

LONE WOMEN

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a white long-sleeved blouse and a long, dark skirt, stands in profile in a vast, golden-brown field. The sky is a mix of blue and white clouds. Above the woman, a large, dark, swirling, ethereal shape, resembling smoke or a large shadow, dominates the upper half of the frame. The overall mood is contemplative and mysterious.

VICTOR LAVALLE

Author of *THE CHANGELING*



LONE WOMEN

a Novel

**Victor
LaValle**



ONE WORLD

NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by One World, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Hardback ISBN 9780525512080

Ebook ISBN 9780525512097

oneworldlit.com

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Barbara M. Bachman, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Tal Goretsky

Cover images: Magdalena Żyźniewska/Trevillion Images (figure); Spencer Whalen/Alamy Stock Photo (texture): Hinkleyimaging/Getty Images and Jeff R Clow/Getty Images (landscape)

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About the Author

“Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.”

—TONI MORRISON, *Song of Solomon*

ONE



1

There are two kinds of people in this world: those who live with shame, and those who die from it. On Tuesday, Adelaide Henry would've called herself the former, but by Wednesday she wasn't as sure. If she was trying to live, then why would she be walking through her family's farmhouse carrying an Atlas jar of gasoline, pouring that gasoline on the kitchen floor, the dining table, dousing the settee in the den? And after she emptied the first Atlas jar, why go back to the kitchen for the other jar, then climb the stairs to the second floor, listening to the splash of gasoline on every step? Was she planning to live, or trying to die?

There were twenty-seven Black farming families in California's Lucerne Valley in 1915. Adelaide and her parents had been one of them. After today there would only be twenty-six.

Adelaide reached the second-floor landing. She hardly smelled the gasoline anymore. Her hands were covered in fresh wounds, but she felt no pain. There were two bedrooms on the second floor: her bedroom and her parents'.

Adelaide's parents were lured west by the promise of land in this valley. The federal government encouraged Americans to homestead California. The native population had been decimated, cleared off the property. Now it was time to give it all away. This invitation was one of the few that the United States extended to even its Negro citizens, and after 1866, the African Society put out a call to "colonize" Southern California. The Henrys were among the hundreds who came. They weren't going to get a fair shot in Arkansas, that was for damn sure. The federal government called this homesteading.

Glenville and Eleanor Henry fled to California and grew alfalfa and wild grass, sold it to cattle owners for feed. Glenville studied the work of Luther Burbank and in 1908 they began growing the botanist's Santa Rosa plums. To Adelaide the fruit tasted of sugar and self-determination. Adelaide had worked the orchards and fields alongside her daddy since she was twelve. Labored in the kitchen and the barn with her mother for even longer. Thirty-one years of life on this farm. Thirty-one.

And now she would burn it all down.

"Ma'am?"

Adelaide startled at the sound of the wagon man.

"Good Lord, what is that smell?"

He stood at the front entrance, separated from the interior by a screen door and nothing more. Adelaide stood upstairs, at the threshold of her parents' bedroom. The half-full Atlas jar wobbled in her grip. She turned and called over the landing.

"Mr. Cole, I will be out in five minutes."

She couldn't see him, but she heard him. The grumble of an old Black man, barely audible but somehow still as loud as a thunderclap. It reminded her of her father.

"That's what you said five minutes ago!"

Adelaide heard the creak of the screen door's springs. A vision flashed before her: Mr. Cole coming to the foot of the stairs and Adelaide dumping the remaining gasoline right onto his head; Adelaide reaching for the matches that were in her pocket; lighting one and dropping it right onto Mr. Cole. Then, combustion.

But she didn't want to kill this old man, so she called out to him instead.

"Have you got my trunk into the wagon yet?" she called.

Quiet, quiet.

Then the sigh of the screen door being released. He hadn't stepped inside. He called to her again from the porch.

"I tried," he said. "But that thing weighs more than my damn horse. What did you pack inside?"

My whole life, she thought. Everything that still matters.

She looked to the door of her parents' bedroom, then called down one more time.

"Five minutes, Mr. Cole. We'll get the trunk in the wagon together."

Another grumble but he didn't curse her and she didn't hear the sound of his wagon's wheels riding off. For a man like Mr. Cole, that was as close to an "okay" as she was going to get.

Would she really have set him on fire? She couldn't say. But it's startling what people will do when they are desperate.

Adelaide Henry turned the handle to her parents' bedroom and stepped inside and shut the door behind her and stood in the silence and the dark. The heavy curtains were pulled shut. She'd done that at dawn. After she'd dragged the bodies of Glenville and Eleanor inside and put them to bed.

They lay together now, in their marriage bed. The same place where Adelaide had been conceived. They were only shapes, because she'd thrown a sheet over their corpses. Their blood had soaked through. The outline of their bodies appeared as red silhouettes.

She went to her father's side. The fabric had adhered to his skin when the blood dried. She'd pulled the sheet up over his head. Better that way. She didn't want to see what remained of him. She poured gasoline over his corpse, from his forehead to his feet.

Now Adelaide moved round to her mother's side.

