

the South. The oldest of the congregation, Brother Cruikshank, had fought in blue at the battle of Pigeon Forge and had the minie ball wound to prove it.

“My husband,” the high-tan woman was saying, “he was a soldier, out here.”

“That so? Auntie, who do you be?”

Angeline Rathbun identified herself while the boy peeked around at all the hawknosed faces. He wanted to tell the people about picking the chokecherries and where all he and Angel Momma had been along the creek, but it wasn't nice to interrupt grownups.

“Service in the uniform of our country, that's all well and good,” the lay preacher allowed. “But if you'd excuse us now, we have the Lord's business to tend to yet.”

“Mister? Couldn't I sing with you? Just sing? I could”--she swallowed--
“wait outside between songs, if you'd want.”

Jones gave her fresh regard. The congregation had visibly perked up. The spirit making itself known, was this? Jones waited on his own words, wetting his lips. Then heard himself poke the question out: “Just what kind of singing do you know?”



sent

“By your leave?” Angeline moved a little farther into the room. She clapped her hands a few times to set a beat for herself, then began to carol in a voice dexterous as fine fiddling:

“Take a mouthful of stars,

Set your ladder ‘gainst a cloud.

Go hammer up Heaven,

Oh hammer up Heaven,

Fixin’ up Heaven,

Slickin’ up Heaven,

Silver nails of Heaven,

Driven nails of Heaven,

Heaven, strong roof of my soul!”

Jones took a fresh grip on the pulpit. “We make our own singing, but this’s a new one on us. Yours sounds like our spirit music,” he mulled, “yet it don’t quite, either. Am I right, brethren?” The congregation murmured affirmation. Jones felt a tingle. “Where’d you ever pick that up from, Mrs. Rathbun?”

“Slave days, when I was a bit of a thing like him here. In the war times. Every day before sun-up, what we called in Kentucky ‘cain see’--”

“We call it that to this day,” Jones could not help but put in. “‘Cain see’ to ‘cain’t see,’ that’s our working day in the woods.”

“--my mama and me had to take the mistress’s white saddle horse up in the woods and mind him there.”

“Nothing goes over the Devil’s back that don’t buckle under his belly,” Jones chanted in contrary praise of those forced to shoulder the work of the world.

“The mistress was afraid the War Department was gonna see that horse and take him for the army,” Angeline ventured on. “My mama, she’d pass the time remembering songs, maybe make some up. Got me to doing it with her. Then when night come, she and me led that horse home in the dark--”

“In the dark,” Jones crooned experimentally, “Satan’s satin dark.”

“Yes sir. And the mistress would go out and ride that white horse with a black blanket over him. And mama and me still had to wait, to all hours. So then we’d sing those songs we put together. Play we was a whole church, like your one here.”

“Why are you not singing them this Sabbath, somewhere with your own people?”

“Mister, we’re it,” Angeline Rathbun smiled a little forlornly down at her fidgety son. “No other colored, not in all this county.”

Jones brooded there in front of everybody, the congregants as still as the prayer-worn benches under them.

“She brings mighty fine songs, brothers and sisters,” he felt moved to put the matter to the general will. “What say you?”

“She been sent!” Sister Satterlie shouted, with a lurch that gladdened Jones’s heart. “The Lord ever is mysterious in His ways!”

Brother Cruikshank climbed to his feet and testified: “I for one see no reason our congregation cain’t have a colored auxiliary.”

Jones turned back to Angeline. “You may stay,” he spoke for them all. “We will together sing the songs of one tongue, Our Maker’s. But there’s another consideration.” He pointed a not unkind finger.

“The boy here, he’ll be fine,” Angeline vouched. “He has a voice, too. Don’t you, Montgomery.”

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Summer Nights

1924

“Ol’ Snowball, he thinks the world’s wagging its tail at him.”

Dolph’s elbow slipped off the edge of the table for the second time in as many minutes. Irritably he anchored it there again, determined not to let go of his Saturday night spree just when the whiskey was getting good.

“They’re that way,” the man across the table from him ground out. He topped up Dolph’s glass again and then his own, and sat back. The two of them were by themselves in the back corner of the speakeasy, their conversation oiled by the bottle of bootleg blend from Canada that the man sorely needed some company on.

"Monty ain't a bad sort, far as that goes." Dolph wanted this made clear.

"But he's latching onto too much of a good thing, if you was to ask me."

"He actually goes back to her at night? What manner of woman is she?"

Didn't Dolph wish he knew. Perpetually parched for women, cowboys tended to believe there must be winks of ecstasy waiting for them somewhere, if only the circumstances ever would line up right. But tonight's perfunctory prostitute whom he had sprawled himself on in one of the rooms overhead was more like a blink. And the Duff woman, she seemed blind to her own kind.

Dolph had to shake his head. Whenever a man met confusion in this life, it almost always wore a dress. How was it in any way fair for Monty to be the object of her eye?

"Like I was telling you, I suspicioned that something more than do-re-mi was going on. So I kind of checked up on it." The day he caught the string of fish, he came whistling back up to the house to find the two of them looking like they were ready to jump out of their skins. That evening he had sauntered over from the bunkhouse to Monty's room to try to find out what was what; no Monty. "Middle of the night, here he comes scooting back." Dolph walked his fingers along the table to show so. He fought through the haze in his head to see again

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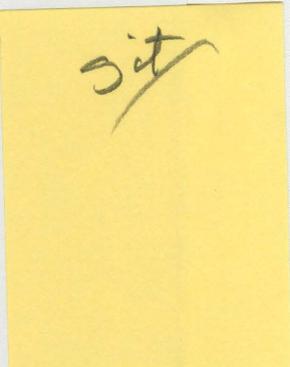
the pinto saddle horse coming down the benchland from the North Fork, pale hide in the moonlight. "Puts his horse away real quiet. Goes to bed." Dolph widened his eyes in wonder. "Second time that night, I guess."

"And during these...music lessons?"

"I'm right there, ain't I? They can't get up to anything then, me around keeping my eye on them."

The man clucked one last time at the goings-on Dolph was forced to put up with and said he had to call it a night. He clapped Dolph on the shoulder. "See you in the funny papers."

