



# Water Money

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**T**here's no rain. The big fields of trees take all the water that's underground. That's why there's none left for our little house. It's why the sink sputters when you twist the knob. The earth here is parched. I am too.

This is what Casey tells us when she says we're moving to Oregon. Casey's always been the dad. And the mom. She's the oldest.

"It's close," she says, when I ask her where Oregon is.

Later, I find Oregon in the atlas in my closet. It is not close. Close is just around the block, and run this to the neighbors. Close is not five hundred and forty-seven miles away. I tell Casey this.

"It's wet there. There's the sea. There's no dust," she says, emptying cans of chili into a big bowl.

I set a bottle of water at each of the seven paper plate place settings. I spy the jar of peaches on the counter for dessert, and sag against the fridge so she has to step around me to get to the table. "I like dust." I don't. I've never been anywhere but here. I like here. I like dust.

"You do not." The bowl thunks against the small, circular table. The chairs crammed into place around it look like too many puppies around a food bowl. The thunk is as good as a dinner bell, and soon the chairs are full.

I look around the table. Casey, Jordan, Johnny, Aleigha, Emmaline, Ricky, me. The kids. As in, *the kids asked to use my shower this morning, but I can't keep letting them, our water's low too, and the kids bought ten cases of water yesterday, where'd that money come from?*

The money comes from Casey. She wakes up every day when it's still dark. Goes down to the big orchard just outside our town. She walks

the rows and checks the sprinklers, makes sure no tree goes thirsty. *Water money*, she calls it, and keeps it in an envelope under her mattress. Casey has her own mattress, because she's older and bigger than the rest of us.

Jordan speaks through a mouthful of chili. "What's there to do in Oregon?"

Casey hands him a napkin, and he crumples it in his hand without using it. She doesn't press the matter. "Well. You can play at the beach. We can plant a lawn. I can buy dishes to wash in the sink."

Johnny, an exact copy of Jordan except he has a birthmark under his eye and chews before he talks, points at his empty bowl. "Is there chili in Oregon?"

Casey plops another serving down in front of him. She opened too many cans. "There's chili in Oregon."

The dessert peaches are sweet and wet. I slurp the slippery wedges off my plastic fork. I get four before all that's left is the golden syrup.

"Are there peaches in Oregon?" I ask, when Casey lets us pass around the jar and take a sip. I take a gulp when no one's looking.

She smiles at me the way she smiled when we had water in the fridge, and the sink, and the bathtub. "There's peaches in Oregon."

She tells us the way we're getting to Oregon later, when we're sprawled out on the frayed carpet, fanning ourselves with our hands, and the mail, and books, whatever we can find. The nighttime summer air is thick like warm peach syrup.

"We're going to use the water money to fill the old car with gas, and drive." She's fanning me with her book now. I put my head in her lap.

Ricky flaps his magazine too loudly to do any good. "We won't fit," he says.

Casey fans herself, then me, then herself. "We'll fit."

Emmaline is the only one with a real fan, because the man at the shop, with the name I forget, gave it to her. It's pink with purple flowers and taps her freckled nose every time she waves it. "If we use the water

money for Oregon, we have to call it Oregon money.”

Casey smiles her water smile again. “Alright, it’s Oregon money now.”

I steal a pamphlet from Aleigha’s pile-of-old-mail fan. It tells us how to save water. *Turn off your sink when you brush your teeth; shorten your showers; don’t wash your car.* I fold it in half and fan my legs. It’s easy to save water when there is no water to waste.

We’re leaving in ten days. We put our house in boxes. There’s not much to pack. We get one box each and whatever we want to put on our lap. Emmaline’s box bulges on the top, so Casey sits on it to smash it down.

“My dolls are squished in there. They won’t be able to breathe,” Emmaline pouts.

I put my clothes in my box. I’ll put my camera on my lap. And the atlas.

Ricky bounces up and down on Casey’s lap. “Your dolls don’t breathe anyway, dummy.”

Three days till we leave, Casey uses a little bit of our Oregon money to buy M&Ms and pretzels and cookies. They go up on the way-high shelf with the medicine and the knives that got put there and forgotten when Ricky was a baby. We all try not to think about them until the trip. The M&Ms, not the knives.

On drive day, we get up before the sun. The moon tries to fill in, but it only lights things up silver, like an old movie. The boxes are already in the car. We put them there last night, complaining about the heat. Casey said our future selves would thank us. I do.

Jordan and Johnny squish into the left backseat. Ricky gets the middle, because he’s the smallest. I share the right backseat with Emmaline. I want the front, but Aleigha got car sick one time a long time ago, and Casey does not want to repeat that. Aleigha gets the front. I can see her smug smile in the mirror above her head.

