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 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 station 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 since Monty's apartment 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 at 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 be just fine. But you say I can't 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 aqueduct 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 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 kind of company? Monty negotiated another cautious mouthful of milk-sopped toast. Damn, but being a patient was unbelievably hard work. He was tired 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 from the kitchen 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 how 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 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 cocked a look at her. Odd woman. He knew from something
she had said back there at St. Mihiel that she had once partaken of Greenwich
Village life, in its storied era of long-haired men and short-haired women. But
when dislodged from that by family obligation or blunted singing career or the
lure of the suffrage movement in the West where it had seemed to be doing some
good—"the particular story that followed her wandered back and forth over all of
those—she had chosen to bury herself back 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 its 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, 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, what brings you to New York?”

“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 gingerly
explored: “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--

“We can always use your talents, I’ve told you that before.”

“Fine, then. Oh, did I mention, I can only come to the office in the
afternoons. Although if you’ll provide me with a typewriter, I can take any
amount of work home.”
That set an executive nerve to twitching somewhere in him, she could tell. But when he spoke, it was to say he supposed they could work around that, since it was her. He cleared his throat more extensively. "I know you have a particular interest in the archive. It's become a struggle—you know how it is, things get lost from sight. Tucked into trunks, squirreled away in drawers. Susan, I spend what seems like every minute of my life raising funds. 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. Some people can't stay with it. I would ask you to see what you could do with that."

It was a week later. The doctors had counseled that he not use his voice for one more week, and all they could do then was to test his windpipe capacity. Monty 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 cinnamon 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 right. With quite scholarly care he formed down onto the paper this 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 writing.

J.J. and you deserve all the credit there is for thinking I am worth one more try. But what's happened is just something I don't think my voice can ever get over. I don't much like the idea of getting up 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.*

“It’ll clear up when—” she began, and he threw down the pencil at having handed her that opening.

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 get 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.

The first day, feeling ridiculous, Monty had yawned miles' worth.

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

He was dubious about the amount of control anyone could exercise on the human tongue, but he willed himself to give her another gape, if that's what she wanted. 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."
He closed up as she backed away. Rubbing his already 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 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

little 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 assured

him, "vowels are the currency of our realm." He could have sworn she brought

the scent of heather into the apartment just by the way she said 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, 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, 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 the 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 Paris-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. Visitational as a cat, it sneaked pawfuls of hours away every time she tried to do something. Its appetite for her nights was insatiable; when she took up membership in a light opera group that met once a week, somehow two nights or three went to its persuasions. Treat herself to a Broadway show or some other musical doing 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 a hideous nibbling of her time all the long ride back downtown on the 
El. Held in the sway of the train, she chronically 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 Vermont that somebody 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 El 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 them in James Europe’s orchestra—we run into each other at benefits and like that. 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 only a little 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 bloodlessly into
a major center of the making of kites, and the spot by the river where you had
watched the shad fishermen 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 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 Mary Garden doing injustice to Annie Laurie--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 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._ Monty

had been listening quizzically, 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 in attention 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 most steps 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? He was listening hard now, the blues had him by the ears.

"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 moons of his toenails, all those seemed the same. Hands, fingers, nimble as they ever were. His same darkly durable skin over the same 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, 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.

The mountains still stood, but the Scotch Heaven homesteads had gone to their knees.

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, Susan. But that is the sum of it. Girl you were, when that father of yours out-stubborno mine for this land, and beloved calamity you've been to me, 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 Wes sat in the buckboard studying the vee of the North Fork. He had been perched there
for some minutes now, lost in this reconnoiter of the passage of time and the ways
of water and grass.

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. 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 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. Half the divinely allotted threescore years and
ten, it took, then to now. Plus a bit. Her sharply-missed residency down there at
the old Duff place was the bit. Without Susan to go to, Wes was enduring the
summer as a season with the sameness of an uneasily-dreamed trek, going from
sun to sun, never done. Until today.

Valleys are folds in the earth's apron, I might have been moved to say in
that ungiven speech, which must be why we hug to them in the manner of a
seeking child. The creek-twined line of homesteads showed pockets worn
through by the past winter. Half the roof of the long low 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 chimneyless. 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 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. *The places are folding in on themselves, Susan, as if you and the McCaskills were their last mainstays against gravity.*

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 no 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 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 water, 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. A kind of pleasure he had almost forgotten took him over in the
buckboard ride up the gently climbing road, the horses snappy at the ends of the reins. The bolster beneath his knee almost had the feel of a saddle, although he knew that was stretching imagination some.

The going was not as easy in the chronology around him. One after another the homesteads met him like a ghost town that had been pulled apart, 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. Here’s a bit of self-confession that will tug a smile onto you, I can almost guarantee. As I neared the McCaskill place, I kept having the feeling that something was missing from the head of the valley. I looked, looked some more, and finally identified the missing, so to speak. Angus’s sheep. I am too much a Williamson to admit an affection for the sight of sheep, but I have to tell you that their absence was like a blank spot in a remembered picture. All of my grown
life, the surest marker of these particular foothills was the rounded white canvas of the McCaskill herder's wagon, standing up out of the flat tones of grass like an igloo. No more.

His conversational Whoa 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 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 Angus had done, every morning and evening, for those thirty-five years.

The mountains practically at the back of his neck, from here Wes could see the full length of the valley, catch-basin of snow in the winter, gentle long swale the color of cured hay at the moment, to where geography was first marked by homestead habitation, the now-distant buildings of the Duff place. The silence
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 girl 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 get in the way between
us.* He knew he was dealing with the memory of a man who had managed to live
lifetimes one on top of the other. Schoolhouse and here. Scotland in his younger
time. Not to mention 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. Meanwhile a wife at his side who perhaps did not quite fit into that
collection of existences. That part Wes could identify with. All else here, though,
eluded him. Why a man, or for that matter a woman, would stay on at a place like
this after the rest had given up. 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 just 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, 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 wayward 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 still were there. 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 cupbord he built from his leftover flooring.* Indolence at the Spedderson place.

*Not even a garden plot, Susan, nor a decent stanshion for the milk cow.*

Overreaching at the Barclay quarter-section, 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, in this loop back through time, he was brought again to the Duff place and the neighboring Erskine place, the earliest two homesteads of what grew into Scotch Heaven. He walked the Erskine place first. Donald and Jen they had been. A thrushlike woman, by reputation. A quiet block of a man. Both died right here in the influenza epidemic. It astounded 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, still standing foursquare. You could tell by the way he built:

he was not one to run.
Wes @ the Duff place:

--nettles have begun to come back in yard since Susan's leaving

--swallows' nest on house

--Ninian who did not know the meaning of flinch, let alone run.

