

Troughs of the past pooled with sudsy water as she slaved away at the old floor. The oblong worn spot in front of the cookstove where her mother had fended, morning, noon, and night, for thirty years. *"Susan, see to Samuel, pretty please. The taties are refusing to boil, the devils."* Over there where the table had sat, the most seriously rubbed groove was the spot where her father's sizable workshoes shuffled. *"A man needs a firm understanding,"* topmost in the tiny horde of jokes he allowed himself. Her father could quarrel with the wind, then turn around and recite from heart the most lilting Bible passage. It picked at her that contradictions were still the fare of this house. Ninian Duff had swept into this pocketed-away valley in 1887 with a bemused wife and a daughter inquisitive beyond her three years of life and a ramrod determination to make his chosen acres of American earth a homesteaded Eden, whether or not the ground had those ingredients. Ninian's land, all this had been called, even the pasture domain up under the mountains that was nowhere on the proving-up papers of the homestead and was now national forest. *And here I am, back at his old haunt. I can just hear him.* *"Ay, Susan, we couldn't have kept you in Scotch Heaven with heavy fetters, and here you are back because of a notion worth its weight in*

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of Eng. Ark
given

moonbeams?" She knew the chapters of her life did not sit well together, she didn't need telling by the echoes here.

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

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

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

The cat licked its chops remindfully.

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

The vagrant cat dispatched, she made herself simmer down and take stock of what all else needed doing to make the place livable. Except for the want of a door, the house was still in one piece, at least. Windows were filthy, half a dozen years of grime and fly life on them, but they would feel washwater before the day was out. The roof seemed sound, although she knew the test of that would arrive with the first cloudburst. Other necessities for her stay here--the pump at the well

"Of course," she said with a start. "Give him my best."

It lightnined out of nowhere to her. That time in their growing years when everyone thought they were intended for one another and Davey Erskine had accordingly asked her to a dance at the Noon Creek school, the next valley over. As he led the way through the dark from the hitchrack to the tuned-up schoolhouse he kept bashfully muttering, "commoner." Commoner than what? she wondered. She came to realize when they reached the lighted doorway that Davey had been doing his unsuccessful best to pilot her with the warnings, "cow manure."

w/ warnings
of cow
manure

Now Susan giggled, which was not like her. Then worse: the thought of the prophet Davey and this fertilized floor she was in combat with set her off into a helpless fit of laughing. Finally she placed her hand over her mouth.

"Angus, I apologize, really I do. It's just a silly old memory about Davey."

"I'll tell him," Angus said judiciously, "that you remember him with gladness."

That night she put into her diary:

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

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

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

condensed
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Unter den Linden. But the enemy's attentiveness to newcomers in the stale flat-footed killing match that was the Western Front was understandable: Montanans were the mould for reinvented soldiers, American Expeditionary Force-style-- hunters from the time they were boys on ranches and homesteads, well acquainted with shovel calluses and dirty chores and rough quarters. Most of all, not worn down as the Europeans and British were by the routine of trench life, mud and boredom interspersed by the warning whizzes of every calibre of weapon known to man. Wes remembered thinking that Company C handled better that day, their first in the frontlines, than they ever did on the grumblesome troopship or in the poker-wild disembarkation camp, and that sort of thought had told him he was thoroughly an officer again. At the time, of course, only newly commissioned as an old captain, not yet a young major; but back in command comfortably enough.

"Sergeant, instruct Private Imhoff to limit his conversations with the other side,"

he had issued the order just to keep matters rolling his way, before jauntily setting off to inspect the remainder of the position. Not twenty minutes later, a salvo screamed in on the Montana battalion. He and Lieutenant Olsen had to make themselves thin together behind a shared snag of a tree, shrapnel whining around them.

sharp as
a singing
saw.

doughboys had fought together and broken the German salient, their countries would erect for all the world to see a monument of that hardest alloy to attain, peace. If her given part in that was to hold herself high enough tonight for the French to sight along, she could stiffen herself to it.

Yet under it all Susan, for all her common allegiance with the other Americans who had been sent, was there decidedly to represent the postage-stamp trust territory populated entirely by herself and Samuel. The colossal memorial statue, to rise out of the field of white crosses marching in place, she had not bothered to have an opinion about, and could not believe Samuel would have. But the archive proposed by the French, to hold forever the letters and diaries of the killed soldiers--their stories in whatever scrawled moments, adding up to the last chapter of a sacrificed generation--she would have skated the Atlantic to see done. Tucked in her luggage back at the clammy hotel was the packet of Samuel's letters, the most costly of donations.

Dear Susan--Funny place this world, where they put a fellow on a troop train at ----- and he gets off a ship at -----. Where's any progress in that? She had seen him and the other recruits off at the Great Northern depot at Havre, therefore he had alit at Le Havre, the first of the pushpins she deployed on the

censored

wall map of Europe newly put up in the music parlor. Without him, the house seemed howlingly empty. Four crammed years, his high school years when his rambunctious intelligence broke the boundaries of the homestead as her voice once had done, he had been both the man of the place and its kaleidoscope of boy. It was with an eye to Samuel's future, and the music academy for wherewithal, that she had taken the great step of buying the house on Highland Street.

