

## Old wives tale

Valentine, Nevada had a view of the mountains and had an old west charm, rich with cowboy shootouts and ghost stories. There's a story that's been told to tourists often: the murder of one of the most powerful train barons in the country's history. Story goes that a witch became the family's governess and seduced him, while making the wife sick. She'd been keeping another secret lover, though, a man folks called the Demon Gun. A mean sharp shooter, thief, and murderer. Story has it they planned to rob the family blind and make their way to California. The night everything went down, stories vary from teller to teller. Some say the witch set the house on fire with the whole family inside. Others say the Demon Gun shot him in the street on a rainy night. The facts are that the Becketts died, the house burned down, and the two dark lovers were never heard from again. To this day townspeople say there's a Valentine Curse. The truth is that death fell in love with a cowboy.

## Excerpts

Like most people, Constance was born messy and naked and crying, but unlike most she was a full grown woman crawling out of the dirt on her hands and knees. Obviously she wasn't being born, but it's the first thing she remembers. She slowly ambled into town on a cold spring day, while the flowers were still just green shoots in the dirt and the trees had yet to bloom. It was a Sunday, and the church bells were ringing. That's how she found her way in the first place, by following the sound of the bells over the hill. There was an enormous crowd of people coming out of the building ready to spend the rest of their day at home. The preacher saw her first, but soon there was a mass commotion. The preacher ran through the crowd with his wife, who took his robe and threw it over her body. They'd brought her to the doctor. Everyone in town was unsettled for days. No one knew who she was or where she came from. She seemed educated and healthy, but no one ever came looking for her. She had skills, but no memory of anything useful. Just a name. Constance. That's all. Constance could read and write and do basic arithmetic,

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There was a poster for a one-man job from the town big wig. It was enough money to feed the gang for a while if they were careful with the money.

At the house he knocked on the door. It was answered by a tall young woman.

“Arthur Morgan. I’m here about the job?” She seemed to recognize him for a moment, but stepped outside. He extended a hand. She took it immediately.

“Miss Constance, I’m the governess, I’ve been tasked with finding a repairman by my employer. Our usual man is injured and out for the month.” He wasn’t sure he liked the way she looked at him. “Do you have any experience fixing things up, Mr. Morgan?” He nodded.

“Sure. Plenty.”

“Have your own tools?”

“Afraid not, ma’am.” She narrowed her eyes just a little.

“That’s fine, we have plenty, and you can go and see Mr. Jones about borrowing his for the time if there’s anything we don’t have.” She was making him nervous.

“I’m sorry, do I know you from somewhere?”

“You were tossed out of the bar a few days ago, weren’t you?” He began to try and come up with an excuse, but she smiled. “Will you be any trouble here? The Becketts have three daughters, we can’t have any trouble.” He touched his hat awkwardly.

“No, ma’am, no trouble. That was a matter of a man cheating at cards.” She took her time to think.

“Do you have references?”

“The poster didn’t say nothing about references.”

“No, but it didn’t say anything about bar fights, either. Come back with a reference tomorrow and the job is yours for the month. See you then Mr. Morgan.” He tipped his hat as she went back into the house.

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The world fell away with those wretched four words. Her breath left her body so quickly it seemed she was more surprised than horrified.

“You can’t be surprised, Constance, can you?” He laughed in a way she was sure was meant to be easy-going, and used her first name to make-believe a kind of closeness where none existed. She could feel her hands begin to shake.

“No,” she breathed.

“I’m sorry?”

“Mr. Beckett— your wife—”

“Liliana is dead. You must have known I cared for you, I saw how you cared for us as a family—”

“Dead?” She feigned surprise.

“Constance, I love you, I’ve always loved you.” He took her hand. She smelled it on him then. Death. Not the peaceful kind.

“I care very much for the children, and I did my job the best I could to help beyond what was asked of me, but please understand I cannot marry you.” For a number of reasons. Not least of all being that Mr. Beckett was not a kind nor a gentle soul. She had seen how little he regarded Mrs. Beckett while she was sick, how little he cared for his own three daughters, one of whom was just 5 years younger than her. She knew exactly the kind of person he would want to be a wife. A moving doll of a woman, someone to tend the children and fuck him like as if she enjoyed it as often as he wanted. The more she thought about it the sicker she got. Had she been hired as the governess all along for this purpose? Mrs. Beckett had always been very sick, like a thin white ghost around the house, heard only moving something or moaning in the dead of night.

