

THE DALHOUSIE REVIEW

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FICTION

TOM BENTLEY

The Sun Woman

EDNA RELEASED HER JAW and let her lips fall free. The back of her ribcage swung into the mattress as she breathed into the morning. Footsteps marched across the linoleum floor above her and tapped little imprints into her broad forehead. Tap tap tap tap. Eleven to the front door. Tap tap tap. Seven to the bedroom. Tap tap tap. The tip of her tongue counted each beat as they tap tapped to twelve before coming to a halt in the kitchen. I love my aunt, she thought. How lucky I am to be living in her basement. The sound of water rushed through pipes. She opened her eyes.

Edna went to the large sink and filled the kettle. She looked into the mirror above the faucets. My face is so round, she sighed. I love my face.

She returned from the little bathroom her aunt made specially for her and toasted her bread on the twisted clothes hanger over the hotplate. She poured her cup one-third full of tea and two-thirds full of milk. She spread honey on her toast.

Every morning Edna walked over to the chair at the front of her basement. She sat on three cushions and looked up at the small window eating her toast and sipping her tea. She'd take two nibbles of toast between each sip of tea. By floating her round head above her neck she could just see over the lilies to the summer sky above. When there were clouds, she'd let them sail across her forehead and gently coax them into the rhythm that balanced her through the day. One two three four. Over two three four. Under two three four. Back two three four. She'd guide the clouds to the edges of the sky and beyond the roofs. Edna couldn't remember when she learned how to move clouds but she knew it was a gift.

Edna loved doing laundry. The smell of Fab and bleach. Starch and the hissing of the iron. Living in her aunt's basement was much better than taking care of those horrible children in Rosetown. And every Sunday her aunt let her go upstairs for supper. Mrs. Potts was kind.

Edna used to stay with Mrs. Potts' sister in Rosetown. When that aunt passed away, she moved to a new town and a new aunt. Two years ago. The very same day she turned twenty-two. Mrs. Potts gave her crayons to celebrate her birthday but she's never used them. She keeps them on a cardboard box by her bed. She'd enjoy smelling the crayons but doesn't take them out of their package because they remind her of the children she looked after in her dead aunt's garage.

They were horrible children. They called her names and never paid attention. She wanted to teach them arithmetic. She was very good at arithmetic. Much better at multiplication and division than any of those children.

One day Bobby MacIntosh put his hand up her skirt and Edna thought it was a very poisonous spider. She accidentally broke his fingers and he had to stop taking piano lessons. Then the children quit coming and Edna spent her time in the garage alone.

The only thing Edna missed about living with her dead aunt were the times she went to the country. As well as being able to move clouds and do complicated sums, Edna had a third gift. She knew how to find water. Whenever the locals needed a well or an irrigation ditch, they'd come to town and ask for her services.

Edna would walk the farmland and listen to the musical tap tap tapping that guided her behind the light pull of a willow branch. She glided open-faced across the prairies, giving over to the sustained rhythm of numbers that fed through her body.

Still, she was happy in her new aunt's basement. She'd listen to the beat of footsteps as customers arrived with their laundry at the front door and try to figure out which footsteps belonged to which articles of clothing.

When the dirty clothes started plunging onto the floor, Edna began the routine which took her through the day. She was careful to keep the loads of laundry separate so when she left them at the top of the stairs they were returned to their rightful owners. She trusted the sequence of numbers counting their patterns into her body. She wanted to make sure her hands wouldn't get caught in

the wringer. One two three let go. One two three grab on. One two three let go. One two three grab on.

She had to stand on a stepladder to get the laundry onto one of the three clothes-lines her aunt's friend made for her over the vegetable garden in the backyard. She'd reach through a window to one of the three pulleys which carried the load up to one of the three lines. Edna sailed pants, socks, underwear, skirts, dresses and every imaginable article of people's waking or sleeping lives out over the potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, turnips and beets.

At night she would do sums.

Gladys Potts was a widow three times over. When her sister died she was the only person left in the family to take care of Edna. She was mortified. She could barely make ends meet—how was she to take care of a poor simple girl? Gladys prayed for guidance and received her answer from God.

