

## More Praise for *Oh My Darling*

What wondrous and magical stories Cate O'Toole has woven in these dark, revisionist tales of Clementine, who comes powerfully and heartbreakingly alive under O'Toole's ministrations. The brilliant format allows readers to choose how they move through the collection, and which narratives they want to privilege. Reminiscent of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, O'Toole creates such utterly genuine and believable (if sometimes scary!) characters and landscapes you'll forget you are reading fiction. And you'll never listen to "Oh, My Darling, Celmentine" in the same way after reading this book.

—Sheryl St. Germain, author of *Navigating Disaster:*

*Sixteen Essays of Love and a Poem of Despair*

In *Oh My Darling*, Cate O'Toole invites us to take part in the highs and lows of the California gold rush. Each decision we make as Clementine, a miner's daughter, brings us closer to love and fortune, or, just as easily, death and despair. With masterful, sometimes unflinching, prose, O'Toole paints the harsh realities of the untamed West where mere survival is a challenge. She asks us again and again what it is we really want, what it is we really need, and as we navigate Clementine's many possible lives, we must decide what we're really after: gold, love, or something closer to contentment.

—Rebecca King, *Origami Zoo Press*

**CATE O'TOOLE**

# **OH MY DARLING**



Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*To the incredible broads of my workshop group,  
for your support, your insight, your bottles of wine.*

# Clementine

At the last dusty town in a line of dusty towns, her father stops for supplies. Clementine unfolds from the back of the creaking wagon and follows him into the general store. Pa says, *Don't touch anything.*

When his back is turned, Clementine strokes a bolt of blue muslin, stains it with her fingers. Disgusted, she rubs her arms, dirt and skin flaking away like fish scales. She shakes the dust out of her skirts, spits on the worn floor. They've been traveling more than a month, filth their constant companion. Clementine wants a bath, a bed, an end to her journey. Heavy red dust and a deep, desperate yearning fill her days.

Pa, arms full of tools shining sharp and savage, comes on her picking apart knots in her long blonde hair. He frowns. He says, loud enough for everyone—miners and farmers, women with baskets and babies—to hear, *Clem, honey. You wait outside.*

She drags her feet over the threshold, cheeks burning. Fifteen and still being scolded—as though her father set any kind of example for decorum, weeping day and night for his dead wife and lost babies and sick, scabby farm. Such a small man, she thinks. Weak-hearted. Clementine was glad to leave the farm, to leave her mother behind with her brothers and sisters. She didn't trouble to grieve at the time and she won't spare grief now.

Clementine watches a man with a black mustache roll a cigarette, finish with a twist. He leans against the porch rail as though he has never known trouble or hurry or gone without. His clothes are neat, only the barest crust of dirt on the hem of his pants, clinging to the heels of his boots. He catches her staring and tips his hat. He has thin lips, a round chin. His eyes dance a slow circuit over her. She feels his gaze on her hips, her breasts, her mouth. The man with the black mustache doesn't speak, but he is asking a question that Clementine knows she must answer.

Pa, coming out of the store, says, *Clem, honey?*

Something inside her, the heavy pit of badness she has carried west, begins to sing.

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**The Man with the Black Mustache—turn to p. 3**

**The Gold Claim—turn to p. 25**

# The Man with the Black Mustache

In his room at the boarding house, the man with the black mustache says, *We ought get married, Clementine*, and she agrees. He kisses her, and later she touches the spot over her lip where his mustache rasped her skin. The man sees and smiles. He says, *Cupid's bow*.

The man bathes her. Sends her dress to be washed and pressed. Loves her. One afternoon he borrows a wagon and drives to a hard, bare scrap of meadow, announces his intention to build them a home. *Soon*, the man says, flexing his hands. *Soon enough!* He is eager to start, swollen with plans. Clementine thinks of her father, stooped and small. She likes the idea of being a prosperous man's wife, living in a town and raising his happy children. No mining, no farm, no want or toil. Yes, she has been fortunate. Yes, she has struck a vein more precious than gold.

In the evening, the man excuses himself to the saloon and sits for hours with other men, laughing and growling and gnashing his teeth. Clementine lies in the man's narrow bed and prays for good luck and good hands. When his boots tread heavy down the hall, she sits up to greet him, arranges her hair in a yellow cascade over one shoulder.

The man with the black mustache fills up the doorway, casts shade on the bed. Clementine starts to say something wifely and the flat of his hand catches her ear. Such strong hands.

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Endure—turn to p. 5

Escape—turn to p. 15

# Endure

Bruises are no less than she deserves. Hasn't Clementine always had a streak in her, a devil on her shoulder? Her husband with the black mustache says his luck changed when she sauntered up to him, that he traded gold in his hand for the gold of her hair without knowing the terms of the bargain. He wages a great battle against fate with his fists, night after night.