The town of Gros Ventre, nippy even on a midsummer night such as this, lay tucked under its double blankets of darkness and leaf canopy. The man walked home with great care, taking to the deserted street rather than trust himself on the undulations of the board sidewalks forced up by the roots of the big cottonwoods. It had been a night's work, lubricating that homely mutt of a cowboy. But even a common cowhand knew an abomination when he saw one, give him credit for that.



He tromped on through the dark, filled with a consuming urge to shout to the whole town about the Williamsons and what they spawned. But that wouldn't do. Late as it was, and quiet, he confined himself to humming fiercely, hymn of him and his kind:

"Klansman, Klansman, of the Ku Klux Klan,

Protestant, gentile, native-born man,

Hooded, knighted, robed, and true,

Royal sons of the Red, White, and Blue."

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Nightfall wrote itself across the hills of Helena, the rowdy downtown gulch as ever the first to be shadowed and streetlit, then the slow summer darkness gently inking out the superior slope-sitting neighborhoods around their punctuations of lamplight. Throughout the evening Wes glanced out now and then as if to compare the progress of the dark to his own. His desk was a ranch in the making--the Deuce W, incipient in the piles of title abstracts and livestock tallies and crop records and tax rolls of three counties its clusters of acreage would dapple like a prairie archipelago. A separate stack of paperwork high enough to be teetery held foreclosed mortgages, walked away from in the dusty exodus of the

landed settlers these past half dozen years and now bought from the banks by the Williamson agents for pennies on the dollar. Wes was sifting it all as if he were a monk among Alexandrine scrolls. Dyed into the documents, beneath the legalistic curlicues where it took a kind of second sight to go, rested actions of the past that changed everything caught in their path. The shaping hand of a Senator on the generous contours of the Fort Assinniboine military reserve, there in the act of congressional appropriation that had created the great and needless fort. The decisive signatures of a handful of sodbusters, who had thrown in together to buy more tractor than buffalo grass could withstand. Receipts that remorselessly followed the decline in rainfall, depositions that attested to the economic laws of gravity even in virgin land as flat and beckoning as a trampoline. If you were trained for this, and he by nature and imperative was, it was all discernible, under the ink. He paused a long while over a contested bill of sale for a pitiful herd of workhorses, depleted by half by the blizzard of 1906, which was signed by his own father.

Hallway noises roused him out of the watermark whispers of the papers.

“Busy, I tell you.”

“Only take a minute, Mrs. Gus, don’t get yourself in an uproar.” The predictable barely restrained knock on the door.

“If it’s who I think it is,” Wes emitted like the warning blast of a foghorn, “come in and have your story ready.”

It took a little time for the doorknob to turn. Then Monty stepped in, ranch clothes on him but Saturday night readiness in his expression. “Major, bother you a minute, can I?”

“How did you get to town?”

“Bummed a ride with the brand inspector. This way, see, I can take the driving off Gus’s hands when you head back to the ranch.”

Wes’s ire stalled momentarily in the face of this tactic. It was perfect fact that Gustafson took the wheel of an automobile with the glumness of a lumberjack unfairly sentenced to pushing a baby buggy. “Wasn’t that thoughtful of you,” he at last responded to the all-too-ready volunteer sticking close to the sanctuary of the door. “And other than that, what’s on your mind this hour of night?”

As if he didn’t know? Going to be like that, is it. Monty might have been philosophical about this if he had time. But this was never any too much fun, dealing with a boss who wasn’t in a mood to be dealt with, and he drew himself

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moments

up some to stand his ground. "Mister Whit didn't have his checkbook on him, there at the stockyards. Say, he told me to tell you--let me get it exactly: he hopes your writing hand is in good shape come Monday, because there's one hell of a bunch of new cows going to need a ranch under them."

Wes let his brother's words pass without comment. Monty's next ones he waited for as if ready to lay down the law.

"I know it pesters you, something like this," Monty came out with it.

"But tonight being what it is, I need to go out for a little while."

"Can't you ever--"

"Don't even have to draw a whole month's pay," Monty hastened this in, "but just about."

"--steer clear of that?" With difficulty Wes kept control of his face, but his voice sharpened to a stab. "Monty, you have to think about these things now. What is it going to take, some drunken gandydancer beating your brains out in an alley? Hear me on at least this, can't you? Clore Street isn't the best place to be, any more."

Monty rammed his hands into his back pockets to hide his clench of dismay. As if he hadn't turned himself inside out thinking about this. As if

someone who could take that district of paper there on his desk and Monday morning turn it into a ranch that stretched out of sight over the bend of the earth, as if anybody that mighty knew anything about the tight corners of a colored Saturday night in Helena. Three months ago, as Monty too well understood about himself, in this situation he would have turned turtle, pulled his neck back in and stood plunked there allowing as how the Major no doubt knew best. But the Major and her, wasn't that what they were supposed to be at in all this, to help him shore himself up into something more substantial than a choreboy standing on one foot and then the other? Build himself around his voice, wasn't that their bright idea? Change his chances in this life, from squat to sky-high? And that took some doing like tonight's, if he could just zip across town there and get it done. There was no way around it. He couldn't hope for the Major to give him his blessing on anything like this, but a bit of room to operate, out on his own, ought not be too much to ask by now. For the hundredth time this day, he assessed his chances with the man on the far side of that big desk. If things had really changed, his best hold with the Major was man-to-man.

“Got to go do it,” he said as if sentenced to it. “I’m not gonna gamble this time. I’m not. Honest.” As usual, that word called into question any preceding

truth. Looking stormy, Wes with effort held in a hideous impulse to turn that protestation against games of chance on its head with an abrupt *I'll bet*.

"See, if I don't show my face there, before I start out as a singer," the rest of it was tumbling out of Monty, "I'm written off. Major? They'll think I turned uppity. Say I caught that skin condition: white-itis."

"And that would be too bad."

"It'd be attached to my name. And you never get rid of that."

For whatever reason, Monty could see, that hit home. The burly Major for a moment looked like a boy accused. He of the family that had employed Rathbuns back to almost time beyond memory seemed to stare as if he had never seen such a stranger. Then his face set. The anthracite eyes of a snowman could not have been colder. With rough motions he shoved out of his chair and stalked to the dark-green safe in the corner of his office, knelt, twirled the combination as fast as fingers could move, and in an instant came up with a money caddy that held silver dollars as if they were bleached-out poker chips. He grabbed out a full stack, then a judicious half of another, plunking them side by side on the parquet table by the window. "You might as well take the works."

half-knelt

My whole pile? All of a man's wages usually showed up in a boss's hand only when the words *You're fired!* or *I quit!* flew through the air. But the lord of pay, there by the safe, so far hadn't decreed the one and Monty had no intention of uttering the other. He hesitated, then went and scooped up the tall-standing coins. "I'll stay a stranger to trouble this time, honest."

