refused to budge from his cage. He was close to death, and he

determined it better to die hidden than out in the freakshow under the dull eyes of the townsfolk. The Bearded Lady knew the Sheep Child didn't have long, and so she let him rest.

When the Man in the Tall Hat and the Henchman finally arrived, the Mermaid was thrown into such a panic by the sight of them that she grunted and sloshed and made terrible sucking sounds in the way trapped wild things do when they're first compelled to attempt impossible escape. The Henchman told the Bearded Lady that she had failed in her duty. He told her that the freak show must always be setup on time, and that it would come out of her hide if she didn't see to it immediately.

"He's sick," she said, casting her eyes at the Sheep Child.

The Henchman wrapped the bars of the Sheep Child's cage with his bully stick, but the Sheep Child didn't move. When he hit the cage again, the Bearded Lady protested. The Man in the Tall Hat gave a look to the Henchman who immediately covered the distance between himself and the Bearded Lady. He pressed his bully stick against her throat until she saw stars and then delivered a swift strike to her temple that stung like hell and caused a trickle of blood to leak out of the split skin. The Bearded Lady looked past the Henchman to the Man in the Tall Hat and held his gaze with such a quiet rage that he finally looked down and drew a cigarette from his pocket and lit it.

"Everything must be running by tomorrow," he said, then walked out.

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In the morning Magnolia and Lucius ate the last of their hominy from dented tin cups as they made the wagon ready. It was past noon by the time they had the mule hooked up and Molly loaded in the back of the wagon. Magnolia was tearful the whole time, and Lucius grew increasingly irritated by the display. When they finally set out toward the carnival the dust was blowing across the plains, and far to the west Magnolia could make out the silhouette of some kind of dog, a lone coyote maybe, watching them as they moved slowly down the caliche road.

The mule's breathing grew increasingly raspy as they went, and after a mile the mule refused to walk. Lucius grew frustrated and struck it with his whip harder than was his custom. After sitting in silence, Lucius got down and tried to pull the mule forward, but the animal only stood there before falling to its knees and looking dull-eyed for a full half-hour before dying in the harness. It was only a matter of minutes before the buzzards appeared overhead. Lucius and Magnolia stood off to the side with Molly and looked at the wreckage of the mule.

"I'm about to give up," Lucius said.

"Don't," Magnolia whispered back.

It's the great secret strength of man and wife, that they give up at different times, and if they're a strong couple they rally each other until the end. After a while Lucius walked the mile back to the farm and returned with the means to butcher the mule. Magnolia helped him, and they carried the meat back and hung it in the smoke house wrapped in cheese cloth to keep the flies off. Afterward they washed the blood from their hands and set off with Molly for the carnival.

It was dark by the time they reached the tents, and Lucius led Molly into one of the stalls where the folk had come to sell their stock and wares. The tents of the carnival made a maze of impromptu streets and alleys. The lights from the torches illuminated everything, mixing with the sounds of the barkers and the steam powered calliope, they created a disorienting fugue.

"I can't bear to see her sold," Magnolia told Lucius.

Lucius reached into his pocket and handed Magnolia a few pennies.

"Be back in an hour," he said.

Magnolia squatted and hugged Molly's neck. She pressed her cheek to Molly's and whispered some inadequate words in her ear as she fought off the tears. The desperation became so great at the moment of parting that it forced Magnolia to hurry away suddenly, looking only at the foot-tramped ground as she went.

Lucius watched her go. For a moment he wished she would never return, and he could start a new life somewhere and remember all this as some hazy dream.

After only an hour, two Comanche took an interest in the sheep. They could see that Lucius was in a tight spot from the exhaustion in his eyes. The truth was, they were in a tight spot too, and the thought of having the sheep with its consistent regeneration of wool appealed to them greatly. After a brief negotiation Lucius sold Molly to them for a sum that was better than the value of her meat. The Comanche led her away, and Lucius walked into the shadows and counted his money, observed only by the Henchman who had walked away from the nearby liquor tent to take a piss.

Lucius sat for a while near the animal stalls waiting for Magnolia and listened to the fiddler at the liquor tent playing for a drunken group of men. He recognized the tunes and was drawn to them like one is drawn to home. After a while he got up and headed to the tent, buying a glass a whisky against his better judgment.

As he drank he watched the fiddler's fingers move across the neck of the instrument and the bow glide across the strings. Before long he could feel the whiskey take hold of his body, and he felt relaxed for the first time in many months. Soon he

caught the eye of the Whore who was fanning herself in the corner of the tent.

The Henchman sat down beside Lucius and offered him a drink from his bottle. The Whore joined them, and Lucius was drunk. Now he was outside the light of the torches in an ally of tents, and the Whore was kissing him, sliding her tongue into his mouth and groping him. Lucius felt as though he was falling into a delirium. Suddenly he was consumed by a blinding light and felt for a moment as if he had exploded.