--He roused himself.

"Forgive me for speaking of Samuel."
He took a wry pleasure in the house of Ninian Duff having been turned into a music parlor. He could envision Monty and Dolph saddling up and jangling away.

_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, we Williamson possessors by nature. And at the other end, one of the almost accidental acquisitions we had picked up in our lordly 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.

He hadn’t come here to search for Susan’s presence. 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 blessed day.
Well, that is my letter back to you from what was Scotch Heaven and now is leased land, Susan. Or it would be if I ever dared to put it down on paper, let alone mail it.

He closed away the imaginings that had carried him through the homesteads, and with a fresh turn of mind put his attention to the high enfolding land to the west. He had left the mountains and foothills for last. The Rockies gray-blue, tilted and pillaring. But his interest today was in 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 now, but back then a last beckoning rumple of open range--free grass--in here behind the North Fork.

Now he traced out a particular route, to where the homesteaders would have grazed their livestock up there. 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. The Double W and its most durable adversaries started off with at least that much in common.

He took a sighting, then steered the team and wagon up onto the long angle of the west shoulder of Breed Butte. As he had been pretty sure, the full
valley of Noon Creek could be seen from there, the Double W and the haystacks
that stood in giant droplet pattern along the creek and the specks of grazing cattle,
all the way north toward the Blackfoot Reservation. The wood gate, portal to the
empire he and Whit had been shaped, as thoroughly and carefully tooled as
sceptres, to inherit and to operate. To shoulder.

Time cuts its own circle on itself, and the past hooks on this moment. that
sudden season of last boyhood. Royal cubs with the run of the ranch, he and
Whit saw life from low to the ground or on top of odd vantages. Hunting
jackrabbits. Searching for tepee rings and arrowheads. Alarms and
astonishments came often at that age. Small wonder that the residue is a magical
cache of memory.

It was growing late, but he stayed on, as if to experience the full of the day
he was seeing back into. 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.
"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, 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 unused 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 only said, "All right, Susan. How do we start at it this time?"

"By changing clothes."

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 smear," she said as though she told men to put on tuxedoes at ten in the morning every day of her life. "It’ll spiff up the day, start us off right."
"One thing about it," he conceded, "if I sound like I think I'm going to, I can go over to the Bronx Zoo and live with the penguins." He went 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?"

He looked surprised at having to defend the numbers game in its own fertile habitat. "We all do it. It's kind of like whites are with racetracks. He's careful with it, he only lays two bits a day on it now."

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. I tell him he ought to try to spread his luck around a little, but he plays that same 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, but--"

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

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

"Haven't yet."

Monty had a point and she knew it. They had just tried Praying Jones five times in a row and the song not once showed any of the magic-lamp burnish of old; if Susan was honest with herself, rust clung instead. She crossly plucked up the follow sheet and re-creased it, as if the trouble lay there in the music on paper, while she contemplated surrender. These weeks of runthroughs, every song in the bunch tested and circled back to and all but sung into the ground, had not got them anywhere except on each other's nerves.
He leaned against the end of the piano, torn. She was one of those people you could see the wheels go around in. Fascinating as he found that, it was time—probably past time—to put it at the inevitable distance. Maybe they could go on writing to each other, when she was back west.

"It'd be a mercy to the songs," he said gently, "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 Schuman-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 after the war," she was thinking out loud, enthusiasm starting to dig its spurs in. "It just now hit me. She sang every opera before as a contralto—but it was the talk of the music world, her tone went in a direction where she could nearly do tenor parts. People said it was as wonderful as it was spooky."

"How do you mean, 'after the war'?"

"She had sons on the Western Front. On both sides. Both were killed."

Monty watched her struggle past the war words. She gathered breath and hurried
on: “What she went through came out in her voice. To the benefit of her music. There we go! If--”

“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.”

“A little hard to deal with,” 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 Assiniboine on enunciation and rounded tone? What about all those damned Scotch vowels? Mustering all the calm he could put in his speaking voice, he asked:

“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 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. But 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. To let it handle them. If it happens to have"--he wondered just how she was going to describe a voice that knew it had been beaten halfway to hamburger and rooked out of its career just when it had made and more than likely was headed back to an existence the equivalent of calling cows in from coulees; she caught his look, steeled herself against all the angry evidence in it, and managed to continue--"travail in it, let's make use of it."
He watched her, but she finally seemed to have spent the last bit of her argument. He 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. “Hexed” matched it like the second word of a dark secret. The phrasings shaded into one another.

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

“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., you had better not be teasing," Susan threatened. 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," he said with becoming modesty. "They put out the word. 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 one the censors let pass."

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

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, “we want an enjambment there. Oh, never mind what it’s called, sneak it in like this:

“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 Ode to Joy, da-de-dum-da-
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 are put away. She smiled gamely. "We can let J.J. know he won't have to ride herd on me any more. Oh, a weekly rehearsal until you're back performing wouldn't hurt, but beyond that--"

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

"If J.J. will go for that, 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 this was going to be familiar.

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 her opening music, as if time were cutting its own circle on
itself and the past was hooking onto the present moment. 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. “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, you make me sound like I have one foot on the train. But soon enough after, I’d better. Monty, I can’t tell you how much this has meant to--”

He thought he was doing presentably, until she began with that. Everything that had carried him this far crumbled.

“Don’t, please,” he heard a voice he scarcely recognized as his own. “Susan, I--I’m stuck.” He gulped, knew he had to get it out if it killed him and it might. “With telling you how I feel about you. I chickened out of doing it,” he faltered on, “that time at the Broadwater.”

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

“I’m not asking now, either,” Monty had gone on. “But it works me over, night and day. That I can’t even begin to say how far gone I am, over you.”

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

“Worse than that. The worst. I was hoping it would wear off.” He bleakly looked over at her. “Not so’s you could notice.”

“Haven’t wanted to admit it, even to myself. But I show all the signs.”
"When--?"

"Probably back there at the fort. When I saw how far you'd stick your neck out for me, that couldn't help but get my attention, could it. I don't know--the music together, 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."

"That's me as well," she said at last.

"You're kidding. No, you wouldn't be.

"Monty, I have a house there, a business. An existence. I'm set in my ways."

"They string up people like me for even thinking 'love' around somebody like you."

"Not everywhere." She gestured vaguely, knowing how helpless it seemed. That hope was like a tarp tent, stiff and heavy and empty.

He only laughed, short as a bark.

"They wouldn't go easy on you either, Susan. You know that."

Of falling for you. Already fell, I should say.

