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# Steam Talk

by Jeanne Mackin

Her mother stood in front of the east kitchen window, a summer dawn throwing fire into her grey hair. The kitchen was already thick with heat and humidity and the greasy smell of breakfast.

“Morning, Mattie. Sleep well?”

“Yes, m’am.” Mattie hopped from the last step onto the barewood floor, a habit begun in childhood and not yet broken though she was a big girl of fifteen with eyebrows like strokes of tar and a grown woman’s basket-wide hips.

“Well, then. Sit and eat. You must be famished.” Her mother broke stale bread into a bowl and slopped scalded milk over it. She hesitated a moment, then sprinkled a heaping tablespoon of sugar over the bread and milk. That was how Mattie knew it was to be a special day.

The tea kettle on the hob hissed. SSSSS. Special, maybe, but it never finished the word. It never did.

“Eat up,” her ma said. “I’ll get the coffee.”

“Shoulda been ready by now,” Pa grumbled, pulling out his chair and sitting heavily. He was wiry and his wife and daughter were unceasingly surprised by the way his small frame could make chairs groan and floors creak. “Pass the bacon, daughter.” He hitched his thumbs through his suspenders, drawing Mattie’s eyes to the blotched yellow underarm stains on his longjohns.

The first hard choice of a long summer day: to look at him, or to look at the fried meat. She closed her eyes and thought of field daises dipping their white heads in a soft breeze.

“Bacon,” her father growled.

Mattie held her breath when she passed him the plate of still-sizzling bacon. She was careful not to let her thumb or forefinger get near the meat. If her hand got greased she might forget and lick it off. That had happened once, and she had been ill for a week after. Easter week it had been, and the house smelling of ham day after day, till the bone was finally bare and washed clean in a broth for soup. She’d never been so sick.

Her father took the plate and purposely handled it in such a way that strips of the hot flesh bumped against his fingers and palms. Mattie watched, and her throat closed against the bread and milk.

“Saddle,” she said loudly, picking at a round red scab on her arm.

“What, Mattie?” asked Ma. “Stop picking.”

“Saddle. The teapot is trying to say saddle, I think. Once it gets past that hiss, I’m sure it will be saying saddle.”

Pa looked stormy and slammed the plate on the table. When it first began his daughter’s strangeness scared him; now it was just one more thing gone wrong and like all things gone wrong it angered him.

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**M**a's look was deeper. She'd born and delivered eight children; six lived past infancy. Mattie was the last one still at home. Clara Samson supposed the odds were at least one of the six would turn out not right in the head, so she wasn't bitter. Surprised, perhaps. Mattie had been a bright child, learned her alphabet and numbers faster than any of the others. But all that bright quickness had taken a wrong turn, and now here was Mattie claiming that the teakettle was going to say 'saddle.'

Yesterday it had been Samaritan. "Though that's a difficult one, probably," Maddie had admitted, picking at a fresh scab on her leg. "And it has a funny smell to it, like a rotten apple."

The day before the kettle had been trying to say sore and before that skunk and before that scale, Sabbath, sheet, sickle, every day a new word that began with a hiss.

"Eat your breakfast, Mattie," her mother said, "We're taking a trip today." She wiped her hands on her apron, an apron so hard used that its print of violets had faded into a blur of blue and grey. She lifted the tea kettle off the hob so that its hiss turned to a sputter, then a sigh, then silence.

"Where to?" Mattie picked at an invisible speck in her bread and milk, pretending there was a fly in it so she wouldn't have to eat it.

"Up the west side of the lake. To a pretty place called Willard. Want some more sugar in that, Mattie? Some more hot milk? You've got to eat breakfast, today."

"No, ma'am. The mush is fine. Sweet. Maybe that's what the kettle was going to say."

Pa grabbed at more bacon. He ate a slice in two bites, crunching and chewing with a fierceness that made Mattie dizzy. When he turned the page of the newspaper he left huge rings of transparency where the grease soaked through, she could see the outline of his face through the rings, his long nose, the beard that began on his razor cheekbones and bristled greyly to the third button on his longjohns. He looked like the God of the Israelites, who put them in bondage to Pharoah, except for those longjohns.

"I want some hot tea," Mattie said. "Put the kettle back on, Ma, please."

"No." She slammed a coffee cup against the table. "It weren't going to say saddle, Mattie, and it weren't going to say sweet. It weren't going to say anything." Her mother's instinct grabbed at one more chance. One last time she hoped Mattie would look at her in that old bright way and laugh and say, "I know that! I was just funning you." But Mattie looked longingly at the tea kettle, she fretted with the ribbon bow at the top of her sleep gown, her thin fingers making certain it was tied tight.

Clara turned and looked out the window, at the pond where the ducks and chickens scratched and waddled next to the lightening scorched tree. No time to look for eggs this morning. Let the chickens keep them, for all the good a new clutch of hatchlings would do them. What a weary business, this birthing of new generations, only to see them fester.

"Now go up and pack your travel case, Mattie. Be sure and take your hairbrush. And teddy."

