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NAOMI

AND THE

HORSE

FLAVORED

T-SHIRT

*A Post-Petroleum Novel*

by DAN BOEHL

DAN BOEHL | AUSTIN, TEXAS

**Acknowledgments:**

This book would not exist if not for Naomi Tuchman. She traded me this story for a t-shirt. It took me six years to complete the story for her. Thanks, Naomi.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*for Cordelia*

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## Chapter 1: Her Name Means “My Delight”

Naomi was born in a town called Endless Ranches, Texas, where a huge paste factory coughed plumes of smoke into the air. The paste factory made everything the people of Endless Ranches needed: clothes, school supplies, toys, books, magazines, and sold these things at the Pastery, the huge store in the middle of town. But mostly what the paste factory made was paste, the only thing to eat in Endless Ranches. As the townspeople would say, all there was to eat was paste for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Naomi was a pretty, dark-haired, and clever girl. Though she was only thirteen, she had always had the feeling that things in Endless Ranches were not what they appeared to be. To begin with, as long as she could remember, there were no horses in Endless Ranches, but there used to be. The townspeople always talked about them. This meant there really weren't any ranches there at all.

One Thursday morning just before she turned fourteen, Naomi was eating her breakfast in the kitchen. She asked her mom for the millionth time how things used to be in their town. For once, her mom started to give her an answer. She told Naomi that Endless Ranches used to be surrounded by ranches. “That is where the farmers lived and grew food,” she said. “Then they would hitch their horses to the wagons and bring the food into the town market, where the townspeople would come and buy it.”

“So there really were horses?” Naomi asked. “And they lived on the ranches?”

“Yes,” her mom said.

“What happened to them?” Naomi asked. “And what kind of food did the farmers grow? All we eat is paste.”

Her mom said, “It’s best for us not to talk about this. Maybe when you’re older.”

“They disappeared when the paste factory came to town, right?” Naomi said.

“Yes. That was when everything changed. But that was before you were born,” said her mom, shaking her head. “We shouldn’t talk about this right now.”

• • •

Naomi knew her mom sometimes hid things from her. Like anything about her father, for example.

Naomi never met her father. In fact, she knew almost nothing about him—who he was, where he was, what happened to him so that he did not live in the small two-story house that Naomi and her mom occupied on the edge of town. All Naomi knew was her father’s name, Joseph, and that he had disappeared when she was a baby.

Later that evening, as she sat on the steps of their covered porch reading her favorite teen magazine, *Pasty Beat*, and enjoying the warm, waning Texas sun, Naomi got the courage to ask again about her father. She turned to her mother, who was sitting on the hanging swing.

“Mom,” Naomi said, folding the glossy magazine in one hand, “Where do you think dad is?”

Her mom, as always, shook her head and answered, “I don’t know.”

Naomi saw a pained look on her mom’s face that meant she knew where he was, or at least she had an idea. Naomi felt bad that she had brought up such a hard subject again, but after this morning, she thought maybe her mom was ready to tell her more. Now it didn’t seem that way anymore.

But her mom said, “I’ll tell you more, but not right now.”

“Why?” Naomi asked.

“Please, not yet, Naomi,” said her mom.

The porch swing creaked as her mom rose. The screen door clapped

shut, and Naomi's mom was gone. Naomi heard her mom's footsteps going up the stairs. Her mom spent the next few hours in her bedroom, leaving Naomi to cook her own dinner of gooey white paste on the hot stove.

• • •

Naomi's fourteenth birthday was the next day. Though she expected it to be different than an ordinary day, she had no way of knowing just how extraordinary it would be.

After dinner, as Naomi and her mom sat at the kitchen table before a birthday paste topped with candles that begged for a wish, her mom lifted a square box tied with a purple braided bow from beneath the table.

She handed the box to Naomi. "Happy birthday."

Naomi pulled the purple braid from the box and removed the top. Inside was a T-shirt that was purple, Naomi's favorite color.

"It's so soft," said Naomi, feeling the fabric between her thumb and forefinger.

"It's Joseph's. I mean, it's your father's." Her mom smiled but there were tears in her eyes. "He was a horse speaker. One of the people that took care of horses. Like a doctor." Her mom got that distant look, and for a second, Naomi thought she would reveal more. Just a little bit more . . . But instead her mom said, "Blow out the candles so you can make a wish."

