

Prairie Nocturne

by Ivan Doig

Overture

A story wants to be told a certain way, or it is merely the alphabet badly recited. At the right time the words borrow us, so to speak, and then out can come the unsuspected sides of things with a force like that of music. This is the story of the three of us, which I am more fit to tell now than when I was alive.

--on the flyleaf of the diary of Susan Duff,
discovered among the papers of the WW Cattle and Land Company,
Wesley Williamson special collection, Harvard University,
in the year 2025

Amended Star

1924

*"The evening, the evening,
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 straightening expectantly even though there was no one in the house to meet for the evening but herself, she shuffled sheet music into its rightful order, tallied the hours of lessons in the secondhand mercantile 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 freshening of her face with a rinse of cold water; one adjusting glance into the mirror, never two; 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 in a finger snap.

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 greeted 1924 three months ago, which seemed to her uncalled for.

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

She gave a throaty chuckle at herself and wended her way toward her desk. Pausing to choose a lozenge from the cut-glass jar there, she tasted it thoughtfully with the tip of her tongue, then swirled it in her mouth as if it would clear away beginner lessons and quavery approximations of high C; poor Flossie, last pupil of the day and absolute farthest from a worthwhile voice. *No recital there*, she reflected, *except what I'll hear from her mother*.

Still caught in thought, Susan automatically cast a glance around to judge the state of her housekeeping up here and reached her usual conclusion that she needed the availability of these spacious hours beyond dark more than the place demanded housecleaning. The attic-like room extended the full length of the house--loft quarters for a married pair of servants, this must have originally been--

^{treated}
 and she ~~used~~ the expanse like a rambler cottage perched above the formal quarters of downstairs. The rolltop desk, a divan, a Victrola, 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, ^{swayback} sets of bookshelves, a spinet piano, a typewriter sitting composedly on a rolling secretarial table, a highly unreliable new thing called a radio set standing on a sturdy side cabinet, the whopping Duff family Bible on a commemorative 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, resourceful as she probably ever was going to be in what that Bible would have called her fortieth year under heaven, she held to the belief that she was most her reconstituted self in these upstairs hours, at this elevation where the minute hand did not count. The time of footlights and the song-led marches for the right of women to vote were tucked into the past as firmly as could be, 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, what she could do was to get 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; many a time Susan wished she could deal solely with the voices, shapes of sound standing free in the air, without the human wrappings.) This political city's newspapers to be devoured, Anaconda Copper's one for spite and the independent one for sustenance. Books in plenitude; currently she was trying to make her way through E.M. Forster and the murky doings in the Marabar Caves. Music, of course: her half-finished operetta *Prairie Tide* always awaited, always unnavigable; and the radio set sometimes brought in serenades from

Seems to me a slightly inaccurate figure of speech given your ensuing description

unimaginable distances and sometimes madly cackled out static; but the Victrola sang the songs of others perfectly on command, restorative in itself to a teacher of voice. Then too she still was secretary of the state chapter of the Over There Memorial Committee, which took her to a drafty meeting hall once a month and obliged her to see to official correspondence, clerical enough to cross the eyes, in between. Tonight, as always, she shifted ^{workspots} ~~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 permitted to.

workspots

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. The blue of his blood and the red silver of bayonet steel, those paradoxical flying colors by which he came through the war. Behind Wes, it was said, men would have charged Hell; in fact, men had.

Susan sat back hard in her chair at the desk, surprised no end to be confronted with him again after all this time. Even so she could not help but marvel at the presence with which Wes did most anything, as though the shadow under him were the thrust of a stage. Her emotions were more mixed about how little the years told on him. Poised there at the top of her stairs, wearing a fortune on his back--or more aptly, on the swath of chest where General Pershing himself had pinned the highest medal--as ever he looked ready to do a white-glove inspection. ^{like that} ~~same~~ civilian life, now that he was tailored to it again, was a continuation of duty by other means. Even his ~~same~~ way of standing, the weight taken on his left

leg to spare the right knee peppered by shrapnel at St. Mihiel, ^Istill 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 unforeseen benefits. She thought she managed to sound in possession of herself--or at least within her own custody--as she spoke back to the immaculate invader:

"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. In out of nowhere, walk uninvited into a woman's bedroom, then be solicitous about seating himself too near. Susan laughed to clear away her incredulity, and answered him in a tone that 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. *One thing about Susan, she doesn't just go through the motions of being riled.* At least she had not put the run on him, quite yet. He settled to the very outside of the bed, accommodating his leg, and wordlessly looked over at her before trying to make his case. The woman there just beyond reach had an enlarged sense of justice, which had been one of the first passions that drew them together. He saw that their years apart had deepened the lines of her, ^{accented}~~made her more so, there in the lean~~ longstroke features that would never amount to ^{outright}~~beauty~~, quite, but summed up as ^{well-carved}~~an august attractiveness; as if done by a master carver,~~ a face that had always had

OK - fits the era.

character enough for the capacity of a stage. The old disturbance Susan caused in him gathered at the base of his throat as he sat there reviewing her. That laugh of hers which started somewhere down in the Scotch gravel of her family footing, then her voice finding its way to the heaven-given lilt: Lord, how he missed that. The snip and snap of talk with her, all the times of concocting their political mustard plasters for the world. The linear extra helping of her, the long-boned grace that had added so to their love-making. Topping it all, her cinnamon eyes that could put you in your place and make you like it. Everything was there to be missed, as he contemplated Susan across the frozen distance between bed and desk.

"Lost, are you?" she inquired. "I thought this was still your New York time of year."

"You make me sound like a migratory bird."

"If you show the feather..."

Didn't I hear
~~"I've heard~~ you've been to France again yourself?"

"Committee doings. That was two years ago."

"Four take away two," he mused as if maintaining his own special calendar of their time apart. "Halfway back to when the earth cooled."

"Wes?" She put down her pen as if pinning something beneath it. "Do I get to know why you're here?"

"I'm working on that." Reluctantly giving up his inspection of her, he let his eyes slide over the motley keepsakes in attendance around her, the brass paperweight shaped like a treble clef, the tiny mock strongbox which held pen nibs, the soldier photograph with its tint going drab, the silver letter-opener with the maiden of liberty, one breast bare and glinting, in bas relief on its handle. His gaze lit on the open pages in front of Susan. The voices of paper were one of his

specialties. Thinking out loud, not a usual habit, he said: "A woman armed with a diary. Not the best company for me to be keeping, I suppose."

She looked at Wes across the small white field of pages. Just looked at him. 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 he brought out:

"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 misbegotten marriage. "*She's not a well woman, Susan. That on top of the faith-- I can't face leaving her when she's like this, it's against everything in me.*"

Susan, from a family that had the stamina of sled dogs, held no patience for the delicate constitution and strategic indispositions of Wes's wife. She could not resist asking now:

"How is the tender Merrinell?"

For a start, his wife was under the impression Wes was in Minneapolis at this moment, buying grain consignments. He shifted a bit on the bed and reeled off that she was holding her own, at the Lake George place now for Easter break with the gold-dust twins, although they weren't especially twins any more, only grudgingly even sisters.... Susan half-listened, fascinated as of old with the change of atmosphere he brought into a room with him. In the period before him one of her beaux at musical evenings, a tippler, smelled of cloves. She could swear Wes always carried the scent of silk.

He broke off what he was saying and again regarded Susan as though taking the opportunity to stock up on her. "We both know you don't care a hoot in hell about any of that. Let's try you. How is the Lord's gift to the musically inclined?"

"Oho, this from the man who always told me he couldn't tell Paganini from page nine? This isn't like you, Wes. At least your word was always good. When we stopped throwing ourselves at 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 and I said I'd have no more of it if I couldn't have you, we agreed that was that."

Actually, he recalled, she had handed him his walking papers with words more stinging than those. *"If I'm going to be alone in life, Wes, it might as well be with myself."*

"You're not doing either of us any good by barging in here in the middle of the night, are you," Susan was at now. "If I know anything about it, 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." With the aimed quickness which had always reminded her of a catapult going off, he launched up on his good leg and was over to the gable.

In spite of herself, curiosity drew her over to the window by him. In the diffused glow of the strings of bulbs on the capitol dome, the butter-yellow Duesenberg could be seen parked down the hill from dozing Highland Street. Despite the night chill this time of year, Wes's bravely outfitted Negro chauffeur, Monty, was caressing the hood of the limousine 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 transfixed. The Williamsons. Their wealth and their fortunes, which were two different things. She closed her eyes for an instant, overcome by the fresh weight of memory. Wes's coming here made her feel piqued, put upon, singled out a time too many, on down the list. There had been another man since him, not married but not worth marrying either. She didn't suppose Wes had shown any more ^{belated} wisdom and retrieved chastity than she had. They had gone their old separate anchorless ways. Yet here they were, side by side at a window again as if reviewing life's march bearing down on them. And when she opened her eyelids 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 smile of a more mischievous sort lingering on him as he sized up her reaction. Wondering why she hadn't changed that door lock, she scrupulously created more distance now between herself and him.

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

"Not without a Ouija board."

"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 believe I see the unfinished musical masterpiece. I see the man-eating diary. What I don't see is you taking the world on as you always did." When she made no answer, he shifted to the affectionate mock burr he had never been able to master: "Tis a waste of a bonny woman."

"It's late, is what it is," she left it at, making a show of checking the clock.

"Wes, please. Have your say and take yourself home."

"I have the pupil of a lifetime for you."

Susan laughed uncertainly at the size of that statement. "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 put all your time to, for however long it takes."

He lifted a hand, as if taking an oath, to head off the protest she was sure to make.

"I'll pay double for everything--your hours, whatever you need to arrange in the way of accompaniment, all the sheet music you can stand, name it. All right then," he said after a moment of gauging how she was taking this, "triple."

"Where does this come from all of a sudden? I have never wanted your--"

"There's no charity to this. You'll earn your keep with this pupil, Susan, don't ever worry about that. It's a voice I'd say is--different. Unformed, maybe you'll say rough as a cob, but hard to resist somehow. It stays on in the ear, is ~~that any kind of musical term? You'd take this on, if it fell on you from a clear~~ ^{snap this voice up, if you heard it out of} blue sky, I'm sure you would."

His cadences of persuasion tested the walls of the room, as if this familiar floor were a speaking platform over the night-held capital city. Wes himself had a voice the size of an encyclopedia set. Susan knew by heart every gruff note and passionate coax he was capable of, and how effectively the mixture worked. "*The copper companies that have looted this state for thirty years think they are immune to fair taxation,*" she had heard him send crowds into a rising roar as he uncoiled his campaign tagline, "*I promise them an epidemic of it!*" No other politician in the state had stung back as fiercely at the Ku Klux Klan as it crept west and its flaming crosses began to flare on the bald hills above Catholic towns and railheads bringing immigrants to Montana land: "*This cuckoo Klan, they seem to be scared*

the Pope will descend on them in their beds, else why do they go around wearing their nighties over their heads?" The cause in her own bones, women's right to vote, he had furthered at every chance in the state legislature. "*Comets attend the death of kings,*" his famous words to the 1910 suffrage convention as Halley's fireball swept across the Britain of the newly deceased Edward VII, "*perhaps to see whether they truly fit their filigreed caskets. Across the water, there is a government, with complicit silence from its throne on down, that has fought its suffragists with detention, forced feedings, and truncheons. But this country, this state, with its every voice must greet the women who are pointing out true democracy to us.*" There never had been a hairbreadth of difference between him and her on politics, only every other field of life, and she had been all for his gubernatorial bid and the passions he gave such voice to. In his other great campaign, in the bloody mud of France, the words of Wes were known to have made the difference between life and death. Her head swimming, four years out of practice at dealing with the mesmerizing side of him, she carefully chose her way around his entreaty now:

"If it's one of your daughters, I wouldn't feel right about--"

"Not even close. Fatherly pride isn't anywhere in this. Promise me you'll give a listen."

"I seem to feel the presence of the Williamson disposition to bargain."

He reflected for a moment, as if she had shown him something about himself. Then said only: "I don't consider I've ever lost anything by it. About giving a listen--how can that hurt?"

She had to grant, "For a singing teacher, hearing is believing. All I ever ask is to be amazed."

So I remember, his expression let her know. "Opera, vaudeville," he went right on, "I don't know what we're talking, with this. I honestly don't. But

you, New York and Europe and all, you've heard the best and you'll know where this voice can be made to fit. Oh, and when you start the lessons, it'll need to be done at the ranch, not here. It's a shame, but we can't--well, you'll see..." He furrowed as he came to the next thought. "I'll work the idea into Whit's skull, but ^{*id better be ready*} ~~we may need~~ to make arrangements around him."

Susan scowled, reminding him one more time this was not a woman who could be steered like an ingenue at a tea dance. Wes watched her shake her head no and then some.

"Your old place, then," he knew to regroup. Not for nothing was this prideful woman the daughter of Ninian Duff, he always had to keep in mind. Ninian the Calvinian. The fathoms of bloodlines, always treacherously deep. "You could set up shop there at the homestead, why not? It'd be convenient all around. I'll see that it's outfitted for you, furniture, groceries, bedding, cat and canary if you want."

