



Christmas 1910

by Robert Olen Butler

Scenic, S. Dak.

Dec. 24, 1910

Mrs. Sadie Yinkey

R.R. #2

Edgar, Neb.

*My dear gallie: Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.
This [is] my barn. Am hugging my saddle horse. Best thing
I have found in S.D. to hug. Am sending you a trifle with this.
With love, Abba.*

My third Christmas in the west river country came hard upon the summer drought of 1910, and Papa and my brothers had gone pretty grim, especially my brother Luther, who was a decade older than me and had his own adjacent homestead, to the east, that much closer to the Badlands. Luther had lost his youngest, my sweet little nephew Caleb, to a snakebite in August. We all knew the rattlers would come into your house. We women would hardly

take a step without a hoe at hand for protection. But one of the snakes had got into the bedclothes and no one knew and Caleb took the bite and hardly cried at all before it was done. And then there was the problem with everybody's crops. Some worse than others. A few had done hardly ten bushels of corn for forty acres put out. We weren't quite that bad off, but it was bad nonetheless. Bad enough that I felt like a selfish girl to slip out of the presence of my kin whenever I had the chance and take up with Sam my saddle horse, go up on his back and ride off a ways from the things my mama and papa and brothers were working so hard to build, and I just let my Sam take me, let him follow his eyes and ears to whatever little thing interested him.

And out on my own I couldn't keep on being grim about the things that I should have. There was a whole other thing or two. Selfish things. Like how you can be a good daughter in a Sodbuster family with flesh and blood of your own living right there all around you, making a life together—think of the poor orphans of the world and the widows and all the lost people in the cities—how you can be a good daughter in such a cozy pile of kin and still feel so lonely. Mary Joseph and Jesus happy in a horse stall, forgive me. Of course, in that sweet little picture of the Holy Family, Mary had Joseph to be with her, not her brothers and parents with their faces set hard and snakes crawling in your door and hiding in your shoe.

So when the winter had first come in, there hadn't been any snow

since the beginning of November and it was starting to feel like a drought all over again, though we were happy not to have to hunker down yet and wait out the dark season under all the snow. There was still plenty of wind, of course. Everybody in our part of South Dakota shouted at each other all the time because of the wind that galloped in across the flatland to the west and to the north with nothing to stop it but the buffalo grass and little bluestem and prairie sand reed, which is to say nothing at all. But the winter of 1910 commenced with the world dead dry and that's when he came, two days before Christmas, the young man on horseback.

We were all to Luther's place and after dinner we returned home and found the young man sitting at our oak table in what we called our parlor, the big main room of our soddy. He'd lit a candle. The table was one of the few pieces of house furniture we'd brought with us from Nebraska when Papa got our homestead. Right away my vanity was kicking up. I was glad this young man, who had a long, lank, handsome face, a little like Sam actually, had settled himself at our nicest household possession, which was this table. And I hoped he understood the meaning of the blue tarpaper on our walls. Most of the homesteaders used the thinner red tarpaper at three dollars a roll. Papa took the thick blue at six dollars, to make us something better. People in the west river country knew the meaning of that, but this young man had the air of coming from far off. We all left our houses unlocked for each other and for just such a wayfarer, so no one felt it odd in those days if you came

home and found a stranger making himself comfortable.

He rose and held his hat down around his belt buckle and slowly rotated it in both hands and he apologized for lighting the candle but he didn't want to startle us coming in, and then he told us his name, which was John Marsh, and where he was from, which was Bardstown, Kentucky, county of Nelson—not far down the way from Nazareth, Kentucky, he said, smiling all around—and he wished us a Merry Christmas and hoped we wouldn't mind if he slept in the barn for the night and he'd be moving on in the morning. "I'm bound for Montana," he said, "to work a cattle ranch of a man I know there and to make my own fortune someday." With this last announcement he stopped turning his hat, so as to indicate how serious he was about his intentions. Sam's a dapple gray with a soft puff of dark hair between his ears, and the young man sort of had that too, a lock of which fell down on his forehead as he nodded once, sharply, to signify his determination.

My mama would hear nothing of this, the moving on in the morning part. "You're welcome to stay but it should be for more than a night," she said. "No man should be alone on Christmas if there's someone to spend it with." And with this, Mama shot Papa a look, and he knew to take it up.

"We can use a hand with some winter chores while we've got the chance," Papa said. "I can pay you in provisions for your trip."

