

THE TRAIL

Stephen Carter

The world was divided into three.

Three shards of sagebrush and sky.

That's how it looked to Emma as she blinked through the thick wooden wagon spokes next to her head. She winced at the odor of ox droppings and then looked to her left where Matthew, Gloria, and Juliette were sleeping as children do. She said a prayer and rolled from under the wagon into the thin light of dawn.

She had not slept well. No one had. Mother had been groaning and calling out all night. She could hardly walk anymore. They had fallen further and further behind the wagon train until the rear leader only showed up every other day to urge them on.

"Emma."

She turned to see her father's wan face peering out of the covered wagon.

"Take care of the oxen and make sure the children have breakfast," he said. "Then you need to run ahead and fetch Sister Fallon."

The sun was already high in the sky—its heat sending trickles of sweat down Emma's back—before she could set off. As she approached the wagon, she heard her mother's voice through the canvas.

"I'm going," Emma whispered into the dimness.

"Quickly, Emma."

Her mother's voice frightened her.

Emma ran.

The wagon trail contorted in front of her like arthritic handwriting, stumbling through washes, jolting around boulders, bumping up and down rises. It had no plan but west. No scheme but forward.

Emma wondered: if she could fly, if she could look down upon this trail as a hawk might, would these marks mean anything? Would the quivering tracks resolve into words, a sentence? A story?

Was the story already written?

Was she only the reader?

Her feet, bare and calloused, tapped out an ellipsis stretching from her mother's labor bed. She ran hard at first, hoping that black figures would sprout from the horizon and grow into the company she was pursuing.

Finally she found the remains of a large campfire, the earth around it trodden and packed, a circle of wagon tracks surrounding it. She stopped and ran her fingers through the ashes.

Cold.

She had only crossed a single day of wagon travel. How many more lay ahead?

She faced west again and ran with the sun.

But her throat was raw from the constant rush of her breath. Her eyes were prickly from the dust. And soon small black spots began jumping in front of the landscape. She realized that the water barrel was far behind and could hear no creek nearby.

Her lips cracked and her tongue dried. The black spots became pools.

Twilight was coming on. Emma was alone. She saw no fires ahead, heard no oxen lowing or wheels rumbling. She had to press on.

And she did.

Until the blackness filled her eyes completely, and the ground felt her impact.

Something called out to her—something like a young woman's voice. A coyote?

The stars, unreadable, illuminated the landscape. And all its prowling creatures.



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Emma blinked sleepily between the thick wooden wheel spokes next to her head. She winced at the odor of ox droppings.

Then her eyes opened wide.

She scrambled out from under the wagon. "Sister Fallon! Sister Fallon!" she cried.

She looked around frantically for a few seconds until she realized that she was standing next to her family's wagon, Father peering at her from the canvas covering.

"Is Mother all right?" she blurted. "The baby?"

"If the baby were here, you'd know it," her father said. "Get the oxen fed and make sure everyone has breakfast. Then run on ahead and fetch Sister Fallon."

Emma stared at him.

"Unless *you* know how to deliver a baby."

She hesitated a moment. "Alright," she said. "But I'm taking your water skin with me."

Animals and children sated, Emma rushed by the wagon, water skin in hand.

"Quickly, Emma."

Emma ran.

The trail stumbled in front of her like the tracks of a wounded animal, hobbling through washes, limping around boulders, dragging up and down rises. It had no goal but far. No plan but gone.

She wished she were a hunter reading this trail; discerning her prey; inhaling its scent. She wanted the trail to resolve into words, a sentence.

A story. One propelled by her own movement—the expansion and contraction of her lungs, the arc and kick of her legs, the thrust and pull of her arms—rippling into the world, conjuring an ending.

But instead, her feet touched upon the earth one at a time, leaving only a long, inscrutable cypher. A repeating code spooling out behind her.

She came upon a campsite. But she did not stop. It did not matter what the ashes felt like or how fresh the droppings were. It only mattered how much earth she could push behind her.

Her mouth stayed wet, her lips moist, her eyes clear. But the sun began to dip, rolling toward the horizon. And soon, the sky opened its million eyes.

Emma thought she heard a cry. Something like a young woman's voice.

And then she remembered the reason you light a fire. The reason you stay with the company. The reason you don't step into the night.

Were those legs galloping behind her? Senses extrapolating her from air and earth? Hunger?

She saw ghosts in the corner of her vision. Heard echoes at the edge of her breath. Felt rhythms syncopating with her feet.

The stars, unreadable, illuminated the landscape. And all its preying creatures.



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Emma's eyes snapped open, her lungs drawing a frantic breath. She rolled from under the wagon and scrambled to her feet. Mother lay on her side beneath the canvas amid the crates and furniture, huge belly pushing her dress outward. Father sat up in surprise.

"I need your bowie knife," Emma whispered.

He blinked at her a few times, then rummaged around and finally handed the object to her. "Careful," he said.

