

Tares among the Wheat, by H. Melvin James

Volume Two, Chapter 1, Simple Joy

“Look, Marjorie, Amelia’s eyes are watering! Could that be a sign that she has an eye infection?”

Nurse Wellford turned her attention from Mrs. Ecker and stepped over to Amelia’s bed. “No, Barbara, her eyes were clear and her cheeks were dry when I checked on her just twenty minutes ago. It’s more likely that she’s been crying. I’ll note that on her chart. That’s another positive indication of her progress. It’s good to see that her tear ducts are functioning. It is also significant that she has been imagining things that move her to cry. Perhaps her eyes have begun to hydrate naturally again. We’ll need to keep checking and administer eyes drops if necessary, but this is a good sign. Crying is good for the eyes as well as good for the soul. I wonder what would have caused her to cry.”

Amelia’s eyes opened, and she looked at one nurse and then at the other.

“She just woke up, Barbara! Oh, I must go to check on Mrs. Thayer now. Carry on with your duties here.”

After Mrs. Wellford stepped away, Nurse Radford looked into Amy’s eyes as she dabbed her cheeks with a tissue. “Good evening, Amelia. I believe that you were crying just a moment ago. Were you crying because of a bad dream?”

Amy tried but failed to speak, so she blinked her eyelids twice.

“No? Okay, were you crying because of something you overheard? Hmm...also no. Did someone tell you something that made your cry?

Yes! But who would’ve told you something sad tonight?”

Amy forced her eyes to dart left and right.

“Was someone here? Talking to you? Yes! Was it Beatrice or your son? Or Sheriff Covington? No. Was it a doctor or a nurse? Hmm, yes and no. Who could that have been?”

The young nurse was inquiring cheerfully and a bit teasingly. She was enjoying the “guessing game” conduct of their conversation. “You must have been dreaming, Amelia, because there have been no aides or helpers in this wing since four o’clock this afternoon. So you see, you have nothing to cry about. It was only a dream.”

Amy ceased to manipulate her eyes and eyelids, allowing those muscles to relax as her mood also relaxed.

The nurse continued with her routine of measuring and noting vital signs, and then she began to exercise Amy’s lifeless arms. “Amelia! Did I feel your arm resist my pull, just a little? There, you pulled your arm back just slightly ahead of my push! You are moving your arm!”

Nurse Wellford had left Julia Thayer's room, one door down the hall, and was returning to the nurse's station when she passed by Amy's room. Hearing the young nurse's excited talk, Marjorie stepped in. The young nurse looked up at her senior and exclaimed with the excitement of a young girl having just received a pleasing surprise.

"Amelia has shown some ability in her arm! I know I felt it!"

The older nurse smiled, hoping that it was true, but always careful to confirm, validate, and be certain, she had to see for herself. "When I tell you, Amelia, will you try to push your arm against mine? Yes. Okay. Now. Very good, Amelia. Now, keep trying as hard as you can and we will see about your left arm, your legs, and your neck.

Okay. Yes. Wonderful."

The two nurses were gleeful as they recorded that the patient had discernable willful muscle resistance in her right arm and both legs. They witnessed Amelia's rapid eye blinking as a sign that she, too, was happy.

"I will make a special note to tell the day nurses of this good news. They should make certain that Dr. Edwards, or Dr. Hendricks, if he should come by, is informed, in case they don't consult Amelia's chart. And everyone who comes to visit Amelia will want to know also. Amelia, you should try to go back to sleep again, Amelia. You will have a strenuous day tomorrow. I expect Dr. Edwards will double up on your exercise routines. No more lazily lying around all the days anymore, Amelia."

Amy was elated. But it was frustrating to be so helpless to express her joy. In her normal state, she would have laughed, shouted, or sung a song verse while clapping her hands or dancing a few steps. Having to feel emotions without expression produced a strange mood that seemed to dampen and weigh down the buoyancy of the happiness she felt. It was exceptionally unnatural for Amy to hide her feelings, whether it was trying to keep secret a surprise or pretending not to be affected by a hurtful remark. Now, in a quiet and darkened room, the time to have cheered and danced expired, her mind settled into pleasant thoughts about how hard she would work to regain all her abilities sooner and better than any of her doctors, nurses, or loved ones could have imagined. As she fell back to sleep, Amy was anxious for the new day.

"Are you there, Unole? I seem to have again awakened in the middle of the night, and I do so hate to just lie here in silence and darkness."

Seconds later, Unole responded, "Yes, child, I am by your side. And I know you have displayed another of a series of progressive indications of your recovery. As I told you before, you are certain to recover and to recover fully. You have only now to keep up your courage and your confidence."

"Your story of my great-grandmother Hattie barely surviving giving birth to my grandfather Lexington made me cry, Unole. Then I was awakened by the nurses, and I looked but you were gone. The nurses discussed that no one had been in my room before they entered, so they suspected I was merely dreaming. Are you a nurse or a doctor, Unole? Oh, but you must be a psychologist. You did tell me that your purpose was to keep my mind and my heart engaged while I was in this coma. But I am gradually coming out of my paralysis now. Isn't that wonderful, Unole?"

"Yes, Amelia. It is a miracle, one not to be taken for granted or as trivial. Too often the blessings of miracles are overlooked or underappreciated."

"Yes, Unole, a miracle, and one for which I'm thankful to the Lord. Now, Unole, tell me, was the doctor able to save Hattie? Did she recover?"

There was no hospital in Rogersville in those early days of the pioneer town's development. The doctor shouted at Ardal, directing him to fetch the widow Caveness as quickly as possible. "She practiced midwifery back in Illinois, and I need her to assist me. Tell her to come in her sleeping gown. There is no time to waste. She lives upstairs above the shoe cobbler shop. Now hurry."

Gypie heard the doctor's orders and was holding the reins of her mule, Jere, for Ardal to ride.

As Ardal coaxed the mule into a clumsy run, a jittery quick step that could not be compared to a horse's gallop, Gypie turned her attention back to the dimly lit and quiet house. Unable to do anything, she returned to prayers for her beloved friend Hattie. Then Gypie thought of their mutual friend Ebba. She lived but diagonally across the next block. If the doctor needed one woman's help, he could well do with the help of two.

Still at the peak of her illness, Gypie could feel and hear her heart beating rapidly, pulsing in her ears, as her head seemed to swim like an empty jug in a streaming river. She was cold with sweat as she stepped down from Hattie's porch, trying to keep her balance despite her dizziness, trying to make her legs move despite her weakness. Somehow, although the world seemed bizarre, as if she were hallucinating, Gypie managed to get to Ebba's door and explain the crisis to Ebba and her husband before she collapsed on their porch.

An unknown time later, Gypie awoke, still feverish, to find herself in the Bergstrom home, lying on their davenport. Ebba was holding a glass of water, telling her to sit up and drink. When Gypie sat up, Ebba filled a teaspoon with white powder from a brown bottle.

"The doctor gave this to me and told me to give you a teaspoon of the powder every four hours. It will make you feel better."