"But mom," Naomi said, "you told me you would tell me about dad."

Her mom looked into Naomi's eyes as if she were searching out Naomi's wish.

"Okay," her mom said. "As I told you, your dad was a horse speaker. When you were just a baby all of the horses finally disappeared and your father tried to figure out what happened to them. There were people in town that thought the paste factory had taken them, but most people thought they were taken by other townspeople or, in a lot of cases, by people in Oklahoma."

"Because of the horse wars?" Naomi asked.

"Yes," her mom said. "But don't tell anyone any of this."

"Why?" Naomi asked.

"You remember Mr. Heller," said her mom.

Naomi thought of one of her teachers, Mr. Heller. “Yeah,” she said. She had a thousand questions to ask but she only asked, “Why are you telling me this now?”

Her mom said, “Because you are getting to the point where you can make your own decisions and I realize that not telling you about your father would mean you may not make the right decisions. That you might hate me for not telling you. But, look, you have to blow out the candles!”

Naomi blew out the candles.

“Did you make a wish?” her mom asked.

“Yes,” said Naomi.

“Don’t tell me!” her mom said. “Or it won’t come true.”

• • •

That night as Naomi laid in her bed the birthday paste felt heavy in her stomach. She could see the outline of the paste factory through her window, puffing dirty clouds of smoke into the dark air. Not at all sleepy, she got out of bed and opened the window. The warm breeze drifted in as she strained her ears to listen. She wondered what horses might sound like.

Then she picked up the horse-flavored T-shirt from her nightstand and felt the fabric, clean and soft in her hand. She raised the shirt to her face and she remembered her birthday wish.

## Chapter 2: Dreams Are Where People Travel

That night Naomi had a strange dream.

She was standing on the road that led from her house into town, which was the road she walked every day to school. Trees lined the dusty lane and the sun hung low in the sky like a half-inflated balloon.

Naomi held her father's horse-flavored T-shirt in one hand. She did not know what she was doing there or why she carried the T-shirt, but since it was a dream, this did not bother her. She did not know what to do, so she started walking down the road like she had done a hundred times before.

She did not get far before she noticed a man standing in the road. He wore a gray vest and a white shirt. He had a hat so worn it looked like a rusted can with a dirty brim. As Naomi approached him she saw he was not mean or scary looking. Rather, he wore a welcoming look on his face, like he expected her and her arrival made him happy.

Naomi thought the man looked familiar. She had seen his features before but could not quite figure out where.

Getting closer still, she noticed his vest was embroidered with animals. The animals, stitched in white, appeared to be running free in a gray field, their manes wild and long tails flowing behind them. Right away she knew these animals were horses.

The man spoke. "Naomi, I have been waiting for you." His voice croaked like a screen door, which made her think he had not spoken in a long, long time.

“Why have you been waiting for me?” she asked.

His voice sputtered as he said, “You . . . you have the horse-flavored T-T-T-shirt. With it you can return th-the horses to En-Endless Ranches.”

“Who are you?” Naomi asked.

“I am a gypsy,” he said. “My people protect horses everywhere, moving from place to place, taking care of them.”

“But there aren’t horses here anymore,” she said.

“I think you know differently or you wouldn’t be here.” A smile opened on his face. It seemed he understood something and was waiting for Naomi to understand, too.

“Then where did they go?” Naomi asked, unsure of what the gypsy wanted from her.

“I think you already know that too, don’t you?” he said. Naomi thought of the factory and the thought made her shudder.

“Why don’t you find the horses yourself? Why do I have to do it?” she asked.

“You are the keeper of the horse-flavored T-shirt and therefore you are a horse speaker. Only you can return the horses to Endless Ranches. My people and I have been waiting for you.”

“How?” she asked.

“My people will help. Look,” the man said. He bent over and drew something in the dirt: three straight lines and a fourth line curved like a half moon.

He said, “The curved line represents the horse’s footprint. The other lines are strings of the lute, the musical instrument of my people.”

“I don’t know if I can find the horses.” Naomi said. She twisted the T-shirt in her hands. “I’m just a girl.”

“Today was your fourteenth birthday. You are not so much a girl anymore,” he said. “When you feel you’re lost, just look for this symbol and you’ll know what to do.”

“How will I know?” she asked.

But she didn’t get an answer. She wasn’t on the road anymore; she was awake in her bed, blinking up at the ceiling.

