

UNTIL HELL FREEZES OVER

The sun was telling me to get out of bed. It might have been as warm as hell where the sun was, but it was freezing here. I didn't want to move. I was in an upstairs room that I shared with my sisters. They were already getting dressed. But, today, I didn't want to leave the cocoon.

I was making a deal with heaven. If I agreed to get up and face the cold, I would receive some kind of blessing in return. I didn't want to appear selfish, but come on! I was sure that Mary of Nazareth never had to endure such weather.

Despite my initial misgivings, it was not that cold out. We walked to school. This morning, I had dawdled. And since I was in the back of the pack, I was walking by myself. I felt fortunate that there was no snow on the ground. At least, I would make it to school dry.

My puttering almost made me late for school. I was lucky. I put my coat away and found my seat. I really liked learning. And I thought of myself as a good student. But there were times when my mind seemed to wander.

I had been having the strangest experiences recently. I seemed almost out of touch with my own present. It was almost as if I was recalling my own experience from a dream. And there were these gaps that made it difficult to concentrate. At any moment my present would seem to slip away. I did my utmost to focus. There were so many distractions. It was more than the fact that I longed for another life. I tried to find reassurance in the things close to me. I just couldn't make it all connect.

It was the middle of the night. Snow was coming in the window. And someone needed to put some wood in the stove. I got deeper under the covers, but it wasn't doing the trick. Was the fire just going to come to an end?

I could here rumbling downstairs. I assumed my mother realized that it was time to feed the stove. That was enough for me. I could drift back to sleep. I would face the terrible winter later on.

When it was finally time to get up, I was hardly better prepared. But I had no choice. I splashed some well water on my face and greeted the world.

Once we were outside, we became one with the snow. The banks were towering above. I made sure that I didn't get buried in the depths. The longer that I trudged in the snow, the more that the cold penetrated my clothes. I was freezing. And I needed to keep on. I was moving on sheer instinct. I could walk this route in my sleep. Today, it was so bad, I wasn't sure if I actually was dreaming it. My clothes were soaked through. Inside, I felt all clammy. Out the outside of me was turning to ice. The air cut the inside of me like a knife. I tried to bundle up. But it wasn't doing much good. The cold breeze ripped right through. I was now surviving on sheer will. I tried not to fall. If I went under, I was done for.

Once I hit the railway tracks, I could savor a temporary salvation. I was no longer buried in the immense drifts. I could find my way to the school. I tried to make out the others. This was one time that I needed to maintain my pace with everyone else. I had just enough visibility to carry on.

I knew that it wouldn't be all that warm in the classroom. But it would feel like a hundred degrees once I got inside. I let my imagination guide me. The tropical sun burned me to

a crisp. If only my hope could melt away all the snow. Even as I saw the school, it seemed like forever to force my way through the final drift. The wind had blown away any path that had been made by my siblings' progress.

Dante must have understood well when he made the last circle of hell into a lake of ice. There could be no punishment worse than a deep freeze that ripped through the body and shook the soul from the inside. The very thought of being in frigidity brought a halt to any meditative moment that help transcend one's eternal sentence.

My teachers hardly appreciated Dante's wisdom. Their version of eternal damnation required the sting of a constant inferno. They reminded us of fire and brimstone that made a cauldron out of hell. The wayward sinners became enslaved to the furnace that required constant feeding to maintain its flame. My teachers wanted to scare us into submission. Their stories hardly had any effect on my brothers. They would spend their time rough-housing in the school yard. But the stories struck a nerve with me. I would have to live on the straight and narrow or I would risk permanent exile to the dreaded fires.

Since all of the teachers lived in a building adjoining the school, they seldom had to suffer the same lashings by the cold that we did. So they could dole out their form of punishment without hardly understanding the nature of their vision.

Once my teachers fed my imagination, I was ready to fill in all the details. Just as the fires of hell dominated the forsaken depths, desire burned through the heart. We risked our purity if we tried to accelerate the natural course of human events. We were farm kids. We knew the ways of the world. But the Church taught us not to surrender to our curiosity. And in the straw and the mud of the barn, there was too much behold so I needed to retreat to my inner vision. There I could follow the strict boundaries that had been set for me.