John Marsh studied each of our faces, Mama and Papa and my other older brother Frank, just a year over me, standing by Papa's

side as he always did, and my younger brother Ben, still a boy, really, though he was as tall as me already. And John Marsh looked me in the eye and I looked back at him and we neither of us turned away, and I thought to breathe into his nostrils, like you do to meet a new horse and show him you understand his ways, and it was this thought that made me lower my eyes from his at last.

“I might could stay a bit longer than the night,” he said.

“Queer time to be making this trip anyway,” my papa said, and I heard a little bit of suspicion, I think, creeping in, as he thought all this over a bit more.

“He can take me in now,” John Marsh said. “And there was nothing for me anymore in Kentucky.”

Which was more explanation than my father was owed, it seemed to me. Papa eased up saying, “Sometimes it just comes the moment to leave.”

“Yessir.” And John Marsh started turning his hat again.

Mama touched my arm and said, low, “Abigail, you curry the horses tonight before we retire.”

This was instead of the early morning, when I was usually up before anyone, and she called me by my whole name and not Abba, so it was to be the barn for John Marsh.

Papa took off at a conversational trot, complaining about the drought and the soil and the wind and the hot and the cold and the varmints and all, pretty much life in South Dakota in general, though that’s the life he’d brought us all to without anyone forcing

us to leave Nebraska, a thing he didn't point out. He was, however, making sure to say that he held three hundred twenty acres now and his eldest son a hundred sixty more and that's pretty good for a man what never went to school, his daughter being plenty educated for all of them and she even going around teaching homesteader kids who couldn't or wouldn't go to the one-room school down at Scenic. John Marsh wasn't looking at me anymore, though I fancied it was something he was struggling to control, which he proved by not even glancing at me when Papa talked of my schooling, in spite of it being natural for him to turn his face to me for that. Instead, when the subject of me came up, his Adam's apple started bobbing, like he was swallowing hard, over and over.

I slipped out of the house at that point, while Papa continued on. I walked across the hard ground toward the little barn we kept for the saddle horses, Sam and Papa's Scout and Dixie. When Papa's voice finally faded away behind me, I stopped and just stood for a moment and looked up at the stars. It's true that along with the wind and the snakes and the lightning storms and all, South Dakota had the most stars in the sky of anywhere, and the brightest, and I had a tune take up in my head. *I wonder as I wander out under the sky.* . . . Christmas was nearly upon us and I shivered standing there, not from the cold, though the wind was whipping at me pretty good, but because I realized that nothing special was going on inside me over Christmas, a time which had always all my life thrilled me. Luther had even put up a wild plum tree off his land in a bucket of dirt and we'd lit

candles on it, just this very night. And all I could do was sit aside a ways and nod and smile when anyone's attention turned to me, but all the while I was feeling nothing much but how I was as distant from this scene as one of those stars outside. And even now the only quick thing in me was the thought of some young man who'd just up and walked in our door, some stranger who maybe was a varmint himself or a scuffler or a drunkard or a fool. I didn't know anything about him, but I was out under this terrible big sky and wishing he was beside me, his hat still in his hands, and saying how he'd been inside thinking about only me for all this time. *How Jesus the Savior did come for to die, For poor ornery people like you and I.* Ornery was right.

I went on into the barn and lit a kerosene lamp and Sam was lying there, stirred from his sleep by my coming to him at an odd time. His head rose up and he looked over his shoulder at me and he nickered soft and I came and knelt by him and put my arm around his neck. He turned his head a little and offered me his ear and waited for my sweet talk. "Hello, my Sammy," I said to him, low. "I'm sorry to disturb your sleep. Were you dreaming? I bet you were dreaming of you and me riding out along the coulee like today. Did we find some wonderful thing, like buffalo grass flowering in December?"

He puffed a bit and I leaned into him. "I dream of you, too," I said. "You're my affinity, Sammy." Like John Marsh not looking my way when Papa spoke of me, I was making a gesture that was the

opposite of what I was feeling. My mind was still on this young man in the house. I suddenly felt ashamed, playing my Sam off of this stranger. In fact, I was hoping that this John Marsh might be my affinity, the boy I'd fit alongside of. I put my other arm around Sam, held him tight. After a moment he gently pulled away and laid his head down. So I got the currycomb and began to brush out the day's sweat and the wind spew and stall-floor muck and I sang a little to him while I did. "When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall, With wise men and farmers and horses and all," me putting the horses in for Sammy's sake, though I'm sure there were horses around the baby Jesus, even if the stories didn't say so. The stories always made it mules, but the horses were there. The Wise Men came on horses. There was quite a crowd around the baby, if you think about it. But when he grew up, even though he gathered the twelve around him, and some others too, like his mama and the Mary who'd been a wicked girl, he was still lonely. You can tell. He was as distant from them as the stars in the sky.

