look like we can get through.” Wes listened, nodding, working on the logistics of delivering everyone out of this. While Bailey was speaking, Gustafson climbed out and planted himself beside a fender, evidently wanting his feet on the ground until the other car got there and things were sorted out.

Whit came over and drew Wes’s attention. “Maybe we’ve lucked out. This far away, any aftershock might not amount to--”

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

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

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

The other men boiled around the pinned-down attacker as Wes bent over
Monty and Whit chucked his rolled-up tuxedo jacket beneath his head for a
pillow. There over them, Susan stared, sickened unto stupefaction, at the
Williamsons with all their powers and Monty prone in his own blood.

Wes looked up at her when he had Monty’s shirt open. “The collarbone,
the bleeding’s from there. Not from the throat.”

J.J. and Cecil and Bailey scrambled over to help lift Monty to the car.

Bailey’s men frog-marched the assailant off to turn him in to the police. “Ned
recognizes him,” Bailey said, shaken, “hanger-on who didn’t even make it into
Potter’s bunch. He’s the dimwit brother of somebody Whit’s boys gave a going
over. I guess that’s why an ax handle instead of a gun.”

_The hospital was a nightmare. Miraculously few were injured by the
quake, but there were hysterics, and it took some doing to make it understood that
we had a man out in the car who had been beaten with a club. Wes prevailed, of
course, and a doctor and stretcher crew went out for Monty._
In the hallway of the hospital after the patient had been installed in a room
and was being examined, J.J. came over to Wes to make the matter clear. "As
soon as he can be moved we'll be taking him back to New York, Major. Had
enough hospitality out here."

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

"That would help."

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

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

She knew it would be Wes.

The train howled out steam, white whistle blast beneath the plume of
locomotive smoke, at the latest cattle that had broken through the right-of-way
fence. Cecil took such shrieking personally. "Can't they train those cows to keep
off the railroad, like dogs are housebroke?"
J.J. trimmed him to silence with a single glance. To him too this prairie seemed to go on forever, and heifers or whatever they were roamed in shocking freedom. But in his considerable experience grumbling had never been known to make a train go faster.

Cecil vamoosed to the front of the Pullman to read his breviary. J.J. went back to the paneled-off sleeping compartment to look in on Monty again, not that looking helped much either. The doctor that the Williamsons had sent with them, Walker, told him at the start: "The collarbone, that's nothing. I've set hundreds of them on rodeo riders and ranch hands. But that business with the throat—all I can do is keep him quiet and turn him over to somebody who knows what he's doing."

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

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

It had started at Harlem, the Montana depot version of it. Some railroad
magnate went goofy, J.J. had noticed on the way out, and slapped names on the
stops along the tracks the same as real places of the world--Malta, Zurich, you’d
think you were on a royal tour instead of some toot-toot prairie train. He and
Cecil had razzed Monty about that particular little burg, asking why he’d figured
he had to go all the way to 135th Street when here was a Harlem in Mon-tan-i-o,
just look, it even had a skyscraper: the grain elevator taller than the main street
was long, the two of them had thought that was funnier than anything. This time
when the train made its quick stop at the tiny town, there by the telegrapher’s
office waited an overalled man nearly as dark as the shadowed area he was
standing back in: the depot swamper, pushbroom in hand, in respectful
attendance. A couple of hours farther on at the depot at Glasgow, the same
ceremony of witness by a church congregation of ten or a dozen; there was no
mistaking the preacher with the dignified wool under his homburg. J.J. realized
that stop must be a division point on the railroad, to account for such a number,
and from that he figured it out in a hurry. The trainmen. The yassuh telegraph,
silent polite ebony-faced servers of railroad food and dark distant caboose-riding
brakemen who some mysterious way were spreading the word ahead.

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

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

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

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

*The bastard had to really hate hard, ride out an earthquake to get at me.*

*Christamighty, is there just no end to--*

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

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

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

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

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

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

But when she answered it, what the threshold held was Wes. Keyless?

And if so, why? her eyes interrogated before a rustle of impatience at the side of
him manifested itself as Whit.

