

Brianna Sorne

Sutton

Draft 6

It is 1921. The ongoing months were unforgiving and he noticed this when a certain coloration of the sky blanketed the mountains: recognition the winter ahead would be relentless. There was a never ending conversation between the mountains and the sky. The sky called to the mountains and the mountains nodded and nodded, tall and superior. He nodded too, as he looked over and around. Stepping onto the porch that had grown weak with wear and age, particles and dirt sifting towards the earth, he pulled on his boots and stretched. As he walked the extent of the land, he sought out his destination closest to the mountains; threads of his craft, radiant they were, amid the cloaked wasteland. Through the lines, eyeing the growth, contemplating the very prowess for which he lived: his herbaceous mosaic. At the far end of the line he grasped up arugula leaves and started back towards the small cabin.

Something like the sun struggled up, heatless and hollow through the thickened sky amongst the frozen miasma that laced the town and beyond. The coffee was on the stove and his pot of meat broth was steaming as he cleaned the leaves and mixed them in. When it surged, he added corn, closed the pot and walked over towards the stove and put his hand to its belly. Stone cold. The basket next to the stove had little coal. He looked down the iron gullet and poured what was left down the chute, crumpled a newspaper, lit it and threw it down as well. Initial spark. He tried again. Fleeting heat and tortured ash. Then nothing. The air was closing in. Squat down with his hands on his knees he looked up to see movement through the window. The city mouse was walking up the path with his awkward skittish strut. He could already hear the boy's ramblings.

“Sutton, you alive in there?”

He walked to the door and opened it, leaning against the doorway, arms crossed.

“Hello, Francis.”

Sutton looked him up and down. Sparse clothing, too big for his thing body and failing boots, too big for his small feet.

“Aw, hell could it get any colder? I’ve been looking for yeh all day.”

“Well, here I am. How did you find me?”

“I been pokin around, askin every old bastard that knows yeh. Nobody could tell me.”

The city mouse walked past and into the cabin.

“Shitfire, it’s cold in here. You try startin a fire?”

“Didn’t occur. Have at it.”

He squat down and went to work, sitting on the back of his bony legs, his spinal cord protruding through his shirt, his torso a thin curve.

“When yeh coming into town again?”

“When I need something I guess.”

“The boys are askin about yeh. None of them’ll shut up sayin’ where’s Sut where’s Sut?”

“Should come teh Johnbo’s fer drinks.”

His efforts of lighting a fire failed. Hunched over and concentrating he dropped match after match in, which sizzled and smoked.

“I’ll do that. Where are you staying?”

The city mouse scratched himself and darted his eyes about as he spoke.

“Oh I have a nice slick setup down yonder on the other side of town. Yeh should come by. It’s this sly little shack under the south bridge. What’s wrong with your coal? Shit.”

“You be careful. It’s easy to get caught up in the fools by that bridge.”

“Aw I’ll be fine.”

“Have some coffee.”

Sutton sat down on his bed and the city mouse across the room, gulping fast what was his. Soon it grew quiet and all but the whistling of the wind through the cracks of the cabin was still. He held his cup between his legs and traced the rim with his thumb and looked out the window; a small portal to the decay of the land. Grayer still and weighed with the grief and solitude of the little town in its frail horizon. Francis put his cup down, also fixing his eyes through the window.

“Hey Sut, yeh think I could take up some of yer greens?”

“Yes, that’d be alright. Get one of those crates over there.”

Sutton rose, turned off the stove and walked out to his crops, Francis trailing behind him.

“What can I take?”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know what half these are.”

“Alright then. Give me your crate.”

Francis handed the crate to Sutton and he walked down the lines grasping a few beets, onions, a cabbage, carrots, Francis watching the rhythm to his practice; purging each root from its vessel with such ease, his hands leathered from the earth and the work.

“Most helpful Sut, I’ll see yeh around.”

Sutton nodded.

“Yeh should come see my setup soon.”

He walked on, shivering and fidgeting, awkwardly holding his crate, dirt trickling through its holes with each step forward. Before he disappeared from sight, he turned and raised a hand into the air. Sutton raised his in reply and returned to his cabin.

At night he dreamed of those come and gone. Images of the derelict bastard son of a ghost whose father was a ghost and whose father's father drifted to darkness. And the mountains, with bodies of kings and wisdom to last for centuries whose existence can only be matched by God himself. Oh father where have we gone? His hands that wished to touch and the cold that pushed against his very foundation, whistling through his core and drifting him through a gray, bleak world.