I was reminded of the fundamental imperfection of this world. I did all that I could to overcome my fallen nature. There was an integrity of the word that gave me the strength that I needed to confront impurity. Only in my mind could I find the balance that I sought. The weather never allowed me to be one with my physical body.

I wonder why I felt so burdened with my calling. I did what I could to approach the sanctity that was offered to me. But I always felt so inadequate to the task. I didn't have enough to overcome the teeming explosiveness of life. There was so much going on around me. I felt the dizzying effect of the world. At its most extreme, the feeling engulfed me. A few times, I felt faint in church and passed out. I was doing my best to get closer to the promise of heaven. But each time, I would get shunted back to this damned existence.

I wasn't that good at praying. I did what I could. I held my rosary in my hand and work my way through the ritual. But I let myself wander. Perfection was slipping out of my grasp. More than ever I sought a transfiguration of the body. I could get over all the suffering and live life with a true excitement. Why was I not up to the undertaking?

My teachers had set this challenge to us. We weren't supposed to stop at the lessons in the classroom. We needed to find a way to attain a higher state of being. Heaven was in our grasp.

"Father, I don't understand why it is so difficult for me to attain spiritual well being."

My teachers had confused me. I thought that our parish priest could answer my bewilderment.

“You’re doing what you can. I think that your teachers are probably too concerned with instilling the fear of the Lord in you. He is a forgiving deity. If you come to him with clarity of intention, he will help you with the rest.”

I still felt that the dream was impossible.

When I heard the train whistle at night, I felt reassured. The sound comforted me with the knowledge that I had a few more hours to sleep

My father worked for the railroad. Joseph was forced to spend a great deal of time away from home. He would return with stories of adventure in Montreal. He told us about the smoky jazz clubs where a dreamer could buy another identity for himself. My father could picture the map of the country as these criss-crossing lines. He held the pattern in his heart, and it fed his wanderlust.

My mother devoted her time to child-rearing. It was Margaret’s uneasy compromise with Joseph. She would have never liked living in the city. Life had just sapped my mother of all her energy. She simply drifted off into a world of her own. From that vantage point, she ruled the household. I did my best to stay on her best graces. I just never felt as if I could measure up. I didn’t begrudge the fact. I just didn’t feel like one of her favorites.

My father gave me enough of a promise to distance myself from the limitations of our small community. I watched the lives of the residents fade into oblivion. I swore to myself that I would never get swallowed up by this place. This rugged land had a way of eating up your soul. It was never fecund enough to reward sufficiently the toilers. The girls would all drift into anonymity. And the men generally gave themselves up to serious drinking. Married before they knew another life existed besides this forsaken clime, they accepted their sentence with a brewing resentment that they never could clearly vocalize. A few spun out in their own craziness. Our neighbor even burned his barn to try to hide his designs on his brother’s wife.

I was afraid to dwell on their stories lest my merciful heart would forgive their lethargy and accommodate me to the same drudgery. It wasn’t so much that I despised the onerous work. I willingly took part in any chores that could help sustain our household. What scared me the most were the lost dreams. There were no remedies for the hollow in the soul that was the result of years of dissipation. It ate away at the very respectability that made a man whole. These were basically good people. But the circumstances were simply too overwhelming.

Even early on, I saw that restlessness sweep up my brothers. Without some anchor to hold them down, I was afraid that they would drift along only to get swept up in the gathering storm that was consuming our world.

I did what I could to discover my own voice. I didn’t want to get caught up in the currents that swirled around me. However, I feared that my resistance left me open to heresy. My teachers had offered me a righteous path. And I was fighting them at every step of the way. No wonder heaven was outside of my grasp. I was struggling to save my own life at any cost. And I was getting dragged down by my own confusion.

There were times that I could feel this ache through and through. It started as a feeling of discomfort on the skin, but I could feel it go right down to my bones. Occasionally my unease manifested itself as me actually being sick. But it also expressed a more profound discomfort that I felt about my world. On these occasions, it wasn’t so much a desire to go to the city. I

sought a more profound liberation of the soul. My longing brought me closer to a spiritual way of seeing. I really didn't imagine myself as a mystic. It was more a way of knowing. I believed that the cosmos promised me a place where I could find the harmony that I thought that I deserved.

