Tales from a Windy Prairie: A Short Story Cycle

Briana Wipf
Carroll College, Helena, MT

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.carroll.edu/langlit_theses
Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation
Wipf, Briana, "Tales from a Windy Prairie: A Short Story Cycle" (2009). Languages and Literature Undergraduate Theses. 19.
https://scholars.carroll.edu/langlit_theses/19

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Languages and Literature at Carroll Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages and Literature Undergraduate Theses by an authorized administrator of Carroll Scholars. For more information, please contact tkratz@carroll.edu.
Tales from a Windy Prairie:
A Short Story Cycle

Briana Wipf

Department of English
2009 Senior Honors Thesis
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of English.

Ronald Stottlemyer  
Director  
Dr. Ronald Stottlemyer  

Kay Satre  
Reader  
Dr. Kay Satre  

Jeanette Fregulia  
Reader  
Dr. Jeanette Fregulia  

Date  
4/9/09  

Date  
4-9-09  

Date  
8 April 2009
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clutch</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch Rush</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance Sheet</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marianne’s Year</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

*Tales from a Windy Prairie* is a collection of one novella and three short stories set in Cut Bank, Montana, in the late 1920’s and 1930’s. The novella, “Marianne’s Year,” studies the affect a small town’s collective culture has on the individual. It is also written in the style of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s stories and novels that center on an undeveloped female character who nevertheless is able to make all young men fall in love with her. “Marianne’s Year” objects to this Fitzgeraldian anti-heroine by developing this female character while exposing the presumptions and unfair expectations of her suitors.

The three short stories are also studies of the small town but approach the topic from a different viewpoint. In the 1930’s, the discovery of oil made Cut Bank a veritable boom town, and in these stories I attempt to recreate and understand the life of its citizens. “Lunch Rush” focuses on a single woman who is struggling financially before the oil boom. “Balance Sheet” studies a young man who comes to town hoping to make his fortune in the oilfield. Finally, “Clutch” looks at a young woman in a difficult marriage who, because of cultural expectations, refuses to divorce her husband. Together, these four stories represent my attempt to understand the history and culture of my hometown better and to strengthen my storytelling skill. In the end, I hope a reader will find these stories entertaining and coherent and the collection a unified study of history and small-town life.
Acknowledgements

Creative writing is a process that requires honest and competent critical readers. I was very fortunate to have three such readers, Dr. Ronald Stottlemyer, Dr. Kay Satre, and Dr. Jeanette Fregulia, who gave me helpful feedback and excellent suggestions for improving my stories. Dr. Stottlemyer also served as my thesis director, and I am very grateful for his guidance. As well as serving as a reader and offering her thoughtful advice, Dr. Satre encouraged me to undertake an honors thesis in the first place. Dr. Fregulia also generously gave her time as a reader, but she influenced my thesis in another, more important way. In her history classes, I began to think critically about bias in historical accounts and the possibility of alternate histories. The four stories in this thesis are only a beginning of what I hope is a much larger collection of stories that explore alternate histories and social history. Finally, I wish to give my wholehearted and enthusiastic thanks to my creative writing professor and academic advisor Loren Graham, under whose excellent instruction I have gained confidence as a fiction writer and greatly improved my writing style.
As I ease one foot onto the gas pedal while lifting the other off the clutch, the green Ford pickup-truck lurches backward over a small incline then down the other side. Rolling back and accumulating some momentum, its metal guts scrape against a sandstone that juts out of the dry, brittle dirt, at once throwing the vehicle off balance and making a loud scratching noise that makes me wince. I glance in the rearview mirror, and move my foot from the gas to the brake. It doesn’t matter. The rear wheels, slovenly with no horsepower behind them, have already caught on a few mats of grass and dirt.

"Jesus Christ, can’t you even back this son-of-a-bitch up without fucking it all up?" Liam calls. Our eyes meet in the rearview mirror. "Stop. Stop. Stop!" he shouts.

"I am stopped. What do you think I’m doing?" I call, still looking at him through the rearview. At least I have some advantage. I can see him perfectly, but he probably only sees the back of my head.

"Christ, I don’t know. Trying to tear up my truck, if I had to guess," he replies. "Pull forward and get off this goddamn rock."

I shift into first gear and inch forward. The sandstone scrapes metallically against the bottom of the truck, making a sound that reverberates all around me.

"Be careful!" Liam commands.

I pull forward about fifteen feet.

"Get enough ahead so I can pull this bastard out of the ground," he calls.

Shifting the truck into neutral, I watch the sideview as he tries to pry the rock out of the ground with brute strength. That failing, he goes to work hacking at the gray-brown dirt with a rusty pickaxe whose handle is full of splinters I constantly have to
extract from his blistered, calloused hands. I rest my chin on my hand and watch him work. Characteristically on a warm spring day, he is wearing no shirt, and I can see the long, sinuous muscles in his back and shoulders contract and relax as he swings the pickaxe in a fluid, circular motion. I'm too short to use that motion, and Liam always upbraids me because I can't chop wood like a lumberjack. I listen to him muttering under his breath as he tries to extract the rock from the ground, putting all his strength into his back.

"Don't lean so hard on your back, Liam. You'll hurt yourself again," I call.

"I'm fine," he grunts, and finally the rock comes tumbling out of its nest. Liam easily rolls the roughly circular rock into a lilac bush, fully blooming and fragrant.

Our fight today is not unlike the one we had yesterday concerning the proper way to stake up tomato plants. We called a truce last night over dinner without any apologies, which is usual for us. We were both so exhausted we just wanted to be done with it.

"Be a good wife, Stella," Mama had said before I married. "Be his lover, his best friend, his advisor. Support him when he needs it but right him when he's wrong. Apologize when you're wrong, and firmly but kindly let him know that he must do the same. If you'll do that for him, he can only do the same for you."

I wonder what Mama would say today if she knew about our fights. She's dead, so she'll never know, thank God. I tried not to tell her too much about my marriage before she went because there's nothing anyone could do, especially since what my family does seems to matter in town. I can't get a divorce.

"Okay, back up again. Slow this time, and be careful," Liam says, standing off to the passenger side and waving me back with one hand.
I ignore his directing. I don’t need any help backing up thirty feet in a straight line. I suppose I brought all this on myself. If I hadn’t insisted on showing him I can drive, I’d be spending a pleasant afternoon with the perennials in my small garden, preparing them for the coming summer.

“You can’t drive a car, Stella,” Liam had said to me matter-of-factly three weeks after we had married. “Do you know how much coordination it takes to work a clutch?”

“Of course I know, Liam. If I didn’t know how to drive a car I wouldn’t say that I could. I’m just saying that I can, so I can help you if you need help, and you don’t have to call Larry or Pete to come out here,” I said impatiently.

It was after dinner and we had been sitting in the parlor, listening to a baseball game on the radio, when Liam had complained that, when he needed help it was such a pain in the ass to call someone out to our place since his extra hand had quit him a week before and he hadn’t found anyone to replace him yet. I had been reading a book — as far as I can tell, Liam doesn’t know that it is difficult for one to read and carry on a conversation simultaneously, or if he does, he thinks that my reading indicates that I’m bored and want to argue about something irrelevant — when he had brought it up at the end of the seventh inning.

“Well, women shouldn’t be helping on the farm anyway,” he said.

“You said your mother always helped.”

“That was when they just got the homestead and there was nobody else here.”

“I don’t think it’d be too strenuous for me to drive a stupid truck around.”

“The clutch is going out of the Ford. It’s harder to drive when the clutch is going out.”
“I’ve been driving since I was thirteen, Liam. I know how to use a clutch. Besides, I learned on an old Model-T. Those are much more difficult to drive than your old farm truck.” I was tired of this conversation. I wanted to go back to my book.

Liam grunted and left the room without turning off the radio. He had come in and turned it on in the first place, interrupting my quiet evening. I swore under my breath, walked to the radio to switch it off, and returned to my reading.

The morning after, I had awoken early, as usual, to start the coffee and have forty-five minutes to myself. It was late summer and already at five-thirty, the sun was up and the air was warm. I went outside to walk a bit. After swinging around the oil well that Texas Oil Company leases from Liam and making my return trip back to our house, I spotted the green farm truck. I looked at my watch; it was almost six o’clock. Liam would be up soon. I went to the truck to see if, as usual, he had left the key in the ignition. It was there. I hopped in, my weight on the upholstery releasing the smell of manure, cigarette smoke, and man’s sweat, and started the truck. The muffler had fallen off recently, so it roared delightfully when I turned the key and put it into gear. The clutch was stubborn, just as Liam had said, but it was nothing I couldn’t handle. I started driving around the house, the out buildings, the garden, in a wide circle, shifting up and down, varying my speed as I went.

Just as I thought he might not be awake, or couldn’t hear it (being around heavy farm machinery had left him prematurely hard of hearing at twenty-seven), Liam came running out of the house, his hair disheveled, his face unshaven, still in his underwear.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he shouted in a panic.

“Driving,” I called back over the coughing and spitting of the pickup.
I had just swung in front of the house, and he ran up to the passenger side window to unleash a barrage of Anglo-Saxon. I drove the truck forward a little, and he followed at the same pace, shouting into the passenger-side window. Laughing, I slammed the truck into reverse and drove backwards about fifty feet. He followed. Have you ever been to the doctor, and he makes you follow his light with your eyes, back and forth, up and down? Well, that’s what Liam was doing to me, following me like two eyeballs. I shifted into first gear again and went forward.

“Stella, this isn’t funny anymore!” he shouted as I moved my feet on and off the clutch and from the brake to the gas while shifting into reverse again.

“I told you I could drive,” I said, slamming on the gas and peeling out on the dirt, dried out and dusty with the late summer’s dry heat. I only drove about twenty feet forward before I stopped again.

He ran after me, catching up a few seconds later, and shouted, “Fuck, I guess you can.”

I was still laughing, and, as I shifted into first gear again, began letting the truck go forward in quick lurches, careful not to kill the engine.

“So you’ll believe me from now on?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just get out of this thing before you ruin the clutch,” he said.

“Oh, hell, Liam. This clutch has fifty thousand miles on it yet, easy,” I said with a dismissive gesture, and slammed on the gas again, shifting into second and third, and flew down our right-of-way to the county road junction.

Since that day, Liam has begrudgingly allowed me to help him when there are no hands around. But there are today, so I don’t know why he asked me.
“Stop – Stop!” he shouts, right as I had begun to shift the truck into neutral.

I turn the ignition off and grab my gloves, an old pair of Liam’s that are too small for him now, and jump out of the truck. One of our cottonwoods died in the winter and Liam has cut it down. Now we have to load the branches into the back of the truck to take to our burn site a couple of miles away. We start throwing branches into the back. I let him take the big pieces, while I take what I can handle.

“You just can’t treat this truck like that,” he says as he picks up some branches. “You’re gonna ruin it for good, and I don’t want to buy another one. These things don’t grow on trees.” “You could’ve told me the goddamn rock was there. I couldn’t see it,” I say. I hardly ever swore before I married Liam two summers ago. Before then I was as prim and proper an unmarried lady could be in this part of Montana, as cut off from everything as we are here.

“Well, why didn’t you stop as soon as you hit it?”

“I did!” I shout defensively. “And I’m not the one who threw the alignment off when you backed it into the sinkhole.”

“How was I supposed to know it was there?”

“Oh, Christ, Liam, you knew it was there. You told me over and over when I first moved here to be careful of the sinkhole, don’t walk through the sinkhole, over and over. Don’t play stupid with me,” I say, fully ready to argue with him. “If you didn’t think you had to do work when you were a little drunk, things like that wouldn’t happen.”

“I wasn’t drunk!”

“You had three beers and a bunch of whiskey. You were drunk as a damn skunk.”
We had stopped working by now. Usually when we fight we can do it while continuing our present task, but this one was taking up too much of our energies.

“What does it matter how drunk I was? I’ll drink as much as I damn well please. Being married to you would drive Job to drink,” Liam says.

I rather like that one – to suggest that I have more power to annoy than God.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to be married to you?”

“What have I got to do with it?” he asks, spreading his arms out defensively. “I let you get those new shoes, didn’t I?”

“Oh, yes, you’re too kind, Liam. My old pair only had a hole in the sole that had been repaired twice. But really, with all the money we save by me not ever getting to go to the beauty parlor, I think we could afford at least one pair of shoes,” I say. I know I’m exaggerating my hardship, but it doesn’t matter now, in the middle of a fight.

And it was true; Liam lets me get my hair cut and set at the beauty shop and that’s it. No permanent waves, no dyes. About a month after we were married, I told Liam I needed to go into town to get my hair cut and set, he told me, “You have a pair of scissors, cut your hair yourself.” Then he had the nerve to laugh at me when I didn’t get it all the same length in the back.

“Which is why you get to go to the barbershop,” I had said after he told me I had given myself the worst haircut in creation.

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“The barbershop is cheaper. If Stevie would cut women’s hair, you could go there too.”
“And come out smelling like a fella,” I had said.

Liam had scowled at the thought. He let me go to the beauty parlor after that.

Now he’s quiet; he can’t argue with the truth.

“I guess I’m lucky I get my flowers,” I say.

“You’re damn right you are. They waste water,” he spits.

“I like them!”

“You don’t need ’em. I’d take my herbicide to ’em if I was smart.”

“Don’t you dare, you bastard!” My temper has flared at the thought of my grandmother’s red peony plant yellow and drooping. “I’ll leave if you do!”

“Fuck off, Stella. Where’ll you go?” he said. “And you can threaten to do that all you want, I know you won’t.”

Now that was true, and that’s where he had me. My mother had died in January of cancer, and I wasn’t really talking to my father. I can’t forgive him for the trick he played on me about Liam, and without Mama, I don’t want much to do with him.

I had met Liam at a dance about three years ago. I was only eighteen then, just graduated from high school, and I wanted to go to college to be a nurse or a teacher. Papa didn’t want me to; he thought the whole scheme was silly and would only cost him money, but I didn’t know that then. Well, I’m like most women. I have a weakness for a pretty face, and that is Liam Brady. All the women were after him. He’s tall and broad shouldered, barrel-chested – all the clichés of virile manhood – with a fair, handsome face of regular features, a strong nose and mouth, and slightly sheepish eyes with long reddish lashes. And he seemed so considerate and polite when I first met him.
“I’d like very much to dance with you, Miss Gibson,” he’d said to me that night, and I fell for his routine of first looking at me shyly then down at the floor.

We kept company for a year. Meanwhile, my father convinced me to put school off for a year, work a bit, and earn some money for tuition. I had, working in the telephone office as an operator in Cut Bank. Liam came into town three or four times a month and sat with us – very dignified and old fashioned – and I thought he was the sweetest, most gentle man I’d ever known. Still, when he said to me, “Stella, I can’t imagine any other woman as my wife,” I still demurred, preferring to go to school, grow up a bit, and decide then.

