

Noy Holland
from *Milk River*

Their fathers had taken to calling them *Mother*.

They had brothers in the war; mothers dead. They had lockets of hair in their lockers at school; trouble at school; chores.

They filled pillow-sacks with pole-beans. The girls milked and pickled and doctored and cooked and kept the hotrod running they were too young yet to drive. Still, they drove it, nights, on the county roads, the headlights off, throwing back a veil of dust.

They would marry men from faraway places.

They would find where Crazy Horse lay. The white man came like water then— Blixruds and Wenderoths, Crarys and Dahls and Otters. Coming, coming, coming. Yellow dust in the Black Hills. Red Cloud, He Dog. Looking Glass and Sitting Bull. The girls had studied them all in school.

“You’re a pretty smart cookie, for a cookie,” Franny said.

Hoka hey, she said. *Wasichu*.

In the dusk of the month of the sinking grass, the girls lay in the fields where the wheat grew. They dribbled dirt on each other’s faces. The dirt was silver, amended, a chemical ash.

The night was warm. The fields were shorn. Chickadees fattened upon them. The girls lay on their backs against the stubble of wheat, the sheared-off hollow pegs, dispersing their weight as they had been schooled to do when caught on ice that is breaking.

Crazy Horse had not been crazy, they knew. He was touched. He had been laid to rest, left for the birds. Crazy Horse was near and far. His blood ran in the birds, in the

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antelope; it ran in the fish of the river. They had found a cloth he wore. They found his tooth in the silt of the river, one summer when the water warmed.

When the water warmed, the story goes, when their mothers carried the girls in their bellies, two fine feathers, glossy and black, came to them on the wind. Which is to say: their babies would be girls. They would keep to home when the wars began, when their brothers leaned from the windows of the car, tossed out their kisses, and waved. Good boys, gallant, each with a foot in the grave.

The boys had written for months to their mothers, who were dead. Now the boys wrote to their sisters. They sent them treasures: a broken shoelace, a dimpled stone. The cellophane wing of a locust. For every boy in their town who had fallen, they sent a pinch of dust. *Be good to Poppy*, they wrote. *Feed the dogs*.

The dogs, too, had fallen—the one dog mauled in the thresher, another gone by in sleep. The girls' brothers knew nothing of this; the girls kept the news to themselves. For months, they kept the news of their mothers from the boys: they sent only news of the living, the newly living, the pups and calves and foals.

They kept--in a coffee can--in a time capsule—every last little thing their brothers sent them. They kept the key to the hotrod there, and a scrap of hair or feather or hide of anything slaughtered or fallen. They kept pictures of girls—goofy mall shots—their brothers had kissed and sworn themselves to. If they married, these girls, or rode out to the buttes with boys too young to enlist, too crippled or scared, the sisters would burn their pictures. They would push tacks into the faces of dolls they had named for their brothers' sweethearts, and bury the dolls in the barn.

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Their mothers had died days away from one another, days the cold made jewels of the snow. Their mothers had been girls together. They dressed up in the ruffled dresses of the pioneer women before them and rode their ponies sidesaddle through the door of the one-room school. They roped gophers, and shot them through with arrows, and sawed off their tails as an offering to the chiefs they mostly loved. They loved the peaceable chiefs and the savage, the deliriums they could dizzy to when they spun in the remnant tepee rings on the bluffs above the milky river. They gave thanks in the four directions, from which the white horse and the dappled surged, the red horse of the springtime rains, the black of the east loping six-by-six over the darkening plain. They were girls. They would come to be wives together--too soon. Too late to marry Looking Glass. Too late to marry Mort Clark, wavy-haired golden boy, blasted out of a cloudless sky in the last world war.

“I’m him,” Franny said, “I’m Mort Clark—“ her mother’s love, high school days, a golden boy, she’d seen pictures. Franny rolled across the stubble of wheat and kissed Magdalena without knowing she would on her open mouth.

“You poor, poor boy,” said Magdalena.

“Franny,” Franny said, and her throat burned. She was Mort Clark speaking to her mother. She was a girl in a field in autumn. She said, “Nothing ever happened to me. Nothing ever will.”