

Montgomery
(Gomey)

By Ivan Doig

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Fireflies at the Parthenon synopsis

Susan Duff was liberal with the night," the story begins. "The hours beyond dark she counted as her own, free and clear of beginner lessons and approximations to music. It was nearing midnight, she had just begun to salt away another day between diary covers, when she heard the turn of a key in the front door and then the rhythm of him coming up the stairs to her for the first time in four years."

He is Wesley Williamson, the business and political scion of a cattle-empire family. Wes--"incurably married," in Susan's phrase for him--was forced out of a governor's race, and his public career ended, by foes within his own party who knew of his affair with Susan. This night in the mid-1920s, he says he has a singing pupil for her, whose tutelage he will pay. Susan studies Wes, the window behind him framing the state capitol dome and his limousine with his black chauffeur, Monty, waiting outside in the flurry of the winter's first snowfall, and she skeptically asks who in this world means that much to him. He looks stunned at her question, obviously not having thought of it that way, but he half turns toward the scene outside and tells her: "Monty."

Catch a firefly, crimp it under the ring on your finger, and you wear a live, pulsing jewel until its glow gradually extinguishes. The flare of involvement that Wes sets off here, in Susan's domain of night, lights the saga of these three characters all the way from Montana's ins-and-outs of striving and power to New York and the Harlem Renaissance. Monty, fully named Montmorency Rathbun, is known to Susan from their growing-up years in the Two Medicine country--he is the descendant of a "buffalo soldier," the black troopers sent west to fight Indians--and yet an enforced stranger because of the racial divide. When she realizes he possesses a singing voice of rare splendor, untrained but vibrantly born of spirituals, Susan joins Wes's Pygmalion-like project to launch Monty on a performing career. And so, from the political corridors and attained drawing rooms of Helena, by way of a harrowing scene of a snowed-in train on Wes's branch railroad in the Two Medicine country, the three go east to try to affix Monty's star in the musical firmament. Their crossed fates, as Susan and Monty must cope with their growing attraction to each other across the era's dangerous barrier of color, as the motives of Wes unsettle everyone including himself, will make a deeply longitudinal novel, into everlasting questions of allegiance, the hold of the past, and the costs of love and career.

As with This House of Sky, this is a story whose shoulder I have peered over for most of my life. Monty's real-life counterpart, Taylor Gordon, was the only black man in my Montana hometown and his singing voice did carry him to Harlem, and for that matter Carnegie Hall, briefly in the 1920s. I tape-recorded his memories of those times not long before he died, familyless, in 1971, and his papers and other Harlem Renaissance archival holdings are rich with detail. The baronial West, the Wesley Williamsons of the world, I see as a perfect counterpoint to a life such as Monty/Taylor's, endowed with simply talent. As for Susan Duff, who will be the central voice and distinctive sensibility of this novel, she first came into my pages as a bossy indomitable schoolgirl in Dancing at the Rascal Fair and has demanded her own book ever since. [I look forward to making this trio into the cast of characters of Fireflies at the Parthenon.]

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Prairie Nocturne

by Ivan Doig

Night on Highland

1924

"This is a story I am more fit to tell now, to whomever inherits this account of the three of us, than when I was alive."

--from the diary of Susan Duff

"The evening brings all home," the last ringleted girl had finished off the ballad on a hopeful note--she would have given her ears for a praising word from Miss Duff--and night and quiet came again to the house on Highland Street. Regular as the curtain of nightfall was Susan Duff's routine in closing away her teaching day. Shoulders back, her tall frame straightened, even though there was no one in the house to meet for the evening but herself, she briskly tallied the hours of lessons in the ledger she kept handy atop the piano and cast an eye over the schedule of impending pupils, then the balky old doors of the music parlor were slid shut. Next a quick stop in the hallway

the account of 3 of us,

interests. each of yours
pp.

to whomever opens

in
time

This is a story I am more fit to tell now, in this ink that

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memory

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Susan's Room

1924

"The evening brings all home," the last ringleted girl had finished off the ballad on a hopeful note--she would have given her ears for a praising word from Miss Duff--and night and quiet came again to the house on Highland Street. Regular as the curtain of nightfall was Susan Duff's routine in closing away her teaching day. Shoulders back, her tall frame straightened, even though there was no one in the house to meet for the evening but herself, she performed a brisk tally of the hours of lessons in the account book she kept handy atop the piano, then the balky old doors of the music parlor were slid shut. Next a quick stop in the hallway bath to freshen her face with a rinse of cold water; an adjusting glance into the mirror, that pool of candor; hairpins

taken out, and her chestnut hair shaken down. Onward to her stovetop supper, which she raced through as though still making up for her father's interminable graces over expiring food. Now, with a pat to the kitchen and a cursory locking of doors and windows, she was ready to ascend.