“You’re not going to get another offer like that, Stella,” Papa had said to me later than evening, after Liam had asked to marry me. “Liam Brady’s got lots of land and money for a man his age, and I think he really loves you.”

A week of that sort of talk broke my resolve, and as soon as I said yes, my father supervised a whirlwind marriage. It took only three weeks to organize the whole thing.

Papa got what he wanted. I wasn’t going to school and was marrying a rich man. Not as rich as the oilmen – but nobody is these days – and Papa hates oil men. But there’s plenty of oil on Liam’s property (he promised to put the property in joint tenancy after we married but has never done it), and the place reeks of crude oil and methane gas, which gives me a headache, especially during my period.

And soon after we married, I realized what kind of man Liam really was.

He has a short temper and likes to have his way. He likes to argue, especially when he gets to drinking. He rarely lets me go into town, especially when our closest neighbor, Mrs. Cavendish, a prim lady in her middle forties, invites me to go with her.
Most people wouldn't believe me when I told them how bad Liam can be; he's nice to people he's not married to.

Those times during our courtship, when Liam was so pleasant, come back now and again, and I don't feel quite so alone. A few days ago, he came to me, pitiful as a puppy, with a splinter in his hand for me to remove.

"Stella, it hurts," he said, sounding like a little boy and holding his hand out toward me. A swollen, crimson caterpillar was snuggled in the space between his index finger and thumb.

I got a pin and a pair of tweezers and had him sit on the couch in the parlor. It was late morning and hot already. He had shed his shirt but at least still wore his white undershirt, so my couch wasn't completely smeared with his muddy sweat.

"Don't hurt me," he murmured as I held his hand in mine and tried to see the wood splinter embedded in his skin.

"I'll try not to. This is awfully deep, Liam. I'll do my best," I said, pivoting around his hand, trying to get more light on the wound.

I started to probe a bit with the pin. He flinched slightly, but I could tell he was trying to keep his hand still.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's all right."

Digging deep into his skin, I found the splinter at last. Before I married Liam, I couldn't stand inflicting pain on other people. I've had to get accustomed to it; Liam is worse than a child the way he comes to me with splinters, blisters, and cuts smeared with dirt and manure.
“Hold still,” I said, trying to press the blister out with my thumb nail. Watery
blood seeped out of my crude incision. “Sorry.”

The end of the splinter poked out of the skin. I grasped it with the tweezers and
pulled it out. It slid out quickly and cleanly.

“There,” I said.

Before I could do anything else, Liam pulled me down on his lap and wrapped his
arm around my waist.

“Thanks,” he murmured, nuzzling against my neck. “You smell awful good,
Stella.”

Heck, I wasn’t even trying to be sexy: I didn’t know it could happen without my
trying. But I’m not complaining. We stayed together until one of the farmhands came up
to the house looking for him, about fifteen minutes. It was nice to be near him without
fighting.

But incidents like that don’t happen nearly enough for my liking. For affection, I
must depend on those dogs and cats. One fewer cat since March. He killed Fred Astaire,
the black and white cat I adopted from last year’s spring litter. Freddie’s coat was bristly,
and he stood at the pantry door when he wanted to go outside, but I was fond of him.

He may be right that I’m afraid to leave, but now I pretend otherwise.

“I can get a job any place where there’s telephones,” I say. I had been thinking of
that for a while now, ever since I found poor Freddie dead on the back doorstep, poisoned
by arsenic.

“And how are you gonna get into town?” he asks.
"You can’t keep me here like a prisoner, Liam! I’m not your slave. I don’t see how you can be so cruel to living things."

"Are you gonna start that – ”

"I know you poisoned Freddie,” I say.

"Stella, for the umpteenth time, I didn’t kill your cat! I was sorry he died too.” he says, so sincerely I almost believe him.

"I don’t believe you! That cat was all I had. I’m all alone out here all the time,” I say.

That was true, too. And I want a baby so badly, and it never happens. Every month I hope; every time I’m a little late, I hope. But still I am childless.

Not that we don’t try. At least I do, but I don’t know how much I can help. He tells me I’m pretty sometimes, but he mumbles it quickly, as if he’s insincere. Other times he makes fun of me for my small breasts. But, of course, I’m not allowed to remind him that he can only maintain his energy for ninety seconds. Ninety-three if you count foreplay.

Now, I was always told it takes at least fifteen minutes. So I’ve nearly resigned myself to my being childless for my husband’s abilities.

That’s not how people see it, of course. It seems it’s always the wife’s fault for not conceiving a child. I know people in town are whispering, “What’s wrong with Liam Brady’s wife?” But God knows I’d like nothing better. Even as ornery as he is, I don’t think Liam would poison his own baby.

Now I don’t know if he visits the girls at the White Spot when he’s in Cut Bank. I wish I could find out that he does, because it would give me leave to go after the pumper
who watches the oil wells on our land. He’s not so attractive, and he chews prodigious amounts of tobacco and doesn’t bathe as often as I’d like, but he resembles Liam enough that I could get away with it. And get some satisfaction in the meantime, because I’ve discovered that those ninety-three seconds are pretty pleasant. I suspect I’d like the entire fifteen minutes very much. But as soon as I get near the pumper, he repulses me – his brown teeth, bloodshot eyes, whiskers caked with something whitish.

Anyway, I suppose making such a fuss about a cat is foolish, but if I had a baby of my own maybe I wouldn’t. And it’s Liam’s fault on both counts – that I have no cat and no baby.

He makes a dismissive gesture and sighs. “Just get into the truck. The back’s full anyway. I’ll ride back here.”

“Why don’t you ride in the front? There’s no reason for you to ride back here.”

“I’ll ride back here,” he says forcefully, pulling off his gloves and hurling them in the back of the truck. One disappears in the tangle of boughs and he swears at his bad luck.

I don’t really mind when Liam gets mad at me for backing the truck up wrong or not being able to swing an axe, but when he belittles what I do in my own house, like he did one day last spring, I draw the line.

It was last March, and the warm weather we had been enjoying suddenly changed to frigid cold. The muddy earth turned brittle, and thick frost coated the prairie grass. I remember looking out the kitchen window and thinking I was as barren and cold as the land outside. I’m young, I should be a mother, I thought. Instead I’m dry and withered.
Liam had begun the morning unusually grateful for his scrambled eggs and ham. He was gone all day, and, in a fit of good-will, I spent the afternoon making him roast beef and custard pie. The kitchen sink had been leaking for a week, and Liam hadn’t fixed it yet, but that afternoon the pipe gushed a sinkful of dirty water all over my floor. I cleaned it up as best I could, and let supper dishes pile up as I waited for Liam to come home.

But he was late, and dinner was getting cold when he finally came in.

“Sorry, Stella,” he said, shuffling across the floor in socks. “Ed got stuck twice. I got home as quick as I could.”

He was apologetic, and I didn’t doubt he told the truth.

“Dinner’s getting cold. Let’s sit down and eat.” I took the roast out of the warm oven.

“What the hell’s wrong with the sink?” he asked, eyeing the mess on the floor.

“The pipe started leaking terribly this afternoon,” I said.

“Christ, I should’ve fixed this last weekend,” he said, dropping to his knees to inspect the plumbing.

“It doesn’t matter. Let’s just eat for now. I made you roast beef—”

“I know. I can smell it,” he said. “I’ll get this thing fixed right now. Won’t take long.”

“Liam, it doesn’t matter. Can’t we just eat? It’s getting cold and ruined.”

“I can’t leave this place falling apart,” he said, across the kitchen now and rummaging through his tool drawer. “You can’t even fill up the kitchen sink. What kind of house am I making you live in?”
“It’s just a sink, Liam! Jesus Christ, can’t we just eat dinner?”

“Not until I get this done,” he said, brushing past me to the sink, carrying tools in both his grubby hands.

“Eat your dinner cold, then. I’m eating it now,” I said, and piled my plate high with roast beef, potatoes, and green beans. I was too angry to be hungry, but I stuffed the food in my mouth anyway. I can’t do anything right, you see, and Liam would rather fix the plumbing than eat dinner with me.

“Now Margaret,” my father had said before I got married (Margaret is my first name, though I hate it. I prefer my middle name, Stella, after my grandmother of the peony plant), “A good wife submits to her husband in every way. She is obedient to his wishes in the house and out. She raises his children well and loves him no matter his faults.”

I know my father would disapprove of my wifing, but I don’t see any other way to act. I could defer to my husband at all times and outwardly show my happiness, or continue the way I am. Or I could forget about respectability and divorce Liam. Cavendish’s place is only five miles from here. I could walk there, get a ride to Cut Bank, and take the train to Great Falls.

I have an aunt, one of Mama’s sisters, who got a divorce. I remember being about eleven when I heard my parents talking in hushed, urgent tones about her.

“A divorce could ruin the family. Thank God we’re not still back East, where it would ruin us,” Mama had said.

“Lucky it’s your family. Nobody’ll recognize the name. You don’t have to own up to her if you don’t want to,” Papa said.
My aunt never came to visit us after that. I missed her. She brought me licorice and lengths of hair ribbon.

I go around to the front of the truck and climb in, taking off my gloves as I slide into the seat. I look in the rearview mirror at him. He’s sitting on the tailgate, his shoulders, shining with sweat under the warm sun, stooped slightly. I feel bad for him, and I’m almost sorry.

I wish Liam didn’t look so pitiful after a fight. He excites my maternal instinct when he does that, and it pisses me off. I swear he does it on purpose, just to end the fight and get me to submit. He did that last night, too.

“I’m just trying to help you with your plants. I don’t want all your tomatoes ruined. Then you won’t be able to do any canning,” he had said, breaking last night’s silent dinner.

“My way was just fine, Liam. That’s how I did it last year,” I said.

“Jesus Christ, Stella, if you left ’em that way they’d be falling over by the time the tomatoes started to get big. They’re heavy, you know.”

“And if that happened, I could stake them up better. All I’m saying is that they were fine for the time being,” I said.

“If you do things right the first time, Stella,” he trailed off, the way he does when he thinks he’s teaching me a lesson.

I didn’t reply, and a few moments later looked up at him. He was slumped over his plate like a scolded child, or a dog that tries always to please his master.

I sighed. “Stake them up however you want,” I said, with some coldness, ending the fight without his thinking he had gotten me.
Now he’s doing the exact same thing as I turn off the path that runs around our house and out buildings and up onto a small hill. The truck hesitates. I’m in first gear already, so I cannot shift down. Instead I press the clutch in slightly. Still the truck objects, and I push the clutch in more. Now the truck starts to lumber up the hill, wheezing and whining as it goes. I glance in the rearview at Liam, but I can see only his shoulders and head over the knotted branches. He’s turned his head, listening to the engine and glancing at the cab. I’m almost to the top of the hill now, and the truck rocks tiredly, I push the clutch in as far as it will go. It coughs and the engine dies.

“Je-sus Christ,” Liam says. I can’t hear him, but I see his mouth form the words. It’s something he says so often that I can hear his voice in my mind.

I hurriedly try to restart the engine, but it will not turn over. I feel the back of the pickup rock slightly and, looking back, I see that Liam has hopped off and is coming round to the cab.

“You killed the damn engine, Stella,” he says. “Here, let me try it.”

Angry and embarrassed, I scoot across the seat while Liam opens the door and jumps into the driver’s side. Despite his coaxing, the truck won’t start.

“Fuck!” he shouts, then sits still, pouting. “What the hell did you do?”

“Nothing, Liam. I had it in first, and it didn’t want to go up, so I pushed the clutch in more,” I say.

He sighs, putting on his pitiful puppy act. “Now we’ll either have to repair this one or get a whole new truck.”
He says it as if he’ll have to sell the farm to afford it. I know he’s full of shit. I’ve seen his bank book. He has enough for ten trucks. Still, he’s discouraged and I feel bad for him.

“I’ll go get the tractor to pull this thing away from here,” he says, opening his door. “Go back to the house. You won’t be driving again.”

Despite his cruel words, he still looks pathetic and forlorn. I hesitate before getting out. Liam has already exited the truck and is striding toward the barn where the tractor is parked, swearing and muttering to himself. I look at the house, then back at him.

Frustrated, I kick at a clod of dirt, but the rock inside it jams my toe in my worn-out work shoes. I feel helpless.

“Son of a bitch,” I mutter as I hop onto the tailgate and sit tight, my arms folded across my chest. I’ll be waiting for him to come back; then he’ll get it.
“You didn’t put gravy on these hashbrowns. I need brown gravy on them,” I said, pushing a cream-colored, oblong plate across the counter to Harvey.

Harvey, snatching the plate back and scooping a ladleful of gravy onto the hashbrowns, sighed loudly and rolled his eyes.

“Here y’go,” he said.

I should have said thank you, but this was not a good day. Instead, I loaded my hands with four heavy, hot plates and carried them across the dining room to a table where a farmer and four of his hands sat. The farmer, ugly thanks to a bulldog under-bite, comes in almost every day, and he never leaves a tip, no matter how much he makes you run or how much food he gets.

“Ham and over-easy, bacon and scrambled, ham and over-medium, sausage and over-easy,” I said as I handed each plate out in turn.

Just as I turned to get the last plate, the farmer said to the hand whose plate I had to leave at the counter, “I guess you don’t get to eat. – Did you get his order?”

“I got it. I just have to make two trips,” I said, trying to sound cheerful, though I don’t know why. Every time I wait on him, I try to muster the courage to be rude to him and let him know how I feel about his stinginess, but I can’t bring myself to do it. And besides, you would think that someone who’s smart enough to run his own farm could figure out that, when the number of items I’m carrying is equal to or greater than the number of hands I have, I have to make two trips.

In any event, I got the last plate and brought it to the table, stopping on my way back to the kitchen to stack plates from a table left impossibly messy by a mother and her
four children. They left me a few pennies. I dropped the coins into my apron, and they clinked against the other coins in my deep pocket. I’ve probably made only fifty or sixty cents today, and that was bad by any standard. When you added tables like the bulldog farmer who don’t tip, my day was even worse.

After dumping the dirty dishes off at the dishwasher’s counter, and Levi, who couldn’t be slower about scrubbing plates this morning, glared at the pile I had just added. I stopped at the cook’s counter to wait for my next order. Half of it was already there, and I saw Harvey finishing it up.

“I’ve never had such a bad day,” I said to Marlene, the waitress who came on at eleven.

“Why’s that?” she asked. Her voice is raspy and tired.

“Everything bad just seems to be happening today, and I’m not making any money. I’ve been here for six hours and I know I haven’t made a dollar.”