Sister dearest--They do have wind here. Reminds me of a little bit of a constant chinook, but more of a washelli. Samuel with his love of code and collector's passion for language. She went to his notebooks, found the one with his lexicon of wind names, across the airy face of the earth: *chinook, williwaw, datoo, mistral... washelli*, a coastal Indian word for *west wind*. She took another pushpin from her supply and, eyes all but closed, thrust it into the map on the Western Front.

Susan, mon cherie--"Solve this, Erasmus," as Mr. McCaskill would say: With my size 11 1/2s, I am now a runner. My lord and master hands me orders, I twist and dart and squirm through--there is no flat-out running in these slits in the ground crowded with thousands of us, it is more like carnival dodge 'em--and deliver the message, wait for the reply, then struggle back to HQ. There were

three letters after that, brimming with the intrigued jottings of a big-shouldered bright man somehow singled out to trot slips of paper through Europe's artificial canyons of men and earth--*Would that I were from the Rio Grande instead of the North Fork, Susan: after all, 'Thermopylae had its messenger of defeat, the Alamo had none/Because Texans are too bowlegged to run'* --and then instead of the mail one day, the apologetic adjutant from the armory across town was at her door, sent specially.

Now that duty in France was up to her, Susan managed to put aside emotion except to keep tensely dabbing in, *sotto voce*, the correction "Mademoiselle" on the endlessly effusive welcomes from the endless officials. Not to take away anything from the grief of others, but she considered the loss of an only brother worse than widowhood would have been. A bereft wife could remarry.

The rest of it this initial evening was a matter of maintaining a measured smile and accepting apologies for the weather within the confines of France. She played the role of weatherproof visitor to the hilt until inevitably her little group was brought face to face with the famous Major Williamson, whom they surely knew? Oh, they did not?

"Sad circumstances to meet in, Mr. Averill, Mrs. Averill," the distinctive voice undiluted in the several years since she had heard him speak at the ~~Equal~~ ^{convention} Suffrage congress in Helena--he was the state senator from Pondera County, as a Williamson or one of their bootlickers customarily was--and the commanding mien that even then had his listeners whispering *higher office* was similarly undiminished, quite the contrary.

As amused as the occasion would allow, Susan watched him turn in her direction and read her family resemblance with surprise and probably worse; you could not be the daughter of Ninian Duff and pass for anyone else. He must be here, she realized, as the representative of the veterans, which was to say the survivors, the lucky ones. But how does one qualify for luck? *The Lord called Samuel*, her father had put a trembling finger to the Bible passage so many times the page bore a smudge, *and he answered, Here am I*; she herself would no longer go near a God who let that happen.

But that was neither here nor there, the concern of the moment was to come up with enough manners to obscure those grudges, older than themselves, that met at fencelines back in the Two Medicine country. Fortunately the occasion was running over with politeness, so she and he could simply extend a hand to

adjust

most favorite of American songs, could she possibly oblige? Resigned to doing what she could with something like the hurdy-gurdy tiresomeness of "*Over there! Over There! The Yanks are coming...*" as she had in the war-bond rallies, when she heard his request she burst out laughing, she couldn't help it. *So much for Irving Berlin.*

Now, presenting the song as precisely as if it were a set of linked *pensees*, each haunting line in dance with itself to the last downcurl of its comma, she stood and, *a capella*, delivered:

As I walked out in the streets of Laredo,

As I walked out in Laredo one day,

I spied a dear cowboy wrapped up in white linen,

Wrapped up in white linen as cold as the clay.

"I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy"--

She had been up half the night polishing this presentation, but it was paying off. When her voice was in good working order like this, the audience became a kind of pantomime accompaniment, she had never seen it fail: heads nodding, feet patting out rhythm. This crowd, pensive to start with, had begun

non-ital

The wicker picnic basket disgorged. They passed its ingredients back and forth, foregoing conversation for flavor, until Wes no longer could stand not to ask.

"All right, I give. What's a sin-eater?"

"If you were lucky enough to be a *Lowlander* instead of one of those ridge-runners in plaid skirts," Susan said with mock severity, "you wouldn't have to ask such a silly question."

The ins and outs of the Scotland-born were beyond him; Williamsons had been this side of the ocean since hiking their kilts after the Battle of Culloden.

"Deprived as I am, you could take pity on me."

"I'm to instruct you in sin-eating, am I. It's a kind of wake. I wasn't all that old when Gram Erskine passed away and I saw it done, right there." She inclined her head toward the Erskine homestead, next up the creek from the Duff place. Wes felt the stir of his father's voice in him: "*That Erskine is another one-- in cahoots with Ninian Duff.*"

Susan was saying, "Scotch Heaven's first death, she must have been. So, they were all still full of the old country," pronouncing it *auld countrrry*, "and nothing doing but they had to have a sin-eater. They take and put a piece of bread

N Fork

"Monty, I only meant--"

He allowed himself the smallest of smiles. "That could be a while."