She got Harry Jessop from the hardware to install a second-hand toilet and large industrial sink in the cellar. Then she moved down her wringer-washing machine. Harry cut a hole in the kitchen floor and built a chute so the laundry wouldn't fly helter-skelter all over the basement—Gladys wanted to make it as easy as possible for her niece. Then he built a heavy hinged door to cover the hole so Gladys wouldn't be bothered by the constant noise of the swish-swash. She offered Mr. Jessop free laundry services for a year in payment for his Christian assistance.

Finally she took down a second-hand hot plate, a little ice box, and purchased a dead-bolt. She'd heard an alarming story about how Edna turned into a wild animal and broke a little boy's arms one July afternoon in her dead sister's guest house. Apparently the boy couldn't remember the words to "itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout" and Edna was so frustrated she just went crazy. For the safety of the neighbour's children—and the poor girl herself—Gladys made sure there was a good lock on the door.

It broke her heart though—the thought of poor Edna alone day in and day out with no one to talk to—so every Sunday Gladys put on a lovely supper and unbolted the door. They'd sit at the kitchen table and Gladys would talk about the sermon she'd heard that morning at church. She told the unfortunate creature that if she listened very hard, she too could become a good God-fearing woman.

Simon Debronscoville was a man in his fifties who lived alone on a farm south of town. His parents died a decade earlier. He was respected by his neighbours. They regarded him as this pretty ugly old fellah who took good care of his land and dressed well.

Simon was extremely thin and had a larger than normal head. Because it sat on top of such a tall skinny body it looked very large indeed. When he came to town, some of the children enjoyed teasing him. They'd stand on Main Street and yell to the people walking close by: "Clear the street! Big Head's gonna tumble... TIMBER!" Mr. Debronscoville would teeter back and forth pretending he might fall on one of the children until they'd scream and run down the street. He enjoyed the little ragamuffins. Rumour amongst the older kids was that he wore a helmet under his skull because of a wound he got in a war.

The other most distinguishing feature about Simon Debronscoville was the length of his eye-lashes. They were thick and black and curled far beyond anything decent. Many women in the town marvelled. Even the painted ladies of the streets in the city couldn't rival the length and lushness of Mr. Debronscoville's blinkers.

Simon had wanted very much to marry. For ten years, between seeding and harvest, he came to town and took a room in the hotel across from the railroad station. He'd spend a few weeks following every lead available with the hope he might find someone to join him in holy wedlock. He conducted interviews with anyone who cared to talk and always dressed formally. In spite of his odd appearance, occasionally a female was willing to take the plunge. The living arrangements and money were in a pretty good ball park. And there was no doubt to anyone who cared to look beyond the size of his head that Simon was a kind man.

But it never seemed to work. In the final stages of the contract, he always asked himself the same question. Could he learn to love this woman? And he always got the same answer. So several years ago, Mr. Debronscoville hung up his longings and resigned himself to living out the rest of his life as a bachelor.

Gladys was polishing the wrought iron bed she'd been given by her first husband's mother as a wedding gift. It had survived three deaths, but she was convinced the springs had plenty of life

left in them. She treated the heirloom with great care in the event the good Lord should be kind enough to deliver her a fourth husband. She heard a knock at the door.

Gladys looked out the bedroom curtains. It was that strange man Simon Debronscoville, and he was wearing a suit. She'd met him several years ago in a hotel room but called a halt to the interview because she liked a bit more beef on a man and didn't think anybody with such extravagant eye-lashes could be trustworthy. She always suspected her decision might have been a bit hasty. She powdered her nose.

Simon sat in an overstuffed armchair and explained the reason for his visit. Gladys wasn't entirely sure she believed him.

The good farmer was thinking of branching out. There was a far east corner on his land he didn't use for wheat so he thought he might fence it off and try his hand at some livestock. Problem was he couldn't find any water out there for a dug-out. So he'd been speaking with this fellah from Rosetown and they got to talking about Mr. Debronscoville's desire to diversify and his problem about the water. That was how he found out about the girl with the power.

He asked Mrs. Potts if she'd be willing to bring her out to the farm and have a go—he'd be happy to pay the asking price.

