

A brief bit of background: **The Whistling Season** takes place mostly in 1910 and 1957, a set of cosmic parentheses of time that quickly becomes clear in the book but not necessarily here today. The voice of the book, the narrator, is that of Paul Milliron, and here as the story begins he's a seventh-grader in a one-room school and somewhat brighter than he knows what to do with. The other characters in this opening scene are his brothers--Toby, a second-grader, and Damon, a sixth-grader--and their father, Oliver Milliron. You'll hear a reference to two other characters who aren't on the scene yet--George and Rae--Rae in this case is a woman's name, R-A-E. The Millirons are on a dry-

land homestead in an area I've named Marias Coulee--if it existed, it might be about a hundred miles northwest of Great Falls, ~~Montana~~. There's a mention of a nearby prairie boomtown--Westwater--with a big irrigation project.

Well, I think that's enough to introduce the Milliron family, and so here they are:

// This next scene takes place weeks later, after spirited negotiation by mail about what the wages should be for an A-1 housekeeper who can't cook but doesn't bite, and ultimately a telegram of surrender by Oliver--drafted of course by the literate hand of Paul--in which the Millirons give up and agree to advance the housekeeper her first three months' wages, to get her onto the train in Minneapolis at all. Now the family is at the Westwater railroad ~~station~~ ^{DEPOT}, keenly awaiting the arrival of their housekeeping salvation, whose name has turned out to be Rose/Llewellynn:

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She alit to the planked platform of the Westwater depot on feet as dainty as Toby's little ones.

In those days people poured off the afternoon train--it was called that even though it was the only one all day--and peered around like sailors in uncharted latitudes as they waited for their belongings from the baggage car. Babies lulled by the rocking motion of the train were coming awake with shrieks at their new surroundings. Coal dust from the engine tender and the smell of mothballed things gotten out for long journeys clung in the air.

Our eyes big with the occasion, Damon and Toby and I couldn't

Rose's hand flew to her mouth and she whirled toward the train again. There the heavy-set conductor stood, his railway cap squarely on above his uplifted eyebrows, while he twirled a nice new kangaroo-brown Stetson hat on an indicative forefinger.

"A terrible misunderstanding," Rose rushed to tell us in a low but musical voice. "We were under the impression that our tickets would take us all the way to here. But when we had to climb onto this"--she waved a disparaging hand at the branch-line train--"and that man came around demanding fresh tickets, goodness gracious, we had only enough for my fare. And so he grabbed--"

help but stare at the black-clad Belgian boys in the latest colony of families transplanting themselves from Flanders, and they at us. Father, who in strongest terms had prescribed best behavior for us at the depot, was standing on tiptoe and teetering a bit as he tried to sort anyone housekeeperly from the swelling crowd of land pilgrims and irrigation project workmen and homestead people like us on town errands that called for Sunday clothes.

The disembarking passengers were dwindling rapidly, though, and Father's composed expression along with them, when we heard "Coming through!" and had to move back to dodge the cart of cream cans which were the freight for the train's return run to

the mainline. Ever since, I think of Rose as having materialized
to us like a genie from a galvanized urn.

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For when the creamery cart had passed, there she was on the
top step of the nearest Pullman car, assembled in surprising
finery, targeting us with an inventive smile which somehow
seemed to favor all four of us equally, while at the same time
allowing herself to be helped down by an evident admirer from
the train.

“Mrs. Llewellynn?” Father addressed her as if wondering out
loud.

“Yes, absolutely!”

Before we were done blinking she was across the platform to us, a smartly gloved hand extended. “Oh, I’m exceedingly happy to make your acquaintance, Mister Milliron. And these are your young men!”

Naturally Damon and Toby and I puffed up at that promotion in rank. Names were given, handshakes exchanged right down the line--Rose’s hand, like the rest of her, was slender but firm--and our notion of the league of widowhood ^{WAS} seriously readjusted. In our experience widows were massive. ^{BOYS} We felt ourselves shrink in the presence of those great-bosomed old creatures shrouded in dresses as solemnly gray as the gravestones whereunder their late

husbands lay. But this mourner of Mister Llewellynn, whoever he may have been, was all but swathed in a traveling dress the shade of blue flame--Minneapolis evidently did not lack for satin--and there did not seem to be an ounce extra anywhere on her ~~garment~~ PERT frame. In fact, I ~~had~~ noticed Father give a double look as if there must be more of her somewhere.

And she was awfully far from being old.

QUICK "Mister Milliron, let me say at once," the words rushed from her as if she had been holding them in all the way from the train station in Minnesota, "your kind understanding in letting me draw ahead on my wages made a world of difference to my situation.

Really it did. I don't know what I would have done but for your
letters of--" Here, adequate tribute to the Milliron corresponding
hand--mine--obviously failed her, and she accorded Father a look
of overpowering thankfulness for his existence.