Wes still didn't say anything. He sat back down to his desk, eyes into the familiar field of paper, as the door closed behind Monty.

It was not that many blocks to where Clore Street elbowed a gravelly hillside for enough room to cavort, but it was to the city limits of the world known by white Helenans. Among other parts, Clore Street immediately took a nighttime visitor by the ear and nose. "Sandgy man!" the swooping chant of the street vendor echoed every minute or so among the hard-used few blocks of buildings, brazier smoke and smells of cooking wafting from his cart of savouries.

"Baloney cold, molly hot!" Supperless, Monty stopped long enough to devour what was advertised as a tamale. Laughter and protestations between women and men could be heard from second-story rooms overhead, and between that and the sandwich man's tabasco a considerable warmth began to spread in his middle.

Fortified in at least that much of himself, he quickstepped on up Clore to the destination that announced Saturday night with a good-time wall of noise. In the Zanzibar Club, which had taken on the Prohibition guise of a social card parlor that just happened to have a bar still in place along one entire side of the room, the bored barkeep greeted him with the usual:

“Look what the cat dragged in. Where you been keeping yourself, Sticks?”

“Home on the range,” one of the nearby regulars furnished, “where the steers and the roping dopes play--that’s still the stomping grounds of Wrangler Rathbun, ain’t it?”

“Funny as a bunion, Hawkins,” Monty said levelly. Ranch hand that he was accused of being and indubitably was, he stood akimbo a minute at the head of the bar looking over the situation before putting his shoulder to it. Pretty much the usual Saturday-night bunch of jokers, from all appearances. He could pick out the railroaders down the bar by their starched shirts with suitcase folds. Here nearer the door but leaving a newcomer enough space to get his buying hand into action, the customary passel of opportunity drinkers consisted of Hawkins, who had a mouth on him like a terrier but didn’t mean much by it, and the more

questionable pair of Loomises, unrelated except in an approach to life that counted on deuces being wild. The one from Petaluma in California was known as Pettaloomis, and the one who claimed no fixed previous address was called Nowhere Loomis. Thirst cases that they were, the threesome sat with the patience of long practice while the barkeep did his part: "What do you know for sure?"

"Not a helluva lot," Monty went along with the ritual, resting his elbows onto the bar and pattycaking the wood as if he had all the leisure in the world.

The barkeep began drifting his direction, drying a glass as if wringing its neck. "Keeping busy?"

Here was the opening. "And then some. Been taking singing lessons."

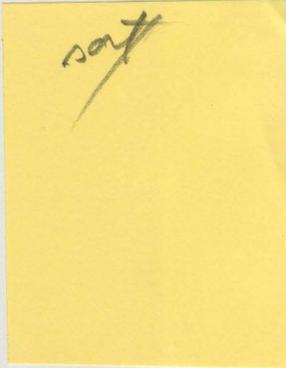
"You guffing me?" the barkeep kept on mechanically. "You ain't? What kind of music you studying on? Blues? Hymns? Hers's?"

"Easiest thing to call them is spirituals."

"Singer of spirit-you-alls?" The barkeep chortled. "You been holding out on us, Sticks."

"Don't remember you ever asking, Jacob."

"So we going to see you famous around town, your mug on every lamp pole?"



"Don't say I didn't warn you," Monty said with seeming serenity.

The barkeep chortled again, his eyes moving off to check various customers' levels of liquid. "What does an about to be famous person drink?"

"Canuck beer, same as ever." Monty did an estimate along the bar. "Give the Sunday school a round, while you're at it." He took out a pocket change purse, leather still new to the touch, and reached in for a trio of silver dollars. Carefully he laid them out on the bar and pushed them one by one toward the bartender as if making checker moves.

Naturally his every word had been snapped up by the Clore Street telegraph of Hawkins, Loomis, and Loomis, so that was taken care of. He skated his beer bottle down the bar to join them now and start fending with their boisterous questions about where this singing racket had come from and where he thought he was going with it. A bottle lasted no time, in the heat of such conversation. He throttled back on the next beer, telling himself *nursey does it*.
Can't keep my guard up if I don't keep my bottle hand down.

It was proving to be one of those nights, tough sledding over and over the same ground. "I'm still feeling deprived of this heavenly voice," Pettaloomis

ragged him for about the sixth time with Nowhere's sly backing, "can't we have a taste? Come on, give us a little render."

"Aw, no, don't," Hawkins put in. "He'd set off every howling dog from here to Butte."

Monty's hand clamped hard as it could around the beer bottle as matters reached this point. Who would have ever thought being sociable was such exhausting work? The gibe from Hawkins was at least open teasing; the urging expressions on the Loomises were about as sincere as crepe paper bowties. *God damn it. Why can't they ever say, like she does, "You're getting there."*

He slammed what was left of his beer to safety an arm's length away, Hawkins and the Loomises too startled to clear away from him in time. Turning his back to the bar, he boosted his rump onto it, then clambered to his feet on the slick polished wood. The three faces directly below gaped up at him like big baby birds, all the other heads were turning. It strongly occurred to him he had better give proof of ownership for the attention he was drawing, awful fast. He put out one foot and scooted Pettaloomis's beerglass off the bar with a ringing crash. "What the goddamn hell you doing?" the barkeep shouted, charging toward him.

Only to retreat with equal rapidity as Monty's workshoe booted another stein into the runway behind the bar where it shattered like shrapnel.

"Run me a tab on glassware, Jacob. You all wanted singing, I'll give you some."

As careful with his footing as if he were up there on ice skates, Monty took his stance. Remembered the litany, every lilted word of command, every push at his posture. Shoulders level and back, head up but not snootily so. Breathe, all the way down until the flanks registered it. He felt as if he had as many parts as a beehive, honeycomb after honeycomb to be minded, but he was doing his absolute best to tend them all. Every moment of it, he could hear that voice from the North Fork as though she was in this room. "*Lacking proof that you can't, assume that you can.*" Talk about taking her at her word: this escapade had better be a high note, higher than any ever delivered from a mere chair, or he was going to have to battle his way out of here, ragmouth by ragmouth. Whatever the outcome, amid all else going on in him he burned with the sudden absurd wish, deep in him as the gather of his breath, that she could see him at this.

