

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

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

Until this summer, Wes would not have believed unsifted sunshine could make a person morose. But without Susan to go to, the Two Medicine season seemed to him to have the sameness of an uneasily-dreamed trek across a parched savannah. His concentration tended to drift. *Major, did you want me to--?* tagged after him from foremen and bankers, some detail or another left out of the narrow gauge of his thoughts as he went from sun to sun, never done. He wasn't much better than a gloomy boarder in the ranch house. *Wes, damn it, smell the posies,* Whit had tried on him and received the opposite of thanks. Whatever Double W ledger or Deuce W title abstract he sought to settle his attention into, the arithmetic that kept ticking in him was the days, weeks, months until he could return to New York, now that it had become the capital city of the state of being that was Susan.

But picking a target on the calendar did not automatically work, either.

The perverse way luck was playing with the three of them since the night at the Marlowe Theater, he could perfectly well imagine Susan climbing onto a train in New York--behind her in Harlem a sunken Monty with a voice that had proved irreparable and a grubbing future that would turn him into something like a numbers runner--on whatever end-of-summer day he chose for his TM&T railcar to be coupled onto the fast train east. The way matters were going, he figured the twain would meet and instantly be thrown apart again at around Eau Claire: Susan westbound at sixty miles an hour and himself hurtled eastward at similar railspeed, the distance doubling between them over and over from the split second when their train windows flashed past each other. *Silly*, a word he wasn't used to using on himself, consistently came to mind along with the rest of this; he hadn't been in mental sweats of this sort since Harvard mixers.

He felt better, for a day or two, after blowing up at Whit over the Reservation herd, telling him the losses up there in the timber wouldn't be amounting to so much if they would quit cramming cattle into every corner of the country. But right after that when the brothers Williamson went to the cattlemen's state convention, it was Wes who got silently but savagely drunk, the first time he

had resorted to pie-eyed oblivion since a leave after the bloodstorm of the St. Mihiel attack.

Say one thing for falling headfirst off the wagon like that, it told him to sober up in more ways than one. He had been avoiding it, but now he knew what he had better do. It took considerable preparation, and so August, the one month of the ranch year when no rain was a blessing, had come by the time he found the right morning to intercept Whit on his way out to boss the haying crew and let him know he would be gone for the day, over to North Fork to check on the fencing. Whit, suspicious, told him, "Wes, that fence would hold in elephants," then corked up at the look he got back.

The day was a good one, as hot haying-season days go, and he started off in the buckboard early enough that the matched grays were fresh and wanting exercise. Until the wheeltrack onto the benchland carried him out of view of the Double W side of things he could see off along lower Noon Creek to the long panel of irrigated hayfield called the Big Field. Now that the wild hay in the swales along the creek was put up in the stacks that stood in giant droplet pattern on the upper part of the valley, Whit was moving the crew down there to where alfalfa grew in a rich dark green. Wes had to smile at Whit's arrowstraight

deployment of his workforce, the machinery of his alfalfa army strung out for about a quarter of a mile in clattering file: the horse-drawn mowers, their cutter bars up like battle standards; dump rakes and buckrakes; the mechanic wagon laden with tools and a bright bundle of freshly peeled spare buckrake teeth; the crew truck geared down to workhorse pace; then finally the overshot stacker, bumping and swaying, a great scaffold somehow walking itself across the prairie. Wes knew that putting up the Big Field would take the next three weeks or more, the haying crew snicking its way windrow by windrow across the fat rectangle of earth.

A kind of pleasure he had almost forgotten took him over in the buckboard ride, the horses snappy at the ends of the reins, the benchland as ever the definitive grassed dike between valleys which had only it in common, a watershed in the truest sense of the word. The bolster beneath his knee almost had the feel of a saddle, although he knew that was stretching imagination some.

When he reached the far side of the benchland, he halted the prancy horses even though they did not want to, and he sat there in the buckboard quite a number of minutes, looking down from that edge of the deck of land onto the valley of the North Fork below. The creek-twined line of homesteads that had

been Scotch Heaven. It 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.

After he was sure he had the genealogy of the nine or ten homesteads straight in his mind, he flicked the reins to start the horses down to the creek crossing. 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.

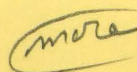
The houses were a gallery of gaping window casements and empty doorways as he passed them one by one. Thinking this out beforehand, he had made the surprisingly shaming discovery that he could not put names, let alone faces or memory traces, on more than half the homesteads of the North Fork. Accordingly 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} Department of Health } where birth records and death certificates were kept. He topped off the compilation by delving into the homestead 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, now he had Scotch Heaven on paper.

As he neared his destination, the McCaskill place, he became aware of something missing from the head of the valley. Angus's sheep. Wes was too much a Williamson to admit an affection for the sight of sheep, but their absence was like a blank spot in a remembered picture. From miles off, the surest marker of these particular foothills of the Rockies long had been the rounded white canvas of the McCaskill herder's wagon, standing up out of the flat tones of grass like an igloo.