Though it was still early, she got up and dressed in the dark bedroom. She put on her favorite jeans and a button-down shirt. Pushing the buttons through the holes, the man's face floated in her mind. She had definitely seen that face somewhere before. Or if not that face, one like it.

She skipped her breakfast that morning, leaving the house before her mom woke. She quietly shut the front door as she left. The light of the sun was merely an idea on the horizon. She slipped the T-shirt into her belt so it hung at her side. She knew she needed to investigate the paste factory. If people in town suspected this is where the horse disappeared to, then she planned on checking it out. So, Naomi took the first step on the road to town and the billowing paste factory beyond.

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### Chapter 3: Like Any Town in Texas

Naomi's house was on the edge of town, nestled in a grassy grove of trees off the main road. The townspeople called it the FM road, which stood for Farm to Market, and it led straight into town. The road was neither short nor very long. It was just long enough that walking it tired Naomi. Every time she walked this road, she thought about the farmers and their wagons and how the horses used to pull the wagons and everybody got around much faster. Of course, that was when the town still had horses.

A few neighbors lived in scattered houses nearby. Every day Naomi and the neighbor kids walked the FM to school, which was halfway between her house and the town proper. As she followed the FM, the houses with wide, tree-cluttered lawns gave way to bigger houses with clean-cut landscaping packed more closely together. School was nestled right in the neighborhood's center. People from the paste company lived in the neighborhood closer to town, and Naomi always saw them dressed in their business clothes as they went to work.

The problem with school was that the teachers never taught how things actually worked. She really liked learning about the world, but the teachers at school never taught anything Naomi thought she should know about the world. In fact, it was like the teachers were misleading Naomi and her classmates.

Clever as she was, Naomi had the first inkling that the teachers were misleading the students when she was in kindergarten. Every day the



teacher taught the letters of the alphabet: Paste B C D E F G Paste I J K L M N O Paste, et cetera, and sang the song afterwards:

*Now I know my Paste B C's.*

*Next time won't you*

*Bring me some delicious*

*Paste from the Pastery.*

At story time, all the books were about paste. *The Little Paste that Could*, *Where the Paste Things Paste*, and the poetry book *Where the Pastewalk Ends*, where all the poems were about paste. One, "The Pastesucker's Paste," went like this:

*Oh the pastesucker's paste*

*may be wrinkled and wet*

*and pasty white as paste*

*but the taste of the paste*

*is the sweetest taste yet*

*as only we pastesuckers know.*

In middle school she took mathematics, where students multiplied and divided quantities of paste, social studies, where they learned paste company jingles from the TV, and science, where they learned that paste was scientifically created to better society. Naomi wondered why everything the teachers taught had something to do with paste.

But one teacher was different. Naomi's fifth grade teacher, Mr. Heller, taught math, history, and science lessons that were about paste, but he never seemed to believe what he was teaching.

One day in class, during history, Mr. Heller was teaching the cause of the war in Oklahoma. He stood in front of the class wearing jeans and a tweed jacket, reading from the textbook he held open in both hands.

Mr. Heller said, "In the year 233, Texas went to war against Oklahoma for the supposed theft of the Texas horses."

Mr. Heller was always saying things like "supposed" when he was teaching.

Taylor, one of Naomi's classmates raised her hand.

"Yes," Mr. Heller said. "Taylor, what's your question?"

"My dad said that a long time ago Texas was in the same country

as Oklahoma. If that's true," Taylor asked, "then why are we fighting with them?"

Mr. Heller looked at Taylor with his mouth open. Naomi could tell he was thinking about how to respond. Then he looked around the room and Naomi looked, too. All the students were on the edge of their seats and Naomi knew that they wanted to know the answer to Taylor's question.

Mr. Heller closed the textbook and put it on his desk. He looked at the classroom door then at the students.

"Okay," he said. "As your parents may have told you, Texas used to be part of a large country called the United States of America, and this country was made of fifty smaller territories called states."

Mr. Heller looked at the door, then he continued. "Everything in the world ran on gasoline, as you may have heard. But one day the gasoline ran out. Things got pretty bad when the gas ran out. People had always acted like there would be plenty of gas so nobody was ready when it was finally gone.