Scotch Heaven? A Williamson spreading the red carpet there for a Duff?
What next, the calendar corrected to come out better? Wary as she was determined to be, all that the Duff place on the North Fork of English Creek held for her flickered up more than a little.

Wes had been counting on the fact that geography has a habit of kissing people in a way they never get over, and he could tell he had said just enough on that score. Now he paused in that spotlight manner, as if to make sure each of his words would register. "I don't ask this lightly, Susan. It isn't some notion that walked up to me in the street. I've thought this over, and then thought that over, and it still comes out the same--I need you to pitch in on this." A tiny stretch of silence he used for emphasis, then: "I'm asking you to do everything you know how for this pupil. The works."

“Wes?” Honest bewilderment broke through in her voice. “Wes, who in this world means that much to you?”

He appeared stunned at hearing it put that way. Sitting there glazed, pale as collector porcelain.

When Wes at last rose from the bed edge, was it her imagination or did he lurch more than a misbehaving knee would account for? She watched him stiffly navigate the length of the room, biting her tongue against calling out to him. Let him march down her stairs and out of her carefully compartmented existence (*Treed!*), let him leave that key in the door, let that 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.”

Whiteface

1914

The sound always gave him a bad time, the slobbery breathing at the lip of the barrel. Then the bawl of fury six inches from his ear. *Who said this is easy money?* Panting, he stayed jackknifed in the barrel, chest against his knees and chin tucked down, clutching the handgrips next to his ankles. "Hyah, bull!" he could hear Dolph Kuhn, the pickup man, shouting from somewhere in the arena, but Dolph couldn't ride anywhere close while the animal still was on the prod. A horn tip scraped the metal of the barrel, inches from his other ear; he flinched every time that happened, even though he knew you could go over Niagara in one of these. When the serious butting began and the barrel tipped over and started to roll, the jolt delivered by the bull came as almost a relief; now he could at least concentrate on holding on. *You don't want to let yourself shake loose in there,* the wizened rodeo clown up in Calgary who had given him a couple of lessons in this had warned, *or you'll know what a pair of dice feels like.* Nor, he had found out the hard way, did you want to keep your eyes open during this or you'd end up dizzy as a cat in a churn. His ears told him enough about it anyway: how

the crowd loved to be scared at this stunt, the human ball in the barrel and the bull determined to butt the infuriating object until it presented something to gore.

When the barrel at last seemed to have quit rolling and he opened one eye and cautiously raised his head, he saw the ornery whiteface bull paw the ground one last time, and then its departing rear end, the tail switching slowly back and forth as the critter lost interest. Even so, he waited to hear the whap of lariat on rump as Dolph galloped in to haze the bucking bull out the far end of the arena. "He's on the run, Snowball," Dolph called, "better git yourself out of there."

Monty gulped air and unkinked himself. Somewhat groggy, but he remembered the routine and tossed his hat out first. Reliably the crowd guffawed. When no harm came to the hat, he stuck his head out the end of the barrel like an inquisitive turtle, gawking this way and that. The rhythm of the laughter built, orchestral, mass chortles of anticipation as the audience waited for his next maneuver; he'd been right about this, rodeo-goers could handle the idea of him fooling around. He clambered out, spun around and peeked back into the barrel, as if the bull might be in there. Thunder of laughter at that, any more and they'd shake the grandstand to pieces. He quit while he was ahead and picked up his dusty hat, bowing to the announcer with the megaphone who was whipping up a nice round of applause for "our artiste of the barrel after that dosie-doe he just did with the gentleman cow." Then back to business, kicking the big barrel along until it was in the vicinity of the bucking chutes again and he was standing ready for the next bull rider who needed his neck saved.

'Artiste' now, am I. Hope they don't pick that up across town. He drew another deep breath and concentrated on the gate where the bull would rampage out. Only one more rider in this go-round, and wouldn't you know, there was a hang-up in the chute. Another recalcitrant whiteface with hay on its horns. He watched the rider scramble up off the bull's back as if it was suddenly too hot a

place to sit, while the chute men shoved at the mass of animal. Forced to wait out there center-stage in the arena with only the barrel for company, Monty took the opportunity to mop the back of his neck and under his chin with the red handkerchief. That was another of the jokes, using the red hanky like a matador's cape when he had to draw the bull away from a bucked-off rider. It occurred to him that it was actually pretty funny to be swabbing at himself this way with the hard-used piece of cloth, because at this point of the rodeo he was an irredeemable mess. The bib overalls six sizes too big drooped on him, and the screaming-red long underwear that was the other part of the costume was darkly wet with sweat. He had fresh green manure up one pantleg. *Angel Momma ought to see me now. Used to worry about me playing in the mud, she'd have kittens over this.* But that seemed to be how life generally went, any way but straight, at least since she passed on. Keeping watch on the chute situation--the bull had jammed a horn under one of the fence planks and was resisting the profane persuasion of the chute crew--he checked around on himself to make sure his props were at the ready. Out of his hip pocket dangled the head of the rubber chicken that came into use when he and the announcer had to resort to chicken thief jokes, and handy in the bib pocket was the hairwork braid for the other surefire gag where he grabbed onto a bull's tail and it appeared to come off in his hand.

Weary and filthy as he was, while the action was suspended this way Monty felt almost like he was back at one of the Sunday picnics along Noon Creek, standing around at the edge of the chute crowd like this; something like peace. When he and his mother used to go to those church picnics, they would pause as soon as they were in sight of everybody but just out of hearing. "*Well, Montgomery, the two colored people are here,*" his mother would say solemnly. He would giggle, without entirely knowing why, and Angel Momma would laugh way down in her throat, and then the two of them would take their dark faces

amid all the white ones. Well, *that* hadn't changed. The backs of Monty's hands as he comically put up his dukes in challenge to the reluctant bull in the chute were a burnished dark brown that resembled the oiled saddle leather all around him in this rodeo arena, but he was as aware as ever that his color was not repeated on any face within sight.

Including his own. From brow to jaw, and ear to ear, Monty's face was white with theatrical makeup. This of course was the main joke, that he was scared white.

By now Whitney Williamson was parting the sea of riders and hangers-on who were milling around in front of the chutes, on his way to see why three men could not deal with one bull, and Monty straightened up to his full height. It never hurt to be on your toes when the boss was around. That was how he had cozied into this, when word went around the ranch that the Williamson brother who ran the livestock side of things had bought up a string of bucking stock. The very next morning, quick as he was done with the milking chores, Monty stuck his head in the boss's office off the kitchen and mentioned that he'd heard Mister Whit was turning into a rodeo producer and if he happened to be hard up for someone to do that clown job, here stood a person fool enough to try. Whit looked him up and down--young enough yet and built on springs; a bit of a cut-up on payday since he was off his mother's apron strings, but it didn't matter to the ranch how a man behaved in town--and saw no particular reason why the Double W choreboy couldn't give it a whirl, on rodeo weekends; somebody had to put on the clown get-up.

That had been a dozen rodeos ago and here they were at the last and biggest of them all, in the fairgrounds of the capitol of Montana. As was their custom, the Williamsons were using the occasion to play both ends against the middle. Somewhere up there in the shaded side of the stands would be Wesley

Williamson with Helena society and the money men from as far away as Boston and New York, while Whit ramrodded the show down here at the level of hooves and horns. The ways of the Williamsons were beyond Monty, the manner in which they divvied up being in charge while leaving the impression it was merely the natural order of things, but it didn't especially matter to him either. Like the other hands on the WW ranch who'd been chosen to try their luck at putting on rodeos, such as Dolph and the stock handlers and the unfortunates trying to pry that bull loose, he was along for the ride, so to speak.

Right about now he could have used a sample of that grandstand shade. He mopped himself some more, taking care not to touch the mask of makeup; ~~by~~ ~~now~~ he figured he knew at least that much about how a woman felt. It was Mister Whit, who had traveled and knew about these things, who decreed the whiteface cosmetic. *"Those minstrel shows, they put on blackening. Be kind of funny if you did the opposite, wouldn't it?"* Monty saw the point.

At last there was hope at the chute; the horn was grating out from between the planks after great contortions by all involved. A minute or so more, and he'd be matching wits with a bull again. He dug himself a starting place with the heel of each boot, stretched down and cleared away pebbles of any size, checked once more that the barrel was sited right. Stood ready again.

"Hard to wash all that off, ain't it?"

There is no known cure for what the human voice can carry. Sickened at the insinuating tone, at having to calculate how to deal with this, even out here with the crowd sunny and contented, Monty turned his head not too fast and not too slow to find where the remark had come from.

The telltale expression was on one of the calf ropers lounging around the end of the chutes, he and a pal putting rosin on their lariats. *Explains it some.* Calf ropers didn't have enough on their minds, their event wasn't any harder than

tying their shoes. He never heard much from the bull riders; they didn't care what color the man was who let the bull chase him instead of them. With a practiced eye Monty tried to read the frogmouth grins on this pair of lasso twirlers. It always rankled him, a thing like this, from one of the bunkhouse boys or anybody at large. You get so sick of it you're a walking piece of resentment, he could have testified to the world. Again now he banked the anger he didn't dare let flame up. Maybe he was going to be lucky, maybe the show-off one was joshing about the whiteface makeup.

"Oh, I shine up pretty good when I want to," Monty put to him past the greasepaint smile.

"I'm sort of curious about what you use on yourself," the first roper persisted, the other one looking uneasy. "Stove black?"

"LIE" the sound rolled from the depths of Monty's lungs, surprising him as much as the two of them. Both of the ropers were staring at him now, hard.

"Lye soap," Monty sang out, no boom to his voice this time. "Ain't you heard, us boys who've still got the bark on us, we can scrub up good with that and it don't hurt a bit."

The one who'd started this gave him a last narrow look, then grunted and sauntered away. The other roper tagged after him and Monty overheard:

"You maybe ought to let up on him. He's the Williamsons' pet pup."

"Aw, hell, I was only funnin'."

"You find your check in your plate in the morning and a walk to town with your bedroll, you won't think fun."

"Jesus, what's life comin' to."

The megaphone of the announcer heralded readiness in the chute at last, and Monty went back to a bullfighter frame of mind.

Why not
"Lye"?

I see the
double-
meaning,
of course,
but I'm
unsure of
need for
the LIE
Spelling.
Perhaps I'm
missing
something.

Keep "LIE"
for visual
equivalent of
effect the
sound has on
the ropers

STEP

This bull erupted sideways from the chute, a side of beef writhing eerily in the air the instant before it struck the ground with all four hooves extended, the rider clinging on but in trouble. *Damn. This one would have to be a twister.* Monty danced from one foot to the other behind the upright barrel, the red handkerchief held ready behind his back. He wasn't to make his move until the whistle blew at the end of the ride or the rider was bucked off. This bull's third jump, the man on his back went flying. Instantly Monty scampered in to draw the animal's attention before it could wheel around and find the figure pancaked into the arena dirt.

The bull turned toward Monty faster than he wanted, and he backed off a step. Just that little half-dance set off titters of anticipation in the crowd. Audiences were the damndest creatures.

Some bulls just stood there in confusion at the sight of the clown, some tamely turned away. This animal lowered its head and looked like it meant business. "If you like the look of my tracks so much, I'll make you some more," Monty loudly chanted to the animal for the crowd's benefit, then backpedaled until he had the barrel between him and the bull. When the bull charged one way, he dodged to the other side of the barrel. Back and forth, beast and man, like drunks trying to navigate past one another in a narrow space. This was another part the crowd ate up.

He knew the time had come to hop into the barrel, the bull was getting good and mad. Hesitated a moment. He'd had enough rides in the barrel for one day. He bolted for the fence at the far side of the arena, sprinting as hard as he could.

The bull blinked once at this turn of events and took off after him.

Running for his life, Monty had the presence of mind to hold the red handkerchief out at arm's length and daintily drop it, as if the bull were a suitor.

The crowd howled. The arena fence was proving to be farther than he'd figured, but steadily drawing nearer. According to the bawling, so was the bull. *Best advice I can give you is not to fall*, the Calgary oldtimer was cackling in his head.

He aimed for a stout corral post--if you made your jump onto the middle of a section of plank fence and the bull plowed it out from under you, then you were in a hell of a fix--and leaped, grabbing for the post with both arms and pulling his legs up under him. The fence shuddered below him as the bull slammed into it, but he was high and dry, and at that moment full of complete joy at having pulled off the stunt. *What could be better?* the triumphant chorus in the loft of his brain sang all through the rest of him. The bull down there in a fit of snot and slobber and other fluids of rage, himself perched up here a bit out of breath but otherwise cozy, the big Helena crowd yowling in his favor: he'd take this a thousand times in a row.

Dolph rode up to encourage the bull to the exit gate, then reined around to check on the puff-cheeked clown as he slid down off the fence. Hands on his thighs as he spent a minute getting his wind back, Monty admitted: "This is getting to be a long day."

"One more go-round and you can quit teasing the livestock," Dolph commiserated.

There was a break in the action now while the chutes were being reloaded, this time with broncs. Dolph dismounted and Monty swung up into the saddle and slumped there like the end-of-the-trail Indian while Dolph led the horse across the arena, another ^{surprise} ~~part of the~~ act. The dried-up little cowboy walked as if his feet hated to touch the ground, which was not an act at all.

