

ranchland and beef on the hoof but the attic space of geography; nooks and crannies of pasture like this under the planet's eaves.

A series of whoops and orders being shouted above the mooing drew her attention back to the trail herd. Perhaps stuffing this many cattle this high into the timbered foothills of the Rockies went against the human ear and common sense, but she couldn't deny that it made quite a picture. Several day-herders now slunched in their saddles at strategic points around the milling herd while the main file of riders headed in, their roans and sorrels and pintos mirrored in the bowl of lake like rich dabs of color on a clear blue palette. As they dismounted around the chuck tent for the midday meal, the bearded cook directed the traffic of Stetsons and batwing chaps with an imperial ladle. Susan tickled behind Wes's ear to make him look up and take in the scene. "Even I admit it's like a Russell, except nobody is bucking a bronc through the pork and beans."

Wes gave an appreciative wisp of smile. "Charley^{la} apparently never met a horse that wasn't snorty at chow time."

"He portrays schoolmarms as a pernicious influence, too."

"While I think they are nature's highest achievement."

"Do you really? I'm afraid we have loftier rivals, right around here." She took in again the glacier-scarved mountains, augmented at this time of day by puffy clouds with flat, gray bases as if they had been sponged against the earth on that side. "Doesn't it remind you of that time in the Alps?"

He swung around to look at her, losing his place in the tallybook. "We were never in the Alps together."

"Just testing how well you keep track. And your ability to tell me from a Heidi. And how many yodels you've never yodeled."

"Not to mention your capacity to tease the life out of me."

"I hoped I was teasing it into you, Wes."

"All right." He laughed as if to demonstrate he hadn't forgotten how. "Guilty as charged. I'm more wrapped up in the travels of cows than I want to be. Whit has always been trail boss." At the moment Whit was in California, sorting out Wendell after some scrape frowned on by the college authorities. Getting the bearer of the Williamson family escutcheon through Stanford was requiring increasingly strong doses of fathering. "I'll make amends," Wes promised while he reached and took Susan's wrist as though he were a penitent who just happened to have a glint of another sort in his eye. "What would you say to a basket supper and sunset at the upper lake, when I'm done with the Agency people? Whit would never spoil you like that, but if he hears about it and takes my job away, so much the better."

Susan had to smile back at him over that. She was no expert on trail drives, but she knew Whit also would never have shoved a couple of thousand head of cattle miles out of the way, as Wes had done the day before yesterday, to keep them from trampling the vicinity of the site of the Lewis party's fight with the Blackfeet, and then spent the afternoon bumping over that prairie in the Duesenberg, navigating from one landmark to the next in the Fields journal with her in wonderment at his side and Gustafson peering over the steering wheel for badger holes. When at last the ill-used automobile nosed along a particularly precipitous brink of white-clay bluff, Wes let out the shout, "There!" Directly below, in the colossal rupture of the prairie where the Two Medicine River twisted through, stood the three huge old solitary cottonwood trees, like ancient attendants minding the campsite. With wild roses on the face of the bluff blowing in the wind, Wes and ^{she} ~~herself~~ had sat there gazing down into the century before, retrieved by a single witnessing pen. She had a diarist's feel for the quirks of opportunity it must have taken to set the Lewis and Clark explorations down onto pages at all, but an unearthed journal fresh from midtown New York still seemed

to her as randomly propitious as lightning illuminating a safari map. She had tried to wheedle out of Wes the cost of such a piece of historical luminescence, but he wouldn't tell. "*Beyond price*," was all he would say. "*Like you*."

seems an odd comparison for her mind to make

"Supper that way sounds grand," she responded now, along with a return squeeze of his arm. "This is rude of a guest, but will you clear something up for me? Why are you putting cows and calves onto rough country like this, and for that matter why isn't Whit having a conniption about it? These cattle will have to work uphill for every spear of grass. Not to mention that the timber up here is full of blowdowns, and probably bear."

Now, she's imaginative enough to be capable of it.

If her line of inquiry hit home, squarely in the tallybook, he didn't show it. "The Deuce W needs shaping up before we run the full number of stock on it," he said almost idly. "Some windmill watering holes, fencing to be done, that sort of thing."

"Short grass again, you mean."

"Your father's daughter." That drew him enough of a look that he hastily tacked on: "When it comes to grass. What was I thinking, trying that on you." Suddenly serious as could be, he folded his arms on his chest and contemplated the herd already starting to munch its way up a slope that turned to timber just ahead of them. "If we ever have anything but a dry summer, we can quit being cow conductors. For now, these bossies are going to have to pretend they're mountain goats."

Grass is short, i.e. scarce, because of

He paused, then returned to her question. "Whit will just have to put up with the fact that I no longer can buy acres as fast as he can buy cows. You're right that we'll be nicked on a lease like this. A considerable number of head will end up inside grizzlies or at the bottom of gulches with broken legs. Probably more will end up in stewpots--we have to see that as a tithe." He gave a slight shrug.

Susan was surprised he could be that casual at the prospect of losing cows to enterprising Blackfeet. Rustling was rustling, wouldn't you think? Particularly if you were a Williamson?

"Speaking of fathers," she got in, still trying to follow his thinking, "let me be more rude yet while I'm at it. What would yours think of paying good money for land this time of year and then having to walk away from it in the fall?"

That turned Wes dramatically philosophical. "Why do you even ask?" He tossed a hand of futility in the air. "He would think Whit and I have taken screaming leave of our senses, as the old always think about the young. As Whit and I think about our own offspring."

"Oho. Old now, are we."

"It's only a masculine trait. Women grow more fascinating."

"Especially in a cow camp," she whittled that down. "Your riders look at me as if I have two heads." She mimicked a cowboy gape, ~~that was at once shy, sly, and apprehensive~~. "But you, oh no, you don't get that from them even when you chase off across the prairie in the Doozy after Lewis and Clark. I hope, my dear Major Williamson, that doesn't mean they're used to seeing you with a woman who isn't your wife."

At first she thought he wasn't going to answer, but then as though it were a duty to report this sort of thing he told her: "They seem to expect something of the sort of me, actually."

"Really?" Susan's tone was as if she was taking a scientific sounding. "It has come to that? Where there's a rich man, there positively has to be a mistress tagging along?"

"For God's sake, Susan. You know there's more than that to it, with us."

"No, this interests me. Shouldn't I see myself as a kind of collectible, like that journal you can barely stand to put down? And you as the connoisseur of

sufficient means I've been lucky enough to be plucked up by? Privilege has its rank, we both recognize that. If you were one of your cow chousers squatting around the bean pot over there, we never would have had the least chance at one another, now would we."

Wes studied her thoughtfully, then stepped over and kissed her for as long as it took.

Susan brought up a hand and ever so lightly ran a finger back and forth along the side of where their lips met, as if saving it to taste. Eventually she stroked free and drew a breath. "I suppose you think that's a way of ending an argument. It's not bad."

"High praise. I can hardly wait until we outright fight. Add that to supper, can we?"

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than she gave him a soft biff to the collarbone, as if to announce her readiness to trade love taps any time he wanted. Wes chortled, and stepped away to collect his tallybook. "I hate to cease hostilities. But I'd better go down and run through things with Petrie"--his foreman--"so we'll be ready when the Agency people show up."

"Wes. There's something on my mind--surprise, surprise, right?"

Reluctantly he pivoted to her and stood as if braced for the worst. Only to hear her say:

"How would it be if I let you have my piece of the North Fork?"

His face lit up, but she had anticipated that. Only in his eyes did she catch the flicker of the chain lightning of his mind.

"On lease, I mean," she stipulated. "This year, and we could see about next."

She could see the calculations flying in him, cows into acres, acres into cows, the capacity of the North Fork as an ever-running watering hole, the tonnage of its hay--"Susan, it would help on the Double W herd. In a big way."

"I want you to put a fencing crew in there first. I won't stand for cows mooching onto the McCaskill place from mine, I don't care if Whit has to sit out there himself shooing them away."

"I'll see that the fences are so tight not even a wee sleekit cowering tim'rous beastie could get through." Wes took an eager step toward her, although he knew better than to kiss her this time. Sticking to business if that was where she wanted to be, he vouched: "Of course we'll pay you top dollar."

"You'd better."

"I'll tell you what, I can bring the papers with when I come in for Monty's concert."

That wasn't her preference, but she held to the mood: "Two occasions for the price of one, why not?"

"On that. I'd like us as much together there as we can--you'll see, he's gotten astounding." Susan waited, knowing what was coming. Managing this was the one thing that seemed to throw him, and he was ~~not much~~ ^{did not} better at it than ever when he awkwardly asked: "You'll be able to come in the warm company of Mrs. Gus, won't you?"

"I wouldn't miss the chance for anything, even Mrs. Gus."

Looking buoyed, Wes went off to muster the cattle for counting. This time Susan ~~didn't~~ ^{did not} watch the panorama of herd and riders and wary mountains. She sat in the tent, distractedly leafing through the valuable journal Wes had given prideful place on his portable desk. *Beyond price. Like you.* Such woo from a Wes with infinite cattle on his mind. *I'll see that the fences are so tight not even a wee sleekit cowering tim'rous beastie could get through.* Passable Robert Burns

from the man who ordinarily fumbled the Scottish tongue, no less. Where did he summon that from, even given his knack to perform up to what nearly any circumstance asked? She should know something about gauging that capacity in him, and it bothered her that she did not. Rehearsals were her field, but run those clinching sentences of Wes's over and over in her mind as she was, she could not decide whether he had rehearsed those lines.

DROP
CAP

"Hated to ask you to come all the way across town, but I didn't know how else--"

"All that way, tsk. This is a treat. I'd have been happy just to poke my head backstage and say hello after you floor them tonight."

"Couldn't let you off that easy. Get you something? Tea and honey?"

"You. Inflict my own medicine on me, would you. But thank you, nothing. Monty, this--I have to say, I'm impressed."

"Not exactly Fort Skin-and-Bone, is it." He followed her gaze around the parlor of the Broadwater Hotel, Helena's finest, complete with plush grounds and natatorium. Now that he and she were established in the plush chairs, nicely out in the open but far enough from the lobby not to have every word overheard, he felt relieved. Even yet this was not easy to make happen right, not here, not anywhere that he knew of. From the window of his room he had watched like a hawk, if hawks are ever nervous, until she pulled into the grounds in her car, its doors and fenders still peppered with what likely was North Fork mud. Then made himself hover just back out of sight at the top of the stairwell while she announced her purpose to the desk clerk, to see how it went before he would have to go down and try to bluff the clerk. *Damn it. All we want to do is visit with each other like human beings.* They lucked out on the clerk: the man turned out to be the father of one of her pupils in years past, and Susan's sweetly put "*here*

for a musical consultation with your famous guest Mister Rathbun" did not stand his hair on end. Here then they sat, decorous amid the nearly smothering decor of velvet and Victoriana and tasseled rugs. Monty could tell she meant surprised along with impressed. "Year ago, they wouldn't have let me in here," he said what they both knew but it helped clear the parlor air by saying it. "Maybe even now, but the Major put in a word."

"Tell me whether I'm seeing things. A man out in the gardens looks all the world like Bailey."

"None other. I had him hired. There's a bruiser or two around somewhere, too." He rushed through that as if it was an ordinary part of business, but Susan was looking at him so pointedly that he broke off and made a small patting motion in the air. "Nothing to be excited about. The people I'm with are sort of spooked by what the clucks tried on you and me, is all. I thought they were going to back out of town when I told them about the Confederate Gulch gold and the Johnny Rebs who turned into galvanized Yankees out here as soon as they had money in their pocket. Took the pair of them around to Clore Street and that settled them down some." His turn to put a point to her with his eyes. "Life been treating you all right, I hope?"

"Atrociously. I haven't been around a world-beating voice for what seems like ages. Until the one I'll hear tonight."

"More what I had in mind was you being out there alone at Scotch Heaven all that while. It's been bothering--"

Surprised at the urgency in his voice, she cut in with what she always said when people got going on how much time she spent with herself: "Don't fret, 'alone' isn't spelled the same as 'lonely.'"

"Maybe around the edges, it's not," he said as if his experience did not jibe with hers.

She made a conceding murmur and ducked onto surer ground. "At any rate, you can quit worrying--I'm going to lease out the homestead. Helena has me on her hands again, poor old town."

Now Monty was the surprised one. "The Major didn't say anything to me about you giving up the place."

"No? Did you check the reflections in his vest buttons?" Fanning a hand and holding it with her other, Susan expertly mimicked a person playing cards close to the chest.

He acknowledged that with a slow nod. "I'll need to do that when he comes in from the ranch tonight, you think?"

"Whit's, too, while you're at it. You knew you're going to be honored with his presence, didn't you?"

"You must be kidding. He's setting foot off the place when there's no livestock involved?" It was on the tip of his tongue to say what next, the ghost of old Mister Warren showing up along with them tonight at the Marlow Theater and growling out *I take it back, Monty, go ahead and blow your bugle, boy*. But her and the Major, as close or apart as rails of a railroad track, depending on when you squinted in their direction--right now she was really up on the doings of the Williamsons, and he didn't want to tromp flatfooted into whatever that meant. He switched back over to his original intention. "I started to say, it's bothered the living daylights out of me that you were where the Klan hoodoos could have got at you. I know you wrote that the Williamsons made it too hot for them, but--"

"Scalding, was more like it." Departures in the night. Examples made by Whit and his ax-handle crew. Sheriffs and county attorneys suddenly rigorous. Wes and the influences he could bring to bear had taken the Klan out of the prairie heartland of Montana like lice soaked out of sheets. "My neck never felt at risk, any of the school year," she maintained. Monty watched the familiar way she

arched that neck, ivory as a carved rarity, as she pronounced on that chapter of the past. "No excitement except the boys tipping over the girls' privy, and that's eternal. No, I've done my bit in memory of Angus and helped Adair close up their place, and I'm tucked back into the house here and the Double W's cows inhabit the North Fork, end of story. Now you." She sent him a mock haughty look intended to let him know she was inspecting his progress. He had filled out somewhat, but solidly, no jowls or paunch. His fetching blue pinstripe suit would not give any of Wes's a run for the money--whose would?--but it had a tailor's touches. All along the line, so far as she could see, he looked as if New York life agreed with him. Still, he was here, not there. "Somehow I didn't expect to see you back, this soon."