"I sure haven't wanted to face this."
“I’ve faced it before, with Wes.”

“Susan, I don’t think you have. Not like this.”

“We’re painted in a corner. Two coats.”

“And you don’t want that. Any more than I do.”

“This isn’t real bright of us.”

“Sometimes that can’t be helped.”

“I’m used to—well, not this. But with Wes...”

“He’s the one who tossed us together. He must have figured he was getting something out of it. The Williamsons generally do.”

J.J. did a skip-step to keep in stride with her. Whatever Susan was marching to today, it didn’t know slow. They were already bearing down on the El station and he still was trying to catch up with her surprise prognosis.

“Really ready?” he persisted. “Enough that I can put him up in front of people and they won’t mob me to get their money back?”

“His voice is ready,” she repeated.
“Well, then, amen,” he made his decision. “If his voice is ready, he’s ready. I’ll set up a musicale or two, sprinkle him around town that way at first. Let Montgomery tune himself up without the whole world listening.”

“And then?”

“I’ll have to see. Book him as I best see fit, maybe tour him somewhere before letting the New York crickets at him. One thing, Miss Duff.” He halted so abruptly at the base of the El stairs that Susan flew past him a couple of steps before she could attend to his next utterance. “You have to understand, you probably won’t see us in Helena again,” and he handed her the black bag in the usual ritual of goodbye.

Each of them ever so carefully tended to business the next time in the apartment, Monty meticulous in his fresh parsing of the songs, Susan unhesitatingly breaking off the accompaniment to amend the tempo of a passage here, turn a sharper corner on a line there. When neither of them could find any way to make the rehearsal go on any longer, there they were again, involved in what had yet to find a name in the world.

“You’re sounding fine, at least.”
“I wish that’s how I was. You find out how you stand with the Over Theres?”

“They can use me until after the Observance. That gives us a little time.”

“Take what we can get. J.J.’s lined up a musicale. Even if I have to hogtie everybody involved, I want you on hand there.”

“That’s dear of you, but—”

“Never mind dear. It’d put a stick up my back to look around there and see you. Besides, you deserve to be there as much as I do. We don’t have to be, what’s a nice way to put it, obvious--but I just want you in that room hearing the music we’ve put together.”

“Don’t think I wouldn’t give a year off my life to be there. Really, but no. You’ve told me yourself how swank those evenings are, and I’m only the voice teacher. That’s no leg up at all on the roost back here.”

“You’re going to be there, depend on it. I know somebody you can show up with, it’ll look just fine. Don’t be a scairedy-cat, Susan. I’m enough that for both of us.”

She poked a half-willing smile back at him. “If you’re that sure. When?”

“Week after next. That Friday.”
“There’s something else.” He glanced around as if the air could help him out with this. “J.J.’s booking me and Cecil a tour. Across the pond.”

“That’s wonderful,” she said, sick underneath.

“One end of Europe to the other, what he tells me. He’s not saying so, but I expect he wants to break me in on big audiences where nobody in this country can see. Can’t exactly blame him.”

“How long?”

“Half a year. J.J. claims that’s what it takes to cover the ground, over across.

“That sounds right.” In that instant, Bristol, Cologne, Brest, the tens and dozens of provincial stages where she had toured, came alight in her memory like a stained-glass window; and the greater halls, the leading cities, would be thrown open to his voice.

Monty looked over to the window and its blowing curtain, as if surprised that weather still went on during all this.

“It’s clabbering up to rain, looks like.” He turned around to her. “Let’s don’t be any more knock-kneed about this than we have to. Come on, I’ll walk you to the El. We can leave J.J. a note.”
“No, leave that ridiculous satchel.”

They walked out into Harlem, apart but of course not.

“Much better” and “Getting there.”

“Finally I know a little what it’s like for you. It’s as if they’re counting the pores on us.”

“That’s what people do. Gets old in a hurry, doesn’t it.”

“All right then,” she said through teeth next thing to clenched. “Let’s use this.”

“The whole clatter of them.”

“I don’t like it, yet I do. Let’s just say it’s not anything I’m overly comfortable with. But do I want a chance to let the songs out, God, do I ever.”

“Other audiences. How is that by now, any kind of a bother to you?”

“Sometimes.”

“Often?”

“Just about always. Su--Miss Duff,” he glanced around, “I get myself by the scruff of the neck and make myself face those audiences, okay? Question for you now. Do you ever let a poor beat-up singing student alone?”

“In this case, not until he’s perfect. You’re within a spoonful or so.”
“Right. Try several shovelfuls.”

They came to the El. A polite skirl of parting. He tipped his hat, tried to joke. “Any hope for the patient, you think?”

She responded as if he was not the only one who needed steadying.

“Cures like this always take a while.”

He turned back toward Strivers Row, she mounted the stairs toward the downtown train. Both of them were wet-eyed.

J.J. boiled into her office the next day.

“Stand me up if you want. Parade around out in public with Montgomery so people can get to wondering just what kind of doctor you are, I can’t stop you. But what’s this about our Harlem letters?” He flung down her message.

“‘Problem’ with them, what kind of all of a sudden ‘problem’? The color of our stationery, maybe?”

“Insufficient recognition.”

“Say that again?”

“The Harlem collection deserves--what do you call it when you want notice for Monty or one of your other performers--push?”
“Push it till it smokes, if that’s what you want,” he responded, crinkled
with puzzlement. “I can help you pitch it to the newspapers some, if that’s what
you’re after, but—”

“I have to wonder, J.J., if your sense of push is working the way it
should. Scooping Monty out of the country before you put him in front of a real
audience, for instance.”

For a moment he went still but alert, as if figuring out the crossfire she had
him in. “All right, Miss Duff. Feel free to tell me my business then, why don’t
you. Where would you book a singer who has every right to have the heebie-
jeebies after what’s happened to him?”

“Carnegie Hall. On November eleventh.”

J.J. went back on his heels ever so slightly.

“It would all fit,” Susan wouldn’t let him get in a word edgewise or
otherwise, “the Harlem letters would get their fanfare, your veterans would be
there to be honored better late than never, Monty’s songs would be a natural, and
Over There would gain push galore.”

“You mean this? I don’t question that you want to do it, but can you?”

“I know where the ears are located on those who can.”
His index finger came up and simply stood there, his mind so busy with her.

"'One thing,'" she prompted.

"Right. Have you spoken to Montgomery about this? Because I don't want his hopes up and then--"

"It should come from you. I haven't said a peep to him about this."