“Sorry to intrude, we thought you would be done by this time of day,”

Wes put forth a politeness that carried like cologne toward Mrs. Quinton and her
daughter. “Really, our business matter can wait if--”

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

Mrs. Quinton simpered past the man who would have been governor and
his cattle king brother, Lily managed to look everywhere except at the gauntlet of
grownups, and off down Highland Street they vanished, leaving Susan with her
next tableau.

“My, the brothers Williamson. Thinking of becoming a duet, are you?”
“I’m needed to co-sign,” Whit for once kept himself to the minimum.

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

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

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

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

“Yesterday,” Whit husked as if his own throat was parched.
Susan stood there uncommonly pale, as if keeping a moment of silence for Scotch Heaven. After a few seconds, she murmured: "Then let’s get it over with."

The signing of the papers didn’t take time at all, it seemed to Susan. Whit had capped the pen and handed it back to her with awkward gallantry when she became aware that Wes was studying her speculatively. "Now that we’re past that," she caught up to what he was saying, "this came just as we were leaving the house." He handed her a telegram.

MUST REACH MISS DUFF. PLEASE.

--JACE JACKSON
Why give them another run at me?

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

Susan leaned to the table again, trying not to let her apprehension show as
she took in the writing. The tablet traveled on the veneer with a sandpapery
whisper each time Monty whipped it over to her. She held back for a few
moments, as if waiting for the paper to quit rasping, before she spoke. “You
can’t just let them wreck you. You certainly don’t have to worry about another
run at you from that cretin with the ax handle--the Williamsons will see to it he’ll
be in the penitentiary until he comes out in his coffin.” Monty was grabbing the
tablet back to himself, pencil at the ready. “I know,” she tried to head off the
agitated scribble, “that doesn’t put you back to what you were. But he’s going to
be out of commission from now on and there’s every chance that you’re only out
of commission until you heal up.”

The tablet scooted back toward her as if of its own accord. You don’t
savvy, it read, it hurts to even breathe deep. Before she could respond, he
swung the paper again and jotted: & I sound like death warmed over, you heard
that yourself.
There, she would have had to admit under oath, he had chisel-hard truth.

Her ears still were trying to recover from when she stepped into this stuffy apartment with Jace Jackson and heard like a croak from the crypt: “Why’d they have to bring you back here?”

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

“Monty,” she tried again now, “all I am saying is that when the doctors decide it’s all right for you to try your voice, we can see how it handles music. I helped with that once, I may as well again.” The pencil was twitching in his fingers as if he couldn’t wait to stab at that. Whatever the medical prognosis turned out to be, the mood she was seeing across the table showed the opposite of hope. “You have every right to be down on life,” she felt she had to resort to,
“but what happened back there was a chain of bad luck. If we hadn’t all been shaken out of our boots, Bailey and his men would have been able to keep that creature off you. That’s behind, now, and when we have you so you can sing again and audiences flock to hear the man who withstood the idiots of the world, life will even out again.”

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

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

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

She shoved the window up as high as she could. The air of Harlem felt only marginally less hot than the incubating apartment. Nonetheless she pushed aside the lace curtains and stood at the window trying to will the atmosphere into some cooling motion. What she got was commotion. Iron-wheeled clatter of a knife-grinder's cart going by, along with a chant she could not understand a word of. Peppering in and out of that was the rackety putt-putt of an ice truck. Background to both was the pervasive locust hum of automobile traffic over on the avenues and main cross-streets. The steady clamor it took a mammoth city to produce, and she was fifteen years out of date at coping with its energies and mystifications. Had Jace Jackson lost his bearings, gambling that she was the right medicine for here? Somewhere down the block she could hear a water-rush that must be a gushing fire hydrant, and she drank in the sound of that cataract as if it were the North Fork in spring spate.
When she turned around to Monty, bracing herself for the treatise, he was sitting back as if spent. Slowly he sent the tablet her way.