Emma grabbed the water skin, filled it, and was running before the sun broke the horizon.

The trail was pressed into the earth like lines in a human palm. Creases formed by the clench of an infant's fist, by the wires of ancestral weight, by the crossing of prophetic stars. The washes were dips between tendons, the boulders were knuckles, the rises hidden bones.

Emma wondered: if her heartbeat never came to rest, if she could run for a hundred years, what would she see when she looked back? Would her path turn out to be a mere point? The end of a long, straight line? Would she finally be far enough away to see the trail resolve into a word, a sentence? Or would it merely be one long, undeviating story pulled along lifeless behind her—an accident, an afterthought?

She passed a campsite. Eyes clear. Breath smooth. Throat moist.

The sun slowly disappeared.

Then Emma heard a cry. Something like a young woman's voice.

Or a . . .

Emma stopped.

Her trail would *not* be a single line.

She turned toward the cry.

A girl about Emma's age was sitting on a large rock, her hands pressed to her face, shoulders shaking.

Behind her, a lanky body crept upon the earth with the patience of rust, the certainty of shadow.

Emma curled her fingers around the knife's handle, drew a deep breath, and released a scream: one edged with the blood of two nights, infected with the premature silence of an infant, hallowed by ten thousand strides.

Both the girl and her stalker turned in the same instant.

The shadowy body crouched lower to the ground and growled, its triangular head snapping from girl to girl.

“Move in a circle toward me!” Emma shouted. “But don’t take your eyes off it!”

The girl moved slowly, step by step, around the figure, arms out, breath labored.

Suddenly, the devilled form lunged at the girl, but Emma screamed with a rage that punched a hole in the twilight. She whipped the knife out and slashed at the air.

The thing froze, its eyes trained on her. The girl sidled a few more steps until she and Emma were only a yard apart.

“Where’s camp?” Emma hissed.

The girl pointed to an area beyond the slinking figure. Emma looked toward it but saw nothing but dim horizon.

“I don’t know how much good this knife is going to do,” Emma said. “If we had a fire . . .”

At this, the girl reached into a pocket secreted in her dress and pulled out a black rectangle about the size of a folded handkerchief.

Emma saw her push a small circle at the bottom of the rectangle. And then the luminous face of a boy appeared on its surface. Emma stared.

“I’m totally breaking up with him,” muttered the girl. “So not worth it.”

Then she swiped her finger across his upper lip. A series of colorful symbols appeared and the girl tapped one of them.

A fire sprang to life on the rectangle’s glassy surface.

“Careful,” Emma gasped.

The girl turned the object around and shone it toward the lurker. It backed away slowly until Emma jumped forward with one last cry.

The shadow turned and plummeted into the night.

The two girls watched the creature’s lupine gait and then turned toward one another.

“Which company are you from?” Emma asked.

“Umm, the only one,” said the girl.

Emma got excited. “Is Sister Fallon there?”

“Who?”

“The midwife.”

“Uh . . . sorry.”

“Do *you* know how to deliver an infant?” Emma persisted.

The girl’s eyes grew huge. “NO!” she said. “Gross!”

“Do you know anyone who does?”

The girl held up her luminous stone and used its light to look Emma over for a moment, taking in her bare feet, her worn dress, her dirt-streaked face.

“Are you from *this* trek?” she asked.

“Please,” Emma begged.

The girl furrowed her brow, then hesitantly tapped another symbol. “How do you deliver a baby?” she said.

The rectangle changed and revealed some small blue words. The ones at the top read, “How to Deliver a Baby (with pictures)—[wikihow.com](http://www.wikihow.com).”

The girl tapped them and they turned purple. After a few seconds, the rectangle changed again and big black words appeared: “How to Deliver a Baby (with pictures).”

The girl moved the words upward by drawing her fingertip up the shining field. A color drawing of a pregnant woman lying on a bed appeared below the words.

The girl offered the object to Emma, who reached out for it, her heart beating even more quickly than it had when she had been running.

She read the words. She studied the pictures. Then she touched the surface and moved the words up to reveal more. This was truly a miracle. Like the smooth stones the brother of Jared brought to the Lord, or the seer stone Joseph used to translate the Book of Mormon.

Emma turned to the girl. “Who *are* you?” she asked in awe.

“Sandra,” said the girl, “My great-great-great-grandmother was actually born on this trail. Who are you?”

And then her body winked out.

Emma was alone.

Emma followed her own footprints back toward the wagon, the light of the stone guiding her way. Toward her mother. Toward the baby she would deliver.

She ran down the middle of the two thin inscriptions that stretched for thousands of miles in either direction. If she had the right eyes, the right lens, the right light, would she decipher a word, a sentence, a story in them?

Or would she see two? Parallel but yoked. Distinct but coupled. A veil pulled taut between them.

Sometimes tearing just a little.

The stars, unreadable, illuminated the landscape.

And all its newest creatures.