



Idyll in the Desert, William Faulkner

Idyll in the Desert

Random House, December 1931

I

“It would take me four days to make my route. I would leave Blizzard on a Monday and get to Painter’s about sundown and spend the night. The next night I would make Ten Sleep and then turn and go back across the mesa. The third night I would camp, and on Thursday night I would be home again.”

“Didn’t you ever get lonesome?” I said.

“Well, a fellow hauling government mail, government property. You hear tell of these old desert rats getting cracked in the head. But did you ever hear of a soldier getting that way? Even a West Pointer, a fellow out of the cities, that never was out of hollering distance of a hundred people before in his life, let him be out on a scout by himself for six months, even.

Because that West Pointer, he’s like me; he ain’t riding alone. He’s got Uncle Sam right there to talk to whenever he feels like talking: Washington and the big cities full of folks, and all that that means to a man, like what Saint Peter and the Holy Church of Rome used to mean to them old priests, when them Spanish Bishops would come riding

across the mesa on a mule, surrounded by the ghostly hosts of Heaven with harder hitting guns than them old Sharpshoes even, because the pore aboriginee that got shot with them heavenly bolts, they never even saw the shooting, let alone the gun. And then I carry a rifle, and there's always the chance of an antelope and once I killed a mountain sheep without even getting out of the buckboard."

"Was it a big one?" I said.

"Sure. I was coming around a shoulder of the canyon just about sunset. The sun was just above the rim, shining right in my face. So I saw these two sheep just under the rim. I could see their horns and tails against the sky, but I couldn't see the sheep for the sunset.

I could see a set of horns, I could make out a pair of hindquarters, but because of the sun I couldn't make out if them sheep were on this side of the rim or just beyond it. And I didn't have time to get closer. I just pulled the team up and throwed up my rifle and put a bullet about two foot back of them horns and another bullet about three foot ahead of them hindquarters and jumped out of the blackboard running."

"Did you get both of them?" I said.

"No. I just got one. But he had two bullets in him; one back of the fore leg and the other right under the hind leg."

"Oh," I said.

"Yes. Them bullets was five foot apart."

"That's a good story," I said.

“It was a good sheep. But what was I talking about? I talk so little that, when I mislay a subject, I have to stop and hunt for it. I was talking about being lonesome, wasn’t I? There wouldn’t hardly a winter pass without I would have at least one passenger on the up or down trip, even if it wasn’t anybody but one of Painter’s hands, done rode his horse down to Blizzard with forty dollars in his pocket, to leave his horse at Blizzard and go down to Juarez and bust the bank with that forty dollars by Christmas day and come back and maybe set up with Painter for his range boss, provided if Painter was honest and industrious and worked hard. They’d always ride back up to Painter’s with me along about New Year’s.”

“What about their horses?” I said.

“What horses?”

“The ones they rode down to Blizzard and left there.”

“Oh. Them horses would belong to Matt Lewis by that time. Matt runs the livery stable.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Yes. Matt says he don’t know what to do. He said he kept on hoping that maybe this polo would take the country like Mah-Jong done a while back. But now he says he reckons he’ll have to start him a glue factory. But what was I talking about?”

“You talk so seldom,” I said. “Was it about getting lonesome?”

“Oh yes. And then I’d have these lungers. That would be a passenger a week for two weeks.”

“Would they come in pairs?”

“No. It would be the same one. I’d take him up one week and leave him, and the next week I’d bring him back down to make the east bound train. I reckon the air up at Sivgut was a little too stiff for eastern lungs.”

“Sivgut?” I said.

“Sure. Siv. One of them things they strain the meal through back east at Santone and Washinton. Siv.”

“Oh. Siv. Yes. Sivgut. What is that?”

“It’s a house we built. A good house. They kept on coming here, getting off at Blizzard, passing Phoenix where there is what you might call back east at Santone and Washinton a dude lung-ranch. They’d pass that and come on to Blizzard: a peaked-looking fellow in his Sunday clothes, with his eyes closed and his skin the color of sandpaper, and a fat wife from one of them eastern corn counties, telling how they wanted too much at Phoenix so they come on to Blizzard because they don’t think a set of eastern wore-out lungs is worth what the folks in Phoenix wanted.