“My friends down at this end of the bar have requested a spiritual,” he told the eyeballing crowd since he had to be telling them something, “and I can’t stop it from getting on those of you at the far end either.” Pouring forth for all he was worth, he gave them the song that his mind had been rehearsing ever since he knew he had to do this, his bold voice stilling the restless bay of faces around him.

“...one more soul down to bone,

Just another Praying Jones.”

When he was done, for maybe five seconds the only sound was the barkeep nervously treading on broken glass. Overall, the Zanzibar Club was not quite sure whether to encourage this sort of thing. Then a goodly number clapped and called out, while others shrugged and let it go as just another Saturday night hijink. A few laughed harshly. Monty noticed, though, that the sharp operators--the tiger riders at the card tables; the hooch merchants; for that matter, both Loomises--were not among those laughing.

“Give us another,” Nowhere’s voice of insinuation floated up to him, “so we’ll know that wasn’t a fluke.”

Perfectly ready to oblige, Monty smiled, cleared his throat, and from his Adam's apple on up, went blank. No such thing as another song seemed to exist anywhere in his frantically upended mind; right then, he could not even have done *Praying Jones* over again, even though it wasn't much longer ago than an echo. Dread filled him to overflowing as he sensed this bunch watching for him to go into a stumble, the way the rodeo crowd had been when he hit the ground in front of that bull. In a panic, he assumed what he hoped was an appropriately haughty expression and told the lesser Loomis: "Nothing doing. From here on, you can pay good money to hear me."

His expression still fixed, he hopped down. He retrieved his beer, took a single solid swig, and dug out enough silver to cover the breakage. The bar crowd turned back to the business of drinking now that he was down here mortal again.

The Loomises glanced at each other. "Wasn't that fine," Pettaloomis provided, Nowhere nodding at his every word. "Now we got another situation calling for your talents. Serious shortage, over there at the game. We need a man."

"Not this one, you don't. What I need is my beauty sleep."

That was no way to be, they protested. They had listened, civil as anything, and now he was too good for a little game with friends?

Now this part. His heart was thudding harder than it had when he was up there singing. "I'll watch, a little."

The clocks of Danzer's Time-Repair Shop, on the next street back from Clore, were ticking toward morning when he finally trudged back to the Williamson manor. One lone putt-putting jitney of starched waiters heading for the breakfast shift at the Broadwater Hotel seemed to be Helena's only traffic besides his dragging feet. He felt done in, drained dry inside but the shirt-drenching sweat of his hours beside the gambling table clammy on his back.

Wes lay dozing on the divan in his office, a pillow under his bad leg. The open and close of the back door brought him awake. "Monty?"

The footsteps in the hallway halted, then slowly approached the office. To the figure draped in the doorway, Wes asked as tiredly as if he had never slept: "How bad this time?"

The answering voice was exhausted but even. "I'm in one piece. No battle-royal, for a change."

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After a moment of getting his bearings Monty stepped in, and in the dim light he crossed the room. We heard the clink of dollars onto the top of the safe.

“Stayed out of games of chance, too. Could you hang onto the rest of these wages for me? Good night, Major.”

Angus walked Susan to the car with a lantern, handing it to her to hold while he gallantly cranked the black-as-night vehicle. “There, the steed is onto its legs,” he proclaimed as the Model A’s engine coughed to life. “Have a care there at High Centerville by Allan Frew’s gate, mind you.”

“Don’t worry, all Fords are part goat,” Susan said loyally from behind the wheel. “Angus, thank you again. Go back in there and tickle that wife of yours in the ribs for me. I haven’t had better deer steak since--”

“--the last time you were here, Saturday night.”

“The singing and the cards, smartypants, they came out different this time though, didn’t they. You have to admit Adair and I cleaned your clock at both.”

“I don’t suppose you’d believe I held back out of modesty? I didn’t think so. Good night and best of dreams, Susan.” He held the lantern hoisted until she navigated out of the yard, then retraced his steps back inside to Adair.

Susan sang her way home from their place. Reliable night; how it always welcomed a song for company. The moon itself seemed to keep coming back for more, poking a plump encouraging ear from behind the blowing chintz of clouds every so often.

“Had we never loved so kindly,

Had we never loved so blindly--”

The old trouper of a song lent well to alto persuasions, if she did have to say so herself. Angus was right yet again: that rascal Burns knew how to pour the words. During the evening’s spates of songs that Wes inescapably would have called heather-and-thither, the look on Adair’s usually sheltered face became a girl’s at Christmas.

“Never met, or never parted,

We’d not sing now so broken-hearted...”

“Bravissimo, Robbie,” she accorded the plowman poet, absent from the evening by a mere hundred and some years, as she steered around the stretch of deep ruts Angus had warned her about. A jackrabbit jigged wildly in the thin corridor of her headlights, then found a sagebrush avenue back to its universe and vanished.

Her mind was on the move itself, this night. Scotch Heaven could do that to a person, most especially on a proper night of summer like this, with the darkened buttes stationed up so close to the stars that sky and earth seemed one perfect geography, the willowed creek every now and then dappling in the car lights companionably to show the road the way. And the day had been of the same inspirational flavor. (She made a mental note to capture that phrase in the diary.) This morning Monty and Dolph had ridden up in improved moods--men and their Saturday nights--and the day's session had gone like a dream: she would gladly give her all to pupils for the next two hundred years straight if each lesson could go like that. And she would have bet a considered sum that Monty had been bolstered by the day's progress as well. Only a few rough edges remained to be taken off, the main one his tendency to lose himself in what he was singing at any given moment with no strategy beyond the song's last syllable. (Presentation, she made a further mental note, was another; bless him, he still tended to introduce a song as if he were addressing a chicken-thief joke to the back row of a rodeo grandstand.) "*You can't just pop out with one song,*" she had explained. "*A careful program, a repertoire, is needed and you must have it in mind as clear as a list at all times.*" At that, he tilted his head and looked ready to say something.

But all that came was one of his deep nods, and on they went in fashioning the creekside spirit songs into some sort of order. Now to her own somewhat surprised ears she heard herself experimenting with one of those.