As fixed as a star, the telltale glow of her gable window appeared over Helena at the last of dusk and burned on past respectable bedtime. You might think a woman of her early climb in life, singled out by her father's God for a soaring voice to lift His hymns and then casting away choirsong for the anthems of a harsh young century, would find it a hard comedown to be faced with a nightly audience of only herself. You'd be as wrong as you could be, Susan would have you know. The hours beyond dark she counted as her own, free and clear of beginner lessons and quavery approximations of high C.

This night, however, no sooner was she upstairs than she whipped to a halt in front of the alcove of window, her gaze drawn down the hillside to the state capitol dome, resting as it did on the center of the government of Montana like a giant's copper helmet. The dome still was alight with the festoon of bulbs that had brought in 1924, four months ago, which seemed to her uncalled for.

"Blaze," Susan addressed the civic constellation in the gratered Fifeshire burr she was born to, "see if I care."

She gave a throaty chuckle at herself and wended her way toward her desk. The attic-like room extended the full length of the house--loft quarters for a married pair of servants, this must have originally been--and Susan used the expanse like a rambler cottage perched above the formal quarters of downstairs. The rolltop desk, a divan, a phonograph, what had been her father's Morris chair and footstool, onyx-topped sidetables, a blue-and-black knitted comforter on the sill seat of the strategically aimed gable window, sets of bookshelves, a spinet piano, the whopping Duff family Bible on a reading stand of its own, all populated what was in actual fact her bedroom.

This mob of comforts drew her up out of public day as if lifting her into a lifeboat, and Susan tallied the necessity of this each time, too. Liberal with the night, inventive as she probably ever was going to be in her fortieth year under heaven, she was convinced she was most herself in these private hours, this room where the minute hand did not count. The time of footlights and the song-led marches for the right of women to vote were forever tucked into the past, she knew, and as to the tongues of the town down there beyond the base of the stairs,

she could do nothing about those. But up here, she got busy at life's amended version of Susan Duff. There were encouraging letters to be written to favorite former pupils. (Tonight's, which took lip-biting concentration, to the breathy young soprano whose recent *lieder* recital in Milwaukee had not found favor there.) The afternoon's newspapers to be devoured, the *Herald* for spite and the *Independent* for sustenance. Books in plenitude; at this point she was determinedly attempting the novels of D.H. Lawrence. Music, of course; the phonograph sang perfectly on command, restorative in itself to a teacher of voice. And she still was secretary of the Montana chapter of the Flanders Field Remembrance Alliance, which took her to a drafty meeting hall once a month and obliged her to see to official correspondence in between. Tonight, as always, she shifted scene every so often, her tall solo figure suddenly on the move as if she were a living chess piece. Time did not lag here in her industrious garret, it was not allowed to.

When it was nearing midnight and she had just begun to salt away another day between diary covers, she faintly heard the turn of a key in the front door and then the rhythm of him coming up the stairs to her for the first time in four years.

“Susan? You might have changed the lock.”

He arrived on the wings of that commanding smile. *The very model of a modern genteel Major*, a line of hers teased somewhere back in that diary.

Behind Wes, men would have charged Hell; in fact, men had. Even his way of standing, the weight taken on his left leg to spare the right knee peppered by shrapnel at St. Mihiel, proclaimed the reliance that the world had wanted to place on him. Brave and wounded at the same time: the story of Wesley Williamson's life, as she was plentifully aware, on more than one kind of battlefield.

Voice training had its benefits. Surprised no end to be confronting him again after all this time, Susan sounded in possession of herself--or at least within her own custody--as she spoke back to the expensively tailored figure at the top of her stairs:

“Evidently I saved you some shinnying, by not.”

“Oh oh,” Wes said, his smile dented but still there, “I guess I've been told.”

He picked his way through the long room, interested as a museum-goer, to the perch nearest her, which happened to be the edge of her bed. “May I?”

You and your Williamson manners. Walk uninvited into a woman's bedroom, then be solicitous about seating yourself too near. This time Susan's words would have cut through bone:

"Sit yourself down, Wes, please do. I haven't had a good look at a family man in a while."

Wes ducked his head slightly in acknowledgment. The woman there just beyond reach had an enlarged sense of justice, which had been one of the first passions that drew them together. The snip and snap of talk with Susan, their political mustard plasters for the world if they could have had their way; he missed that, and their comical first clasp of love and all it led to, and her laugh which started somewhere down in the Scotch gravel of her family footing, and that violet concentration in her eyes--everything was there to be missed, as he watched Susan across the frozen distance between bed and desk.

"Wes? Do I get to know why you're here?"

"A good question," he admitted. Not for nothing, he reminded himself, was this sharp-edged woman the daughter of Ninian Duff. Ninian the Calvinian.

Reluctantly giving up his inspection of Susan, his gaze lit on the open pages in front of her and the pen she had just put down. "A woman armed with a diary. Not the best company for me to be keeping, I suppose."

Susan only looked at him across the small white field of paper. When you have cost a man a governorship, what further scandal does he think you are apt to inflict on him?