Gladys was certain she glimpsed a glimmer of fondness penetrating through his deep black eye-lashes into her own not unattractive grey-blue eyes. They arranged he would pick them up in his half-ton the following Saturday and agreed that three dollars was more than adequate. But that was three dollars even if the outcome wasn't moist.

The sun beat down on the dry prairies. A tall, aging thin man in a buttoned-up grey suit held a black umbrella over the head of a soft, round young lady in an off-white dress as she serpentineed through the grasslands, treading gentle behind the pull of a willow branch into the lush waterfall of her future.

The elegant couple glided through the hot molasses air. The only motion contrary to the single direction of their procession was the fluttering of Mr. Debronscoville's eye-lashes as sweat poured in buckets down his towering forehead into the long thick bushes above his eyes. He had to blink at the sweat with such ferociousness his east pasture began to look like a scene from an old silent

movie. Flick flick flick. Flick flick flick. Pulsating flashes of light guiding him forward.

It was hypnotic. And timeless. And Simon Debronscoville was entranced by his new vision of the world.

The young woman beside him was his high priestess. He could feel the heavy robes of their past dragging through the open field—leaving a trail of dust to billow in the wide sky. He could see a shimmering light guiding them to their future. They walked united in the perfection of the trance.

Who was this woman? Who was his angel of the walk?

Edna gave in to the pattern of numbers that were running not only through her body, but through the strange man holding the umbrella as well. She walked, balanced by the power of his surrender. She heard the deep flow waterways inside their bodies. The cloud mass movements of their breath.

Suddenly Edna gasped. The willow branch vibrated with a force that made her scream.

Simon felt as if a great arm had bolted from the centre of the earth and grasped the inside of his throat. It slashed his head towards the sky and wrenched him to the ground. The umbrella fell from his hand.

Edna looked down at the prairie giant kneeling in the hard parched earth. She saw the beads of moisture trapped in the thick spider web of his quiet eyes.

Simon looked up at his angel of the walk. He saw her round face. The open lips and the gentle tapping from the tip of her tongue. He heard the ocean and felt the spray of deep canyon rivers. He adored her.

Edna knelt down. She guided her face towards him. He closed his eyes. Her tongue touched his eye-lashes. She licked the moist web and drew beads of wetness back into her mouth.

Gladys had worn the wrong shoes. There was no way she could have traipsed over to the far east corner. So she waited in his house while the pair of them did their business. She'd insisted her niece take an umbrella for protection from the hot sun. The poor girl hadn't been out in donkey's years.

Gladys was most impressed with how tidy Simon kept things. The teaset in the sideboard was lovely—it must have been his

mother's, she thought. And the Chinese bowl full of dried wheat stocks and cattails? She knew exactly where she'd put it in her living-room. It was a pleasure getting to know the dear man's house. What touched her most was how he kept his socks in a different drawer than his underwear.

When the diviners returned, Gladys was delighted to hear that Mr. Debronscoville had found satisfaction in her niece. "Next thing you know it'll be oil," she joked, flashing her not unattractive grey-blue eyes. She invited him to supper the following Sunday and spent the entire week preparing for courtship. She clipped her toenails, shaved her varicosed legs, plastered them with band-aids, painted her fingernails, and had her hair done.

Edna waited patiently for Sunday to arrive. When she wasn't doing laundry, she copied the long list of numbers she received from Mr. Debronscoville, multiplying and dividing them over and over again and always attaining the absoluteness of perfect symmetry. Only his scent came from the piles of clothes falling from the kitchen. The smell of dark earth and the sap of a willow tree. The hint of prairie sage drifting just a whisper above the tight skin on his glowing moon face.

As she sat looking up at the small window eating her toast and sipping her tea, Edna would navigate the flow of clouds over the roof to the far east corner of Mr. Debronscoville's land. Over two three four. Under two three four. Feeding them with the moisture from her tongue. Steering them full-sailed across the prairie sky to pour her wetness into the hidden stream below his field.

She began to wonder about being out of the basement. About walking great distances without an umbrella and the sun falling into her face. For the first time she had ungrateful thoughts about living in her aunt's cellar.