Or maybe it would be vice versa, with the wife with a sand-colored face with a couple of red spots on it like the children had been spending a wet Sunday with some scraps of red paper and a pot of glue while she was asleep, and her still asleep but not too much asleep to put in her opinion about how much folks in Phoenix thought loway lungs was worth on the hoof. So we built Sivgut for them. The Blizzard Chamber of Commerce did it, with two bunks and a week’s grub, because it takes me a week to get up there again and bring them back down to make the Phoenix train. It’s a good camp. We named it Sivgut because of the view.

On a clear day you can see clean down into Mexico. Did I tell you about the day when that last revolution broke out in Mexico? Well, one day — it was a Tuesday, about ten o'clock in the morning — I got there and the lunger was out in front, staring off to the south with his hand shading his eyes. 'It's a cloud of dust,' he says. 'Look at it.' I looked. 'That's curious,' I said. 'It can't be a rodeo or I'd heard about it. And it can't be a sandstorm,' I said, 'because it's too big and staying in one place.' I went on and got back to Blizzard on Thursday. Then I learned about this new revolution down in Mexico. Broke out Tuesday just before sundown, they told me."

"I thought you said you saw that dust at ten o'clock," I said.

"Sure. But things happen so fast down there in Mexico that that dust started rising the night before to get out of the way of—"

"Don't tell about that," I said. "Tell about Sivgut."

"All right. I'd get up to Sivgut on Tuesday morning. At first she'd be in the door, or maybe out in front of the cabin, looking down the trail for me. But after that sometimes I would drive right up to the door and stop the team and say 'Hello' and the house still as vacant as the day it was built."

"A woman," I said.

"Yes. She stayed on, after he got well and left. She stayed on."

"She must have liked the country."

“I guess not. I don’t guess any of them liked the country. Would you like a country you were just using to get well from a sickness you were ashamed for your friends to know you had?”

“I see.” I said. “He got well first. Why didn’t he wait until his wife got well too?”

“I guess he never had time to wait. I guess he figgered there was a right smart lot for him to do yet back yonder, being a young fellow, and like he had just got out of jail after a long time.”

“That’s less reason than ever for him to leave his wife sick.”

“He didn’t know she was sick. That she had it too.”

“Didn’t know?” I said.

“You take a sick fellow, a young fellow at that, without no ties to speak of, having to come and live for two years in a place where there ain’t a traffic light in four hundred miles; where there ain’t nothing but quiet and sunlight and them durn stars staring him in the face all night long. You couldn’t expect him to pay much mind to somebody that never done nothing but cook his food and chop his firewood and haul his water in a tin bucket from a spring three quarters of a mile away to wash him in like he was a baby. So when he got well, I don’t reckon he could be blamed for not noticing that she had one more burden herself, especially if that burden wasn’t nothing but a few little old bugs.”

“I don’t know what you call ties, then,” I said, “If marriage isn’t a tie.”

“Now you’re getting at it. Marriage is a tie; only, it depends some on who you are married to. You know what my private opinion is, after having watched them for about ten years, once a week on a Tuesday,

as well as carrying a letter or a telegram back and forth between them and the railroad?"

"What is your private opinion?"

"It's my private opinion, based on evidence though not hidebound; I was never a opinionated man; that they wasn't married to one another a-tall."

"What do you consider evidence?"

"Well, a letter to me from a fellow back east that did claim to be her husband might be considered as evidence. What do you think?"

"Did you kill this sheep with one shot or with two," I said.

"Sho, now," the mail rider said.

II

"This fellow got off the west bound train one morning about ten years ago. He didn't look like a lunger, maybe because he didn't have but one grip. Usually it's too late already when they come here. Usually the doctor has told them they haven't got but a month more, or maybe six months. Yet they'll get off that west bound train sometimes with everything but the cook stove. I've noticed that taking trouble just to get through the world is about the hardest habit of all to break. Owning things.