_Miss Susan--I am taking your name in vain, but I need to make the point as strong as I can--I know you think you can fix anything but the break of day._

_But this isn’t anything a music stand or running to keep my breath up or anything else will help. The man who beat me is only one of who knows how many, and that’s what there is no cure for. You know and I know that I didn’t pick out my skin, like it was the one suit of clothes I’d ever get. Yet that’s how it is. The singing does not work out for someone like me, we have to face up to that. I’ll maybe end up swamping at the cafe under the Elevated, but at least I will be in one piece. Believe me, I hate to say this, it goes against everything the both of us have tried to do. But I wish we had never started._

Susan read it over, then motioned for the pencil. _“To save both of us hearing me say this over and over like a cuckoo clock, I may as well write it down where it’ll be handy.”_ She flipped to a fresh tablet sheet, jotted briefly, then tore 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 as the Song of Solomon, sailed past her like a luscious vision in peppermint, Susan felt like a pillar of chalk. Yet all the passersbys’ glances that slid off Jace Jackson and stuck to her pale self seemed not to convey hostility or racial grievance, but something
more like cold hard clinical curiosity. Distracted at being constantly gone over as if she were an eye-chart, it took her a number of strides before she managed to find her way back to what she had been wanting to ask. “As I understand it, if I were to come up here at night with other whites and party until dawn, that would cause no stir. But you say I hadn’t better show up alone in broad daylight.”

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

“Then tell me this, why is it all right for you to walk in and out of here with me?”

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

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

J.J.’s low response was drowned out by the departing train. She waited, watching as the train cars caused the shadow-and-light pattern beneath the elevated track to flicker like giant piano keys being madly played, until the rumble passed them by. “I’m sorry. What?”
He gestured at the teeming street and said only loud enough for her to hear: "People think you’re a doctor."

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

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

Monty grimly plowed at his brought-in meal. It was a mess, one-handed eating. He still was on milk toast, but even so, the bowl and spoon had minds of their own and his throat did not want anything to come near it. He had made it clear to J.J., practically in block letters, that he did not want anyone around when he had to tackle food like this. The kitchen helper from the E&B who lugged in the hot-water caddy three times a day and fished out the bowl of sick man’s grub always cleared out anyway as soon as the dish was on the table. Couldn’t blame
him. Tongue-tied invalid propped up by plaster of paris and tablet paper; who wants to hang around in that sort of company?

He negotiated another mouthful of milk-sopped toast as carefully as he could, slopping some of it even so. Damn, but being a patient was unbelievably hard work. He was 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 by way of the kitchen telephone forever. The Major was pretty much out of the picture, it was his Montana time of year for months yet, and he couldn't be expected to handhold a person endlessly either. Meanwhile the bankbook with the name **Rathbun, Montgomery** on it was going down as if a plug had been pulled.

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

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

“Going on six years, how can it be,” Vandiver was saying, as if marveling
at how calendars took flight, when he and Susan faced each other across the light-
gained 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 mentioned back there at St. Mihiel that she had once partaken of Greenwich Village life, before the war, in its storied era of long-haired men and short-haired women. A blunted singing career, the way he heard it, that not uncommon souvenir of New York. But after she was dislodged by family obligation or the whim of changing her vocal vocation to teaching or the lure of the suffrage movement in the West where it had seemed to be doing some good—the particular story that followed Susan Duff wandered back and forth over all of those—she had chosen to burrow herself away in Montana ever since. He had to wonder about that. Her efforts out there for the Committee had been miraculous, and every autumn she could be counted on to subscribe for a contributor’s ticket to the Armistice Day observance; at Carnegie Hall going rates, that was not a negligible amount. Before her last trip to France he had written to persuade her to stop over here and for once attend the great event, he and his wife would be glad to put her up and show her around for a few days afterward, but she replied that
she had already arranged to sail from Montreal, thank you very much. Now, though, here she sat, running a caretaking eye over his view of the ocean liners and the docks they were nuzzled to, as if they were her personal aquarium. He cleared his throat. "Susan, may I ask--what brings you to New York at last?"

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

Vandiver waited, but that appeared to be all. After a bit, he ventured:

"You're available to us, do I gather?"

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

The big hands spread apart on the table as if measuring out the invitation.

"We can always use your talents." Vandiver delivered it along with the practiced smile, "I've told you that before."

"Fine, then. Oh, did I mention, I must have mornings for myself. The, ahm, recuperative chore. Although if you'll furnish me a typewriter, I can take any amount of work home and do it at night."
That set an executive nerve to twitching in him, she could tell. But when he spoke, it was to say he supposed they could work around that, since it was her. As if that reminded him of something, he cocked his head to one side again.