This old pig-iron world

Keeps trying to put its mark on me--

She didn't carry it very far, merely tasting the song with her voice, curious how it clung. Monty's inherited trove all carried that immemorial pungency, made up of his mother's washboard life and the misery-whip labors and testifyings of those itinerant sawyers, as if each song had been aged in a kind of smokehouse. Steeped in sing-to-get-by as Burns's were in peasant prance of rhyme. "*People are gonna like those old things, you think?*" Monty had guardedly asked her.

People were going to have to grow used to having their ears in love with the words and music of Montgomery Rathbun, if she knew beans about it. A pang came with that knowledge. Monty's time under her tutelage was now down to a matter of mere weeks rather than the infinity when they started at this. Her calendar of herself was going to have to change again as surely as that moon would find a next phase. But to an unexpected degree--she had been a teacher more than long enough to know that every pupil took wing--she found in this case

she was resenting that, resisting it even. There was something beguiling about Monty, even when he was in his worst snits about the exercises. The storm before the calm, she had come to think of those heavy-browed moods. By now she was convinced he had the mental substance to go with that extravagant gift of voice, and while she was having teacherly longings she let them carry all the way to the wish that she could pick out the stage for him to debut on, the acoustics where the spirit songs could so wonderfully linger. No, though, pretty soon now Monty's career was going to have to be up to Monty, and she and Wes would only watch from the wallpaper. To herself as the Model T made the turn into the gateway of the homestead almost of its own accord, Susan smiled one of the harder smiles: she and Wes had taught each other all there was to know about losing an object of the heart. Or had they.

As her car trundled into the yard, she did away with the headlights to begin to accustom her eyes to the dark between the Lizzie's usual spot and the house. The thin clouds actually helped, sharing out what the moon had to offer without stark shadowpatches of black, and as she went humming her way up the brief path she could even dimly make out that someone had hung a sack on her door. More than likely the latest unsought generosity sent over by Wes, a

gunnysack of the past week's newspapers and, who knew, another helping of picnic makings?

She would have to make sure to tease him about his Williamson bag of surprises, she was telling herself as she stepped to the gray shelter of the doorway and reached her hand to the hanging shape, and touched not burlap but cat fur.

The realization struck her like a hot spatter of solder. Jerking her hand away from the blood and hair, by instinct she stifled outcry with a gagging swallow ~~before it could get out of her throat~~, not give whoever might be out there the satisfaction. She backed away one step, then reached around for the doorknob from the side of the doorway and waited to a count of ten. Breathing with greatest care now, she pushed open the door with the cat nailed to it, and hurriedly stepped over its puddle of blood on the threshold.

She sensed, as much as saw, that the kitchen had been disrupted. In moments she managed to feel her way to the silverware drawer and had the butcher knife in her hand. Every ounce of her knew she had to get back to Angus and Adair's at once, but she also had a furious need to know how much had been done here. She felt along the wall by the stove to the matchbox holder. In the flare of the first match, she saw that the kitchen table had been kicked over. Carefully

of solder
 of hearing
 her
 scream

lighting another, she sighted in on the spare lamp on the sideboard and brought it to flaring life. Corners; the kitchen suddenly seemed to have many. No one but shadows there, though, and she was drawn, lamp high and knife clutched like life itself, to the doorway to the next room.

Then she saw the white paint across the music room wall, using the worst words about her and Monty.

His door erupted open, bringing him blinking out of a jumble of bedclothes and dreams. He swung his feet onto the cold floor, meaner chill whiffing in from the doorway but, further confusing him, a flicker of flames candled somewhere out there above and behind the figure bulking over him. Then his hearing picked up the gunfire, quite a way off, the kind when a hunting party gets into a herd of something.

“Stay put.” The Major wasn’t there much longer than his words. “The men are around the place.”

As if in a trance Monty shed his nightshirt and put his clothes on, his eyes never leaving the window looking south where the distant flames branded a cross onto the night.

—

“Reynolds didn’t sound in any hot hurry to get here, when I telephoned him,” Whit conferred with Wes as soon as they had the ranch crew deployed in a fireline on the ridge. They would wait for daylight before going to see what the toll in cattle was from all the shooting the nightriders did in the vicinity of the east pasture.

“So, on top of it we have to shop for a new sheriff.”

“Looks like. Bastards,” Whit let out for perhaps the tenth time, whapping a patch of smoldering grass with a wet gunnysack. “They could’ve set the whole sonofabitching country on fire, dry as it is.”

“We’re lucky they only had guts enough to play with matches around us, this time.” The moon was fully out now, too late; Wes slid his rifle under the seat of the buckboard, then climbed in and took up the reins. But before turning the grays toward the house, he scanned again the terrain that made it so easy for the Ku Kluxers to sneak onto the Double W and then race off east to wherever they hid in their everyday lives. Then he stared down at the pattern of char and embers where the sizable wooden timbers had fallen. As much to himself as to his ash-

smudged brother, he murmured: "What are they thinking of? They burn it, the cross."

"I wouldn't say they're absolute bundles of brains," Whit responded.

"What we have to worry about is what kind of push they find to put on us next."

"If I have to fill Hell with them, Whit, I will."

"Suits me. But there's our musical auxiliary they're after, too."

"Don't rub it in."

"I never would, Wes."

"I'm not supposed to let nobody by."

"Would you care to tell that to either or both of the almighty Williamsons, with whose blessing I'm here?"

"If I get my ass chewed--"

"--it will grow back, plumper than ever. Man, will you look out over that field for incendiary lunatics and let me be about my business?"

Listening so keenly he could about hear the angry disturbance of the air as the visitor tromped past the cowboy sentry, Monty was ready for this call at his door. "Hello in there," Angus's voice sounded as if he had trooped here from one

of the ends of the earth. "Can you stand a boarder, for whatever's left of the night?"

As quick as Angus was in and the door held their words in the room, Monty feverishly put the question. "They're at her, too?"

"Trying, in their miserable way."

In a crushed voice, Monty managed to gulp out the next:

"She all right?"

Even in the murk of the lampless room, Angus could discern the anguish of the man. "So mad she can't spit, but other than that, I'd say Susan is in working order. Don't worry your head on that score, she and my better half are up at the house probably in a canopy bed." Warily Angus told the rest of it, the Model T flying back into their yard just after he and Adair had gone to sleep, Susan with a butcher knife on the seat beside her, then the ungodly drive cross-country over the benchland. "Susan at the wheel gives no quarter to badger holes," Angus reflected, rubbing the base of his spine. He squinted around in the gloom hoping for accommodations to be offered, but the stone-still figure across the room kept on staring out the window toward the bluff where the last glow of the fire was vanishing under the stomp of Double W boots.