So I finished up with Sam and then with Scout, and Dixie had stood up for me to comb her and I was just working on her hindquarters when I heard voices outside in the wind and then Papa and John Marsh came into the barn, stamping around. I didn't say anything but moved behind Dixie, to listen.

And then Papa said, "I'm sorry there's no place in the house for a young man to stay."

"This is fine," John Marsh said. "I like to keep to myself."

There was a silence for a moment, like Papa was thinking about this, and I thought about it as well. Not thought about it, exactly, but sort of felt a little wind gust of something for this John Marsh and I wasn't quite sure what. I wanted to keep to myself too, but only so I could moon around about not keeping to myself. John Marsh seemed overly content. I leaned into Dixie.

"I was your age once," my papa said.

"I'll manage out here fine."

"Night then," Papa said, and I expected him to call for me to go on in the house with him, but he didn't say anything and I realized he'd gone out of the barn not even thinking about me being there. Which is why I'd sort of hid behind Dixie, but he'd even ignored my lamp and so I was surprised to find myself alone in the barn with John Marsh. I held my breath and didn't move.

"Hey there, Gray," John Marsh said, and I knew he was talking to Sam. "You don't mind some company, do you? That's a fella."

I heard Sam blow a bit, giving John Marsh his breath to read. It was not going to be simple about this boy. Him talking to my sweet, gray man all familiar, even touching him now, I realized—I could sense him stroking Sam—all this made me go a little weak-kneed, like it was me he was talking to and putting his hand on. It was like I was up on Sam right now and he was being part of me and I was being part of him. But then I stiffened all of a sudden, got a little heated up about this stranger talking to my Sam like the two of them already had a bond that I never knew about. I was

jealous. And I was on the mash. Both at once. In short, I was a country fool, and Dixie knew it because she rustled her rump and made me pull back from her. She also drew John Marsh's attention and he said, "Hello?"

"Hello," I said, seeing as there was no other way out. I took to brushing Dixie pretty heavy with the currycomb and John Marsh appeared, his hat still on his head this time and looking like a right cowboy.

"I didn't know you was there," he said.

"Papa was continuing to bend your ear, is why," I said.

John Marsh smiled at this but tried to make his face go straight again real quick.

I said, "You can find that true and amusing if you want. He's not here to take offense."

John Marsh angled his head at me, trying to figure what to say or do next. He wasn't used to sass in a girl, I guess. Wasn't used to girls at all, maybe. I should have just blowed in his nose and nickered at him.

"He does go on some," John Marsh said, speaking low.

I concentrated on my currying, though it was merely for show since I was combing out the same bit of flank I'd been working on for a while. Dixie looked over her shoulder at me, pretty much in contempt. I shot her a just-stand-there-and-mind-your-own-business glance and she huffed at me and turned away. I went back to combing and didn't look John Marsh in the eye for a little

while, not wanting to frighten him off by being too forward but getting impatient pretty quick with the silence. The eligible males I'd known since I was old enough for them to be pertinent to me had all been either silly prattlers or totally tongue-tied. This John Marsh was seeming to be among the latter and I brushed and brushed at Dixie's chestnut hair trying to send some brain waves over to this outsized boy, trying to whisper him something to say to me. *Which horse is yours? Or, You go around teaching, do you? Or, Is there a Christmas Eve social at the schoolhouse tomorrow that I could escort you to?* But he just stood there.

Finally I looked over to him. He was staring hard at me and he ripped off his hat the second we made eye contact.

"I'll be out of your way shortly," I said.

"That's okay," he said. "Take your time. She deserves it." And with this he patted Dixie on the rump.

"You hear that, Dixie?" I said. "You've got a gentleman admirer." Dixie didn't bother to respond.

"Where's your horse put up?" I said.

"Oh, he likes the outdoors. Horses do. It ain't too fierce tonight for him."