He woke to a steady tapping from outside and he already knew before he opened his eyes. Once it ceased and he heard the culprit start the motor car and drive away, he eased himself out of his bed and walked to his porch. Sutton ripped the piece down from beside the doorframe and went back inside. Laying it on his small table, he stared at it. An exhale, finished coffee and he walked through his cabin, back to the porch and around behind to the shack. He approached his companion awaiting him. After brushing it down, he jolted the saddle blanket into the air and let it fall on its back and positioned the saddle. The horse's eye slowly rolled to peer at him and he peered back; punctuated, steady whiffs of air through its large nostrils; the grinding of a grain. He tightened the cinch strap and loosened the flank strap, fixing the skirt and pulling on the stirrup, wrapping the belts around the underline. He led it outside to the wagon and locked the rods to the belts.

“Alright, chief.”

The horse pulled forward, the wagon lazily following, tired wheels circling through the dirt and grit. As they walked, Sutton threw crate after crate into the small bed and continued to walk along side until they got to the lines.

“Whoa.”

The horse halted. He unloaded two of the crates and walked in between a line of onions and beets. Setting the crates on the earth, he grasped the roots and loaded them inside; hunched

and resisting the cold, a faint declaration in the deaden landscape. Once finished, he returned to the wagon and repeated the movements for potatoes, cabbage, carrots, chicory and then he was riding his horse slowly towards town, towing his efforts. When the market was in clear vision, he said whoa. The horse halted. He stepped down and put his hand to his companion's forehead, took a breath. He began again, leading.

Arrival at Market Street. The dirt of the masses one with the swine and the cattle. Vendors lined the streets calling and cackling. Beggars walking aimlessly. A mantle of barren perversity. Sutton walked forward and came to his first vendor. A surly and podgy woman.

“What yeh got?”

“Crate of onions.”

“Onions. How much?”

“Two dollars.”

“Two dollars? Snot nosed shit.”

Sutton stared at her.

She shifted back and forth, uneasily, avoiding his eyes.

“Give me, heres 2, givem' to me.”

Her hand briefly disappeared into the large dirty depths known as her chest and returned with two tarnished silver dollars. Sutton turned and reached for the crate, traded with her and turned to go on as she mumbled profanities and shifted back and forth. He continued his routine as the day progressed, buying enough coal, a walk through the horrific filth, sodden with grief only felt by one of divide who wishes and who wishes. The day progressed and sun moved to its highest in the sky, crossing the forsaken scene like a mother searching for her lost child. A carrot stolen from his bundle. The thief ran crazily through the crowd. Sutton continued and led his horse through the maze in the street. An ancient woman, crumpled and swallowed in a heap of

soiled clothing, one eye socket empty, watched him as he walked. From her place on a set of boxes she smiled a toothless smile, licked her lips and snatched his wrist and pulled him towards her. Stench of rancid whiskey and pyramids of the morbid.

“What yeh gonna do boy?”

Sutton stared at her dark hollow socket. The horse’s ears twitched with alarm.

“Do yeh see what I see?”

“What do you see?”

“I see yeh dead. Yeh be dead boy.”

His eyes continued up to her head, a combination of dirt and grease and what was left of her thin hair. A fleeting moment. A tightened grip. Licking her lips.

“Would yeh let go of him, yeh crazy bitch?”

Johnboy pushed her back and she released his wrist, tumbling over boxes, smiling a garish smile.

“Yeh alright there, Sut? I say, yeh can’t go nowhere no more.”

Sutton adjusted himself.

“How are you John?”

“Oh I been real good. Me and the boys have ben freezing our asses off but we got a nice setup now.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeh should come over fer drinks.”

Sutton started again with the horse and wagon.

“Tomboy got shut out again, though. Aint gonna be back fer awhile.”

“How long?”

“No less than six months.”

“Well, at least he’ll get some sleep.”

The drunken friend rambled on.

Suddenly, a scene in the distance jolted through Sutton and released the buried memories in which he had neglected. They danced and flooded over him, robbing him of any warmth he held. Eyes unwavering, remembering. He stopped. Where the bank and the courthouse once met, he remembered the time of honest men’s strength. What was and is no longer, diminished to nothing more than a product of foul men’s whores.

“...Stupid son of a bitch he is, gettin locked up in jail. I had teh clean things up an I was as drunk as he was...Alright Sutton, yeh stay warm now. Come see me.”