Angus sidled across the room toward him, bumping furniture as he came. When he gauged that he was near enough, he reached with one hand and gripped Monty's forearm to insure full attention.

"Monty. Odds are that the commotion is over for now. To get at any of us those dunces would have to come through the Major, on his own ground, and I don't think anybody who hides under a sheet wants to do that."

Monty swore with a force that jarred Angus. Then swung away from the window so they were face to face, his words so heated that the taller man flinched backward an inch or two and let his hand drop. "How the hell come they're out after her and me? It was nothing but singing lessons!"

In response Angus's burr was measured but carried everything he had. "Why are there maggots like that in the world, you're asking? It's been a long time since I thought I was bright enough to figure that out. But I do know we've all lived through the night, and that gives us another start against the likes of them."

"People who could have been left off the face of the earth," Monty gave vent to. Like a shot he broke past Angus and halfway across the room, but then spun around toward to him again. "Can't even give the sonsabitches what for,"

his voice was low and seething. "I have me a 30.06 and used up my last shells on a coyote yesterday, can you beat that?" He made a furious swipe with his hand as if to bat away the door and get at the sentry on the other side of it. "Tony won't give me any, either. Major's orders, he says."

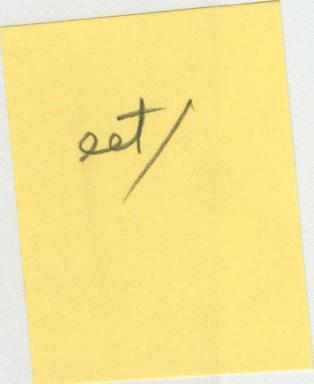
Angus already had his own indictment in on the Major this night. Once Adair and Susan were headed upstairs to whatever sanctuary a Williamson bedroom constituted, he had steered the Major aside for a few words. "*If you let anything happen to Susan or Monty out of this, I'll deliver you to Hell personally.*"

"*I know the way by myself,*" the damn man had answered as if that was another thing they taught at Harvard.

But importing that to Monty's presence wouldn't help the situation any. Instead Angus suggested: "Let's get some daylight on the issue and see how this stacks up then, all right?"

Sounding a great deal more distant than he was, Monty spoke back: "You putting up here till morning--you don't have to, you know."

Angus sighed. "If I have to snuggle with a Williamson or with you, it might as well be you. Probably you at least can carry a tune when you snore."



set/

It came to Monty then that setting foot on this ranch had put this man behind enemy lines. Ordinarily, Angus McCaskill would rather have eaten dirt than come to the Double W for anything. And all the Major or Whit or their father before them ever wanted to see of a North Fork homesteader was the back of him, quitting the country. The Klan couldn't have kicked everybody more cockeyed tonight if it had tried. *And her, why'd they have to get after her? How'd they even know to?* Not that there was any sorting this out, but he reluctantly gave in to the fact that daylight was a better time to try. The man here was right, all you could do was stand the gaff and see who else ended up with you. "All right then," he told Angus heavily, "let's get you installed. I'm gonna make a light. Just as soon catch a bullet as live like a mole."

"It's at least a philosophy," Angus concurred, "but I'm going to be a rude guest and bring down the shade."

With the greenblind firmly down, he turned as Monty flicked on a bedside reading lamp. Everything that could be done with the sparse room had been, he saw; cloth ceiling carpet-tacked to the rafters, beaverboard put over the walls and painted a resounding aqua-green. There was far too much furniture, belongings of all kinds, for the size of the room but not, Angus realized, for a man's full life

lived in its confines. Picture calendars, the freest art there is, rioted on every wall. Across the exact center of the ceiling stretched a wire where a cloth curtain could be drawn to divide the room in half; on one side of that was a mussed bed and on the other was one neatly made up with a quilt of many colors atop.

Monty went across and untucked the covers, then made an awkward take-it gesture. He said gruffly, "My mother's bed."

"I'm honored."

As played out as he had ever felt, Angus deposited himself on the edge of the bed and took his shoes off. Then looked up; Monty still stood at the curtain line, hesitating.

"Mister Angus?" he finally brought out. "I've always done my level damndest to watch my step, here on the place and out in town. But tonight tells me there's people who think I've stuck my foot in it and I'm not even sure what it is. Can't even be in the same room with a white lady, while there's Dolph riding herd on us right outside? I better get myself woke up about where all this comes from." He eyed the graying temples of the man seated on the bed. "You been in the Two country practically forever, haven't you, about like me? Both of us, longer than Montana itself has been around?"

“A dead heat, in my case,” Angus reflected back. “I lit in Helena the day of statehood. But you’re pretty much right, I was on the North Fork by the spring of ‘90, why? And if you don’t pull up a chair, I’m going to keel over from exhaustion watching you.”

Monty sat, but like a coiled spring. “These hoodoos, tonight, what brought them on? Butte and places like that, I know they have trouble with them, but I’m pretty low to the ground from a couple of hundred miles off, aren’t I? All I even know about the bastards is what my mother would tell me when I’d complain about some half-ass little thing some white person did to her or me. ‘This is a flea bite, compared,’ she’d always say. Then she’d get going on how the Klan clucks would light their cross on fire to get themselves stirred up, hang some colored person if they happened to feel like it, cut down the tree and paint the stump red as a reminder. She saw all that, when she was just a bit of a girl. But that was back in the South, all those years ago. And now here’s this.” He wiped his temple with the palm of his hand as if trying to move elements of this around in there. “You hit here in early ‘90, you said? You must have just missed my old man, wherever the hell he took himself off to.”

Angus stirred. “When was that?”

~~little~~

“What I remember is”--Monty scanned his mother’s side of the room as though it might help--”the Rathbuns didn’t make it to the statehood celebration in town. I was all excited that my mother was gonna sing for the people, Mister Warren had arrangements already made--the Williamsons were gonna strut their stuff every which way that day. But just before, there went my father.”

“Come here to me, Monty. Momma is sorry as anything we can’t be going to town, but I’d just cry in front of everybody if we did. They’ll need to put Montana on the map without us .”