As Gypie took the medicine and washed it down, Ebba continued to talk. "Our dear Hattie is recovering. The baby is perfect. He is fit and strong, a man-child. The doctor stopped Hattie's bleeding, but she almost died from loss of blood. Minister Murray's wife is with her now. I came home to see about you and to change my clothes. It was good that you came for me. The doctor sent Lauris back here for lanterns to make more light for his surgery.

The doctor had a difficult time. He and Mrs. Caveness worked all through the night. Ruptured blood vessels had to be sewn or seared. The baby was just too big for such a petite woman."

Gypie translated the abstract meaning of every word Ebba spoke into her own vivid emotion. She would not interrupt with questions until all was first heard. Now Ebba was forcing a cup of hot tea to Gypie's lips. "Hattie will need a lot of care. The doctor said she will need spoon-fed lots of liquids, nourishing soups, teas with sugar and cream, milk, raw eggs, extracted fruit and vegetable juices, as much as she will take until she has the stomach for solid foods. So, dear Nefreta, you need to get well soon, so you can help. And you will stay right here until you are well. Lauris has taken your mule back to your barn, leading him behind his buggy. He planned to ask one of your neighbors to feed and water your mules until you got home."

Ebba, Mrs. Murray, and two other women, wives of Ardal's fellow mill workers, all consorted to care for Hattie every hour of the day and night.

Ardal sent a telegram to Hattie's father, Calvin, and then he sent the same telegram to his sister Brianna. He abbreviated the telegram messages as a matter of form, to save costs as well as to not waste the resource with any but relevant words. In his hurried and worried state of mind, Ardal had neglected to make the telegram subtle: "Hattie near death, stop. Baby boy fine, stop. Need help, stop."

Unable to find a priest and desperate to seek God's help for his Hattie, Ardal consulted with Gypie. Gypie suggested that he talk with Mrs. Murray's husband. "He is a Protestant minister, but he answers to the same God as your Catholic priests." Not being a devout Catholic, Ardal had little reservation. He found the pastor in the church, polishing the pulpit. Together they prayed for Hattie and the baby and, finally, for Ardal himself.

The temporary encouragement Ardal gained from the one-time prayers eroded with each passing day of Hattie's chronic fragile condition. In time, the only words he recalled no longer held any consolation, abstracted from the verse "Woe besets the man with enough goodness to suffer guilt, but insufficiently devout to avoid the sins that beget guilt and lacking the faith to shed his guilt through Christ's redemption." Ardal remembered the sermon only as, "Decent enough to feel guilty but not faithful enough to overcome its agony."

Three days later, Brianna arrived, not with compassion and sympathy, but with an air of disgust. She had endured two days and nights of uncomfortable seating on the hard wooden benches of train cars traveling and depots waiting, all the time mulling over in her mind how Ardal must have somehow been personally responsible for the tragedy.

Brianna thought to herself, repeatedly turning the thoughts over in her mind. This calamity of Ardal's may have cost me the promotion that I was due. It is preposterous that I should have to step away from my important bookkeeping work at the lumber mill and travel to the crude Western frontier, the edge of civilization confronting wilderness. But I had no choice. Lockie could not leave a house full of children, even though she is nearly worried out of her mind. My brother Ardal's blithe attitude must have been the cause of this trouble.

No sooner had Ardal helped her step down from the passenger car than she began to accost him. She continued her verbal assault while the porter fetched her wardrobe trunk, and she did not let up until she entered Hattie's front door.

"It was reckless and foolhardy of you, Ardal, dragging such a fragile young girl across the wilderness and into this savage land! And long before that, I tried to tell you that taboos against the marriage of first cousins were rooted in reason. Now this is what your vulgar act against nature has wrought. Neither you nor anyone else knows what may yet come of it. The poor baby may mature into a moron, an epileptic, a bleeder, or something to be revealed later, now known only to heaven. And if the trouble were not from the inbreeding, then from which of your foul vices might you have contracted a disease that inflicted innocent young Hattie?"

Ardal was conflicted. When he first offered his hand to assist Brianna to step down from the passenger car, he was both pleased and relieved to see her. He had been worried, bewildered, and troubled since the problematic birth. Three sleepless nights and three agonizing days had worn his spirit. He had held on to hope for the arrival of his good and smart and righteous sister. "My big sister will help set everything right," Ardal had repeatedly said to himself in despair.

As Brianna berated him, Ardal was void of either the spirit or the confidence to argue with her. Shameful and head bowed, he passively accepted each of Brianna's scolding remarks as deserved punishment. Further killing Ardal's spirit to defend himself, Brianna had not accused him of any sin that he had not already tortured himself to recount many times over. That litany of iniquities would haunt Ardal for the remainder of his life.

Brianna gave Hattie only enough consideration to determine that she was too sick to carry on conversation. Then Brianna turned her attention to the baby. Ebba had just washed the baby's rump and

laid him on a clean diaper when Brianna rudely took him up from his crib. She inspected him as if he were a plucked and gutted turkey being considered for Christmas dinner.

Hattie looked sadly upon the two through glassy eyes, their once sapphire blue drained pale, like the bleached sky of a hot, arid summer day.

To everyone's surprise, Lockie arrived by train the next day. She explained, "While I was reflecting on my reasoning for staying home—that is, to not leave seven children without their mother in order to be with one child—I was reminded of a verse in the book of Luke. It is the verse about a shepherd leaving his flock of ninety-nine sheep to search for just one that was lost. So, realizing the wisdom of God's Word and, at the same time, acquiescing to my nagging heart, I decided to come to my first child's side. My good neighbors are taking care of Hattie's brothers and sisters when Calvin is away at work."

Lockie did not admit to anyone, not even to herself, that she had felt a sinister twinge even before the telegram arrived. Her doldrums had since mounted to become undeniable. Calvin recognized Lockie's despair, and he understood, perhaps more so than she did, for in Lockie's anxious state, her emotions supplanted her self-awareness.

During the long, arduous hours of the rail journey, Lockie mixed meandering thoughts, prayers, and memories. She wondered if she should finally tell Hattie that she and Ardal were not blood relatives. *I would only tell my daughter of my secret if she feared there was something wrong with her baby as a result of her conceiving a child with her presumed first cousin. Otherwise, she does not need anything else to cause her concern, to learn that she was a bastard child and to discover that the man she loves and adores as her father is a pretender. Damage to my daughter's spirits would only further harm her health. Especially while she is ill, Hattie should not learn that her mother committed adultery and then kept the dark secret all these years. It was essentially the same as lying to Hattie for these seventeen years and lying also by hiding the truth from Brianna and Ardal. Maybe I will tell Hattie when she is a grandmother herself. But then again, why should she ever know?*

Soon after Lockie's arrival, Brianna decided that she and Lockie could provide all the help that Hattie needed. That day was Nefreta's first visit to Hattie after getting over her "Italian influence" disease, *la influenza*. It was Nefreta's first opportunity to see the new baby and to give a loving touch to Hattie's hand and cheek.

While Lockie was spoon-feeding Hattie, Brianna took Ebba and Nefreta aside and dismissed them from further help. In further disregard for their feelings, Brianna also told them not to come by to visit. "The mother and child need peace and quiet."