Until my point of true liberation, I would have to bear the trials that came my way. I didn't view suffering as a my state of being. But if I ever relinquished my constant struggle to survive, I would be subject to unimaginable pain. It wasn't in my nature to sit still. I'd pull a broom from the closet and go to work on the kitchen. Or I'd grab a book and concentrate my efforts to creating an image of splendor. I always felt that my contribution helped to improve my lot. At the same time, I recognized that a momentary lapse would be enough to knock me down permanently. I defended myself against these nasty premonitions.

It might be presumptuous to assume that my efforts qualified me for some special consideration by providence. I wasn't one to gnash my teeth in the chaotic night all in the hopes of my ultimate salvation. I took it for what it was and tried to blend into the natural order. I didn't view myself as cursed. Therefore, I wasn't in need of some kind of special intervention to render me whole. Nevertheless, I could not so easily dismiss my feeling that something was deeply wrong with the world. And I needed to do my utmost not to be overcome by my feelings of dread.

As long as I kept busy, I felt perfectly happy to assume my place in the grand scheme of things. I was curious what made things tick. But I did not feel as if I was carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders. I just didn't feel totally right in my body. I didn't really care what others thought. I was never afraid of being teased. So I seldom used the approval of others to guide me in my own actions. I just found it impossible to rectify an imbalance that touched me physically.

For some, the relative asymmetry of the universe may have been an invitation into the contemplative life. The most revered types used their devotion to form a more perfect union with the deity. I was not so sainted. I may have aspired after the lofty nature of the truly holy. But I did not imagine that my being had been crafted for constant admiration by my creator. There were moments when I craved the respite of the shadows. And I could not allow myself to bask in the rude light of the midday sun. So I took whatever blessings came my way. They only increased my spiritual commitment.

Like the land around me, I felt that I had been tossed onto the rocky path. It was not a source of complaint. It simply forced me to expend more of my strength. Even when I felt continual fatigue, I found a power in myself that encouraged me to persevere. I valued my time of rest even if it came at a price. I never felt that I should take a break if there was still an ounce of vigor within. When I finally let go of the concerns of the earth, I felt good about my accomplishments. I could close my eyes and accept the refreshment by sleep.

There was little wonder that I viewed myself as a morning person. I didn't want to let the phantasms of the night break my composure. And morning filled me with such energy. I only wished that the early chill did not bring with it such a rude awakening. Now and then, I welcomed the reward of sleeping in.

My mother was quick to claim her empire. She was usually up way before the crack of dawn. The stove would be working extra hard to bring us a breakfast of oatmeal. We ate a hardy

fare. And I often wondered if I could ever get over a deeper hunger that touched me. But my mother was careful to meet our needs. That was often where I felt it stopped. She barely made it clear what it would take to garner more of her love. And I knew when I couldn't ask her for any more. Dear Meg had her rules, and I needed to accommodate myself to her reign. I knew that idle hands would make me susceptible to the devil's affronts. So I could, at least, make up for my mother's limitations. She was not at all negligent in regards to her station. I simply grew tired to trying to measure up to an illusory standard. All the while, I showed her the respect that she demanded. And I made sure that I stayed out of her way. I simply took her counsel when it was available.

Ultimately, my mother could not question her life. There was too much to occupy her time. I'd see her sewing in her room. Or she'd be feeding the chickens. There was always some thing that demanded her attention. Indeed, there were these moments when she seemed to have everything under control. I could almost feel this invisible force hover over our place. Margaret could focus all this energy for her own purposes. Except for these rare moment, I saw another face. She was so absorbed in the frenzy that I had difficulty getting any closer to her. I could battle to glean some of her wisdom. I would often find myself in the thick of things. I tried to work a thread and needle. Or I would whip the potatoes. But I never could attain a sense of mastery. I was simply moving things along. At times, my mother seemed to ignore my contribution. She would just go about her duties. Through it all, she seemed drawn to some guiding light that I had trouble perceiving. And I never understood what she really wanted from me. Some of my sisters may have appreciated their connection with my mother to a greater degree. I couldn't figure things out. I didn't really bother trying. She was my mother, and I gave her the love that was expected.