The Henchman stood holding his bully stick over Lucius's unconscious body. The Whore quickly rifled through Lucius's pockets and pulled out the money from the sale of Molly. They left him there in the mud and made off to their train car to count their loot and to laugh.

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When the Man in the Tall Hat saw Magnolia walking among the carnival tents he instantly recognized her. He had begun to follow her so she picked up speed and tried to make her way back to the livestock tent. Soon she found herself disoriented and lost. With each turn through the maze of tents the spectacles of the carnival seemed more terrible, and the laughing and drunken faces of the townsfolk appeared gruesome in the flickering light. As the Man in the Tall Hat drew closer, Magnolia ducked under one of the tent flaps, finding herself immediately in the

dimly lit corridors of the carnival's inner recesses. The Man in the Tall Hat followed as she twisted and turned through the passageways, her body brushing under low hanging cloth and beaded curtains. Finally, she came to a split in the corridor. She hesitated for a moment and then turned right.

When the Man in the Tall Hat made his turn and entered the canvas room he stood silently for a moment. Behind a silk curtain hanging as a partition he could see the silhouette of a woman sitting silently near the soft light of an oil lamp. The curtain was deep red and adorned with images of peacocks spreading their green and blue feathers in boast. The black circles on the feathers seemed like eyes watching him as he approached. He stopped only inches from the woman. He reached out and touched the form, feeling a breast through the finely spun silk.

"Maggie," he said, recalling her name from the day of the storm. He moved his hands over the body and felt his face grow flush. Then the hand from the other side of the curtain grabbed his wrist. The grip was soft at first but quickly became so strong that it took his breath away. The hand drew him closer with great force. He tried to pull back but couldn't. The body on the other side of the curtain began to push against him. He could feel the hard prick of his assailant grinding against his groin. In his panic, he twisted in the curtain until it tore

from the ceiling and surrounded him like a shroud, the mad eyes of the peacocks peering out from his swaddled body. His hat fell to the floor revealing the downy hair covering his bald head like some newborn and wild-eyed thing destined for misery.

The Bearded Lady stood before him, holding him close and delivered a rough and unrequited kiss to his trembling lips. For the next hour he would know a humiliating and painful suffering that would torment him for the rest of his life and send him scurrying off to live as a recluse among the boney chert that lay like a massacre among the wastes of the far western hill country.

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When the Sheep Child heard Magnolia enter the tent he opened his eyes. He could see her standing over him, peering into his cage. She seemed like an angel now, come for him in his final moments.

"Don't let me die here," he said in his fragile voice. Magnolia's heart was broken by the sight of him, and tears welled up in her eyes.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"The Sheep Child," the Sheep Child said and raised his head to look at her with the last of his strength. His huge brown eyes peered deep into Magnolia's. She felt as if her knees would give out.

"I'm dying," the Sheep Child said. "Help me."

Magnolia bent down and opened the cage. She lifted the Sheep Child out, his body so light it seemed his bones were made of balsa. As she cradled him in her arms, she could hear the muffled whimpers of the Man in the Tall Hat coming from the tent nearby.

Magnolia hurried back to the muddy street then carried the Sheep Child the five miles back to the farm. When she arrived, she found Molly there. Molly's new owners had fallen asleep on the plains after drinking in celebration, and she had walked casually back home, ruining their lives for the foreseeable future.

Magnolia sat with the Sheep Child at the edge of the corn field and ran her hand tenderly over his wool and looked into his eyes. She hummed a soothing rhythm meant to lull babies to sleep. Molly came close and pushed her muzzle against the Sheep Child's face.

"Home." He said.

"Where's home?" Magnolia whispered.

"The old blue mountains in the east," he said.

Magnolia began to describe those mountains to him. She described the high forested ridges and the pools of mist that collected in the valleys at dawn. She told him of the meadows and the fast running streams filled with smooth and striated

rocks. As she told him these things the Sheep Child looked up at the bright stars, and he remembered for a moment his own mother lying in the green field. Soon he died in Magnolia's arms, his hand against Molly's velvet cheek. Magnolia buried him next to the road that ran through the corn field. She marked the grave with a pile of white stones.

When Lucius woke he dragged his aching body back toward the farm, ashamed and mournful. A line from a song he remembered ran through his mind again and again like a curse "I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger, struggling through this world alone, I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger, struggling through this world alone." As he walked he suddenly saw a brilliant light coming from the direction of the farm to the east. He thought that the barn must be on fire and so he ran the last mile, but by the time he arrived the light was gone and only a strange dim blueness crested the four dolomite hills in the distance and silhouetted them against the flat expanse. He found Magnolia and Molly standing at the grave of the Sheep Child. He walked beside Magnolia and put his hand on her shoulder. As they stood the sky opened up and the rain began to fall. The great drought lifted, and Magnolia put her hand to her stomach, closed her eyes, and felt an almost imperceptible flutter in her womb.

*The End*