"It was nothing," Father replied, magnificently bland, "an A-1
housekeeper is worth a bit of extra ink."

Rose blushed becomingly. Modesty's rush of blood went well
with her gently proportioned cheekbones and the demure
expression that came to her lips. Over that, though, there still
were the warm brown eyes to contemplate, and the hairdo where
wavy curls and fair forehead played peekaboo in a style slightly

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saucy compared with, well, our notion of widows. None of which caused disturbance in any of us, let me say, including Father.

Toby was not advanced enough in life yet to think about it, but

Damon and I knew Father was immune to women because he

missed Mother so. "I will not go through life resenting a woman

because she isn't Florence," he had made plain whenever anyone

pointed out to him that people were known to marry again. "And *a stepmother for this tribe of heathens*"--he meant us--"*is apt to be*

a cure worse than the affliction." So, he was at his most

academic as he sized up--more likely, sized down--Rose

Llewellynn there at the depot. All he wanted was a housekeeper,

and this one had come with proclamations to that effect all over her. Besides, there were those three months of wages and a train ticket invested in getting her here.

“Well, shall we be on our way, Mrs. Llewellynn?” His baritone was a bit brusque as he indicated to where our horses and wagon were hitched. He unrooted Damon and me and even Toby with seat-of-the-pants pushes of encouragement toward the baggage car. “The boys--the Milliron young men will gladly fetch whatever you’ve brought.”

An exclamation that defied translation came from Rose and she gave her head a quick little shake, her dark Brunette curls

flipping on her forehead, as though just then remembering something. She spun half around, her gaze flying across the now nearly empty platform.

Our four sets of eyes followed hers to the tweed-suited traveler who had helped her off the train.

Like her, this individual believed in sparing nothing on appearance. A paisley vest peeked from amid the tweed. A gold watch chain was swagged across the vest. The man was not at all tall, but held himself very straight as if to make the most of what he had. He was lightly built, and an extraordinary amount of him was mustache. It was one of those maximum ones such as I had

seen in pictures of Rudyard Kipling, a soup-strainer and a lady-tickler and a fashion show, all in one. / Almost as remarkable, he was the only bare-headed man in Montana, the wind teasing his dramatically barbered hair. As we gawked at the stranger he appeared somewhat ruffled, and not merely by the breeze.

Rose went, took him by a wrist and led him to us.

“Mister Milliron, Toby, Damon, Paul,” she counted off as if we were a select regiment, “may I present my brother, Morris Morgan.”

“I’m sorry to intrude on the tableau,” the newcomer said with melodious articulation. My ears and Damon’s and possibly

Toby's perked up at his cultured way with words. This was like

—THE MAN WENT ON—
hearing Father meet up with himself. "But I'm afraid it's what
comes of an attachment to Rose."

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"Such luck!" Rose said as if it was an explanation for his
presence. "That Morrie was able to accompany me."

"Are you also relocating to Montana?" Father inquired
pleasantly enough over a handshake he obviously had never
expected to make. Morris Morgan appeared not to hear that,
instead glancing nervously aside.

"Rose? My chapeau? The ransom, remember?"

“--confiscated as collateral--” Morris Morgan interpolated as if interested in the philosophy of it.

“--my poor brother's hat,” Rose went on. “Mister Milliron, I hate like everything to ask. But might I draw ahead a trifle more on my wage? Just enough to cover Morris's fare?”

Now it was Father and Damon and I who looked around nervously, to make sure no one was overhearing this. ~~He~~ ^{FATHER} had soundly counseled the pair of us not to mention to anyone the outlay for a housekeeper we had never laid eyes on/ while Toby had got it into his head that sending money to her saved her the trouble of ever stealing it from us.

// You can't leave a man hatless in the middle of Montana. / But Father did say, "If this keeps on, Mrs. Llewellynn, you'll have the house and we'll be in your employ." He counted out the exact fare and handed it to Rose.

Noticeably she did not hand the money onward to her brother, but marched over to the conductor and liberated the Stetson herself.

"Now that that's settled," Father was determined to take charge, "Mrs. Llewellynn will ride out with us," nodding in the general direction of Marias Coulee, then inclining civilly but definitively toward Morris Morgan, "and you we can drop at the

hotel." He paused as the newly hatted figure drew himself up
straighter yet and pulled out a pocket watch, one of those the size
of a turnip, at the end of the gold chain.

MORRIS MORGAN

Looking at Father instead of the time, ~~he~~ asked: "Does
Westwater boast a pawn shop?"

"Not yet," Father was forced to admit.

"Oh dear," said Rose.

I was the one who came up with:

"George and Rae have that attic room, if Mister Morgan
doesn't mind a little dust."

TO BE CONTINUED, IN THE BOOK.