"I think it's a leading idea," Vandiver gave her notion his blessing. "It does put us on a different footing with the Carnegie Hall people, however," he informed the two of them across his desk with a tinge of fiscal sorrow. "They take a radically different view"--he rubbed his thumb and fingertips together in the universal suggestive sign for money--"if it's a performance rental rather than a speaking event."

Susan sent her Well, then? gaze to Phil Sherman. He returned her an appraising look, as though weighing where she fit in the Table of Elements.

"Maybe you missed your calling, Susan, if I may. Van puts the touch on all of us for the observance every year, but it's usually like going to church the second time in the same week. This has some ginger to it. Let's count on our fingers first,
though. One, you’re sure J.J. is dying to book Monty into this? And two, Monty’s fit to be back on stage again?”

“Absolutely, both of those.”

“Then I’m in. Monty is an incredible talent, this could be a ripper of an event.” He shifted his gaze to Vandiver. “I’ll agree to be the producer if somebody with actual money will come up with the backing. I’m tapped out, Van--everything but my gold fillings is in Flo’s next show.”

“We thought maybe Major Williamson--”

“I thought that’s what you thought.” He served them both a veteran conference logroller’s grin. “Serves Wes right for being out there with the cows instead of in here defending his back like a civilized man. Anyone know when he’s coming back?”

*Tomorrow,* Susan knew to the minute and also knew better than to say.

“I’ll ring up his secretary and find out,” Vandiver said. “So,” he delegated by habit, not skipping himself, “I’ll put a toe in the water with the Carnegie people. Susan, if you would be so good as to handle the speaking arrangements,
the presentation of the Harlem letters, and so on. Phil, you’ll pull the rest of it together, bless you. Anything we’ve missed?”

Sherman spread his hands. “That should cover it. All we need now is Wes, so we can clap him on the shoulder in congratulations on being the honorary chairman of the observance and catch what falls out of his wallet at the same time.”

The bedroom finally was silent except for some hard breathing.

Wes stirred first, his knee dictating yet another change of position. Susan kissed her fingertips and then lavished them on his lips, as if sealing the further favors to be offered there. By now they were drenched in each other. He had arrived on the noon train, and by the time New York was going back to work from lunch, he and she were devouring each other. He would not have said it caught him by surprise, her fervor--no holds barred, wall-to-wall, that all sounded too crude but the strenuousness was there; most of his waking moments all summer he had wished for this just this sort of scrimmage of desire. Severe love-making made up for... Yet it didn’t. Sunlight poured in the mansard window,
tendrils of vine shadowing onto the wall. It was like the memory of their 1919
time together caught in the hot light of an explosion.

"You had better be right about your landlady off visiting her sister, or
we'll be thrown out in the street."

"Let's hope not--you know what they say about that, it might frighten the
horses."

"I feel used like a maiden."

"Tsk. You don't know the half of it yet."

the warm cup of her hand, already urging him to hardness again.

After, he took her to dinner at the restaurant of the Brevoort Hotel, on the
basis, as far as Susan could see, that it was the nearest palace he could think of.

The headwaiter fussed them into place, chanted Monsieur and Madame while
enthroning them at the nicely placed table which one glance at Wes had evidently
entitled them to. Something was whispered in Wes's ear that made him nod
gravely, menues were conferred on them, and then they, like the few hundred
other dining couples, were by themselves in the sea of ice-white tables. Glancing
around, Susan recalled the French saying: In society, one must climb like a parrot, with the help of beak and claw.

"Too bad Montana doesn't have a seacoast," Wes said as if something should be done about that. Running a finger rapidly down the seafood side of the menu, he chose clams, specifying a l'eau.

Susan ducked her head to the menu, not fully trusting her expression in front of a man whose version of eating fish on Friday was clams boiled in cream.

"I'm hopelessly carnivorous," she announced. In French probably better than the waiter's, she ordered the loin of lamb, done just pink. "Back home we never ate the little dickens, you know, or maybe you don't. Mutton, yes."

Wes felt around under the draping tablecloth and pulled out a champagne bottle. "Louis informs me the only available wine is on the order of glycerine, but this isn't bad." He poured the sparkling liquid in their waterglasses. Susan was constantly astonished at the hiding places of alcohol.

They looked at each other, bed memories between them. She had needed to know. It had not changed anything but her pulse rate.

The French onion soup was brought before she said:

"Is this safe for you?"
He realized that she didn’t know--how could she--that the snoops and
tattlers of his and Merrinell’s set were universally at summer places yet; for the
gilded ilk, October brought the social season back to New York as inexorably as
the tides of Fundy reversed themselves. Across the next ten days or so the pair of
them could cavort the length of Fifth Avenue undiscovered if they so pleased, then
suddenly the Puritans would land again. Rather than go into all that, Wes
gestured around at the palatial roomful of other dining couples conducting
dialogues across snowwhite tablecloths. “We’re nicely hidden in plain sight here.
Snowshoe rabbits in a drifted field.”

But Susan said as if she knew more than that about the nature of
camouflage: “Won’t they pick us out by the pink of our eyes?”

He was about to laugh and hoist his glass with the remark that pink
champagne was more likely a dead giveaway in such circumstances, when she
said: “Pink is the color of guilt, isn’t it?”

“I’ve just hit town, so I’m running behind on the guilt issue. Although I
gave it my best this afternoon.”
“You seem to be in a mood.” Meaning their bedroom marathon, he said:

“There’s not much more I can do in this calendar day to take your mind off whatever it is.”

“Knowing you, I have to calculate that you’ll take yourself back to Helena as soon as you have Monty put right and the Observance out of the way.”

“I ought to, yes.”

“Stay, why not. We’ve hardly been together at all, this year. I don’t like the sound of ‘arrangements’ any better than I know you do, but there could be some and we could just call it our way to be together.”

“That’s a big step. If I were a certain someone, I’d call it a major step.”

“You’re as bad as I am. ‘If for every pun I said/I were to be pun-i-shed--’

‘I’d be be made to go to a puny shed/And there hang my punnish head.’ I sang that once.

The meals came.

“Fair warning. Your wife.” He went still. “Van is going to put the arm on you to coax her and her circle, he calls them, in on the Observance. He seems to think she hobnobs with the governor’s wife, among others. A slum relief
committee together, is it, the Cardinal and some others thrown in?’” Her face was perfectly straight.

“You know how that is, committees make”—just in time he backed off from the cliff where the sign read ‘strange bedfellows.’ Something like a chuckle came along with the realization that a conversation with Susan still was next thing to a blood sport. He could feel a welcome stirring of zest in his lately underused capacity to formulate talk. “Van knows how to turn a circle into a round number,” he polished off that topic. “I’ll see that Merrinell’s phalanx pitches in on the event, don’t worry.”