"Without gas no one could drive their cars so it was hard for adults to get to work and it was hard for kids to get to school. Maybe some of you wouldn't mind missing school, but there were other problems. Factories couldn't get the things they made, like clothes, to the stores because there wasn't any gas for the trucks that carried these things. But even if the stores had things to sell, the people didn't have any gas to put in their cars to go to the stores and buy things.

"It got really bad when everybody realized there wasn't any gas to run farm equipment, no gas to get food to the food manufacturing plants, no gas to get food into the suburbs, the towns, and the cities spread all over America like a network of spider webs.

"People ran out of food, and when they got hungry they got mad, and when they got mad they starting fighting. Riots started in the cities and wars started between the states. The people who didn't starve to death killed each other over the food they needed to feed their families. The United States fell apart and the people who survived lost contact

with the rest of the world.”

Mr. Heller was going to say something else when the classroom door opened. Mrs. McLeroy, the principal, stepped into the room followed by large men in white uniforms that Naomi had never seen before. Some of the students gasped as Mr. Heller’s face turned white with fear.

“Mr. Heller,” Mrs. McLeroy said. “Will you step outside for a moment?” Then to the class she said, “This won’t take long, children.”

Mr. Heller went outside with Mrs. McLeroy and the uniformed men. The door closed and a murmur rose in the classroom as students whispered to each other.

It wasn’t long before the door opened and Mrs. McLeroy came back in.

“Okay, children,” she said, taking the history book from the desk. “We have standardized tests coming up so we better get cracking.”

Taylor raised her hand.

“Yes, what is it?” Mrs. McLeroy said.

“Where is Mr. Heller?” Taylor asked.

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” Mrs. McLeroy said. “He won’t be coming back.”

Naomi thought about this as she walked the FM road, passing the neighborhood and her school as she headed toward the heart of Endless Ranches.

By the time Naomi got to town she was thirsty and very hungry. She had, after all, neglected to eat her breakfast before she left the house. It was getting toward lunchtime and the town was beginning to bustle with people headed to the Pastery, the place that sold everything, to do their weekly shopping. Naomi decided to stop at the Pastery, too, and pick up some paste.

She was walking through the Main Street crowd, feeling her stomach rumble, when she noticed an alleyway she’d never seen before between the dog groomer’s shop and the Paste of India restaurant. She stopped and looked. Though it was dark down the alley, Naomi thought she saw something move. She figured she probably should not stop in front of

a dark alley, but as she went to step away, her gaze fell to the sidewalk. There, between her feet, was the lute the gypsy man had shown her in her dream, placed there in tile in the concrete.

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## Chapter 4: Horses Ain't Real

It was so narrow in the alleyway that when Naomi looked up, she saw only bricks stretching away. It was so hot it felt like being inside an oven. She walked as fast as she could, trying to get to the end as quickly as possible, but the alley didn't seem to end.

Then she realized there were not any doors on either of the buildings beside her.

Scared now, she ran as fast as she could, certain that there must be a way out on the other side. She ran and ran and ran. Then she ran some more. Her legs felt like they were on fire. When her foot hit a crooked brick, she tripped, bumping her knee on the ground. She touched her aching knee and got upset.

She had come here alone and now she was lost in an alley. She was hungry and thirsty, and the worst part was she had come this far all because of a stupid dream.

Naomi touched the horse-flavored T-shirt. It was okay, she told herself. She would just have to go back the way she came. Being lost in an alley that went on forever didn't have to be a big deal. She would just turn around, get back to the FM road, and be on her way to discover what happened to the horses in Endless Ranches.

"What you got there?"

Naomi jumped when she heard the sound of a strange voice. She turned.

"It's a horse-flavored T-shirt," she answered.

“No it ain’t.” The voice belonged to a boy about her age, maybe a bit older. He was dressed in faded overalls so worn that Naomi could almost see through them and a ripped flannel shirt that seemed too big for him. The sleeves were rolled up around his arms, showing off his muscles. Naomi thought that the boy must be a hard worker to have muscles like that.

“What do you mean, ‘No it ain’t’?” Naomi said.

“I mean, it ain’t no horse-flavored T-shirt because there ain’t no horses,” said the boy.

Naomi thought she knew what he meant. She said, “But there were horses once. I’m going to find out where they went.”

The boy cocked his head to take a better look at her. After studying her a moment the boy smiled as if being let in on a joke.

“You’re yanking my chain,” he said.

“What?” Naomi asked.

“You’re yanking my chain,” he said again.

“What are you saying?” Naomi asked.