Clementine tracks the progression of his anger on her skin—here a dusty, sprouted green, there purple as distant mountains—and in her split lips, her loosened teeth. She is conscious of crunching bone and rending hair even as she moves outside herself to watch the man beat her. She waits for some sign that the devil has been cast off, her husband's anger sated, but it will not be shaken. Its grip is deep as skin and blood and bone.

She thinks of her mother, hard-lined and grim, a broad woman crushed under the weight of despair. She thinks of influenza, her brothers and sisters in their cedar coffins. She thinks of those sweet dead children and understands at last the misfortune of survival. When she succumbs to the slack embrace of black night she sees their faces in her dreams. On waking she will turn her body again to her husband and hope to join them. He can give her that much.



But then there are some nights when the devil breathes fire within her, when a spark of fury zips down her spine. There are nights when her muscles burn with the urge to strike at her husband, to smother him as he sleeps, to stand at the door and watch the bedclothes burn. Even as Clementine comforts herself with the dream of death, her blood roars its own demand.

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Fall—turn to p. 7

Fight—turn to p. 9

# Fall

The man's fists sing on her skin, drowning out the devil's rumbling. Lovely music, sweet and melodious, though lacking a certain polish, finesse. Clementine allows her thoughts to wander, to find comfort in nonsense. *I am a harp*, she thinks, *and my back is strong and unyielding and my insides have disappeared, I am all strings and emptiness, waiting to be plucked. I am a drum, solid, held tight, and the world bounces off my skin and nothing can hurt me.*

Clementine sees shapes and colors as she slips into unconsciousness. The angels have come for her: her brothers and sisters, her mother still unsmiling, firm even in mercy. In these moments she can recall all of their faces in intimate detail, untouched by sickness: the soft curve of red cheeks and brown eyes rimmed by pale lashes. She can smell their skin and feel their breath all around her, the man and his grunts fading away to nothing. Such a disappointment it would be to wake in her body!

Clementine imagines her mother's face, wearing an expression almost like affection, the hint of a smile. She dreams of pressing her face to the chubby neck of her littlest brother, inhaling the baby scent of him. She forgets about her husband and their tiny room. Her mother, her brothers, her sisters—her father, maybe,

easy to imagine him dead—reaching for her. She can feel their hands, warm all around her. She slips from her skin like soap down a drain. Clementine neither harp nor drum nor girl, but a sliver of light in a boundless sky.



# Fight

The man with the black mustache is almost too drunk to stand, almost too drunk to beat her. Almost. Clementine squats in a dark corner of the room, waiting for him, biding her time, her anger a glowing nugget of iron in her chest. She watches his lurching shadow on the far wall, lets him come close enough to the bed to raise his fist and pound the pillow where her head ought to lay.

Clementine's first swing with the hammer lands a glancing blow on the back of his shoulder. It is harder than she expected, harder than her husband led her to believe, to strike another person, to deliver a blow with intent. The hammer weighs heavy in her hand but she raises it again as he turns to face her. The whites of his eyes glow as the hammer arcs to meet his jaw.

She steps back as he spits out blood and bits of broken teeth. When she swings again, her husband's legs fail him and he collapses to the floor, making a wet whining noise through his nose. He weeps, his mustache tinged red. Clementine, teeth bared like a jackal, descends on the man and brings the hammer down again and again, until she grows tired, until the face with its black-red mustache is gone.

She changes into a clean dress and searches the man's pockets for money. Clementine sinks into a chair, weighing the coins and

sweaty bills in her hand. It's enough. She sleeps for a time. Soon the sun will creep above the trees and burden the town with light, but for now the night is so dark and so still.

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By Foot—turn to p. 11

By Train—turn to p. 13

# By Foot

The road is deeply rutted and pock-marked by the hooves of horses and oxen, mud-slick in some places and dusty in others. She walks without hurry, brisk but careful, watching the path ahead of her and choosing her steps with care. She walks far enough that the sun sits high in its throne of clouds, far enough to sweat through the thin fabric of her dress, before the men catch up.

They say, *ma'am*, and she doesn't stop, *ma'am!*, and she ignores them. One man angles his horse ahead of her, forces her to stop and lift her head. Man and horse are dirty, stinking, their filth offensive. He scowls down at her and she wishes she had the strength to topple him and the horse together, send them both screaming to the ground. Somewhere behind her, another man dismounts, his saddle leather groaning. The devil inside her lifts its pointed head, hisses a warning.

The touch of a man's hand on her arm breaks her. Clementine whirls on him, digging for his eyes with her broken fingernails. The man screams and another man says, *Jesus*, his voice high and pinched like a woman's. Clementine squirms away, dodges around the horse, and runs. Her ankle twists against a hole in the road. She lets the pain spur her on. When a hand in her hair jerks her off her

feet, she fights, kicking and biting and scratching like a cornered animal, overcome by blind instinct.

Let them take her to jail, lock her away forever. Let them throw a rope over a strong branch and hang her. The devil inside her foams at the mouth, eager, bloodthirsty, and Clementine has had enough of men. Let them feed her a bullet like a rabid dog. Let them come and put her down.