“I wasn’t, particularly. Now I have a better surprise for you.”

“Isn’t there a limit on them, in one calendar day?”

“Monty’s first musicale, since.”

“Already?”

“And we’re going to it. We’re expected.”

“Are we. When is this?”

“Oh, around ten.”

“Ten when?” Then it dawned on him, or whatever the nocturnal equivalent is. “Tonight?”
“Of course tonight.”

Wes sat back to compose himself for a moment. “I hope you’re not going to tell me next it’s at my house.”

“Touche. J.J. wouldn’t pull anything like that, now would he. It’s at, who did he tell me the people are, Baxters, Hatcher’s, Thatcher’s--Brewsters," she triumphantly came up with it. “Allthough J.J. assured me they go by How and Sooz.”

“Susan, this is pushing it. I do business with Howard Brewster, and Lord only knows who else will show up.”

“Don’t fret, we’re not strolling in together. Phil Sherman is squiring me. You can make your appearance when you like, only don’t you dare miss any of the songs--Monty and I worked ourselves to the bone on them.”

“That Phil. I’m going to have to keep an eye on him.”

“Actually it was Monty’s idea. I still have never heard him sing in performance, you know.”

“That’s purely silly,” he said as if just noticing that state of affairs. “Of course you need to be there, it’s only fair.”
“I’m sorry to have sprung that on you so quick, about wanting you to stay. Forgive me that, all right?”

“All is forgive,” she said in a comic tragic accent that could have got her instantaneously hired at the Brevoort.

The grand piano at the Brewsters’ had the type of gleam to it that comes from that assiduous polishing agent, old money. Cecil hung around the great dark lustrous instrument looking as pleased as if it was his to take home. Run your hands under hot water before touching it, did you, Cece? Monty stood by, anchoring himself into what seemed the best spot to sing from, watching as Cecil enthroned himself on the piano bench and began manipulating the follow sheets, and along with them his third beer. Prohibition, in Cecil’s opinion, had made brewing an uncertain art, and as usual he plopped a cough drop into his glass to give the beer some snap.

J.J. was down at the other end of the sumptuous living room in conversation with the heir to something or other. Monty never liked taking it on himself, where Cecil was concerned, but an accompanist who was not up to the mark was the last thing this night needed. He pattycaked a brief drumbeat on the
piano top, leaving fingermarks that drew Cecil’s instant attention. “Easy does it, partner,” he issued. “Those cough drops can get you.”

The pianist looked up, irked, and just as quickly learned he had better not be. Cowboy or whatever he was, Monty had a set to him that suggested you really ought to start herding yourself in the direction he wanted you to. And he hadn’t come out of that beating any less determined to have performances done his way and no other. Privately Cecil had figured Monty was headed for the scrap heap, after that. But that woman, whatever kind of music witch she was, and him, however they did it the pair of them had come up with renditions that made his fingers itch, they were so good. Cecil knew when to back off, and now was not a bad time.

“Only oiling up enough to be loose, Monty,” he soothed. “I’ll be right on soon as we start.”

“That’d be good,” Monty said deadpan.

He turned away from Cecil and scanned the party-comers as they gathered in flocks of four or six. Pompadoured men and bobbed women, about like the last one of these all those months ago, but none of these evenings quite mirrored any of the others; he was pretty sure that was their point. Costumes, sometimes--
godamighty, once there had been a hat night, with half the crowd in sombreros and hawkshaws and he sang in his tux and Stetson—and more generally some ins and outs to the mix of the invited each time. High society constantly put itself through a strainer, it looked to him like, and keeping track was J.J.’s job and thank heavens not his. He did know that J.J., without coming out and saying so, had wanted tonight’s do to be out of Harlem, to see how the resuscitated voice and redone songs went over with white hearers. Got his wish on that, for sure: tonight’s guest-list sift had shaken out like pure flour. The only dark skins in evidence anywhere in the room were J.J.’s and his and Cecil’s, except of course those of the serving staff, as carefully distant-faced as Eskimos.

At the point now where his music was ready in him and the waiting had to be got through, Monty occupied himself by watching the faces, all the rituals of expressively widened eyes and laughing lips and butterfly kisses on cheeks.

Tonight’s host and hostess were the type who stayed on the move to pollinate the party, shunting this famous couple over to meet that notorious one, bringing a hipper-dipper with the ladies over to meet the newspaper versifier who had recently left her husband. He knew there were places in the world where people like these would be taken out and shot, but he found it hard to hold much against
anybody whose worst quality—at least out in public—was trying everything in order to have a good time. Quite a few of these, he figured, were the kind of person who would be fun on a picnic, if it was a short enough picnic.

At last he saw Susan come in, on the much-used arm of Phil Sherman.

*Here we go, hon,* his thought cried across the room to her. *Someplace we never thought we’d get to, let alone in a bundle.*

*Do I have enough faces for this?*

Looking at herself in the abstract, which was currently the only way she could stand to, Susan believed herself as revealing and moment-by-moment duplicitous as a mirror with three panels. Across the room there, a man her heart went to. Somewhere on his way up Park Avenue to here, a man whom her impulses had tried to fit with, that very afternoon. About to enter an evening where they would both be. She hoped she could hold herself together long enough to sort herself out.

First, though, she had to survive the onslaught of hospitality.

"*Delighted...acquaintance...welcome to our little evening,***" was luxuriantly drawled at her from both sides before either she or Phil could put a name on
herself. When he managed to, the hostess and host beamed expertly while they tried to place it. Even the muscles of their smiles, Susan sensed, had pedigree.

Susetta Brewster was of an old Virginia family--Tidewater roots as far back as the first anchor splashes--and slender and decisive as a sceptre. Her husband, older, possessed a high stomach, on the style of a pigeon, and had a way of leaning in on whomever he was talking to as if offering the comfort of that hearty bosom.

As the Brewsters’ gracious hovering elongated into hesitation, though, Susan realized that her showing up with Phil Sherman did not fit expectations, rather like a kangaroo print in the snow. She fixed a shielding smile against the determined attention Susetta Brewster was giving her--with just a tiny stitch of wariness at the corner of each eye--as Phil yattered an introduction that didn’t make much sense until he invoked Susan’s work for the Over There Committee.

At once that pegged her for Susetta: doubtless a war widow, tragic as a Brancusi figurine from the look of her, most likely an heiress from the West on top of it all or why else would Phil Sherman be convoying her around town? With relief she burst out to her husband: “Oh, then, Howard, you must see to it that she meets Major Williamson.”