“I’m saying, everybody knows there ain’t no such thing as horses. My brother said they’re like Big Foot, the Yeti, the Chupicabra, and the Paster Bunny. There just ain’t no horses.”

“What’s a chupicabra?” Naomi asked.

“You don’t know the chupicabra? It drinks blood. But it ain’t real,” he said.

“Oh,” Naomi said. “But horses aren’t like the Paster Bunny at all. They are real. My father was a horse speaker.”

“No such things,” the boy said.

“Seriously,” she said, noticing the crack of panic in her voice. “This is his horse-flavored T-shirt. Here.”

Naomi raised the shirt to the boy. He stepped forward and put his nose in it. The boy closed his eyes as if thinking of some life-changing experience he could not quite remember, like the first time his mother held him or the moment at night between waking and sleeping when his mind slips into dream.

“Amazing.” He opened his eyes. “You’ll have to see pa,” said the boy. He grabbed Naomi by the arm and pulled her back down the alley.

“What’s your pa got to do with anything?” she asked.

The boy stopped pulling and pushed on the wall. It swung open and Naomi realized that the wall was not entirely a wall, but there were doors hidden in it.

“Cause my people need horses. We’re farmers,” he said, and then he pulled Naomi through the door. “Pa needs to know.”

Then they were in a much different place. A courtyard filled with pathways lay in front of her. Hundreds of wooden booths dotted the grassy patches. At the courtyard center a flagpole flew a giant banner.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“Farmer’s Market,” he said, a look of pride flashing across his pointed face. “Where we farmers hock our wears. At least that’s what pa says. We ain’t had no wears to hock since I remember.”

“Oh,” she said, not knowing what to tell the boy. Instead, she looked at the gigantic flag flapping in the sky. On it an animal reared its legs over a thing that looked like a garden hoe. “Is that a horse on the flag?” she asked, happy to change the subject.

“Yeah,” said the boy, “and a plow.”

“The horse is so beautiful,” Naomi said. Somewhere deep inside of her she felt something swell, almost like pride or love, or maybe the mixture of both. “It looks so free.”

“I reckon,” replied the boy, and he tugged Naomi down the cobblestone path.

At first Naomi was impressed with the booths in Farmer’s Market, but as the boy led her farther in, it became obvious that they were falling apart. Rotted boards jutted from some. Others had ripped awnings. They passed one that had simply fallen to the ground.

The people here were dressed in clothing as raggedy, torn, and rotted as the booths they occupied. Naomi paused to watch a group of children throw handfuls of dirt at one another. She felt sorry for these kids who had nothing to do but toss dirt. One of the children, a girl, noticed

Naomi staring and stood up and acted as though she were going to throw dirt at her. Naomi turned and hurried after the boy, afraid to look back. The girl's eyes followed Naomi as she went along.

The boy stopped at a booth right underneath the flagpole. Inside the booth, a man sat on an ancient wooden chair. The chair's arms were smooth and round from years of use, showing ridges like ripples under the man's elbows. He had a handsome face like the boy's, though his was leathery like an autumn leaf. He held a knife in one hand and a stick in the other. Wood shavings littered his overalls and the ground around his boots. On the counter in front of him stood carved horse figures. The man stopped his carving and looked up.

"What's this fancy thing you brought here?" the man asked, pointing the knife at Naomi.

The boy said, "I found her in the alley."

The man folded the knife and stuck it in his overalls. He sat forward in the chair. "She got a name?" he asked.

Naomi tried to hide the fear in her voice, but she croaked like a frog as she stuttered, "Na...Na...Naomi."

"Well, Na....Na...Naomi, ain't that a pretty name? Naomi, we ain't seen folk like you in a long time." A smile tightened his face as he asked, "What brings you?"

It was the boy's turn to answer. "She's looking for horses."

The man let out a small laugh.

"Ha. Sammy," he said, "don't be a fool. There ain't no horses left in this town."

Much more nervous now, Naomi spoke up again. "Sir, he's telling the truth. I am looking for horses."

"Humph," said the man, shaking his head. "That's a fool's errand and you're a dang fool for looking. Ouch!"

The man hunched over, hands gripping his head. A woman stood over him. Her raised hand was twisted around a yellow spoon.

"Don't listen to him, honey," said the woman. She was the same age as the man, but with a fresher, rounder face. Naomi guessed this must be Sammy's mother.