"Denver is next on the tour." He grinned. "I convinced my manager this is practically on the way."

Susan's eyebrows were up. "I must have left geography out of those lessons of yours."

"That'd be about the only thing. Say, you know what works slick? That music stand." He had particularly wanted to ease her mind about the audience problem. "Can't explain it, but I don't get choky with the songsheets right there, even if I never need them."

"Told you." Her face lit, she urged: "Your turn. Those fancy-pantsy musicales of yours--tell all."

From there on their conversation kept jumping its banks. He told her about hobnobbing with the Rabiznaz, wanted to know how her own music was coming. She told him she was within shouting distance of the end of the operetta if the shout could be a better song than she had managed to come up with yet, and what were his living arrangements in Harlem like? They were back and forth at

this a mile a minute until they heard a notifying cough. In the doorway of the parlor stood J.J. and Cecil, fluffy bathtowels over the arm of each.

"This is Miss Duff, my teacher I told you about," Monty said, reeling off the introductions. "Wasn't for her, the most I could look forward to would be changing sparkplugs every three months."

"Ah? Then the ears of the world are in your debt, Mrs. Duff," J.J. said with something between a nod and a bow. Cecil's wordless acknowledgment of her certifiably amounted to no more than a nod.

"It's Miss."

"Mizzz Duff, excuse me all hollow." J.J.'s sibilant antic made Monty want to bat him one.

"Sorry to interrupt," J.J. swept on, "but we were just passing. We are off to the waters," meaning the Natatorium across the hotel grounds. "Cecil here needs to cook like an egg to thaw out from this Rocky Mountain air, he claims. We are told we will have a generous portion of the pool to ourselves." J.J. smiled as if at the wonder of that. "Roped off for our very own use, I gather the procedure is. Western hospitality is really quite something."

"We did give the world Monty, from out here," Susan offered as though it were a neutral observation. "We may be coasting a bit much on that."

"That was generous, I can't help but admit." J.J. fussily checked his watch against the parlor's grandfather clock as if two opinions were needed on the hour of day, then recited: "Keep an eye on the time, Montgomery, don't forget to catch some rest."

"It's as good as caught, J.J."

"Good day, Miss Duff. Been our pleasure."

Monty watched the pair of them go, shaking his head. "See what you and the Major got me into? They both know their stuff, but--what're you laughing about?"

"I just realized. Here you are in the Broadwater with a manager and an accompanist and Bailey and bruisers, all the trappings I could have dreamed of for you, and I've never even heard you in front of an audience."

"You have so. Not their fault they were pigeons. Toughest critics I've had yet, though."

Susan surprised herself as well as him by giggling. Monty ~~chuckled~~ ^{chortled} at the scale-like run of that, which tickled her some more, and then they were both in helpless gusts of laughter, two Two Medicine ragamuffins carried up past Fort Assinniboine's pigeon droppings and all other mires to make their marks on life by the glorious force of music.

Susan at last wiped her eyes. "Stop. Halt. Enough. I really should be going."

"Not before I put you to work a little." Before she could blink, he reached something out from behind his chair and rested it in his lap. "Do you mind? Wanted to show you a change in *Mouthful of Stars*---I think I misremembered how the holy rollers used to do the chorus of that." As he dug out the piece of music she saw that he carried the songsheets in a leather case embossed with the initials MR; cowhide had a different place in his life now. "I think it should go"--at the back of his throat he deeply crooned down, then up, up, instead of up, down, up.

Susan hesitated. Was this something he needed done, or a pat on the head for her? He had not been the butter-spreading type before, but that was before. The question lasted no time before giving way to the spell of music in his throat and his hands. "Let's just see," she said, a bit out of breath, and was up from her

chair and confronting the upright piano, its teeth yellow with age, that claimed a corner of the parlor.

Plinking until she found a reasonably reliable run of keys, she coaxed out an amendment to the tune, Monty at the end of the piano listening keenly. At her nod, he sang the chorus that way atop her playing. She knew she probably shouldn't--the justifiable wrath of his manager was somewhere between there and the Natatorium--but she plunged into the whole song, Monty's voice all but taking down the walls of the parlor.

"There, then." Past the ache at the back of her heart for more of this, she made herself quit, saying she would fix up the follow-sheet for his accompanist if he liked. Monty dug in his shirt pocket, came up with a stub of pencil. With great care she wrote in the notes, guided by her own hum now. One last thing and then she would go. "Could I take a peek at the songsheets? It would be fun for me tonight to know the order of songs."

"You bet." He gravely handed her the sheaf that represented all their work together. "That's how I've got it put together for here. Oh, and over Cecil's just about dead body, I always stick in the Medicine Line one wherever the program feels like it needs a lift."

"Why doesn't he want you to use that one?"

"Because he doesn't like it."

"So then why do you use it?"

"Because he doesn't like it."

That set them off riotously again. Susan sobered an instant before he did--*what am I doing, this man has a performance tonight--* and resolutely stood up from the piano stool. But invoking a teacher's privilege, she took a last memory-book look at him, storing away the prospering dark features that were as heightened and polished as his voice now. Not much more than an arm's length

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away Monty was gazing at her as if trying to remind himself of something. She
held still, →

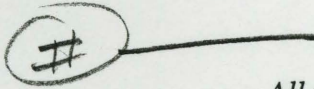
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waiting for whatever it was. Finally he said: "You're wearing your hair down. It's nice." Hesitantly he put out his hand for the songsheets.

"Trying to keep up. Speaking of hair, it's really time I get out of yours."

Taking the music from her, he fumbled it back into the leather case. Then gestured as though he would change things if it were in his power. "We have a rehearsal, after J.J. and Cecil finish their soak. I'd have asked you to come to that, but--"

"Monty, I would have turned you down flat," she said fondly, sadness in there, too. "I'd be one too many irons in the fire there. Seeing you this way meant more."



All those other Saturday nights in town, and I never even made it through the door of this place. He moved back and forth in an arc across centerstage there in the afternoon-empty Marlow Theater, singing the two lines "*When I was young and in my prime, I dabbed my X on the Medicine Line*" over and over as he sought the spot where it felt right to stand. The massive chandelier out over the seats scintillated as if beaconing him to step this way or that. He grinned, just from general joy at treating this fancy stage like a parade ground. *No way this was in the running with the Zanzibar, back then. Some of those scrapes, ow. It's a wonder I'm here with my guts still in me.* He kept an eye on J.J., audience of one, who was prowling the empty seats, nodding when the sound reached him just so, shaking his head when it was not so good. Monty wheeled, tried it from closer to the lip of the stage. Took a step the other direction, cast "*When I was young....*" into the air of the theater from there as though flyfishing into promising water. Right from the start of the rehearsal he had been feeling exceptionally fine, as loose and full of jingle as when he was a much younger man

challenging the rodeo bulls. The stage manager stood off at stage left patiently plucking his sleeve garters until Monty called over, "I think I found it here."

The man came out and chalked an X where the toe of Monty's shoe was indicating. "I'll be right back with your music stand and we can see how the lighting suits you," he told Monty and disappeared backstage.

Cecil had been sitting in wait at the piano. Now that Monty's voice was not claiming the theater, he noodled at the keyboard of the Steinway, apparently without satisfaction. "They call this a piano in this burg?"

Monty and J.J. exchanged glances. They might have been concerned about Helena's taste in pianos if they had not heard Cecil make this same complaint about Boston's. Before J.J. could say anything, Monty observed: "Looks to me like it has all the keys, Cece."

"This new follow-sheet, man, I don't see why that chorus goes--"

"Because now it's right," Monty said easily.

Frowning, Cecil tugged at the cuffs of his tux and looked to J.J. for justice.

With a show of judiciousness the manager sized up the two of them. Poor Cecil, eagerly waiting for fame to devour him. Monty was a different breed of cat. In off these wide open spaces. Monty reminded him of the Senegalese, when they stood there blank and calm sharpening those three-sided French bayonets as the attack barrage poured down only yards away. J.J. still could not put his finger on it exactly, but there was a solo quality about Monty that ran deeper than what issued from his mouth. In all his time as a manager, he had never come across a talent who climbed so fast yet kept his head about him. And that white woman, whatever she was about, had given Monty over readymade for stage work. "They're his songs, Cecil. Ours not to reason why if he feels better primping them."

"Probably be an audience like an icebox, no matter what I do," Monty by now had reached the trouper's point of courting good luck by invoking bad.

"You're sounding first-rate," J.J. told him, more than ritually. "A little more geared-up for this than you maybe need to be, though. You don't have to bust a gusset for these people just because you're back home. They'll clap if you so much as step out there and clear your throat, you watch."

"Nothing doing," Monty retorted firmly. "All out, tonight. Goes for you, too, Cecil. Don't be on bad terms with that ^{CQ}piana, hear?"

Just then the stage manager called him for the lighting check, and the other two retreated to backstage.

Cecil was still steamed. "Jace?" He was the only person in the world who called J.J. that, particularly with a permanent question mark. "What goes, anyway? I was kidding around about the piano. But messing with the follow-sheet without even talking to me about it, that's something else. He's been acting high and mighty since we got here. I know these are his old stomping grounds, but--"

"So let him stomp for the folks," J.J. said tiredly. "We'll sort all this out in Denver."

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The bromide for the unspeakable is, 'Words fail me.' I vow they will not. Susan was panting markedly with the effort this took. When she caught up to realization of it, she drew a careful series of breaths to steady herself before writing the next. *Tracing in ink what happened last night is the only way I know to tell the world ahead how one thing followed another, each piece of time a shard streaking lightninglike to the next.*

This night she had come to the diary in something like a daze of duty, the rhythm of obligation as insistent in her as the tides of her heart. Her hand was fixed to the page before she made herself pause and review everything that had danced out of place since the last time she seated herself there. The past twenty-four hours were a jumble, at every level. She blinked hard, barely staying dry-eyed, as it registered on her that Samuel's photograph had been toppled. Might she just now have done that herself, in her willed unseeing reach for ink, pen, and pages to testify on? Or--? Whether or not it was her own doing, she picked the photograph up off its face, stood it where it belonged, and again put herself for all she was worth into her pen hand.

Mrs. Gus and I had arrived to the theater together, bookends that don't match but surprisingly few people seem to notice. An audience huge for Helena was pouring in and the lobby was a crisscross of former pupils of mine grinning at me as if they had good sense and mothers on the warpath about my absence for the past--dear me--year and then some. I fended as well as circumstances would allow, promising probably too many of them that I now would be giving lessons again and if they dreamt of their child one day filling a theater this way, lo, that chance awaited in my music parlor. I could not account for why I was such a sudden celebrity until someone said in near-awe "You've met Montgomery Rathbun then, what is he like?" and that quick it dawned. Word had spread from Milly Tarrant's father, the desk clerk, that the famous Mr. Rathbun had sought me out for advice on a point of music; the image of us meeting like heads of state of the musical world there in the parlor of the Broadwater would have bowled us over at Fort Assinniboine.

Of course every stitch of a performance night interests me, even the straggly processional of the audience sorting itself into place, and we were going

in to our seats early when Mrs. G. looked back over her shoulder and said, "The misters are here."

There was a last nimbus of sun going down behind Mount Helena and a moon like a globe lantern waiting to replace it as Wes and Whit climbed out of the big car. Lilacs bloomed, their color deepening with the day, in the hillside neighborhood across the street from the Marlow Theater. Summer on such an evening was slow to step down from the longest day, a week before; dusk and warmth would linger as if night was temporarily postponed. Because of the time of year Monty's performance was set for 8:30 so people could do the necessary for their gardens and lawns, come in from fishing or porch-sitting, round up the musically inclined members of the family and stroll down the gulch to the theater, men carrying their suit jackets carefully over their arms.

Whit, though, lodged a complaint to the evening air that seemed to have come in on a tropical tradewind. "Damnedest weather. Still feels like the middle of the afternoon."

"Is there any weather you do like?" Wes inquired, genuinely wondering, while he gestured that Whit's tie was riding cockeyed. "You came back from ten days of California sun complaining it didn't give you anything to get your teeth into."

"This is about as balmy as it was there, and you can't tell me that's natural. Gus, I need to fix my choker. Would you--?" As Gustafson held the door of the Duesenberg open at an angle that provided enough reflection, Whit bent down and used the car window as a mirror to adjust his white tie.

Waiting for him beneath the modernly elegant vertical marquee of the Marlow, Wes took the chance to scan the streets and was reassured to find policemen posted where they ought to be--some up at the corner of Broadway and Last Chance Gulch, others down here at the intersection by the theater--just

conspicuous enough. Whit was in the Knights of Columbus with the Helena chief of police, and it had been decided that any dregs of the Klan who showed up to shout epithets were going to find themselves charged with spitting on the sidewalk. Privately Wes believed last summer's crackdown had sent any of them who counted slinking off to safer climes, tails between their legs, but an extra shift of police should make Monty's entourage feel better. Right then a lantern-jawed man stepped out of the lobby, took a look around, and nodded to him. One of Bailey's. They probably were unnecessary too, but wouldn't hurt either. "What do you think then," Whit was asking as he gave a last tug at his tie and straightened up, "will Monty add '*The Palm Trees Sway When You Say I May*' to his list tonight?"