I know folks right now that would hold up a train bound for heaven while they telephoned back home for the cook to run and bring them something which, not having ever had any use for it at home, they had done forgot. They could live in a house on earth with it for years

without even knowing where it was, but just try to get them to start to heaven without taking it along.

“He didn’t look like a lunger. He didn’t look concerned enough. You take them, even while they are sitting on the baggage truck with their eyes shut while the wife is arguing with anybody in sight that her husband’s lungs ain’t worth as much as western folks seem to think, and they look concerned. They are right there, where it is going on. They don’t care who knows that they are the most interested parties present. Like a man on horseback that’s swallowed a dynamite cap and a sharp rock at the same time.

“But him. His name was Darrel, Darrel Howes. Maybe House. She called him Dorry. He just got off the train with his one grip and stood on our platform and sneered at it, the mountains, the space, at the Lord God Himself that watches a man here like a man might watch a bug, a ant.

“ ‘Our station ain’t much,’ I says. ‘You’ll have to give us a little time. We only been working on this country about two hundred years and we ain’t got it finished yet.’

“He looked at me, a tall fellow in clothes that hadn’t never seen as far west as Santone even, before he brought them. What the pitchure magazines would call a dook, maybe. ‘That’s all right with me,’ he says. ‘I don’t intend to look at any of it longer than I can help.’

“ ‘Help yourself,’ I said. ‘They’ll tell you in Washinton it belongs to you too.’

“ ‘They can have my part of it back soon then,’ he says. He looked at me. ‘You’ve got a house here. A camp.’

“I understood what he meant then, what he had come for; I hadn’t never suspected it. I guess I thought he was a drummer, maybe. A perfume drummer, maybe. ‘Oh,’ I says. ‘You mean Sivgut. Sure. You want to use it?’

“That was what he wanted, standing there in his eastern clothes like a Hollywood dook, sneering. And then I knew that he was just about scared to death. After them three or four days on the train with nobody to talk to except his own inhabitants, he had just about got himself scared to death. ‘Sure,’ I said. ‘It’s a good camp. You’ll like it up there. I’m going up there today. You can go with me, if you want to look at it.

I will get you back here by Thursday night.’ He didn’t say anything. He didn’t seem to be paying any attention at all. ‘You’ll have a lot of time to listen to them little things before you die, my friend,’ I says to myself. ‘And without anybody to help you listen, neither.’ I thought that that was what it was. That he was just young (there was something about him that let you know, plain as if he had told you, that he was an only child and that his ma had been a widow since before he begun to remember; anyway, you could see that he had probably spent all his life being took care of by women, women to whom he looked like quite a figger, and here when he really needed to be took care of, he was ashamed to tell them the reason of it, and scared of himself.

I didn’t think he knew what he wanted to do or what he would do next; I thought that all he wanted was for somebody to tell him they would do this or that next, before the time come to need to do something else even. I thought he was running from himself, trying to lose himself in some crowd or in some strange surroundings where he would get lost and couldn’t keep up. I never thought different even when he asked about food. ‘We’ll find some at camp,’ I said. ‘Enough for a week.’

“ ‘You pass there every week do you?’ he said.

“ ‘Sure. Every Tuesday. I get there Tuesday morning. And Thursday night this team will be champing corn in Blizzard again.’

“The team was. I was in Blizzard too, but he was up there at Sivgut. He wasn’t standing in the door, watching me drive away, neither. He was down in the canyon behind the camp, chopping wood, and not making much of an out with the axe, neither. He gave me ten dollars, to buy him a week’s grub. ‘You can’t eat no ten dollars in a week,’ I said. ‘Five will be all you’ll want. I’ll bring it to you and you can pay me then.’ But that wouldn’t do him. When I left there, I had his five dollars.

“I didn’t buy the grub. I borrowed a buffalo robe from Matt Lewis, because the weather had changed that week and I knew it would be a cold ride for him, them two days back to town in the buckboard. He was glad to see the robe. He said the nights was getting pretty chilly, and that he would be glad to have it. So I left the mail with him and I went back to Painter’s and talked Painter out of enough grub to last him until next Tuesday. And I left him there again. He gave me another five dollars. ‘I’m making out a little better with the axe,’ he told me. ‘Don’t forget my grub, this time.’