“Happens,” Marlene shrugged.

She could afford to be indifferent. She had a husband who helped pay the bills. But I was all alone, living in an apartment across the street from this place, the Big Sky Café. I had been thinking about moving somewhere else because my tips were good enough that I could afford it, but ever since the Great Northern railroad closed their repair shop and the hotel where a lot of the workers stayed, business has dropped off since most of the men have left town. Railroad men were young and single, and they had extra money. They tipped good. But now they were gone, and my tips went with them.

“But I haven’t had a decent day in over a week, and my rent is due on Friday,” I said.
Marlene didn’t say anything, and Harvey put my second plate on the counter, so I took both to my table.

It was probably my fault that I didn’t have any money. My last good day was a Saturday when I worked the ten to seven shift. At four o’clock when the second waitress came on, I had already made a dollar seventy-five. Now the waitress who I worked with that night isn’t very good, and I know she doesn’t make good tips. We hadn’t been busy for a few days, and that night we got swamped at about six-forty. Instead of taking more tables myself, I figured since I had already made so much, I would just help her with the tables and let her have them all (although I did take a few tables when she was overwhelmed). But when I finally left that night at almost nine o’clock, I got no thank-you from her. What’s worse, I left my last table, and the next morning when I came in to work, there was no tip in my tip basket. I’ve waited on these people often, and they always left at least a nickel. Not only did I help her for nothing, the little witch stole from me too.

Another table paid and left me a penny tip. Not many people around here leave anything. Some don’t know better, and others refuse.

I came here two years ago from Great Falls because I wanted to live on my own, away from the help and control of my family. I was nineteen and had no serious marriage prospects, and I thought this was my chance to be on my own and independent. Cut Bank was booming then, thanks to the railroad, and for a while I had fun waitressing and being on my own. And a lot of those railroad men are young and single, so I thought I’d find myself a husband in no time.
But here I was, two years later, with sixty cents in my pocket, all alone, tired, poor, in the same situation as when I left home.

I finished bussing my tables and went to the kitchen, where Marlene paced nervously. We were busy for the first time in a week. At times like these, when you’re just waiting for the cooks to finish your order, all you can do is pace and wipe counters, trying to look busy.

“I suppose, if you really need it, I could lend you a couple of bucks until payday,” Marlene said. “If you’re really in a bind.”

I knew she didn’t want to part with her money, and I didn’t want to take it from her. Marlene’s past was murky. I always suspected she was an upstairs girl for a while before getting married. She had probably been in my situation before and was reluctantly paying back the person who had helped her through once.

“Thank you, Marlene, but I really can’t take your money,” I said. “I’ll come up with the money somehow. And my rent has never been late before, so maybe my landlord will carry me for a month.”

Marlene made a skeptical face. She was probably right.

“Goodness, El, just come home!” Mama had told me last night. “Papa will pay your rent and you’ll pay him back when you can.” She added jokingly, “We know you’re good for it.”

I stuttered something into the telephone receiver in the little wooden booth in the lobby of my apartment building. I wanted to go home last night. I was tired and crying and I wanted to talk to someone.
“Don’t cry, baby, just come home,” Mama continued. “Do you need money for a train ticket? I can wire it to you first thing in the morning.”

My family wasn’t thrilled that I was waiting tables. Waitressing isn’t exactly a respectable occupation.

That entire morning, I thought about my telephone call to Mama. I could go back home, to my parents, nearly toothless grandmother, and three younger brothers. Waiting tables in Great Falls would mean better tips, but I was almost sure my family wouldn’t allow it. I knew that if I went to live with my parents again I would be under their supervision. If they said no waitressing, I couldn’t waitress. The best I could hope for would be a job as a receptionist, which would pay a fraction of waiting tables.

“El, please!” Harvey shouted, and I crossed the kitchen to the grill, where he stood looking at one of my tickets, holding it steady with a greasy brown hand.

“What is this steak and eggs? Is it the dinner or the breakfast?” he demanded.

“He wants mashed potatoes instead of hashbrowns,” I said, immediately remembering that strange order of steak, scrambled eggs, mashed potatoes and gravy, and sourdough toast.

Harvey studied the ticket for another few seconds. “Oh,” he said. He seemed embarrassed. He was awfully high strung, and only in the past couple of months could he handle a rush by himself. In the past, Phil, the Big Sky’s owner, had told all the waitresses that if it got busy and he wasn’t there, we were to go after him immediately. Usually we found him in the apartment above the restaurant, tinkering or building little models of boats or aeroplanes for his nephews because it was impossible for him to sit still. But whenever Harvey cooked, and especially now when he was alone and busy, the
floor was covered in hashbrowns, bacon, eggshells. I liked him; he was sweet. When he made you food and you said something like, “Good turkey sandwich, Harvey,” he’d look at you sort of blankly, then say quickly, “You’re welcome.”

The jingle bell on the front door sounded, and I turned to see two of the few Great Northern fellows who are still in town enter the restaurant. I watched them, hoping they’d sit in my station, and they did. I grabbed menus and took them to the table, catching a glimpse of Marlene as I went. She didn’t look happy. We both knew that railroad workers usually tipped well. You had to keep an eye on Marlene. She’d tried to steal tables that she knew would leave a good tip. But these guys were sitting against the wall, squarely in my station. There was no way she could claim that she thought the table was her station or that I looked too busy to take them.

“Good morning, fellas,” I said cheerily.

“Morning.”

“Hi.”

One of the guys was older, perhaps forty-five, but the other was probably less than thirty. I’d seen them here before.

After I rattled off the special, the older man barked his order and I scribbled it on my pad hurriedly. I didn’t mind asking how he wanted his eggs cooked. Some people try to act as if they were professional restaurant patrons. They don’t have to look at their menu and they know exactly how they want their food cooked. It’s fun to make them realize they’ve missed something.

He shifted in his seat and grumbled, “Over-medium.”

“And for you?” I asked the younger man.
He looked up at me, his eyes laughing.

“Give me some hashbrowns and eggs, sunny side up, and bacon with toast,” he said.

“White, wheat, rye, or sourdough?”

He thought for a moment, as if his decision on toast was the most important of his day. “Sourdough, I guess,” he said at last.

I smiled back at him and took their menus.

That sort of thing used to be an almost daily occurrence, but there were few young, unmarried men around here now. Most of the men who stayed here have families, and they either don’t have the money or the ambition to get out.

As I crossed the dining room, I passed one of my tables where two grubby, overalled men sat. Neither had shaved in a few days, and they could both have used a haircut. They had been in before and were easy to wait on. They tipped decently, but nothing special.

“Order up!” I said and tucked my ticket in the wheel. “Just bacon and eggs and hashbrowns.”

“Thankyou,” Harvey said. He spoke so fast sometimes that all his words jumbled together.

In the next moment, as he cracked one egg after another, his relatively pleasant morning ended. A bloody egg had plopped on the grill, and in an instant the kitchen was filled with its pungent odor.

“Holy fuck!” he breathed as he tried to scoop the egg off the grill. I smothered a laugh. Patrons who were offended by obscenities knew not to sit close to the kitchen
when Harvey was cooking. I was offended when I first started here, but now it didn’t bother me.

I took a coffee carafe around the dining room and refilled coffee. When I got to my two-top with the Great Northern fellas, the younger one thanked me as if I’d brought him water in the desert.

It was nice, I suppose, to get some attention from a man again, but it had happened so often with no result that I had long ago stopped expecting anything from it.

I put the coffee carafe back on the counter next to the giant, shiny coffee urn, where Marlene prepared to make another batch.

“Have you smelled those guys over at my table six?” I asked her, pointing with my chin when she turned to the dining room.

“They’re oil men,” she said.

“What are they here for?”

“They’re looking for oil up here. They’ve found it in the north part of Toole County, near the border. They’ll be building some refineries up there, maybe even a town. They think there’s oil here, too,” she explained.

“Oh,” I said. I was curious about them.

“They have money,” Marlene continued.

“They don’t tip terribly well,” I said.

“Well not yet, because they haven’t found oil yet, but it might be coming. I heard they’re having good luck north of town.”
I looked at the oil men again. One was in his middle-thirties, and the other looked about my age, maybe a few years older. I thought it was strange that money might be so grubby.

“Have you thought of getting a second job, El?” she asked.

“There aren’t any. I’ve looked, but nobody needs help,” I said. “I’m lucky I have this job.”

“Oh,” she said.

“And I talked to Phil about working more shifts, and he said all the staff wants that,” I added.

“Mm-hmm,” she said stiffly. She turned on the coffee urn and walked away from me silently. She wanted more hours, too.

I busied myself by wiping down the back counters and glanced back once at the young GN fellow. I had another GN fellow, but he left when the shop closed. I thought things were going well. He always made sure to sit in my station and always gave me good tips. Often he would come before or after a rush so I would have time to talk to him. A few times we both went to the same dances, and he always made me promise to dance with him a few times.

He had had a lovely last name, too: Atwood. I thought it would sound good with my name, Eleanor. Eleanor Atwood; it had a ring to it.

But when the GN shop closed, he left without a word to me. I had hoped he would ask me to go with him, but the last time he came to the restaurant, he acted no different than he always had. He left me a larger than usual tip.
That was my last good chance at a husband. I suppose if I were really desperate I could get myself one, but I had more self-respect than that. And what’s the point of getting married if it wasn’t for stability? Marrying one of the drunkards around town wouldn’t bring me that.

“Shit!” Harvey hissed, loud enough for me to hear clearly. I smiled to myself then went to the counter.

“I have customers out here!” I said to him, and he glared at me.

“Here,” he said and slid two plates, for my GN table, down the counter.

“Thanks,” I said sweetly.

I carried the plates in one hand and picked up the coffee carafe with the other. The older man was drinking his coffee fast. If he needed more I wouldn’t have to make two trips. I dropped the plates off at the table and topped off their coffee cups. This time, however, the younger man hardly gave me a look.

My bulldog farmer was done eating and stood up at the till, waiting for his ticket. I hadn’t done a very good job taking care of his table, but I didn’t care. He wouldn’t tip if I brought him everything on gold plates. I rang up his ticket, the till ringing and ticking as I pressed its buttons. He took the change I counted out into his palm and walked away from me, ignoring my wish for his good day. I went to his table, hoping one of his hands had at least had the decency to leave me something, but there was nothing there.

I took the plates and mugs back to the kitchen. I had long ago mastered plate stacking and cup nesting. I could clear off almost any table in one trip now. I was generally a good waitress. Most people told Phil they liked me. But it doesn’t matter if you don’t make tips.
"I think I might give Phil my notice," I said to Marlene and Levi, the dishwasher.

"Why?" asked Marlene.

"I'm just tired of it. If I can't pay my rent I can't live on my own," I said.

"Who was eating on that?" Levi asked, pointing to a pile of leftover hashbrowns on one of my plates.

"Carl Bauer, I think."

Levi smiled and grabbed the plate, turned and scraped it on his own plate behind him. Levi ate half his weight in food a day, and Phil wouldn't let him eat so much for free. When he got hold of a half-eaten plate that belonged to someone clean, he'd eat it. He liked to box, and when he wasn't at work, he was either jogging around town or in the gymnasium beneath Joe's Drug, training for hours. Even at work, he would impulsively break out ducking and bobbing, throwing punches at invisible opponents.

"Do what you think is best," Marlene said. She'd probably be happy if I left. She'd get an extra shift.

I went back to the dining room with a dishrag to wipe off the bulldog's table.

"I'll pay for mine now, too," the older oil man said.

I turned and flipped through my ticket book.

"Here you are," I said, and tore his ticket out.

He looked at the ticket then dug in his back pocket for his billfold.

"You're oil men?" I asked.

"Yeah," the younger one said, smiling up at me.

"Where're you from?" I asked.
“All over,” said the younger one. “We just got done in Texas, now we’re up here.”

“Al’s the real oil man. I just dig holes in the ground,” said the older one as he handed me the ticket and a half-dollar.

I didn’t know what he meant and must have looked confused, because he added, “Al’s just got done with college for engineering. He knows what he’s doing. I just sorta guess what looks like good oil ground and start drilling.”

“I see,” I said. “And what do you think of around here?”

“Looks promising,” Al said. “We’ll have rigs and crews up by next spring.”

“Well, good luck to you,” I said, and took their money up to the till. They had twenty cents of change coming, but when I looked up, they were walking out the door. The older one tipped his hat to me as he went and got a funny smile on his face when I held up my fingers clutching two dimes.

I hadn’t gotten a tip that good in months.

I dropped it in my apron pocket and heard it jingle against my other change. That tip alone would give me a good day. I went to the help corner at the back of the kitchen, sat down in a chair, and shoveled the coins out of my pocket. I counted them carefully. I had a dollar and six cents. That and the tips I would make the rest of the week would probably be enough to pay my rent. I was thinking about what the oil man said, about the crews that would be here next spring.

“Phil is here,” Marlene said as she came from the back alley where she was smoking a cigarette. “Have you given him your notice?”

“No. No, I don’t think I will,” I said.
Balance Sheet

I stab at the gravel with my toe and listen to the train heave and chug and whistle as it pulls into the station. It is afternoon, and I’ve been waiting three and a half hours for the train. I came to the whitewashed station at eleven, and the dispatcher told me it would be late. I went to the Big Sky for a couple hours and had lunch, then to the Stables to have a beer. But I’m not drunk. If I had gotten drunk, I’d be in the dog house for sure.

I see one of our outfits going north down Central Avenue. It’s stopped and is waiting for the train. The truck is only nine or ten years old, but the green paint is chipped and a jerry-built winch weighs down the back end. A couple of the guys lean out the window and shout and wave.

“You’re under probation now, Joey,” one of them laughs.

I’m in public, around women, so I can’t make any obscene gestures. Instead I just wave. I wish I was with them. They’re going about twenty-five miles north to start work on a field that’s just starting to be explored. The oil is good, and it’s easy to get out of the ground. The few wells they’ve already started don’t pump much water. They’re good wells, and there’s plenty to do. It’s good money.

The train has stopped, and people are starting to mill about. The ones on the platform with me are looking for friends and relatives and getting ready to board, while those getting off make sure the porters have all their bags or stretch their legs. I start looking for Nedra. She wore a green coat all the time when I saw her last, so I look for that.
“Oh, Joseph, there you are!” Nedra exclaims behind me. I turn around and see that she’s wearing a brown coat now. And I wouldn’t have been able to find her anyway, probably, because she’s died her hair from brown to Jean Harlow blonde.

I shout and take her in my arms. I haven’t seen her since Easter and it’s July.

“Baby, it’s been so long,” I say. Her hair smells different, tinny, and her new coat is softer against my palms.

“You can say that again. I’ll go gray waiting for you to come back to me,” she laughs.