Ebba was admonished to relay Brianna's decree to the other three women who had been helping to care for Hattie and the baby. Although Brianna had expressed no gratitude, Ebba insinuated to the other ladies that the family was very grateful for their devoted help. The gracious ladies were nevertheless hurt and saddened to be restricted from even looking in on the baby. Initially, they had volunteered out of a sense of charity, but soon they came to love the young mother and her adorable baby. Now apart, they felt the full extent of severing that attachment.

After the first week of regimented care under Brianna's strict supervision, and with Lockie's loving encouragement, that which only a mother can give, Hattie improved marginally. She gained enough strength to get out of bed, dress, and walk across the room between sitting, lounging, and dozing.

Ardal noticed that Hattie worked hard to pretend stronger than she was. Hattie was concerned that her mother needed to return to her seven other children and their father. Hattie was also concerned, especially given the constant complaining, that Brianna would lose her job, or at least be reduced from her hard-earned position, at the Khoury Company.

When Ardal returned from the depot after seeing Brianna and Lockie on their way home, he found Hattie collapsed on her bed. She had exhausted herself in order to act as if she were strong enough to allow her mother and sister-in-law to leave. For the first time since his baby was born, Ardal had his little family to himself. He warmed the vegetable stew that Lockie had made the night before, and he made a pot of coffee. Hattie preferred tea, but Ardal believed coffee would do her more good. Stronger than tea, coffee was Western America's favorite, a betterment over the Anglo's weaker tea, much as the Western American preference for heartier beef over mutton, poultry, or pork.

Hattie ate most of her bowl of stew, but she only took one sip of the coffee. Then she lay down, as feebly as if she were a hundred years old. In a voice as faint as a child's whisper, she asked Ardal to bring the baby to her. The baby suckled and fell asleep only seconds before its mother. Quietly and gently, Ardal picked up his son, still wrapped in his blanket, and laid him back in his crib.

With the house warm and the mother and child fed and sleeping, Ardal checked to make sure there was nothing near the stove to catch afire, and then he ran to Lauris and Ebba's house. Ardal needed to be on his job early the next morning, regardless of Lauris downplaying the importance, and he did not want Hattie and the baby to be alone all day.

Before Ebba could open the door wide and ask Ardal to enter, he was boyishly blurting out his plea for her to reorganize the ladies' care for Hattie. Somehow, with only a few words and with no more than

her hand on Ardal's forearm, Ebba consoled and reassured Ardal. Lauris would take Ebba in the buggy, first to tell Nefreta, and then to the houses of the other three women. One of the women would come to care for Hattie and the baby at six o'clock the next morning.

The caring ladies brought home canned and store-bought canned vegetables to make soups for Hattie. As Hattie graduated to digesting solid foods, broths became stews of beef and chicken, but regardless of the dish, each meal included generous helpings of several nourishing vegetables. When Hattie thought she had eaten her fill and that her shriveled little stomach could hold no more, she was presented with an irresistible dessert of easily digestible fruits, applesauce, strawberries, cherries, pears, or peaches cooked delicately to soften, sweetened with sugar or syrup and whipped into heavy cream. She was then persuaded to eat at least just one more bite.

"Tis that last extra bite that makes a healthy woman fat and a weak woman strong," the minister's wife added for humor.

"Hattie's health is progressing, but slower than an oak sapling grows," Nefreta described with frustrated emotions of both hope and fear.

But Hattie gradually became stronger. Color returned to her pallid flesh, and light again glowed within her blue eyes, but her sublimity was not as before, not as when she glowed in vitality and beauty as a fertile young woman ripe for the harvest, or even more differential, when her radiance was that of an expectant young mother filled with love and sprouting a new life within.

The doctor and all who cared for her suspected there was something more seriously affecting Hattie than simply her recovery from a difficult childbirth and the loss of blood.

One evening soon after Brianna and Lockie left for home, the doctor made another house call to check on Hattie and the baby. Afterward, the physician took out a piece of paper. Satisfied that the baby had a healthy start in life, the doctor would draft a certificate of live birth.

He asked a dozen questions, full names of mother and father, dates of birth, and so forth. Finally, he asked what the baby's name was to be. He needed to complete the certificate and submit it to the territorial government for recording and filing.

After Ardal announced the baby's name, the doctor looked at Hattie. Without expending precious strength to try to sit up in her bed and physically assault Ardal, Hattie vehemently expressed her disapproval. Hattie protested strongly, even though her voice was meek and her physical motions were restrained, "Ardal dear, I cannot allow you to give our perfect baby a name that would make him a laughingstock. 'Rifle Bullet' might be a suitable name for a dumb animal, but not for any blessed child of ours."

The doctor waited patiently, still holding his pencil while Hattie and Ardal juggled words and names about. Finally, the mother and father compromised and Hattie informed the smiling doctor, "Our son's name will be Lexington Rifle McClary."

The doctor folded the paper and placed it in his coat pocket behind his fountain pen. "That is as fine a name as any I have heard."

"Lexi" was indeed, as many oft claimed, "a most happy and healthy baby as any on this side of the Mississippi," and, as Lauris extended, "and all the way farther west, to the river's other side." He was, of course, inferring the remainder of the earth's circumference.

The baby was everyone's joy and, certainly not in the least, Hattie's most effective medicine and beneficial nourishment. Few babies had more admirers. The "McClary baby" was as much of a common passing conversation about town as the weather. Ardal was radiant with pride and quick to brag about his strong, handsome, and smart son.

Any man offering an ear to Ardal was compelled to listen to the new father's exaggerated stories. Ardal bragged about the baby's exceptional strength, as exhibited in clutching his father's little finger, or his quick mind and reactions, expressed in his anticipation of each peekaboo. "Obviously, the child is extraordinarily smart and strong," was Ardal's determined final words.

Nefreta, too, had bragging rights as the child's godmother, but she graciously shared her royalty with "reserve" godmother Ebba. Not to be omitted, Lauris immediately claimed title as godfather.

Lauris never told a soul, but he felt guilty for having taken Ardal to the tavern that fateful night that Hattie gave birth alone. He cursed himself for not insisting that Ardal go directly home, or for not taking Ardal home in the buggy to make sure he was there with Hattie. Lauris was also troubled in recalling a nagging sensation he felt that evening. He felt that something was amiss, but he shrugged it off as he hurried home.

For the childless Lauris, Ebba, and Nefreta, the baby was especially cherished. They each imagined themselves participating, at least in minor ways, in the child's growing years. Nefreta envisioned herself answering a young lad's innumerable questions about the world around him and the universe overhead, from caterpillars to meteor showers.

Ebba planned to bake delicious treats, cookies, cakes, and pies that she could take to the McClarys as excuses to visit. *When he is old enough, she planned, I will give him money to paint my picket fence or to rake the leaves from the trees we planted. Those little saplings will grow into shade trees as he grows into a young man. If he does chores for me, I will give him cookies and milk and he can tell me about his schoolwork and about anything that makes him happy or sad.*

Lauris had ideas too. *I will invite Ardal and the boy to go fishing with me, and rabbit-hunting, often perhaps every two or three Sunday afternoons.* Lauris reasoned that he and Ardal would need to keep the boy toughened up a little to compensate for the expected “extensive ruinous influence of too many mothering women.”