“Woman,” the man shouted, “what you do that for?”

“You shut your mouth now, you buffoon, before I smack you again.” She raised the spoon as though to strike him once more. “You’re attracting attention. Can’t you see what she’s got?”

The man looked, eyes narrowing when he saw the shirt on Naomi’s belt.

“Is that what I think it is?” he said.

Naomi, totally afraid of these strange people, of their torn clothes, of their rickety homes, took the shirt in her hands to protect it. She only shrugged in reply.

Sammy answered for her. “It’s a horse-flavored T-shirt.”

The man came around the counter so fast that Naomi flinched. He peered down the pathway. Naomi followed his gaze. People were staring at her and more were beginning to gather in the path. Another wave of fear hit her as Sammy’s mother demanded, “Get her in here!”

The man sensed Naomi’s fear as clearly as if she were wearing it like a sweater.

“Don’t be scared,” he said in a quiet voice. “It’s best you come in here with us.”

“Come on, hon,” said Sammy’s mother. “We ain’t going to hurt you.”

## Chapter 5: Strawberries Make It Better

Naomi expected the place to be a mess, but as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness she noticed that, though cramped, the kitchen they stood in was tidy and clean.

“Please, sit,” Sammy’s mother said, waving her slotted spoon at a large table. Naomi sat on one of the table’s long benches. Sammy sat on the bench opposite her.

“Are you hungry?” his mother asked. “You must be hungry. I got a pot of paste here all ready. The other kids ate.”

Underneath one of the kitchen’s windows was a stove. On the stove sat a huge metal pot. Naomi figured someone could feed an army with a pot that big. Sammy’s mother reached into the pot with her slotted spoon and ladled a gooey wad of paste into a bowl.

She slid the bowl in front of Naomi. Then she ladled another wad of paste for Sammy.

“Thanks, ma,” Sammy said.

“Thank you, Mrs...” said Naomi.

“Fitzpatrick,” Sammy said.

“Thank you, Mrs. Fitzpatrick,” Naomi said.

Until now she had not realized exactly how hungry she was. She thought back to the morning and how she had crept out at dawn, leaving before she could eat her breakfast. A terrible roar rose in her belly as she opened her mouth for a spoonful of hot paste.

When she was halfway through her meal, Sammy's father came in the shack, dragging the worn chair behind him. He pulled the chair up to the end of the table and sat. Naomi felt his eyes on her. She looked up to see that Sammy and his parents were watching her very closely. A twinge of fear rose in her.

"Where did you get that?" Sammy's father demanded. The paste in Naomi's mouth turned to sawdust as she tried to swallow it.

Whack. Sammy's mother brought the slotted spoon down on her husband's head again, leaving speckles of paste in his hair.

"Dang, woman!" he cried.

"You're scaring the wits from her," said Sammy's mother. "Look at her. She's white as that paste."

"Well, she should be!" Sammy's father exclaimed. "It's lucky Sammy brought her here. The other farmers are getting itchy to know who she is." Then he asked, "Where'd you come by that horse-flavored T-shirt?"

Whack. Sammy's mother hit him again.

"I told you not to scare her," she said. And to Naomi, "Naomi, honey, you finish that paste. Pay no mind to my husband. Even though he has so many children he has no idea how to talk to them."

"How many are there?" Naomi asked.

"There's nine of us," Sammy said.

"Eight," Mrs. Fitzpatrick said.

"Yeah," Sammy said. "My brother John was killed in the war with Oklahoma."

"That's terrible," Naomi said.

"It is," Mr. Fitzpatrick said. He looked at his wife, who seemed like she was about to cry.

"I'm sorry," Naomi said.

Mrs. Fitzpatrick gathered herself and said, "It's not your fault, Naomi." As if to change the subject, she said, "Wish we had some strawberries to put in that paste. I'm sure you would like that."

A little hesitantly, Naomi asked, "I've heard of strawberries, but I've never had one."

“Ahh!” Sammy’s mother threw her arms into the air and exclaimed, “Will there be no end to this!” Her hands came to her face and her cheeks swelled like angry balloons. She flopped on the bench.

“What’d I say?” asked Naomi.

Sammy’s father used a softer tone. “You didn’t say anything,” he said. He squeezed his wife’s hand in his own. “Mrs. Fitzpatrick is just a little tired is all.”