Wes looked at his brother in surprise. Whit getting off a thigh-slapper over a song of the day was about as likely as Al Jolson making a joke about Herefords. But Whit himself would have been the first to say he was an improved person since the North Fork was offered up. For his part, Wes had stuffed the lease papers into his attache case before they left the ranch as if the document was any other transaction. Which, pretend to himself as he was trying, it in no way could ever be. He still was working on tomorrow, when the two of them were to meet with Susan in the morning and signatures were to go onto dotted lines. When they pulled up in front of the theater he had glimpsed her for a moment there in the lobby and knew he would be aware of her during every note of Monty's performance and it still seemed beyond reckoning, that a bumpy encounter in France had led all the way to this. And Monty at the heart of it. In tribute to that he started into the theater, but Whit rerouted him with a shoo of the hand.

"Let's hold on out here a minute--we're in for more culture than I can usually sit through. Condemned man always is given a chance to roll a last one,

isn't he?" He pulled a tobacco pouch and pack of rolling papers out of the pocket of his evening wear, did a judicious sprinkle and licked together a cigarette.

While Wes withdrew into his thoughts, which he never seemed to want company on, Whit let out a silent whistle of smoke as he studied the theater placard studded with the most glowing phrases from the review in the *New York World*. Half the newspapers in Montana had picked up that review. He shook his head at having had so famous a choreboy. "Do it all over again, would you?"

Wes chose to misunderstand. "What, every particle of my life?

"How about one or two of the main chunks here lately?" Whit invited.

"What's turned you philosophical?"

"Ahh, who knows. Told you it's funny weather." Whit tossed down his cigarette and demolished it under his patent leather shoe. "All right, let's go get music in our ears. Here's hoping his Montana debut turns out better than his mother's."

Wes said flatly, "It's bound to."

You can sometimes tell what an audience is like beforehand. This one was curious, perhaps a bit--Susan waited, pen nib poised, for the right sharpening of word--anxious. Monty's songs would be as new to them as an underground stream suddenly pouring up out of the ground. My sense was that they wanted Monty to be the real thing, to be someone who had made it to on high, from their midst.

There was the curtain motion, the flutter, that happens not long before a performance.

"Five minutes, Mister Rathbun," came the call and short rapid tattoo of rap on his dressing room door that seemed to be delivered by the same set of vocal cords and knuckles in every theater in the land.

"Be right there, thanks," Monty responded and checked in the mirror one last time. Meeting there a version of himself so fitted out in distinction and determination that the apparition looked primed to perform the concert from that spot in the dressing room and be heard in the dusk-curtained canyons of the Rockies all the way to the Two Medicine country. Out across the reach of prairie, bounded only by the moon, to Fort Assinniboine. Into the winding country of memory, where his mother lifts from her laundress chores and prepares herself to sing at the statehood celebration, in a yesterday that never came, three dozen years ago. He nodded satisfaction at the personage in the looking-glass as if catching up with him after all this time.

Exultant, he went on out to the back of the stage and around to the wing and the stage manager's roost. Even yet he didn't care much for the feel of backstage, it amounted to about the same as the chute area in a rodeo: you hoped nobody did anything back here that would have untoward consequences to you out front. But he thought of how Susan loved every guy rope, dust mote, and gizmo trunk of it, and had an abrupt word with himself for not working it out to invite her to watch from the wings tonight. Could have asked the Gustafsons and she'd have been included as if attached to them, that would have been the way.

Can't get it all right all the time.

Within whispering range of the stage manager, J.J. was at his usual perch on a high stool too big for him, like a natty flagpole sitter. A figure planted in the shadows beyond J.J. and the stage manager and a couple of stagehands was as unmoving as a costume mannequin, but the set of its hat identified it as Bailey. Monty knew that one of the bruisers was stationed at the back door, and if all this didn't reassure J.J. and Cecil he didn't know what would.

"Good house tonight," J.J. recited to Monty as he always did, whatever the audience size.

Monty stepped out onto the curtained stage ~~far enough to see~~ ^{check} that his music stand was on the mark ~~where it ought to be~~, then made a beeline for the stage manager's peephole.

J.J. was not stretching it tonight; a sellout crowd, packed from the front row to ~~some~~ ^{some} standees along the farthest wall. What seemed to be Clore Street intact filled one entire balcony. He spotted Susan beside the Gustafsons. A row behind and a few seats over, the Major and Whit Williamson in full evening regalia, one slick and one mussed but otherwise drawn by the same hand.

"One minute," the stage manager called, nervously watching Cecil who was still fussing with his music sheets in the rack for them on the piano, moving them an inch one way and then the other, although Monty seriously doubted music racks differed very much from piano to piano. But as he always did, with seconds to spare Cecil sashayed over into the wing alongside the rest of them as if the curtain could not rise without his elevating presence, the first bow of the evening deliciously his.

The accompanist sopped up applause somewhat overlong, Susan jabbed the comma in as if it was a thumb in Cecil's ribs, bobbing like one of those toy birds that dips its beak in a glass of water. But then Monty made his appearance, and the real applause started.

As he came out I saw that he had been right to resist my attempts to cure his walk--that cowboy saunter of his lets the audience know this is a person who has come an extreme way to reach this point. He handles himself notably in every other way that counts, too. It has been long years since I sang on the Marlow stage myself, but I thought I remembered its particularities, and Monty did me proud when he took his mark exactly where I had guessed. As if the stage belonged to him. As if he had inherited it from ~~say~~ ^{the most royal line of singers} Chaliapin.

The few times I've been on a stage*, I have in no way been able to identify anyone in the crowd, and I gather from others that this is a common phenomenon among stage performers *or even in the wings.

Task, you note: musicians are so hyper. Any number of times in theaters like the Marlow, I've picked out Carol & Sunday friend in the audience, akin to what Monty does here. & etc.

also a necessary set-up for where everybody is when the quake hits.

The applause poured over him until he steepled his fingers in a gesture of thanks and readiness. He had decided against saying anything first, just hit them with the first song. Now he nodded ever so slightly to Cecil, who piously unclasped his fingers from his lap as if raveling out a prayer, and the piano music rippled out with a parade-ground prance.

"Forty miles a day

on beans and hay.

Scenery all the way

on cavalry pay.

"When I was young and in my prime--"

Monty with controlled power held the note on the last consonant, setting it up to chime with the even more resounding one in the next line--

"I dabbed my X on the Medicine Line."

As he hit that note, round and perfect, the chandelier above the crowd began to sway.

He froze, the cut-glass constellation in motion even more now. Cecil shot him a confused look, trying to decide whether to keep playing so Monty could pick the melody back up or wash the tune out and start over--and then his hands halted on the keys as if a message was coming up through them. The music stilled, the only sound now the gentle tinkling of the chandelier. Then a rumble, like thunder down in the ground.

The theater floor vibrated as if it were the deck of a steamship leaving the dock. Pell-mell, the crowd came to its feet and started piling toward the doors, not a stampede yet but definitely a clogged surge.

An earthquake gives a person a jolt in more ways than one. It causes your basic assumption of life, the ground on which you exist, to quiver. I had been through one before, the time I took Samuel to Yellowstone Park. But we were

outdoors there, the sway of the trees like fishing rods in truth rather interesting. Here the question was whether the theater would shake to pieces with us in it. I thought something already had fallen and bruised my arm when I realized it was Mrs. Gus's grip on me.

Willing his bad leg to match his good one in the effort, Wes was up and clambering into the next aisle, fighting past eddying audience members to reach Susan and Mrs. Gustafson. He always hated pandemonium, he would rather take his chances in a shellhole. Now he banged over seats until he was within reach of Susan, a vexed expression on her that seemed to wonder why people needed to be so contrary, as she tried to make her way toward the stage. His instinct supported that: "The stage steps! Out that way!" No sooner did he have Susan and Mrs. Gustafson plunging that direction with him than the Marlow Theater gave another shudder and the lights went out. In the sudden interior dusk, plaster dust making them all cough, he muscled a path for the women to follow him. Whit and Gustafson, each puffing harder than the other, caught up with them.

At the first ripple of motion under the stage Monty had bolted for the shelter of the nearest wall, in case the roof was coming down. He hung on there, peering out into the spilling aisles of the theater, in spite of Bailey tugging at him and J.J. and Cecil shouting at him from the backstage door. When Susan and the rest of the group came stumbling up the steps in the dimness he grabbed her by her free arm, and between them he and Wes, and Bailey somewhere in there too, half-shielded and half-levitated her in a crablike scramble.

It is the nearest I will experience to traveling by sedan chair. Behind me Mrs. Gus was similarly scooped up by Whit and Gus and the bruiser.

A chunk of plaster the size of a garage door fell and shattered on the stage.

They heard a rain of glass as windows rattled to pieces. As they ran the obstacle course of backstage, the building seemed to think it over, whether to settle back from its restlessness or curtsy to the mastering earth.

We came out in the sidestreet. The quake seemed to have shaken the clock mechanism of the universe, it had been only few minutes yet it was as if we had passed through some entire season of life.

J.J. and Cecil were there to lend a hand when they flooded out the door. The rumbling and shaking quit as abruptly as it had started and that was disorienting too, not knowing when the earth's case of the quivers might start up again. The group of them clambered away from the back of the theater, Wes counting heads as they skittered out into the sidestreet like a handful of dropped marbles. He halted everybody when they were safely out of range of walls that might crumble. Dazed, they peered around as if surprised that the moon still hung in place, that there was the same air to breathe as before the thundershake of the earth. Except for the population out in its streets, most of whom would spend the night in their cars, downtown Helena at the intersection a block away from them appeared remarkably unchanged. "Gus, if the car is in one piece, bring it around here, quick," Wes directed. Bailey said the same to his man, then sprinted up to the corner to see if the streets were passable out of the Gulch.

No one else moved much, as though the surface under them was delicate. Susan had taken to gripping Mrs. Gustafson's considerable bicep reassuringly rather than have that muscle applied to Mrs. Gustafson's gripping of her. All the while, the only sound besides everybody's tentative breathing was Mrs. Gustafson softly moaning in a hiccuping way. The cluster of them stood waiting there, dressed like aristocratic refugees amid the tipped ashcans and broken windowglass. The night was staying warm. "Earthquake weather," Whit

accused, from his familiarity with California. "Damn it, I knew it was up to no good."

Monty numbly stared around at the city pocketed now in the moonlit mountainscape. *What does it take*, the thought came at him from every direction, *a million tries?* Rodeo getup or tuxedo, this place was determined to leave him in the dirt. Two more shakes and every one of them would have been buried in bricks, all because he had been determined to put the postponed anthems of his family into the air here.

Watching the look on Monty with apprehension, J.J. cursed under his breath. He edged up to Susan and whispered, "Can you do anything with him?"

No longer holding back, she was at his side in an instant. "Monty, you can't let this get you down," she heard herself saying, something they both knew the words to. She rummaged desperately for anything that might count as consolation. "Caruso was in San Francisco in that earthquake, and he went on to--"

"I'm no kind of a Ca--"

Just then the Duesenberg nosed into sight, Bailey riding its runningboard. He jumped off before the car drew to a complete halt.

"I grabbed onto a newspaperman^a who's on the line to his office," he reported. "Most of this was around Three Forks, Sixteenmile Canyon, in through there. Streets look like we can get through." Wes nodded along^{as} while he worked on the logistics of delivering everyone out of this. While Bailey was speaking, Gustafson climbed out and planted himself beside a fender, evidently wanting his feet on the ground until the other car got there and things were sorted out.

Whit came over to draw Wes's attention. "Maybe we've lucked out. This far away, any aftershock might not amount to--"

"Harm!" Gustafson shouted, startling them all. He broke from beside the car, making a run at the danger he could not name.

Wes whirled, but saw he was too far away. The man had charged out from behind the lilacs here on the residential side of the street. He targeted Monty before the others saw him as anything but a blur detaching from the dark, swinging the ax handle with both hands, like a baseball bat. Monty tried to duck while Bailey pushed Susan out of the way and kicked at the assailant.

Wildly the ax handle swished in the air as the man bulled in on Monty like a crazed woodchopper. Just before Gustafson barreled into the attacker and upended him, a backswing caught Monty as he tried to turn his head away, the blade-end of the wood cracking him across the base of the collarbone and up onto that side of the throat with a terrible sound. He fell backwards to the street with one hand splayed toward where he had been hit.

The other men boiled around the pinned-down attacker as Wes tried to minister to Monty and Whit chuckled his rolled-up tuxedo jacket beneath his head for a pillow. There over them, Susan stared, sickened unto stupefaction, at the Williamsons with all their powers and Monty on the ground like something slaughtered.

Wes looked up at her when he had Monty's tie undone and his shirt plucked open. "The collarbone took it worst. But the throat, along that side--"

J.J. and Cecil and Bailey scrambled over to help lift Monty to the car. Bailey's men frog-marched the assailant off to turn him in to the police. "Ned recognizes him," Bailey choked out, near tears, "hanger-on who didn't even make it into Potter's bunch. He's the dimwit brother of somebody Whit's boys gave a going over. I guess that's why an ax handle instead of a gun."

The hospital was a nightmare. Miraculously few were injured by the quake, but there were hysterics, and it took some doing to make it understood that

we had a man out in the car who had been beaten with a club. Wes prevailed, of course, and a doctor and stretcher crew went out for Monty.

In the hallway of the hospital after the patient had been installed in a room and was being examined, J.J. came over to Wes to make the matter clear. "Just as soon as he can be moved we'll be taking him back to New York, Major. Had enough hospitality out here."

"My rail car is in the yards over there. It's yours. "

"That would help."

Nightmare does not begin to say it, about this. People wake from nightmares eventually. Monty may never, even though his eyes came open when I last saw him, being carried from the hospital. That creature from out of the dark could not have hit him in a more severe place if he had sighted in with a rifle. I--

Susan stopped writing. Downstairs, the snick of a key in a lock, the sound of the front door opening and then quietly shut.

She knew it would be Wes.



