

Whiskey When We're Dry: A Novel

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Named a Best Book by Entertainment Weekly, O Magazine, Goodreads, Southern Living, Outside Magazine, Oprah.com, HelloGiggles, Parade, Fodor's Travel, Sioux City Journal, Read it Forward, Medium.com, and NPR's All Things Considered.

"A thunderclap of originality, here is a fresh voice and fresh take on one of the oldest stories we tell about ourselves as Americans and Westerners. It's riveting in all the right ways -- a damn good read that stayed with me long after closing the covers." - Timothy Egan, New York Times bestselling author of *The Worst Hard Time*

From a blazing new voice in fiction, a gritty and lyrical American epic about a young woman who disguises herself as a boy and heads west

In the spring of 1885, seventeen-year-old Jessilyn Harney finds herself orphaned and alone on her family's homestead. Desperate to fend off starvation and predatory neighbors, she cuts off her hair, binds her chest, saddles her beloved mare, and sets off across the mountains to find her outlaw brother Noah and bring him home. A talented sharpshooter herself, Jess's quest lands her in the employ of the territory's violent, capricious Governor, whose militia is also hunting Noah--dead or alive.

Wrestling with her brother's outlaw identity, and haunted by questions about her own, Jess must outmaneuver those who underestimate her, ultimately rising to become a hero in her own right.

Told in Jess's wholly original and unforgettable voice, *Whiskey When We're Dry* is a stunning achievement, an epic as expansive as America itself--and a reckoning with the myths that are entwined with our history.

John Larison spent much of his childhood in remote regions of Australia, the Caribbean, Canada, the South Pacific, Alaska, and the American West before graduating from high school in Ithaca, New York. He studied philosophy and literature at the University of Oregon, and became a renowned fly-fishing guide ahead of earning an MFA from Oregon State University, where he stayed to teach while writing *Whiskey When We're Dry*. He lives with his family in rural Oregon. I heard it said God moves on the water. Well, I have looked for Him there. My thirst grows with his flood.

Our kin homesteaded where desert met lake. The hills in the near distance wore blankets of pine. Patterns of aspen marked the water. Beyond them the mountains stood blue on clear days and devoured the sun long before it left this world. From the home Pa built us we couldn't see the lake but we could see the willows along its edge and we could hear the wingbeats of doves. Bison calves still wandered in with the heifers and arrowheads clung to their shafts. This autumn air delivers me there still.

They arrived in 1864 by the deed I once held in my hand. Pa was fresh from the war and on a horse he took off a Johnny Reb. Pa told us he was a Yankee sharpshooter through the first two years of that war. He come home after to his family and found his own father's grave and his mother under the watch of a new man and his kid brother dying of infection. He stayed until the brother passed and then rode west.

Pa killed many men. I know that for certain. But he wasn't the kind to talk of it. The stories he told of that war was his histories. If Pa ran the schools pupils would memorize the names of each man killed on both sides.

Ma was dark skinned and Spanish speaking. Her kin was at some point subjects of Spain, France, Mexico, and the United States by the time they was forced from their home by Sam Houston and Santa Anna and the thousands of American settlers coming for what had been theirs. They fled the only direction without guns and come to settle in Kansas, peaceful land-rich Kansas. By the time Ma was of marrying age the war was kicking and the raiders come from Missouri and John Brown come from within and soon it was bloody torn-to-bits Kansas. Her intended was shot one night for no good reason at all and her brother who had joined the fighting returned ill of mind. Kansas wasn't Kansas no more. They rode on.

She was twenty-two and walking with a load on her shoulders somewhere in the plains when she heard a horse gaining and turned to see Pa slowing on her. Course he wasn't Pa yet. He was a stranger who introduced himself as Milt Harney. She said folks called her Rosa, her mother's name. I don't know what she thought of him but I know he memorized her details. There was sweat through her dress and flies so thick from the oxen she give up waving them off. A rare sight, a shapely girl without child or man. To hear Pa tell it there wasn't no west after he saw her, just the direction she was walking.

He took up with the uncle and the leader of the clan. Traveling poor as they done was slow work. No riding for those with legs. Folks now talk like everybody rode west but not many could afford a riding horse. So it was footwork and loads and dust so thick it turn your lungs to chalk. Pa had that horse and her uncle must've been looking to slip out from under his burden. A week on they was married by the book of a revivalist in a circle of wagons as a church.