She'd pulled Eleanor's side of the sheets up only to her chin, hiding the damage done to her throat. She hadn't felt able to pull the shroud over her mother entirely. Strange to get squeamish about that part considering all the other damage done to Eleanor's body. Adelaide tilted the jar above her mother's head but found she couldn't pour out the last of the fuel. She held it over Eleanor and stared into her mother's opened, empty eyes.

She couldn't bring herself to do it. She set the jar down and crouched by the bed. She whispered into Eleanor's dead ear.

"You kept too many secrets," Adelaide said. "Look what it cost you."

With that, she rose and reached into her pocket. The matchbox bore the symbol of the African Society, a silhouette of a Black man driving a plow. She struck a match and watched it burn. She flung it at the bed, where it landed on her father.

She turned quickly so she wouldn't have to see the bodies catch, but she heard it. As if the whole room took a single deep breath. An instant later she felt heat across her scalp and neck, but when she stepped out of the room the flames still licked at her skin. She realized it hadn't been the fire that burned at her but the guilt.

On the upstairs landing her right knee buckled and she nearly went down. Kneeling with one hand on the railing. She'd done it. Behind that door her parents were burning. Maybe she should stay with them. That's what she considered. Enough gasoline had spilled on her hands, her dress, that it wouldn't take long for her to burn. Step back inside the bedroom and kneel at the foot of their bed and be engulfed. End the family line. That's what she deserved. What kind of daughter would do the things she'd done in the last twenty-four hours? A foul and terrible daughter.

Soon Adelaide rose to her feet but hardly recognized she'd done it. As if her body wanted her to survive even if her soul felt differently. She rose and put one foot forward. Then the next. She'd be leaving, it seemed. *Who decided that?* she wondered, even as she held the railing and descended the stairs.

"Well, there you are," Mr. Cole said when she stepped out from the screen door. He looked from her to the house. Did he see smoke yet? Could he hear the upstairs bedroom walls starting to crackle?

His buckboard wagon sat by the porch; horse nearly as malnourished as the man. Adelaide stood six inches taller than Mr. Cole and outweighed him by forty pounds. No wonder he couldn't lift the trunk.

There were handles on either side of the Seward steamer trunk. Adelaide grabbed one end and Mr. Cole took the other. She bent her legs and lifted. Mr. Cole huffed with the strain.

“Quick now,” he said. Though he wasn’t doing much work, he still felt happy to give commands.

She yanked the trunk toward the bed of the wagon and Mr. Cole was pulled along.

They reached the wagon and with one last effort they set it down in the bed. The wagon sank inches and all four wooden wheels creaked. Mr. Cole’s horse took a step forward as if trying to flee the burden. When they stood straight both Mr. Cole and Adelaide were breathless.

Adelaide climbed into the wagon. The only other item she’d brought—besides that trunk—was her travel bag. It had been packed already, sitting right at the threshold inside the house. Mr. Cole got in beside her on the spring seat.

He looked back at the house. “Where’s your people?” he asked.

“My parents,” she said softly.

“They don’t come out to see you off?”

She looked at the house as well. The bedrooms lay at the back of the structure. Even if there was smoke, it probably wouldn’t be seen from the front of the house for a little while. Maybe she had a bit more time before the fire became obvious.

“They’re resting,” she said.

Mr. Cole kept any further questions to himself. He held the reins and gave two clicks with his tongue and his poor horse pulled and pulled until, finally, the wagon moved.

Adelaide was leaving California with \$154, a large sum of money and still hardly enough for an entirely new life. But that was all she had. That, and her travel bag, and her trunk.

The farmhouse would burn. Eventually their neighbors—the closest farm lay nearly a mile away—would notice. They would sift through the damage and find only two bodies inside. They would ask where Glenville and Eleanor’s daughter had gone.

On Tuesday, Adelaide Henry had been a farmer.

By Wednesday she became a fugitive.

2

“I know you.”

Adelaide and Mr. Cole were an hour into their trip before he said these words. The first ones spoken since Adelaide’s farmhouse disappeared behind a bend in the road. She hadn’t minded the quiet.

“Queer folk,” Mr. Cole continued. “That’s what they say about the Henrys.”

Mr. Cole’s horse had become accustomed to the weight. Not comfortable, but accustomed. The bed of Mr. Cole’s buckboard wagon wasn’t large, which meant the trunk hardly had room to shift even as they went uphill or down; a small blessing for the animal. Adelaide wondered at her sympathy for this horse when she had so little for herself.

“Oh yes,” Mr. Cole continued, feeling bolder. He cut his eyes in her direction. “I’m not just talking about round here. They know y’all in Victorville and Allensworth.”

She’d hired this man to take her to the Port of Los Angeles. A twenty-four-mile ride south. And when she got there, she meant to board a ship. She guessed they had another five hours to go. Five more hours of this. The weariness is what made her speak; it certainly wasn’t curiosity.

“And what do they know?” she asked.

He grinned, began a recitation: “Keep to your property. Don’t visit with others. Never speak a word in church.”

“We bring plums every Sunday,” Adelaide offered.