Mrs. Fitzpatrick looked at him, then stood back up. With her back turned to the table she said, “I’m not tired. I don’t want to lose sons in pointless wars. And I’m sick of living like this. Like refugees in our own town.”

“Mr. Fitzpatrick,” Naomi said, “what is this place?”

Mr. Fitzpatrick sighed. “This is Farmer’s Market. This is where we’ve been ever since the horses went away.”

“Oh, my mom told me about this place,” she said. “Do you know where the horses went?”

Mr. Fitzpatrick glanced over to his wife. “No,” he said. “Ain’t nobody knows.”

“But why do you need the horses to harvest? Can’t you do it without them?” Naomi asked.

“I don’t know how much you know, seeing how young you are,” Mr. Fitzpatrick said. “But the horses started disappearing and it became harder and harder to get water to the crops. We have wells and a river, but without the horses to pull the wagons around it was too hard to get the water barrels out into the fields. So, slowly, all the crops withered.”

“That’s horrible,” said Naomi.

Mr. Fitzpatrick nodded his consent. “The vegetable crop failed. So we tried to harvest our fruits and our berries. But we found all those withered on the vine. No water, no food. That’s when the factory started selling paste.”

Mrs. Fitzpatrick said, “Fruit is like pure sugar from a plant, but sweeter. Strawberries look like little hearts and taste wonderful.”

Her husband nodded his agreement. “But they’re all gone now,” he said. “All that’s left is paste. After our crops failed, we farmers left our

farms and moved here. This was where we sold our fruits and vegetables to townfolk. Now we ain't got nothing to sell. We can't hardly afford the paste from that factory."

"The factory was built and the horses disappeared. Then the food died because there was no way to get water, right?" Naomi said.

"Yes," said Mr. Fitzpatrick.

"Well, I'm going to find the horses." When Naomi said it, she sounded more confident than she felt. She didn't really know what she was doing. All she had to follow was an old T-shirt and a dream.

Mr. Fitzpatrick pointed to the T-shirt Naomi had in her lap. "Where you get that from?" he asked.

"This," she said, "used to be my father's."

Mrs. Fitzpatrick came to the table. She sat down and took Naomi's hands in her own. "Do you know what that is?" she asked. "That purple is the color that the horses love. It's the color the horse speakers wore when they called the horses and trained them to pull our farming machines."

"What do you think happened to the horses after the paste factory was built?" Naomi asked with a lump in her throat.

"Nobody is really sure, but we all suspect the factory has something to do with it," Mrs. Fitzpatrick said.

"I'm going to the factory and find out," said Naomi.

"It isn't safe for you to go there," Mrs. Fitzpatrick said.

"But I have to," Naomi said.

Mrs. Fitzpatrick frowned. "How about we talk about it in the morning? I'll get word to your mother that you're here and you can stay here tonight. That sound alright to you?"

"I guess so," she said, but only because she didn't want to argue with Sammy's mom.

"You can go with Sammy to the Pastery tonight, though. He needs to get our paste for tomorrow," Mrs. Fitzpatrick said. "You take her with you, Sammy."

## Chapter 6: The White Army

The sun was setting as Sammy led Naomi out of the shack. Naomi picked one of Mr. Fitzpatrick's horse carvings up off the counter as she passed the booth. It looked like the horse on the market's flag but was much more detailed. The horse had thick-muscled rear legs and long slender front ones. A shock of hair jutted from its neck as though flowing in the wind. Naomi ran her finger along the nose and felt the nostrils under her fingertip. If this truly is a horse, she thought, then they are as beautiful as I imagined.

"Take it." It was Mr. Fitzpatrick. "Hope it brings good luck." He took the knife from his pocket and gestured toward Sammy. "Get going," he said, "before it gets too dark."

The market was empty in the purple light of the setting sun. Here and there Naomi saw people among the booths or sitting on chairs in the pathway, but mostly the courtyard was deserted. The shacks were lit by electric lights and the smell of wood smoke filled the air. As she and Sammy passed underneath the enormous flag she felt a pang of homesickness. She thought about what it meant that her mother had given her this gift. She lifted the shirt to her face and felt its velvety softness on her cheek.

Sammy stopped at the edge of the courtyard. Wooden doors rose up in the wall before them, barred closed by a huge log.

"This isn't where we came in," said Naomi.

"No," said Sammy, "It goes out to Main Street."