“Shall!” promised Brewster.
Until that could be made to happen, she and Phil were shooed into action in the crowd. Phil did not abandon her, but in this atmosphere of excess money and women with telltale sidling eyes he had trolling to do and often worked with his back to her.

In the course of the evening she jumped now and then when Howard Brewster shouted "Sooz!" which each time turned out to be robust abbreviation of his wife rather than the start of summons of herself. Maybe it was the influence of her neighborhood, maybe it was the marinade in the Brevoort lamb, but in this gathering she felt temporarily French. What was the saying, over there: "On the ladder of life one must climb like a parrot, with the help of beak and claws."

Tonight's rungs were perilously close to the top of New York. She drew on resources she hadn't used in twenty years; she had been through this before, in the Village; there had been nights then when she was one standing by the piano. She had a good pithy conversation with an old growler who had started as a rigger in the Oklahoma oilfields and wildcatteed his way next door to the Rockefellers.

Next she had one that spun in circles, with a cottontopped actress who had been the stand-in for Jeanne Eagels in *Rain*. The matter of roles. The woman would
go from young and white-haired to old and white-haired with quite possibly nothing between. What must that be like?

Wes paused. Rooms like this were stacked through history, jewel cases and music boxes elaborate in their time and eventually shelved away, generation by generation. Versailles and Tsarskoe Selo and Minaus and Sydney, probably Pompeii, had had rooms such this. Dazzling chests of entertainment, boxed by the infinite night. He had been stepping into rooms like this since he was eighteen years old and the first 00 on the Gold Coast. In a later one he had met Merrinell. But never had he strolled into one where there waited, supposedly unbeknownst to him, a woman he had been vigorously in bed with all afternoon.

In the bit of time between the butler spiriting his hat from him and Howard Brewster hoving to, he performed a rapid surveillance on the room, best chance to do so on evenings of this sort. Utrecht velvet on the near wall, making that statement in a hurry. The newer decorating touch was paisley shawls adorning the backs of all the furniture, as if peasant women the size of gnomes were stationed throughout the crowd. Over the fireplace blazed one of Nikolai Fechin’s Taos paintings, a pueblo woman in a dress of many colors and holding out a
golden peach. Half a head taller than nearly all the other women, Susan, mingling. And 00 at the piano, Monty. He had deposited both of them into this room--a delegation of two, the Metternich of Montana, almost as if I knew what I was doing---and whether it was reward for good works or not, Howard Brewster now clamped his arm and swirled him into the musicale.

Susan went easy on him, making sure Howard Brewster hung on until he could not resist foisting another couple into the conversation.

"I meant what I said, at dinner. Stay in New York and see the world."

This wasn't a particularly hard audience, but it wasn't an automatic one either. Gin had made its inroads in attention spans.

But the songs caught them by the gills. Interposed music between the air they breathed.

He was readying himself for the final song when a hand plucked his sleeve. "Excuse me all to hell, Montgomery," J.J. whispered, holding on to a tiniest inch of fabric to show he was interrupting only to the absolute minimum.

"But I have to hit them with this before the night goes to pieces."

Monty backed up, knowing J.J. would not do this if it didn't count.
“Good people, I need to make an announcement. I get paid to spill the beans. On the eleventh of November, Montgomery and Cecil have another little do. They’re hearing about it for the first time along with the rest of you, look at their faces. It will be at a place called Carnegie Hall.” An ahhh like an ascending run plucked on a harp zephyred through the room. “Bring any money you’re tired of having laying around, need I say.”

Monty squared up again.

Something phantasmal came into the room now when he sang the Medicine Line song. Wes felt it as a chin-level chill, up around where his officer tabs used to be. There was a tinge of something timeless, some note of soldierly contemplativeness, in Monty’s voice when he sang it now. Even Wes’s ear picked it up. Hector sang so. Lyre, bugle, drum. Bagpipes.

The applause cascaded.

The big Dutchman he had been warned away from. Artist of some kind, no one seemed quite sure on what basis. The man’s wife was across the room, although her hard dark eyes were not. She watched, Monty watched, as he leaned intently in on Susan. “So you are from the wilds of Montana, ha. Had you heard of this musical gentleman out there? His singing is amazing. So--so natural.”
Over the man's shoulder Monty traded a sneaking glance with Susan, knowing she had caught on in the same instant he had as to how near that meant naturally so-so.

"Only barely, over the sound of the tom-toms," she answered. "Wouldn't you say, Mister Rathbun?" The man sputtered a laugh and moved on.

Monty circulated, watching his chance until he caught her alone for a moment at the table of food.

"Carnegie Hall, that's pretty foxy," he said low and offhand as though consulting her on whether the Pecorino cheese carried any advantage over the Stilton. "Wonder where the Over Theres might've got that idea."

"I'll never tell."

"Right. It's only all over you. Susan, good godamighty, you know I'm a little leery on audiences yet and you're going to plop me in front of--"

"You'll get over it," she assured him, confident enough for both of them.

"You'll have to. Now shush about that. Your following wants petting, here come some now. And just so you know--you were everything I could have hoped, tonight."
Past one in the morning the evening began to break up, as raggedly and inevitably as floes calving off an iceberg. The noisiest contingent wanted to go up to Harlem. Cecil enlisted as guide at once. When they swept by Monty he declined by rote, saying the only place up there he wanted to see this time of night had a bedpost in each corner and a pillow to welcome him. From her windowseat Susan watched what happens after the finale, the dispersal of the audience, content to her core that Monty's music--their music--had reached into this gathering. Before long, Phil came over and manfully asked her to come along with a bunch he had assembled, they were going to the Kit Kat Club where the liveliest hoofers from Flapper Revue congregated after the show, there would be dancing--"Phil, I'm sorry, but I don't flap." He offered to flag her a taxi for home, and out they went, she once again on his arm, past the indefatigable cordialities of the Brewsters.

Wes had waited for the party to thin out before going over to Monty.

"Major, how you doing, how's the ranch? Hoped we'd get to shoot the breeze," he fibbed industriously.

"You and Susan have done wonders."
“She’s one of a kind. The Lord Himself wouldn’t know how to put a
price on her, don’t you think?”

J.J. was in a purring mood when he met with Susan to work out the
details. “The newspapers will lap it up. ‘Negro singer shrugs off Klan beating,
reaches heights of Carnegie Hall.’”

“As you say, Vitamin P,” she said, meaning the power of push.

“You know, I can sort of see the audience that night in here,” he palmed
his forehead like a phrenologist. “You ever do that?”

“Only every time I ever performed.”