“And I didn’t forget it. I carried it to him every Tuesday for two years, until he left. I’d see him every Tuesday, especially during that first winter that near about killed him, I’d find him laying on the cot, coughing blood, and I’d cook him up a pot of beans and cut him enough firewood to last until next Tuesday, and finally I took the telegram down to the railroad and sent it for him. It was to a Mrs. So-and-so in New York; I thought that maybe his ma had married again, and it didn’t make sense. It just said ‘I’ve two weeks more the less long than

farewell' and there wasn't any name to it. So I signed my name to it, Lucas Crump, Mail Rider, and sent it on. I paid for it, too. She got there in five days. It took her five days to get there, and ten years to leave."

"You said two years a minute ago," I said.

"That was him. He just stayed two years. I guess that first winter maybe killed his bugs, same as boll weevils back east in Texas. Anyway, he begun to set up and to chop the wood himself, so that when I'd get there about ten o'clock she'd tell me he had done been gone since sunup. And then one day, in the spring after she come there the spring before, I saw him in Blizzard. He had walked in, forty miles, and he had gained about thirty pounds and he looked hard as a range pony. I didn't see him but for a minute, because he was in a hurry. I didn't know how much of a hurry until I saw him getting onto the east bound train when it pulled out. I thought then that he was still running from himself."

"And when you found that the woman was still up there at Sivgut, what did you think then?"

"I knew that he was running from himself then," the Mail Rider said.

III

"And the woman, you said she stayed ten years."

"Sure. She just left yesterday."

"You mean that she stayed on eight years after he left?"

“She was waiting for him to come back. He never told her he wasn’t coming back. And besides, she had the bugs herself then. Maybe it was the same ones, up and moved onto a new pasture.”

“And he didn’t know it? Living right there in the same house with her, he didn’t know she was infected?”

“How know it? You reckon a fellow that’s got a dynamite cap inside him has got time to worry about whether his neighbor swallowed one too or not? And besides, she had done left a husband and two children when she got the telegram. So I reckon she felt for him to come back. I used to talk to her, that first winter when we thought he was going to die.

She was a durn sight handier with that axe than he was, and sometimes there wouldn’t be a thing for me to do when I got there.

So we would talk. She was about ten years older than him, and she told me about her husband, that was about ten years older than her, and their children. Her husband was one of these architects and she told me about how Dorry came back from this Bow and Art school in Paris and how he went to work in her husband’s office.

And I guess he was a pretty stiff lick to a woman of thirty-five and maybe better, that had a husband and a house that all run themselves too well for her to meddle with, and Dorry just twenty-five and fresh from Pareesian bowleywards and looking like a Hollywood dook to boot.

So I guess it couldn’t have been long before they had one another all steamed up to where they believed they couldn’t live until they had told her husband and his boss that love was im-perious or im-peerious

or whatever it is, and had went off to live just down the canyon from a stage settin with the extra hands all playing mouth-organs and accordions in the background.

“That would have been all right. They could have bore unreality. It was the reality they never had the courage to deny. He tried, though. She told me that she didn’t know he was sick nor where he had went to until she got our telegram. She says he just sent her a note that he was gone and to not expect him back. Then she got the telegram. ‘And there wasn’t nothing else I could do,’ she says, in a man’s flannel shirt and corduroy coat. She had fell off and she didn’t look thirty-five by five years. But I don’t reckon he noticed that. ‘There was nothing else I could do,’ she says. ‘Because his mother had just died the year before.’ ‘Sho,’ I said. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. And since she couldn’t come, you had to since he never had no grandmother nor wife nor sister nor daughter nor maid servant.’ But she wasn’t listening.

“She never listened to anything except to him in the bed or to the pot on the stove. ‘You’ve learned to cook fine,’ I told her. ‘Cook?’ she said. ‘Why not?’ I don’t guess she knew what she was eating, if she et at all, which I never saw her do. Only now and then I would make her think that she had found herself some way to get the grub done without burning it or having it taste like throwed-away cinch-leathers. I reckon though women just ain’t got time to worry much about what food tastes like. But now and then during that bad winter I’d just up and run her out of the kitchen and cook him something he needed.