"You’ll need to find lodging, I suppose? Miss Cooper or Mister Lehrkind could go around with you. Or, my wife’s mother knows Mrs. Maeterlinck in the Village, she might take in--"

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

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

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

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

Susan. Can I call you that? Saves words.

“You may. You’d better.”
Susan, listen for once.

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

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

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

“You’ve had worse.”

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

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

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

_Any of that, I brought on myself. But this—it’s like terrible weather that just never quits._

“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 have your cast off.”

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

Monty had yawned miles' worth, feeling ridiculous, that first day,

"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, hmmmm mmm mm, keep it going, work on the resonance, make it carry all the way up to here.” She tapped each side of the bridge of her nose indicatively.

“Put your fingers up there by your eyes, feel the vibration?”

For whatever it was worth, he could.

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

“You’re unbelievably lucky to have someone Scotch for this,” she was assuring him, “vowels are the currency of our realm.” He could have sworn she brought the scent of heather into the overstuffed apartment by the way she 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," she pranced her voice as if his was bound to follow, "now let's go through it a few times. I'm the customer, I come into your dry goods store looking for, oh, let's say a new shawl"—she glanced around and felt of the hem of the nearest antimacassar—"and I'm not just sure what material it is I'm finding.

Remember, you answer only with the vowels like a temporary Scotchman. I ask," and now she trilled, "'Wool?'"

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

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

"Ay, oo."

"'All wool?'"

"Ay, aw oo."

"'All ewe wool?'"

"Ay, aw ew oo."

"'All one ewe's wool?'"

"Ay, aw ae ew oo."

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

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

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

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

Her pen paused in mid-page as if listening. The first metallic wheeze from across the street was always as if the siren was gulping in enough breath to last, and now the firetruck howled off as if baying on the scent of smoke. So much for my cosmopolitan airs, she twitted herself for at least 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 reminiscently scented neighborhood nearer the docks where French silk merchants
once clustered. Smitten with iron-trellised balconies and creeper vines and the air-promised presence of bread and cheese, she had managed to entirely miss the presence of the firehouse in the middle of the block.

As the siren wound away, she glanced at the clock. Nearly the middle of the night already. The city ate her time when she wasn't looking. Visitational as a cat, it sneaked pawfuls of hours away every time she turned around 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. An evening at the Vandivers' or an occasional Broadway show, and she was abruptly short of portions of the week for Over There work. The morning trips up to Harlem, distinct as a picnic during her hours with Monty, turned into a nibbling of her time all the long ride back downtown on the El. Held in the sway of the train, she perpetually had to try to make up for the lost top of the afternoon by composing in her head that day's plea to the state chairman in Georgia to get in there among the peach crews and harvest their war letters, or to coax the one in 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?”

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

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

"Good as gold but hard to hold--"

The blues had been trying to get Monty by the ears, and failing. The man sounds like that and probably gets paid plenty for it. Me, if I was to do my songs that way, everybody would just say my voice is shot. He had been listening offhandedly—all right, enough to scoff—in the dim of the apartment, to the program drifting into his cabinet radio from someplace where shoeing mules and tending moonshine stills seemed to be pretty much the constants of life. Harlem and the prairie both beat that, at least. But he sat up, disturbed, now as the delta growl made wavery by distance found something remembered in him.

"Flat to stack and round to roll--

Silver dollar, lift my soul.

Silver, silver, silver,

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

"Hard to bend but easy to spend--

Flat to stack and round to roll--"

I get the idea. He reached over and snapped off the radio. Blues singers were really something, they could get by with about twenty words and repeating ninety percent of them six times. The ditty out of nowhere had put him up against himself yet again, though. Now that his shoulder was mended and the purple blotch of the blow was gone from the column of his neck, he seemed to be back to what he had been, in any way that he could see. The staves of his legs, the arch of his foot, the 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, summation came to Susan's pen, before Monty has his music back. But so far neither of us has swerved from that. She folded the diary closed, and in midnight ink began her weekly letter to Wes.

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

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

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

The creek, subdued by this time of the summer, prattled at the stones of the crossing just enough to be heard at the brow of the benchland where he sat in
the buckboard studying the vee of the North Fork. He had been perched there for some minutes now, totting up what lay before him. The creek-twined line of homesteads showed pockets worn through by the past winter. Half the roof of the long 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 without chimney. Nearer at hand—closer to home, you would have me say—off to the side of the Duff house the root cellar had caved in, the dirt of its crater fresh, not grassed over. He calculated back: it was no more than a year since he wheeled in there with the makings of picnic in the johnnybox of this wagon, and in the quantity of time he was weighing today, he had to think that was not much. The seasons here were even more ruthless than most calendars, though.