By the time that I came along, things had changed so much. I often felt that I was the mother to my younger brothers and sisters. That was pretty much how it was supposed to be. My mother never was a shirker. She just seemed to be somewhere else. I really wished that I had been a little older. I would have liked to have known a more profound bond with her. I just felt that the link was frayed, and there was little that I could to fix that. If I asked for too much, I knew that she could get testy. It was almost as if I knew better than any of my siblings what Margaret was really thinking. So I stayed out of her way.

The knife that she sharpened to cut chicken meat had already been used to slice her pound of flesh, and mercy didn't extend far beyond that initial helping. I knew when to hold my tongue. This may have been the ultimate source of my intelligence. My siblings might wonder out loud why things were this way. I couldn't bother wasting my time. I was equally precise as Meg in imposing the final judgement on this rowdy crew. Our most boisterous impulses were readily quashed in this environment.

I served my time in silence. Now and then, someone would wonder what Alida was thinking. When I heard my name, I was quick to pipe up with my opinion. But I made sure my diatribe was short and sweet. They all appreciated my pithy jibe. And I immediately went about my business. My mother could hardly tell that I was restless. Although down deep, she knew that I heard the call of the lonely road. She did not begrudge me my dream. But we both knew that I could never completely escape that wailing plaint. If I really pressed my mother, she would tell me that was our heritage. It was even the adventuresome spirit that had bitten her own

brothers.

By the time that I got home from school, my sister Helen has already been there for a while. She was upstairs lying on her bed.

“Are you ok. You're not sick?”

“Sick? What do you mean?”

“It's the middle of the afternoon. Why aren't you outside playing?”

“Heaven knows I'm not sick, but Margaret has taught us well.”

“How so?”

“She can never say what she really feels. So she just complains about her aches and pains.”

The other older siblings simply ignored my mother's dilemma. But Helen was even more cynical than I was. And she wasn't about hold her tongue. It was as if she was trying to draw my mother's ire.

“The only way that we can ever gain Meg's sympathy is if we are completely incapacitated. Even then she'll stare at the thermometer for good hour before she shows us any real concern . We might as well be dying.” She flipped over on her back and stared at me. “You know that's the Mackenzie curse.” She was referring to my mother by her maiden name. “The only way our of here is in a pine box. It makes me want to run away from here.”

“Where do you want to run to?”

“I always thought about Hollywood. I wouldn't mind a little scandal tarnishing my reputation.”

She was already thinking about boys in a way that seemed to flatter her reckless appeal Helen was a lot like me . But I had none of her confidence. And I felt that her pride would eventually do her in. The Lord didn't grant us that kind of latitude. Besides, Helen seemed much more trusting of males in general. Except for my brothers, I found a lot of guys to be creatures overcome by an excess of sexual desire. But I was hardly old enough to worry about it for long. And Helen was betting that her supposed precocity would ease her through a decidedly adult situation.

Helen's comments kindled my own restlessness. She would never be able to settle down here. But her promise was waiting for her somewhere. She just had to make it to the city, and her search would be over. She would never go any further than that. It wasn't as if she felt the call of the road. Her dreams were only a slight variation on what we saw around us. In that her satisfaction seemed only temporary.

All the while, I sought a more permanent connection to the world. I embraced the impossible. I had no idea where my journey would take me. When I heard the train whistle, I imagined that it was talking to me. It told a story of perpetual motion. And I could feel myself turn around and around in the eternal night. I stepped off the earth and floated in the air. I sensed a spiritual vocation. I needed to express the deeper harmony that I observed.

When I was flung back to reality, I could feel a major let down. I had great aspirations. But I hardly had the ambition to take on all the obstacles. I was holding on by sheer will. I thought of it as a stubbornness that I had derived from my mother. I was going to do my best not to become like her.

No one was going to guide me through the relentless flow of time. The solitary path was

scary. And I was groping my way in the obscurity. I worked to find joy in simple things. That would help ease the burden as I slowly made my way. But I was going to need so much more if I was going to truly hang on.