“Where’s your bag?” I ask, annoyed at her comment. She couldn’t wait for me to come to Billings again for a visit. She had to take the train up here for a few days. Here we are in the middle of a depression and she thinks she has to come see me when we already talk on the phone almost every damn day. And I had to take the day off to come pick her up. That’s why I’m not with the crew.

“Over here. I’ve three of them here,” she says, indicating a set of matching brown leather suitcases.

“The truck’s over here,” I say as I pick up two of the bags. She takes her time going after the third one, one of those round ones for hats or something.

I lead her over to my truck, a red Ford I bought last spring, and toss the bags in the back.

“This is it?” she asks.

“Sure.”

“I pictured something different. Something with new paint.”

“I got this one used. But it runs like a dream.”
Nedra waits so I can open the door for her. I give the handle a yank and the door screeches open. She climbs in, and I close the door behind her then cross over to the driver’s side.

“This smells funny,” she says, wrinkling her nose, as I get in.

“That’s what crude smells like.” I start the truck.

“Why should it smell like petroleum in here?”

“Because I get in here when I’m done at work and I’m covered in it.”

“No. Really, Joseph? You don’t get all dirty with it, really, do you?” she asks.

“Yeah, Nedra. What did you think I’d do?” I say as I turn the truck onto Central Avenue.

New brick buildings line Central and Main these days. If brick could shine, these buildings would, they’re so clean and new. The busiest streets have just been paved, and surveyors have carefully laid out a grid for the streets, not like Billings, with streets slapped down wherever they fit. Cut Bank is starting to look like a town.

“Well, I don’t know.”

“I sure as hell don’t work in an office.”

“Language, Joseph.”

“Sorry.”

“What do you do with your clothes? I mean, when they have petroleum on them?”

“Mrs. Bollard has an old wash machine she uses for our oily clothes. We drop them at the back door.”

“You don’t.”
“Sure. What else are we supposed to do?”

“And you walk around this woman’s house in your underwear?”

“If you forget to hang up a clean set of clothes you do.”

“Oh,” Nedra said, relieved. “You change right there. I see. How scandalous it would be for grown men to run around in their underwear in some strange woman’s house.”

I shrug. I’d done it before. I figured Mrs. Bollard had four sons; it was nothing she’d never seen before.

I pull the truck in front of Mrs. Bollard’s house where I and four other rig hands stay. She’s a widow, and all her kids except her youngest daughter, Sophie, have moved out. Since she has a room open right now, she agreed to let Nedra stay for the next six days.

“It could stand some paint,” Nedra says, eyeing the Bollard house.

“We’re painting it next month for her. She’s knocking some of our rent off if we do.”

“Do you really have to do side jobs like that? I thought you said you were doing well here,” she says.

“Well, no, I don’t have to. But I don’t mind helping her out,” I say, getting out of the truck and going after Nedra’s luggage.

Nedra is quick to jump out. She reaches over the side of the pickup and picks up her round suitcase.

“What do you keep in there?” I ask.

“Oh, toiletries and things,” she says.
“I always wondered why it was shaped like that.” We walk up to the house.

“This luggage is top-drawer, Joseph, and it cost me quite a bit, but it’s much better than the old beat-up stuff I used to have.”

“Oh.”

The front door opens, and Mrs. Bollard, a tallish, plump lady with dark hair she does not dye and a naturally smiling face, stands before us on the small wooden veranda.

“Well, Joe, look at this lovely girl you’ve brought to us,” she laughs.

* * *

“Earl Slattery, you remember him, don’t you?” Nedra asks.

We two are sitting together in her bedroom after supper that evening, and Nedra is telling me news and gossip from back home. We used to have fun together, just like this, talking with no one around us. When she’s alone with me she puts away her airs.

“Of course I remember him. We went to school together,” I say.

“Oh. Well, he’s getting married next month. The girl’s a Newman, but I forget her first name.”

“Too bad I won’t be able to get home for it,” I say. All this talk made me a little homesick.

“I’m sure you can. The trip isn’t very long at all.”

“It’s not always that easy. We work when there is work, and you work until you’re finished.”

I get up from the bed, stuffed with a feather tick and covered with a Dresden quilt, and walk to the window. A couple of kids lead a long-haired mutt down the street toward the coulee where the river cuts through tall cliffs the Indians used as buffalo jumps. I
brush against the window curtains and smell their cleanness. Everything in Mrs.
Bollard’s house is simple, most of it homemade, but all of it is clean.

"Makes it hard to plan anything," Nedra says.

"You can say that again."

"Is that why you never come to visit me?"

I shrug. "I’m trying to make some money for us. You don’t make money when
you don’t work."

"Don’t you think everyone needs a little vacation? I’m taking one to come see
you."

Nedra works in a hat shop for rich women, and she got some kind of promotion a
few months ago that let her quit her other job at a shoe store. Nedra works hard, even
though she really doesn’t have to because she lives with her parents, but she likes to
spend money.

"Yeah, I don’t deny that. But I just don’t need one right now."

Nedra looks sad. "Not even to see me? Joseph, don’t you miss me? Don’t you
miss home and your family?"

"Of course I do. But this is the place to make money. So let’s just make the most
of it for now. You’ll come back here to me soon when we can be married, then we’ll be
together," I argue. I’ve been carefully stashing money away in the bank. Within six
months, I think, I’ll have enough to marry Nedra. We’ve been engaged, off and on, for
almost five years.

"Wait. I don’t understand," she says.

"What isn’t there to understand?"
“I’m coming back to you? You don’t mean we’ll live here, do you?” she asks, getting excited.

“Where else would we live? You don’t think I’d get this good job and once I marry you, when I really need the money, quit and go back home, do you?”

“I just thought we’d live in Billings,” she says.

“Not with my job here. Nedra, they just lost a guy who used to run one of the rigs, and I have a real chance to get his job. That’s quite a bigger salary.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I didn’t want to until I knew for sure. I’m on probation right now with my own rig. My first well went all right. I start my second tomorrow. If I do a good job I could get the rig,” I explain.

“I see. And there’s no place around Billings where you could get a job?” she asks.

I shrug. “There probably is, but Nedra, the money’s here right now. I’ve got my foot in the door, and I don’t want to waste this opportunity.”

She fidgets in the oversized chair that she sits in. She looks like a child in the chair, a child with hair so bright and white it almost blinds you. She does look like Jean Harlow now, and I guess some men would like that, but I prefer her hair brown.

“Why’d you dye your hair?” I ask.

“Because I wanted to. Platinum is the style now. This is how all the girls are wearing it,” she says, primping a bit.

“Nobody wears it like that here.”
“Because you’re in the middle of nowhere up here. You’d think it was 1928 the way all the girls are dressing.”

I don’t really know what she means. Nedra has always read those fashion magazines; maybe that’s where it came from.

“Joseph, if I lived here I know I’d go absolutely mad. It’s stupid of you to want to stay here,” she says.

“I kind of like it up here,” I say. I’m not really offended by her outspokenness. She’s always been that way. “I kind of look forward to staying and seeing it grow into a nice little town.”

“Please. In ten years, it’ll be just like those gold rush towns with a couple of toothless miners.”

“Oh, I don’t know. If not for the oil they have agriculture and the reservation. And the railroad is still around, even if they pulled out a lot of their businesses a few years ago,” I say, envisioning a booming little city of a couple of thousand of residents, with a mayor and schools and parks.

“Well I just can’t live here. You’ll have to get a job near Billings, that’s all there is to it,” she says.

“But the money –”

“There’s more to life than money, Joseph. There’s happiness and peace of mind,” she snaps, sitting forward on her chair. “I’ve just decided not to worry about money at all.”

“Somebody’s got to! You think it’s all right to take train trips up here with your new luggage and your new hair. That all costs money.”
“Don’t you think I know that? I pay for everything myself,” she snaps.

“Because you live with your parents and don’t pay rent and don’t buy your own groceries. You can play with all your money,” I say.

“What I do with my money is none of your business. I have no problem managing it. In fact, I have plenty of extra in the bank,” she says. She’s sitting at an angle to me, and she won’t look at me.

“How much did it cost for you to dye your hair?”

“That’s none of your business!” she storms.

“It will be soon enough, and let me tell you, anything over fifteen cents is too much. Any wife of mine wouldn’t be wasting her money on a bottle of peroxide for her hair.”

“And what would I be allowed to buy?” she cries, jumping to her feet. “A permanent wave kit? A nice length of calico for a new dress? You can hoard your money away like a pack rat all you want, but I’m going to enjoy mine, and I’m going to buy what I like. You talk about how much money you’re making, but now you want to keep me in jail up here and not let me do anything fun.”

“Why am I the only one saving money to get married? You say yourself you have extra,” I say.

“I told you it’s not your business. Can’t I have my own money and can’t I do whatever I like with it?”

I take a few steps toward her, trying to make my point by making her feel a little threatened. But Nedra’s a tall, slim girl, and she’s almost my height anyway. Standing a few inches from her doesn’t help much.
“You’ll realize how silly you’re being once we’re married and you have to manage a household. *Then* you’ll apologize,” I say.

“I’m not apologizing for anything. And while you mention it, would you even let me work when we’re married?” she asks.

“Of course not. I’ll make enough for both of us,” I say. I don’t understand why she suggests that. “You’ll be too busy to work.”

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll have twenty-seven children and a bunch of toilets to scrub,” she says sarcastically, walking away from me and crossing her arms over her chest.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, have you ever thought that while you’ve been away playing up here I’ve gotten my own life?” she asks.

I hesitate.

Mrs. Bollard’s daughter Sophie walks by, carrying two extra pillows. She stops in front of the door and looks at us, embarrassed.

“Mama said you asked for some more pillows, miss,” Sophie says, taking a few shy steps into the room. I think she graduated high school a couple years ago, but you’d think she was twelve the way she’s so quiet around people.

“Yes, thank you very much,” says Nedra, turning sweet again as she takes the pillows from Sophie.

“Do you need anything else?” Sophie asks.

“I think this will about do it, thank you.”

Sophie seems a little hesitant to leave, as though she wanted to stay around Nedra a little longer. I wonder what a little country girl like Sophie must think when she looks
at Nedra, with her platinum hair, store-bought clothes, and makeup on her face. Sophie makes all her clothes, and she can perfectly copy a dress from the store just by looking at it. Her face is freckled and pink from soap and the sun.

“Good night, then,” Sophie says belatedly and ducks out of the room. She likes me. Maybe I flirt with her too much.

“Sorry, Nedra, I didn’t mean to be so mean,” I say.

“I guess I’m sorry, too, and I didn’t mean it. I don’t think we should fight at all,” she says.

“You’re right. Tell me what you know about this girl that Earl’s marrying.”

Nedra’s face glimmers. “Everyone says it’s just a disaster of a match. She comes from a real eccentric family, you know . . .”

We’re out in a coulee quite a bit north of town. Only the fellows who are from this area ever keep their bearings up here. The rims are high, and the country is hilly. Being surrounded by the rims this way sort of makes me think that we’re in a big mouth, and the rocky rims are the teeth. A petroleum engineer told me once that the rims are the old sea shore and all the oil is below the ocean floor. The hills beyond the rims rise and dip sort of like a plump girl’s body. When it doesn’t rain the grass turns brown. When it does, the country is lush, green, and fertile. The farmers and ranchers like it, and I understand why. But my business today is with what’s under the soil.

It’s an easy well. Straight down a couple thousand feet. We only need forty-seven rods for this well, and the ground is good. I’m not very worried. It’s noon, and
we’ve already started drilling. I’ve got a good crew on this rig. I told the crew to take their lunch.

Nedra insisted on packing my lunch this morning. Mrs. Bollard usually packs the lunches for all of the rig hands at her house. Nedra’s been around for a few days now, and she’s getting bored. She’s a nervous person who likes to stay occupied. I really don’t care who makes my lunch; I don’t think her lunch tastes any different from Mrs. Bollard’s, and thank God she didn’t put some love note in there with it. She’s got enough sense not to do that, at least.

Leonard Mankiewicz sits down next to me.

“What’s on your mind?” I ask him.

Len shrugs. “I talked to Sheldon yesterday. He says he could keep me busy if I wanted to go work for him.”

“I don’t think they’d want to lose you here.”

“I don’t much like the work. This way I’d stay in town. I’ve always wanted to be a carpenter.”

“One thing about it, there’s plenty to build around here.”

“That’s what Sheldon said. He says he could use a few more hands. It’s hard for him to keep up with the work. There’s so many new houses and buildings going up around town. He said they’re planning on more additions to the townsite already.”

I nod and chew. I know I’m right about what I told Nedra the other night about this town.

“If that’s what you want to do, Len, talk to Nelson,” I say, referring to our boss.

“It’d be a pay cut.”
“You’d have more time with your wife and kids, I ’spose.”

“Probably. More time for the bars,” he says with a smile.

I hear a commotion behind me and turn around. Len and me had our backs to the rig. At first I don’t see anything, but I stand and notice a small flame, about four foot high, next to one of the rig hands. For a moment I don’t know what to say. The hand has taken his shirt off and is trying to beat the fire out.

“Get that fire out!” I shout, thinking I have to say something.

But the fire won’t go out, even as a couple more hands join in the fight. I start to run over to them, and when I’m halfway there, a stream of fire slithers like a snake the one hundred or so feet from its origin to the rig.

“Oh Jesus,” I say to myself, because there’s nothing else to do.

“What do we do, Joe?” one of the hands asks.

For a moment, I can’t think, I can’t even understand what he’s saying.

“Get as much away from the dyke as you can,” I say, “then get out of the way. Somebody jump in a truck and go after help.”

The fire is thinking about jumping up on the rig floor, and we go after burlap sacks and start slapping the flames. The whole works could explode if it gets to oil. The rig itself is made of wood, but most everything else is iron. The rigs are dragged from well to well with Cats, and this one has been used dozens of times. The gray, cracked timbers are smeared and soaked with a thick glue of oil.

“I think we’ve about got it,” Len says after we’ve been beating at the fire for a few minutes.
Coupled with the heat and the dryness, the flames make the air unbearable. I’m soaked through with sweat, and I feel sort of dazed after breathing in all the smoke mixed with the smell of crude.

We can’t see the flames still snarling underneath the rig floor, but in a few seconds, another flame shoots up next to the drill. It comes up so fast it looks like oil gushing upwards. One of the hands jumps onto the floor to go after the flame, but I grab him to hold him back.

“It’s on the oil now, get back!” I shout.

We run about fifty yards back to get out of the way, and when I turn to look at the rig, the fire is quickly traveling from one beam to another, and soon the entire rig is lost behind the orange-black smoke of the fire. There’s no water around, and even if there was, it wouldn’t put out an oil fire. All we can do is watch and feel the flame’s hot wind spray on us. I feel sick.