Lauris wondered how old the boy would need to be before he could go fishing. He decided that a fishing line and pole would be an excellent gift for the boy on his third birthday. *Hunting and a small-caliber rifle would need to wait until the lad was seven or eight years old,* reasoned Lauris.

As Christmas approached, Hattie’s meager gains in strength and stamina plateaued and then began to waver.

Nefreta was first to notice that Hattie’s condition had set in to become chronic. Just a month earlier, Nefreta rejoiced when her prayers were answered and Hattie was rescued from the first death of mortals.

But as soon as Nefreta felt assured that God had granted her request, she allowed her prayers to slip comfortably into an impassionate routine, just another daily chore. Now she repented for her negligence, asked to be forgiven, and prayed with renewed passion. She prayed at length, subconsciously clenching her teeth together until her jaws ached while clutching her hands together until her knuckles stung with pain. Surely, few Christians prayed as sincerely and determinedly as Nefreta.

Nefreta mocked herself. “How bitterly regretful! The arrogant and skillful Gypsy medicine woman has no exotic cure for her dearest friend. At the time in my life when I most desperately need a remedy to prescribe, my mind and my hands are both empty. I cannot even recognize this strange affliction that has beset my dear friend Hattie.”

Other than praying, Gypie only conceived of two means to help Hattie, and neither was spectacular. The doctor approved of Gypie’s treatment, but how could he not? He had no diagnosis, no prognosis, and no further treatment to offer. He had admitted to Ardal that he had done all that he could, that Hattie might just start improving again any day, but by the same token, her condition could also deteriorate.

He believed, however, that if she at least remained stable through the winter, the springtime would surely spawn a recovery. Ardal confided the doctor’s expressed reservations to Gypie and Ebba. Thus, Gypie sought the doctor’s approval for her obvious two treatments, first, continuing to see that Hattie was well nourished and cared for and, second, trying to keep Hattie’s spirits high and joyful. Ardal, Ebba, Gypie, and the three other volunteer care-women conspired to redouble their efforts in these simple

treatments, and each, regardless of their differences in faith, was outspoken about contributing their prayers for Hattie's sake.

With everyone trying their best, including Hattie, the patient remained essentially stable. On her best days, Hattie could get out of bed, dress herself, walk across the room, and sit. Miraculously, Hattie's mammary glands continued to produce milk. She could nurse her baby while lying in bed. Hattie was too weak to pick up her baby, but she could hold him if she was sitting down, and he was placed in her arms. Hattie loved to hold her baby and murmur a lullaby as she gently rocked him in the big oak rocking chair, a gift provided by the baby's proud godfather.

One afternoon, Lauris abruptly and noisily banged through the front door with the heavy rocker. Ebba was there to scold him severely for his barbaric intrusion, a reprimand delivered without raising her voice.

The baby stirred but did not awake, but Hattie did. The next day, Ebba came with a set of hand-sewn cushions for the chair, one for the back and one for the seat, each complete with straps to tie in bows to the chair's rails and frame.

Hattie's ailment was not the only detractor to the baby-brought bliss. As winter droned on, Little Lex suffered colic and various other ordinary torments of the cruel world outside the womb, nasal congestion, diarrhea, and diaper rash.

Sometimes the baby simply cried of no apparent cause, but as one of the two mothers among the volunteers excused, "Sometimes we don't know why they cry. We can only make sure there is nothing else we should do for them and then patiently wait for their happiness to return. We must also be careful not to teach them to cry just to get attention."

The caring women discovered that sometimes, if Ardal was home, the baby would immediately quiet down when placed in the cradle of either one of Ardal's big arms. Once quieted, Little Lex either fell asleep looking up at his daddy or he commenced to coo and slobber on his own tiny, fisted fingers.

Ardal was delighted if he could make the baby smile, grunt, burp, or coo, and so he made faces and funny sounds continually until the baby fell asleep or began getting fidgety, tiring of his daddy's teasing.

Hattie's closeness to the baby was different, as nature designed, flesh against flesh, nursing and cuddling. Their communion was more solemn and gentle. Baby Lex seemed to recognize each of his parents, interacting quite differently than with others. The baby usually enjoyed being held and entertained by anyone, but when he was held by Ardal or Hattie, a precious intimacy ensued.

The baby knew his nursing mother, smelling of milk, soft body, gentle, and tender sounding. And he knew his adoring father, smelling of many curious odors, some objectionable, firm body, slightly clumsy and rough, and gruff sounding.

As if Mother Nature were also concerned for Hattie, that winter was less severe than normal, and as only the natives knew, that winter was tremendously less savage than it could have been as an aberration. But if the mild winter was the result of nature's compassion for mankind, its consideration was more likely for the sum total of tens of thousands of new pioneers, the homesteaders, who faced winter with great trepidation, having only makeshift shacks or dugouts to shelter themselves. But even the marginally mild winter entailed many consecutive days of freezing temperatures.

Those extended cold spells necessitated a continual fire in the coal stove of the McClary home. Thus, the stove was repeatedly refueled, stoked, grated, and cleared of ashes. The windows and doors of the house were kept closed, and rugs were tucked against door thresholds to seal against outside air.

One January morning, several days into a monotonous cold spell, for the first time since her faint recovery from death the month before, Hattie did not get up from her bed. When Nefreta arrived early that morning to relieve the minister's wife, she found Hattie feverish and breathing with difficulty, wheezing with each hot breath. For this compound ailment, both Gypie and the doctor were quick to diagnose and agree. Hattie had pneumonia.

Hattie felt helpless. Her ailing body seemed to have wandered away from her spirit. She wanted to command her body to embolden itself, to fight its diseases with determination and put an end to this pacification. As a queen sending a declaration throughout the land, she dispatched thoughts to command her mortal flesh. I demand that every ounce of my blood and every part of my body destroy whatever ails me so that I can get on with my life, to care for my husband and to raise my child. My healing shall begin immediately with no reservations. I command thee.

By the end of next day, Hattie's stubborn will seemed to have retreated from the battle. Her mind drifted through feverish nightmares even while she was awake, trying to concentrate on reality over imaginings. She tried to identify the faces of those around her, but her eyes were blurred in sweat and tears. She listened to comprehend the voices, but the words echoed and distorted in the rushing and ringing sounds in her ears. When she attempted to speak, murmurs were all she could muster. Efforts to move, even so little as to raise her hand, only twitched her fingers.

After another day, Hattie's fever subsided enough for her conscious self to reemerge. She managed to whisper softly, "No," when asked if she was cold, and, "Yes," to an offer for a drink of water.

Ardal lifted her frail upper body while Ebba stacked pillows between her back and the bed's headboard, propping Hattie up.

Nefreta brought some of her special tea and a bowl of chicken broth. Both were spoon-fed to Hattie. She managed to swallow several spoonful's of each and then whispered, "Baby."