Mr. Cole pinched his lips, but nodded finally. “I’ll give you that much.”

Adelaide thought her father would’ve been pleased. She could tell Mr. Cole wasn’t the type to give credit for much of anything.

Adelaide looked at her hands. The cuts ran along her palms and most of her fingers. Some of the gouges were quite deep. They'd stopped bleeding but she hadn't bandaged them. Her hands must've looked nearly inhuman. She turned them back over, palms down, when she understood Mr. Cole had glanced her way. The cuts wouldn't heal for days. Somewhere along the journey she'd better buy gloves.

She tried her best but she couldn't picture exactly how she'd got the wounds. Not to say she didn't know the cause—of course she did—but the moment when any one nick or scratch appeared had been scrubbed from her mind. There was dinner yesterday evening and the sun coming up at dawn. The time in between had disappeared. It was as if she had materialized in the kitchen, her hands covered in cuts, and on the counter there were two jars filled with gasoline. She didn't even remember filling them.

I burned the evidence.

Adelaide caught herself, a hand literally thrown over her lips. For a moment she thought she'd said the words out loud. But no, she hadn't, she could tell because Mr. Cole still sat there jawing about her family and their reputation in the Valley. His lips were moving—no doubt he felt bold enough to insult her family openly now—but she couldn't hear him. Instead she heard only herself. *Every tongue shall confess.*

She kept her hand over her mouth because she wasn't sure what might come out. The words, or the last meal in her stomach.

"You feeling sick?" Mr. Cole asked.

She nodded and looked to him with a tight grin.

"Well, if something comes up," he said, looking toward the horizon, "make sure you spill over the side. I keep my wagon clean."

—

TWENTY-FOUR MILES TOOK HALF a day. Half a day with Mr. Cole. Imagine how tedious that sounds. Then double it. A funny thing happens when a man

thinks he has a woman's company all to himself. He may show a face to her that he would keep hidden if there were even one more person around. He speaks from his secret self.

And even though Adelaide had been part of a family that largely kept to itself, she'd gone back and forth to Victorville and Allensworth, hauling plums to be sold. At the markets, or along the roads, she'd encountered many men by herself. The things they said. When she began making the trips alone, she wouldn't recount the words to her mother or her father. They became like a small bag of stones she carried in one hand. A bother. A nuisance. They made it more difficult to do the necessary things, big or small. She'd travel farther just to avoid certain roads. So Mr. Cole spent much of the journey talking badly about her family and did it with impunity because who else was around to shame him?

As the trip continued, Adelaide wondered what it would feel like to bring a bag of rocks down on this old man's head. By about the fourth hour, she passed the time casually imagining all the ways she might murder this spiteful man. Like right now, one hard push off the wagon and he might break his neck. She watched him and the fantasy made her grin.

But then he looked directly at her and said, "What you smiling about, girl?"

And the moment passed.

That's twice she'd contemplated killing him. There were people who would judge her harshly for her thoughts. Those people, she felt, could fuck themselves.

The wagon ride continued.

There was some confusion as they approached Los Angeles. Turns out the Port of Los Angeles was located in a town called San Pedro. Mr. Cole learned this at a feed store along the way. His exact words were, *Well, that's some foolishness.*

If the door to the feed store hadn't been open, Adelaide wouldn't have overheard the news about the error. Mr. Cole got in the wagon and

pretended like he hadn't made any mistake at all. Every tongue shall not confess, apparently.

Mr. Cole backtracked for half an hour and soon set them on the proper road. Adelaide said nothing. Getting to the Port was all that mattered. She had a ship to catch, and now she worried she might not make it.

When they finally reached San Pedro, the city shrank them. Both Adelaide and Mr. Cole felt reduced. On Beacon Street they passed the San Pedro Bank Building; its clock tower stood four stories tall. It cast a shadow that crossed the road. It seems foolish, but when they rode through the shadow, Adelaide shivered. Even Mr. Cole stopped talking. She'd seen plenty of grain silos that size, but never a clock.

The whole town was wired for electricity. A streetcar rumbled through the intersection carrying twenty-five people, maybe more. Adelaide and Mr. Cole sat in the wagon and watched the streetcar rattle past. A few of the passengers looked at her without seeing her. They looked through her, past her. They didn't know her. Didn't know her family. She was unknown. To some this might sound terrible, but that moment was the first time Adelaide Henry realized she might escape. What if she skipped all the rest and settled here?

But six hours from Lucerne Valley wasn't hardly far enough to go. And besides, Mr. Cole, this mouthy coot, he'd know where she'd settled. A man like this savored gossip the way others did her father's plums. When the streetcar passed, Mr. Cole looked to her.

"Keep going?" he asked.

For him, the Lucerne Valley was welcome, and welcoming. Had she ever felt that way?

"We're almost there, Mr. Cole." Adelaide gestured forward. "Let's keep on."

He studied her face, as if memorizing something.

He clicked his tongue and with a snort his horse took two steps forward.

The wagon wheels creaked. The trunk shifted as much as it could in the small space behind the spring seat. Adelaide reached back and placed a hand