When they got over by the chutes Monty slipped smoothly off the horse and Dolph tied the reins to the arena fence.

I'm not
sure I
understand
the dynam-
ics of this -
how it's
"part of
the act."

"Monty?" The pickup man inclined his head in the direction of the bull pen. "You don't want to run too many of them footraces with these bastards."

"I'll have to remember that."

"It makes for quite a show, though," Dolph granted with a chortle, "you lighting out across there with that bull's horns tickling your hip pocket." He sized up the riders and ropers and hangers-on clotted around the chutes. "Now's a good a time as any to pass the hat for our hardworking rodeo clown, don't you think?"

"I been paid," Monty said swiftly. "Mister Whit already--"

Dolph looked as if he hadn't heard right. "What's that have to do with the price of peas in China? You got something against extra money?"

"Not so I ever noticed," Monty stalled. He'd known Dolph longer than he could remember; Dolph himself was a stray who was riding the grub line about the same time the Double W took in Monty's mother as washerwoman. Yet he found he didn't want to tell Dolph, right out, that there had been that run-in with the mouthy roper.

"So how about it?" Dolph persisted. "Halvers?"

Monty glanced again at the men along the chute^S. Everybody looked to be in good cheer, beer-induced or otherwise, but you never knew. He drew out deciding until Dolph started to give him a funny look, then nodded. *Go for broke, why not. Last show of the season, any hoodoos in the bunch will have all winter to get over me.* "If you're gonna be the one that does it, Dolphus, sure."

Dolph already had his Stetson in one hand and was fishing into his jeans pocket with his other. "I'm the man what can." He held up a fifty-cent piece as if to fix the specific coin into Monty's memory. "We split halves *after* my four bits is out of the take, got that?"

"You drive a hard bargain," Monty laughed in spite of himself. He watched the skinny sawed-off cowboy gimp away on his collecting round.

"DOLPH!"


Frozen in his tracks, Dolph cast a look back over his shoulder. That voice on Monty; when he wanted to, he sounded like a church organ letting loose.

"What?"

"Be sure and trade the chicken feed in at the beer booth for silver dollars, would you?" Monty's tone was shy now.

Dolph snorted. "It all spends, on Clore Street. Don't worry, Snowball, I'll git you dollars."

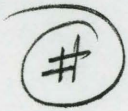
As Dolph set to work with the hat, Monty stood there loose-jointed and private, the middle of him warming with anticipation of Clore Street. Silver dollars were definitely the ticket. Like in the blues he'd heard the last time he hit town. "*Flat to stack and round to roll/ Silver dollar, lift my soul.*" Not that he had any use for the blues, but good sound cartwheel money, he most certainly did. Tied in the bottom of his side pocket right now was one of those little cloth sacks that Bull Durham tobacco came in, with the ten silver dollars Mister Whit had paid him. If Dolph did well with the chute crowd, as much as another ten might be added to the sack and that was a full Bull bag. Drop one of those on the wood of a bar and you could start to get somewhere in life. In his head he began parceling out the twenty lovely coins across town. The Zanzibar Club: the trick was to hit it early, not so many to buy drinks for. The trainmen came off shift at eight, the porters and brakemen from Chicago and Kansas City piling in to hear the music and have the company of other dark faces here in the white, white West. Things started happening in the Zanzibar then. Those KC boys made him nervous, though, calling him "Sticks" and "Montan" as though it was his fault he had been born out here instead of on the corner of Twelfth and Vine. And


In this era
in Montana
"cartwheel"
was slang
for a silver
dollar

Montgomery Rathbun had as much name as anybody, if the world would ever use it.

So, hoist a few in the Zanzibar before the KC boys hit town, then try to find that sporting girl from last time, the one who took it slow. Couldn't pray for something that fine to happen every time, but it didn't hurt to hope. When a man came to town all stored up, he didn't want a hurrying woman. Then the fantan game, in the Chinese gambling place. He should have half his money left by the time he drifted into the game, and with a stake like that there was every chance he could win back what he spent at the Zanzibar and the cathouse. Head on home to the ranch with a good stake for next time, even.

He watched Dolph passing the hat and saw with relief that the rodeo contestants each were chipping in their four bits, no complaints. Even the loudmouth roper tossed in when Dolph jawed at him. Monty felt like a man whose ship had come in. He hummed a snatch of "*Silver Wings and a Golden Harp.*"



By nightfall the Bull Durham sack was flat empty.

Gates of the Mountains

1924

"You're awfully quiet, Susan."

"Such a place, there is everything in the world to be quiet about." Even her declarative tone was rounded off by the murmur of the Missouri River. "I could pinch myself. Half my life I've spent in Helena, and I've never once been out here."

Wes yanked down on the brim of his hat one more notch. "We could do without this wind." A sharper gust through the canyon buffeted the ~~motor launch~~ ^{excursion boat} as he spoke. "I hope it doesn't snatch Monty's breath away."

In the sway of the bow, like a bundled statue being borne into a white-walled port, Susan stood braced as she gazed ahead to the Gates of the Mountains. Half the sky of her younger years had been the arching northern palisades of the Rockies, but here the mountains made fists. Precipice after precipice stood guard over these waters, pale limestone cliffs materializing straight up out of the river and lifting forests on their shields of stone and catching on their summits the fresh flags of snow. Every whiff of air held the scent of pine. Off to

I'm having trouble picturing this. What kind of boat?

starboard--at least she still knew right from left--a stand of snow-flecked jackpines on the nearest clifftop filtered what there was of the early-spring sun through the shade of their branches, and she watched this lattice of the seasons until the river left it behind. As the boat pattered deeper into the corridor of channel, Wes kept himself propped against the deck railing near her, resting his leg and evidently his thoughts as well. Her own mind was a maddening merry-go-round, thanks to him. When she insisted on auditioning Monty in private, but someplace spacious to hear how his voice carried, Wes simply commandeered a mountain range.



Williamsons had always owned.

Susan turned her head just enough to study him as he bent to coil a mooring rope that didn't pass muster, seeing in the intent lines of his face the Wes Williamson she had seen the first time ever, eternally tending to details. At the time she was twelve and snippy and inseparable from her father, particularly on trips to town, and they had gone in to the stockyards at Conrad to settle up with the railroad agent on the shipping of their lambs. Commotion bawled out over the prairie from the loading pens. "*Ninian Duff! And Ninian's likeness!*" the shout came from on high, the ringmaster of cattle himself, old Warren Williamson in the catbird perch above the cutting chute. "*Come to see what real livestock looks like?*" Susan's father had begun with cattle and advanced to sheep, and along the way contended for every spear of grass with this range potentate and his bony-hipped Double W specimens. From day one Ninian Duff knew when to stand his ground, and now he barked a laugh and shouted back: "*Livestock are those, Williamson? Here I thought the flea circus had come to town.*" Taking their time about it, the two Duffs approached the corral, bearded scarecrow of a man and gangly girl in overalls, and climbed up to inspect the mooing mess. The cattle were being chuted into railroad cars: dogs worked at their heels, dismounted

riders stamped around trying to look useful, the stockbuyer slapped the corral boards with a tasselled whip thin as a wand. The herd of brown-red backs was wound tight against the end of the corral, a rivulet of steers banging up the high-walled ramp into the rail car. Down there in the muck hazing his crew as they hazed the cattle was the next of the Williamson breed, Whit, ^{being trained} ~~installed~~ by his father to run the Double W ranch in the next valley over from the Duff homestead.

At her father's side above the milling cattle Susan fiercely took it all in, allotting grudge where she knew it was due--to the grabby Williamsons, high and low--and something like hunger toward every other face around her. The poor riders, unfit on foot. The stockbuyer, like a big gray jay in his suit of gabardine. The familiar thicket of dark whiskers that marked her father's ever authoritative presence, at the near corner of her vision. Faces, she had decided, were the first letters of stories all around a person. So, she was at the stage of ravenous wondering about anyone within range of her eyes, and lately that included the father whom everybody said she was such a tracing of.

"Ay, *Williamson*," her father hooted across the corral to Warren as a steer broke back past his swearing son, "*any cows ever I had could knit socks with their horns. These seem to be wanting in mentality, not to mention poundage.*"

Then and there she caught sight of Wes, his expression minted into her memory the way a likeness is stamped onto a fresh coin. He had been half-hidden next to the stockbuyer, flipping through the shipping papers, but her father's gibe brought him immediately hand over hand to the top of the corral, still clutching the paperwork like a crumpled bouquet. She knew him without ever having laid eyes on him before: Whit's brother, the citified member of the family, the one everyone said was the brains of the litter. She kept her gaze glued to him as he poised atop the corral across from her father and her. It had been drilled into Susan, as only recitative Scotch parents could drill, that it was rude to stare. But to really see you

had to keep looking. To this day she could bring back that expression on Wes as he studied her father the way he would a wild creature. For her age Susan knew a substantial amount about life. She had grasped almost as soon as he did that her teacher at the South Fork was dreadfully in love with the new schoolma'am over on Noon Creek. She had deduced for herself that the drugstore owner Musgreave's "vacations" to Minneapolis were to dry out from whiskey. She knew with the instinct of a child on a borrowing homestead that her father regarded banker Potter in Gros Ventre as a grabber second only to the Williamsons and that was why they did their banking here in the county seat instead. The Scotch Heaven neighbors, she had down cold--the Speddersons would exert themselves only to avoid work, the Frews were tight as ticks where money was involved, the Erskines would lend you the elbows out of their sleeves, the Barclays kept everything *up* their sleeves--and accepted the principle that each family had some exception that proved the rule. But whatever this look on Wesley Williamson's face represented was beyond her.

They were near enough to Warren Williamson on his cutting-chute throne that he didn't need to shout, but he shouted anyway:

"I'll tell you again, ^{Duff} ~~Wintan~~, I want you Scotch Heaven lamb lickers off that Roman Reef range. We've always grazed up in through there."

Her father leveled a stare across the backs of the cattle to the elder Williamson. Then said in his Biblical timbre:

*"You ought to know by now Scotch Heaven hangs its hat
~~"We find it hard to hear when you talk through your hat."~~
 wherever it pleases."*

In that exchange of thunders Susan had seen something, and if she had, the young man so intent across the corral surely must have: in the contest of the fathers there at the stockyard, Warren Williamson looked away first.

*I'm curious
 to know
 what this
 means.*

#

^{touring boat}
Aboard the ~~motor launch~~, the ancient impatience of water moving them steadily into the mountains, she scrutinized Wes as he placed the coil of rope where it belonged. A quarter of a century and then some, on the visage across that corral; the same Wes but more so, if that was possible. The boxer's jawline. The philosophical eyes. Jack Dempsey met the jack of spades in that face. After all her trying, in love and its opposite, this was still the greatest of puzzles to her, the different ways of adding up Wes.

He met her gaze for a moment, smiled but kept the silence, then they both turned again to the Gates of the Mountains.

Is a
"motor launch"
a kind of
boat? I
realize I'm
not very
knowledgeable
when it
comes to
motor boats
on the
Missouri
in 1924,
but I
imagine I'm
not the
only one.

—————
"Have I got it right, that we're out here freezing our tails so's you can sing to us?" the boatman, Harris, was asking Monty.

"This is a new one on me, but that's about the size of it," Monty responded, only half there in conversation but by habit trying to keep his end up, even with this sour looker. He warmed his hands over the boat engine.

"Probably the Major didn't order this wind. Throw it in free, did you?"

Harris hunched farther into his mackinaw and steered toward the middle of the river, giving plenty of leeway to the blunt set of cliffs rearing at the next bend. Exhilarated, apprehensive, and all the rest, Monty took a gulp of the spring air, to clear his thinking as much as he could. *There ain't much I can't do some of, by now. But this?* ~~He hadn't expected this dizzying excursion.~~ The most he had been counting on was to-the-point advice from the Major, or possibly a word put in somewhere, or if he really hit it lucky a nice dab of loan. (*Draw some wages ahead*, was always the way you wanted to put that.) So he could have been knocked over with a feather when the Major proclaimed "*I know just the medicine*" and produced this ^c ~~this~~ *and this dizzying excursion* music teacher. But then the Major wasn't someone whose thinking a person could always follow.

"Say, how many horses you got going on this pirate ship?" Monty threw out, to get the boatman to talking ^{again} ~~again~~. Around somebody like him, best way to be was to listen more than you spoke.

"About a dozen. Who wants to know?" Harris eyed him as if he resented the challenge to the boat's horsepower.

The Duesenberg had ninety. "Just wondering. I been around engines quite a little bit myself." Deciding this was one of those times when there was something to be said for silence after all, Monty clammed up and warmed his hands again in the radiated heat from the cylinder block. Fingers long and tapered but strong from years of milking cows; pinkish palms that had known their share of calluses--these hands had been his ticket to chauffeuring, that time during his recuperation when he took it upon himself to tinker Mister Whit's junked Model T back to life, handling each part of the stripped-down engine until he could have assembled them in bed under the covers. 'Handy' was one thing that meant what it said. With all due satisfaction he recalled washing these hands over and over at the end of each day spent in the grease, carefully cleaning under the fingernails with the point of his jackknife blade, to look slick as a whistle when he sat up to the Double W supper table with the hard-used riders and haying crews. Done their job, too, these hands; flagged the Major's attention when he looked around for someone new to be his car man after Frenchy went on one drinking spree too many. Monty kept on rubbing them here for circulation and luck. Now to see what his voicebox could manage.