The next morning I observed a flock of birds take off from the field. They all had clear direction. But one little bird seemed to lag in the back. He did all that he could just to keep up with the rest. As he chugged along, he drove that weak heart of his. He felt as if he was working twice as hard as all the other birds. Somewhere a lonely watcher waited for the arrival of the flock. He had timed their coming year after year. But this year was different. The silence haunted him. The winter seemed to hang on. He feared that his friends would not bring him their spring cheer.

Just on the horizon, the watcher could detect a faint movement. And the frail bird was doing his best to stay in the air. Somehow, he was announcing the rest of his flock. But they were nowhere to be seen. The promise of the season seemed curtailed.

The bird now rested on a tree right next to the watcher. He looked up to see his messenger. And he did his best to interpret what the bird was telling him in song. The bird had trouble surviving in isolation. But the man took the bird's situation as a symbol of his own solitude. No wonder he had drawn such comfort from his yearly visitors. He felt his own mortality due to the failure of the other birds to show up. Perhaps, that was the real message of the bird's music.

The sky started to fill up with the cries of the other birds. The weakest of the flock had used his wiles to make it this far. The others were now in the back. The little bird had felt a sense of triumph in his accomplishment. But he also seemed to reflect the sadness of the man. He seemed to talk to his host. There would be one day soon when the one watcher would not be there to greet the visitors. Would they notice?

I wanted to believe that the young bird found special strength in his bond to the man. The two shared a sympathy. In this feeling, the man was able to take flight. As the birds made off for another destination, he could feel himself wafted into the air.

It took more than desire to propel these birds through the air. I wanted to learn the secret of their flight. I watched them all flap their wings together. They would soar as a group and tempt the power of the sky. Then they all seemed to become one with the cosmos. Their zeal was transformed into a energy that resonated through the universe. And I radiated with that power.

I felt as if I knew something that I couldn't tell anyone. I was already overcome with my own restlessness. But this was so much more. I had tapped a magic that fulfilled the promise of my quest. As the birds started to disappear from view, I felt as if they were taking the very thing that kept me whole. I wanted to retain that vision. The inspiration remained. But it was not enough to express my realization. So I again returned to the craggy rural surroundings. Eldorado was only a thing of my imagination.

Would I ever be able to explain my understanding? I felt an impatience with my brothers and sisters. Down deep, I believed that only my father had an inkling of what I had seen. And he was off on a journey of his own. He did what he could to hold the family together. But I would often catch him in his room listening to radio. It transported him to another place. And the rail beckoned him. So even while he served his time here, he felt as if he was existing somewhere

else.

I couldn't begrudge my father his pleasure. Even if it made him withdrawn, it was the only way that he could reconcile the fundamental contradiction of his life. It wasn't as if he left the child-rearing to Margaret. But I understood why he needed to gratify his longing. And he didn't want to come up against the vain stubbornness of my mother.

I sat in the classroom and let myself become distracted from my work. Outside, I could already hear the proud whispers of spring. It was a blustery day, and the wind was thick with pollen. It tossed around the sweet message of the future bloom.

I tried to use the season's promise help me to invigorate my work. I only turned the pages as the teacher read aloud. My mind was elsewhere. I would catch up later. I was trying to make any excuse that I could.

I felt mesmerized by what was going on outside. The world abounded with activity. The meadows exploded in a counterpoint of sound. Birds wove their way through the swinging trees. They fed among the rich abundance of springtime fare. The overall effect was dizzying.

I did my best not to draw attention to myself. I needed to get up to go to the bathroom. I carefully made my way so as not to disturb anyone. When I walked through the classroom back to my seat, I tried to remain as collected as possible. The least little rustle of my skirts would result in a flourish that might awaken the desire of the boys. I wanted to keep them at a distance. I didn't mind their school boy crushes, but I couldn't allow my heart be assailed by their complements. And I didn't want anyone to know what I was really thinking. It didn't take much to make me conjure up the image of cats in a frenzy wrestling in a field. If I surrendered my youth over to some foolish trifle, I would be condemning myself to be here forever. That only made me more committed to my studies. Better a devotion to Lord Byron who was long dead and buried, than a affection for some silly boy. My brothers could protect me if things ever became too overwhelming.