“J-jim,” she started, “I need to get some air. This is something a-a lady must consider carefully.”

“Consider? Carefully?” She forced herself to breathe. To lie.

“Jim,” she tried again, softer, with an attempt at an affectionate smile. She stepped in closer and yielded her hand to him. “I had no idea you felt this way, too. I-I’d thought you’d just seen me as the governess. I need some time to collect myself. If I could just go for a walk, sleep on it...” “His chuckle was bitter.

“Tell me tomorrow. Sleep on it.” He leaned in and planted what must have looked like a chaste kiss on the forehead. “But remember. I have done a lot for you. Kept the town on your side.”

“Yes. You have.” He had used his money and power to do a lot of bad things, but he had in fact also used it to help her. The town was always weary of Constance. She’d shown up one day unconscious and naked. She had no memory of who she was beyond a name. Constance. That was all. The kindest of them thought she was spooky, the scariest whispered other things. She knew all sorts of things she wasn’t supposed to, namely when someone was going to die. She went to church every Sunday just so no one would think too ill of her.

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“There’s a bounty, fresh, no poster. \$50, cash in hand. You want it?”

“Sure. Where should I start?”

“She was last seen running west to the river on a stolen horse.”

“She?”

“Wanted for murder, and horse theft of course. Nearly set the town on fire.”

He shrugged.

“All the same.”

She was easy to track. This clearly was someone sloppy and tired. He found her shivering in a wet blanket on the ridge over the river. Looking down the barrel of his rifle, she looked more like a wet dog than a lady. Her shaking hand with a bright silver gun slipped out of the blanket. He realized who it was.

“P-please. Just leave me alone.”

“Miss Constance?”

“Please, I didn’t do it.” He holstered his gun and held up his hands. “Mr. Morgan?”

“Let’s put that thing away before we talk.” She tightened her grip on the gun.

“You’re not gonna take me in.” He came further into the small alcove where she’d tried to wait out the rain.

“If I was gonna take you in you’d be on the back of that horse tied up like a hog by now. I wanna help you. Like you helped me.” Her lip quivered while she stared him down. She set the gun down.

“There’s not even any ammo in it.” He chuckled.

“It was a good bluff. What happened?”

“Mr. Beckett killed his wife and framed me for it when I said I wouldn’t marry him.”

“*Shit.*”

“You’re telling me.” She wiped her nose. “Everything I own is still back there. All my things, my money. I’ve got... I haven't got anything. Again.” She’d cry, but she was out of tears.

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Arthur hated to be fussed over, mostly because he didn’t know what to do with it. But after he returned from Guarma with the other missing boys, she couldn’t really help herself anymore. she’d restrained from fawning and such both for their own sakes and his pride. He rode back from a detour to Saint Denis and when he returned he made for one of the huts. She had been in knots with intense worry since they went missing, and when he returned looking like a pale, sick dog she nearly was in tears with horror and relief all mixed together in a horrid tangle. He’d just gone to Saint Denis to get a haircut, but the cloud over him told her something had happened. After the sun was well down, she ventured out from the girls’ cabin to talk to him. She knocked on the door with one knuckle, he was a light sleeper and she didn’t want to wake him if he’d fallen asleep.

“Come in.” he sounded far away. She opened the door slowly to find him sitting on a sad excuse for a bunk, boots still on, his shirt half unbuttoned, seeming to have given up on finishing the task. He looked up at her. If she were to compare the man in front of her with the day she first met him, she’d have been hard pressed to say they were the same person. It was like only half of him was here. She couldn’t help the emotion in her voice when she said,

“*Arthur.*” He just sighed and ran a hand through his freshly cut hair. She didn’t go to him just yet.

“I look like shit, I know.”

“I’m just worried.”