During the nights she heard whispered warnings that the Moon Man was looking for his Sun Woman. She dreamt of licking giant eyeballs and was fearless as a spider crawled up between her legs.

Late Sunday morning Mrs. Potts spoke to her niece in the cellar. She told Edna it would be inappropriate for her to join them for supper that evening, but asked her to keep her fingers crossed,

because if things went well they might be having more suppers with the gentleman farmer than Edna could possibly imagine. Then she gave her a big wink and headed back up the stairs.

On the landing, she turned around. She'd forgotten to share any of the sermon she'd heard earlier at church, so took a moment to give Edna a synopsis. It was from the Gospel according to Saint Mark.

"A certain woman has a young daughter with an unclean spirit. Very dirty. Dirty thoughts. Dirty body. Bad. So this kind woman takes her to Jesus, and even though Jesus was busy as anything, he takes this bad girl—casts out the devil—and washes away her sins."

Gladys bolted the door.

Simon sat silently eating his way through the fresh garden peas, potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, turnips, beets, and roasted chicken. He was terribly worried about the young lady's summer flu, and only hoped that Mrs. Potts' assurance that her niece would be well in no time was an accurate diagnosis.

Gladys was sensitive enough to understand that courtship probably made the poor man a little shy, so took full responsibility for the dinner conversation.

Edna stood on the stepladder with her hands pressed below the kitchen linoleum. She could feel the rhythm of his tapping foot sliding down her arms.

Sinking into the over-stuffed armchair, eating raspberry pudding and drinking his coffee, Simon got on with the business at hand. He'd hoped the angel would be present, but decided he couldn't wait. He put his pudding on the worn-out end table and his coffee down on the floor. After catching Mrs. Potts firmly in her grey-blue eyes, he sat up as formally as he could in his chair and addressed the kind lady.

Mr. Debronscoville sputtered out his intentions. He loved Mrs. Potts' niece. He adored her. He'd throw his life down for the sweet darling and he had to have her. He must, above all else, be married to his angel. "Give us your blessing dear kind Mrs. Potts!"

Gladys pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. She tried to catch her breath. Dignity, she told herself. This calls for dignity.

"Get the hell out of my house!" she screamed.

Mr. Debronscoville tried to wrestle his way out of the enveloping armchair, kicking over the coffee and flailing his arms into the raspberry pudding, which landed on Mrs. Potts' collection of Ukrainian Easter eggs.

Scrambling for the front door, he stumbled headlong into Mrs. Potts' record player, and as he turned to apologize, his belt caught on a sweet little tablecloth crocheted by a Methodist dog-breeder and whipped it from right under a stack of *Everyone's Favorite Sing-Along Hymns*, which Gladys had been receiving from Ohio once a month for five years.

Fortunately, like the seasoned trick of a magician, the stack of records elevated into the air and landed intact back on the table. Unfortunately, Mr. Debronscoville's foot went straight through a recording of Mario Lanza, splintering the poor tenor into an ear-splitting myriad of daggers, four of which stuck in Mrs. Potts' ceiling.

As he made it down the front steps, Simon was only grateful that none of the sharp little weapons had pierced Mrs. Potts in the heart.

Edna was alarmed by the terrible commotion. It reminded her of the time she bit into the boy who used to take piano lessons. She ran to the front of her cellar just in time to see Mr. Debronscoville's skinny legs leaping down the steps.

For a moment everything was quiet. Then she heard the unbolting of the door.

"You get down on your knees right now and pray for forgiveness," her aunt commanded from the top landing. "Down on your knees!"

Edna knelt at the bottom of the stairs and looked up at her aunt's puffy red face.

Mrs. Potts took one step into the cellar. Her voice began to shake. "You are a bad girl, Edna. A dirty girl. You'd better pray Jesus has the time to cast out the devil and wash away your sins—because just like that girl in Saint Mark, you have an unclean spirit. You've driven Mr. Debronscoville away with your badness and you've broken my heart. You may be retarded, Edna—but you're still nothing more than a dirty little tart."