“Then let me tell you the kind of thing I see there in great big gorgeous
Carnegie Hall.” He sketched dreamily in the air with his hands. “People dressed
to the nines, Vandiver and the Major’s people wearing their money on their backs,
they got every right to. Lots of medals catching the light, I may even put on my
set. Montgomery and Cecil up there on stage, looking so fine—oh, by the way,
since it’s the finale, we’ll hold them to five songs, tops. Double encore that way,
if the whole crowd isn’t out there sitting on their hands.”

“Right,” Susan muttered, writing down the five-song stipulation.
“All that, then,” J.J.’s voice pussyfooted on, “I can see just as plain as anything. And all of us of a certain shade up, ever so high, up there in...peanut heaven.”

Susan’s head yanked up. Cinnamon eyes to almond eyes, she and he stared to a draw. After a bit she said, “No one has told us the seating has to be that strict.”

“There is a way to encourage it not to be.”

“J.J., I’m no good at mind-reading.”

“Round up the cripples.”

Susan had to swallow hard. She kept still, so he would go on.

“Ours and yours both. Crutchers, one-lungers, blind beggars, any of the wounded vets.” He clicked these off like an abacus. “Make them honored guests, put them in the front row, mix them up. Speckle the place with them, that way. How can Carnegie Hall make a fuss about where anybody else sits if those are up there together, I ask you?” He didn’t even stop for breath. “Another thing. Welcoming speech from Major Williamson. Hero and big giver and all, it would be good for the crowd to see him limp across the stage.”
“But he doesn’t—” She realized she had never thought any gait of Wes’s could be called that. “I’ll see that he’s asked.”

“Let me just keep track. I put up the money for the observance, I haul in friends, I deliver the welcome—do you want me to work up a trapeze act, too?”

After the last musicale Monty was already fondly missing them when J.J. gave him a lift home as usual. This one had been on the West Side, the Dutchman’s place. The Observance fell in the middle of the week. Rain poured as if clouds were punctured by the high buildings.

“Good do tonight,” J.J. was musing out loud. “Nice and speckled,” his term for a mixed audience. “Your better class of ofays, but you couldn’t swing a cat in there without hitting a hushmouth poet either.” He added a little laugh. “Not to mention the fine assortment of brown sugars. Wouldn’t hurt you to get yourself one of those, you know.”

Monty made an amused sound at the back of his throat and was about to rib back by asking him what kind of manager he was, trying to get a poor angelic recuperating singer in the clutches of wild women, when J.J.’s next words hit:
“Because you ought to lay off the white lady.”

Monty swung his head around the gingerly way he used to when there was trouble in the vicinity of the bull chutes.

“Goddamn it, J.J., where’s your evidence on that?”

J.J. tapped his temple impatiently and then went back to working the wipers. “Too careful says something, too.”

“I thought you got along with her.”

“Getting along with her isn’t the same as getting in deep with her.

Montgomery, the last time I looked half an hour ago, that woman was white, white, white. Mingle with them, tooth and nail, hide and hair, that’s fine. But draw the line where the skirt starts, okay? You got no business up there anyway. Whatever you may have heard, that pink thing of theirs doesn’t run sideways in them. At least not in the French ones, I can speak from experience. So don’t go being curious.”

“She’s--the music--” Monty fumbled for how to say it. “We’ve gotten to be friends, her and me. Been through damn near everything together, trying to bring the songs up out of nowhere and me along with them. You know most of that. I don’t see why--”
“The Club isn’t ready for that,” Phil gestured languidly around at the wholly masculine roomful of alumni in protectorates of three and four, “and I doubt that those particular ladies are ready for the delicatessen behind the Garrick. You have to be the stand-in. Pile on the grub, you can probably use the nourishment for your speech tomorrow. Everything down pat?”

“I’m so rusty it’s pitiful--it’s been five years since I made a speech, can you believe? I used to reel them off almost without thinking. This one is giving me fits. I’m going to end up reading it from a piece of paper like a town crier.”

“Maybe you should have Susan Duff rehearse you for a change.”

Wes examined his oldest friend. The start of a chill came into him at hearing Phil, cunning about women, make a point with her name on it. “You aren’t just telling me that to see if the silverware will jump again, are you.”

“Hardly. I don’t like what the side of my eye has been seeing at our man Monty’s musicales.” Now Wes felt the frost of apprehension fill in fully within himself. “Susan is as clever as a woman can be about it,” Phil’s tone betrayed nothing and granted nothing; he could have been discussing a character turn in a script that had come in over the transom, “but she and Monty keep crossing paths a tad too often. Let’s hope they haven’t come down with a case of each other.”
Afraid of how he would sound, Wes didn’t say anything. He sat all the way back in his chair, pinned as a butterfly, waiting for what else the suddenly prosecutorial friend across the table would come out with.

“You’ve backed Monty enough it ought to earn you sainthood,” Phil went on making his case, “but it’s reached the point where you need to bend his ear on what goes and what doesn’t. It’s a fact of life, is all—the two of them are asking for trouble if they so much as make eyes at each other. If I’ve noticed they’re on the brink, others will.”

Of necessity Wes found words, for what they were worth. “Phil, really. Aren’t you reading rather a lot into a couple of people simply working up music together? I know you’re a professional noticer, but in this case I think you’re jumping to conclusions.”

“And you’re dodging them.” Phil leaned in, diagnosing as he came.

“There are times when you don’t see what you don’t want to, Wes. Probably that saved your skin where the odds of getting past machine-gun nests were involved. But it can cost you everything you’ve put into Monty’s getting somewhere, if you don’t snap to.” Pup of the historic old wolves in his family, Phil Sherman knew how to nip when he had to. When he was satisfied that his words were
sufficiently under Wes’s skin, he settled back again. “Don’t I wish I were misreading,” he said more leniently. “Seeing the way he lights up around her--I thought at first it was gratitude, on his part. Missy from the nice house, helping him up in the world a little--why wouldn’t he feel grateful? He’s feeling more than that, though, I’d bet anything. She doesn’t show any signs of allergy to his skin either, if you know what I mean. If that doesn’t bother her, why wouldn’t she set her cap for a man on his way to being famous?”

Incalculably more irritated than he dared to show, Wes managed to say by the book: “My family knew hers. She’s from different circumstances than you and I. She doesn’t work that way.”