Although the town's one doctor was also new to the area, as were more than nine of every ten people, he believed that cases of pneumonia were exceptionally high for the homesteaders for this, their first winter. That winter came upon these settlers of the Cherokee Strip only a few weeks after they raced to stake their claims. Thus, the high incidence rate of pneumonia in this doctor's community might have been due to the pioneers' being ill prepared with makeshift cold and drafty shacks, insufficient fuel stockpiles for heating, cooking, and laundering, inadequate food supplies, lacking means and facilities for personal hygiene, or perhaps worst of all, living in damp, dark, and dusty dugouts.

The doctor had been treating a dozen or more pneumonia patients that winter, and hoping to bolster his success, he had read as many subject medical articles as he could find. The good doctor had accepted the notion that a newborn acquired much of its strength and resistance to disease from its mother's milk. His readings had convinced him that it was more beneficial for the baby to continue nursing even though the mother was ill than to try to switch the baby to another milk that would not include disease resistance.

Furthermore, he concluded, babies often refused other milks and subsequently suffered from less nourishment intake. Then, too, he believed, the routine experience of nursing provided health benefits for both, mother and baby, derived mysteriously from their intimacy. Thus, the doctor had advised continued nursing until Hattie's fever raged.

During that day and night, Hattie's caregivers tried to get the baby to suckle a bottle fitted with a rubber artificial nipple. They tried to get the baby to accept goat milk, and after that failed, they tried again with whole cow milk. Lastly, they tried adding a teaspoon of honey, but no substitute pleased baby Lex.

Now, with Hattie having asked for her baby, Ardal was delighted to lay the warm, squiggling bundle at his wife's side. Still a shy young woman, Hattie tried feebly to pull the blanket up to cover her chest. Ardal took her frail hand in his palm, and with his thumb and trigger finger, he gripped the edge of the blanket to draw it and her hand up to her chin, just over their son's fuzzy big round head.

Ebba and Nefreta retreated to the chairs at the table to give the little family a degree of privacy. Ardal loosely embraced Hattie, kissed her forehead, and felt the unrelenting fever. He turned his cheek against

the top of her head, closed his eyes, and made a prayer of emotion, without a word being so much as whispered or even thought.

When Ardal returned his attention to Hattie, he could see the baby nursing. Despite her weakness, Hattie had managed to pull down the neck of her sleeping gown and lift the baby up to her teat. Now she had one hand at the baby's back and the other behind his head. Her eyes were closed. Ardal sat back in the chair, allowing Hattie to dwell in bliss with her baby. For Ardal, just to gaze upon his wife as she nursed their baby, not saying a word to her or making a touch, was more than enough emotion for that moment.

The precious moment did not long last, however. The baby fidgeted and began to cry. Hattie opened her eyes and looked into her husband's face. Her expression was frightful and peculiar, suggesting a mood that Ardal could only guess to interpret. She was perhaps frustrated to be so helpless, hurt that her baby seemed to dislike her milk, and together with those feelings, surely she was depressed for not being well and strong enough to simply enjoy normality with her baby and her husband.

Ardal's intuition of Hattie's disposition was closer to truth than either knew. At that moment, Hattie felt everything her husband imagined, but multiples deeper and with a dozen other emotions as well, mixed too complexly to understand, fear, sadness, regret, a touch of anger, and a wellspring of love.

As her baby cried at her rib cage, Hattie, now too weak to cradle and comfort him, complained silently, *Why, Lord, why can I not have the simple joy of my husband and my baby as you allow for multitudes of women all over the world, rich and poor, righteous and wicked? Am I not worthy? Have I been so sinful to deserve this suffering?*

Hattie felt the baby's weight lift from the nest of her arm and side. The crying reduced to whimpers as Ardal's rumbling vocal chords hummed, void of melody, like drawing the bow across the open strings of a cello. Soon the baby burped, as guttural and loud as a baby many weeks older could. "Our little man must have been so hungry that he gulped more air than milk. I think he now wants his mother again."

Hattie managed a smile, but she could only lie motionlessly as her husband gently placed the baby against her side and her naked breast, mouth first to her nipple. Then Ardal slowly lowered the bundled boy against his mother, moving Hattie's limp arm under the baby, and tucked tufts of the blanket to better cradle the baby against her side. The baby had already found the nipple and was sucking anxiously, making tiny noises that confirmed his feeding.

Again at peace, Hattie prayed and gave thanks for her baby and for all her blessings. Then she asked forgiveness for complaining earlier rather than humbly praying for mercy.

When the baby fell asleep, Ardal moved him to his crib near the bed. With the onset of cold weather, the bed and the baby crib were all moved from the one bedroom to the main room of the house, the biggest room of the three, the room that held the heat stove, the cooking stove, the dining table, and the porcelain sink. The third room was a small front-room parlor.

While Hattie was still sitting, propped up, Nefreta gently coaxed her to take sips of tea and a few more soup spoons of chicken broth. Then, although she had spent most of the day sleeping, she closed her eyes.

For a moment, Ebba, Nefreta, and Ardal were motionless and silent, observing and listening, as Hattie's labored wheezing breaths were the only sound in the world. Then, while Nefreta carted the cup and bowl, still nearly full, to the kitchen counter, Ardal and Ebba gently removed the stacked pillows, lowered Hattie's upper torso to the mattress, and rearranged her bedding. Ardal refilled the big pot of water on the coal stove, keeping it evaporating to provide moisture in the air, as the doctor had advised.

The window of the small front room was opened by two inches, also as the doctor ordered, to allow some fresh air. The cold air entered the house far enough from Hattie's bed that she would not feel a draft. A bit more coal was needed to offset the cold air inlet, but that was a small price for anything that might help Hattie's cure.

Nefreta returned from the sink with a damp cloth and used it to cool Hattie's warm face and neck, then left it draped across her fevered forehead. As darkness crept in through the windows, the three of them sat without talking, listening to Hattie's precarious breaths, praying silently, remembering, hoping, and fearing. Some unaccounted moments later, Hattie moaned and whimpered, causing Ardal, Nefreta, and Ebba to leap to their feet and lean over her bed. Ebba turned to the lamp table and raised the wick on the coal oil lantern. The room filled with soft amber light, as if sunrise had just flooded through an east window. Hattie whispered, "Ardal..." softly trailing her voice as in lullaby. Ardal moved his face close to hers. "Yes, my dear Hattie. What is it?"

Hattie's words were as faint as an autumn breeze through a pine tree bough. "Take... good... care... of... our son." Ardal had only begun to reply before he saw Hattie's mouth try to speak further. Spaced within inaudible, hushed sounds and motions of her lips that formed no sound, a single word in a tone so rich with feeling that only an angel could have spoken it was heard distinctively by Ardal: "Love..."

Then she smiled slightly, weakly, but sufficient to cause Ardal to remember that smile from two years ago. It was the same as her first smile for him, that one little gesture that first captivated his heart. Hattie felt satisfied to have spoken. She was comfortable now, and her heart and mind were at ease. She felt well and strong again, but she did not try to understand if she had so quickly overcome her illness or if

she had slept through it. Morning was dawning, and she was facing the brilliant light of the sun. She was standing in a pathway surrounded by indescribable peace and beauty. She was overwhelmed with happiness and contentment. She followed the path toward the sun, toward a beckoning voice, a lovingly familiar voice that she knew but did wonder to identify. With each step her elation grew; she felt like a carefree child rushing to the playground, hearing the voices of her playmates calling. And every sense of her being was transformed to joy.