The hum came without his even inviting it.

You know how you get at the end of the road,

Trying to stand up under life's load.

The memory voice came along with it. "Can you sing that one by yourself, Monty? Momma's momma taught me it, when I was little like you. Here, I'll help you with it."

Done in and done up and down to a speck.

That's when the right word will lighten your trek.

Whatever that word was, in this life.

Still needing to assure himself this was really happening to him, he sneaked another look around the boat. The Major and the music mistress at the ~~The Swede couple who took care of~~ ^{house} bow, taking in the sights. The Major's Helena ~~hired couple~~ ^{craft} huddling under the canvas canopy, bewildered as chickens. Himself and Harris, chauffeurs by land and water. Six folks total on an excursion ~~boat~~ ^{craft} that would hold, what, fifty?

who are they?

The boatman had followed his gaze around the vessel. "Normal people, I don't take out here this soon in the year," Harris muttered.

Like to meet any of those in this lifetime, normal, Monty's mind raced on. *But the man has a point. 'Normal' wouldn't cut it for a shindig like this.* Notions jittered in him today like fancywear on a clothesline. It was boggling: a different life to fit over the one he already had on? Was there enough of him to ~~wear~~ ^{change into} all that? Let his imagination tailor it and there was. If he could get trained up for it, maybe he could show the world something this time around. New York, even. ~~And right away~~ ^{big notion} He caught himself letting his hopes run too high; there was also every chance his ~~big notion~~ ^{big notion} of becoming a real singer ~~amounted to a pipe dream that~~ ^{amounted to a pipe dream that} was going to be over the instant he didn't make his mouth work right for that woman up there in the bow.

To be doing something besides picturing himself in full song beneath chandeliers that scintillated like the diamonds in the necklaces and stickpins of the rapt audience one moment and envisioning himself pucker-mouthed and mute as a trout in front of this music woman the next instant, Monty craned out enough to

catch a glimpse of the higher reaches of the Big Belt mountains. Gulches to nowhere, slabs of cliff around every corner, round-shouldered summits that didn't amount to that much. Not like the broad resounding Two Medicine country he was lifelong used to, with its dune shapes of the Sweetgrass Hills way over east there with the prairie in between as if they were pretty mirages that miraculously never faded, and the mighty reefs of the Rockies pushing up everywhere into the sky to the west. But he had to admit this river was quite a thing, rolling its way mile after mile through rock-solid canyon. And dead-end views or not, the low mountains stacked around the canyon showed nice clean fresh snow on their slopes; good tracking snow. He half wished he were up there hunting, cutting the tracks of a bull elk in one of those open parks near timberline, instead of down here at this. But wishing was what had landed him into this, wasn't it.

Of its own accord his turned-up overcoat collar all at once drooped and let the wind in on him, surprising him the way nearly everything was surprising him today. No reason to be jumpy, he told himself as he turned the unruly collar back up. Yes, there was. White lady variety. They could be worse than the men. Treat you like some sort of moron who sleeps in the sheepdip trough. He sneaked another peek toward the bow of the boat and wondered again about this Miss Duff. Why wasn't she a Mrs. Duff, for starters? She looked lofty, although maybe it was only the altitude temperature that went with her being so ungodly tall for a woman. Whatever way she stacked up, the Major claimed she was the sharpest thing going, where training up a singing voice was involved.

Look at it like resorting to a doctor, one of those specialists; that was the point of view he was going to try to take. It would be a lot easier on the nerves, though, if her skin tone and his weren't as far apart as those white and black Scotty dog magnets he had played with as a boy, one capable of propelling the

other across the floorboards simply by being the opposite kind. But that was the sort of principle he would have to put up with to get where he wanted to go, he resolved again.

That's if she ^{even} consented to take him on, after this. He could kick himself for the way he'd messed up back at the dock. "How do you do, again, Miss Susan," he'd heard come out of his mouth when she stepped aboard the boat and walked up to him as if examining a bad painting. He had no earthly idea why *again* hopped in there that way. It wasn't as if he was on speaking acquaintance with her--although he had heard ^{enough talk} ~~the rumor~~ about the Major and her, back ^{a few} ~~some~~ years before he was driving for the Major--but somehow the fact that he and she both were ^{products of} ~~originally from~~ the Two Medicine country seemed like a kind of knowing each other or each other's families or general circumstances of growing up there or some such. His try at conveying that, though, had come out sounding all too much like they were peas from the same pod.

Snooty wasn't quite the word for the way she'd stood there giving him a going over, or at least he hoped it wasn't. *Keen*, that was it, he tried to convince himself. Although maybe *starchy* said it better. Whatever the correct read of her was, she came right back at him with: "You seem to have caught the Major's ear, Mister Rathbun. Such a spot for a debut."

"He's giving me a good help, that's sure." He had not known what more to say about the Major providing all of outdoors as a music hall. Being a Williamson, the Major could do about anything he wanted, couldn't he. So, with that the two of them ran out of the makings of talk and he'd had to stand there like a mooring post while she and the Major went on with chitchat until the boat chugged to life and he headed to the stern in the natural gravitation of things.

What if he got buck fever, in front of her, and couldn't remember the words? Couldn't possibly forget words to something you'd known all your life.

"Sing with Momma while she washes, Montgomery. Ah ah AH! That's it, sing with Momma." Just to make sure, he ran the song through his head again now.

Then what if he sang it word-perfect and she still said she had heard a better voice on a bullfrog?

Nervously he rubbed an eyebrow with the knuckle of his thumb. Nobody around but the clam running the boat and the dumb-cluck ~~hired~~ couple to watch him make a fool of himself, at least. That hadn't been the case often enough lately, he reflected with overdue wisdom as the boat slowed to an aquatic waddle in the presence of the most imposing cliffs yet. He grimaced, the reminder of his last time in town still so fresh. The dust-up over his fantan debt, nothing really hurt except his dignity; but on top of that, the brush-off from Leticia. A man could hardly come to town any more without getting treated like Job's dog. "Leticia?" those joyboys in the Zanzibar had razzed him unmercifully, "call out the militia!" This time his wince cut all the way to the heart. He had been stuck on Leticia. She wasn't street baggage, she was a good decent copper-brown woman with a part-interest in a millinery establishment and a sideline in cosmetics. He had sounded her out on marriage, even. And received: "You're a lovely man, Monty, but you are no provider." Quite a lot about life he had learned to laugh off, but when ~~she had~~ ^{Leticia} let him have it with both barrels that way, it registered deep. Off she had gone with that slickback head waiter from the Broadwater Hotel, and that was that.

Maybe it had taken him too long to get himself in gear, maybe he shouldn't have needed yet another dose of Clore Street to teach him. But in any case he had dragged his tail back to the ranch admitting to himself that life as he was practicing it was never going to provide beyond what it already did--the room on the back end of the wash-house, the choreboy's place at the long table three

I'm afraid
I'm just
unfamiliar
with what
purpose of
a "hired
couple"
might be

and
times a day, wages that were gone before you could clink the dollars together.
Which is why he had mustered himself and asked the proper source:

"Major? You know anything about those singers, on stage and that?"

#

"Pity." Wes was peering critically at the Missouri's volume of water, already running high with the first of spring melt against the shoreless base of the cliffs.

"What is?"

"Oh, nothing. It would've made a wonderful place to put a railroad through."

"You and your railroad notion," Susan made fun of him. "You would levitate it, would you?" Actually, it occurred to her, magic carpets were his stock in trade. Wes had but to say *presto and keep the change* and this steam launch awaited where the Missouri swept into the mountains. Monty and the Doozy presenting themselves at the dock, both looking newly spiffed up. Susan herself had been royally fetched from Highland Street ^{Wes's household} ~~by the Swedish couple who took~~ ^{although} ~~care of Wes's Helena house.~~ She had stiffened when she learned the Gustafsons-- Mrs. Gus's middle name was Nosey, Gus's was Gloomy--were to be her escorts. In the past she had asked Wes why on earth he kept them on, and he had pondered for awhile and then said he supposed it was because they provided all the discomforts of home.

"An outing for the servants, is this to be?" she had jabbed him with, this time around.

"Your old friendship with Mrs. Gustafson must be kept green." Then in his married tone: "It's that usual matter, how things have to look. Please, Susan."

Clasping her scarf to her throat against another incursion of the raw wind, she glanced back along the length of the boat. Mr. and Mrs. Gus sat shivering,

OK
as u
Aha!

Is this
italicized
because it's
flashback
dialogue?

Yes

dressed too lightly. Susan had little sympathy. Sweden was not exactly a Mediterranean clime, why did the Gustafsons think Montana's latitude would be balmy?

She centered her attention back on the matter of Monty. The taproot of talent is ambition. This man was quite far along in life to be wanting a career; what had he been saving himself for until now? Not to mention far along the palette of pigmentation, compared to the flesh tones of the audiences he seemed to crave. Yet she knew he had already come some way up in life. The dawn-and-dusk chores of the Duff homestead would never leave her, and when she multiplied those by what must be the drudgeries asked of a choreboy on a ranch as huge as the Double W, yes, this Monty person had come considerably up. The emphatic crease of his trousers, the good hat. And he smartly wore a greatcoat, nearly as capacious as that on Wes. She wondered how ~~on earth~~ ^{ever} he and his mother had ~~alit~~ ^{ever} with the Williamsons: two shakes of pepper in that salt-white confederacy of riders and masters.

She kept watch on him now as Wes beckoned him from the stern. He had a roomy chest, which gave her hope. Ropy in build, and as yet he had no belly to speak of. Full-lipped, but no more so than the bee-sting look that was popular on motion-picture women. Glowering brows, but his eyes did not seem to start off with any color grudge; not quite crafty in look, thank goodness, but taking in more than he seemed to, if she knew anything about human nature. No prominent Adam's apple to bob up and down disconcertingly while he sang, she was glad to note. And small ears, tight to his head. Hair that hadn't been fiddled with, no misplaced faith in doses of straightener. Spotless hands and fingernails. In outward appearance, she was forced to admit, so far so good with Montgomery Rathbun, songbird on the edge of the Williamson nest.

"All of a sudden you feel that it's due him?" she had tried to press Wes.

"You might say that."

"Him in particular? I'm only asking."

"Why so suspicious? You make it sound as if I have more motives than Rasputin. Isn't the glimmer of a voice enough for you to go on?"

"Wes, you yourself say that your ear is straight from the tinsmith."

"I knew what I was hearing when I first heard you, didn't I?"

There was a fluster at the center of the boat as Mrs. Gustafson scurried out from under the canopy and announced noon by pointing to the sun. She brought forth the dinner basket: fresh baked bread, headcheese, boiled eggs. A lard can of doughnuts.

"It's a hard and fast rule of the profession," Susan headed this off, "that Mister Rathbun must sing with an empty stomach."

"Then we'll listen, in hungry concert," Wes pronounced. He looked around at the cliffs, like opera-house walls grown to five hundred feet: La Scala fashioned out of a fjord. "Will this do?" He seemed to be serious.

even so slightly
Susan smiled ~~a little~~. "As good a place as any."

"Harris, can you let us drift?" Wes called to the launch operator.

As soon as
~~When~~ the engine was shut off, the silence was overpowering. The wind stirred the swags of branches far above them, but evidently was blocked by the oxbow turn of the river.

At Susan's nod, Monty took a position in the center of the boat. She was dismayed to see he stood like a cowboy, hip-sprung, spraddled. But then that's what he was, among a confusing number of other things, she reminded herself.

Here goes nothing from nowhere, he tried to bolster the inside of his head with the chant that breathed luck on a pair of dice, sometimes. As if feeling the need for correction in her look, he grasped the lapels of his coat, thought better of that stance, and let his hands drop to his side. There they opened and closed. He

drew in an audible, open-mouthed breath, but no sound issued forth. Standing as if rooted to the deck, he discovered he was dry-lipped, dry-mouthed, dry-throated, a desert down to the moons of his toenails. *Be there*, he implored his voice. "Excuse me one moment," he half coughed out, went over beneath the canopy and swigged from a glass of the lemonade Mrs. Gustafson had thought to welcome spring with, then returned to his amidship spot.

It dawned on Susan that Wes was making this hard for him, depositing him out here in this magnificence, proffering him his moment in grand style, testing him. Deliberately?

"Ready when you are, Monty," issued from Wes now, not exactly an order but close enough.

Stiff as a cactus, Monty aimed himself at the crowding cliffs and suddenly let out:

*"Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land-- "*

There was a catch of breath, Monty's and everybody else's, then he sang on in a tone as deep as the sound of a bronze bell.