He flicked the reins to start the horses toward the creek crossing. The day already had the hot crinkly feel of August, the peak of haying season, the one month of the ranch year when 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 yhr 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. The going was not as easy on the eyes. One after another the homesteads met him like a ghost town that had been pulled apart and scattered, the sun-browned boards of a barn or a shed or a picket fence cropping into view at a bend of the creek or an inlet of meadow. The houses as he passed them were a gallery of gaping window casements and empty doorways.

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

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

The mountains practically at the back of his neck, 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 middle-distance buildings of the Duff place. The silence
over everything was as if a spell had been cast, and in a way it had, although it
had taken nearly three dozen years to register. The North Fork valley was all as
empty as his father ever could have wished it. Which was to say, occupied only
by Double W cattle with their heads down in the good grass.
So there I stood, in the tracks of a man who once told me my father had been such a sonofabitch toward the people of Scotch Heaven it was running out his ears. Angus McCaskill had an everything-included romance with the language, did he not. I know as well as anything that you had a sort of crush on him, from 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 be in the way between us. Wes counted back: the last half dozen years, no night here would ever have known a neighboring light, not a sign of a larger world beyond the fate-inked dark of this valley. Days, what would have begun as necessary settler solitude would have turned into 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 chafing summer for the horses to run away and leave him afoot over here. Then he prowled, seeing what suggested itself. He knew that out of the volume of lives here he could discern only flecks; but from such glints of memory we try to make out
what we were, do we not. The patterns built into everyday still were there at each place. The barn never more than two lariat lengths from the house, because no sane person wanted to have to follow a rope farther than that to feed the workhorses during a whiteout blizzard. The outhouses always astutely downwind from the living quarters. Colossal runaway molten-orange poppies, tall as he was, marked the flowerbeds the women long ago put in under their kitchen windows.

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

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

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

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

As he pulled into it, the Duff place seemed to him the emptiest of all, without Susan’s presence. New York, and her mending of Monty there, was all but unimaginable from here. He half-wished she wouldn’t write him the letters she did. The other half of the time, he yearned to hear from her every blessed
day. Climbing down into the yard, he at least took a wry pleasure in the house of Ninian Duff having been turned into a music parlor, there at the last.

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

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

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

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

Wes gave the Duff homestead one last looking over and turned away,
taking care to avoid the nettles that were reclaiming the yard.
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.

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

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

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

"We're ready to start on songs," she gave J.J. the big news. "Actual music, no more oo ee ah ah." She swept over to the reclusive piano. "Ta-da!"

Pinging a finger down onto a key to underscore that, she elicited a broad flat brang as keys either side of that one stuck to it.

"I'll get a tuner in here," J.J. said hastily, "first thing in the morning. I'm slipping, I should have cottoned that you were about creep up on the singing. Montgomery, this lady will have you top-billed at the Aeolian again in no time."
“I’ve been meaning to ask, how we’re going to work this,” Susan broached. “I’ll tend to all the voice matters, but accustoming to the music will eventually take piano playing. Shouldn’t his usual accompanist--?”

“No can do.” J.J. seemed less concerned than she would have thought.

“Cecil’s up at New Haven, filling in on the organ at Yale. He’s in choirboy heaven. You did the piano work the time before, didn’t you? That’ll serve.”

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

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

“There, see?” Susan didn’t know why she felt so celebratory, when all they had to work with was a raspy voicebox and a rickety piano, both in 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 session, start us off right.”

“One thing about it,” he more or less assented, “if I sound like I think I’m going to, I can go over to the Bronx Zoo and live with the penguins.” He 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 some, 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. Susan sat there two feet away from him oblivious to anything but the direction of her thought. She was one of those people you could see the wheels go around in. Fascinating as he found that, 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 Assinniboine 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 had been beaten lopsided; 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, and I had them put out the word,” J.J. said with becoming managerial modesty. “The stuff is probably ragtag and bobtail, but there it is.” He hesitated, then finally produced another packet from inside his suitcoat. “Here, before I lose my nerve. Love letters to my wife, the ones the censors let pass.”