Nedra and me sit in a stiff swing on the back porch of Mrs. Bollard’s house that evening. We just finished supper, but I didn’t eat much. I’m not hungry. I’ve told her about the rig burning up already.

“So you went to town to talk to your boss?” she asks.

“We made sure the fire was out and then went to town. I could’ve puked, Nedra, I was just so sick.”

It’s a hot evening, but not stagnant. In Billings, sometimes it gets so hot you can’t breathe, but here the wind almost always blows a bit. Tonight the breeze cools the air
just enough, and the leaves on the trees quiver nervously like a deer that’s just caught
your scent.

“What did he say, Mr. Nelson?” We’re sitting next to each other on a porch
swing, and she leans forward, trying to see my face.

“I told him the rig burned up, and he asked me how it happened. I said, ‘One of
the hands said he was smoking and must not’ve got the butt out.’ ‘There’s a rule against
smoking within five hundred feet of a working rig,’ he says. I said that I knew that, but it
was lunch and I wasn’t paying attention. I forgot to say anything to the hands.”

“Shouldn’t they have known not to smoke?” she asks, sounding angry.

“They all know, but it’s my fault for not keeping them from doing it. Everybody
smokes at the rigs, some even when they’re working,” I explain.

“Did you tell your boss that?”

“I didn’t, because it wouldn’t have mattered. This was a one-in-a-million thing,
and I was the unlucky bastard – ” I cut myself off, realizing my slip. Nedra says nothing
but shifts uncomfortably. “ – I was the unlucky one it happened to.”

“Did he fire you?” she asks.

“No, but he took the rig away from me. ‘You might get a rig someday, Joe,’ he
says, ‘but not today.’”

We’re quiet together, and I light a cigarette.

“I want you to come home with me, Joseph,” Nedra says after a while.

I want to go home, too. We won’t know until tomorrow how much damage the
fire did. We thought this afternoon that there wasn’t much damage. We only lost the rig
and some equipment, and nobody was hurt.
“Maybe you just weren’t meant for this. You may not make as much in Billings, but you’ll be with family and friends and people who love you,” she continues.

“My boss told me today I’m a good hand. He just couldn’t give me a rig right now,” I protest quietly.

“Oh, yes, Joseph. You’re a good worker, and you’re smart. There are always jobs for people like you.” She puts her hand on my arm, and it makes me feel better.

Sophie comes out, wearing gloves and carrying a pair of flower clippers. She goes from flower pot to flower pot, snipping dead blossoms from plants. She looks like she knows she’s intruding and tries to stay away from us. Sophie isn’t a pretty girl, but she isn’t ugly, either. I don’t think she wears make-up, and she keeps her hair curly. Her skin is tanned. I look at Nedra and put my arm around her. Nedra’s been wearing make-up since I’ve known her, and I think I’ve only see her without once. She dyes her hair and straightens it.

“Let’s go in for tonight,” I say. “I’m tired.”

I’m not, and I know I won’t sleep tonight. Every time I have a few spare seconds I’ll relive this afternoon. But I want to get away from Sophie, Nedra is grating on me suddenly, and mostly being around both of them at the same time makes me feel uncomfortable, and guilty for some reason.

“But this is our last night,” she says. “Are you coming with me tomorrow?”

“I don’t know.”

“Please, Joseph.”

“I can’t leave my job on such short notice.”
“You can give your boss notice tomorrow and be home in two weeks,” she suggests.

I don’t know what to say. I think of the long time we’ve waited to get married. And although most of this week it seems that I’ve been annoyed about her being around, right now I don’t want her to go. I don’t know where she’d go—away, I suppose—just away. She can go to Billings if I know I’ll see her again, but I don’t want her to go away from me.

“Think about it, please. You don’t want to be here, and I certainly don’t.” She kisses my mouth. It’s only the third or fourth time this entire week. All the other times I started it. I’m embarrassed because I know Sophie can see us, and probably the other fellows, if they’re around.

Nedra is late. I’ve been waiting in Mrs. Bollard’s parlor for twenty minutes. I’m giving Nedra a ride to the train station, and the train leaves at eleven-twenty. It’s eleven o’clock right now. I’m annoyed because I don’t like people being late.

“How are you doing this morning, Joseph?” Mrs. Bollard asks as she passes by the doorway. “Are you feeling better?”

“I guess so,” I lie.

“We all make mistakes, and we all deserve second chances,” she says. “Lars Nelson is a good man. He’ll give you another chance, I know it.”

“Thanks,” I nod. I know she’s right about my boss.

“And I suppose you’re sad to see Nedra leave,” she says.

“Yeah.”
“You just don’t worry. Work hard and go out tonight and have some fun. When you’re young it’s easy to get to feeling better,” she says.

Nedra comes down, carrying her small round suitcase and I go upstairs after the other two.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” I hear her say to Mrs. Bollard.

“I hope we’ll see you again,” Mrs. Bollard says.

Nedra says, “Of course.” I can’t see her, but I know from her tone that she is smiling.

As I come down the stairs I see Sophie standing a little back from the dining room doorway. She looks at us curiously, the shade of the morning covering half of her earnest face.

“Let’s get going,” I say and we go outside to my pickup. The morning freshness is still in the air, but it’ll get hot today. I toss the suitcases in the back.

“Careful with those,” Nedra says, and I don’t like her scolding.

“They’ll be fine. Luggage is made to be banged around.” I open the passenger door for her and then get in the driver’s side.

“You ought to teach me to drive,” Nedra says.

“Your dad can teach you,” I say. I don’t like the idea of her driving.

“I’d like to learn from you,” she says and smiles at me. “Can I expect you the week after next? You can start teaching me then.”

We turn the corner and the train station is in view. Around us there are buildings new enough that they still smell like fresh paint and sawdust, and more buildings –
houses and stores and offices – are going up fast. I can see why Len would want to get into the construction business.

I look at her, and the only thing I can see is her blinding-bright hair under a wide-brimmed blue hat that keeps the sun from tanning her face. She looks artificial to me, like a mannequin. Outside us, the wood on the buildings and the gravel on the streets smell like something real, not synthetic like Nedra’s hair. I used to know what her hair smelled like. I’ve been thinking about what she said the first night she was here, about getting her own life in Billings while I’ve been gone. It makes me feel like she’s leaving me behind, and I don’t like it.

I pull up at the train station. A rig crew drives by, heading north.

“Telephone when you get home,” I say, “so I know you got there safe.”

She shakes her head a little. “Why won’t you answer me? Joseph, please don’t play games.”

“I’m not playing games with you because I don’t know the answer myself,” I say.

“Stay until the end of the summer and then decide,” she suggests, but it sounds more like a question.

Instead of answering her, I get out of the truck and take her suitcases to the platform where the porter takes them. She gets her ticket in order before turning to me.

“Don’t you think you could meet me halfway?” I ask. “We could live here and you could still work. Does that sound all right?”

She hesitates. “I’ll have to quit working eventually when we have children.”

I sigh, frustrated. “Do what you want, I suppose.” Forgetting we’re in public, I’ve thrown up my hands and taken a step away from her.
“I’ll ’phone when I get home,” she says quietly and climbs the steps of the train car. I don’t see her again.

I get back in my truck and watch the train pull out of the station. After it’s gone I still don’t leave. She wants her own way all of a sudden; she never used to be like that. But I feel alone without her.

I start the pickup and drive out of the large gravel lot surrounding the station and pull on to Central Avenue.

There is nothing for me anywhere but here, I think. I’m surprised by the thought – I don’t expect it.

I look east after the train that is no longer visible and force myself to think of Nedra and myself together; we have been together so long.

But now that she is gone I feel nothing for her.
Marianne’s Year
(in the style of F. Scott Fitzgerald)

Marianne Coleridge didn’t want to get married, but in our minds, there was no other reason for her to come back. We didn’t know her plan, but we played our parts perfectly. She stepped off that train one spring afternoon, a warm – almost hot – late spring day that seemed ironic only because three days before a snowstorm dumped eight or nine inches of heavy, wet snow on the ground. Piles of icy snow in gutters and ditches were melting fast, and, cold water the color of weak coffee with cream rushed through the gravelly streets.

We hadn’t seen Marianne for more than three years, and when she left, she had been small and plain, didn’t go to dances much because nobody asked her to dance, didn’t smile much because nobody smiled back. She had a tongue in that mouth that’d scare the tail off a rattlesnake, and that might’ve been the real reason why all the fellows stayed away. She’d tell you what she thought of you, and she’d tell you when you were wrong, and she’d beat you in a game of checkers or in a footrace. And she’d be happy when she beat you.

I was at the station the day Marianne came home, waiting for a friend from college who came to visit every spring. She was standing on the platform, a black hat with a sort of pointy bill shading one of her eyes, looking for her luggage. I didn’t recognize her until I heard Joe Hampton say, “Christ, that’s Marianne Coleridge.”

“Who?” Henry Kinyon asked.

“Marianne Coleridge, you know, Doc Coleridge’s daughter. The mean one,” said Joe.

“Marianne? That’s not Marianne.”
But it was Marianne. I stood, leaning against the station wall, staring at her legs, at how nice the seam of her stocking ran up those gently muscular calves. Calves are simple things that don’t allow for much variation, compared to other features of the female form. But a woman’s calves can have just the right shape that they’ll drive a man wild.

“I’m glad one of us pays attention,” said my friend. I was surprised to look up and see him at my side. “What’re you looking at?”

“Nothing,” I said, giving him my hand to shake. “It’s good to see you again.”

I didn’t know where Marianne went for all that time. I think we had heard that she was going to live with relatives in Kansas, but I knew Kansas couldn’t work such a miracle on her. As Charlie and I were getting into my car, I saw Marianne, carrying a suitcase now, get all but accosted by a group of young men, tossing their cigarettes, lifting their hats, and trying to get her to let one of them carry her bag. That old look came back in her face. It said, “Who the hell do you think you are?” But now it came from a different place inside her. I don’t know how it was different, but it was, and instead of driving all the young men away, it brought them closer to her.

“I’ll take your suitcase for you, miss. Do you have a ride home? ‘Cuz I have a nice new car I could give you a ride in,” said Eddie Peterson.

Marianne laughed but held fast to her suitcase. “Edward Peterson, since when do you call me ‘miss’ and offer to let me ride in your car?”

Eddie started, then studied her face.

“It’s Marianne, you idiot!” one of the men said.
“Hey, I never would’ve recognized you,” Eddie said, extending his hand to her, happy and confused. “Let me give you a ride to your father’s house, Marianne.”

“I’m afraid I already have a way to get home,” Marianne said, “but thank you anyway, Eddie.”

She broke through the pack of men, the youngest of them no more than twenty-four, yet acting like schoolboys, and walked from the platform toward Central Avenue where her father’s practice was. A few of the men followed her fifty or so feet, while others dissipated from their circle reluctantly, Marianne’s energy still holding them, plugging up their frowning mouths with cigarettes. I watched her go, too. She turned a couple times, watching her admirers, shaking her head and laughing.

“Ain’t you got any pretty girls here? This the first one you seen?” my friend asked.

I lit a cigarette and started the car. “Not like this one.”

I couldn’t stay away from her any more than the rest. I heard she was filling in for Dr. Coleridge’s receptionist, who had just had a baby. After mooning over her for a while, I swallowed my pride and called, complaining of a headache, to make an appointment. When I got to the office, fifteen minutes early, no one was there yet. Marianne and her father came together, with her climbing the stairs at an exuberant clip and the old doctor reaching the top heavily.

“Good morning, Nick,” she said, searching for the right key in her purse and unlocking the door.
“Good morning, Marianne,” I said, removing my hat and grinning as stupidly as the fellas on the platform.

The three of us went into the office, and Marianne turned on the lights. The room lit up, displaying walls covered on the top half with inoffensive burgundy paisley wallpaper and on the bottom with expensive, richly dark woodwork. Recently, the doctor had replaced the hardwood floor with light-colored carpet.

“Have a seat, Nick,” Dr. Coleridge said. “I’ll be right with you.”

The doctor walked to the back of the room and turned into his office. I sat down and looked at yesterday’s newspaper while Marianne put on the water for tea and finished opening the office. The telephone rang and she took the call, scheduling an appointment for that afternoon. Her voice was no different than it had been three years before, but it hypnotized me now. As I listened, I saw the doctor pass from his office to the examination room.

“It’s good to see you again, Nick,” Marianne said, just as her father came out of the examination room and told me to come inside.

When I came out, under orders to get some more sleep and smoke and drink less for my nonexistent headaches, a woman and a toddler sat in the waiting room and the doctor’s nurse was flipping through some files.

“I’ll take you back now,” the nurse said to the woman and led her and her son back to the second examination room.

The doctor still passed back and forth between my examination room and his office, but Marianne and I were effectively alone.

“It’s good to see you, too, Marianne,” I said.
She laughed. “What a memory you have!”

I stood next to her desk, my hands in my pockets, desperately mining my brain for something to talk about. It occurred to me that I really didn’t know this girl anymore. She was so different. In the past two weeks since she had come home, I think we all had fallen a little in love with her.

“Would you like some tea?” she asked.

“I’d love some,” I said. She was up and after the tea before I had even finished answering.

I tossed my hat circularly, catching it by the brim with my right hand, while I waited, suddenly nervous.

“Here you are,” she said, handing me a teacup and saucer, white with a hummingbird painted on it.

“We haven’t seen you for a while,” I said, leaning a little bit against the desk. She smiled, got up, and fetched me a chair so I could sit next to the desk.

“Just over three years I was gone,” she said.

“Where to?”

“College,” she said.

“No kidding? We all thought you were killing elephants in Africa,” I said. That was one of the outlandish theories about her whereabouts after she disappeared, along with other, more mean-spirited ones, like that she became one of those female boxers or that she went to the Yukon after gold and a man who was more man than she.

Marianne smiled. “No, just college.”

“Where at?”
“Bryn Mawr,” she said, burlesquing the New England accent, drawing out *Mawr* for a ridiculously long time.

“What did you study?”

“A little of everything. History, English, psychology,” she said.

“Not medicine?”

“A little of that, too. But I don’t want to know too much about it, so my father doesn’t recruit me as his nurse,” she smiled. She seemed to radiate something bright, and it was impossible to take yourself away from her.

“Why not?” I asked.

“You know me, Nick. I’m too mean to be a nurse,” she laughed.

So this was the real Marianne. I had been skeptical, and even fantasized that this was her long-lost twin who had taken her place as some sort of a joke.

“Why did you stay away so long? You never came home for a visit,” I said.