*"Tell old Pharoah
To let my people go.*

*When Israel was in Egypt land,
Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard, she could not stand,
Let my people go."*

Wes listened with everything in him, the song taking him back through time. Back nearly as long as he could remember, Angeline Rathbun's spirituals hovered over the white clotheslines behind the ranch house, indeed like angelic

sea chanties wafting above a ship under sail. The carry of Monty's voice, though, except when he sang while at his barn chores, had mostly been in evidence at branding time and roundup, when the other riders would encourage him to yell the cattle down out of distant coulees. That, and shouting tag-ends of jokes to his interlocutor, the announcer, in his rodeo period. This might mend that, and more. *If he has it in him. If she can't resist seeing if he has it in him.* That skinny compass-needle word, *if*. All the directions it could waver to. But he had given this due thought, in many a long night, and come back to his starting point, the overpowering urge that now was the time if--that, again--the needful was ever to happen. It just might work. *Please*. Listening to Monty now, Wes put his head down and focused on the upside-down steeple of his fingertips meeting, very much as he did when he was in the confessional.

Susan keenly watched Monty's every breath, as the echoes chorused off the cliffwalls.

*"You'll not get lost in the wilderness,
Let my people go,
With a lighted candle in your breas',
Let my people go.*

*"Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land,
Tell old Pharoah
To let my people go."*

When he finished, the Gustafsons hesitantly beat their mittened hands in applause. The boatman leaned forward in fascination. Wes nodded firm encouragement to Monty. Five faces now turned toward Susan.

"Again, please, Mister Rathbun."

Monty sagged.

"Don't be down in the mouth," Wes consoled at once. "She's known to be hard to please."

"If you could possibly hold off on the man-to-man sympathy," Susan shushed him. "Mister Rathbun? Again?"

"Miss Susan, honest, that's as good as I can do."

She seemed surprised. "Then simply do it the same. I'm sorry, but one time through a song is not being a *singer*. That's merely"--she searched for an uncritical set of words--"whistling with your voicebox. Mister Rathbun, I need to hear certain things again in how you managed that song. I thought that's why we're here." She locked eyes with him, the stare that had conquered a thousand pupils. "Now then."

Wes broke their deadlock. "Harris?" He twirled a finger at the boatman, and the launch coughed to life and turned back upriver to where Monty had aimed his voice at the canyon amphitheater. As soon as the engine was cut, Monty squared away, with his eyes closed this time against the skinning-knife challenge of Susan's, and in slow measure summoned up from wherever he could reach in himself:

"Go down, Moses..."

When the last echo expended itself, Wes clapped once, hard, and swung around to Susan. "Well?"

"Well."

"Susan, blast you," Wes was nearly laughing in exasperation, Monty scarcely daring to breathe, "what's the verdict?"

Ninian's Land

1924

*Scotch Heaven may not have amounted to much as a site,
but you cannot beat it as a sight.*

--from the diary of Susan Duff

Susan scrubbed the floor a second time. The homestead house had stood ^{a half dozen years} empty ~~since 1918~~. Almost the same could be said of the valley.

The world was definitely a different habitat on hands and knees. Her kneeling parts ached and her knuckles were red from the harsh washwater as she attacked the uneven pine floorboards with the scrub brush, round two. Cows had been in here; Whit Williamson's drizzling cows, Wes's drizzling cows, depending on whichever end of the beasts he held title to in the Double W scheme of things.

Troughs of the past pooled with sudsy water as she slaved away at the old floor. The oblong worn spot in front of the cookstove where her mother had fended, morning, noon, and night, for thirty years. "Susan, see to Samuel, pretty please. The taties are refusing to boil, the devils." Over there where the table had sat, the most seriously rubbed groove was the spot where her father's sizable

really?

Yup.
Dorless
homestead
houses were
open to the
elements &
livestock
seeking
shelter

workshoes shuffled. *"A man needs a firm understanding,"* topmost in the tiny horde of jokes he allowed himself. Her father could quarrel with the wind, then turn around and recite from heart the most lilting Bible passage. It picked at her that contradictions were still the fare of this house. Ninian Duff had swept into this pocketed-away valley on the North Fork of English Creek in 1887 with a bemused wife and a daughter inquisitive beyond her three years of life and a ramrod determination to make his chosen acres of American earth a homesteaded Eden, whether or not the given ground had those ingredients. Ninian's land, all this had been called, even the pasture domain up under the mountains that was nowhere on the proving-up papers of the homestead and was now national forest. *And here I am, back at his old haunt. I can hear him now. "Ay, Susan, we couldn't have kept you in Scotch Heaven with heavy fetters, and here you are back because of a notion worth its weight in moonbeams?"* Her scrub brush retaliated with furious vigor on a floorboard. She knew the chapters of her life did not sit well together, she didn't need telling by the echoes here.

In mid-swipe at the next offending floorboard she froze. Motion and furriness where none should be, in the open doorway.

She jerked her head up as the ragged ball of gray settled into cat pose, at ease on its haunches, ready to be waited on.

"You're prompt," Susan addressed it, "wherever you've been mooching previous to now."

The cat licked its chops remindfully.

"Shoo. Scoot now. There's not a drop of milk, canned or by the squirt, on the premises yet. Later." She dipped her fingers in the bucket and flicked washwater at the cat, which flinched, thought matters over, and stalked out.

The vagrant cat dispatched, she made herself simmer down and take stock of what all else needed doing to make the place livable. Except for the want of a

door, the house was still in one piece, at least. Windows were filthy, ^{the} ~~half a dozen~~ years of grime and fly life on them, but they would feel washwater before the day was out. The roof seemed sound, although she knew the test of that would arrive with the first cloudburst down out of the Rockies. Other necessities for her stay here--the pump at the well outside that gaping doorway, the cookstove and stovepipe, the outhouse--she had found to be cranky with age but in working order. By nightfall, assuming that Whit Williamson's roustabouts didn't tip over in a coulee with her truckload of promised furniture on the rutted road into here, she would be installed in a reasonably presentable household or keel over in the attempt.

So, about to be all in, one way or another, here she was, intrigued with this familiar old stranger of a place one minute and very nearly terminally exasperated with it the next. It served her right, she knew she would need to admit to the diary if this interminable day ever produced a night to sit down in.

"Why me, though," she had tackled Wes after the day at the Gates of the Mountains. *"Male music teachers exist, scads of them."*

Always one for fine points, Wes could be seen honing his reply before he offered it. *"You have edge, and I mean that as a compliment. If Monty is going to be serious about this singing, it'll do him good to see how you bear down on things."*

"I can apply 'edge,' as you more or less nicely put it, as well here in Helena as on the North Fork, Wes."

"Helena has its distractions. I don't want Monty's head bothered by anything except toeing the line for you."

She fathomed that there was more to it than that: discretion, for Wes's sake one more weary time, and her own if that mattered any more, and poor dark Montgomery Rathbun's as well. Everything of Wes's, said and unsaid, could be

truer than true and for her this still was a flit out the coop door that happened to have peeped open. The well-furnished solitude of the weeks ahead she could not bring herself to pass up. A chance to catch up and reflect, and, with enough piano time and lined paper, to woo her operetta to completion at last. After all, she pointed out to herself with a rueful twitch of her lips, music is the only lust you can do justice by yourself.

And all the while obligated only to one pupil, the likes of which she had never had in all her teaching, instead of the ceaseless succession of Helena muffets and their impresario mothers. *But the pupil it is? An academy of music here just for him? Never mind the impenetrable head of Wes, have I gone out of mine? Or at least bid goodbye to any speck of judgment I had in me?* Every kind of doubt applied, despite her best efforts to send them on their way. Absconded to New York meanwhile, Wes had, to spend time in the shallow bosom of his marriage. Susan allowed herself a vixen smile over that, but her mood returned as she had to stoke up the reluctant old stove to heat a bucket of rinse water.

Before the next bout of scrubbing, she stepped outside and took her leisure at the perimeter of the yard, idly whacking cockleburrs and nettles out of her way with a stick. Nearby, the creek ducked past behind its stand of diamond willows, plump at their ends with budbreak. A well-behaved school of white clouds coasted over the highest peaks to the west. Door or no door, Susan conceded, she at least had lucked into the picture-perfect time of the North Fork valley, with wild hay surging in the bottomland along the creek and fresh grass on the buttes and foothills that tilted the valley to the spring sun. On a day such as this when the clear air was a delicate shellac on every detail of each gray-blue pillaring cliff, the mountains castled up even closer than she had remembered over the Duff homestead and the dozen other deserted ones of Scotch Heaven.

Occasionally,
I'm going
to cut a
sentence
here and
there, like
this one,
just to
speed
things up
ever so
slightly.

Green-stained stick in her hand, Susan stood stock still for a minute and listened with all her might.

The silence. Eloquent of the space, of the reach of country here along the footings of the Rockies, the cathedral-rise of the continent into the blue stillness of sky, the prairie unrolling from the other horizon like Bedouin tarpaulin.

Her ears took in the solitude while her mind stayed busy with the comings and goings of the dead and the momentarily absent. This place's traffic of presences, of one shade or another. Not that she at all believed in the specter world, but right now she rather wished she was capable of it. Ghosts ought be interesting company, she reasoned, particularly here. Not gauzy visitors who popped out of walls and gabbed when least expected; she could do without those. But why shouldn't leftover spirits, to call them that, constitute a kind of echo of the soul, lingering tunelike in the air after life was gone? A nocturne, she wouldn't be surprised: ruminative, tending toward melancholy--*after all, the poor things are no longer the freshest notes in the musical arrangement, are they--*yet with a serenade melody that would not leave the mind. Chopin, she decided, pensive a moment herself; Chopin surely would be the court musician of eternity's nightsingers. She wished her piano were here; the opening passage of her favorite of his pieces had found its way into her fingers and wanted out right then.

It took no real prompting to remind herself that she currently had enough concerns dealing with the living. To name the closest to mind--she lopped the head off a thistle with opinionated vigor--Whit Williamson, mastermind of trespassing cows. But bright and early tomorrow the matter would become Montgomery Rathbun, showing up here expecting to trade a chauffeur's polishing rag for the velvet stage curtains of Carnegie Hall. For better or worse, Scotch Heaven would have the human voice back in it tomorrow.

She listened again, as if her life depended on it.

Again, nothing met her ear but the cockleshell ring of silence. Instead, memory hinted behind her eyes everywhere her glance lit. Her mother, plump as a hen, forever there in the front room used for gatherings, trilling one of the songs of the old country with Donald and Jen Erskine or grandly matching installments of poetry with Angus McCaskill. Her father, whiskers down his chest, striding off up the slope to the scattered band of woolies with the fatalistic tread of that first keeper of sheep who ever came to grief, Abel. And Samuel, *oh God of my father, where in the tune of things is there any explanation of Samuel?*

She squared her shoulders and went back in to where the scrub brush waited.



The sparkplugs lay in two rows on a clean gunnysack rag spread along the runningboard of the Duesenberg, like soldiers formed up on a tan field for the changing of the guard.

Monty fingered the new ones with respect, intrigued as he always was by the notion of bits of fire igniting gasoline in the cylinder heads. He twirled each fresh sparkplug into its place in the rank atop the engine, tightening down just so with a socket wrench. Try as he would, though, to confine himself to what his hands were doing, his mind insisted on going like sixty. *You are stark crazy, a man your age*, ran one line of self-argument about this ^{notion} ~~bright idea~~ of trying to turn himself into a singer at this stage of life. The other camp just as vigorously pointed out that a man gets in a rut, and the next thing you know, that rut is six feet deep and there's an epitaph over it.

So, try high or lay low. Things ^{seemed to be} ~~were~~ going his way so far, quite the deal if he did say so himself. Hadn't the music teacher agreed to take him on? Wasn't the Major peeling off the money to cover it? But in each case, he had to wonder

exactly why they were giving him a hand up like this. As he'd heard said ~~one~~
~~time~~ in the Zanzibar, you could never be sure whether what white folks were
 passing you was pepper or fly grunt.

Overly picky, his mother would have called that sort of thinking. He
 extracted the last grimy sparkplug and spun a fresh one in. *There. Firing on all*
cylinders. That's where I better get myself to. His engine work finished, he
 washed up and then applied bag balm to his hands to keep them nice, wishing he
 had something similar for his voice and for that matter the rest of the inside of his
 head. Tomorrow already he had to start lessons from the woman. Rubbing the
 balm in and in, he stood there beside the long yellow car for some minutes,
 looking off to the prairie he had been born to, and around at the Double W ranch
 buildings that were such home as he had ever had. The air had that spring
 freshness to it, winter shaken out and packed away in last snowdrifts far up in the
 Rockies along the western sky; the mountains this day were blue, as if lightly
 tinted with clean pine smoke. He loved the Two Medicine country. The question
 was whether it loved him back. Except when he and Dolph were doing chores
 together or he and the Major went on a car trip, a lot of his life here was alone,
 dead-dog alone. Wouldn't get an echo back if he hollered, sometimes.