After Hattie's last word, she gasped a shallow breath, abbreviated by her fluid-laden lungs. The wheezing sound from her bronchial tubes fell silent. Her face washed of expression, but her glazed eyes still looked into her husband's face. Her delicate lips were still open, as if she were about to speak or as if she anticipated a kiss. Her hair flickered with the same precious colors of gold as the lamplight. Ardal kissed her lips and buried his head into the blanket at her chest. He bawled into the blanket, tears from his eyes and nostrils, as he clutched his Hattie in his arms. He and his companions knew without question that Hattie had passed, peacefully and reconciled, without futile frantic resistance.

Sometime later, Ardal heard the baby cry. He collected his senses enough to feel a hand on his shoulder and to hear voices. Lost in his grief, he had leaned back as he cried. Still holding her tightly, Ardal had unknowingly lifted Hattie's upper body while keeping his head at her chest. As he raised his head to look again upon his wife, he saw that he was holding her up so that her head tilted far back, allowing her long waves of hair to freely drape their length. He gently let her down, hiked his right shoulder against his right eye and nose to rub the water onto his shirt, and then he did the same for his left side. Ardal collected Hattie's hands within his. There was still some warmth in the hands, and he tried to enclose it there with his.

As Ardal bowed his head and closed his eyes, he again made a prayer composed of no words spoken or even thought. He had reasoned as an adolescent and derived an idea of his own. Father O'Dell teaches that God knows every thought and feeling. So if I just feel something really hard, it is as good as a prayer. And for me, it is probably better because I do not always know the right words to say.

While Ardal prayed, Nefreta lovingly closed Hattie's eyelids and then embraced her face with both hands, silently prayed, and closed her jaw. When Ardal opened his eyes, he looked upon Hattie's face. Hers was a face of beauty undaunted by her illness, and now that beauty was enhanced with an expression of peace and a glow of holiness, as portrayed in a painting of Holy Mary in Father O'Dell's church.

Finally, a numbness crept into Ardal, as if it came from the cold floor, through his boots, and up through his bones. He had accepted reality for this moment, that Hattie had passed and there was

nothing to be done to change that. Now there was only to carry on. He rose from the bedside chair and walked to the parlor, where Ebba held his crying son. Ardal wanted to hold the baby that meant so much to Hattie, the baby that was itself much of Hattie, her blood, her flesh, and her love, still alive and still with him. "Hattie lives on, Little Lex. She lives on in you. I will cherish her in you as long as I live and until I can be with her again. I will tell you about your mother as you grow, so that you will know how wonderful she was, and I will have the joy of remembering again with each story I tell."

In the long hours that followed, Ardal remembered the jeweled brooch of his mother's lineage. He took it from the keepsake box and handed it to Ebba, asking her to take it to the funeral home to adorn Hattie in her burial clothes. "As the royal princess she truly was, despite the circumstances of her birth as a commoner. Then Saint Peter will immediately know that a fine lady is entering through the gate, even before the crier announces her name," Ardal explained solemnly and too seriously for anyone to argue.

Watching as Ebba wrapped the brooch in her handkerchief and tucked it into her purse, Gypie recalled the words of a wise European statesman. "Badges and pendants, emblems for the impressionable, from heathen to king, priest to sheriff, from earthly man's beginning and to his end." Then she remembered an acquaintance of many years ago and her hawking cry, a ditty to sell her trinkets, "Badges of honor, power and beauty, wear to instill love, fear or duty."

The day following Hattie's diagnosis of pneumonia, Ardal had dutifully, although reluctantly, again sent telegraph messages back to Kentucky, one addressed to Hattie's father and one to his sister. As if Brianna expected the worst, she was already traveling west to Rogersville when Hattie died. She arrived the day after Hattie's passing, behaving more indignantly than sympathetically.

Nefreta and Ebba had already made all the funeral arrangements and consulted in every detail with Ardal, limited to the extent that they could distract him from his agonizing grief. The two women had also derived means to ensure the baby's continual care. Nefreta and Ebba acquired fresh goat milk from a farm near town. The milk was rich and nourishing, but Lexi was unwilling to accept it. They had already conceived of an alternative, whole milk from a Jersey cow, rich in butterfat. Lexi eventually accepted the Jersey milk, but he frowned while he nursed the artificial nipple on the end of the hard glass bottle. It was obvious that he missed nursing his soft, warm mother while hearing her heart beating in whichever ear was against her chest.

The women planned and dreamed for baby Lex to have an abundance of love and care all the days and into the nights, until well after Ardal's getting home from his work each day and well before he left in the mornings. With love and devotion, everything from Hattie's funeral through baby Lexington's care, until he would begin elementary schooling and beyond, was carefully planned and discussed with Ardal.

Nefreta and Ebba were self-sworn, even unto God, to see that Hattie's baby was lavished with care, attention, and love. Setting aside their more mature and learned perspective on the afterlife, they shared their imagination of Hattie observing from her place in heaven and being pleased with them for looking after her baby and Ardal too.

Hattie was buried in a new cemetery. The nondescript patch of prairie grass hosted the remains of only six others. A small woodframe church was being constructed that day, just a strong stone's throw from the graveyard. The hammering stopped, and despite the bitter cold that morning, the carpenters stood like statues, holding their hats in their hands.

When the final rites were completed, the funeral party, appearing at a distance as a single huge black organism, turned and moved as a group away from the grave. The gravediggers immediately began shoveling the heavy, hard clods of frozen black soil into the earth's open wound, slamming like stones noisily onto the coffin, resounding like a slow drumbeat of erratic rhythm, indelibly impressing into the memory cells of the caring among those present.

Congregating at the railroad house, the funeral party found the dining table and kitchen countertops crowded with bowls and platters filled with food of every fashion and form. But Ardal, ironically a man of enormous appetite and love of food, remained so grieved and beside himself that he just stood in a stupor, staring at the floor or at nothing at all.

Like a bashful primary school student prompted by his teacher to recite, Ardal was finally coaxed by Nefreta to permit the crowd to begin the luncheon. In a voice void of inflection, Ardal managed words before a quiet and patient audience. "I thank everyone for the food and for all you...if you will, Parson, give us grace for the meal and then, please, everyone, help yourselves." Then Ardal stood motionless, again succumbed to the spell wrought by the ghost of grief. As soon as the minister pronounced "Amen," the chattering and shuffling of three dozen people began. There soon followed the familiar clinks and clanks of china, tin, and pewter.

It was not the din of the crowd but Brianna's abrupt shout in his ear that again brought Ardal out of his trance. She pulled his sleeve and led him into the bedroom. Nefreta was there, holding and coaxing Lexi to nurse the bottle between fits of fussing and fidgeting.

"I have something to tell you, Ardal. And you will not like what I am going to say." Then Brianna looked over at Nefreta, who had turned her head toward her and Ardal. Nefreta looked both stunned and sorrowful, as if she were witnessing something horrible transpiring and she were helpless to avoid it.