When I was finally freed for the day, I ran ahead of everyone. I wanted to enjoy the refreshing air. I simply became absorbed by the rush of sensations. I was shaking off winter's encumbrance. I didn't dare open my coat because I didn't want to get sick. But I did what I could to welcome the exuberant change.

I looked behind me and realized that I had escaped everyone else. I was completely isolated. I again took off running so that I could get deeper into a place of my own making. I reveled in the wonder that surrounded me. It was almost as if they would never catch up. I hid behind the trees so even if they were behind me, I would just blend into the surroundings. I didn't feel lonely. I had discovered a new sense of marvel.

On reaching the open field near our place, I saw that my brothers and sisters were indeed catching up with me. My paradise had been short-lived, I needed to be happy with the splendor that surrounded me.

When I finally reached the house, I faced a momentary letdown. I had participated in the wonder of nature. I had triumphed in my transcendence. Once the others passed through the glory, they didn't notice a thing. They deprived me of the full excitement that I deserved. What had been a time of joy now became another reminder of my entrapment. I was sure that there was somewhere out there would allow me to remain with my contentment. But there was little that I could do. I tried in vain to hold on to the fading dream.

Back at home, I needed to find some delight in the boisterousness of my comrades. We shared an exhilaration. But it was nothing like the feeling that had overcome me on my walk home. For once, I had surpassed the limitations of my circumstances. I was rudely brought back to reality. I did all that I could to derive some comfort from the harmony that remained. I didn't want my life to be like this forever. I needed to realize my inner vision.

I went upstairs and finished my homework. I was making up for my lapse earlier today. I tried to make my studies special. They summarized the unique character of what I had seen.

With the coming of spring, we all became excited about the Spring Social. It gave the kitchens of the neighborhood a chance to share their wares. All of us busied ourselves whipping up our favorite desserts. Sugar spun around the room. Butter melted on the stove and invited a host of ingredients. Ginger popped in recipe after recipe. The mixture of exotic aromas enticed us. I didn't even have to taste these flavors. My imagination was enough to take me away.

We wrapped our fare in tins lined with wax paper and headed over to the event at church. This was a chance to become someone new. It was almost as if we were donning masks. We didn't have a lot, but we did our best to look stunning for the event. We were going to the circus. Rides and magic tricks would have been just enough to complete the experience.

Even the boys appeared to be ambassadors of a charmed life. I tried to imagine that things were indeed different. I let these otherworldly flavors carry me away. Out there on some faraway sea, I floated until I finally reached my sacred paradise. Again my journey was solitary. When I returned from the flight, I felt restless. I had tasted enough of this carnival. I wanted a more profound respite.

What had been so comforting was now disturbing. I could feel an element of horror set in. I felt haunted by a lingering spirit that would not let me settle down. The moist chill of the night air was unnerving. I had had my fun, and I wanted to go home. My older siblings were involved in serious conversations. And the rest of my family were hopping up and down as if they were still full of energy. I wanted no part of this. If it wasn't so dark out, I would have walked home on my own.

I was feeling ill. I told myself that I had eaten too much fudge cake. That explained things. In fact, I had hardly sampled any of the sweets. My excitement had been moved along by my imagination. What I now saw before me was the aftertaste of a rich feast. And it made me sick. I didn't want to think about any of this. I had trouble staying alert.

"Are you OK?" my sister Helen caught up with me.

"I'm doing fine."

"You seemed to be teetering over here. I'm going to get someone to take you home."

They packed me into the car, and I was sent home before all the rest. I didn't want to make any trouble for anyone. My heart was no longer in the celebration.

I went to bed early. I pretended that I was feeling bad. But it was nothing like that. I was more sick in my soul. It surprised me how that feeling seemed to captivate my body. I had been doing so well earlier in the day. I had thrown myself into all the preparation. I told myself that I was just tired. But it was more than that. I felt as if I was existing in a nether world between the physical and the imaginary. The more that I tried to make myself real, the harder that it was to sustain myself. But my dreams proved unreliable in rescuing me. I simply needed to work harder to liberate myself. That was why I had been so overjoyed in the kitchen. I was part of

something full of vibrancy. I was actively affecting my life.