And the opposite wasn't a whole lot better, as far he had found. When he
 was in the company of others--which, short of those rare Saturday nights when he
 could get to Helena, always meant white others--there were times when he still
 was as lone as the word could mean. Around whites, in town and so on, he had
 long since given up ~~angry~~ ^{furiously} bewilderment for something like an exasperated
 wariness. Yet even that wasn't foolproof. He always had to remember that time
 when he had been in at the Gros Ventre mercantile, treating himself to new leather
 gloves. Rodeoing had looked like it would pan out then, people coming and
 going in the store kidded him about the bulls giving him a day off. While he was

did so. Angus McCaskill had always been as easy to read as a weathervane, even when she had been no more than elbow-high to him.

"Look at you, your eyes out like organ stops," she said fondly.

"It's been ages, Susan Duff."

"*'Ocean's ebb, and ocean's flow/Round and round the seasons go.'*

There. In Mother's name, I've beat you to the rhyming stuff."

"No fair," Angus protested, his craggy face full of indignant amusement.

"I was standing here struck dumb, and you took advantage. Besides, that wasn't Burns, so it only counts when said on Sundays."

Laughing, she released him and drew him into the house with a gesture at the same time. "I was going to come up later. I knew you were still holding school."

"You ought to have stepped in and done a twirl. Let my not so model scholars lay eyes on my best pupil ever."

"On a spinster teacher starting to go long in the tooth, you mean."

"Don't. What does that make me?" It was comically said, but she caught a glint of rue. His mustache, which came and went according to private seasons in this otherwise open man during all the time she had been one of his schoolgirls, had turned drastically gray and looked permanent now, and in the lines around his eyes she could read with clarity every one of his decades of fending here. The world and its whirls had shaken this valley empty of all the others, but he was still on the land at the top of the creek as sheepman ^{and} as teacher over at the South Fork school, the last burr clinging to the swatch of homesteads called Scotch Heaven.

"*You couldn't quench Angus McCaskill with the Atlantic Ocean,*" her father often said of the nimble spirit of this man, not entirely admiration from a Calvinist.

"And your better half?" Susan inquired, a trifle late with it. "How is Adair?"

"Dair is gallivanting," he responded cheerfully enough. "Varick fetched her down to Indian Head to spoil Alec for a while and keep Beth on her toes. Nothing like a grandson to draw her. And another McCaskill is on the way there, toward the end of summer," he gave out this news the surprised way men do. "We're becoming downright prolific."

Angus stopped. Family talk was a one-way conversation with Susan, the realization caught up with him. "I'm not much of a caretaker for you here, am I," he cast a glance around, away from her. "By now I've worn the legs off three canine generations, dogging Double W cows out of the North Fork, and still they sneak in." Then, giving the rectangle of sunlight where the house stood open to such creatures his consideration: "Mind you, I haven't been asked the whereabouts of your door. But there's one remarkably like it at Rob Barclay's old place."

"Do you suppose it could find its way back here by nightfall?"

Angus gave a grin. "I'll see that it does. You have your work cut out for you, it looks like. I shouldn't be keeping you from it."

"You'll have coffee and a bite if I have to poke it into you," she had him know. "My pantry is the Lizzie, at the moment. I'll be back in two shakes."

He watched her go out to the automobile, striding in the scissor gait of Ninian Duff but bearing herself as if marching to drums strictly her own. The Model T which had caused pandemonium among his pupils that morning when it putt-putted past the schoolhouse, immersed itself up to its runningboard in the creek crossing, and at last crawled up the little-used North Fork road, sat now, black and pert, amid the sun-browned dilapidation of the homestead buildings. Angus shook his head, frowning, then searched for someplace to sit and settled for leaning against a tilted cupboard.

In no time Susan swooped back into the house bearing an apple box of kitchen basics. "The bite is going to be graham crackers, it appears." She further fished out a blue enamel coffee pot and a pair of tin shepherd cups. Fussing with the coffee, she asked over her shoulder: "By the way, are you absent a cat?"

"Ah, that would be Fiddle Strings," came Angus's answer, "Dair's footloose mouser. He lives at all the old places, up and down the creek, except our own. If you can hold his affections you're more than welcome to him."

"He'll be company, I suppose, although his manners can stand some--"

"Susan?" He startled her with the gravity of his voice, as if calling on her in school. "You didn't come back to Scotch Heaven to gain a cat."

She looked around at him. "Would you believe, I'm here to teach singing."

"I did hear something of the sort. And to whom."

Susan could not help but give an amused snort. This had not changed. Try to do anything on the sly in the Two Medicine country and Angus McCaskill knew it by nightfall.

"You heard right," she sorted her way through these words, "Wes...Wesley Williamson is giving him this chance."

"That's a modest wonder to me," Angus said with equal care. "Generosity from a Williamson."

She tended to the boiling coffee, clattered cups onto the cupboard sideboard between him and her, and set down the box of brown crackers with some force before answering. "You know and I know that Whit would kick a blind orphan out of his way. But the Major seems to have Monty Rathbun's interests at heart, don't ask me why. Angus, I've given myself a good talking-to about this, any number of times since I heard the man sing. This all may seem daffy"--she swept a gesture around at the dilapidated room, farthest thing from a

proper music parlor--"but the thing worse is not to see what can be done when a voice you'd gladly give your own for comes along. There's something there, when this Monty person stands looking like a hopeless cow chouser and then out pours the majority of a choir."

Angus's expression granted all she had said, but there still was a furrow of concern on him. "Say you brush him up and push him out of where he's always been nestled. Leading where, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Don't I wish I knew. I hear everything you're saying, his color can get in his way that quick. But knocking on stage doors will have to be his own concern, or Wes Williamson's. I don't care if he were made of limburger, my part in this is to train that voice of his."

"That mightn't be popular, with some."

"I've been spat on before," she said levelly.

He knew that look on her. The Susan who was the leader of the girls in the garter snake fights with the boys, the Susan who had brains by the bushel and curiosity by the cubit; the Susan he many a time would have traded places with on the checkerboard of life, truth be told.

"You know my inclination," Angus had ready now. "Teach away. You remember the approach I took with you," he made the old joke of the timid preacher being urged by the deacon to cut loose in his sermons: "*For the Lord's sake, man, fire the popcorn at the porcupine--some of it may stick.*"

They laughed together.

"I've yammered on," he chided himself after a bit. "There's not that much conversation to be made around here, any more."

"No." This cobwebbed room that had rung with Bible and rhyme. Susan glanced around, then at him. "I noticed on the way up here, the graves are kept."

"Yes, I see to that."

"Angus, it haunts me that they came to Helena to me at just the wrong time."

"People die everywhere, lass, so far as I know." He stepped to the stove and coffeed up again, his back to her. "They went like flies here, too, during the flu." She heard him swallow, on more than a bite of cracker. She knew there was particular loss, Anna Reese by name, his equal at the Noon Creek school and the woman he had waited half his life for, in that slight sound.

Susan had her own tightness of throat to talk past.

"I've been across to Samuel's grave. Twice now."

"Ah. Have you."

His turn to silently bolster her. It was six years on, since his own son Varick had come home from the Great War, and the brother whom Susan had raised like a son did not. Somewhere in his schoolhouse even yet was the homemade telegraph rig that incanted from one end of the room to the other the name of its long-boned inquisitive young maker in Morse code: Samuel Duff, ajump with ideas. Susan had taken the bright lad under her wing for high school in Helena, and right after, seen him climb onto the troop train that never brought him back. Then, their hearts out of them, no sooner had Ninian and Flora lodged themselves in Susan's care than the capricious influenza epidemic doubled back and took them. Angus winced within. The flood of death around Susan, ^{there at} ~~that last~~ ^{the end} ~~year~~ of the Great War, would have knocked anyone off her feet.

"You've been through the thick of things, I know," he resorted to. "But maybe this is your turn at some of the thin. One pupil, mind you--shall I change the name of Scotch Heaven to Easy Street for you, Miss Duff?"

She made a face at that, as he hoped.

Next task prominently waiting, Angus ~~deposited his cup on a scarce flat~~
~~surface and gathered himself to go. "I'm off to the rescue of your door."~~ He gave
 the doorway a pat of promise on his way through as Susan followed him out.

She watched him swing into his saddle and as he departed the yard, she
 thanked him with the instruction: "Don't you dare be scarce, you and Adair.

Ham supper here, as soon I can get the ingredients."

"We'll bring our appetites." ~~"You're on."~~

Sounds like
 a modern
 colloquialism
 to me, but
 you'd know
 better than
 I would

Why this, Wesley bastardly Williamson?

Angus turned that over and over as he went home and hitched his team of
 workhorses to the wagon he had been using for fixing fence on Breed Butte. By
 now the wagon ought to know the way up to the Barclay place by itself, he
 paused only long enough to muse; then climbed on and gave the reins a flip to
 start the horses.

As the rescue vessel for Susan's door splashed across the North Fork and
 began lurching its way over the ^{years =} old ruts up the slope of the timber-topped butte,
 Angus swayed on the wagon seat and in the course of his thoughts as well. Great
 treat that it was to have Susan back in the vicinity, where in the book of reckoning
 did this open-handedness by the lordly Major come from? A singing school for
 one, fluffed into Scotch Heaven by Williamson money generous as feathers? A
 change that was. Angus's mouth soured at the ancient history of contention with
 old Warren Williamson and his hoofed locusts branded with the Double W. And
 now the magical Wesley, next thing to a governor, kindly turns the valley into a
 music parlor, ~~piano and all~~? Nothing against the man Rathbun, but since when
 was a choreboy a logical candidate for the Susan Duff Conservatory of Music?

Arrival at the Barclay homestead silenced all this in Angus. He climbed
 down into the yard where he and Adair Barclay had exchanged their marriage

vows, Scotch Heaven's legion of people three deep around them then. Clapped a hand to his hat to firm it down against the chronic mischief of the wind up here so near the brow of the butte. Walked past the caved-in root cellar where Varick, forest ranger in charge of half the mountains in the Two Medicine country now, had played billy-of-the-hill endless afternoons with his girl cousins. Gingerly approached the house of logs built by himself and Rob, his one-time partner, eventual brother-in-law, and ultimate nemesis. Thirty-five years, gone again in the space of his steps; how was it possible?

McAngus, you're not immune to the calendar, he chided himself.

Looking the door over and finding it still fit for service, he went back to the wagon for prybar and clawhammer. Again now the hair on the back of his neck was up a little about the Williamsons. The original of the outfit, old Warren, four or so years ago had gone to his reward--it would take a Dante to know, but Angus figured his was a reasonable guess--on some coast of Hell. But the dirt had barely begun to settle on that well-earned grave when the next in command of what promised to be unending Williamsons, the Major, materialized right here in this yard. Angus thought back through that with care, looking for snares. He had happened to be here on some errand in his ordained role, landlord of the empty. It was soon after Rob's widow Judith had loyally sold him the Breed Butte homestead, and with that and the lease Susan had given him on the Duff grazing land, he had been going around feeling fortified about keeping the Double W from buying in on Scotch Heaven. Therefore the appearance of that gorgeous matched gray team and the buckboard with a figure of significance in it coming over the ridgeline had only tweaked his curiosity.

The grays came like winged things, then had halted smartly, as if on target, in the center of the yard. *"I merely came over to clarify something, I hope you don't mind,"* the squire at the reins delivered with a winning expression.

Angus,
right?
Specify
for
clarity.

Major Williamson was a famous smiler, and Angus didn't doubt he meant most of it, except *merely*. *"I understand you put the run on my agent the other day."*

"Tsk, Major. I nicely asked him to keep his feet off my soil."

"Does that still go?"

Angus's gaze took in the unnaturally propped leg there on a padded bolster, as if it were an item of cargo that didn't fit with the rest of the imposing person in the buckboard. *"Come on down for a stretch if you'd like."*

Wrapping the reins in a way that the grays would not get any ideas, the Major descended smoothly enough, considering. Angus watched him alight in fine western boots but with walker heels; specially made, those, he had no doubt, since the man could no longer put that limb to the stirrup of a saddle. From his end of things, the Major was all manners:

"Angus, if I may?"

That would be an improvement, Angus had come close to saying. In his time the elder Williamson had one boxcar name for all of them over here,

"Damnsotchprotestant."

"We've never been able to deal with--reach a deal with those of you on the North Fork," the Major was saying in a voice with none of his father's rasp.

"Wouldn't you agree it's about time for a fresh start?"

"I'd agree it's time the Double W had a fresh dealer, if that's what you are, Major," Angus had set the man straight. *"To us over here, your father was every kind of a sonofabitch, and Whit I'd say takes after him."*

"You're still here in spite of them, or I wouldn't be standing in this yard with the wind blowing through my every aperture, trying to talk sense to you."

Angus had chuckled. *"I'm with you on the wind, at least."* They moved into the lee of the house.