“Then that next spring I saw him at the station that day, getting on the train. After that, neither of us ever mentioned him a-tall. I went up to see her next day. But we didn’t mention him; I never told her I saw him get on the train. I set out the week’s grub and I says, ‘I may come back this way tomorrow,’ not looking at her. ‘I ain’t got anything that goes

beyond Ten Sleep. So I may come back past here tomorrow on my way to Blizzard.' 'I think I have enough to last me until next Tuesday,' she says. 'Alright,' I says. 'I'll see you then.'"

"So she stayed," I said.

"Sure. She had them herself, then. She didn't tell me for some time. Sometimes it would be two months and I would not see her. Sometimes I would hear her down in the canyon with the axe, and sometimes she would speak to me out of the house, without coming to the door, and I would set the grub on the bench and wait a while. But she would not come out, and I would go on. When I saw her again, she never looked no thirty-five by twenty years. And when she left yesterday, she didn't look it by thirty-five years."

"She gave him up and left, did she?"

"I telegraphed to her husband. That was about six months after Dorry left. The husband he got here in five days, same as she did. He was a fine fellow, kind of old. But not after making no trouble. 'I'm obliged to you,' he says first thing. 'What for?' I says. 'I'm obliged to you,' he says. 'What do you think I had better do first?'

"We talked it over. We figgered he had better wait in town until I got back. I went up there. I didn't tell her he was there. I never got that far; that was the first time I ever come out and talked like there was any such thing as tomorrow. I never got far enough to tell her he was there. I came back and told him. 'Maybe next year,' I told him. 'You try then.' She still thought Dorry was coming back. Like he would be on the next train.

So the husband he went back home and I fixed the money up in an envelope and I got Manny Hughes in the postoffice to help compound a crime or whatever you do to the government, with the cancelling machine so it would look natural, and I carried it to her. 'It's registered,' I said. 'Must be a gold mine in it.'

And she took it, fake number and fake postmark and all, and opened it, looking for the letter from Dorry. Dorry, she called him; did I tell you? The only thing she seemed to mistrust about it was the only thing that was authentic. 'There's no letter,' she says. 'Maybe he was in a hurry,' I says. 'He must be pretty busy to have earned all that money in six months.'

"After that, two or three times a year I would take her one of these faked letters. Once a week I would write her husband how she was getting along, and I would take the money two or three times a year, when she would about be running out, and take the letter to her, and her opening the envelope and kind of throwing the money aside to look for the letter, and then looking at me like she believed that me or Manny had opened the envelope and taken the letter out. Maybe she believed that we did.

"I couldn't get her to eat right. Finally, about a year ago, she had to go to bed too, in the same cot, the same blankets. I telegraphed her husband and he sent a special train with one of them eastern specialists that won't look at you without you got pedigree stud papers, and we told her he was the County Health officer on his yearly rounds and that his fee was one dollar and she paid him, letting him give her change for a five dollar bill, and him looking at me.

'Go on and tell her,' I said. 'You can live a year,' he said. 'A year?' she says. 'Sure,' I says. 'That'll be plenty long. You can get here from anywhere in five days.' 'That's so,' she says. 'Do you think I ought to try to write to him? I might put it in the papers,' she said. 'I wouldn't do that,' I said. 'He's busy. If he wasn't pretty busy, he couldn't make the money he's making. Could he?' 'That's so,' she said.

"So the doctor went back to New York on his special train, and he gave the husband an earfull. I had a wire from him right off; he wanted to send the specialist back, this eastern stud doctor. But he figgered by telegraph that that wouldn't do any good, so I told my substitute he could make a good job; he could make one and a half of my pay for a year. It never done no harm to let him think he was working for one of these big eastern syndicates too, as well as the government.

And I took a bed roll and I camped out in the canyon below the cabin. We got a Injun woman to wait on her. The Injun woman couldn't talk enough of any language to tell her better than a rich man sent her to wait there. And there she waited, with me camped out in the canyon, telling her I was on my vacation, hunting sheep. That vacation lasted eight months. It took her a right smart while.