As sleep rolled over me, I gave into its calm. I could not be more satisfied. My former discomfort was chased away for good.

The next morning was rainy. My early sleep gave me a head start over everyone else. When I went down to the kitchen, only my mother was there. I greeted her perfunctorily. I joined her in her morning tasks. I hardly said a thing. This silent understanding was the best that I could hope for. What really needed to be said? There was enough to do to keep both of us busy. That was how it was meant to be. Margaret had no complaints for the moment. We both worked together to greet the day.

Tonight was going to be a special time. We were going to be able to go to the movies. There was nothing that I liked more. Helen was beaming. It was her chance to shine.

We had brought our own snacks with us. As the picture played, the hands passing around treats accompanied the action. Helen and I loved romantic stories. A little tragedy was enough to involve us completely.

This evening's picture was a mystery. It was all about a stolen book. And the detective had been hired to chase the book around the world. I loved the premise, the search for ultimate knowledge. And the detective was thwarted by his love interest. She was working with the people who first stole the book.

"I wish that I could look into the book that there were trying to find."

"There really was no book, Alida. It was just a prop."

"I know that. I just love what it represents."

"It represents how we can never fulfill our romantic dream. We are abandoned to our broken hearts."

Helen was trying to play the part of the matinee idol. But she was convincing for me. If only I had the book, I would not have to play the role of the femme fatale. That was the lesson. The detective was trying to prevent her from having self-knowledge. He was acting superior towards her. And she wanted to betray him because she didn't like his attitude. It was an expression of power on her part. Even though she was villainous, I admired her independent streak. The detective tried to crush her. But she would not yield.

"Helen, that is why she is so defiant. She wants to keep the knowledge for herself."

"You're just saying that because you don't know what it is to love."

Helen continued her role as the Hollywood starlet. She even held her head at an angle so the camera could catch her best side.

"Hold still, darling!" I teased her.

The movies told me that there was life outside of the confines of this community. And I could use my imagination to escape. I had my dream. But I wasn't crazy enough to run off to Hollywood. Nevertheless, I felt as if these voices on the screen were talking to me in a special way. And I needed to listen to their advice.

How could I ever form my ideas of trust and honor from tales of betrayal? More than ever they made me believe in the authenticity of my own vision. I could take a unique comfort in this blessing. No one could take that treasure from me. I had the opportunity to make myself into whomever I wanted. And I was only limited by my own desire. I only wished that I could take the movies with me. My temporary consolation withdrew even as I felt its power.

In place of the magic of the silver screen, I faced the rocky countryside. I would find no liberation in battling these stones. Others had tried to plant their dreams in this soil. But there was little of magnificence. My brothers fought to harvest the hay. You couldn't make a very good living off of milk from the cows. And there was nothing for me here. I couldn't make much poetry out of this existence. The struggle ate away at my imaginative strength. So I did what I could to hang on.

In the darkness of the movie theater, I recognized another world. I was never going to be a Rockefeller. I didn't want to be. But there was something of beauty out there. I was going to get closer to that sparkle and feed off of its glow. My relatives had exhausted themselves in the search for fool's gold. I would be able to tell myself when to stop. But I felt myself yielding to that same longing for something greater.

Each time that I passed a mirror, I would pretend to effect a pose. This was the very thing that obsessed Helen. I would watch her primp before the mirror. I knew that vanity was the source of sin. It didn't take much to push us over into the realm of total damnation. I didn't want to give in to my worst excesses. But I knew that my surroundings were working me down. And the movies offered me an invitation for something more. The mirror only allowed enough room for one star. And Helen controlled it when she was around. But I needed more reassurance. And I couldn't risk the silly complements of the boys to boost my confidence. Even when I looked at myself, I didn't feel as if I was seeing the same person that I was. I needed to watch my movements so that I could synchronize them with what I was actually doing with my arms and my legs.

I asked my father, "There's not something wrong with me, is there?"

"Alida, you have nothing to worry about."

I wasn't sure if I should believe him. He knew a world of tools and machines. I wanted to be a flesh and blood girl.