The silence stretched. At last Wes said:

"You know I couldn't."

"I know you *wouldn't*," she said as if correcting his spelling. They had been through this and through this. A proven hero who could not or would not undergo a tug-of-war with his church. "*Wes, the Pope has no need of the divorce law. But you do.*" Who had broken his vows six ways from Sunday in half the countries of Europe and in this very room and then would not break his marriage. "*She's not well, Susan. I can't face leaving her, it's against everything in me.*"

Susan, from a family that had the stamina of wolfhounds, held no patience for the delicate constitution and strategic indispositions of Wes's wife. She couldn't resist asking:

"How is the tender Merrinell?"

For a start, she thinks I'm in Minneapolis buying grain consignments.

Wes shifted a bit on the bed. "She is...holding her own. At Lake George, with the tykes. Easter break. Although they aren't tykes any more. Comanches, more like." Once again he regarded Susan as though taking the opportunity to stock up on her. "How is the Lord's gift to the musically inclined?"

"Enough how's, don't you think? This isn't like you, Wes. Do I have to refresh your memory? When we stopped seeing each other--"

"--When you dropped me like a bushel of hot peppers--"

"--When we were this close to being the flavor on every gossip's tongue in Montana and I said I'd have no more of it if I couldn't have you, we agreed that was that. You're not doing either of us any good by walking in here in the middle of the night, are you. If I remember, you were always quite concerned with 'appearances.'"

Wes waved that off. "No one much is up at this hour. I had Monty leave me off at the capitol grounds and came up around the back blocks. Here, come see the new Doozy." That quick, he launched onto his feet and was over to the gable.

In spite of herself, curiosity drew her over to the window by him. In the streetlights and diffused glow of the strings of bulbs on the dome, the Dusenburg could be seen. Wes's Negro chauffeur, Monty, was caressing the hood of the automobile with a polishing rag. The lanky form leaned into the already burnished surface as if magnetized to the machine. "Monty would sleep in it if I'd let him," Wes was saying.

Susan stood there for some moments, transfixed. The Williamsons. Their wealth and their fortunes, which were two different things. She closed her eyes for an instant, but when she opened them again it was all still there: the penny-colored dome that should have been Wes's by civic right, her reflected outline on the pane of night beside his, the chauffeur stroking the flanks of the costly plaything.

Wes turned from the window, a lingering smile on him. Susan created a little more distance between them. She did wonder why she hadn't changed that door lock.

He surveyed the room's furnishings again. "I'm glad I wasn't the one to heft all this up those stairs. Susan, you know what I think?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm about to find out."

“You’re treed, up here. No, let me finish. You’ve treed yourself. Chased the Susan Duff that was, right up into this upholstered perch.” He walked back the length of the room to seat himself on the edge of the bed again, letting drop a phrase at a time as he came. “I see makework. I see pastimes. I see the man-eating diary. I don’t see you taking the world on as you always did.” Wes looked levelly at her. “It’s a waste of a good woman.”

“It’s late, is what it is,” she left it at, checking the clock. “Wes, please. Have your say and take yourself home.”

“I have a pupil for you.”

“I don’t lack for pupils, they’re coming out my ears.” Which was not as true as it once would have been.

“This one, I want you to devote all your time to, for however long it takes. I’ll pay double for everything--your hours, all the sheet music you can stand, whatever you need to arrange in the way of accompaniment, name it.” Watching to see how she was taking this, he quickly said: “All right then, triple.”

“I have never wanted your--”

“Susan, there’s no charity to this. You’ll earn your keep with this pupil, don’t worry about that. It’s a voice I’d say is ...unformed. But wonderful in its

way. You'd take it on, if it fell on you from a clear blue sky, I'm sure you would. "

"Hearing is believing. All I ask is to be amazed," she said, as if there was not a chance of that.

"There's always a first time," Wes said drily, then went right on. "Opera, vaudeville, I don't know what we're talking, with this. I honestly don't, Susan. That'll be for you to decide. Oh, and we'll need to do this at the ranch, not here. We can't--well, you'll see..." He frowned. "I'll pound the idea into Wendell's skull, but we may need to make some arrangements around him. Your old place-- could you stay there? I'll see that it's outfitted for you, groceries, bedding, cat and canary if you want." He paused as if to make sure his words were registering. "Susan, I want you to do everything you know how for this pupil. The works."

"Wes?" Honest bewilderment came out in her voice. "Wes, who in this world means that much to you?"

He appeared stunned at how she'd put it. Sitting there glazed, pale as porcelain. When he at last rose from the bed edge, was it her imagination or did he lurch more than a tricky knee would account for? She watched him stiffly

navigate the length of the room, biting her tongue against calling out to him. She figured he would march down her stairs and out of her carefully compartmented existence (*Treed!*) and that would be the natural end of it.

But he paused at the gable window and stood there facing out into the night. Over his shoulder he told her: "Monty."