“That makes it worse then,” came back implacably. “A steel heiress or a countess with enough money to be naughty might get away with a fling across the color line. Not someone whose name only carries the letters it has in it.” Phil tapped the tabletop in emphasis. “Susan Duff throws everything out of kilter. I’m not poking my beezer into this for the fun of it--you of all people know me better than that. I like Monty, I’m all for him. Nothing against her, for that matter, if you like them on the tall prickly side. But I’m not entirely disinterested in how they behave with one another. The sky is the limit, for a voice like his--I
can imagine him someday in the right kind of Broadway vehicle. *Green Pastures of the West,* why not? If the gossip columns take in after him, though, that fries that.” He raised a cautionary hand. “We don’t want to upset the applecart before the Observance. But the minute that’s over, somebody had better land on Montgomery Rathbun with both feet about this.”

“Damn it,” Wes struggled to keep his voice down, “I’m not his lord and master. Something like that ought to come from—well, from his manager.”

“If I know J.J., he’ll weigh in strong on that, if he hasn’t already,” Phil conceded. “But a manager is just another kind of hired hand, you know about those. Monty is used to listening to you. Wait until we have tomorrow night over with, then do us all a favor and take him aside and straighten him out about white women.” He signaled as though just remembering the purpose of this noon at the Club. “Ready to order?”

Something that outwardly resembled Wes made its way to his street address, handed over his hat to the usual serving hands inside the voluminous front door, somehow navigated stairs and hall and thick silence of office to slump into the refuge of his desk chair. This hollow version of himself echoed without
stop with what he had never expected to hear. The Harvard Club conversation, to call it that, tortured all the more because its initiating voice was next to his own.

_Damn you if you brought this up and are wrong, Phil, and double damn you if you are right._ But here in the terrible honesty of aloneness he took over the interrogation of the creature who bore his name in all this and made correction after correction, now that it was too late. What a crude mechanism the mind is, he savagely notified himself. He hadn’t foreseen, hadn’t headed this off in time, hadn’t calculated that their courage could be greater than his. _More fool yet, I hadn’t a clue I was being one, did I._

Eventually what he had left to work with began to come to in him. Clock, social calendar, the footstep chronometry of the household, such reminding taps of time impelled him, however reluctantly, to unmoor from the chair and go through the motions necessary. This next semblance of himself managed to put in an appearance downstairs. It roused considerably at the news that Merrinell was out for hours more, enmeshed in the fitting of the necessary new gown for the Observance gala. Then it mystified Hilliger by discharging him for the rest of the afternoon. This was not like the Major, and every eye of the downstairs staff watched the muted figure climb back up the stairs.
But he was enough himself by now to go about this methodically. His bedroom the first stop, he winnowed through his closet until he found a shirt slightly yellowing with age and tux pants with a wine stain on them, the nearest thing he had to workclothes. The change of costume usefully occupied him; he decided against risking cufflinks up there and rolled back the shirtsleeves, then glanced down at his usual good shoes and shed them in exchange for his old pair of Army field boots. Looking more like a propbox from Carnegie Hall than someone who was going to appear there the next night, out he went into the upper hallway and tromped on up to the mansard attic, the sight of him freezing maids in their tracks all along the way.

Taking care in dodging under the rafters—he had been conked enough for one day—he surveyed the family flotsam stashed there. An attic was always the overhead catch-basin of life's leavings, but he was surprised to see how things had bubbled up here strictly according to generations. Presiding over upright clothes trunks was a lineup of dressmaking forms, successively more slender than the proportions of Merrinell that were being swathed at this very moment. In a gathering of their own were the girls' jilted playthings: rocking horses; menageries of puppets; their dollhouse period. Farthest back in the eaves, galleon-like under
sagging sail-riggings of cobwebs and most of a decade of dust, rested his
brassbound Harvard trunk handed down from his father and in which the old
man’s mementoes were mixed with his. He hadn’t known what else to do with
his father’s last effects.

Grunting, Wes went down in front of the trunk in the angled half-crouch
that was the best he could manage with his knee. The accumulated grime and
spider output made him hesitate; he had forgotten gloves. With mental apology to
his daughters, he pulled on a sleeve puppet of a giraffe with coy eyelashes and
batted away the cobwebs. The he cautiously blew the dust off the trunk and lifted
its lid.

His father’s things were the top few strata of its holdings. Brittle
mummy-brown scrapbooks; on the first page of the first one that came open, a
Miles City newspaper account of the inception of the Montana Stockmen’s
Association in 1885. Wes could not help running his finger down the list of the
men who possessed the prairie then: his father as treasurer of the group, which
would have been his way; among the others, the invited-in ranch operators just
over the Dakota line, including one T. Roosevelt. What if you had all gone into
pig raising, Teddy—would I be hunkered here?
He stacked the scrapbooks aside, then with soldierly care lifted out the holstered horse pistol that young Lieutenant Warren Williamson had used with effect in the Union cavalry corps, and never after. It took Wes over for a moment, the antique pistolry of his father's war compared to the mammoth-calibre barrages of his own. *A peashooter like this to Big Bertha--there's progress for you.* He stuck the gun aside with the scrapbooks and dipped again into the trunk until he could reach what he was looking for. There, beneath it all, the box that he and Whit had long ago agreed they wanted off the ranch.

Surprisingly light but awkward to handle, at least the thing had a carry-string, as such boxes do; he wouldn't have to go there holding it in both hands like something that was about to spill. *Not that it's anything that will ever wash out, no matter how careful I am.* The box had risen, in his grasp, only to the brass-edged rim of the trunk, insecurely resting where the corners lipped together. Holding it there he stayed in the half-kneel, still deciding, bothered raw both ways. There would have been a time when he'd have prayed, in such a position, to work out what to do; sought some justifying snippet of code in the holy accumulation of teachings, some overlooked affidavit of motive that would spell out whether to keep the silence or let this box speak its piece. But, in a wealth of
confusion as unsortable as the attic around him, faith had entirely too many meanings in this situation. The word was as shifting as bits of alphabet shaken into a kaleidoscope: a twitch back or forth spun up a different color-stained letter of faith that one or another of them had put full belief into, in all this.

Wes drew a deciding breath. He hadn’t become who he was by letting others put their spin on things. Lifting the box on up, already he was fashioning his route out past Merrinell for the evening. Benny Leonard’s bout tonight; he would say Phil had happened onto ringside tickets. Lightweights usually went the full fifteen rounds, that would give him ample time. He could cover with details from the morning paper, if she showed curiosity. That wasn’t likely.

He lugged the box downstairs and stashed it at the back of his closet, cleaned up and changed into clothes for the evening. The preliminary with Merrinell aside, the worst he faced now was killing time until dark. It doesn’t stay killed, that’s the problem. It lies around in us in piles until something like this fans air into it.

It was full night when he emerged from the taxi, stood stock-still on the sidewalk to see if he was going through with this, then pushed off on his good leg and approached the door.