The train howled out steam, white whistle blast beneath the plume of locomotive smoke, at the latest cattle that had broken through the right-of-way fence. Cecil took such shrieking personally. "Can't they train those cows to keep off the railroad, like dogs are housebroke?"

J.J. trimmed him to silence with a single glance. To him too this prairie seemed to go on forever, and heifers or whatever they were roamed in shocking freedom. But in his considerable experience grumbling had never been known to make a train go faster.

Cecil vamoosed to the front of the Pullman to read his breviary. J.J. went back to the paneled-off sleeping compartment to look in on Monty again, not that looking helped much either. The doctor whom the Williamsons had sent with

them, Walker, told him at the start: "The collarbone, that's nothing. I've set hundreds of them on rodeo riders and ranch hands. But that business with the throat--all I can do is keep him quiet and turn him over to somebody who knows what he's doing."

Monty and the doctor both were dozing, the one in the bunk half mummified with the cast across the upper part of him, the other in a chair with his head propped by an arm in a way doubtless learned by waiting for babies to come. J.J. had stepped in here steeled, but the sight of sleep as the only reliable truce that life let anybody have made him wilt as much as it had during the shooting war in Europe. The catch in his throat he recognized as the fear he had carried through the Argonne forest of hell: of a living death, the kind of wound that took away eyes or testicles or a leg or an arm. He hadn't even thought of the voice.

Feeling the train slow a notch and then another and another, he backed out of the sleeping compartment to watch what happened at this stop.

It had started at Harlem, the Montana depot version of it. Some railroad magnate went goofy, J.J. had noticed on the way out, and slapped names on the stops along the tracks the same as real places of the world--Malta, Zurich, you'd think you were on a royal tour instead of some toot-toot prairie train. He and Cecil had razzed Monty about that particular little burg, asking why he'd figured he had to go all the way to 135th Street when here was a Harlem in Mon-tan-i-o, just look, it even had a skyscraper: the grain elevator taller than the main street was long, the two of them had thought that was funnier than anything. This time when the train made its quick stop at the tiny town, there by the telegrapher's office waited an overalled man nearly as dark as the shadowed area he was standing back in: the depot swamper, pushbroom in hand, in respectful attendance. A couple of hours farther on at the depot at Glasgow, the same ceremony of witness by a church congregation of ten or a dozen; there was no

mistaking the preacher with the dignified wool under his homburg. J.J. realized that stop must be a division point on the railroad, to account for such a number, and from that he figured it out in a hurry. The trainmen. The yassuh telegraph, silent polite ebony-faced servers of railroad food and dark distant caboose-riding brakemen who some mysterious way were spreading the word ahead.

Wolf Point, the weather-scarred sign on this town less than royally said, and J.J. saw that this time it was a colored family, probably the only one in a place so small, presenting itself on the depot platform, the father pointing past the Great Northern coaches to the Teton and Two Medicine railcar and saying something to his children in a tone obviously hushed.

Back at Glasgow the first newspaperman had been waiting too, and J.J. knew there would be packs of them at the big-city depots ahead. That was the only good thing about this, he thought grimly, and set to work on his statement about the one more form of lynching that would be on the conscience of this country if Montgomery Rathbun was never able to sing again.

(H)

Why didn't that sonofabitch just kill me and get it over with?

Somewhere around Minot, Monty came more or less awake again. He felt as if something terribly heavy was sitting on his windpipe, with its claws dug in. Not to mention his collarbone hurting like fury all the way out to the point of his shoulder, and the skin under the cast starting to itch.

The bastard had to really hate hard, ride out an earthquake to get at me.
~~God~~
~~Christ~~ *mighty, is there just no end to--*

"Here," the gruff voice was back. "Just try some."

Hovering over him the same as the last time he had opened his eyes was Doc Walker, after him to take some soup down. Monty started to shake his head, and found out what a bad idea that was.

"Goddamnit," the doctor reasoned, "if you don't want to eat for your own sake, do it for mine. How's it going to look if a patient of mine starves to death?"

To get Doc Walker's spoon out of his face, he opened wide enough for a sip of the soup. It hurt all the way down.

#

DROP CAP

All lyrics seemed leaden to Susan, in the days after, and she hastily abbreviated the rendition of "*When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder*" that the redheaded girl had been proudly prompted into by her mother.

"I can take it on faith that you kept her voice up, Mrs. Quinton," Susan pasted on her best expression again. "Very well then, we will resume Lily's lessons. I regret that I had to go away for that while, but Lily is so much more mature now that we'll make up for that bit of interruption in no time." One version or another of this she had recited five times already today, and she was almost prayerfully grateful for the rescuing knock on the front door.

But when she answered it, what the threshold held was Wes. *Keyless? And if so, why?* her eyes interrogated before a rustle of impatience at the side of him manifested itself as Whit.

"Sorry to intrude, we thought you would be done by this time of day," Wes put forth a politeness that carried like cologne toward Mrs. Quinton and her daughter. "Really, our business matter can wait if--"

"Not at all," Susan interjected, her eyes still working him over and delivering a few swipes at Whit as well. "We were just finishing off ours. Come in out of the summer."

Mrs. Quinton simpered past the man who would have been governor and his cattle king brother, Lily managed to look everywhere except at the gauntlet of

grownups, and off down Highland Street they vanished, leaving Susan with her next tableau.

"My, the brothers Williamson. Thinking of becoming a duet, are you?"

"I'm needed to co-sign," Whit for once kept himself to the minimum.

She studied him as though wondering whether he was fit for such a task. When she had him sufficiently unnerved, she turned toward Wes. "And Monty? Any fresh word?"

Wes hesitated. The side of his face could feel the press of Whit watching him at this. "He's out of Presbyterian Hospital back there," he kept it to. "J.J. has him in his apartment, a nurse with him. The medicoes can't tell about his voice yet."

Susan would rather have taken a beating than do the arithmetic of *yet*. A week after the drunken roper at Havre had done her such damage at her neck, her voice had begun to respond. It had been ten days now since Monty's clubbing. Equivocation by the doctors at this point was worst news, she knew.

Wes ached to go to her. Which only would have postponed the next hard part. "I--we don't like to bother you with this, honestly. But another dry summer--Whit tells me tomorrow wouldn't be too soon to start watering cattle on the North Fork."

"Yesterday," Whit husked as if his own throat was parched.

Susan stood there uncommonly pale, as if keeping a moment of silence for Scotch Heaven. After ^{some} ~~a few~~ seconds, she murmured: "Then let's get it over with."

The signing of the papers didn't take time at all, it seemed to Susan. Whit had capped the pen and handed it back to her with awkward gallantry when she became aware that Wes was studying her speculatively. "Now that we're past

that," she caught up to what he was saying, "this came just as we were leaving the house." He handed her a telegram.

MUST REACH MISS DUFF. PLEASE.

--JACE JACKSON

set in
small caps?
something
telegram-like

Downtown and Up

1925

Why give them another run at me?

The pencil point nearly pierced the paper as Monty jabbed the question mark onto that. Behind the angry fuse of line was explosiveness tamped tight by ax handle. What else was he supposed to do with the fundamental fact of life that some loony would pop out of nowhere swinging a club or worse and leave him like this, beaten halfway to hamburger and rooked out of his singing career just when he had it made ~~and more than likely headed back to an existence the equivalent of milking cows~~ no matter how he watched his step. And it was always going to be that way, because that's the way it had always been. He turned the tablet around and shoved it across the table to her as if they were trading turns in a furious grudge match of tic-tac-toe.

Susan leaned to the table again, trying not to let her apprehension show as she took in the writing. The tablet traveled on the veneer with a sandpapery whisper each time Monty whipped it over to her. She held back for a few

unclear

Monty's explosive anger is tamped in him by the ax-handle incident as blasting powder or dynamite is tamped in before detonation. let's keep it, if just to give the reader something to think about

moments, as if waiting for the paper to quit rasping, before she spoke. "You can't just let them wreck you. You certainly don't have to worry about another run at you from that cretin with the ax handle--the Williamsons will see to it he'll be in the penitentiary until he comes out in his coffin." Monty was grabbing the tablet back to himself, pencil at the ready. "I know," she tried to head off the agitated scribble, "that doesn't put you back to what you were. But *he's* going to be out of commission from now on and there's every chance that *you're* only out of commission until you heal up."

The tablet scooted back toward her as if of its own accord. *You don't savvy*, it read, *it hurts to even breathe deep*. Before she could respond, he swung the paper again and jotted: *& I sound like death warmed over, you heard that yourself*.

There, she would have had to admit under oath, he had chisel-hard truth. Her ears still were trying to recover from when she stepped into this stuffy apartment with Jace Jackson and heard like a croak from the crypt: "Why'd they have to bring you back here?"

"Such a greeting," she had forced out, for once in her life certifiably scared. "Are you supposed to use your voice yet? I don't think you should." In disgusted answer he brandished the writing paper. She had stood rooted there, trying not to stare at the purple splotch of bruise that was the side of his throat, and below that the turtleshell of plaster cast showing through his dressing robe. A sleeve of the robe hung empty, that arm sling-fixed in front of him to immobilize the shattered collarbone. By then J.J. was fleeing to the kitchen with the excuse that he had to tend to business by phone.

"Monty," she tried again now, "all I am saying is that when the doctors decide it's all right for you to try your voice, we can see how it handles music. I helped with that once, I may as well again." The pencil was twitching in his

fingers as if he couldn't wait to stab at that. Whatever the medical prognosis turned out to be, the mood she was seeing across the table showed the opposite of hope. "You have every right to be down on life," she felt she had to resort to, "but what happened back there was a chain of bad luck. If we hadn't all been shaken out of our boots, Bailey and his men would have been able to keep that creature off you. That's behind, now, and when we have you so you can sing again and audiences flock to hear the man who withstood the idiots of the world, life will even out again."

He shook his head, slight movements that still looked as if they hurt like fury. He held up his hand as if to say wait a minute, then set to work on his next message.

She sat there trying to dab her wrists and brow into some semblance of dry, but perspiration popped back on her within seconds after each swipe of her handkerchief. The living room of the apartment--rented furnished, she could tell; Monty would not likely have smothered the couch and every stuffed chair with matching magenta antimacassars, nor invited in the retired-looking piano that took up more space than anything else in the room--was close and dense as a chick hatchery on a day like this. She remembered these kinds of summers from her first time around in New York, with a heatwave haze over the city for days on end, a gauzy coverlet on top of the blanket of humidity. She felt doped with the heat, and rocky yet from the three-day train ride that had deposited her at Pennsylvania Station that morning. "Could we have a bit of air, do you think?"

Monty lifted his pencil long enough to gesture impatiently that he did not care one way or the other, although the upper part of him must have been sweltering under that cast.

She shoved the window up as high as she could. The air of Harlem felt only marginally less hot than the incubating apartment. Nonetheless she pushed

aside the lace curtains and stood at the window trying to will the atmosphere into some cooling motion. What she got was commotion. Iron-wheeled clatter of a knife-grinder's cart going by, along with a chant she could not understand a word of. Peppering in and out of that was the rackety putt-putt of an ice truck.

Background to both was the pervasive locust hum of automobile traffic over on the avenues and main cross-streets. The steady clamor it took a mammoth city to produce, and she was fifteen years out of date at coping with its energies and mystifications.

Had Jace Jackson lost his bearings, gambling that she was the right medicine for here? Somewhere down the block she could hear a water-rush that must be a gushing fire hydrant, and she drank in the sound of that cataract as if it were the North Fork in spring spate.

When she turned around to Monty, bracing herself for the treatise, he was sitting back as if spent. Slowly he sent the tablet her way.

Miss Susan--I am taking your name in vain, but I need to make the point as strong as I can--I know you think you can fix anything but the break of day. But this isn't anything a music stand or running to keep my breath up or anything else will help. The man who beat me is only one of who knows how many, and that's what there is no cure for. You know and I know that I didn't pick out my skin, like it was the one suit of clothes I'd ever get. Yet that's how it is. The singing does not work out for someone like me, we have to face up to that. I'll maybe end up ~~swamping at the cafe under the elevated~~ ^{back milking cows}, but at least I will be in one piece. Believe me, I hate to say this, it goes against everything the both of us have tried to do. But I wish we had never started.

Susan read it over, then motioned for the pencil. "To save both of us hearing me say this over and over like a cuckoo clock, I may as well write it down where it'll be handy." She flipped to a fresh tablet sheet, jotted briefly, then tore

As before,
I thought
this was
his idea.
I have a
creeping
feeling,
however
that you've
going to
point out
a passage
that I'm
not
recalling.

p. 78 - Susan
suggested music stand,
Monty repeated the idea,
later comes around to it
on his own

the page out. "I'll put this over here and simply point to it every time it's needed, all right?"

He saw she had written: *I categorically disagree.*



"Mr. Jackson, something bothers me." Striding beside her through Strivers Row and its inventive margin of enterprises, carrying the same small black case that he had met her at the el with, Jace Jackson looked for all the world like one more snappily-dressed postulant of success out on his professional rounds. Which, Susan reflected, he in a way was, if escorting an outlandishly white woman in and out of Harlem counted as a professional endeavor. It was nearly noon and as far as she was concerned the heat had turned the streets into block-long griddles, but people were flashing by as if they were ice-skating. Obviously a midday flurry of people heading home from visiting or shopping, the sidewalk traffic every step of the way was overwhelmingly female and except for Susan unanimously dark in complexion. The whole sashaying caravan of them, as far as she could see, in frocks of colors that seemed to have come from heaven's candy jars. When a particularly well put together woman, dusky as Nefertiti and suggestively rhythmic as the Song of Solomon, sailed past her like a luscious vision in peppermint, Susan felt like a pillar of chalk. Yet all the passersbys' glances that slid off Jace Jackson and stuck to her pale self seemed not to convey hostility or racial grievance, but something more like cold hard clinical curiosity. Distracted at being constantly gone over as if she were an eye-chart, it took her a number of strides before she managed to find her way back to what she had been wanting to ask. "As I understand it, if I were to come up here at night with other whites and party until dawn, that would cause no stir. But you say I hadn't better show up alone in broad daylight."