“There was no reason for me to come home. My father always visited me. Our family is back East. It made more sense for him to buy one ticket to visit us all than for us all to come here,” she said. There was some sadness in her voice, and I wondered at the source.

“But you’re still here, Nick,” she continued. “I tagged you as one of the ones who wouldn’t come back after college.”

Marianne’s Ivy League education suddenly made my four years at the University of Montana seem provincial and unimportant.

“My dad’s business is here, and I think I’d like to take it over when he retires,” I said, aware that I was throwing my shoulders back a little, like a bull elk strutting before
his harem. My father and I came to Cut Bank ten years before with the oil boom, and he started Cartwright Petroleum, one of the biggest oil drilling outfits in the area.

"Of course," she said. "It must keep you very busy. The oil men were the only ones who had jobs the past few years."

I wondered if her comment was a subtle hint for me to leave. I thought of risking it and staying, but decided I could undo all the goodwill I had just planted if I overstayed myself.

"Marianne, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind going with me to Lydia McGovern's party on Saturday," I said. This was the real reason I had made this appointment, to ask her to the party.

Marianne tipped her chin upward thoughtfully and half-smiled. "I suppose I could do that," she said.

"Can I come get you at seven?" I asked.

"That sounds wonderful," she said.

I think, if you add up all my time dancing with Marianne at Lydia's party, it doesn't come to one full song. I guess I don't mind that all the young fellows cut in, because it's all part of that intricate ceremony we call the mating game, but when the old married men started in, I almost punched someone, namely Sheldon Harrington, who's married and had grandchildren older than Marianne. But she was a good sport about it, smiling at me apologetically as the old man danced her away.
“I think you’re the prettiest girl here tonight,” I said after we found a spot under a
tree in the backyard, where the darkness shrouded the still-bare branches of shrubbery
and flowerbeds and only a few hardy perennials poked through the cold dirt.

Marianne smiled and sort of shrugged before she said, “Thank you.” It wasn’t
insincere, but I realized that she must hear that often. And I thought I had been the bearer
of good news.

I was quiet and put my hands in my pockets. “Did you have a lot of beaux back
East?” I knew I was being brazen.

Even in the darkness, I could see the look in her eyes, a mix between amusement
and indignation.

“I suppose so – the average number, I guess. I went to school to study, too, and
that took up some of my dating time,” she said. “And how about you? When you were
away at school did you have many girls?”

I hesitated, not knowing what she implied by her last verb. “I dated a few;
probably the same as you – average.”

“And here, I’ve heard about you and Laura McRae,” she said, her eyes laughing.

“Laura and I dated for a while. It’s nothing,” I said, trying to be nonchalant.
Laura never could get over that we were through. Every few weeks she’d call me at
work, hinting for me to ask her out. There was nothing wrong with her; I just couldn’t
picture her as a lover.

“I’ll take that, I guess,” she said, flirting.

I wished I could tease her about a former beau, but I could honestly think of no
one that I knew she had dated here.
“Now that we’ve established that we’re both hopelessly average,” she said when I didn’t reply, “do you really want to stay here forever and take over your father’s business?”

“Sure I do. I’m his vice president now. He wants to retire soon; his health’s not so good. As soon as he thinks I can take over, I will,” I said.

“Really? Don’t you feel hemmed in by all this?”

“By what?”

“Oh, the people. The same people all the time, the same thing all the time.” She made a dismissive gesture. “I guess it’s just a small town.”

“Cut Bank might be an important town someday, with the oil, and the farms, and the Indians,” I said.

“It might be,” she conceded coolly. “I suppose that’s not what I meant. I meant that, don’t you think the people here seem to have some kind of illness? They’re so mean to each other sometimes. Nobody tries to get along and make good at anything.”

I could understand what she said, to a point. When I was about ten, I had come to Montana with my father, looking for oil. We wandered for a few years, with him drilling wildcat wells around the state, until he hit oil here right when the boom started. He had always wanted to own a production company, so he seized his chance early in the game. I went from having no shoes and one pair of knickers without holes in them to driving a Cadillac and going to college. So while I did see what she saw, I guess I was more patient with it, because I hadn’t always been so lucky.

“All towns have problems like that, all groups of people,” I said.

“Probably. I’ve just noticed it here,” she shrugged.
She didn’t let me kiss her that night: she just sort of pushed me away gently and laughed when I tried to take her in my arms. She hadn’t led me on, and I had no reason to expect it. I had just hoped.

At the time, we had a service rig on a well north of town. It was a good well, but unpredictable, and the rig hands took to calling it Dorothy, even making a nice painted sign in front of it, because they said it acted just like a woman. My father was worried the rig hands would ruin the well, so he sent me there to help them and keep them from being careless, and I ended up spending the better part of a month babysitting that damned rig. When I came to town, all I had the energy to do was go to the office to do my work and go home and sleep. I never saw Marianne. In the first few days I made an attempt to try to tell her what was happening and that I couldn’t possibly see her, even though I wanted to, and to wait for me. But she was under no obligation to me, and I couldn’t blame her for keeping company with Eddie Peterson while I was gone.

They had become pretty well enmeshed by the time the dyke was moved off the well, the pump jack replaced, and oil started pumping again.

When I saw Marianne at a harvest dinner the next September, after hearing that she and Eddie were washed up, I cut in on her the first chance I got. I didn’t care that I was there with Melanie Harrington (the very granddaughter of the same Sheldon Harrington); I went after Marianne like a schoolboy.

She had the same hold over men that she did that first day at the train station four months ago. There was no dancing that night, but men surrounded her all the time. She
came to the dinner alone, and didn’t seem the least embarrassed for it. I think she enjoyed if not the attention certainly her knowledge of the current scandal.

It wasn’t spoken of in polite circles, and certainly not tonight. It manifested itself in knowing smiles from men and the raised eyebrows of women. A couple of weeks before, said the rumor, at about seven in the morning, Marianne Coleridge was seen exiting the in-town house of Eddie Peterson’s family. Eddie left a few hours later. Now this probably wouldn’t have raised much of a ruckus by itself, but when asked about it, Eddie at first refused to deny the charges and then confidently confirmed them.

So Marianne, a respectable girl from a good family, who grew up on the good side of town, never married, never before with a mark upon her reputation, had spent the night with a man – several nights, according to Eddie.

"Now here’s a face I haven’t seen for ages," Marianne said as I approached her that night.

"It’s nice to see you, Marianne," I said.

"Sit down," she said, motioning to one of the leather-covered chairs at her table. Dinner had ended, and everyone was mingling and drinking.

"I’m sorry I never talked to you. I didn’t mean for that to happen. Work got busy –" I said.

"Don’t apologize, Nick. I know how these things work. Along about finals time I used to disappear and was never heard from either," she smiled.

It was obvious that the men’s widespread fascination with Marianne wasn’t going away. It wouldn’t until she was married with ten children and an extra thirty pounds – probably not even then. I had been trying to figure out what was so different about her.
She didn’t look much different: her face was a bit more mature, the features more finely defined. The real difference, I think, was an intense self-confidence that radiated from her. She was like that old Marlene Dietrich song, with Marianne the flame and all of us the long-suffering moths.

“It was my bad luck,” I said.

She laughed bitterly. “You’ve no need to serenade me beneath my window, Sir Lancelot.”

I didn’t entirely follow her reference, writing it off as East Coast pretentious Bryn Mawr nonsense.

“But did you get your well pumping again?” she asked.

“We did, and it looks like it’ll pump like before.”

“Now I find the oilfield fascinating, Nick. What was the problem, exactly?” she asked, leaning her chin on her fist. She gazed at me with dark, expressive eyes that I thought women only showed in the bedroom.

“We had problems with holes in the pipe,” I said, confused and embarrassed by her question. She wanted detailed information that she wouldn’t understand.

“What was causing that?”

“It happens sometimes in that field,” I said, idly scanning the room.

“Crooked holes, right?” she asked.

I looked at her immediately. She was exactly right.

“How do you know about that?” I asked.

She laughed. “I know about a lot of things, Nick, and it’s not very nice of you to assume that I don’t know a thing about your old oil wells.”
“I’m sorry,” I said sincerely. “Women aren’t usually interested in it.”

“But you are,” she said.

“Of course. It’s my whole life.”

“I don’t mind if you talk about it. I want you to.”

That night, not the party earlier in the spring, was the beginning of our romance.

Football had been the largest aspect of my high school days, and since coming home after I finished college, I still liked going to the games. Some people, after graduating high school, continue to be interested in almost every aspect of the school system, from the sports teams to what color the physics room will be painted, and they talk about it endlessly in social settings. For me, an interest in football was all that carried over between my adolescence and adulthood. Marianne had been a little more hesitant when I asked her to come to a playoff game with me. It was held on a cool Saturday afternoon a little over a month after the harvest dinner.

“I suppose you didn’t have a football team at Bryn Mawr,” I said, aware of my own joke.

“I’m sure we could have. Some of those girls are pretty butch,” she said, pretending not to get my joke.

“You used to play football with us, Marianne,” I said. “Why don’t you like watching the games?” We sat together in the stands, away from the students but not too close to the parents either.

“Because it reminds me of high school,” she said tiredly. “That’s something I’d rather forget.”
“You don’t have any good memories?”

She smiled sardonically. “One. When Arthur Nichols was made ineligible for basketball our senior year.”

Art Nichols was Marianne’s age, and therefore several years younger than me, but I knew he was an exceptional athlete. All his talent had apparently gone into his motor ability, because he was dumber than your below-average Holstein heifer. Most of the teachers let him slide through classes, until his senior year, when a new geometry teacher, not from Cut Bank and fed up with the politics, failed him.

“Why would that matter so much?” I asked. She wasn’t the sort to glory in others’ misfortunes.

“Because he was the meanest person to me out of everyone,” she said. Her smile was gone and her beautiful face was solemn and dark. “Finally someone at that school did the right thing, and he got what he deserved. If everyone got what he got, I doubt we’d have a team on the field now.”

I didn’t know she was so bitter about her experience in town.

“And it’s not just the school, you know,” she continued. “The County is awfully corrupt, and the way some of the farmers on the reservation treat the Indians – it’s not fair, and nobody seems to care at all.”

“Oh, I don’t know, it’s all about who has the most money and the most power,” I said philosophically.

She glared at me. “Don’t you think people can be capitalists and still have morals?”
I hesitated. Just a few months before one of Cartwright Petroleum’s competitors had accused us of trying to monopolize the fields south of town.

“I’m not talking about you,” she added bitterly. “But look at Harriet West. The woman claims to be running a charity but takes some of her donations to buy furs.”

“Why did you come back here, Marianne?” I asked.

Surprised, she looked at me, as if I had just stumbled on her deepest secret.

“To spend time with my father,” she said shortly, turning her eyes back to the action on the field and watching it a little too interestedly.

“I thought you said he always came to visit you.”

“I like Montana. I wanted to come back to the place, not necessarily the people,” she said, and added after a pause, “Not that all the people are so bad.”

“That’s nice to know,” I said, annoyed and little offended.

Eddie Peterson and a girl came wandering up the bleachers, looking for a place to sit. I saw him look at Marianne, a look of embarrassed panic on his face. I looked at Marianne, interested to see her reaction, but she wore a look of smug superiority that was unsatisfying to me. I would have preferred to see her avert her eyes, ashamed to see her partner in indiscretion.

“Afternoon, Edward,” she said coolly. Nobody called Eddie ‘Edward.’ He had been ‘Eddie’ as long as I could remember. I recoiled at her version of familiarity.

“Beautiful day.”

“Yes, Marianne. Hi,” Eddie stammered. He was rakishly handsome, like Clark Gable or Errol Flynn, and much better looking than me. Girls loved him, and he reveled in their worship. He had a reputation for sullying more than one girl’s good name.
Eddie’s girl had been looking at Marianne as if she had just killed the former’s dog. Eddie had hold of her hand and led her away back down the bleachers.

Marianne laughed, satisfied, behind closed lips. She looked at me with the same satisfied look she had previously given Eddie.

“I don’t believe in pretending to hate someone you used to date,” she said. “What a waste it is, to cultivate a relationship with someone and cast it aside the moment you realize you don’t want to go after him in a white petticoat!”

“You’re not still interested in him, are you?” I asked, shamelessly jealous.

“Nick, if I were interested in anyone else, I wouldn’t be with you,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said, smarting.

But I suppose it was true. She had only stopped seeing other men two weeks before. Until then, she juggled dates with incredible ease. I had been jealous the entire time, even though I knew I had no right to be. We hadn’t made an arrangement, and she had even encouraged me to go out with other girls. In the meantime, she tore through a slew of young men, leaving them despondent when she finally settled on me. Just before I had come to pick her up at her house to take her to the football game, Lloyd Harrington (there was no end to that family) had shown up, begging her to go out with him that night.

“Don’t go getting territorial,” she said, picking up my meaning. “I can’t stand men who try to tell me what to do and whom to see.”

“I won’t,” I said, not knowing if it was a promise I could keep.
“I only get visitors when the housekeeper and Marianne are out,” Dr. Coleridge said to me as he carried a tea tray tremulously toward the coffee table. “Marianne and her mother both knew how to do this. I just sat and looked stupid.”

Dr. Coleridge was a nice man. His manners and immaculate grooming reflected his New England origins. On my way in that day, I had noticed a picture of him and Marianne’s mother, who died when their daughter was about nine, when they were very young, and in it he wore a stiff high collar, round spectacles, and an alert, noble expression. Despite his highfalutin demeanor, Dr. Coleridge really wasn’t what you would call a stuffed shirt. He was a generous, friendly old man, known in town for taking care of anyone he thought he could help.

He wasn’t the only doctor in the area, however. The other doctor catered mostly to conservatives and religious elite of the town. Doc Coleridge, most everyone knew, was very progressive where women’s health was concerned. It was widely known that he was willing to give contraceptive devices to unmarried women; gossip alleged that he had even given them to girls under the age of eighteen. Moreover, rumors stated that he had provided abortions to women for reasons other than therapeutic.

“And now that Marianne has come back to me, I don’t have to worry about it anymore,” he continued, fiddling with the tea service, “except this one day when you show up.”

He spoke with mock-anger but immediately looked at me and smiled.

“I would have been happy with a glass of water, sir,” I said.

“It’s too cold and windy to have anything but tea. Cream and sugar?”

“Just sugar. Lots of it,” I said.
He complied, scooping two heaping spoonfuls in my cup and handing it to me.

"Marianne usually doesn’t take this long shopping. She must have found something she likes,” he said.

“I don’t mind waiting, as long as I’m not a nuisance.”

“Not at all, Nick. I’m always happy to see a friend of Marianne’s,” he said. Now that he had prepared his tea, he sat down on a chair across from me.

I must have become visibly uncomfortable because he smiled and said, “I guess I’m being obtuse. You young folk are so open about romances.”