After crossing the divide they broke off on their own for the valley that would become our home. "A barrel of sugar by autumn," he promised her. Pa would be a cattleman and to him that occupation promised wealth and maybe a mountain to name as his own.

To start he got homestead acres and unspoken grazing access to the nearby Indian lands. There was a lake and the valley held its green long after the hills went to brown.

When they arrived she was already growing with child. Ma wept when she saw the valley. Cranes danced at sunrise and wildflowers shone like embers in the grass. Here no view reminded her of someone she had lost. Noah come along that autumn.

Noah. My brother's name.

Even now I turn and expect to see him riding hard for supper. How many times did I push back the cowhide flap and see him leading a string of dust down the valley? Never late for grub and never one to show up on a dry horse, that brother of mine.

You knew him best but you didn't know him then, before. Sure you've heard the stories folks tell. They make him a killer and hellion. Little children hear his name, Noah Harney, and they see men falling from stagecoaches and smoke rising from a barrel and they think a man is made real by the violence he wields.

Noah was a killer, that is certain. I ain't never been sure if he was right.

Ma didn't live past my entrance to this world on account I wasn't no good at getting born. I set Ma to bleeding.

Pa knew right off there was trouble. She was twenty-seven and her color was slipping and her lips was going purple-her life was draining from her and there wasn't nothing Pa knew to do. He wanted to ride for help but she held him back. She asked him to build up the fire. He did as she asked. Under the rest Pa was a good soul, full of respect for the women in his life, which might be the straightest measure of a man.

Ma pulled little Noah close. He was five then. He put his head on her shoulder and touched his fingers to my dewy head. "Ma, how come you so cold?"

She pulled up the quilt around them, us. "Don't worry, my child."

"Milt?" she asked of Pa. These was her final words on this earth: "Play me our song."

As Pa put bow to string, Ma put her nipple to my lips. She gave me my mother. Some things in this world you don't never forget even if you ain't got no memories of them.

The one time he spoke of her passing, Pa talked most of the storm that night and how the snow climbed the door. It blew in through the slats and flakes drifted toward the fire and turned to rain halfway. The water and her blood turned the dirt floor to mud.

After a time with her gone I got to shivering. It was my brother who wrapped me in a blanket and sat with me before the fire and gave his finger to my gums so I might stop crying for her.

I asked Pa what he done with her remains.

What choice did he have but to put her to rest in the snow outside until spring might allow a shovel to crack the earth. He must've carried her there. I imagine he took a final moment together. Come inside and stood a piece looking on us. A cattleman alone now with a too young boy and a baby girl.

I suspect he looked on me a long time trying to feel something different. I never did know what Pa felt, not even when I knew him best. When he come inside from leaving his young wife in the snow and saw the thing that put her there, what did he feel? How could it have been love?

Pa hired a wet nurse who'd been a whore over in Clayville. She had her own baby boy. Pa wasn't in no state to judge character. I don't remember her none, she was with us just one season, till she located his savings and rode off with it. After that it was just us. He grew me on chewed venison, bone marrow, and pulped tubers, as was the method in them days.

Pa did right considering. Most men would've turned to stone and been a mountain between the table and stove. Nothing to do but overcome a father like that. No, Pa was tender for us. His hands was leather and his eyes was gray and he might've been short on words but he wasn't short on feeling. Music turned him to butter.

He must've sought a new woman. He must've considered putting us to another family. The Mormons down the valley already had a couple of their own. Handing us off would've been easy enough, and expected in that time.

But he kept us and did right by us, right as he could. He had nearly two hundred head that spring. Most he'd ever have. Tending to us kids was the reason.

Most what I know about Ma come from Noah. He was five when she passed but might as well have spent a lifetime in her lee from all the stories he told. They come from him with no more thought than a belch. It was my brother too who taught me to dress, to squat over the night pot, to grow my hair long and braid it before sleep. These things he learned from watching her be a woman.

I ain't got no recollections of her voice but I'd know the sound. As a child I went about my chores in silence so as not to miss her when she come. I was certain she would come. Each time I think of our family place I feel her. She is the water brought inside by the camas, you don't see her none but without her there ain't no flower.