“I wouldn’t really say I can tell, J.J., but I suspect you’re blushing.”

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

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

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

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

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

*Trying to stand up, under--”*

“No, wait,” she corrected herself in mid-lilt, “right there we want--oh, never mind what it’s called, just--”
“No, put a name to it for me,” he said firmly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Very well. If J.J. will go along with 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 Assinniboine 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. She was as aglow, he registered, as whatever the most valuable white gem was. “The operetta bunch I told you about kept after me, I had to write and write in self-defense. And working the way we did here—it must have been catching.”

“It’s a beauty. Makes me homesick, if that was home.”

“High praise, I think.” She laughed a little. He didn’t.

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

“Not just that quick, you make me sound like I have one foot on the train. But soon enough after, I’d better. The house is there waiting, the mothers with my pupils dribbling after them.” She saw that she was not having any luck at perking him up. “I’m set in my ways—that’s hardly news, is it. But you and your music have been good for me.” Knowing it was time to gather and go, she
squared her music sheets together. "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 knew he had to get it out if it killed him even though this was the sort of thing that could. "With telling you how I feel about you. I chickened out of doing it," he faltered on, "that time at the Broadwater."

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

"I wouldn't do it now, either, if I felt like I had any choice," Monty had gone on brokenly. The anguish in his voice jarred her. He gathered breath and gulped out the next. "But it works me over, night and day. That I can't even begin to say how far gone I am, over you." He spread his hands, palms up, as if their emptiness spoke it better than he could. "I couldn't stand to not tell you, ever. What the hell kind of way is that for people to have to live?"

It tore through her. "Caring about me, it sounds like you mean."
"Worse than that. Bad as love gets, if I have to put a name to it." Bleakly he stared over at her. "I was hoping it would wear off, Susan, honest. Was I ever hoping that."

She knew she had to try to slip a different meaning over this. "Working close as we have on the songs and all, there's naturally something emotional about it." She tried to force a chuckle. "I take it as a compliment you've come out of this feeling the way you do rather than wanting to box a bossy teacher's ears."

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

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

"Since sometime back there at the fort. When I saw how far you'd stick your neck out for me, that couldn't help but draw my attention, could it. Then everything else--the music together like you say, the haywire Klan keeping us cooped up with each other, the two of us up against it all, next thing I knew I was stuck on you. Sparking on you to myself like some fool kid. Tried not to show it. I guess I hope I didn't."

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

It was her turn to falter. “Monty, we shouldn’t go too far into this.”

He wiped the corners of his eyes with his fingertips. “Let me just get this said and you can go—J.J. will be here pretty quick to walk you out. I need for you to savvy what you’ve meant to me, or I’m going to bust with it.” For several moments he looked off around the apartment as if for any direction to extricate himself, then turned his gaze back to her. “You know how my spirits get down sometimes, what with—everything. But you’re, how can I best say this, you’re a cure for that even when you’re not trying to be especially. I’m here to tell you, when you march in, life better shape up or you’ll do it for it. Everything is so wound up around you. So down-to-business-or-else. And I get a charge out of
that. I really do, Susan. Being with somebody who goes at things all out. It’s just a good feeling being with you, better than any other I’ve ever had, if you follow.” Shaking his head, he said in a defeated tone: “Anyway, that’s it.”

“I’m afraid I do follow. You poor dear.” She rose abruptly. “Why didn’t I stick to business earlier and not set things off by playing around on the piano, today of all days?” Monty watched her whisk the music sheets into the black bag. She snapped the clasp shut, then looked at the door as if it were a long way off. “No,” he heard her say as if correcting herself. “Why don’t I tear my lying tongue out of my head and start over.”

She sat back down. “It’s been a long time since I was as fond of anyone as I am of you. Monty, that’s a lot. I--” she had to halt. She mustered a weak smile by the time she could resume. “When I’m tripping over myself like this it may not sound like it, but it’s--well, it’s everything.”