“Do you object to that?” I asked.

“Not at all. The best way for any two people to know if they’ll be happy is to do as much as they can together. Marriages aren’t made up of quiet evenings in the parlor with parents watching like hawks,” he said.

“I suppose not.”

“But I’m making you uncomfortable. Don’t be. I know Marianne can take care of herself so I let her,” he said.

“I’m sure you’re happy to have her home.”

“Of course. I missed her terribly the past few years. I wanted her to come home before this, but she liked it in New England so I never pushed the matter. I really can’t tell you how much she means to me, and to have her back – I’m just in heaven right now,” he said.

I was surprised and a little put-off by the doctor’s intimate confession. My acquaintance with him, though amicable, had only consisted of listing symptoms or halfheartedly apologizing for waiting a week before seeing him for a sprained ankle.
“She’s a lovely girl,” I said.

“She is, and so smart these days. I never thought she could tell me something about Plato.” He sighed. “But she is young, and young people are bound to make mistakes.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He looked at me and forced a smiled. “I’m just being a mother hen, worrying, as usual. Marianne won’t listen to my concerns, but I have them, just the same. It’s always the smart girls who are most likely to misstep.”

“Is she in some kind of trouble, sir?” I asked.

“No, no. She just has so many plans for her future, and plans naturally have risks. Girls who marry right out of high school live very safe lives. Girls who don’t, well,” he trailed off. “While she’s here, she’s safe. I wish it would last.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Dr. Coleridge looked at me, a little surprised. “She’s already talking of leaving again. I’ve tried to convince her to stay on here permanently, – there are plenty of jobs for her – but she won’t hear it.”

“When will she leave?” I asked, feeling left-out and empty inside.

“She has no definite plans. But I’m sorry to be the one to tell you, Nick. I’m sure she’s meant to tell you. She’s probably putting it off, trying to make all this last as long as possible. I think she’s very fond of you,” he said.

The doctor’s last sentence, one that, under any other circumstances, would have made me ecstatic, only puzzled me more. Until Marianne returned, carrying a pile of rectangular boxes wrapped in brown paper and fastened with twine, with more to be
delivered over the next two days, I spent my time with Dr. Coleridge trying to maintain a civil conversation while simultaneously letting my imagination fly away from me. Most of the scenarios involved Marianne fleeing home after breaking a long and trying engagement, or depicted her as one of those urban vampires, preying on unsuspecting men like me.

“I’m so sorry I took so long,” Marianne apologized, exasperated, as she pulled off her hat and fluffed up her hair. Last summer it had become almost red; now it had faded to a warm, ruddy brown.

“I took care of him,” Dr. Coleridge said proudly.

“I see you did, and very well, too,” she said, coming to us and putting her hand on her father’s shoulder.

“What did you buy?” he asked, looking up at her and smiling.

“Christmas presents.”

“For me?” he asked, his voice rising in hope like a child’s.

Marianne looked at me when she said, “Of course for you. And for you too, Nick, so you can’t throw me over until New Year’s.”

She laughed, and I joined in perfunctorily.

Her father looked worried and got up. “I think you have something to talk about,” he said and left the room. “I’ll be in my office.”

“What’s this about?” she asked, her brows knit.

I smirked, trying to make light of the situation, not to seem presumptuous.

“I didn’t know you were planning on leaving.”

“I’m not leaving,” she said, taking a few steps toward me.
“Your father said you weren’t sticking around.”

“Not forever. I’m sorry. I thought you knew that, Nick,” she said, sitting down in the chair next to mine and leaning against the arm closest to me.

“I didn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and I could tell she was sincere.

“I feel a little like a heel,” I said.

“I feel like a horrible person.”

“When are you leaving?” I asked, and there must have been foreboding in my voice that I didn’t intend.

“Not until the summer,” she said and smiled. “I want to go to Glacier again. I didn’t get as much time to hike as I wanted last summer. I have nothing definite planned, Nick.”

Summer was a long way away. Who knew but that she might change her mind by then? And who knew that I would even want her around?

“Sorry,” I said. “Now I do feel like a heel.”

“You’re not, though.” She laughed and dropped her forehead to the armrest until she recovered. She looked up. “You’re awfully nice; I wouldn’t leave without telling you.”

I wanted to kiss her, but I hesitated, wondering if her father really was safely put away in his office. But Marianne resolved my dilemma as she leaned across both chairs and turned my head toward her with her lips.
Sandra Nelson’s annual Christmas party was truly the social event of the year during my youth. Invitations usually went out early; Sandra knew that the ladies spent weeks looking for and mail ordering or having their dresses made. Luckily the all-occasion black-tie suited the men. By the middle of December, Marianne and I were getting close, and I finally learned the truth behind the scandal with Eddie Peterson.

“I picked up a peculiar habit in the East,” she said one day. I had come to her house for lunch and we, sitting in the dining room instead of in the kitchen, had just finished. She was stacking our plates abstractedly as she spoke. “It’s something girls from here have no idea about. Girls here measure their worth relative to their level of purity, and it just isn’t so, Nick. Men are allowed to go out tomcatting, but women certainly aren’t.”

I leaned back in my chair and lit a cigarette, interested and a bit scared.

“Not that I’m a proponent of promiscuity, mind you, but I don’t play the purity game. It’s so medieval,” she said, looking at me with accusing eyes.

She expected me to say something, but I didn’t know how to respond. I hadn’t really thought of this “purity game,” as she called it, as a way to control young women, another subject I rarely thought of.

“So I’m not going to sit at home in the evenings, waiting – for what? For a husband, as if that’s the apex of female accomplishment. I decided almost as soon as I left town how free I could be, and that it really made me happy. I don’t care what other people think,” she said.
I thought I knew that she was talking about the incident with Eddie, but I was afraid to ask her. Almost as soon as the rumor swept through town, the news of their breaking followed it.

"I like spending the night with men, and I’m not ashamed of it," she continued, leaning back in her high-backed chair, her arms crossed over her chest. "It’s true about Eddie and me, but I didn’t leave him because I was ashamed of it. I don’t like little boys telling tales outside school."

So that was it, I thought, suddenly understanding everything. That day at the football game, other times afterward when we had seen Eddie, she had always spoken to him, acted with civility. But her manner was always undeniably frigid. As soon as he had started bragging about her, she ended it. She didn’t want to be his plaything; she wanted to be the one in control. Dropping him in the midst of their affair was his punishment. Being happy with other men in front of him was his torture. She was more like a man than ever.

The only thing I remember specifically about Sandra’s party that year happened close to the end of the evening. A few people had been swapping possession of the piano, an old brown-varnished spinet, playing uninspired version of Christmas tunes. When Marianne took her turn, sitting on the bench with her back to the instrument and spinning around a few times before stopping with her fingers on the keys, she played "Pineapple Rag" with a swing rhythm, which to us at the time was new and exotic. Some of the older people at the party called her music choice inappropriate – this was a respectable Christmas party, not a speakeasy. Transfixed, I watched her, beautiful in an emerald green strapless gown with a full velvet skirt, and realized she was never meant to
be here. She was different than any girl I had ever known, and she was too exuberant, too free thinking, to be corralled by the confines of a small town.

I was sad as I watched her, as I listened to her tell everyone in the room her personality, her manner of living, with the song – how she let the notes swell toward the end of a phrase, slowed the final section down to a confident march, made the music an extension of her body as she leaned against some notes and backed away from others. She had told me a month ago that her plans for leaving weren’t definite, but they had to be. Marianne was a smart girl; she wouldn’t confine herself this way for long.

She played a few more ragtime and jazz pieces before ending with a jazzy arrangement of “Jingle Bells,” but none of the pieces were able to match her as well as the first. By her third song, everyone had grown used to her unorthodox musical choices, and the young people and a few of the older ones were dancing again.

“What time is it, Nick?” she asked me after relinquishing the piano and weaving through her usual crowd of male admirers to find me.

“About eleven thirty. That was wonderful, Marianne. I didn’t know you played so well,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said. Her face was flushed as if she had just won a footrace.

“You’re not very tight at all.”

I thought that was an unusual thing to say. “No, not too bad, I guess. I try to hold off on that when I’m at parties with girls I want to impress,” I said.

She laughed and wrapped her arms around one of mine. “I’m ready to go, if you don’t mind.”
I thought that was a very unusual thing to say. It was quite early yet, and Marianne liked to stay at parties not so late that she was among the last to leave, but late enough to see the death throes of everyone’s enjoyment as it turned to confessions more appropriate to the deathbed or fights over long-forgotten loves.

“You want me to take you home?” I said.

“No. Let’s just go driving for a bit,” she suggested.

So we did. She didn’t want to go too far out of town.

“I don’t want you to run out of gasoline on a cold night like this,” she joked.

She sat close to me and leaned her head on my shoulder.

“This is no good,” she said at length. “You can’t shift with me in the way. Your house is a couple of blocks from here. Let’s go there.”

Her suggestion surprised me, but I didn’t protest. My house had two garages, one in the front and a smaller one in the back that I rarely used. Tonight I pulled into the one in the back. I hadn’t shoveled the approach when about five inches of heavy snow fell the day before, so getting the garage door open and maneuvering the car into the small space I kept clear for it took a little more time than usual. Marianne laughed as I fought with the car and the snow. I tried not to swear, cutting the words off before they were complete but after their meaning was clear.

“I’ve heard much worse than that,” she laughed. “You’re such a gentleman.”

We went inside and I helped her off with her heavy fur coat, noticing how the little hairs at the nape of her neck curled upward slightly. The semidarkness of my entryway, illuminated only by the streetlights outside, accentuated the lines of her shoulder blades embedded in her back and the concave arch of her shoulder as it became
her neck. She opened her richly beaded clutch and searched around in it for a few seconds before closing it again and laying it on the little table against the wall.

"Would you like a drink?" I asked, nervous now as she seemed so calm.

She turned to me and smiled, then handed me a small paper envelope, about two inches square, that she held like a cigarette between her fingers.

"No drinks tonight, Nick," she murmured.

I took the envelope in one hand and her hand in the other.

The fish hook, weighed by a lure and a pathetic worm, plopped into the brown water, and Marianne began her expert reeling. She would let it sink for a few seconds, then reel first slowly with increasing speed, and toward the end she slowed her reeling once again until the hook became visible in the turbid water.

"Do you think we'll ever catch anything?" she asked.

"We have five on the stringer," I laughed.

"I know, but it's been almost a half hour. I think they've wised up to us," she said.

Marianne had been after me to take her fishing since a chinook melted several feet of snow in February. I had promised we could go as soon as the snow melted enough that we could get down to the coulee to fish at the creek. It was March, too early for the spring runoff, and the day was warm and windy, the sky and the prairie grass gray.

"Maybe we should move downstream," she suggested.

"No! I just got a bite."
We stood about fifteen feet apart from one another, casting and reeling into a deep hole whose waters had a tendency to swell and swirl, making it possible to fish only in the early spring and late summer. I hadn’t believed we would catch anything, but after experimenting with lures, we began to raise a few hungry trout from the water.

“Don’t reel so quickly!” she said. “Give it a chance to find it again.”

“All right, all right. Give me a chance,” I said, laughing at her intensity.

Some people might hope that I say that I lost all my respect for Marianne after waking up next to her, that I discovered she was exactly what the rumors had called her last summer. Instead, – and I’m not supposed to be so candid about my feelings – I discovered I loved her.

Since December, we usually spent a couple nights a week together. We even made a long weekend out of a trip to a chateau in Alberta in January. My father didn’t speak to me for a week afterwards. I left town in the middle of the winter, just when the cold makes oil wells most vulnerable to disaster.

“Why don’t you put off leaving until August or September,” I began tentatively. “The fishing is better that time of year.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, after casting and reeling in half of her line. “My friend from Connecticut invited me to spend the summer with her. I told her I would months ago.”

“Oh.” I had been trying to work up the courage to ask her to stay for a long time. I thought suggesting that staying would mean better fishing might appeal to the sportsman in her, without making it appear that I was pushing for a more permanent arrangement, which I was.
“I’m leaving about the third week in June, and I’m staying with her and her family until the end of August,” she continued in a tone that was difficult to decipher.

“The water is low and warm in September. Have you ever floated the river?” I said.

“Once, a long time ago.”

“But you haven’t done it with me. I know exactly where to go,” I said.

“Sounds like fun,” she said a little mournfully. “We’ll see, Nick. I can’t promise you anything. I want to start looking for a job as soon as I can. I can’t stay here playing the rest of my life.”

“What do you want to do for work?” I asked, realizing that we really had never talked about her future, probably because I was afraid to bring up the subject of her leaving.

“I’m not really sure yet. Sometimes I think I’d like to be a muckraker, or that I’d like to go back to school to study a language so I could go overseas and work for some big corporation or for the government,” she said.

I was a little overcome by her lofty goals. She wanted her work to mean something to many people. I wanted my work to be important, too, but I really had no desire to make Cartwright Petroleum the next Texaco. I was content to keep it a regional outfit, where I would still know my employees and be able to oversee all our problems instead of passing them off to assistant vice-presidents.

Marianne would be the perfect wife for a man who wanted to build a company. I imagined her in elegant cocktail dresses, skillfully mingling with stockholders and investors at business dinners. She would be perfect to lead the women’s clubs around
town that admitted only the most accomplished, most educated ladies. And I wanted her to raise my children, too, to teach the girls to be smart and the boys ambitious.

No other woman in town, or any woman I knew, for that matter, would be able to do what Marianne could.

"You really want to do all that?" I asked.

"Of course," she said quickly, soberly.

"Wouldn’t you be happy here? Cut Bank is going to be an important town soon."

She reeled in her line and walked down the half-frozen mud bank to me. She rested the handle of her pole on her old boot and stood at my side.

"I don’t doubt that at all. I just don’t want to stay here," she said.

"What about Montana? You don’t even want to stay in Montana?" I asked.

"No."

"You could rake up plenty of muck in Butte," I suggested, trying to sound disinterested in her fate, but I desperately wanted her to agree to stay here.

"I’m sure I could, but I don’t want to."

"Or the reservation. They’re stealing land from the Indians hand over fist. You said so yourself once."

Marianne leaned her head against my shoulder, more pitifully than affectionately. I didn’t reciprocate her action by putting my arm around her.

"I thought of that, but I don’t think so," she said. "I haven’t even been here a year, but it’s already driving me crazy."

"What is?" I asked.
“Nothing to do with you, Nick. If it weren’t for you and my dad, I wouldn’t have stayed so long. But everything else, the people and how they do things, and we’re so isolated. I feel as if I’m living on the moon sometimes,” she said.

“Don’t you think you make it that way yourself?” I asked.

