

Deadwood reading:

I suppose theoretically I'm up here because everyone else in South Dakota is supposed to read **The Whistling Season**, and now it's my turn. So my share of tonight's words will be a bit of the book's opening scene. The voice is that of my narrator, Paul Milliron, and the year is 1909.

Whistling Season reading:

6

PACE

That night we were at our accustomed spots around the kitchen table, Toby coloring a battle between pirate ships as fast as his hand could go while I was at my schoolbook, and Damon, who should have been at his, ^{WAS} absorbed in a secretive game of his own devising called domino solitaire. At the head of the table, of course, the presiding sound was the occasional turning of a newspaper page. One has to imagine our father reading with his finger, down the column of rarely helpful want ads in the *Westwater Gazette* that had come in our week's gunnysack of

I did so, Damon and Toby halting what they were at to try to take in those five simple yet confounding words:

/Can't Cook But Doesn't Bite./

Meal-making was not a joking matter in our household.

Father, though, continued to look pleased as could be and nodded for me to keep reading aloud.

/Housekeeping position sought by widow. Sound morals, exceptional disposition. No culinary skills, but A-1 in all other household tasks.

Salary negotiable, but must include railroad fare to Montana locality; first year of peerless care for your home thereby guaranteed.

Respond to Boxholder, Box 19, Lowry Hill Postal Station,
Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Minneapolis was a thousand miles to the east, out of
immediate reach even of the circumference of enthusiasm we
recognized growing in our father. But response wasted no time in
trying itself out on the other three of us. "Boys? Boys, what would
you think of our getting a housekeeper?"

"Would she do the milking?" asked Damon, ever the ~~sparring~~ ^{CASEY}
one.

That slowed up Father only for a moment. Delineation of
house chores and barn chores that might be construed as a logical

extension of our domestic upkeep was exactly the sort of issue he liked to take on. “Astutely put, Damon. I see no reason why we can’t stipulate that churning the butter begins at the point of the cow.”

Already keyed up, Toby wanted to know, “Where she gonna sleep?”

Father was all too ready for this one. “George and Rae have their spare room going to waste now that the teacher doesn’t have to board with them.” His enthusiasm really was expanding in a hurry. Now our relatives, on the homestead next to ours, were in

the market for a lodger, as unbeknownst to them as our need for a housekeeper had been to us two minutes ago.

CUT

Lowry Hill," Father had turned back to the boldface little advertisement as if already in conversation with it. "If I'm not mistaken, that's the cream of Minneapolis."

I hated to point out the obvious, but that chore seemed to go with being the oldest son of Oliver Milliron.

"Father, we're pretty much used to the house muss by now. It's the cooking part you say you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy."

He knew--we all knew--I had him there.

Damon's head swiveled, and then Toby's, to see how he could possibly deal with this. For miles around, our household was regarded with something like a low fever of consternation by every woman worthy of her apron. As homestead life went, we were relatively prosperous and "bad off," as it was termed, at the same time. Prosperity, such as it was, consisted of payments coming in from the sale of Father's drayage business back in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. The "bad off" proportion of our situation was the year-old grave marker in the Marias Coulee cemetery. Its inscription, chiseled into all our hearts as well as the stone, read *Florence Milliron, Beloved Wife and Mother (1874-1908)*. As

much as each of the four of us missed her at other times,
mealtimes were a kind of tribal low point where we contemplated
whatever Father had managed to fight onto the table this time.
“Tovers, everyone’s old favorite!” he was apt to announce
desperately as he set before us leftover hash on its way to
becoming leftover stew.

Now he ~~resorted to a long thoughtful slurp of his infamous~~
~~coffee and~~ came up with a response to me if not exactly a reply:

“These want ads, you know, Paul--there’s always some give to
them. It only takes a little bargaining. I’ll bet that Mrs.

Minneapolis there isn't as shy around a cookstove as she makes herself out to be."

"But--" My index finger pinned down the five tablet-bold words of the heading. (CAN'T COOK BUT DOESN'T BITE)

"The woman was in a marriage," Father patiently overrode the evidence of the newsprint, "she had to have functioned in a kitchen."

With thirteen-year-old sagacity I pointed out: "Unless her husband starved out."

FATHER SAID.

"Hooey," "Every woman can cook. Paul, get out your good pen and paper."

replace text into "Whistling Season 20-min reading" file