"My Sam—he's the gray down there—it took a long time for him to adjust to a barn. But I like him cozy even if it's not his natural way."

"I'd set him out on a night like this," John Marsh said.

"He's better off," I said.

"I'm sure you love him," John Marsh said.

We both stopped talking and I wasn't sure what had just happened, though I felt that something had come up between us and been done with.

John Marsh nodded to me and moved away.

I stopped brushing Dixie and I just stood there for a moment and then I put down the currycomb and moved off from Dixie and found John Marsh unrolling his sleeping bag outside Sam's stall.

I moved past him to the door. "Night then," I said.

John Marsh nodded and I stepped out under the stars.

Then it was the morning before Christmas and I'd done my currying the night before and I'd had a dream of empty prairie and stars and I couldn't see any way to go no matter how I turned and so I slept on and on and woke late. As I dressed, there were sounds outside that didn't really register, their being common sounds, a horse, voices trying to speak over the wind, and then Papa came in and said, "Well, he's gone on."

Mama said, "The boy?"

"Yep," Papa said. "He wants to make time to Montana. He's got grit, the boy. The sky west looks bad."

I crossed the parlor, past the oak table and Papa, something furious going on in my chest.

"I was his age once," Papa said.

Then I took up my coat and I was out the door. It was first light.

Papa was correct. To the west, the sky was thickening up pretty bad. A sky like this in Kentucky might not say the same thing to a man. Even thinking this way, I knew there was more than bad weather to my stepping away from our house and looking to where John Marsh had gone, maybe only ten minutes before, and me churning around inside so fierce I could hardly hold still. Then I couldn't hold still. I told myself I needed to warn him.

I dashed into the barn and Sam was standing waiting and I gave him the bridle and bit and that was all. There was no time. I threw my skirt up and mounted Sam bareback and we pulled out of the stall and the barn and we were away.

There was a good horse trail through the rest of our land and on out toward the Black Hills that rippled at the horizon when you could see it. But there was only dark and cloud out there now, which John Marsh could recognize very well, and Sam felt my urgency, straight from my thighs. I hadn't ridden him bareback in several years and we both were het up now together like this, with John Marsh not far ahead, surely, and we galloped hard, taking the little dips easy and Sam's ears were pitched forward listening for this man up ahead, and mostly it was flat and winter bare all around and we concentrated on making time, me not thinking at all what it was I was doing. I was just with Sam and we were trying to catch up with some other possibility.

But John Marsh must have been riding fast too. He wasn't showing up. It was just the naked prairie fanning out ahead as far

as the eye would carry, to the blur of a restless horizon. What was he running so fast for? Had I frightened him off somehow? Was it so bad to think he might put his arms around me?

I lay forward, pressing my chest against Sam, keeping low before the rush of the air, and I heard Sam's breathing, heavy and steady, galloping strong with me, him not feeling jealous at all that I was using him to chase this man. I closed my eyes. Sam was rocking me. I clung to him, and this was my Sam, who wasn't a gray man at all, not a man at all, he was something else altogether, he was of this wind and of this land, my Sam, he was of the stars that were up there above me even now, just hiding in the light of day, and we rode like this for a while, rocking together like the waves on the sea, and when I looked up again, there was still no rider in sight but instead an unraveling of the horizon. Sam knew at once what my body was saying. He read the faint tensing and pulling back of my thighs and he slowed and his ears came up and I didn't even have to say for him to stop.

We scuffled into stillness and stood quiet, and together Sam and I saw the storm. All across the horizon ahead were the vast billowing frays of a blizzard. I had a thought for John Marsh. He'd ridden smack into that. Or maybe not. Maybe he'd cut off for somewhere else. Then Sam waggled his head and snorted his unease about what we were looking at, and he was right, of course. He and I had our own life to live and so we turned around and galloped back.

The storm came in right behind us that day before Christmas in 1910, and there was no social at the schoolhouse that year. We all burrowed in and kept the fires going and sang some carols. *Stars were gleaming, shepherds dreaming. And the night was dark and chill.*

After midnight I arose and I took a lantern and a shovel and I made a way to the barn, the new snow biting at me all the while, but at last I came in to Sam and hung the lantern, and he muttered in that way he sometimes did, like he knew a thing before it would happen—he knew I'd be there—and I lay down by my horse and I put my arms around him. "Aren't you glad you're in your stable," I whispered to him. "I brought you here away from the storm." And I held him tight.