Sutton stood, transfixed and watched the being that did not belong converse and deal at the bank, reasoning, bargaining, and fighting for the right to his land. And yet, he left so soon. All of the worlds crashed together and Sutton’s mind circled, swarmed and reeled for all that he lost. The damned ghost had drifted forth. And what was to become? To the lands beyond and back there are no answers there. Yes, I was his. He is no more and I have the drowned man’s burden. As he stood, the slightest movement told him the imagined figure may have seen him there: a lamented desire. And then he was gone and Sutton stood among the filth once more and blinked.

At the final place he sought to do business, he tied his horse to one of the stakes in the ground and walked inside the wooden building. Three men sat slouched in chairs, lazily fiddling with wood or picking their nails among the cool darkness, dust swirling where Sutton entered, a dead fire hissing in the corner. None stirred to look up as he stood in the entrance. He carefully eyed the dark room for a moment, waiting. When he took in a breath to speak, the one farthest from him spoke slowly without looking up, a half smile crawling across his face.

“And what do yeh want?”

“I have business with him. Is he here?”

“He don’t wanna talk to yeh. He done playin yer game.”

“I’m not playing anything.”

“Well, why yeh here then? Yeh didn’t come teh beg fer more time did yeh?”

Sutton looked up to the ceiling.

“When will he be back?”

“Yeh fuckin deaf? I told yeh boy, he don’t wanna talk no more.”

The one closest spit in a can on the floor.

“Ha.”

He watched the particles in the air sift slowly in the beam of light shining through one of the small windows.

“I have most of what he needs. You tell him that.”

The farthest one laughed and shook his head.

“Git on lil lamb.”

The dirtiest one blew a kiss.

Sutton ran his thumb along the door frame.

Once at the edge of the town, he halted the horse, climbed and mounted and turned to look back on the sorry horizon; the lost, rubbing his eyes. He footed the horse and they started home to his cabin with the empty wagon and the money he earned. The sun would set within the next hour and the cold was growing faster still.

And then, as Sutton began to gain speed, he saw a tiniest glint of a something.

“Whoa.”

The horse stopped.



He swung down and knelt with his hands on his knees a moment, staring at it. The outer lying desolation pressed inward. He let one hand slide off his knee and he picked it up, stood and brushed off the dirt. The horse and he stared at each other a moment as he traced and thumbed it in his hands. He looked around slowly for any sign of life.

He smiled.

“Let’s go home.”

When he arrived at his cabin, he brought the horse around to the shed and stripped off all of its gear, leaving a fresh blanket around him and insulating with more hay. He took his bag of coal from the wagon and finally walked inside. A fire lit and coffee made, he scooped his find out of his pocket and set it on the table and sat down in his chair, eyeing it.

Could the drowned man’s burden be dead with the tiniest piece?

He slept with the dreams of triumph and sadness, riving at his work and seeing the old decrepit demon that would not and could not be silenced. An effort lost to the cold; to his father, punctured and horrific. And as he slept, a different kind of discomfort surfaced in which he had never felt before. His core filled and all breath was gone, a fire spreading through his lungs and then he was awake, smoke filling his cabin. He stumbled and coughed as his eyes watered and he crawled to what he knew to be the front of the cabin. On his feet and the door falling in, more smoke poured. Towards violent reds ahead, he staggered off of his porch to see the three intruders on their horses. Each man stained with smoke and darkened with ash, fleeing his land, cackling, spitting. The three from town.

“My God.”

All through his fields, torturous flames devoured every crop or effort. Smoke rolling thickly to the sky, adding decay. A nearby farmer and his family looked on, huddled together from their home. The chance for survival lost to the hands of the condemned. A drowned man’s

burden. On his knees, he dug his hands into the earth and he cursed what couldn't be and he sank below the smoke. The strength we carried, broken by the son. Oh father, you see the fall of what was sacred. But he who felt the fire would fight. After a short while had passed and raising his head, he saw his companion, radiant in the distance, magnificent color blurred in the smoke, running true beyond the flames. If this was death, he would not stay.

Sutton ran into his cabin, grabbed his boots and dropped the small find into his pocket.

As he passed the failing land he brought his eyes to the mountains.

Soon the fiery waste was behind him and his companion joined, his palm to its forehead.

And they walked towards the mountains.

Beyond was the newly reckoned prospect of a tired man's hope; a drowned man's burden freed by the fire. Such things would pass and he who survived would ascend.

He would rise and he would rise.