"Then I went back to town and telegraphed her husband. He telegraphed back to put her on the Los Angeles train on Wednesday, that he would go on to Los Angeles by airplane and meet the train, so we brought her down Wednesday. She was laying on a stretcher when the train come in and stopped and the engine uncoupled and went on down to the water tank. She was laying on the stretcher, waiting for them to lift her into the baggage car; me and the Injun woman had told her that the rich man had sent for her, when they come up."

“They?” I said.

“Dorry and his new wife. I forgot to tell that. News passes Blizzard about four times before it ever lights. News happens in Pittsburg, say. All right. It gets radioed, passing right over us to Los Angeles or Frisco. All right.

They put the Los Angeles and Frisco papers into the airplane and they pass right over us, going east now to Phoenix. Then they put the papers onto the fast train and the news passes us again, going west at sixty miles an hour at two A. M. And then the papers come back east on the local, and we get a chance to read them. Matt Lewis showed me the paper, about the wedding, on Tuesday. ‘You reckon this is the same Darrel House?’ he says. ‘Is the gal rich?’ I says. ‘She’s from Pittsburg,’ Matt says. ‘Then that’s the one,’ I says.

“So they were all out of the cars, stretching their legs like they do. You know these pullman trains. Folks that have lived together for four days. All know one another like a family: the millionaire, the movie queen, the bride and groom with rice still in their hair like as not.

He still never looked a day more than thirty, with this new wife holding to him with her face lowered, and the heads of them other passengers turning when they passed, the heads of the old folks remembering their honeymoons too, and of the bachelors too, thinking maybe a few of the finest thoughts they ever think about this world and the bride thinking a little too, maybe, shrinking against her husband and holding him and thinking enough to imagine herself walking along there nekkid and probably she wouldn’t take eleven dollars or even fifteen for the privilege.

They come on too, with the other passengers that would come up and pass the stretcher and glance at it and then kind of pause like a house-owner that finds a dead dog or maybe a queer-shaped piece of wood at the corner, and go on.”

“Did they go on, too?”

“That’s right. They come up and looked at her, with the gal kind of shrinking off against her husband and holding him, with her eyes wide, and Dorry looking down at her and going on, and she — she couldn’t move anything except her eyes then — turning her eyes to follow them, because she seen the rice in their hair too by then. I guess she had maybe thought all the time until then that he would get off the train and come to her. She thought he would look like he had when she saw him last, and she thought that she would look like she had when he saw her first. And so when she saw him and saw the gal and smelt the rice, all she could do was move her eyes. Or maybe she didn’t know him at all. I don’t know.”

“But he,” I said. “What did he say?”

“Nothing. I don’t reckon he recognized me. There was a lot of folks there, and I didn’t happen to be up in front. I don’t guess he saw me a-tall.”

“I mean, when he saw her.”

“He didn’t know her. Because he didn’t expect to see her there. You take your own brother and see him somewhere you don’t expect to, where it never occurred to your wildest dream he would be, and you wouldn’t know him. Let alone if he has went and aged forty years on you in ten winters. You got to be suspicious of folks to recognize them

at a glance wherever you see them. And he wasn't suspicious of her. That was her trouble. But it didn't last long."

"What didn't last long?"

"Her trouble. When they took her off the train at Los Angeles she was dead. Then it was her husband's trouble. Ours, too. She stayed in the morgue two days, because when he went and looked at her, he didn't believe it was her. We had to telegraph back and forth four times before he would believe it was her. Me and Matt Lewis paid for the telegrams, too. He was busy and forgot to pay for them, I guess."

"You must still have had some of the money the husband sent you to fool her with," I said.

The Mail Rider chewed. "She was alive when he was sending that money," he said. "That was different." He spat carefully. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth.

"Have you got any Indian blood?" I said.

"Indian blood?"

"You talk so little. So seldom."

"Oh, sure. I have some Indian blood. My name used to be Sitting Bull."

"Used to be?"

"Sure. I got killed one day a while back. Didn't you read it in the paper?"

The End