Mrs. Potts re-bolted the door and went into her living-room to survey the damage.

Edna ran back to the front window to see if there was any remainder of the man going down the steps. She looked back at the empty landing at the top of the stairs. She closed her eyes and listened for the comfort of her numbers but all she could hear was her aunt—and all she could feel was her own badness. How could she have hurt her kind aunt? She loved her aunt. How could she have driven away the good farmer?

Edna looked at her round face in the mirror above the sink. It was the face of an unclean spirit. It was the unclean spirit that drove him away.

Edna turned on the faucets. Water poured into the rubber tube attached to the wringer-washing machine and into the large aluminum basin. She pulled off her blouse, skirt, shoes and underwear and put them into the tub of the washer. She turned on the machine and added two boxes of Fab. Then she hoisted her body up onto the washer and held the clothes deep in the bottom of the tub.

Her face skimmed the surface of the foaming bubbles. Her shallow breath panted back and forth to the swish-swash of the propelling vanes. She wanted Jesus to wash away her sins. She wanted him to reach up and pull her into the wetness. She waited.

Water flowed over the aluminum basin and onto the floor.

Edna pulled herself down and fed the wet clothes through the wringer. Then she dumped in four more packages of Fab and put the clothes into the washing machine for a second time.

She turned to look at her room.

Her badness was lying everywhere. She yanked the sheets off her mattress—the clothes from the cardboard boxes at the foot of her bed—towels, shoes, curtains—the lists of multiplication and division from the walls—the crayons Mrs. Potts gave her for her birthday—and all the facecloths she got as gifts from packages of detergent. She washed and re-washed all her belongings. Suds bubbled out of the machine like lava.

Edna waded through the flowing tide and packed powdered soap into the open pores of her naked body. She called for her numbers to lift her from her badness. She called for Jesus to cast out the devil and wash away her sins. But nothing happened.

She climbed back onto the washer and balanced herself over the vibrating tub. She lifted her knee and tried to force her leg in

beside the quick jerking shaft. She wanted to be wrapped in the water's fluttering wings—drawn into the deep swirling pool. Floating. Floating. The slow easy ride of the jellyfish float.

A noise pounded at her from the other side of the cellar. Edna looked across and saw a huge face at the window. Spiders were crawling from its eyes. She pulled her hands off the machine and thrashed her arms in the air. She tried to scream. The wringer-washer tumbled forward, thundering her into the debris of the flood. It rolled into the wall and was silent.

Edna scrambled to her feet and began to run. She ran without bending her knees, kicking ribbons of water high in the air. Spiders pressed onto the pane of glass.

Pound. Pound. Pound. It was face of the devil. Numbers scrolled from its mouth and wrapped around her body. They pulled at her badness.

Edna ran through the water and grabbed towels—clothing—face cloths. She hurled them across the waves toward the window. Blankets—sheets—curtains—paper. She raged through the cellar—plastering her wet belongings onto the walls—barricading herself from the devil.

An arm crashed through the glass. The basement glimmered with flying light.

Edna stopped. The night sky poured from the open casement into her cellar. Shadows of trees fell onto the surface of the water. Clouds drifted over her face and billowed onto the cement walls. She could hear her own breath. A lily was gliding in the reflection of a pale green moon.

She looked up and saw the glowing moon skull of Mr. Debronscoville in the open frame of the window. She saw the perfect river of his veins flowing under the thin layer of his tight skin. The dark sky filled the quiet sadness in his eyes. She felt the gentle beat of numbers run across her forehead and she opened her lips. Spiders fell from the ceiling.

Edna stumbled into the water and crawled toward him like a blind child. "Leave me Lord," she called out. "I am the Sun Woman."

It was six months before Gladys had the energy to go see Edna in the Mental Institution up at Battleford. She was too worn out from having to do laundry all the time.

She was a little disappointed but not surprised to find Mr. Debronscoville sitting with Edna in the visitors' room. He was dressed in a charming blue suit. Store-bought flowers were on the table between them. They didn't look up when she walked toward them.

Gladys looked down to see what they were writing in their matching notebooks. Edna and the man with the enormous eyelashes were doing sums.