"This conversation only concerns my brother and me. Oh well! That woman might as well stay, since she is feeding the baby."

Ebba had observed Brianna leading Ardal into the bedroom. She looked on and judged from their facial expressions that Brianna had spoken something harsh and that had upset Nefreta. Ebba had been courteously standing back from the table while others crowded in and helped themselves to the food. Having not so much as a cup in her hand, she was able to pass through the meandering crowd and step quickly into the bedroom.

Turning to see Ebba enter the room, Brianna looked toward the ceiling and fluttered her eyelids. "Well! I did not expect we would have such an audience. Ardal, please tell this woman to leave. One Gypsy listening to our private conversation is all I can tolerate."

Ardal had been standing, slumped in every bone joint from neck to ankles. He quickly straightened his posture and glared at his sister. "These two ladies were the dearest of friends to Hattie. These women worked tirelessly feeding and caring for Hattie and the baby, and me, all the while Hattie lay sick and suffering. Hattie loved these women, and anyone good enough for my Hattie is more than good enough for me. Anything you have to say to me, these good souls are welcome to hear. You cannot hurt or shame me to feel any worse than I feel now. So, say your words, Brianna, then kindly leave my house."

"Very well, then, brother of mine. They can stay and listen, but they are not to speak." Brianna stepped aside and turned so she could face her three opponents. She wanted the satisfaction of seeing that she had their attention and to assess their reaction. Subconsciously, she also wanted to project her mood, smug and unrelenting. "I am informing you that I will depart from your wretched little town on the day following tomorrow. And when I go, I will take the baby with me."

Brianna raised her voice and continued immediately, as to dissuade any interruption. "I have already secured all the necessary documents. My attorney obtained sworn affidavits and secured a court order. Telegrams were dispatched from Waterville to Rogersville and the territorial governor's office. This envelope of papers is for you and your attorney, should you hire a counselor. A hearing has been scheduled for two o'clock tomorrow afternoon. The envelope contains copies of the documents that I am required to give to you. But I will tell you now, there is nothing you can do to prevent me from taking the baby. You will see in the sworn testimonies that a number of people told the court of your drunkenness, Ardal, engaging in brawls, bankruptcy, gambling, and consorting with Gypsies.

"You have not had a permanent home since you married, gallivanting around the continent with your unfortunate and vulnerable young bride. Because of your vagrancy, you have not a chance of keeping this baby to raise on your own. The baby's own grandmother and grandfather have given sworn statements. They have granted to me any claims to the child they may have under the law. And they recommend to the court that I raise their grandchild."

Ardal was numb with grief for the loss of his Hattie, but Brianna's words cut through the shroud to inflict even more torture to his suffering soul. His heart was wounded, screaming in pain, and his mind was offended, crazed to retaliate. But with the two masters of his fate contending for his voice, his retort to Brianna issued as slurred and stammered, as if he were intoxicated. "He...he is my son, and no, you cannot take him. Hattie gave him to me. He is all that I have now."

"Oh, Ardal! Come to your senses! You are even less able to care for an infant than you were able to care for a young bride. The courts recognized that since you have not resided in any one city or state long enough to establish residency, the jurisdiction for this child's custody remains in Kentucky. The hearing here tomorrow is simply a formality to comply with ensuring you are given notice and to physically transfer the baby to my custody. There is nothing more to say. I will see you in court tomorrow. And do not do anything stupid, or you will be in trouble with the law in addition to all other of your problems."

After Brianna left, Gypie suggested to Ardal that he should talk to Mr. Glover, the local attorney that had processed her land title. "He seemed to be a nice young man, and smart too. And you recall that he did not charge a lot of money for his work."

With a speck of hope, like a penny left to bet against a ten-dollar pot, Ardal took the big manila envelope in hand, stepped quickly through the crowd of visitors, and went directly to the lawyer's office. Gypie followed closely behind, having to take two rapid steps to each one of Ardal's. Ebba thoughtfully remained to attend to the baby and host the company.

The lawyer was considerate and thoughtful. He carefully perused each piece of paper, making marks with his pencil here and there and writing notes in short phrases on a tablet. When he finished reading through the papers, he calmly began asking Ardal of incidences reported of his behavior.

Ardal complained that in one instance he was not drunk but instead had been drugged and assaulted at the horse race. Even at that, the lawyer pointed out, he admitted to being engaged in illegal gambling. There was little in the testimonies that could be disputed; Ardal had indeed moved about, taking his young bride from town to town, from state to state. He had gone bankrupt. He did damage Mr. Khoury's desk, damage that later caused bodily injury to Mr. Khoury. He did engage in a brawl in the lumber storage yard. And so on. Finding each claim essentially incontestable, Ardal could feel his penny of hope turn to a grain of sand.

"Mr. McClary, did you receive a special letter several days ago?" Ardal looked bewildered. "No, not that I recall. The last few weeks have been so...jumbled..."

The attorney patiently waited for Ardal to complete his statement, and after a moment of silence, he continued, "The letter should have been delivered to you by hand. The person delivering it would have asked you to sign a paper to verify that you received it."

Ardal then recalled having received the letter, but he sensed that incident was not going to help his predicament. He responded sadly, "I do remember a letter being delivered. I was beside myself. Hattie had just...passed. I thought the letter concerned some late unresolved business with my bankruptcy, another legal notice having to do with confiscating my property. I did not hear a word the delivery man said. I scribbled my name on the sheet. I do not know what I did with the letter."

The lawyer shrugged and grimaced. "That was your official notice of proceedings. It is of no matter now, but if you had not received it, I might have used that for an argument to delay proceedings. Your sister obviously planned everything well, or rather, her attorney was calculating. For the notice to have been delivered so soon after your wife's death, it would have been prepared ahead of time and left with a local agent who would have it delivered upon news of your wife's passing. Thus, the formality of the hearing tomorrow could be scheduled so unusually soon. Your being here in a territory, not a state within the union, and you and your wife being legal residents of Kentucky but dwelling out of state all played heavily in your sister's favor. All that she contrived may not have been forthright and considerate, but it appears to have been within the law. I do not have any Kentucky lawbooks, but I can consult various cases within the state concerning child custody. I have serious doubt that I will find any way to delay this proceeding, let alone reverse it or get a stay. But I will give it my best in the little time allowed."

Mr. Glover agreed to continue to search through the documents and look for "a leg to stand on" and then to represent Ardal in court the next day, just in case a window of opportunity should open.

Gypie searched for Ardal that next day, to make sure he was in court on time. With only minutes to spare, she finally found him, drunk and asleep in an alleyway, disheveled, unshaved, and filthy. She left Ardal there, and with tears blurring her path, she ran to the courthouse to tell Mr. Glover.

Mr. Glover explained to the judge that he was there to represent Ardal McClary and that Mr. McClary, after losing his wife and facing the loss of his son, was too distraught to attend. Gypie sat behind the banister in the visitor's section and observed the three-minute procedure performed with rapid, mechanical precision. Stoical exchanges of curious verbiage interjected with Latin words and phrases and sprinkled with disingenuous courtesies of "Your Honor," "Sir, please," and "Thank you." Only three minutes of cold, emotionless chants and a child's destiny is forever changed, Gypie thought as she stared

up at the ceiling. The judge ordered, and Ebba obeyed to bring Lexi forward and present the baby to Brianna.