“What I’m getting at,” Monty persisted, “things don’t always reach ears like ours then. Yours maybe are a better shade for that.” Monty jerked his head toward the window that had framed the cross as it blazed. “Was there anything like *these*”--he spat the bitter word--”around here then?”

Angus took his time putting an answer together. When he had the past assembled as best he could, he set in. “I was fresh from the old country, green as a pea, and Two Medicine life all was a startlement at the time, mind you. Sit in town there trying to have a quiet drink and you’d probably have to dodge a traveling fistfight over whether aces chase faces or vice versa. There was a shooting or two in Gros Ventre before I came, cowboy life as it is in the books,

driving

but things had already tamed down from that. And that was the extent of it, I'm sure as anything. These ninnies were't kiyiing around here then, Monty, if that's any help."

"Maybe not just like this." To Angus, Monty looked as bleak as any human could. "Story's always been, my old man pulled out on my mother and me. Now I'm wondering."

Life marched in long review in Adair's nights, and thanks to Susan Duff, this was one of the more restless processions of thoughts her mind had ever set out on. Just hours ago the familiar dark of her bedroom wall had been lit with a pale frieze of shadowvines, the climbing rose at the window sketched into motion by the headlamps of the approaching automobile; only trouble took to the road at that time of night, and with held breath she had watched the trellis design grow and grow into the room before she undertook to shake Angus out of sleep. And now here in a Williamson guest bed as large as a barge, she lay open-eyed nearest the wall while the sound sleeper in the lump of covers at the outside of the bed was Susan.

Only
Not all
that
many
had

It was astounding, how life reacted to Susan. Adair had long ago concluded that Susan was like a hot poker into cider. A savor came from her which, whether it was to your exact taste or not, boilingly changed the flavor of a situation. Adair lay there bringing back that most distant day when she and Angus were wed and all at once a great unforgettable goose of a schoolgirl with the majestic neck she had not yet grown into and those sinewy Duff shoulders stood up tall and in the finest voice gave the one gift that, even then, Adair knew would last:

Adair Barclay, she was there,

Gathering a lad with red hair...

Angus McCaskill, he was there,

Paired with a lass named Adair...

Feel love's music everywhere,

Fill your heart, fill the air,

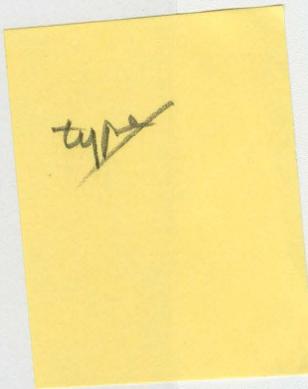
Dancing at the rascal fair.

She tensed now as Susan stirred, hoping she had not unwittingly hummed her awake. But Susan simply gave a bit of a dreamer's groan. Angus so often did the same. Down through the years sleeplessness had given Adair all the

experience there was at sorting sounds in the dark. Sentrylike she lay there, her thoughts obstinately marching back over how it was that here they were, Susan and poor wishbone Monty, Angus and herself, under Williamson roofs while outside one or another of them--she was pretty sure it must be the Major--every so often could be heard making the rounds of the guards put in place against those who tormented the night.

The morning came haggard, with waterless clouds in the way of the sun, and the burnt patch on the slope above the Double W ranch house emerging to Wes on his dawn round of inspection as incontrovertible as a tender new scar. By the time he was an hour into this day, he had kowtowed to the McCaskills with the loan of a buckboard to go home in and accompanying apologies for the night in harm's way, held Whit back from several precipitous actions, had it out on the phone with the nonfunctioning sheriff, and now was faced with Susan.

"I don't think I heard that," she was telling him with the kind of enunciation he wished she would save for waist-high pupils. "Call it quits?" Her gaze cut back and forth from one burly Williamson brother to the other, Wes the office master untanned as fine stationery, Whit on the permanent brink of



type

sunburn. At the moment the pair were anvils for her words to strike blue sparks from. "Nothing of the sort. You're surely not going to let Klan loonies make mincemeat of all our work, what's the good of that?"

"She can't be back over there on the North Fork by herself," Whit spoke as if Susan was not in the room. "Monty can't be scooting over there for any more lessons anyway. Some nitwit up a coulee with a .30.06--" He stopped, at the expression on Wes.

Susan gave up on Whit with a glance that told him so, and set out to surround Wes. "This is new of you, Major. Since when do Monty and I have no say in this?"

Wes had never thought of himself as someone trouble follows around, but if Susan was any evidence, that seemed open to question right about now. "Last night you escaped a whipping or worse," he tried to keep it crisp. "Lord only knows what they would do to Monty if they get the chance."

"And you're going to put it to him that he has to take off out of here."

"I didn't say that."

"You were about to. He's not yours to ball up and toss somewhere!" By now her words were practically molten. "Can't you see, you're taking away

exactly the chance you wanted to give him. Monty and I still have work to do, and it can't be done if you just throw him to the wind."

"Susan, please. You're going to have to turn loose of him sometime."

"When he's good and ready, of course I will. Would you send a soldier out when he was only partway through his training? Wes, you know you wouldn't."

The rap at the door forestalled what he was about to say.

Monty stepped in with the look of a man holding himself together by the knots in his middle. He stood his distance from all three of them, but his head inclined a smallest notch in Susan's direction. The remorse in that she answered with her own. She was dismayed to see he was wearing town clothes.

No one even went near *Good morning*. Monty's voice found its footing before anyone else's could. "I guess, Major, I'm going to have to draw all those wages after all."

"Monty, maybe--"

"Wait, Wes." Susan brushed at his words as if erasing a blackboard.

"Please, there's something Monty and I have to go over, first. A minute alone, may we?"

Williamson etiquette came to rest on Whit. Wordlessly he gestured them to the office.

After the two of them were out of the room, Whit turned to his brother.

“Going to lose some of the crew. Saw it in their faces at breakfast.”

Wes nodded. “Any others we want off the place?”

“I can think of a couple or three.”

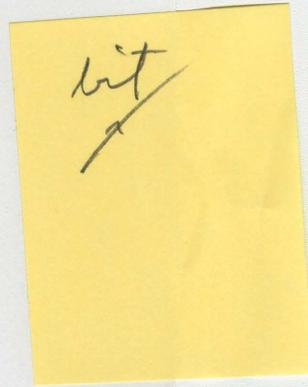
“The ones we stick with, jack up their wages a little. That never hurts loyalty.”