"I do not make the rules for the game of skin, Miss Duff."

"Then tell me this. Why is it all right for you to walk in and out of here with me?"

J.J. sighed. "Second time I've been asked that today--my wife claims she is married to a crazy man all of a sudden."

"Well, then?" she pressed him. They were only a block or so now from where the elevated railway stood like a steel-legged aquaduct into Harlem, and an arriving throng was pouring down from the platform to refill the street, every eye of them, naturally, on her.

J.J.'s low response was drowned out by the departing train. She waited, watching as the train cars caused the shadow-and-light pattern beneath the elevated track to flicker like giant piano keys being madly played, until the rumble passed them by. "I'm sorry. What?"

He gestured at the teeming street and said only loud enough for her to hear: "People think you're a doctor."

Susan snorted a laugh, saw he was serious, and stopped short in the middle of the sidewalk.

J.J. reluctantly hove to beside her. "Throat specialist from the West Coast," he ^{rattled} ~~reeled~~ off to her in the same low tone. "Studied in Vienna. First woman admitted to the Royal College of Surgeons. Please don't be looking at me that way, people have to be told something." He handed her the satchel. "I'll meet you at the el again tomorrow, same time. Be sure to bring your doctor bag."

#

Monty grimly plowed at his brought-in meal. It was a mess, one-handed eating. He still was on milk toast, but even so, the bowl and spoon had minds of their own and his throat did not want anything to come near it. He had made it clear to J.J., practically in block letters, that he did not want anyone around when he had to tackle food like this. The kitchen helper from the E&B who lugged in

the hot-water caddy three times a day and fished out the bowl of sick man's grub always cleared out anyway as soon as the dish was on the table. Couldn't blame him. Tongue-tied invalid propped up by plaster of paris and tablet paper; who wants to hang around in that sort of company?

He negotiated another mouthful of milk-sopped toast as carefully as he could, slopping some of it even so. Damn, but being a patient was unbelievably hard work. He was ~~fired~~ all the time with this, ~~worn out with worry~~. At least he would be able to sack out again this afternoon. Sleep was the one thing he could look forward to. Bed rest. Read the newspapers J.J. brought. Take it easy, was everyone's prescription for him. He wished he could find anything about this that was easy to take. J.J. was being an absolute ace, but he couldn't run his business by way of the kitchen telephone forever. The Major was pretty much out of the picture, it was his Montana time of year for months yet, and he couldn't be expected to handhold a person endlessly either. Meanwhile the bankbook with the name *Rathbun, Montgomery* on it was going down as if a plug had been pulled.

Which only brought the worries as far as the medical side of things. Tomorrow he would be put through another round of doctor appointments over at Presbyterian Hospital. How many ways were there to say inconclusive? So far the sum of their diagnosis was that his damaged shoulder would only be an inch lower than his other when it finally mended and somewhere down the line he would have his voice back; but a voice that sounded like what?

And on top of it all Susan Duff had materialized, right in this room. Didn't she know when enough was enough?

#

"Going on six years, how can it be," Vandiver was saying, as if marveling at how calendars took flight, when he and Susan faced each other across the light-grained expanse of his desk; mahogany, she noted, not true oak. She knew that

much of his job was as official greeter, and right now he was addressing her as if she had just descended the gangway from one of the ocean liners down there at the Hudson docks framed by his office window. His was a bracing style, a conscious bit of brine to it, like the air here so close to the working river. People came into the headquarters of the Over There Memorial Committee expecting a war poet, some consumptive stick of a soul who had glimpsed humankind's worst fate in the reddened mud of Flanders and dedicated himself to making sure the waste of so many lives would never be forgotten. But Vandiver looked like Tom Mix unhorsed. His big impressive hands were clasped on the desk in front of him as if they were a gift put there specially for her. "Life has been treating you well, I hope?"

"As well as I have a right to expect, Van."

Vandiver canted into a pose of appraisal. Odd woman. He knew from something she had mentioned back there at the St. Mihiel event that she had once partaken of Greenwich Village life, before the war, in its storied era of long-haired men and short-haired women. A blunted singing career, the way he heard it, that not uncommon souvenir of New York. But after she was dislodged by family obligation or the whim of changing her vocal vocation to teaching or the lure of the suffrage movement in the West where it had seemed to be doing some good--the particular story that followed Susan Duff wandered back and forth over all of those--she had chosen to burrow herself away in Montana ever since. He had to wonder about that. Her efforts out there for the Committee had been miraculous, and every autumn she could be counted on to subscribe for a contributor's ticket to the Armistice Day observance; at Carnegie Hall going rates, that was not a negligible amount. Before her last trip to France he had written to persuade her to stop over here and for once attend the great event, he and his wife would be glad to put her up and show her around for a few days afterward, but she replied that

she had already arranged to sail from Montreal to have a headstart on French, thank you very much. Now, though, here she sat, running a caretaking eye over his view of the ocean liners and the docks they were nuzzled to, as if they were her personal aquarium. He cleared his throat. "Susan, may I ask--what brings you to New York at last?"

"Recuperation." When she realized Vandiver had no idea what to make of that, she tacked on: "A friend's, after a bad accident. I came to help with the care."

Vandiver waited, but that appeared to be all. After a bit, he ventured: "You're available to us, do I gather?"

"I apologize, Van," she said with a start. "Talk about out of practice--it's been an age since I was any kind of job applicant. But yes. I need a steady wage while I'm here, and I thought--"

The big hands spread apart on the table as if measuring out the invitation. "We can always use your talents," Vandiver delivered it along with the practiced smile, "I've told you that before."

"Fine, then. Oh, did I mention, I must have mornings for myself. The, ahm, recuperation situation. Although if you'll furnish me a typewriter, I can take any amount of work home and do it at night."

That set an executive nerve to twitching in him, she could tell. But when he spoke, it was to say he supposed they could work around that, since it was her. As if that reminded him of something, he cocked his head to one side again. "You'll need to find lodging, I suppose? Miss Cooper or Mister Lehrkind could go around with you. Or, my wife's mother knows Mrs. Maeterlinck in the Village, she might take in--"

"That's quite all right. I'm taken care of."

Susan's return glance having firmly sealed off that topic, Vandiver cleared his throat more extensively. "It's really quite lucky, for you to show up just now. I know you have a particular interest in the archive. It's become a struggle to keep up with it." Hearing what was coming, she resigned herself to sorting paper; cataloguing, to put the most elegant job-name on the driest task. Well, she told herself, somebody had to do the chores. "Susan, I spend what seems like every minute of my life raising funds," Vandiver seemed to be going a long way around to get to the point. "The monument, the Armistice Day observance--they take everything we've got. The archive collecting, I'm ashamed to admit it, has had to be neglected. Other chapters weren't as quick off the mark as you were in Montana." He gave her another of his off-angle looks, but this time she didn't care, she could already tell she was being spared from paper-sorting. Vandiver got up as if it was time for both of them to go to work. "I would ask you to apply your knack at rounding up war letters and diaries and what all for us."

DROP CAP

It was a week later, although to Monty it seemed a lot more than that off his life. The doctors had counseled that he not use his voice for at least another week, and all they could do then was to test his windpipe capacity. He couldn't help thinking that while they were waiting on a medical miracle that way, they ought to try to come up with one that would take the pester out of Susan.

There she sat, same time, same place, those simmer-brown eyes of hers giving him no rest. Behind the closed kitchen door J.J. could be dimly heard trotting the virtues of one of his other acts past some theater owner or another. Monty started to write, made an impatient face and scratched out the first word of the salutation needed for him to frame this the right way. With quite scholarly care he formed down onto the paper a fresh version:

Susan. Can I call you that? Saves words.

"You may. You'd better."

Susan, listen for once.

"I take it you mean, don't spout back until you're good and done."

He nodded with more vigor than had been possible the week before and went to extended writing.

J.J. and you deserve all the credit there is for thinking I am worth one more try. But what's happened is something I don't think my voice can ever get over. I don't much like the idea of going out in front of an audience and wondering if somebody out there is going to clobber me, either. You have your own notions of what a person can and can't do, and good for you, but I can only tell you how it feels in my windpipe and for that matter the rest of me. No good.

"You've had worse."

Worse? The pencil was nearly burning holes in the paper. Worse than an earthquake worse, and a crazy SOB trying to separate my head from my shoulders as soon as the shaking quit?

"That bull's horn. I didn't see any reason to tell you at the time, but that goring should have finished you as a singer, before you even started." She watched him rock back from the table at that, staring at her as if she had put over a swindle on him. "And somebody gave you an earlier working-over in Helena, I remember," she kept right on. "Those bruises?" She mapped them out on her own ribcage and chest frontage as if he needed reminding of each contusion.

Monty absorbed with interest her pantomime of that particular pasting the Zanzibar Club had handed him, then went to work on the tablet again.

Any of that, I brought on myself. But this--it's like terrible weather that just never quits.

P. 344 A follows →

344A
~~507~~

"It'll clear up when--" she began, and he threw down the pencil at having handed her that opening.

p. 345 follows →

Susan dry-scrubbed her face with her hands, then peered blearily at him over her withdrawing fingertips. "We are both overly touchy, it's the fault of the situation. But you're being too leery. I don't care what the doctors say, I wouldn't think of inflicting voice exercises on you after that examination next week."

Cautiously he retrieved the pencil.

You wouldn't? Promise?

"Not until you have your cast off."

He gave up.



Our routine must have half of Harlem wondering by now whether we are testing foghorns in that building, she made her way back into the diary three weeks after that.



Monty had yawned miles' worth, feeling ridiculous, ^{their} ~~that~~ first day.

"Again," she coaxed unmercifully, "but tongue flat as a rug this time."

Dubious as he was about the amount of control anyone could exercise on the human tongue, he willed himself to give her another gape if that's what it took. The jaw-hanging yawn this time drew her in on him. "I need to see in there, hold it open...hold...yes, that's good, your palate is lifting nicely."

As she backed away he closed up like a man who'd had a toothache explored. Rubbing his tired muscles of face and jaw, he said in the hoarse tone he hated to hear coming out of himself: "Susan, he didn't hit me in the palate, you know."

"Now then," she marched right past that, "trap shut, please. You're relaxing that jaw nicely, so you're ready to hum. Have at it until I tell you to stop. Lips together, tongue flat in there, *quit gritting!* Your teeth need to be apart

enough so they don't vibrate against each other--*tsee, like zis*," she showed him as if holding a pencil between her teeth. "Ready? One, two, three, hum. That's it, *hmmm mmm mm*, keep it going, work on the resonance, make it carry all the way up to here." She tapped each side of the bridge of her nose indicatively. "Put your fingers up there by your eyes, feel the vibration?"

For whatever it was worth, he could.



So we have proceeded, these first weeks, from the bottom of the barrel of music up to the spigot where fully rounded sounds must come out. The work needed to bring the sounds from his voice box up and resonating out as they should is chore, chore, chore, translated in musical terms into ah ay ee oh oo and the like. While it is too much to say that Monty finds any pleasure in the endless pitch exercises I make him do, he did smile just a smidge^e when I threatened that any time he let his voice break on a vowel I would yell, 'Timbre!'



"You're unbelievably lucky to have someone Scotch for this," she was assuring him, "vowels are the currency of our realm." He could have sworn she brought the scent of heather into the overstuffed apartment by the way she uttered that. He'd heard her slip into her inherited burr before, but this time she was laying it on as thick as if she was fresh off the boat. "All right, we've been over the drill," she pranced her voice as if his was bound to follow, "now let's go through it a few times. I'm the customer, I come into your dry goods store looking for, oh, let's say a new shawl"--she glanced around and felt of the hem of the nearest antimacassar--"and I'm not just sure what material it is I'm finding. Remember, you answer only with the vowels like a temporary Scotchman. I ask," and now she trilled, "'Wool?'"

"Oo," he dutifully confirmed in a resonant drone.

"My good man," she sang, the vowels of each word so sweet and rounded he thought something would break inside him, "you are sure it's wool?"

"Ay, oo."

"All wool?"

"Ay, aw oo."

"All ewe wool?"

"Ay, aw ew oo."

"All one ewe's wool?"

"Ay, aw ae ew oo."

"We're getting there," she briskly dusted her hands of the exercise.

"Tomorrow we'll do 'eel oil.' Now let's work on your--"

In from the kitchen came J.J., showing stress. He brought his arms up like a man in a holdup and pointed to both his ears. "Nothing against what you're at, mind you, but I'm going to cut, over to the Lincoln. They'll let me set up shop at the backstage telephone this time of day. Quieter there." He gave Susan a mingled look in which the only clear sentiment was that he hoped she knew what she was doing. "I'll be back in time for your noon train. Bring you anything, Monty, besides the usual?"

"No. Don't forget that, though. You did yesterday."

"That was yesterday," J.J. said breezily, and left them to themselves.

#

Her pen paused in mid-page as if listening. The first metallic wheeze from across the street was always as if the siren was gulping in enough breath to last, and now the firetruck howled off as if baying on the scent of smoke. *So much for my cosmopolitan airs,* she twitted herself for ~~at least~~ ^{not nearly} ~~the~~ ^{first} ~~fiftieth~~ time during this New York residency. On her hunt for housing, it had taken her only one transit of Greenwich Village to convince her that its changeover to teahouses and poseur

garrets would be too depressing, and she opted instead for a set of rooms in a reminiscently scented neighborhood nearer the docks where French silk merchants once clustered. Smitten with iron-trellised balconies and creeper vines and the air-promised presence of bread and cheese, she had managed to entirely miss the presence of the firehouse in the middle of the block.

