

My illustrated book

Chapter 1

Leaving for Emporia, 1912 — a chapter about my grandmother

My grandmother left Emporia on a Tuesday, the second week of April, 1912, and she did not tell her mother she was going until the trunk was already packed and standing by the door. She was nineteen. She had a ticket to Williams, Arizona, and a letter from a woman she had never met, and in the letter was a photograph of a house with a porch and a cottonwood tree, and on the back of the photograph the woman had written: there is room. The train took four days. She remembered the dining car, and a man from Kansas City who taught her to play cribbage with a deck missing the four of hearts, and the way the light changed after Dodge City, everything f lattening out, the sky getting bigger than the land. She said she slept with her shoes on because she was afraid someone would take them. When she got off at Williams there was nobody waiting. She sat on her trunk for two hours in the wind. Then a boy with a mule cart came and said her name wrong, and she said yes anyway, because there was only one person on that platform with a trunk. The house in the photograph was smaller than the photograph. The porch was there. The cottonwood was there. The room she was given had a window that looked east, and she cried that f irst night with the light on, quietly, because she was raised not to make a fuss. She cooked for the crew for eleven years. She learned to make sourdough from a woman named Belle who had come out from Missouri in 1909 and who never once said a kind thing to her in public and never once said an unkind thing to her in private.

She kept a notebook of what she fed which men on which day, and she kept it her whole life, and after she died my mother found it and could not throw it away, and it is in a drawer in my house now, the pencil gone soft, the pages holding the smell of f lour. She never went back to Emporia. She said there was nothing there to go back to, which was not true, and which she knew was not true, and which she said anyway, in the same voic