I did the woman work while Pa and Noah labored the spread. I longed to be with them, in truth. I dreaded my lonely washings and stewings and mendings and tendings. But need better breed enthusiasm or you in for a tough go in this life. By six I was doing a half-decent show of laundry. By eight I could skin down a buck so long as there was a stool I could stand on for reaching. Little me had to hang on the hide to get it to peel. My cooking wasn't much seeing as I learned from Pa but it was hot and it kept. He only complained if I skimped on the meat, and in that age the hills was still flush with meat.

I kept on Ma's pattern of things. Mondays was churning, Tuesdays baking, Wednesdays canning, Thursdays jerking, Fridays mending, Saturdays baths and laundry, Sundays cleaning. Most times when alone I pretended I was Ma. She wouldn't stand for a misplaced stitch or a stain left to dry. In every task my burden was the perfection she would've delivered had I not took her.

I slept under the near-finished birth quilt on my side of the bed Noah and me shared. This is how we'd slept since the beginning and so we kept on sleeping like a mother and child.

me curled into him and his warm breath in my hair all those cold desert nights. In my slumber I dreamed her with us and understand those breaths to be hers and so lived what never was.

If Pa and Noah was working a long way off and I missed her painful I might pull out her things. Pa kept them in a trunk under the bed. There was a dress, a calico. There was shoes polished black. The left one had a scrape that cut into the leather near the toe. I never put them on or let them touch the floor. They was hers and I had taken enough. But I did allow myself to touch them. That's how I come to find a chain and a locket made of silver folded inside that calico. The locket held the image of a young girl. I assumed for years the girl was Ma. That girl is still the mother I see. But the picture wasn't Ma at all. Pa told me years on that it might've been her younger sister who died of fever, but it wasn't Ma.

In the bottom corner of the trunk was her Good Book. She knew how to read and she taught Pa. Pa told me, "A woman's best chance in this world is to know the Good Book better than the men in her life." He said as much but he wasn't spending no time teaching me to read.

Under the bed beside the trunk was a box long as an arm. Pa's fiddle. He drew it out only on Ma's birthday, in April, when the camas pushed up from the green meadows. He would set it upon the bed and then sit back from it and put his fist to thigh as he was wont to do when he thought of her. One year he caught me staring on him, and he drew me between him and that box, maybe so I couldn't see his wet eyes. His fingers passed over the wood.

"Pa?"

"Your mother couldn't get her fill of music. She wanted me to play any chance. She kept time with her heel. She never forgot the time."

Inside was a vivid red cloth. It was an age when men and women in town wore browns and olives and dusty white. Colors belonged to the hills in autumn, to the sunset and wildflowers and trout that rolled in the lake, the Indian paint we saw less and less of. I felt Pa quit his breathing at the sight of that red.

He had learned during the war and brought the fiddle west. It was his music that won Ma over those nights among the wagons. Noah remembered him playing. Noah said in them days every dark was warded off by Pa's song.

The lament he played on Ma's birthday I never heard outside our family. I do believe he made it up. Or maybe he and Ma together made it up. Either way it was theirs. The song leaned on mournful drawn-out notes and two steep climbs into high emotion. It was in no hurry to conclude, and neither was its audience. I am haunted by that song.

I remember staring up at his great shape with the fiddle to his chin and the bow cutting back and forth and his song slicing me open. I can't forget the word "Rowhine" burned into

the body of that fiddle. It was branded like a beast, and so I come to think of the instrument as its own animal and Pa as its handler.

For all his tenderness Pa was quick to anger and it was the little things that set him loose. Regular enough I caught the back of his hand. Noah took whuppings too. I think that's how he got so quick with the stories. He knew his best luck was in talking Pa cool. He bent the man's mind. Pa wasn't slow but I don't reckon he was ever as keen as his boy.

Other Books

After, After Raising Sugar Cane, After After Raising SUGAR CANE BOOK-III is a continual autobiography of the life of Barry Franklin Anthony Raffray. This book starts in 1994 and goes to 2010. My first three sons are grown and I will now have two more boys to try and finish raising to become grown responsible men, after marrying their mom in 1997. We had many good times and some bad times. But I would do it all again. I hope that you enjoy reading this part of my life and experiences.

... We spent quite a few hours there. No - I did not drink any samples for free or otherwise. I cannot stand the taste or smell of hard liquor. I had to leave the tour at the Whiskey brewing vats when the tour guide opened it up for the ..."