"*Regrets about Barclay, by the way,*" the Major had said as though the house reminded him. "*I know you and he went back a long way.*"

Angus's glance followed the other man's to the reservoir, off along the slope to the West, where Rob and his horse had slid on the embankment slick with spring and drowned. A life he had known as well as his own, Rob's, and he still could not make its pluses and minuses come out to a proven sum. The fit recitation cropped out almost without his knowing: "*That blind night waiting, all men darkward go/Unto Inferno, or Paradiso.*"

"*Cheyne, is that? 'A tourist, I, on the ring roads of Hell'?*"

Angus had to grant that an eyebrow of approval. "*Teach him even at Harvard, do they?*"

The Major had not seen fit to remark that in Copeland's course on literature of the ages, Copey had delighted in citing Cheyne as the poor man's Dante. With a covering cough, the Major brought matters back down to earth. "*Can we talk business?*"

"*One of us no doubt will.*"

"*Angus, I know you've worked like anything, trying to build an operating ranch over here. But in country like this, it takes a real swath of land to run livestock. Your quarter-sections*"--the Major inclined his head around to the quilt-pattern acreages of the Duff place and this one and Angus's own--"*are always going to be too small. Homesteads were an Act of Congress, and you know what happens when somebody has congress with you.*" No chuckle from Angus at that. The Major backed up to the straight and narrow: "*Homesteads everywhere are going under. You've seen that yourself.*"

"*I have. That's why I thought to shore mine up.*"

The Major looked him over as if he were a checkerboard. "*Let's try this. Double, what my fool of an agent offered. It's a lot for empty country, Angus.*"

"Imagine. Money raining, and there wasn't even any thunder."

"That still doesn't sound exactly like 'yes.'"

Angus had not been able to resist. Puckish as a Shakespearean, he confided: *"Potter in at the bank has kindly offered to take all this off my hands."*

That had sharpened the expression on his visitor right up. Angus had no way of knowing how much under it took on an immediate edge, too. If the Major had wanted to spell it out, whenever his father and Potter at the Valley Stockmen's Bank were not trying to outfox each other for some piece of land ~~the two of them~~ ^{rancher and the banker} had done ordinary business together in cordial dislike that went back approximately to their cribs. *That galvanized Yankee in at the bank* was Warren Williamson's offhand scorn for Potter's ineradicable hardscrabble-Missouri family origins. *That slab of cold roast Yankee*, Potter doubtless dripped back in his genial drawl whenever the Boston-degreed patriarch of the Double W, or for that matter the similar Major, got on his business nerves. It made wicked sense for Angus to do his dealing with Potter and let the Williamsons choke on the bone, and the Major too well knew it. He still was trying to muster the barrage of argument to counter that when Angus's face twitched toward grin.

"Potter has pockets all over him," Angus said dismissively. *"I'm not selling this to any of you creatures."*

"I hadn't thought I would go home counting that a gain," the Major manfully granted, and made the climb back into his buckboard. To his surprise, Angus held him from going by grasping the near horse's rein. *"Potter did have one thing interesting to say. You're buying up homesteads all the way east to the Highwood Mountains, are you?"*

"Where they fit into our pasture picture, I am." His tone as much as added: *With both hands.*

~~What do you get, Angus had wondered then, when you double the Double~~
 "Tell me this, Major. How much ground would you say a man can swallow before he turns into an island?"

No answer given, that day or this. Standing there akimbo, looking out over the gentle spill of valley and the meandering creek he and Rob had followed to here like giddy pilgrims all those years ago, Angus put aside the past for the moment, which was ~~far as he was ever able to put it~~ ^{long as he was ever able to}. He remained bothered over the open hand of the Major, back down the slope where Susan was strenuously setting up shop. But Susan had always known her own mind, had she ever. Telling himself to confine his prying to the stubborn hinges of the door, Angus set to work opening the house on Breed Butte to the elements.

That night Susan put into her diary:

So much for wishing for ghosts, when they line up in the mind to volunteer.

 DROP CAP
 Early sun was sorting the green plaids of spring--blue-green of the timberline on Breed Butte, mossy green of her doddering barn roof, meadow green of the volunteer hay fostered by the creek--when Susan stepped out into the morning and around the corner of the house to gaze north. From growing up here, she could catch sight of a coyote the instant its lope broke the pattern of the grass on the farthest butte. So, she spotted without effort the horseback figure on its way across the benchland from Noon Creek, then could not blink away the duplicate figure next to it.

Eventually the two riders clopped into the yard and swung down, facing her with their reins drooping in their hands.

"Morning, Miss Susan," Monty said in short fashion. She could tell at a glance that he was full of second thoughts over this, about to go back for thirds.

Dolph appeared no more happy to be along than Monty was to have him. The pint-size cowboy reported unwillingly, "Ma'am, the boss says I got to tag along with Monty here, do any chores while you're schooling him up on this singing."

Susan paused over the knot of logic by which, if a woman was at risk from a man, two men were sent.

"You can chink." She indicated gaps between the logs of the house where hard weather had done its work. "The whole place can stand chinking, I'm sure. Mister Rathbun, come on in."

Looking doubly doleful, Dolph moved off in search of buckets and the nearest clay bank as Monty traipsed into the house after her. He was surprised to see it wasn't much of a layout. The kitchen was the center of everything, as was to be expected, but this one appeared to have had a boxcar of peddler's goods emptied into it. All of it made his own room at the back of the Double W washhouse seem a model of order. But through a doorway to the room beyond the kitchen he glimpsed a spinet piano, its white keys like bared teeth.

He kept on looking at every possible thing in the house except the woman standing there like Lady La-De-Dah. All of a sudden he remembered to take off his hat and then had no idea what to do with it.

Susan snagged the unmoored hat, hanging it on her father's peg nearest the door in a way that told Monty there was where it belonged from now on. She wasn't displeased that he didn't sail in here and make himself at home. He had been awkward as a schoolboy there at the Gates of the Mountains dock, too, but for her purposes better that than slick and stuck on himself.

"Let's go on in here." She led the way as if he were the hundredth pupil in this log cubbyhole instead of her first and only.

The piano sitting waiting, Monty edged into the room.

"Ready, I hope?"

"Miss Susan--"

Whatever he had intended to say, he took it back to makings as she watched. Finally he nodded, a sharp inch of inclination and then as quickly gone, and issued only: "I guess I can't count on getting any younger."

I just wish flashed in Susan, right past the ramparts of determination and teacherly creed she had been trying to maintain. In singer's years the man in front of her was a near-eternity older than the pupils who had to prove themselves in her Helena music parlor, and now that he stood here fresh off a horse and in work-worn togs instead of that handsome greatcoat, she was fully faced with the task Wes was letting her in for. And. And of course those considerations paled, so to speak, alongside the fact that among all her pupils ever, there had never been a colored person of whatever age, dress, or capability. Well, she instructed herself, that's why the two of them were here, wasn't it, to drown out *never* with song.

"Don't look so nervous," she passed the mood of instruction toward him. "No one dies of music except in opera. Now then, let's first of all hear how you sound on dry land. That same song, please, and take your time with it."

The flutters in him saw their chance again. Kill this off before it got started. Croak out the spiritual, off-key; cough in the middle; tell her his voicebox had come to the belated realization that it was too old to go to school. *Quit before you even start?* some banshee in his conscience howled back at that. *Why not scoot on home under your Momma's bed and play with the cat, while you're at it?*

Feeling like a first-class fool but choosing that over running and hiding, he nodded again and resolutely gathered himself to put what he could into the air.

"One moment, Mister Rathbun. May I?" She ~~came~~^{strode} over to him and pushed his slouched shoulders back and into straighter alignment, Monty flinching with surprise. "A singer mustn't stand all caved in." Her dress swishing, she stepped back to demonstrate. "High chest. Level head, no, not as if you're gandering around for rain, merely level does the trick. Here, watch again." She looked ready to give the Gettysburg Address, while he felt like he was being turned into one of those hat-store mannequins.

"*Go Down, Moses*" came out about as it did with the accompaniment of the Missouri, Monty's phrases like one bell after another but no arc of sound in between, his voice punctuating the melody rather than following it. Again Susan was bothered by the labored way he squeezed air in and out of himself, as if his chest was a polka accordion, and she despaired for a moment over the lengthening mental list of items to be worked on.

Yet there was the genuine article somewhere in there, she was back to thinking by the time he was done with the song. When he stood planted (pigeon-toed as only someone who had spent a lifetime in cowboy boots could be, she added to the mental list) and let loose, somehow you ended up hearing more than he seemed to have sung, as if his voice had a shadow made of sound. At the Gates of the Mountains, she had wondered if it was a trick of the canyon echo; here as there she had to try to keep a rein on her sense of excitement at the way his knells of song stayed on for that unaccountable moment, lingering in the ear, the auditorium of the head. That vocal quality was rare and it was the one thing this problem pupil had going for him.

"Spirituals suit your voice nicely," she said to be saying something uncritical. "Your mother always sang those at her work, the Major told me."

"She did. She came from church people." He hesitated. "Although it was hard, out here."

"No doubt."

The slap of wet clay against a furrow of logs startled them both. Dolph had chosen to start chinking outside the exact room where they were. The pair of them tried to keep straight faces at being chaperoned with mud and trowel.

"Let's get ourselves underway," she did away with that distraction and set right to work on what was nagging at her the most, the drag of his breathing as he sang. "The first of many first things"--the quick little toss of her head was meant to take the edge off that, and didn't quite--"is that you must learn to properly draw air into yourself."

Disappointment clouded him over. He hadn't come here to take his nose for a walk.

"This all counts more than you may think," Susan came close to a coax a lot sooner than she wanted to. "You can't expect to sing your way to the top of the world without your wind under you, now can you." *Suppose not, Monty's* ~~this~~ manner came around to, and he presented himself for whatever she had in store. She drilled into him that he was going to have to breathe from deep down, bulge his middle so his diaphragm would let air all the way into the lower region of his lungs. "It's like cleaning out the bottom of a closet so the rest of your things will hang right." He gave it try after try, and his intake still was the worst part of his vocal wardrobe.

"Don't worry, there are exercises. Mister Rathbun, you're not to let yourself be perturbed about whatever you think I'm inflicting on you *honestly*" Are we agreed? Now then, pretend you are smelling a rose."

He gave a minimum sniff.

"A nine-year-old girl can do a better job of it than that." She looked stern until he inhaled lustily. "That's not bad," she commended. "Now put your fist in front of your mouth as if holding a bugle."

How does she know these things? His sudden little amused expression took Susan by surprise. He had a good contained grin. She felt silly. What had she expected, a minstrel show gawp?

"Mister Rathbun? What is it?"

"I have me a bugle. I do. Played it all the time when I was a bit of a thing."

"Angeline, the boy is driving us mad with that bugle."

"I'll have him put it up, Mister Warren. It was his father's."

"Then you know very well what I'm asking of you, don't you," Susan swept on. "Put your clenched hand up, no, against your lips. As-if-with-a-bugle, for heaven's sake. Now smell the rose, but put the air back out through your fist. *Deep* breath, now blow out, make it sound like a tea kettle. Again--in, out. Until I tell you to stop. Again. Once more. Take your hand down, keep that same rhythm of breathing. There. Feel the muscles work? Down there in your flanks?"

His flanks felt as if they were an unwilling topic of conversation. "Some, I guess." He wondered how much of this Dolph was hearing, outside.

"That's what you must practice," she decreed. "At home, in the mirror. Do it a dozen times first thing each morning and again over the noonhour and again at night, and I guarantee, I can tell whether or not you have been doing them." Monty considered himself notified. "Next let's acquaint you with the notes."

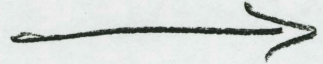
He listened apprehensively while she demonstrated how to sing the scale. Her voice was smooth, each note up the ladder a tease of song; how was he ever

p. 65A follows →

65A
~~66~~

going to get there? She would hold pitch, he would frown in concentration and then sic his voice onto hers. After considerable of this she called a break, with tea

"considerable
of this" OK-
colloquial



p. 66 follows

and honey for his throat and enough advice from her to make his head swim. Then back to traversing the notes. It took many tries, but finally she granted that he had approximated the scale.

By the time they called it a day, he felt as if he had gone fifteen rounds. Heading for his way out, he made his manners and said he would see her tomorrow.

"You will not," Susan informed him with a slight smile. "Three lessons a week are as much as a voice can stand. Every other day and Sunday off. But practice the breathing exercise in between, don't forget." He stood there at the door looking as if he had been swatted with the calendar, but she couldn't help that. "Wait, let me give you my list for some more provisions. And tell Whit Williamson for me that I am going to need a milk cow."

Monty fiddled with his hat while she kept jotting down foodstuffs. The adjusted ciphering of musical career that he was doing in his head was not coming out well at all. "Miss Susan? How long you figure I'm going to need to take lessons?"

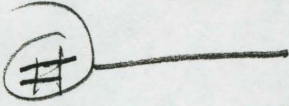
"Oh, forever," she said absently, still writing her grocery list.

"How--how's that work?" His dismay was the purest note he had hit all day, causing her head to snap up. "I can't be coming here until they lay me away!"

"No, no. I only meant that every singer needs refresher lessons, all through life. As to how long these sessions need to go on--we'll just have to see." Her face gave away nothing, but the provisions list she handed to him looked long enough to endure a siege.

~~He~~^{Monty} turned at the door. "Mind if I ask? These lessons forever--who gives you yours?"

"I administer them myself. I take my own medicine, Mister Rathbun, don't worry."



Nights run slow here, rationed out by the wick. Why hadn't I remembered?