The drive is long. The twins shout, Ricky squirms, Emmaline pins me to the window when she falls asleep on my shoulder, the M&Ms stain my

hands, and the pretzels dry my mouth. The water is in the trunk with the boxes.

“We can get water when we stop halfway,” Casey says. She turns on the radio, and the scratchy commercials bore me to sleep.

When I wake up, it’s green. Deep green trees and grey skies and white clouds sitting so close to the ground I think I could touch them if I want to. “Are we halfway?”

Casey turns off the static pretending to be music. “We’re here.”

*Here* is a tiny house on a busy road. It’s green too, and so is everything in front of it. I push Emmaline off me and open the car door. The air is cool and wet. Breathing feels like drinking.

We get one room, one bathroom, and half the kitchen of here. A creaky widow missing her grown-up children is letting us stay, Casey tells us. For barely any Oregon money, too. The widow smiles at me when I bring my box inside. It’s a water smile.

Water comes out of the sink. And the hose in the backyard. And the bathtub. We take turns in the bathtub after dinner. Casey draws a new bath after each of us. She goes last, and takes the longest. The window in our room doesn't close right. Cold air whistles through the tiny crack all night. Our beds wouldn't fit in the car, so we're lined up on the floor like sardines wrapped in quilts. I stare at the ceiling and try not to breathe the smell of the quilt. It smells like old water. I prefer dust.

We've been at the green house for two days when Casey goes into town for groceries. Jordan and Johnny beam when Casey pulls cans of chili out of the brown paper bags. We eat it straight from the cans sitting on the floor in our room, using the pushed-together boxes as a table. I look through the bags when I finish. “Did you get peaches?”

Casey’s spoon rattles in her can. “They didn't have any.”

“You said Oregon has peaches.” I try not to sound mean. I sound sad instead.

“I’ll look again when I go back. They have peaches. Everywhere has peaches.” Casey gathers all the cans and puts them in an empty grocery

bag. She takes them outside, and when she comes back she's wet. And smiling. "It's raining."

It rains for three days. We've never seen rain longer than three minutes. The first two days we go out and come back soaked and chilled to the bone. The last day we stay inside. It's like the heat, except my arm isn't tired from fanning.

The tenth day at the green house, Casey gets home from shopping and takes a hot bath. When she gets out, she frowns at me. Casey never frowns. "They didn't have peaches," she says.

I shrug. But I miss the golden sunshine taste. We never see the sun with all the rain.

The widow asks us to do things for her. Pull weeds, mow the grass, collect fallen branches in the yard for the winter. We find out her name is Gemma.

"Gemma sounds like a young person name," Jordan says. Casey shushes him.

I ask Gemma what winter is like in Oregon when I help her pick pears off the tree in the front yard. They're green too.

"It rains all the time, sometimes non-stop. Oh, goodness, and the wind can make a person crazy if they stand listening to it all day. It snows, too. You ever seen snow?"

"Never," I tell her, and hand her another pear for the basket. She hands me a crisp green dollar bill. A five.

"Pocket money." She smiles at me. *Water money*, I think.

We have canned pears in white syrup for dessert that night. Gemma made them last fall.

"They're like peaches," Casey says, and hands me a fork. It's metal, because we can wash it now.

They are not like peaches. They're gritty, and break when I spear them with my fork. I eat them because they're sweet, but not because they're like peaches.

Twelve days later, it snows. *Winter's comin' early*. Gemma sighs when

she talks. The front walkway looks like a cookie dusted with sugar. We run up and down it, making boot prints until it all goes away.

“Not enough to mean anything,” Gemma says. We have hot chocolate and canned pears for lunch.

I go to the store with Casey, on the forty-seventh day at the house. It has everything. Pears, oranges, berries, cherries, and pineapple. It does not have peaches. Casey gets one jar of each, except the pears. The snow crunches under my boots as we walk home. I scoop up a handful. It looks like it should feel dry, but it melts into water and drips away. My hand is wet and cold. Oregon is wet and cold.

After my bath, I burrow under my musty quilt and listen to the wind sneak through the broken window. I wait for Casey to appear in the doorway after her own bath. The kids are all asleep. Aleigha snores. I’m glad I’m not Emmaline, lying next to her. Casey lies down between me and Ricky. She lifts her blanket and settles it over the top of her. Her blanket smells like mine. Before she falls asleep, I say, “I miss the dust.”

“You do not.” Her voice is sleepy, and happy, I think.

I don't. I miss the sunshine, the still air, and the peaches. Mostly the peaches. The peaches are there, and the dust is there. I miss the dust. I pull the quilt over my head and think about the five dollar bill, sitting in a pear jar in the box of my stuff at my feet.

*Dust money*, I think, as I fall asleep. 🌫️