He would have vaulted over to her then, but she stopped him with a gesture. She had to compose herself, and the odd thing was how mortally inconvenient for both of them this all seemed to her. Starch was supposed to have been the remedy against anything like this. When, where and how had she let her guard down enough for this particular man to take interest in her? And herself in
him. Because it had come to her with a jolt of recognition while Monty was spilling his feelings to her: the declensions of *fond* and how much they meant to her. Samuel, such closeness with him that it would have taken a handwriting expert to tell them apart; Angus, her long admiring affection toward him from far and near; Wes, that entranced time in the old gray stone stratosphere of Edinburgh. And now Monty: the two of them singularities together, more than accustomed to each other, tender toward one another since the reunion afternoon at the Broadwater in ways beyond the power of music. A certain kind of fondness after long enough deserves another name.

"You asked for it," she said ruefully. "That's me as well, everything you've said about coming down with this in spite of trying so hard not to. If you can call that love, I ought to have the heart to, too."

With every care he sized up her words, hope and a new anguish both flickering in his tense expression. "You're not just saying that. No, you wouldn't be."

Susan wanted to go over by him and knew, somewhere deep down, that would jinx this and J.J. would instantaneously walk in on them. Monty shared...
that intuition, she saw. He went past the moment to the calendar of complications ahead of them now. "This isn’t real bright of either of us, is it."

"Sometimes that can’t be helped."

He let out a vast breath. "I thought confession was supposed to be good for the soul, what happened to that? Could be the ruin of us." Looking across at her somberly, he measured out his words. "We can have the best intentions in the world toward each other, can’t we, and there’s still that old problem. They string up people like me for even whistling anything that sounds like love around somebody like you."

"Not entirely everywhere," she tried to maintain, knowing as soon as she said it how little of life’s compass there was in that.

Monty got up and went over to the window. He would rather have taken a sledgehammer to every building-stone and brick in Harlem than have to say this, but she had to be aware. "They’ve got their own notion of who belongs with who here too."

"Let’s say we’ll face any question of neighbors when we have to," Susan shunted that away. "Right now we have to think about something else. If I’m seen with you now, if we’re seen as a couple, it will throw your career off."
She could see that he grimaced. "About like beating it in the head with an axe handle, you mean." He turned around to her, the worse pain of truth written on his face now. "They wouldn't go easy on you either. You know that."

She was there ahead of him. "I've faced it before." A pause. "With Wes."

"Susan, I don't think you have. Not like this."

*Just then came J.J.'s usual shave-and-a-haircut knock on the door,* she wrote in smaller hand to make the last page of the diary entry come out even, leave a fresh one for whatever next. *Before letting him in, Monty looked at me as we both fixed our expressions and said, "Painted in a corner, aren't we. Two coats."

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 for their money back?"

"His voice is ready," she repeated.
“Well, then, amen,” he made his decision. “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?”

“Maybe tour him some 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 bit of 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?”

“Before I know it, almost. Friday.”
"You’ll knock the ears right off them, I know you will." Her spirits went up at the sudden chance to hear him in front of people.

"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.”

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

They walked out into Harlem as it went about its midday business. Kept
pace for a block or so with the yam man’s pushcart, Susan’s head turned in
astonishment as usual at the pitch of the man’s voice: close her eyes during his
chant and she could have sworn he was somebody’s sister from Spain. Kept on
the move past the exhortations of the soapbox preacher Monty identified to her as
the Reverend Skypiece—ambassador hat on him, you wouldn’t know to look at
him he delivers ice, would you. Steadily people they passed would ask Monty
how he was doing by now and he ritually answered “Much better” and “Getting
there.” All of them were used to seeing J.J. businesslike at the side of this exotic
white woman doctor, and now second looks seemed to be in order.
“Finally I know a little what it’s like for you,” Susan murmured. “It’s as if they’re counting the pores on us.”

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

“All right then,” she said through teeth next thing to clenched. “Let’s use this. Down to business. You feel perfectly ready to sing at the musicale, I hope?”

“I wouldn’t say perfectly. But do I want a chance to let the songs out, God, do I ever.”

“Party audiences, those can be uncomfortably close quarters.” That drew her a look from him; one more instance when she had hit the nail on the head in the dark.

“Funny you say that. Let’s just say I’m not overly comfortable with these sassiety shindigs, but I can swallow them.”

“Other audiences,” she said as if speculating. “You told me back at the Broadwater that having the music stand took care of the nerves you had about those.”