At the homestead, Wes 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 the Two medicine country. The mountains seemed practically within touch. He knew he shouldn't stay here long, technically this was trespass. Varick McCaskill had not sold this place, nor would he offer it in the direction of a Williamson if he ever did. But Wes felt compelled to view the North Fork as Angus had done, every single day, for half of the divinely allotted threescore years and ten. Now there was a man who had managed to live lifetimes one on top of the other. Schoolhouse and here.

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Scotland in his younger time. The unashamed harems of his head, half the poems ever written living it up in one corner, calculations of the heart always ongoing in another. Meanwhile a wife at his side who perhaps did not quite fit into that collection of existences. That part Wes could identify with. All else here, though, eluded him. Why a man, or for that matter a woman, would stay on at a place like this after the rest had given up. Wes counted back: the last half dozen years, no night here would ever have known a neighboring light, not a sign of a larger world beyond the fate-inked dark of this valley. Days, what would have begun as necessary settler solitude would have turned into just emptiness, nothing out there past the walls of these buildings to angle away the wind, no prospect except the mountains and ridgelines which simply went up at one end and down at the other, only the neutrality of nature in between. Try as he would to see with the other man's eyes, what stayed with Wes 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 had been the westernmost of the people who hurled their lives against those hills.

Telling himself he had come, he had seen, and only a Caesar counted on being victorious every time, he climbed back in the buckboard and worked his

way down the creek, homestead to homestead. He had all day. He went from place to place like an archeologist reviewing the evidence at a scattered dig. Each time, carefully tying the team to something stout; it would be utterly in the temper of this summer for the horses to run away and leave him afoot over here. Then prowling, seeing what suggested itself. He knew that out of the volume of lives here he could discern only flecks; but from such glints of memory we try to make out what we were, do we not. The patterns built into everyday still were there. The barn never more than two lariat lengths from the house, because no sane person wanted to have to follow a rope farther than that to feed the workhorses during a whiteout blizzard. The outhouses astutely downwind. The root cellar. Springhouse.

He clerked at it as fairly as he could, giving the benefit of the doubt to the homesteaders in what they had been up against, which was to say his father, him, and his. Warren Williamson, like many a man with a knack for wealth, had been blessed with one central notion: that a system employed ruthlessly enough can squeeze profit out even from tight circumstances. Pretty much, that was Whit's system now. Run ten percent more cattle than there was range for and let the excess, the big Double W brand on their gaunt ribs, fend for themselves, the

mongrels of the Two Medicine country. From his end of things Wes had always done what he could to bring livestock and land into fairer balance, but that never amounted to enough.

The shadeless blaze of midday caught him crossing the reservoir on the Barclay place, and he headed the team 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.

And never far away was the further thought. The Rathbun family a couple of cuts below the homestead life, which was to say not appreciably above the way tumbleweeds existed.

Finally, in this loop back through time, he was brought again to the Duff place and the neighboring Erskine place, the first two homesteads of what grew into Scotch Heaven. The Erskines. Donald and Jen. A quiet block of a man. Both died here in the flu epidemic. Land always costs more than any bill of sale can hold. A crippled son, from a horse accident. Donald and Ninian Duff "a pair

of a kind" in stubbornness about their land. It still astounded Wes that he had been safer in the trenches of 1918 than these homesteaders.

He hadn't come here to search for Susan's presence. He half-wished she wouldn't write him the letters she did. The other half of the time, he yearned to hear from her every blessed day. He took a wry pleasure in the house of Ninian Duff having been turned into a music parlor. He could envision Monty and Dolph saddling up and jangling away.

He had left the mountains and foothills for last. The mountains gray-blue, tilted and pillaring. But his interest today was in the business part of the Rockies; the grassy ridges under the rockfaces, the precious green skirts of the mountains. Two Medicine National Forest land now, but back then a last beckoning rumple of open range--free grass--in here behind the North Fork.

Now he traced out a particular route, to where the homesteaders would have grazed their livestock. Cattle, those Scotch codgers were running then; he had checked the old tax assessments to be doubly sure of that fact, even though he knew it almost by the rules of drama. The Double W and its most durable adversaries started off with at least that much in common.

Wood
West
Sale

He took a sighting, then steered the team and wagon up onto the long angle of the west shoulder of Breed Butte. As he had been pretty sure, the full valley of Noon Creek could be seen from there, and all the way north toward the Blackfoot Reservation. The wood gate, portal to the empire he and Whit had been shaped, as thoroughly and carefully tooled as sceptres, to inherit and to administer. To reign over,

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

It was growing late, but he stayed on, as if to experience the full of the day he was seeing back into. As he watched, the shadows grew down off the cliffs of the Rockies, and then came spear-pointed out of the timbered bottom slopes, and at last put a curtain of definition--evening's unarguable edge--down from the grassy ridges to him, as though something old as these hills had been concluded.

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