“I *know*. It seems that’s all you do.” Her lips pressed together and her jaw set. “No, I’m sorry that’s unkind.” He still wasn’t looking at her. “It’s been a long-...” She

saw him calculate exactly what had been long. The day? The week? The year? It had all been long and exhausting. “Yeah. I’m sorry.” She stood leaning against the door a while longer.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know nothing no more. I don’t know what- what all this is for.” She took a few steps toward him. He didn’t stop her. She knelt down in front of him to look him in the face, and set a hand on his knee. His eyes still avoided hers.

“What’s eatin’ you?” she whispered.

“Hm?”

“What’s bothering you?”

“I- uh.” He looked to fight himself for a long moment before he continued. “I went to the doctor’s. Not by choice, I- Someone had to help me get there.” Her stomach dropped in the way that it does when you get horrid, scary news that makes life feel all-too-real.

“Okay.”

“He says- He says it’s TB. I got tuberculosis.” For him she tried to keep calm. She felt cold. He did look at her now.

“Oh, Constance, please-”

“Now that’s just plain unfair, isn’t it?” And with that, the tears did come.

“I don’t know about that-”

“It is!” She hissed. “Let me. Care about you, Arthur Morgan. Will you please?” She could see his face thick with emotion, but unlike her he was able to put it somewhere or hide it away.

“Now ain’t the time for childish things.”

“It sure as hell is. All I wanted in the world was for you to come back to me, safe. I wanted you to come back so you could, so we-”

“Shh. I know, I know.”

“It never ends.”

“No. No, it doesn’t.” Hesitantly she reached up to touch his cheek. When he leaned into it she gave a sigh of relief.

“We’ll figure it out. I won’t feel sorry for you, for your sake. But please. Let me care.”

“C’mere.” He pulled her up onto his lap. She climbed up and wrapped herself around him. His arms were clasped around her middle firmly. They stayed like that, just holding tight to each other like masts of a ship. She’d never been able to fully

wrap her arms around him, it was so scary to feel his thinness. She'd had no idea up until the group of them went missing that she had so much capacity for loving a person. It was terrifying, and the most vulnerable she'd ever felt. She supposed it was the reason he did everything he did, even the worst of the things was for love. For the fear of losing someone he loved. He would never put it that way, she knew, but it was true. Loving Arthur meant living with constant anxiety. Would he get shot? Would he get into a fight? Would he survive the wilderness? Would an O'driscoll grab him again? When he was gone her heart was out at sea, it's well being completely unknown until she saw him come back. And he had no idea. Arthur's humility was one of the things she respected about him most, but it could veer into loathing easily. She saw how he looked at himself in the mirror. How he still sometimes shied away from her. Even with the gang's loyalty he had no concept of having someone care so intensely for his well-being. The gang needed him to be a leader and a provider. She needed him to be alright. But he was always throwing himself into danger, and always ending up helping folks he felt needed helping, even if it got him in more trouble. She understood exactly why Mary and he had to go their separate ways. If she felt at all like Constance did, she understood the fear of loss, and she'd protected herself from it. But Constance wasn't sure she had it in her to go for her own sake, she was just as much a bleeding heart as he was. And if no one else would protect Arthur, it was fine by Constance if it fell to her to do it.

"Now I know why you look at me that way." She almost didn't hear him, and she was falling asleep.

"What way?" He sighed long.

"You looked at Kieran that way. Hosea and Lenny, and Sean. And Molly, come to think of it. Good Lord..." There was a long pause. She wracked her brain. She hadn't thought she was looking at anyone in any type of way. "You knew they was gonna die. You remembered it." Her breath caught. He was right, but she refused to accept it.

"No. No, I didn't know. I- I-..." He rubbed her back with his hand in circles. Goddamnit he wasn't supposed to be comforting *her*. "Arthur no."

"Shh. It's alright. Now we both know. Knowin' ain't so bad."

"So help me God I will do everything— you are *not* going to die."

"Don't get yourself worked up, now." There was a little mirth in his voice. She leaned back to look him in the eye.

"Arthur Morgan. Keeping you safe is my job." He laughed weakly.

“Well good luck miss Connie, I’m a wanted outlaw on death’s doorstep.” She loved it when he called her Connie. It made her feel like they’d been married for a thousand years and had already made it to some sunny, warm porch swing somewhere. That porch swing was under constant threat.

“Not if I can help it.”

“Alright.”

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“I wanted to have the chance to love you, Arthur.”