“Didn’t mean to lay you open to trouble.” Staying standing, Monty put his hands on the back of a chair and kneaded the leather. “I never thought, with the Major and all--”

“Shush about that.”

The chair leather still was receiving a going-over. “No, I’ve got to make you know. Whosever bright idea, I wouldn’t have opened my mouth on that boat if I’d known this was coming.”

“Don’t let me hear anything of the sort from you, now or ever.” Anger spots as round as dollars had come to her cheeks. He cocked a look at her. *Ever?*



Where does that come into the picture? “Your music,” she was saying as if to drum it in, “is worth whatever the Knighty-nights hiding under their sheets try to put any of us through. Never mind shaking your head, I know what I’m talking about when it comes to a voice like yours. Climb over them with it, you have to--
Monty, it’s the only way for you to leave them behind. Up in life is the best distance to be from those who want at you.” For all she knew she was the first person from Scotch Heaven ever to be in the Double W’s inmost lair, but she gestured to the office and its furnishings and its shelves of the royal maroon ledgers of the Williamsons as if showing him around. “You don’t have to ask very far around here to discover that.”

Monty could not hold it all in any longer.

“‘Climb,’ that’s right in there with ‘breathe’ and ‘enunciate’, is it?” He accidentally kicked a leg of the desk, startling her, as he set off around the room. What could only be called grief for all the hours they had put in and now lost coarsened his voice. “But how’s that supposed to happen if I get grabbed onto as quick as somebody decides they don’t like the look of me? Look at us here, all I wanted was to sing and all you did was to try get it out of me”--

“We’ll only know ‘all’ when we hear it from you on stage.”



--"and we're treated like a pair of sneaks. Whoever those were last night, some of them had to know me a long time, from town and around. I've lived here all my life that counts any. Never drew a second look when I sloped along doing the chores or driving the Major around. Why's it any different when I try to make something of myself? If I was yay-high"--he put a spread hand at the height of a seven-year-old--"and you were giving me lessons, everybody'd think it was just cute. Or if you were--" his words ran to a halt.

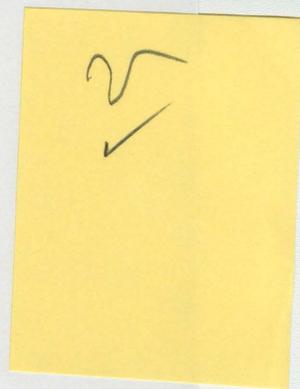
"--dried-up as a prune?" Susan provided.

"--a lady older than what you are, there wouldn't be no problem either, would there." He drew a breath. "But there is."

"Those, last night." She hammered the point for him again. "They're in no way entitled to decide your life or mine either."

"Doesn't seem to stop them from trying. Last night gave me the definite impression that if I don't watch my every step, I'll end up leading St. Pete's choir. And in your case, they don't just have it in for cats."

Impatiently she waved that away. Monty wished she had done anything but that. He had stepped in here as primed as he could be for goodbye, and here she was ready to take on the Klan to both of their last drops. He let it burst:



“All right, you can stand there and say you’re not going to let them put the run on you. It’s different for you. You’re--”

“--white and female and possessed of a singing voice about half the quality of yours.”

“Will you stop!”

“I don’t say we can go on as if not a thing happened. But idiots of the world aside, sooner or later you’ll still have to get back to work if you’re going to live up to your voice.”

He furrowed up, which she took as a favorable sign. “What on?”

“Presentation, stagecraft, adjustment to audience,” she immediately ticked off on as many fingers and stopped as if running out of capacity.

He studied her for the long part of a minute, then shook his head.

“Then what’s your next stop?” she asked tiredly.

“Really trying to figure that out, I am. Where am I supposed to go?” He circled the room as his sentences came out like stones being slung. “Down south, where they maybe won’t even take to time to light up a cross before they fling a rope around my neck? Talk the Major into some la-di-dah job at his New York



de
✓

place and still never amount to anything? Quit the whole country? As I savvy it, those old tickets from Africa were one-way."

Susan let it all roll out of him. He came to rest across the room from her, facing away.

"Monty. Monty?" she said until he would look in her direction. "Just so you know. I had a rope around my neck once."

"You don't mean the business end of a rope."

"Oh, don't I? A lasso. With a noose at its end. All right, a loop, but it very nearly came to the same."

Is she making this up? flashed into his mind. Just as rapidly followed by: *Be the first time. She has about as much spoof in her as that inkwell.* His mouth dry, finally he managed to say: "Probably shouldn't be, but I'm here listening."

Monty watched her try a smile that did not quite catch hold. "It was in Havre, rodeo time. That's always risky, isn't it." Then she rushed on. "During the campaign for the vote, this of course was. We won over the mayor's wife to our side, and so three or four of us who could ride were allowed into the parade. Little knowing." Bit by bit she had been pulling this out of herself, onto the score sheets of the operetta. "Banners across us, of course, with slogans sewn on. I

remember mine was, 'Eve was his equal, why can't she vote?'" She gestured as if the next was inevitable. "A cowboy bunch down by the depot took it into their heads that it would be fun to rope the suffs. They were drunk, stupid, hateful--some of all, I suppose. The one who threw in my direction didn't get it all the way onto me." She drew a hand across the top of her chest. "The loop settled there, and then my horse spooked. It yanked up tight on my neck, the fool was too drunk to let go. It hurt like anything, and I couldn't breathe until someone jumped in and caught the horse." Her hand traced the slender column of her throat, then dropped.

He stared over at her. "Lucky you're still on this earth."

"There was a week when I wasn't so sure. I couldn't sing, Monty. Could barely even croak, and didn't dare do much of that. I had to write out anything I wanted to say. You can imagine--"

He could. The flaming words on paper if this woman could not speak, let alone sing.

Godamighty, no limit to the things they do to us when they get the least little chance. All at once he put his face in his hands. Susan started across the room to him, but did not know what she would do when she got there. A grown

Reached

man she had driven to tears; she hadn't wanted this. But when she tentatively lifted Monty's hands away from his face the worked-leather cheeks were dry, he had his expression set. He said as if into the teeth of a grit-filled wind:

"Say we keep on. How would we? Where, even?"

"That's the Major's department."



~~Apostrophe~~