As the siren wound away, she glanced at the clock. Nearly the middle of the night already. The city ate her time when she wasn't looking. Visitation as a cat, it sneaked pawfuls of hours away every time she turned around to do something. Its appetite for her nights was insatiable; now that she had taken up membership in a light opera group that met once a week, somehow two nights or three went to its persuasions. An evening at the Vandivers' or an occasional Broadway show, and she was abruptly short of portions of the week for Over There work. The morning trips up to Harlem, distinct as a picnic during her hours with Monty, turned into an agonizing nibbling of her time all the long ride back downtown on the el. Held in the sway of the train, she perpetually had to try to make up for the lost top of the afternoon by composing in her head that day's plea to the state chairman in Georgia to get in there among the peach crews and harvest their war letters, or to coax the one in New Hampshire that *some* Granite Stater must have overcome reticence enough to write home during the hundreds of days the American Expeditionary Force was in the front lines.

#

She and her chronic escort were at the foot of the station stairs when it occurred to her. She moved to one side as the usual trample of Harlem home-goers came heading toward the two of them. "Before I go, Mister Jackson--"

"Could you please stop with that? Mister Jackson is my grandfather the undertaker--I'm used to answering to 'J.J.'"

"J.J., then, here's what I need to ask. I don't know what Monty says about me, but when he wants to grumble about you in this, he'll always say you treat him like a boot recruit—do you come by that because you were in the war?"

"To the gills."

"You keep in touch with the others from here, do you?"

J.J. halted at the top of the first ramp and turned to consider her. As he stood there, slim as a clarinet, Susan wondered how *he* felt navigating these streets beside a white woman who could have picked him up under one arm. She saw curiosity getting the better of him, until he decided to provide:

"To some extent, sure. There's a bunch of our old regiment in James Europe's orchestra--we run into each other at benefits and such. Plenty others work at the post office. Redcaps down at Penn Station, you practically trip over Harlem vets there. They're around, why?"

"Because to me you're all men of letters."

#

Yet I made time again today, didn't I, the pen picked up her chronicle of all this, to go hear the confusion concert.

It was not many blocks out of her way on the walk home from work, and the first time she heard it in the middle distance she laughed incredulously and made straight for it. The neighborhood was a few away from hers, but she knew that was only by luck of the moment. Back in her younger experience here, she had learned that New York perpetually colonized itself. A stretch of street that was a lens grinders' district the last time you looked would have turned through some cosmic New York logic into a major center of the making of lampshades, and the spot on the river where you bought imported perfume was all at once where the banana boats came in. She couldn't remember what these precise

blocks of ironfront buildings had been before, but now it was unmissably the radio district.

No, that almost inaudibly said it; Babel and Bedlam freshly seeded with Radio Corporation of America amplifiers, was more like it. Trying to face one another down across the contested air of the street, a couple of blockfuls of these fresh enterprises chorally dinned out the samples of their wares. The ebonite loudspeaker over the entryway of one radio store blaring out Paul Whiteman's jazz band at the St. Regis Hotel, the tin glory horn out the transom of the one next door dizzily trumpeting the fanfare of *Carmen*, the noise emporium across the way countering both with Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink in grave Wagnerian matinee mode at the Metropolitan Opera--her first time through, Susan couldn't believe her ears, but only a stone-deaf person could doubt this. Turn her head toward New Jersey, and she received the WOR chant of Bernarr Macfadden calisthenics. Incline in the general direction of Brooklyn, and some boy baritone reached forth all the way from the WAHG studio to present her *Roses of Picardy*. As best she could tell, there was an inviolate pact among the stores that none would play the same radio station as any other one, but beyond that anything went--banners, installment plans, money-back guarantees, free aerials, complimentary shrinelike bamboo stands to set your set on. At least once a week she feigned interest in the infinite varieties of radio cabinetry, store window by store window, to walk slowly through the mad glorious gauntlet of confusion and attune herself to how zealously the world was enwrapped in voices. To imagine each time one more soar of sound into the atmospheric mix, from up in Harlem.



"Good as gold but hard to hold--"

The blues had been trying to get Monty by the ears, and failing.

The man sounds like that and probably gets paid plenty for it. Me, if I was to do my songs that way, everybody would just say my voice is shot.

He had been listening offhandedly--all right, enough to scoff--in the dim of the apartment to the program drifting into his cabinet radio from someplace where shoeing mules and tending moonshine stills seemed to be pretty much the constants of life. Harlem and the prairie both beat that, at least. But he sat up, disturbed, now as the delta growl made wavery by distance found something remembered in him.

"Flat to stack and round to roll--

Silver dollar, lift my soul.

Silver, silver, silver,

silver dollar blues."

That old ditty, he knew every step of the way. The Zanzibar Club on Saturday nights had been as much education of that sort as any one person could stand, hadn't it?

"Hard to bend but easy to spend--

Flat to stack and round to roll--"

I get the idea. He reached over and snapped off the radio. Blues singers were really something, they could get by with about twenty words and repeating ninety percent of them six times. The ditty out of nowhere had put him up against himself yet again, though. Now that his shoulder was mended and the purple blotch of the blow was gone from the column of his neck, he seemed to be back to what he had been, in any way that he could see. The staves of his legs, the arch of his foot, the slight pink of his heel, all those seemed the same. Hands, fingers, nimble as they ever were. His same darkly durable skin over the same basic arrangement of bones. The workings of his head, he had to hope that even those were not drastically different. But a stranger was living downstairs in his throat.

He wished Susan was right about coaxing back the voice he'd had. He also wished she was out of reach of the stretch of his imagination.

There is an awful distance to go, summation came to Susan's pen, before Monty has his music back. But so far neither of us has swerved from that. She folded the diary closed, and in midnight ink began her weekly letter to Wes.

DROP CAP

The mountains stood taller than ever in the magnifying summer air, but the Scotch Heaven homesteads had gone to their knees.

The places are folding in on themselves, Susan, as if you and the McCaskills were their last mainstays against gravity. The least he could do, Wes ^{told} ~~was aware of telling~~ himself as if it was an order to a subordinate, was to make this reconnoiter of the ways of water and grass and time into a salutation to Susan.

If you were here you wouldn't let me get away with calling the separated chapters of your life on the North Fork long arithmetic, would you. But that is the sum of it by any adding up I know. Girl you were, when that father of yours out-stubborned mine for this land, and beloved calamity you've been to me these half dozen years, unto who knows when. It has to be said, Susan, it is a length--one I have gone to, haven't I.

The creek, subdued by this time of the summer, prattled at the stones of the crossing just enough to be heard at the brow of the benchland where he sat in the buckboard studying the vee of the North Fork. He had been perched there for some minutes now, totting up what lay before him. The creek-twined line of homesteads showed pockets worn through by the past winter. Half the roof of the long sheep shed between the Duff and Erskine homesteads had been brought low by one too many loads of snow. Midway up the creek, the Allan Frew homestead appeared to be without chimney. Nearer at hand--*closer to home, you*

would have me say---off to the side of the Duff house the root cellar had caved in, the dirt of its crater fresh, not grassed over. He calculated back: it was no more than a year since he wheeled in there with the makings of picnic in the johnnybox of this wagon, and ^{given} ~~in~~ the quantity of time he was weighing today, he had to think that was not much. The seasons here were even more ruthless than most calendars, though.

He flicked the reins to start the horses toward the creek crossing. The day already had the hot crinkly feel of August, the peak of haying season, the one month of the ranch year when lack of rain was a blessing. Not until now had he found the right morning to intercept Whit on his way out to boss the stacking crew and let him know he would be gone for the day, over to the North Fork to check on the fencing. Whit, suspicious, told him, "Wes, that fence would hold in elephants," then corked up at the look he got back.

As the buckboard trundled decorously down off the benchland, Wes once more went over the genealogy of the double handful of homesteads to make sure he had them straight in his mind. Thinking this out beforehand, he had made the disturbing discovery that he could not put names, let alone faces or memory traces, on more than half the homesteaders of the North Fork. Accordingly he'd had Gustafson take him in to the county courthouse so he could go through old assessor's records. Then when business next required him in Helena, he went up to the capitol grounds and over to the state office where birth records and death certificates were kept. He topped off the compilation by delving into the proving-up files at the federal land office for naturalization papers and dates when each parcel of homestead land was filed on. With those and a quadrangle map, he had Scotch Heaven on paper now. *It's the margins, where the coffee cups get put down or someone doodles a figure, that require imagination to fill in.*

When the wagon pulled out of the creek, he headed it west past Breed Butte, not bothering to trace along the strands of barbed wire and new cedar posts that now stitched across the valley. He knew he could trust Whit's word on something like a fence.

The road along the creek passed in and out of the dapple of stands of cottonwoods and the wheeltracks were firm from the accumulated heat of the summer. The going was not as easy on the eyes. One after another the homesteads met him like a ghost town that had been pulled apart and scattered, the sun-browned boards of a barn or a shed or a picket fence cropping into view at a bend of the creek or an inlet of meadow. The houses as he passed them were a gallery of gaping window casements and empty doorways.

Susan, I honestly don't mean to sound like a coroner touring through. But examination is the spine of the three of us, in this. Your intense attention to music. Mine to parcels of earth and those who happen to hold them. Monty frisking himself, with a timely patdown or two from each of us, until he found his voice. Whatever we add up to separately, we at least are linked in that.

His conversational "Whoa, we're there" to the grays as they pulled into the yard sounded loud in the still air. More lately lived on than the others, the McCaskill place seemed evacuated, walked away from, rather than undermined by age. In front of the house, he levered himself down from the wagon and knotted the horses to a hitching rail which visitors had probably made scant use of over the years, this far up onto the ruggedest edge of country that broke from the prairie in rising waves of ridge and reef. He knew he shouldn't stay here long, technically this was trespass. Varick McCaskill still had not sold this place, nor would he offer it in the direction of a Williamson if he ever did. But among the compulsions of this day was the need to view the North Fork as had the angular man who dwelled here for thirty-five years in the unashamed harems of his head,

half the poems ever written living it up in one corner, calculations of the heart always ongoing in another. *What a haunting figure Angus was, even in life, I'll say along with you, Susan.*

The mountains practically at the back of his neck, Wes perused this pocketed-away homestead at the top of the valley, catch-basin of snow in the winter, gentle swale the color of cured hay at the moment. The silence over everything was as if a spell had been cast, and in a way it had, although it had taken nearly three dozen years to register. The North Fork valley was all as empty as his father ever could have wished it. Which was to say, occupied only by Double W cattle with their heads down in the good grass.

So there I stood, in the tracks of a man who once told me my father had been such a sonofabitch toward the people of Scotch Heaven it was running out his ears. Angus McCaskill had an everything-included romance with the language, did he not. I know as well as anything that you had a sort of crush on him, from girlhood on, and there is a side of me--opposite the green latitude of jealousy--that commends your taste for that. Given it all to do again, he is a man I would have tried to explore a lot more deeply.

He gave it his best there in the shadeless blaze of midday. Guilty of trespass perhaps, but for once innocent of motive beyond the quest into another man's divided soul. About the third time he fanned himself with his hat, the appropriate voice formed in his head: *Man, there's no law against thinking in the shade.*

Smiling to himself, he untied the team and moved the wagon down toward the creek and a grove of cottonwoods. Under their canopy he waited out the heaviest heat, listening to the sentinel rustle of the cottonwoods at the touch of wind, no other sound like it. After a while he unpacked his lunch from the box

beneath the wagon seat. The hurry-up sandwiches the insufficiently notified cook had made for him dried in the air faster than he could eat them.

It was a noon of absent company, Susan. No sooner would I set a place for Angus at the arguing table than some part of me would be in the way between us. Wes counted back: the last half dozen years, no night here would ever have known a neighboring light, not a sign of a larger world beyond the fate-inked dark of this valley. Days, what would have begun as necessary settler solitude would have turned into emptiness, nothing out there past the walls of these buildings to angle away the wind, no prospect except the mountains and ridgelines which simply went up at one end and down at the other, with only the neutrality of nature in between. In short, try as I would to see with his eyes, what stayed with me was the visual evidence that the lines of settlement long ago began to buckle in the gnarled contours of the foothills up in back of Scotch Heaven. And Angus was the westernmost of the people who hurled their lives against those hills.

He climbed back in the buckboard and began to work his way down the creek, homestead to homestead, for the afternoon. Each time, carefully tying the team to something stout; it would be utterly in the temper of this chafing summer for the horses to run away and leave him afoot over here. Then he prowled, seeing what suggested itself. He knew that out of the volume of lives here he could discern only flecks; but from such glints of memory we try to make out what we were, do we not. The patterns built into everyday homestead life still were there at each place. The barn never more than two lariat lengths from the house, because no sane person wanted to have to follow a rope farther than that to feed the workhorses during a whiteout blizzard. The outhouses always astutely downwind from the living quarters. Colossal runaway molten-orange poppies, tall as he was, marked the flowerbeds the women long ago put in under their kitchen windows.

He found bachelor thrift at the Tom Mortenson homestead. *His kitchen cupboard he built from his leftover flooring, how's that for being honorary Scotch?* Indolence at the Spedderson place. *Not even a garden plot, Susan, nor a decent stanchion for the milk cow.* Overreaching at the Barclay quarter-section, nearest the McCasill place, up on Breed Butte. *This you must have seen with your own girlhood eyes and heard your elders tut-tut about: the spring on the slope under a small brow of land, like a weeping eye, and Rob Barclay chose to build a reservoir there rather than site himself and his sheep along the creek with the rest of you.*

Finally he was brought again to the Duff place and the neighboring ~~place~~ ^{habitation}, the earliest two homesteads of Scotch Heaven. He walked the Erskine place first. Donald and Jen they had been. She a thrushlike woman, by report; Wes could not recall ever having seen her. Donald a quiet block of a man, well-remembered. The death certificates showed that both had perished right here in the influenza epidemic. It still was unfathomable to Wes that he had been safer in the trenches of 1918 than these homesteaders in their own beds.