Air was at a premium. How had he ever outrun all those bulls but one?

Breed Butte loomed over him, he was barely halfway up its slope and pretty far toward done in. He gasped, trying to make more breath gust into him than was whooshing out. Both directions, it burned between the back of his nose and the bottom of his chest. The rest of his laboring body simply wanted to call it quits. His feet, in the kid leather sparring shoes, felt heavy as buckets of water.

Riding a dozen yards behind him, leading his horse behind hers, she called out: "A little faster if you can stand it. The day is hotting up in a hurry."

Susan was having him run on the shank of the morning, before the blaze of noon bore down on them. "It's merely roadwork of the sort Dempsey and Gibbons put themselves through all the time," she told him at the onset, sheer reasonableness. "And at the end, you don't have to do battle with either of them." No, only with her. Monty concentrated on the ground in front of him, picking out a stunted jackpine ahead alongside the baked set of wheeltracks and forcing himself to keep in motion that far, then taking aim on the weathered gatepost

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beyond that and closing his mind to anything but making it to that stout pillar of wood.

Water was the reward when he jolted into the yard of the old Barclay place at the brow of the butte and could at last pull to a halt. Susan swung down out of her saddle and handed him the waterbag. She watched critically as he swished water in his mouth, spat it out, then took a few moderate gulps from the bag. They did not speak much, Monty generally too winded and Susan absorbed in putting him through his pulmonary paces. The Barclay homestead here was the halfway mark on the course she'd picked out, the steep half as he could have told anybody. The next leg was the old sheep trail angling west under the shoulder of the butte, across the dry cracked reservoir, and gradually down the long incline of the valleyside to the road, where she permitted him a cooling-down horseback ride home to the Duff place. In Susan's mind it was a perfectly logical circuit, uphill at first and then coasting downhill. To Monty it was like running up one side of a Nile pyramid and down the other.

Barely visible back at their starting point, Dolph was hammering battens over the cracks in the barn walls, and Monty imagined that even at this distance he

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from under Stetsons and mail-order bonnets these Sundays, but they kept to their strenuous religion here in the foothills of the Rockies where the whole passel of them had been shipped in as tie-cutters for the Great Northern Railway. Third- and fourth-generation sawyers back in the Smokies, the men were proud to call themselves timber beasts and the women had long practice in making do at gulch logging camps such as the one up Noon Creek from here. Looking out over the small assembly, Jones as their lay preacher duly cherished every one of them, but he did wish somebody would feel the call and start thrashing or declaiming in tongues; he didn't have all Sunday up here at the portable pulpit.

"My doctrine shall drop as the rain! My speech shall distill as the dew, and the small rain upon the tender herb, and the showers upon the--who's out there?"

Every head in the room turned. "I feel the presence beyond the door," Jones boomed. He had seen movement through the window. "Who comes calling at this holy house?"

The door peeped open, then swung wide to reveal a Negro woman, lank as a carpet-beater, with a wide-eyed seven-year-old clasping at her dress.

She gestured apologetically. "I don't want to bother, in no way. We were chokecherrying," she indicated the boy at her side with a lard can half full of wine-colored berries. "But I couldn't help but hear. Voices like your ones--I don't know what got into me."

"We're having church," Jones hardly had to point out.

"People I work for," the woman hurried the words, "I heard them say folks like you fought on the side of the North like they did."

"The sunrise side of Tennessee did not follow Jeff Davis to perdition," Jones stated with pride. No one in this room was ever going to forget the Confederate Army's clamp on the Cumberland. The oldest of the congregation, Brother Cruikshank, had fought in blue at the battle of Pigeon Forge and had the minie ball wound to prove it.

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

"That so? Auntie, who do you be?"

Angeline Rathbun identified herself while the boy peeked around at all the hawknosed faces. He wanted to show the people how many chokecherries he had picked, but it wasn't nice to interrupt grownups.

type

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

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

Jones blinked and gave her fresh regard. The congregation had visibly perked up. He posed the question: "What kind of singing do you know?"

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

"Take a mouthful of stars,

Set your ladder 'gainst a cloud.

Go hammer up Heaven,

Oh hammer up Heaven,

Fixin' up Heaven,

Slickin' up Heaven,

Silver nails of Heaven,

Driven nails of Heaven,

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Heaven, strong roof of my soul!"

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

"My Mama's slave days, when she was a girl. In the war times. Every day before sun-up, what we called in Kentucky 'cain see'--"

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

"--she had to take the mistress's white saddle horse up in the woods and mind him there. The mistress was afraid the War Department was gonna see that white horse and take him for the army. Then when night come, Mama led that white horse in the dark--"

"In the dark," Jones crooned. "Satan's satin dark."

"Yes sir. And the mistress would ride that white horse with a black blanket over him. And Mama had to wait, to all hours. She'd pass the time remembering songs, maybe make some up. And when I came along into this world, she taught me them."

re-do

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

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

Jones brooded there in front of everybody, the congregants as still as posts.

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

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

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

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

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