“That could have been truer.”

“Monty, wait, you aren’t still bothered by having to face an audience, are you?”
“Sometimes.”

“Often?”

“Just about always. Listen, Su--Doctor Duff,” he glanced around at the passersby canting inquisitive looks at him, “I get myself by the scruff of the neck and make myself face those audiences, okay? Did it before, every damned time, and I have to figure I can again. Question for you now. Do you ever let a poor beat-up singing pupil 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 these days.” She had spent nearly all night thinking this through, and even so she found herself desperately having to ad-lib it all. “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. Then he moved to the side of her desk, leaning in a bit to deliver each
sentence piece by piece. “All right, Miss Duff. Feel free to tell me my business then, why don’t you. Where would you book a colored 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 have 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.”

J.J. looked like a man who had been given a fast horse and a racetrack to go with it. 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 at the planning session the next morning. “It does put us on a different footing with the Carnegie Hall people, however,” he informed the two of them across his desk with just enough chief executive sorrow at lack of perfection. “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 benefit speaking event.”

Susan sent her Well, then? gaze to the other person on her side of the desk. He returned her an appraising look, as though weighing where she fit in the Table of Elements. She’d felt vastly relieved when, for all she had heard about him from Wes, he walked into the office not seeming to know her from a potted plant. Even freshly shaved and pomaded, Phil Sherman had some of the grizzle of his redoubtable family line of generals and senators; he looked like he could take your head off in one bite.

But he sounded as plummy as the runaway to Broadway that he was when he finally spoke up. “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 game to book Monty into a show for our rather fancy but not that lucrative downtown crowd? And two, Monty is thoroughly 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 backstager’s grin. “Serves Wes right for being out there with the cows instead of in here defending his back like a civilized man. He’ll be back in town when?”

*Two hours from now,* Susan knew to the minute and also knew better than to say.

“I’ll have Miss Cooper ring up his secretary and find out,” Vandiver took care of that. “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, work up 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.”

Vandiver stepped out to instruct Miss Cooper, and Susan sat thinking ahead to Wes as she gazed out the window at the docked ships. As casually as an old flame, Phil murmured: “What time would you like me, tonight?”

She gave him a look just short of a scalping.

“Didn’t Monty get word to you yet?” he asked, furrowing up. “He put the arm on me to escort you to his musicale.”

Sunlight poured in the mansard window, tendrils of vine shadowing onto her bedroom wall. Their breathing having barely settled down from the first time, Wes was increasingly aware of the warm cup of her hand, already urging him to hardness again. In most of his waking moments all summer he had wished for this just sort of scrimmage of desire, but Susan seemed to be ahead of him in
every way. She had launched into this bout of mutual want as if driven to prove something. The sun playing on the disgracefully mussed bedding, their entwined bodies made a memory duplicate of their 1919 spell together, but this time as if caught in the hot light of an explosion.

Wes managed to pause long enough in what they were at to ask: “You’re supposedly where?”

“Mmmh?” She had to think for a second what she had told Vandiver.

“Oh. Carnegie Hall.”

“You rate it.”

Afterward, the surprise on her this time, he took her to dinner at the restaurant of the Brevoort Hotel. Quite possibly on the basis, it looked like to Susan, that this was the nearest palace he could think of. The headwaiter fuzzed them into place, chanted _Monsieur_ and _Madame_ while enthroning them at the nicely placed table which one glance at the cut of Wes’s suit evidently had 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 other dining couples, were by themselves in the sea of ice-white tables. Glancing around at the
murmuring class that obviously frequented here, Susan wondered how far back in
history the rule ran that as the calibre of the family name goes up, the velocity
goes down. Wes was the exception.

"Too bad Montana doesn't have a seacoast," he was saying 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*.

She 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 dickenses, you know, or maybe you don't. Mutton, yes." She didn't
want to babble at this, but words were not the surest part of her at the moment.

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 in the public venues of New
York.
While they sipped and maintained a patchwork conversation, she questioned what she had done and the answer always came back the same. She had needed to know. The afternoon with Wes had not changed anything but her pulse rate.

The soup was brought before she asked out of curiosity:

"Versailles-on-the-Hudson, here--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 around and around the ankle of Manhattan 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 couples. "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?"