Turning slowly in the yard, he took in the structures fashioned by the hand of Donald Erskine, even yet standing foursquare. You could tell by the way he built: he was not one to run.

One to go now, just across what was left of the section-line fence that Donald Erskine and Ninian Duff probably had not needed between them except by habit. *They were a pair to draw to*, Wes's father had been known to say more than once, the saying of it a bitter grudging admiration in itself. With reluctance but knowing he had to, Wes hoisted himself into the wagon, fixed the bolster to his leg one more time, and went onto Ninian's land.

As he pulled into it, the Duff place seemed to him the emptiest of all, without Susan's presence. New York, and her mending of Monty there, was all but unimaginable from here. He half-wished she wouldn't write him the letters

she did. The other half of the time, he yearned to hear from her every mortal day.

Climbing down into the yard, he at least took a wry pleasure in the house of Ninian Duff having been turned into a music parlor, there at the last.

Angus McCaskill at the top of the valley, Ninian Duff at the bottom of it. I know both of them better from their proving-up papers than I ever did in life, Susan. But if I were in office I'd have been on the speaker's stump at the Gros Ventre picnic on the Fourth, extolling the way people such as them ^{historically} ~~have~~ bent their backs on ground such as this. Without saying anything approaching the full of it: that the particular pair of them make a parenthesis of onset and conclusion, of the sort that clasps around dates in an epitaph. You know how I love the wit of words but am not in favor of irony--indeed, you have swatted at me when I picked up your copy of Forster and said he would be a less rusty writer if he would scrap irony. But even I have to admit to a portion of the ironic in the beginnings and endings enclosed by your father and Angus. Plus a bit. Her own sharply-missed residency here at the old Duff place of course was the bit. Wes again felt it come over him, the emptiness that had driven him to undertake this day. Without Susan to go to, he was enduring the summer as a season with the sameness of an uneasily-dreamed trek, going from sun to sun, never done. Until today.

Talk about parentheses. Susan, if you look at it along class lines, these Scotch Heaven families--McCaskill, Mortensen, Spedderson, Frew, a second Frew, Barclay, Findlater, Erskine, Duff; see, I can recite the names from top to bottom now--were bracketed by a significant pair of others in the Two Medicine writ of life, back then. My own stands first and most imposing, I suppose, we Williamsons possessors by nature. And at the other end, one of the almost accidental acquisitions we had picked up in our baronial way, the Rathbun family; man, woman, child, coming to us out of a past a couple of cuts below the life of

you here on the homesteads, which was to say not appreciably above the way tumbleweeds existed.

And here is the 'what if', Susan. What if, when Mose Rathbun, shaped by emancipation (to call it that) to be a soldier, which is to say a follower of orders--what if when Sergeant Mose came hat in hand, my father had put him here among you as a homesteader. Had unobtrusively shepherded him through filing the claim where old Mortenson eventually came and put his name on, let's say. Had privately counseled, one old cavalryman to another, the now landholding head of the Rathbun family through the proving-up years with necessary patience and perhaps a dab of man-to-man loan. Had provided him some seasonal work, at calving and at roundup. Had created an occasional wage for Angeline, too--Lord knows, the house at the Double W could stand spring cleaning any number times a year. In short, had neighbored the Rathbun family as ours easily could have afforded to. There would have been ways. True, Scotch Heaven was as whitely Protestant as we were whitely Catholic, but Ninian Duff--I give him this much--cared only about the complexion of a man's work. The others here, grudgingly or not, would have hewed to his example toward the Rathbun family.

And that brings us to Monty. Imagine him, as I have been, tuned to the best of his abilities in the school of Angus over here. One great thing Angus knew, and put into you and Samuel and others of any talent, was that chore-sharpened ambition could aim itself upward from the narrow acres here. Think of it, Susan, although your emotions on the matter would be necessarily mixed: a greatly earlier start in life for Monty, a less fettered chance for his voice to find the glory it deserves.

Wes gave the Duff homestead one last looking at and turned away.

Well, that is my letter back to you from what was Scotch Heaven and now ~~cow pasture~~ ^{the words} is leased ~~land~~, Susan. Or it would be if I ever dared to put ~~it~~ down on paper, let alone mail it.

It was growing late, but he stayed on at the lip of the valley, as if to experience the full of the day he was seeing back into. The gleanings of swifts over the homestead remnants traced the change of air coming with evening. The high enfolding land to the west, ~~the mountains and foothills~~, was starting to take the color of dusk. He watched in particular the shift of light on the business part of the continental rise; the grassy ridges under the rockfaces, the precious green skirts of the mountains. Two Medicine National Forest land, it was now, but back at the beginnings of Scotch Heaven it had been a last beckoning rumple of open range--free grass--in behind the North Fork. At this time of day, Wes knew as surely as the Bible passage that Ninian Duff would have quoted as justification of Scotch Heaven, the homesteaders would have lifted up their eyes unto those hills where their livestock grazed. Cattle, at first, those would have been, with Duff and Erskine brands on them; he had checked the old tax assessments to be doubly sure of that fact, even though he knew it almost by the rules of drama. He smiled just a little; the Double W and its most durable adversaries started off with at least that much in common.

As he watched, the shadows grew down off the cliffs of the Rockies, and then came spear-pointed out of the timbered bottom slopes, and at last put a curtain of definition--evening's unarguable edge--down from the grassy ridges to him, as though something old as these hills had been concluded.

DROP CAP

"We have an announcement, J.J., hold on to your hat." Susan had saved this to spring on him as soon as he delivered her into the apartment today. "Don't we, Monty."

"Doesn't seem to be any way around it." He sounded on guard, but not about to challenge.

"We're ready to start on songs," she gave J.J. the big news. "Actual music, no more *oo ee ah ah*." She swept over to the reclusive piano. "Ta-da!" Pinging a finger down onto a key to underscore that, she elicited a broad flat *brang* as keys either side of that one stuck to it.

"I'll get a tuner in here," J.J. said hastily, "first thing in the morning. I'm slipping, I should have cottoned that you were about creep up on the singing. Montgomery, this lady will have you top-billed at the Aeolian again in no time."

"I've been meaning to ask, how we're going to work this," Susan broached. "I'll tend to all the voice matters, but accustoming to the music will eventually take piano playing. Shouldn't his usual accompanist--?"

"No can do." J.J. seemed less concerned than she would have thought. "Cecil's up at New Haven, filling in on the organ at Yale. He's in choirboy heaven. You did the piano work the time before, didn't you? That'll serve."

"I get the pudding beat out of me," Monty husked, "and Cecil gets to go to Yale. I hope you don't have any more good news."

"Actually, I do. I copped the follow sheets from him before he left."

"There, see?" Susan didn't know why she felt so celebratory, when all they had to work with was a raspy voicebox and a rickety piano, both in ^{*some need*} ~~amused~~ ^{*of tuning*} ~~condition~~; but she did.

As soon as J.J. took leave of them, Monty turned her way. With a bit of panic she remembered that first time at the North Fork house, his second thoughts adding up faster than she could subtract them; from the look of him, the arithmetic of this could go the same way. But he ^{*merely*} ~~only~~ said, "All right, Susan. How do we start at it this time?"

"By changing clothes."

41 His eyebrows questioned everything about that, but she thought she saw a slight expression of yearning make a quick visit on him. "Performance getup, you mean."

"The whole kit and caboodle," she said as though she told men to put on tuxedos at ten in the morning every day of her life. "It'll spiff up the session, start us off right."

"One thing about it," he more or less assented, "if I sound like I think I'm going to, I can go over to the Bronx Zoo and live with the penguins." He disappeared into the bedroom to change while Susan attacked pieces of furniture, clearing space enough for singer, music stand, roving vocal coach--she was wrestling a chintz chair when J.J. popped his head back in the door, casting around for Monty.

"He's dressing up," she explained. "We're going to try it in full rig."

"Never too soon. Pass this along to him, would you? He gets sore at me when I forget to give it to him."

The pregnant trio of numbers on the unfolded slip of paper he handed her, a fatly printed three and an ought and a six, caught her eye. "J.J., humor me a second. Is this what I think it is?"

"We all do it," he sounded surprised as could be at having to defend the numbers game in its own fertile habitat. "Like whites are with racetracks, is all it is. He's careful with it, he only lays two bits a day on it now."

Next she startled him with a sharp laugh. "I don't care about that, Monty is free to make whatever bets he wants. I just hadn't seen one of these before."

"Seen one of his, you've seen them all," J.J. shook his head. "I keep telling him he ought to try to spread his luck around some, but he plays that same dumb number all the time."

Abruptly Susan felt so singled out it went through her like a fever tremor. Of the endless thousands in Harlem, of the millions in all of New York, she was the one person who understood a man playing a number commemorating as close as he could the 30.06 rifle that escorted him to the sanctuary of the Medicine Line.

#

"Too bad he didn't beat me deaf, too. I hear what I sound like."

"Your voice is somewhat different, a bit clouded, but--"

"Nowhere near the same, is what you mean."

"With work, maybe we can get past that, I still say."

"No sign of it yet."

He had a point and she knew it. They had just tried *Praying Jones* for what seemed like hours on end and the song not once showed any of the magic-lamp burnish of old. She crossly plucked up the follow sheet and re-creased it, as if the trouble lay there in the music on paper. For the first time she considered surrendering. These weeks of runthroughs, every song in the bunch tested and circled back to and all but sung into the ground, were not getting them anywhere except on each other's nerves.

Monty sagged out of singing posture and leaned against the end of the piano, torn. Susan sat there two feet away from him oblivious to anything but the direction of her thought. She was one of those people you could see the wheels go around in. Fascinating as he found that, he was determined it was time--probably past time--to put it at the inevitable distance. Maybe, he thought wistfully, they could go on writing to each other when she was back west.

"It'd be a mercy to the songs," he delivered in a soft tone, "if we just let them drop. The whole thing. I hate to, as much as you do. But I'm doing my best and you're doing more than that, and they still come out sounding like--"

"Madame Schumann-Heink."

Put off, he folded his arms as sternly as she'd handled the music sheet and waited for her to make sense.

"Her voice famously changed because of the war," she was thinking out loud, enthusiasm starting to dig its spurs in. "It just now hit me. Monty! Before, she sang every opera as a contralto. But now, and I've heard this with my own ears if I was only bright enough to know what I was hearing, her tone goes in a direction where she could do tenor parts if she wanted. There we go! If--"

"How do you mean, 'because of the war'?"

"She had sons in the thick of it on both sides." Monty watched her struggle past the war words. "And lost two of them." She gathered breath and hurried on: "What she went through came out in her voice. To the benefit of her music, don't you see?"

"Susan, I know you mean this the best in the world," he had sympathy for all this, who wouldn't, "but I am no Madame Hank. Broken heart, it sounds like in her case, but on me it was a busted voicebox, and those two just aren't--"

"I apologize to you up, down, and sideways," she broke in earnestly.

"You've been in the hands of an impostor. An imbecile. An incompetent. An--"

"A little hard to deal with, now and then," he readily granted, "but--"

"No, no. I call myself a voice teacher, and here I've been going about this like a deaf woman. Clouded, I've been saying. *Shaded!* We need to work with the shadings in your voice now. The catch, the bee in the bottle, whatever we can find in there."

This, from the person who had drilled him the length and breadth of the North Fork and Fort Assinniboine on enunciation and rounded tone? What about all those Scotch vowels? Mustering all the calm he could put in his speaking voice, he asked:

"Susan, excuse me, but since when is that any way to be a singer?"

"Since jazz. Since the blues."

He blew up. "Take a look at me, will you? What I mean, really look. I'm a choreboy, a cowboy, a Fort Skin-and-Bone little colored boy--there's no way you can sic me on jazz or blues and have me be anything but a freak from in off the prairie. I don't have any feel for any of that kind of jive, it's all I can do to keep up with one old lame piana. Besides," he whapped a hand downward as if flinging, "J.J. would drop me like a hot horseshoe. And if I know anything by now, it's that it's hard to pick yourself back up in this business."

She waited to see if he was done.

"Who said we're going to graft jazz or blues onto you?" she started in. "We'll keep doing your songs, of course we will. But a bit differently"--she fingered the piano in a lower key than usual, then a higher, already on the search. "We'll bend the music, no matter, we'll know the right accompaniment for this when we hear it. The main thing is to bring the songs to your voice, not the other way around like we've been. If how you sound happens to have"--he watched her to see just how she was going to describe a voice that had been beaten lopsided; she caught his look, steeled herself against all the angry evidence in it, and managed to continue--"some woe in it, let's make full use of it."

Monty shook his head, started to say something, then stood there working on what she had said. He chewed at the inside of his mouth long enough that she hoped he wasn't doing himself damage. At last he provided:

"You think?"

"Give me a few minutes with the follow sheets. Can you scare up some tea and honey while I'm at that?"

They clattered sustenance into themselves and started the day over. She coached him on letting the edges of his voice work on the words like pumice, roughening then smoothing. They tried *Praying Jones* again.

The song still was uneven, but "*vexed*" had a haunted grandeur to it now. And "*hexed*" matched it like the second word of a dark secret. The phrasings shaded uncannily into one another.

They looked at each other as if afraid to say it out loud. They were beginning to get somewhere.

#

DROP CAP

Delivery for Miss Duff."

Somehow she knew that voice. She opened the door of her cubbyhole office and was met with a tower of hatboxes. They descended onto her desk, and the most dapper delivery man on the North American continent emerged from behind them.

"J.J.," Susan threatened him, "you had better not be teasing." She tore into the string of the top box and snatched the lid off. Letters, packets and packets of them, all with the postmarks from the Front that she could have recognized in the dimness of a coalmine. Amid them here and there like agate outcroppings, the spines of diaries.