Brianna confirmed the baby was indeed one Lexington Rifle McClary. The court was adjourned. Gypie and Ebba had prepared for an outcome they feared but could not bear to contemplate. They had carefully washed and lovingly folded and packed every piece of the baby's wardrobe, blue knit booties and matching mittens, bibs, two caps with floppy ear covers, blankets, and three sleeping gowns. After the hearing, in the hallway of the courthouse, they begged for Brianna's attention for a moment and pleaded with her to take the baby's things with her, for the baby's sake.

Brianna finally agreed to take the baby's things. "Since you both are so insistent and only then because you have already packed the lot." But when they offered to send the highchair and the crib, Brianna scoffed and refused adamantly. She would not hear another word.

After the train departed, Ebba went home to fret in peace. Gypie set out to again search for Ardal. She found him in the corner of a tavern, passed out, face down on a rickety table.

In the days that followed, Ardal's boss, Lauris, attempted daily to sober Ardal up with coffee and frank talk. He wanted to get him back to work, hoping that would give him a measure of new purpose, allow him to rebuild self-respect, and forestall him from a drunkard's early grave.

Finally, after weeks of determined effort, and with the help of Ebba, Gypie, and Minister Murray, Ardal compromised with the stubborn world; he would work half-days, after lunch, six days a week.

Lauris moved Ardal into one of two rooms above the cobbler's shop. The old widow, Mrs. Caveness, the former midwife, lived in the second room. She and Ardal shared an outhouse in the alley behind the shop. Mrs. Caveness agreed to get Ardal up and around, six days a week, at eleven each morning, if he had not already risen. If Ardal was still sleeping deeply after a night of heavy drinking, she would douse him with water or spank him with a broom. Most often, her screeching voice was quite enough to rouse Ardal.

The widow gave Ardal strong hot coffee and lunch each of those six days and then made sure he was down the stairsteps and off to work by noon.

Mrs. Caveness and her late husband came to the Indian territory more than a year prior to the land run. Mr. Caveness was a shoe cobbler. Their covered wagon served as a traveling shoe-cobbler business with a home attached. They traveled to settlements, Indian agencies, and Army posts to repair shoes, boots, and all things fabricated of animal hides. When not engaged in mending, they used their time to fashion all sorts of goods comprised of horse hide, leather, sheepskin, pigskin, or buckskin.

When the Cherokee Strip opened for settlement, the Caveness couple made claim for a commercial lot on the main street. Using the money they had earned through hard work and saved through frugality, they constructed the cobbler shop with living quarters upstairs. It was one of the town's first completed structures among the many storefront tents.

Sadly, six weeks after they moved in, the cobbler died of heart failure. Fortunately, the widow soon found a young man willing to learn the shoe-cobbling trade and work for meager wages as a novice. Mrs. Caveness showed him everything she knew, and that was enough for a handy lad to begin learning on his own. The young man earned his wages and a few dollars more for the widow, just enough to keep the shop operating and the widow an extra dollar or two away from the poor farm.

Lauris made the arrangements for Ardal to reside above the cobbler's shop. The old widow moved everything she needed into one room and rented the other room to Ardal, or, rather, to Lauris. Lauris paid Mrs. Caveness each month ahead for Ardal's room, one meal for Ardal six days a week, and his laundry.

Ardal's six half-day's work barely accounted for Lauris's payments to the widow, but Lauris gave him a small amount of additional cash each week. Ardal could then afford to buy a cigar and a drink now and then. He could only drink excessively by hocking something, winning at gambling, or being favored by a generous fellow at the tavern.

Unfortunately, in Lauris's opinion, those circumstances providing for his excess drinking happened all too often. With each week, Ardal was becoming more addicted to alcohol. He began drinking to numb the hurt of Hattie's death, to forget the shame of having his son taken from him, and to stop the nagging voices of guilt blaming him alone for everything that had gone wrong. At some degree of his decline into the caverns of addiction, the old torments became subservient to the new tyrant, the overpowering need for alcohol.

Perpetual drunkenness was not relieving. The original sufferings were rendered no less; they were simply outranked. With Ardal nearly out of his mind with grief and depression, Ebba and Gypie were left with the sad task of sorting and dispositioning the items remaining in the railroad house. The two women, themselves grieving for Hattie's death, the baby being taken away, and Ardal's suffering, found the task painful and disturbing.

Gypie, having allowed Hattie into her hermit heart, was brought to tears when particular items gave her cause to recall a precious moment with Hattie or the baby. Gypie felt her delicate and gentle spirit lingering still in Hattie's garments. Holding a kettle or a teacup elicited memories of Hattie's delight for her company, her love of conversation, and her appreciation of friendship. And with every scent, sight,

or touch of the baby's items, his subtle grunts and sounding cries seemed to emanate from entanglement amid wooden spindles and fluffy blankets.

Analogous to the angel of death's deed, having sorted and separated mother, father, and child, Nefreta's solemn task of sorting their meager belongings seemed a cruel mimic, tearing apart the remnants of their existence, ultimately to leave no trace of their lives there in that little cottage.

After sorting out the few items that Ardal could utilize as a bachelor, heart-wrenching decisions were made, item per item, as to what should be done with each. Ebba and Nefreta agreed that Hattie's outer garments could not be given to charity, not ripped into rags, and not burned in a rubbish fire.

Thus, Ebba volunteered to store the big camel-back trunk in her attic. Anything they could not bear to burn, donate, or salvage was placed in the big trunk. Perhaps one day Ardal would want to reclaim the trunk and enjoy the memories it held. Or maybe Hattie's mother would want the trunk of items to be sent to her. Ebba would write her a letter to ask.

With Ebba's insistence, Gypie took the baby crib and highchair back to her cottage and placed them in a vacant corner of her front room. She covered them with a bedsheet to subdue the heartbreak of imagining Hattie's baby as he slept in his crib or, as he would have been later, sitting in his highchair and getting more of his food on himself and his platter than in his mouth.

The gilded and silvered ceramic Madonna was still on the wall above the bedstead. Gypie donated it to Reverend Murray's church, where it was proudly displayed on the wall behind the pulpit. Ebba had Lauris take the rocking chair back to their house. She placed it in the corner of the spare bedroom because her heart sank each time she looked at it. On rainy days, when she felt blue, she would sit in the chair, rock slowly, hum the same lullaby she hummed to the baby, and cry.

Everything else of Hattie's household, pots, pans, utensils, and all that a home requires, was given to a group of ladies who were organizing an aid society for destitute families. Stepping out of the empty house and closing the door was the last painful little chore. The door closed not only against a doorframe but also against a small point in the infinity of time, marking the end of a short-lived composite of love.

If Hattie's spirit returned for one last look upon her husband and their baby, she would only find a cold, empty house, Gypie thought as she stepped down from the porch. But for all I have been told and for all I have witnessed, it is only the confused souls that dwell on earth, lost between heaven and hell. This old Gypsy knows for certain that Hattie's good soul is at peace and joy with our Savior.