She moved the lamp some more until it almost touched the open diary, annoyed at how spoiled the electricity of Helena had made her. There was no great reason why a person couldn't write and read by courtesy of kerosene. Compose an operetta.

"Fiddle Strings, will you quit." The cat tickled its moppy fur back and forth across her ankles, purring without shame or letup. "You're a tyrant, you are," she addressed downward. Rather than go out in the dark to the springhouse for milk from the pail, she resorted to the can of condensed milk she used on coffee, cutting off the top to get the last teaspoon into the cat pan. The cat looked a trifle critical, but lapped it up.

She fed the fire next, last of the night's chores except for the load of good intentions she had brought here with her. Piqued by Monty's question, she nightly put her voice through its paces before she ever sat down to the diary and the waiting noteless sheets of score. Good thing, too, because if she held off on her vocal exercises until she accomplished what she wanted on the page these nights, she would be in direct competition with Angus McCaskill's rooster as it summoned the dawn up there at the head of the valley.

Having given herself enough of a scolding, she resumed at the table again. *Prairie Tide* lay there side by side with the diary; inert, the weight of ten years on it. How could this be, that the mud-road cavalcade for the vote refused to shape itself to music for her, after she had been the one to pour forth its soul in song? She could see, fresh as this moment, the famous trio of flivvers, dubbed the

Nina, the *Pinta*, and the *Susan B.*, grinding from town to town along the full length of the Yellowstone River and then looping north to the wide plains of the High Line and the even newer counties and sprigs of towns there along the immigrant seedbed of the Great Northern railroad. Blindfold her and spin her dizzy and she could still perform the evening of favorites that drew the homestead families to the scattered one-room schoolhouses and the fledgling motion-picture emporiums, so that on the heels of her rousing songs the speakers could have at those audiences on behalf of the statewide suffrage referendum. "*Our ambassadress to the shanties*," she was deemed by Jeannette Rankin, high-born and connected and said by everyone to be Congress-bound as soon as Montana women wielded the vote. Susan, her father's daughter in quickness to take umbrage, had swallowed that from Jeannette because there was a flavor of truth to it; as the carloads of the crusade trundled past isolated gulches where kerosene lamps glowed yellow, puddles of light such as she had come from, she felt singled out by some circular law of the draw.

Of course even then she had known that the performance of a lifetime would not go uncriticized. The costs, back in Helena. "*Miss Duff, I must know-- are you one of those suffs? My child does not need a singing teacher who believes in disrupting the home.*"

"*Then she will never have the historic privilege, Mrs. Moberley, of a teacher who believes the female of the species has the right to be distinguished from the lower animals by possession of the ballot. Are we not persons?*"

In the end, all had been worth it. The overshoe counties, the prairie tide of settlers, carried the day in the so close referendum on suffrage. It was a famous victory, and lacked only its snatches of tune. The moment Wes proposed Scotch Heaven to her in this charitable enterprise of his, to call it that, Susan saw the interlude here as her chance to remedy that lack. Here she had solitude, that

Cheshire countenance of creation: find the face of what you wanted to do and lock onto it without blink or hesitation, wasn't that the prescription? Here she was even paid (*All right then, triple*, the most welcome words Wes had spoken to her in those four years) to sit and stew over music. (Unbidden, the schoolyard song chanted in her: *A diller, a dollar/a high-collar scholar*. Why on earth should that take up room in her head, and not some passage fit for an operetta? Maybe there was her answer, have Angus's tots compose the lyrics that seemed beyond her.) Here she had but ^{a single} ~~one~~ student--although he frequently seemed like more--standing in the way of the time and strength and patience that ought to set that pageant of mud and glory to music. And tonight again she couldn't capture any of it, the flivver journey of 1914 as scattered as the Milky Way.

"Trunk songs," she delivered the verdict on this work of hers to the noncommittal cat. What little she had composed so far was only worth being closed away under a firm lid, in there to ferment with the mothballs. With *Prairie Tide* swept away one more time, she went back to the diary and today's other frustrating musical chapter.

I am so down I can hardly write. Monty works hard at these lessons, but there is no reservoir of breath in him. It's as if he has no diaphragm! He chops along from note to note. This morning I braced him as to whether he was doing his exercises when he is out of my sight. "Religiously," he had me know. I must hope that did not mean only on Sundays.

not "he told me";

NO -
it's an
intensifier

The next day came blowy, perfect bad weather for staying in and facing unwritten music, and she was trying to get underway when a voice outside resounded like the language of kings:

"Susan! I've brought you a person of importance!"

Angus's hail drew her to the window. He rode past to his schoolhouse every morning about now, but the bundled-up figure perched on the saddlehorse next to his, those formerly auburn pincurls peeping out from beneath a severe scarf--*Adair, at this early hour?*

She was more wrenlike than ever, Susan saw during the doorway effusions, the years carving her down to delicacy. Most unScottish, for a woman born not a pathlength away from her hewn husband, but then Adair had always been the other side of category.

"Come in, hang your hat on the floor," Susan fell back on the habit of the house.

"Not I, thank you just the same," came back from Angus at once. "I have to go put roundish thoughts into squarish heads."

"And you wouldn't have it any other way," Susan told him, Adair chipping in with "You'd mope like a spent rose without that old school of yours."

"Leave it to Scotch women to shed a ray over the affairs of men," he jested. "If one of you doesn't tell me what I'm about, the other one will."

It took two to set the likes of him straight, they assured him, and off he went to his schoolday. Susan turned and groped at the cupboard.

"Adair? I have coffee on, but beyond that, I'm afraid it's graham--"

Adair produced a dishtowel bundle. "I brought you a loaf."

The bread was still warm from the oven. Susan sent her a look. A woman who had baked bread before breakfast? And then ridden down here in the dew hours to spend, what, the day? Ever since Susan had sung at the wedding of Angus and Adair, when even to a knockkneed schoolmaid it had been obvious how Angus's eyes searched past his bride of convenience to Anna Ramsay, Susan had tried to fathom what this person's view of things must be. But there seemed no knowing, no way in past those deflecting gray eyes with their odd guardpost

of freckles directly beneath each. In the time after Adair's second stillbirth when the women of the other homesteads would visit in and always find a deck of cards laid out in columns in front of this woman, Susan's mother would come home shaking her head and say, "*Adair and solitaire*," not a commending rhyme. Now Adair was fixedly saying, "It's so fresh, it may be hard to cut."

"No, no. It'll be a treat."

Susan mauled off two large floppy underdone slices and the two women silently buttered and ate. They brushed their hands of that, and took up one of those dutiful conversations about the how of things, how was the Rathbun man doing, how were the further generations of McCaskills coming along. Susan was delving desperately--she was relieved out of all proportion when a gust rattled the kitchen windowpane as if wanting to come in out of its own weather and join them, and the two women were able to say almost in chorus that today's was a thieving wind, it had stolen through snow somewhere--when Adair came out with:

"Susan, I'll not keep you from yourself."

With a start--*written all over me, is it*--Susan began to say something patently insincere about company other than herself being good for her once in a while. The other woman interjected:

"I only came to ask a bit of a favor. I would like lessons."

Serves me right, Susan let herself have, suddenly longing for the procession of sugarplums with ringlets through her Helena music parlor. "Adair, really, I'm just here to tutor this one pupil."

"Every other day, according to when I see him and his wetnurse riding across the bench."

¶ "That's so. But--"

"That leaves the other days."

Susan gave up any pretense of politeness. "What brings this on?"

"I'm not asking you to make me into a fine singer or famous or anything of the sort." *I'm spared that, at least*, Susan thought with relief. "It would be something to do with myself, is all." Adair spoke this as if from a slight mocking distance away from herself. She floated a glance to Susan. "A person can sing to herself and not be thought soft in the head, can't she."

Susan blinked a couple of times. "It's a help, I suppose. Music is delirium on purpose." She wrinkled her nose. "Who came up with that? Chopin? Puccini? Madame Schumann-Heink? Me?" In the bit of time this had bought, she made up her mind to the songless soul across the table. "Adair, I always need to know--what manner of music do you have in mind for yourself?"

"Songs with the old country in them," Adair stated. "Your mother's songs would do me."

Susan that night thought long and hard about the populace of solitude. About the dots of humankind, connected and not, strung through the weathered valleys and across the girth of prairie like constellations reflected on the ground. The Adairs, the Anguses--and those between them even when no longer there--of the flivver trip: the women hungry for any other women to talk to, even dressed-up ones from Helena; the men half-bemused and half-alarmed that they would be hearing these suffrage arguments from their wives and daughters forever after. Then episodes began to come back to her, the elongated memory shadows from the dots. The syrup sandwiches that were all the supper that could be mustered by the host family fresh from their emigrant railcar near Ingomar. The proud pledge of allegiance in Danish by the Frisian colony gathered civically in their church in their fledgling town of Dagmar. The way smoke would fall to the ground before a storm, the smell of the weather riding out to the road to meet them as the *Nina*,

the *Pinta*, and the *Susan B.* chugged into view of yet another isolated homestead chimney.

"Out of my way, star boarder," she directed the drowsy cat. She fetched the sheets of composition paper to the table and spread them there in the wash of light.

By midnight she had unraveled two lines for every one she had written, and endured her way through another one of those spasms of hopelessness when not even the prepositions seemed to fit into her sentences, but she had a few lyrics and something hummable to show for the night.

#

DROP CAP

"How's come the Major is so generous on this singing of yours, and not on my trick riding?"

"Dolph, the only riding trick you know is to climb on the side of your horse a person is supposed to, and you've got a fifty-fifty chance on that."

"What the hell you talking about?" Dolph sputtered. "I can do the saddle stand, and the Comanche tuck, and, and--" Monty's effort to hold in laughter registering on him, he grinned sheepishly. "Tune up your tonsils, then. But you end up back at rodeoing instead of concertizing, I'll ride circles around you any day."

"Fair enough," Monty said soberly.

"Here, I'll barn the horses, you git in there and take your medicine from her," Dolph rattled on as they dismounted in the now familiar yard. "Ask her for me what she's doing with all the milk from that damn cow, feeding an orphanage?"

As he approached the house Monty could hear her in there plinking the piano in a testing way, *da dum, da dum da da*. Knowing she was just waiting her turn at him, he knocked and already had the door handle in his grip and his hat

ready to flip onto the peg by the time she called the customary "Come on in, Mister Rathbun."

She didn't migrate into the kitchen to swoop him in as usual, though, only poked the top part of her around the inner doorway like the front end of a clipper ship. "Here's an idea. Come see."

Monty sensed something arduous ahead. But when he stepped in to where she had taken up her station, the only thing new was that her wind-up Victrola had been moved to front and center, its morning-glory horn expectantly aimed their way.

"Today I have something I want you to hear, Mister Rathbun--do you suppose it would be all right if I call you 'Monty'? It would save some on the world's supply of breath that I'm eternally after you about."

His short-measure nod. He still was trying to come up with an educated guess as to what this was about. Stand around and listen today, after standing around chasing through the scale those other days? *Am I ever going to get to just sing?*

Vigorously she cranked the phonograph and set the needle onto the record. Out poured a profound bass sound as if the foundations of heaven were shifting; Chaliapin in *Boris Godunov*. Monty appeared ready to take to the hills.

"Whoops, not that one," Susan said with a chuckle. She grabbed the intended record from the imposing stack on the sideboard. More whirls of the phonograph handle, and a voice soared high and clear:

"Let us break bread together on our knees,

Let us break bread together on our knees.

When I fall down on my knees

With my face to the rising sun,

Oh Lord, have mercy on me."

She cut the song off there with a practiced pass of her hand over the Victrola and looked at ^{Monty} ~~him~~ to judge his reaction. He felt dry-mouthed as he managed to say, "It's nice." He hoped to everything ^{that} ~~it~~ was Roland Hayes. If there was more than one spiritual singer like that in the world, he had might as well go back to polishing car fenders right now.

She ^{divulged that} ~~made him know~~ the voice was Hayes's as if it was obvious even to the snoozing cat over there, and talked on a bit about the fullness of that voice, the technical polish on a natural purple tone. "Now we're going to pick up the trick from him."

Another spirited winding of the Victrola, but this time she hovered over it, putting her finger lightly against the edge of the turntable as it spun. Slowed down that way, the voice on the record became a stately warble. ~~He listened as though he were deciphering pig Latin.~~

^{still listening with the desperation of} "There," Susan said cagily, Monty ~~looking at her as though whatever she~~ ^{a man trying to decipher pig Latin} ~~was up to was as clear as mud.~~ "Hear what he's doing, inside the words? I'll play it again. Here, this part."

This time he could catch it all:

"Leht uss brayke brehd toogethur..."

"Our Mister Hayes e-nun-ci-ates," he could hear every pore of every letter the way she said it, "doesn't he. He's shaping the words, there in the vowels for instance--each word carries into the next and brings the melody right along with it. Now then. I'd like you to copy him at it until you catch the knack." Wind wind wind, went her hand on the Victrola handle.

~~This was off angle enough he wanted to make sure he had a grasp of it.~~

4 "Sing along with that machine while you make it logey, that's what you want done?"

"Only if you're not shy to be around a voice that knows what it's doing."