Dazzled, she murmured as if afraid to break the spell: "I've shaken a whole state by the ankles for the past six years and never come close to this. How--who--"

"Couple of the boys from the regiment look after things in the neighborhood for Tammany, and I had them put out the word," J.J. said with becoming managerial modesty. "The stuff is probably ragtag and bobtail, but there it is." He hesitated, then finally produced another packet from inside his suitcoat. "Here, before I lose my nerve. Love letters to my wife, the ones the censors let pass."

"I wouldn't really say I can tell, J.J., but I suspect you're blushing."

#

DROP CAP

The days sailed, now that they were unmoored from any fixed notion of the songs. Line by line, alphabet curlicue by curlicue, note by note, the two of them finicked with each piece of music, her jotting, him resonating. A day, a week, whatever it took, tune and lyrics were coaxed around to the shadings of his voice. The development of each song, as Susan later thought to put in her diary, was like snapshot upon snapshot, in more ways than one: they worked upward from negatives. So Monty's voice could no longer prance through "*Sometimes I feel like a feather in the air*"? They let the line waft, drift in on the listener unexpectedly like a sun-caught mote of memory. Nor could he echo, any more, his mother's ascending carol of *Mouthful of Stars*? They brought it down to the horizon, its drumbeat line-endings of "*Heaven*" searching off to the corners of this world.

Then came the morning when *End of the Road* resisted everything they tried, until Susan looked at him and said thoughtfully: "I think you need punctuation."

Blank with the effort he had been putting into the song, Monty could only murmur: "Better run that by me again."

"Let's see, let's try"--she scrabbled among his lyric sheets--"here, and here. Let it break, a beat, maybe two, where I've dabbed in commas, all right? And Monty, make me *hear* those commas. Like this." As he tilted his head to make sure he was taking all this in, she demonstrated amply:

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

Trying to stand up, under--"

"No, wait," she corrected herself in mid-lilt, "right there we want--oh, never mind what it's called, just--"

"No, put a name to it for me," he said firmly.

"*Arioso*, then, it's what opera singers do in arias when they phrase to a certain word, not necessarily the one you'd expect. Here, sneak it in like this, a word early:

Trying to stand, up under life's load."

Monty caught on like a house afire. She was barely done with that line before he was over by her, plucking up the sheet of music and producing on first try:

"Done in, and done up, and down, to a speck."

And knew, before she could say anything, to let the last line flow uncomma'ed out of the pent-up confidences of those first three :

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

Susan couldn't help herself. She clapped, once but resoundingly, whirled to the keyboard and pounded out the opening bar of an ode to joy, da-de-dum-de-da-da-dee. For his part, Monty crossed the room as if dreamwalking and collapsed in an easy chair, arms flung in wonder.

"We're there!" Susan was the first to recover enough to speak. "You have your whole set of songs now. I'll bet anything this will be a stronger program than the way you sang them before." With that, she settled her hands in her lap, reaching that point every teacher does where the tools of instruction reluctantly need to be put away. She smiled gamely. "We can let J.J. know he won't have to ride herd on me any more. Oh, a brush-up session every few weeks until you're back performing all the time wouldn't hurt, but beyond that--"

"I could probably stand once a week," he surprised her with.

"Very well. If J.J. will go along with that, next Friday I'll put you through the paces until your tongue hangs out, how's that?"

"Susan? You know how I'd like to celebrate?" The request came out shy but determined. "You play something."

"Mental telepathy. I hoped you would ask."

With a flourish she turned around to the piano again, and sitting very straight, she caressed the keys as if reminding them to trust her touch. The music at once rose in suggestion, a sudden glide of reprise of what she had played for him in the Fort Assiniboine auditorium, then the tune soared, turned in flight, soared again. It fit. That was Monty's first thought: this piece found its way gloriously to the opening part of her music, as if time was cutting its own circle on itself and the present moment was hooking onto something lovingly recalled. He listened with all his might, so glad for her he could feel his heart run itself up.

When she had finished, he let the eloquence of silence match the echoing memory of the notes. Then, to make sure: "That what I think it is?"

"Mmm hmm. The ending of *Prairie Tide*, which I was always afraid would end me first. It even has words, but I'll spare you those." Now she turned full around to him on the piano bench and gestured as if the music flew in from hiding places unknown. She was as aglow, he registered, as whatever the most valuable white gem was. "The operetta bunch I told you about kept after me, I had to write and write in self-defense. And working the way we did here--it must have been catching."

"It's a beauty. Makes me homesick, if that was home."

"High praise, I think." She laughed a little. He didn't.

"That brings up something," he said huskily. "The day we're done, rehearsals or whatever, you're off back to Helena, aren't you?"

"Not just that quick," she did what she could to sugarcoat the inevitable, "you make me sound like I have one foot on the train. But soon enough after, I'd better. The house is there waiting, the mothers with my pupils dribbling after

them. And that 'consultation' you sprang on me back at the Broadwater will be better than money in the bank. 'Montgomery Rathbun himself asked *her* for musical advice'--they'll tell that story forever in Helena." Monty's brows were drawn down. The ability to start a frown with his forehead was a marvelous stage attribute, but not one she wanted to see at the moment. *Why didn't I stick to business and not set things off by playing around on the piano, today of all days?* She ran out of pretense. "I'm set in my ways--that's hardly news, is it," she resumed unevenly. "But you and your music have been good for me."

He watched her square her music sheets together and lay them away in the black bag. She snapped the clasp shut, then looked at the door as if it were a long way off. "Monty, I can't tell you how much this has meant to--"

"Don't, please," he heard a voice he scarcely recognized as his own. He pushed up out of his chair and strode over to the window, the farthest point of the room from her. Stood there like a confined man wanting to take a sledgehammer to every building-stone and brick in Harlem. Eventually, as if ~~coming to~~ ^{his head was clearing}, he turned around. "Let's get out of this place. Come on, I'll stand you to coffee and pie. Give me a minute to ring up J.J. and tell him we're rehearsing extra today."

Susan did not bother to ask whether he was sure such a stroll together was a good idea. Rightly or wrongly, it stuck out all over him that he intended for it to happen. Still, she was surprised when he told her firmly: "No, leave that ridiculous satchel."

They walked out into Harlem as it went about its midday business. Kept pace for a block or so with the yam man's pushcart, Susan's head turned in astonishment as usual at the pitch of the man's voice: close her eyes during his chant and she could have sworn he was somebody's sister from Spain. Kept on the move past the exhortations of the soapbox preacher Monty identified to her as the Reverend Skypiece--"Ambassador hat on him, you wouldn't know to look at

him he delivers ice, would you." Veered around children lost in sidewalk games. The whole way to the Eat 'em and Beat 'em, people on the brownstone stoops or congregated at storefronts would call out to Monty to ask how he was doing by now and he ritually answered "Much better" and "Getting there." All of them were used to seeing J.J. businesslike at the side of this exotic white woman doctor, but now second looks seemed to be in order.

"Finally I know a little what it's like for you," Susan murmured. "It's as if they're counting the pores on us."

"That's what people do. Gets old in a hurry, doesn't it."

He held the door of the eatery for her, and the eye-flicker atmosphere of the street accompanied the two of them in. Monty was greeted by the regulars, but a person did not have to be a vocal expert to hear false notes in the greetings. He made directly for the presiding waitress.

"Nolene, think we could use the banquet room? High-powered medical consultation. No reason we can't do it over sweet potato pie and couple cups of joe, though."

Her eyebrows inched up, but the snake-hipped waitress automatically slid into motion toward the pie cabinet. "It's available, Monty," she provided over her shoulder.

Not "Mister Rathbun," Susan took note, along with all else that was registering soundly in her from this excursion. She had the absurd feeling she was leaving a trail of phosphorescence through Harlem, but she squared her shoulders and marched in what she hoped was medical fashion beside Monty to the banquet room at the back.

In the large empty room he gestured wryly to a table that would have seated twenty, and they were barely in their chairs when the waitress, looking pouty, sauntered in with mugs of coffee and pieces of pie. As the woman's hands

slang for
coffee, my
New Jersey
father-in-
law who
lived through
this period
taught me

flashed cups, plates and utensils into place, Susan saw that her skin tone was the same strong cocoa color as Monty's. Gravely the waitress asked if that would be all, and Monty allowed as how it was for now.

"Well," Susan said with forced brightness when they were alone, "here's to *arioso*." She plucked up her fork and tried the pie, which was not as suffocatingly Southern sweet as she had expected. Wordlessly Monty watched her while he toyed with his coffee cup. Three bites ahead of him, she was about to point out this repast had been his idea, when he finally lifted his fork and plowed into his piece of pie. When he was no more than halfway done, though, he dropped the fork to the plate and sat back rigidly. Susan glanced up and froze short of the next bite. She had never seen him this grim, even in the worst of despond after his beating. What he was saying sounded as if he had to half-strangle it to control it at all:

"This ought to give us enough of a taste, hadn't it? Of what we can't have?"

She knew this had nothing to do with sweet potato pie. Thank goodness his words stumbled out low, wrathful as they were. "You saw for yourself how it is. Just on our little jaunt to here. People looked at us like we're out of our minds-- 'Oh, oh, black man and white woman together, the world is about to end.'" She winced as he fiercely rubbed the side of his neck. "And this is nothing," he flung his hand out to indicate the front of the restaurant and beyond, "to what would happen if you took me into a Schrafft's, anywhere downtown."

She made her own words surge before he could go on. "It is the saddest thing, yes. That people can't see past that aspect. But Monty, we've done miraculously, you and I, given all that's against us. Your voice is unstoppable now, and as for me, this experience with you has been the best thing that could

ever happen to a drying-up voice teacher. And," she tried to maintain momentum despite the catch in her throat, "onward we each go, in spite of--"

He cut her off with the force of the expression that had come onto his face.

"Susan, I--I'm stuck." He knew he had to get it out if it killed him, even though this was the sort of thing that could. "With telling you how I feel about you. I chickened out of doing it," he faltered on, "that time at the Broadwater."

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"...chickened out of doing it, that time at the Broadwater," she was equally shaky when she recorded it in the diary that night.

"I wouldn't do it now, ^meither, if I felt like I had any choice," Monty had gone on brokenly. The anguish in his voice jarred her. She felt like a raw nurse facing a patient who had something she could not afford to come down with. As she held her breath, he mustered his and gulped out the hardest kind of words. "But it works me over, night and day. That I can't even begin to say how far gone I am, over you." He spread his hands, palms up, as if their emptiness spoke it better than he could. "I couldn't stand to not tell you, ever. What the hell kind of way is that for people to have to live?"

It tore through her. "Caring about me, it sounds like you mean."

"Worse than that. Bad as love gets, if I have to put a name to it." Bleakly he stared across the table at her. "I was hoping it would wear off, Susan, honest. Was I ever hoping that."

She knew she had to try to slip a different meaning over this. "Working close as we have on the songs and all, there's naturally something emotional about it," she said as if she had been around such cases before. None too successfully she tried to force a chuckle. "I take it as a compliment you've come out of this feeling the way you do rather than wanting to box a bossy teacher's ears."

"It's not just the music," he responded so intensely it came out bitter, "even though I've tried like everything to hold it to that."

"Monty. How long have you been putting up with this?"

"Since sometime back there at the fort," he said as if saying forever.

"When I saw how far you'd stick your neck out for me, that couldn't help but draw my attention, could it. Then everything else"--his features spoke such wrenching effort that she realized what it had taken for him to work up to this--"the music together like you say, the haywire Klan keeping us cooped up with each other, the two of us up against it all, next thing I knew I was stuck on you. Sparking on you to myself like some fool kid. Tried not to show it. I guess I hope I didn't."

"Then when I showed up here," she said slowly, "I wasn't doing you any favor."

"Of course you were!" he leapt to defend her against herself. "Only trying to save my neck in more ways than one, weren't you. Don't do yourself dirt about coming back east. I couldn't get you off my mind no matter where you were. Had ever so many conversations in my head with you. 'Wish she could see this,' I'd think in Boston or Chicago or any of those. 'Wish she'd been on hand for last night's do.'" He sunk his face in his hands as he had in the Williamsons' office at the Double W, then slowly brought them down and away, saying so low she could barely hear it: "'Wish she was here to talk to.'"

It was her turn to falter. "Monty, we shouldn't go too far into this."

He wiped the corners of his eyes with his fingertips. "Let me just get this said and we'll go. I need for you to savvy what you've meant to me, or I'm going to bust with it." For several moments he looked off around the banquet room as if for any direction to extricate himself, then turned his gaze back to her. "You know how my spirits get down sometimes, what with--everything. But

you're, how can I best say this, you're a cure for that even when you're not trying to be especially. I'm here to tell you, when you march in, life better shape up or you'll do it for it. Everything is so wound up around you. So down-to-business-or-else. And I get a charge out of that. I really do, Susan. Being with somebody who goes at things all out. It's just the best feeling being with you, better than any other I've ever had, if you follow." Shaking his head, he said in a defeated tone: "Anyway, that's it."

"I'm afraid I do follow. You poor dear." She rose abruptly, the scrape of her chair like a slash in the stillness of the room. "Let's--let's go back."

Those whose eyes followed us out the door and all our way back must have wondered at the shock of the diagnosis, if that's what it was. Monty appeared--beaten is too savagely remindful to say, but done in, done up, by another of life's ambushes. I surely looked like a wreck, trying to hold myself together.

No sooner were they back in the apartment than Monty headed toward the kitchen and, Susan could tell, the telephone.

"It's clabbering up to rain, looks like," he muttered, although the weather did not look anything like that to her. "I'll tell J.J. to get a move on. He'd throw a fit if he knew about our little excursion, let alone if I was to walk you to the el."

"Wait."

The word came from her as if it was not sure it had the right to be spoken out loud. Then: "Let's back up." Then: "To around pie."

As if those blurts took all the effort she had, she sank to the piano bench. He still believed it would be a mercy on them both to step in there to that telephone, but something made him reverse himself and cross the room to sit down as before. If one more serving of goodbye was what it took, he figured he could stand that much.