Keeping my eyes on the line tracing across the water, I was trying to act as if I was still interested in my fishing. But I glanced toward her and saw she watched me curiously.

“I mean, it’s really up to you, whether you’re happy anywhere,” I added.

“That might be true, but I’d rather be happy somewhere else.”

I reeled in my line impatiently. “There’s no more fish in this hole.”

Tossing her line in the water, Marianne said cheerfully, “Let me use my worm up.”

She knew what we were talking about, what I really wanted, but chose to ignore it.

Almost as soon as she began reeling her line, the tip of her pole arched downward spastically, and the reel screeched as the fish she had hooked careened under the water.

“This is a good one,” she said, keeping her concentration on the fish. Gradually, it became visible just under the surface of the water, whipping its long, smooth body back, then holding still and floating with the current, then fighting again. Marianne let it fight itself out and drag the line out again before she reeled it in once again. This time, when its silvery body appeared in the murky water, it didn’t dance in the shallows.
“It’s a nice trout,” she said, pulling the fish out of the water and swinging the line so she could catch it in her free hand. “That’s six, isn’t it? It’s a good dinner for Dad, me, and you.”

I watched as she took the fish off the line and put it on the stringer, and a couple of the other fish convulsed at the stimulation.

“Or do you want to try a different hole?” she asked.

I looked at my watch without noticing the time. “I think we should call it a day.”

Snow fell the day after our fishing trip, so the next weekend we couldn’t repeat it. I spent Saturday morning at the office, dictating piles of letters for my secretary to type on Monday morning. Exhausted and still trying to fully understand what Marianne had told me a week before, I went to Monte’s to have a few drinks.

Halfway through my first beer, Dave Sanders, a fellow I went to high school with, came in and stood at the bar with me.

“Haven’t seen you for a while, Nick,” said Dave, extending his hand for me to shake.

“No. How are things on the farm?” I asked.

“Winter wheat’s doing good so far,” he said.

“Good to hear. And your wife and kids?”

“They’re fine; another baby’s due in the fall,” Dave said tiredly.

“Congratulations. I’ll buy you a beer.” I signaled to the bartender and ordered one.

“Is it true what I hear about you and Doc Coleridge’s daughter?” Dave asked.
“What do you hear?” I asked, thinking of the Eddie Peterson debacle. But I hadn’t said anything, although I didn’t doubt some people knew – my neighbor was one of the town’s biggest gossips.

“That you’re getting married at midsummer,” Dave said.

I chuckled. I wasn’t surprised that rumor said we were getting married. In a town of Cut Bank’s size, you have to expect that sort of thing. But I thought it was funny that the gossips had even set a date.

“No, that’s not true, Dave, unless Marianne told you something,” I said.

“No, sir, I haven’t talked to her. I heard it from my wife, and she heard it from a few of her friends.”

We sipped our beers, and I finished mine and ordered another.

“I shouldn’t be asking this because it’s none of my business,” Dave began, “and you bought me a drink. But is it all her choice about getting married?”

I hesitated, momentarily wondering where Dave had got that idea, before I remembered what I had said to him earlier.

“I suppose you could say that,” I said, sighing unintentionally.

“You asked her?”

“Not exactly, but she doesn’t want to stick around.”

He whistled. “I never would’ve guessed a girl like Marianne Coleridge would have you around her finger.”

“Why’s that?”

“Just how she was in school – mean, loud, not bad looking, but nothing special. I would’ve bet that you’d go for a different kind,” he said.
“She’s different from how she was in school,” I said, a little offended.

“That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“The last thing you heard wasn’t right. So what’ve you heard now?”

“Just that she talks about some of the women in town,” he said.

“Like what?” I asked.

“I don’t want to carry tales.”

“You’ve already started. Tell me, Dave.”

He shrugged and wouldn’t look at me, but I could see his narrow, horselike face in the mirror behind the bar.

“I just heard that she said that Harriet West keeps some of the money she raises for herself,” said Dave at last.

Harriet West, the wife of our three-term mayor, raised money to help “unfortunate children” in town. Many people gave freely to her charity, and she was universally praised in town for her altruism.

“She does, Dave,” I said.

It was an open secret that Mrs. West didn’t use all the money she raised on those children. The highest I had heard was that she kept half of the donations for herself. Of course, nobody was supposed to talk about such things; we were all to give cheerfully and congratulate her often.

“I know, but she helps some kids, so where does Miss Coleridge get off criticizing her for it? I don’t see her helping poor kids,” he said.
"I was with her when she said something like that," I said, "and she was joking more than anything. That’s just her way. She’s got good sense, and she says what she thinks."

"It ain’t right, Nick. Mrs. West has been doing this for years. So what if she buys a pair of shoes now and then?"

"That’s easy for you to say, Dave. You know your kids are always going to have plenty to eat and clothes to keep warm."

"You defending her?" Dave asked.

"I give my money to Harriet West, and I’ll keep doing it. But I don’t blame Marianne. Maybe it’s because she was back East. Corruption is a big thing there," I said.

"Corruption? You’re talking like this is Chicago." Dave, who had been leaning against the bar, his boot on the rail, straightened up and faced me, adopting the stance of a man spoiling for a fight.

"Calm down, Dave," I said, deliberately keeping my pose, leaning against the bar and holding my beer bottle with a loose grip.

"All I say is, if you gonna marry this broad, you better figure out a way to control her mouth," he spat, then mumbled perfunctorily, "thanks for the drink."

"I won’t tell her to do nothing," I said to Dave’s back as he left the saloon.

As I finished my beer, I went back and forth between resenting Marianne’s insistence on calling Harriet West on her behavior and being indignant at Dave for being angry at Marianne. When Marianne had dryly remarked about Mrs. West’s funneling at a party a few weeks ago, I had been shocked that she would dare to publicly criticize the
mayor’s wife, who was doing a good thing helping poor kids. But now I thought of what
Marianne had said last weekend fishing, that she didn’t want to stay in Montana to do her
“muckraking.” Did she know already that she would receive such a frigid reception for
uncovering corruption? I thought of the people who had taken advantage of the Indians’
ignorance about the particulars of owning land – paying property taxes, especially. Many
of them were farmers and ranchers who did what they wanted with no fear of reproach,
and the truth was, if Marianne did criticize them for taking land from the Indians, people
would take the ranchers’ part. Marianne, at least, was serious about helping people.
Perhaps she knew already that she could scream as loudly as she wanted, but no one
would care that a few Indians had no place to live.

The bartender walked past me. “A lot of people feel like Dave does,” he said.

“What are you telling me for?” I demanded. “I don’t own Marianne Coleridge
any more than you do!”

I reached into my pocket and slapped down a few coins for a tip and stalked
outside to my car. I drove to her house, hoping I’d find her there. If I found only her
father and told him, I knew he would give me the same answer as I had given Dave – that
he couldn’t – and wouldn’t – try to control what his daughter said.

Luckily, she answered the door when I rapped impatiently, taking my frustration
out on the door.

“Goodness, Nick, what’s the matter?” she asked. “Your wife couldn’t be having a
baby! And my father’s gone today, anyway.”

“I’m serious, Marianne,” I said, stepping inside and dropping my hat on the
sideboard.
"What is it?" she asked, knitting her brow and smiling humorously. "Come in the parlor and sit down."

"I just talked to Dave Sanders. He’s upset about what you said about Harriet West – a lot of people are," I said.

"I know that, and I don’t care," Marianne said. "Maybe it’ll make her behave. People seem to do what others expect them to in this town."

"It wasn’t right of you to say it," I said.

"Yes it was. I was absolutely right, and everyone knows it," she said.

"That’s not the point. Harriet West has been doing this for years –"

"So I’m just supposed to stand around and congratulate her like everyone else? Are you really telling me that, Nick?"

"Yes," I said, aware that I was being a stuffed shirt right now.

She laughed impatiently. "This is exactly what I was talking about last weekend. I can’t stand the nonsense that goes on in this town. I won’t live in it and play by everyone’s stupid rules. You said I should stay around and cry wolf about the Indians –"

"I thought of that," I interrupted.

"And you’re smart; you know everyone would tell me to shut up, just like they’re telling me now. They’d crucify me for criticizing them, Nick, because this is the way they’ve always done things. I don’t do things this way, and I don’t want to. I’ve got a sense of right and wrong, and, unlike a lot of people here, I listen to it," she said. She turned from me. "Thanks for defending me, Nick," she said dryly.

I didn’t reply.
She put her hands on her hips and took a few steps away from me toward a window that looked westward toward the mountains and the reservation. "I guess I know how you feel about me."

Marianne and I spoke twice over the next few weeks, both times over the telephone. The first time, I called to ask her to have dinner with me, but she begged a prior engagement, icily, not apologetically. The second time, I called to ask if I could come to her house and talk to her, but she became agitated and said she had already made plans with some girlfriends. Toward the end of this silence, I pathetically started hoping to hear that she was going out with other men so I could play the role of the spurned lover.

"I’m tired of this game, Marianne," I told her over our third telephone conversation one morning. I had been going over a pile of mineral leases at the office, trying to banish her from my mind and to concentrate on my work, which had never seemed so futile.

She sighed heavily into the phone. "I’m invited to a dinner party in Shelby this evening, so you’d better come now if you want to come," she said.

I left the office immediately, and when Marianne answered her front door, she looked surprised and a little disheveled. She hadn’t expected me so soon. When I had told my dad that I was stepping out for a few minutes, he grumbled, "Good, you’re useless these days, anyway."

"Come in, Nick," she said. "Do you want some coffee?"

"No, thanks," I said, although she made excellent coffee.
She led me into the parlor, where she had a half-drunk cup of tea amidst the morning newspaper, spread out on the coffee table.

"Are you through with me?" I asked. She had her back to me, languidly browsing through a pile of cigarettes in the sterling box.

"That's a good question," she said, replacing the lid on the box without taking a cigarette. She turned around to face me. "I don't want to be, but I think I have to be."

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked, indignant.

"I think you think that I'm entirely different from how I was before I left," she said. "But I'm really not, Nick. I'm the same person on the inside. You all didn't like me then, and you don't like me now."

"That's not true," I objected.

"No, it is. I hadn't wanted to believe it until you came here a few weeks ago. Do you really expect me to stay in a place where everyone hates me so?"

"What does it matter to you how people feel about you?"

"It matters to you what they think of me," she said mournfully.

I didn't reply because I couldn't argue with her. She was right, and I hated myself.

"I went away, Nick, because I wanted to go to school, and I fully planned on coming back and living here for the rest of my life. Then suddenly I changed the way I thought about myself, and I realized that I hadn't deserved how I was treated by all the fellows in town, that there was nothing for me to be ashamed of for being smart and outspoken. It was your fault that you all hated me for it. And I'm happy knowing that, happier than I've ever been before," she explained.
"So why did you come back at all?" I asked.

Marianne smiled and half-shrugged. "Because I didn’t know what I wanted to do when I finished school, and because I had this strange desire to show you all how I’d changed and that you were mistaken about me, because I knew all of you would fall at my feet, because part of what changed in me when I was away was that I acquired this power of making men do that.

"But the part of me that really matters hasn’t changed at all. I still do what I like and say what I like. I just came into town, pretty now, and the boys came rushing in. You all tried to convince yourselves that because I had changed so much on the outside, I had changed on the inside too. And now you’ve discovered it’s not so, and it’s my fault, but I never tried to be something I wasn’t. I just looked good to you all now, so you believed what you wanted to believe. And I let you, because I wanted you to know that you were wrong about me and that you missed something good by overlooking me before I left."

She hurt me, to suggest I was just a pawn in her game, another suitor to grovel at her feet.

"You just wanted to show yourself off?" I asked.

She shrugged and tipped her head to one side, embarrassed. "I suppose so. None of you fellows ever had time for me before. I just wanted you to know what you’d missed," she said.

"Thanks for telling me how you feel," I said bitterly.
"Don’t be such a woman, Nick," she scolded. "You know I wouldn’t pretend to like you so well. All the others – they didn’t matter so much. They were all fun for me, even Eddie."

I put my hands in my pockets and half-turned away from her, pretending to study the Charlie Russell on the wall.

"I never planned on staying here, Nick. I didn’t come here looking for a husband, and for that I’m sorry, because I don’t want to hurt you." Her voice sounded pregnant, as if she was holding back a sob.

"Then why didn’t you tell me so before? Why did you sleep with me?" I asked, aware that I was sounding like a woman now.

"I told you I wasn’t staying here, and I also told you how I feel about sleeping with men. It was never a guarantee, a signed contract. I thought you understood that," she said.

Yes, I knew both things, but I wasn’t going to admit it to her now. Even knowing that she wouldn’t marry me, I had nursed the hope that she would do what women were supposed to do: fall in love and change their minds.

I kept my eyes on the painting, a brownscape of a cowboy displaying trinkets to an angry-looking Indian brave, while a young woman stood demurely to the side, her leather dress falling from one shoulder.

"I hate that thing," Marianne had told me once, "but Daddy won’t move it. It’s disgusting."
“Now I’ve got my satisfaction, and I’m ready to leave,” she continued. “And I’m sorry, Nick, I really am. I hope you find someone you’ll be happy with. Lord knows it wouldn’t be me.”

I left her house soon after. When I stood with her at the front door, listening absently to her saying goodbye, I had pulled her close to me, tried to kiss her, but she slipped out of my embrace and opened the door for me to leave. I went back to the office because the leases had to get done, so I worked on them diligently until ten that night, smoking cigarettes and barking at anyone who tried to talk to me.

Cut Bank is a small town, and only because of this fact did I ever see Marianne after that, at a few parties and a couple of times at restaurants. We were always with some other person, but I wasn’t jealous of her escorts. She had told me she didn’t take the courtship of local swains seriously, and I had no choice but to believe her, because I never knew her to be insincere. I always felt awkward when she saw me with another woman because I only went with them to maintain my dignity. Already the town declared that Marianne Coleridge had tired of me, discovered I was an uneducated, dirty oil man, and thrown me over for farmers’ and ranchers’ sons who had something to offer her.

Marianne left town at the end of May, too early for her to see Glacier again; I guess her hatred of us outweighed her love for the mountains’ pristine beauty. The day she boarded her train, I was at the station, waiting again for my college friend, who was arriving for his annual visit. The crowd of admirers that had first formed around her last year was still there, following her to the train like ducklings after their mother. She paid them no heed this time, walking arm-in-arm with her father. She cried as he embraced
her and said goodbye, tears smeared across her fair cheek, visible under the veil that covered the top half of her face. If anything, she was sad to leave him.

"Now that's a pretty girl," I heard someone, from out of town, say as he caught sight of her. "Too pretty to be hidden away in a town like this."

Brother, I thought, you have no idea.