"Yes, Ma."

"Mattie."

"Yes, Ma?"

"Nothing. Go pack your things. You want to look nice today, so put on your Sunday dress."

Pa flinched behind his paper when she said that. He hadn't been to Sunday service in two years, not

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since the lightning strike.

It had been a full moon July night, near two in the morning, with clouds coming and going and electricity in the breeze. Heat pressed against the earth like an iron making the fields shimmer. Mattie had been awake-dreaming out her window of the new dress she was sewing for the harvest dance, and how it might feel to have the boy from the next farm over take her by the hand and swing her so hard her skirts tilted. Then a bolt came from the heavens, so close it filled her vision for a terrifying second of blindness and when she could see again a huge limb from the oak was blackened and smoldering, and the water in the pond was steaming. A ribbon of light skipped over it like a bright stone skipping over water. Before that she hadn't seen that stones and lightning are kin.

"Mattie!" her father had yelled. "The cows have broken through the fence. Come on!" He was in the hall, in his longjohns, and hop-stepping into his trousers in his hurry. She had almost laughed, but then he had looked up and their eyes locked and her smile ended quick as it had begun.

Father and Mother and Mattie and Eugene – Eugene hadn't joined up yet, hadn't died of the Spanish influenza in the army hospital -- had spent the night tracking down the terrified cows. Mattie came home at dawn and went to her bed without saying a word.

Once, Clara had referred to that night, had said to her husband right in front of Mattie, "You haven't crossed the church threshold since the cows broke out. Are you afraid, John?"

He had hit her, a loud slap on the face that turned her in a semi-circle before she could catch her balance. Now, no one talked of that night, of the smoldering tree and the seared pond and Mattie's wrong turn in her head.

Upstairs, still tight in the throat from the smell of bacon, Mattie found a carpetbag in the sewing room, turned it upside down, emptying it of scraps of calico and spools of thread. In her bedroom, she folded up her sleep gown, her seven changes of linen, her white kid gloves with the strawberry stains on them. She packed her toothbrush and hair brush, her bible, a little ribbon-tied package of letters from Eugene who was dead and her sister Hazel, married in Virginia. She packed the white paper doily Valentines she had received in the Februarys of her school years, and the sewing kit with the gold-headed needle from her grandma Samson, and the little gilt-edged volume of *Sonnets From the Portuguese* with the dried daisy heads making dents in the pages, and her diary, only half-filled, stopped two years before not because there was nothing to say but because there was too much and the words kept running away from her like panicked cows. She packed the green ribbon she wore in her hair for Christmas service and the violet ribbons she wore for Easter.

Then, she knelt beside her bed and peered under its faded blue skirt, looking for dustballs. She found a large one, big as her fist with threads and seeds mixed into the grey fluff. She put this in the carpetbag, on top of the ribbons. She tore a strip of wallpaper from behind her dresser and pried a sliver from the wide planking of the floor.

"Sally?" she said aloud. "Seminary? Sleigh? Shun? Shroud, Spew, squabble, sire, simple, soldier, sun, soft, soup, spike," all the steaming words of a life grown dazed and slow and thick. She stopped often to pick at a scab hidden in her thick hair, where her mother couldn't find it and heal it with the pork fat ointment that she scented with lavender to pretend it had come from a finer source.

When she came back downstairs, Ma was dressed in her black Sunday dress with the little black rosette she wore for mourning Eugene pinned to her right shoulder. Pa had the old horse and cart hitched out front. There was a picnic hamper loaded next to him, on the front seat, the greasy smell of fried chicken seeping from it.

"It's a longish drive. Climb up, Mattie." For the first time, Pa sounded sorry. But there was no hissing steam in his sorry so she knew it was a lie.

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He cracked the whip and the sway-backed mare whinnied in protest, but then began the long pulling, the first strain always the greatest, the cart and the picnic hamper and the mother, father, daughter, and heavy carpetbag fighting against the mare's aged muscles till finally the horse won and the cart creaked, swayed and the wheels turned. Mattie twisted around to look at the shadblow bush, the shame place, where the leaves fell deep in the autumn over her son, who had lived for one hour, the winter after the lightning strike. The neighbors said it had been a blessing that god had called him back so soon, the shame of a child like that and Mattie not naming the father.

"I'll take care of the grave," Mattie's mother said.

"Safe!" Mattie said. "That's what the tea kettle was going to say."

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**Jeanne Mackin** is the author of several novels: [The Sweet By and By](#), [Dreams of Empire](#), [The Queen's War](#), and [The Frenchwoman](#). Writing as Anna Maclean she is author of the Louisa May Alcott mystery trilogy (NAL). She is also the author of the [Cornell Book of Herbs and Edible Flowers](#) and co-editor of [The Norton Book of Love](#). She was the recipient of a creative writing fellowship from the American Antiquarian Society and her journalism has won awards from the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, in Washington, D.C. She teaches creative writing at Goddard College, Plainfield, VT.

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