

In 1940

Every day the news was more depressing, and more frightening . As weeks went by, rapacious German armies were trampling, catapulting into neighboring countries and by force taking them under control, conquering surrounding European territory, and supposedly hearts and minds, marching on relentlessly. By distant reporter voices, tremulous, excited, but withal steady. from the radio these events were chronicled in an evermore concerned swarm to the dining rooms of the United States. Even from far away, by the newspapers and especially the urgency of the news on radio could cast a gray shadowy gloom, even sinister in import, as from a heavy pall. Middle October brought early clouds to the normally crystal skies. Even the usually frolicsome Kate Smith had recent begun, with the iron clouds of October gathered overhead, to send out the refrain of her prayerful and insistent "God Bless America" into a saddening public, whereas Jack Benny or Burns and Allen, as incompatible to the comedy of their own radio styles, still tended to shun too frequent mention of conquering events. The radio often succumbed to static. Winds from the level northwest plains carried sometimes this far a quickly moving duststorm that smothered the prairie,

mostly cultivated now in this black-clay region into farmland, covering with a finely-ground brown blanket. Otherwise this part of the aged Texas prairie, settled for the better part of seventy-five years with pastures and wide fields, remained much the same. Flora Durst considered that dust just another one day or two of extra work, trying to wipe it from every corner. The red ants began their endless treks to carry what they could store in their tunnels for the coming winter. There was ample enough food for farmer families, from the pastures and vegetable gardens, so not so much worry as in more cityfied places that had suffered doggedly from the lingering Depression that had lasted for seemingly interminable long lean years. People were poor, but not much more poor than usual were; and there was as always plenty necessary work to be done on the farms, just to keep life flowing along. All the bounty of the summer had been pickled or jarred and stored colourfully arrayed already in the pantry; now there was only a few gourds or some pumpkins or hard late squash, and soon coming the time to pick up persimmons and then the pecans. Also soon in the snapping cool of November at least two hams would hang in the smoke house, sides of bacon, and cannisters of cracklings. Usually the seasonal routines remained familiarly the same here in this farmland of Texas, as they elsewhere mostly did across the wide eternal and rural prairie of the gentle United States. Seasonal—

everything had its' season, and usually for the most part slow, placid, and predictable. People were accustomed snugly to this predictability. But this rumble of news, distant but disturbingly turbulent from far Europe and already activating a war striking our friends the French and the British, was becoming constant and alarming, as frightening as the season of tornadoes that swept blackly through the constant awareness of people's minds in the springtime.

Keeping the house scrubbed, and the meals cooked and washed up, and the yard swept, milking, collecting eggs, tending the vegetable garden and flowerbeds, raising and feeding the chickens, washing and ironing, sewing, pickling and canning, church work and holidays (so they were called) and visiting the sick, all the attendant chores, kept Flora Durst running in a dashing and somewhat wearying energy. Resignedly smiling, she coped with every day from early morning to regular accomplished bedtime. Only having been married four and a half years, and in this house for not-quite three, Flora, since late last summer, was thirty-five years old. She was beginning often, unlike most time before, and now more than ever, to feel not quite so young anymore. But withal, married housekeeping each day was a pleasure of busyness (after all she had grown up in farm life); and she leapt to it. It did not lend itself to much, or for that matter any, idleness. Time was racing, if something did not get finished

today it would be patiently waiting to be continued tomorrow. The farm work was a continual repetition. Mister Ott Durst, sometimes with seasonal hired hands when needed, took care of the field work, the harvesting, and the needs of the livestock. At any rate life was a parade of toil, anyway, to be accomplished each day and put cleanly neat upon the shelf. The house the Dursts had moved into had been inherited from an old bachelor. It was roomy enough, and sturdy, freshly white, gingerbread, green-shuttered, entirely typical of the old-fashioned immigrant German style favoured in Texas communities. Now it, plus all the outbuildings and barns, and the farm lands belonged to the Dursts themselves, and they loved to adore it. They worked, on the pride of a homeplace of their own.

Perhaps it was the far news, the gnawing at tranquility of the static-y radio, or something else. It was about this time that Flora began to feel—she wasn't sure what—just strange. She dragged about. She seemed heavy. It was not just that autumn was coming, or that the news was so depressing, or (who knew?)... She just did not feel,,,right. Flora felt more doubly tired than usual. She tried to hint concerns to her mother, but was reluctant to talk of complaints. She tried not to think about such too much. However, it nagged at her, weighed on her, much like the calamity of news from over the seas that worried from the radio.

She would listen tiredly to the reassuring chats from President Roosevelt, and for a while be settled. He had certainly saved the lives of her family, the very old and poor, all farm families as well as others with his safety-net establishment of the social New Deal. She could do nothing about far-away events; but she gradually came to feel that she must do something concerning her self—the feeling of her well-being, her undefined health. She must do something to assure, and reassure.

All the hay had long been cut and baled, and secured in the barns. Flora had tried successfully to wait until those black hands alongside with the poorer white, had picked all the last of the cotton. Then she said she could be ready, after harvest, the postponed but inevitable trip to a doctor's office. She went one morning late to the telephone office in the community so she could call for an appointment in the doctor's schedule. Ott was to drive with her the twenty-five miles, and Flora, with a feeling that it might be a help in some vaguely indefinable way, asked her mother to accompany them. Flora's mother, Frances Ora Cass, was in her quiet way concerned for her daughter, while out of the uncertain timidity of her concern she had suggested perhaps a patent tonic from the drug emporium in the village which had always been a preferred methodology; but Flora thought it might be better and comforting to seek more. They rode, Flora

immaculately dressed and powdered and wearing her newest hat, and her mother with a scarf around her head, and looked out the Ford windows at the passing ochre-brown grasses and country of fields. All looked sturdy, seasonable, and implacable. Arriving finally in town they all went quietly into the doctor's small office, and stood fidgety while the nurse asked the preliminaries. Then, in her turn, Flora, bowing her head to a path on the floor while following the nurse, went into the inner office alone, and then into the examining room. The doctor took vital signs and examined Flora; he asked her questions. He palpated, and asked her more questions. He felt her, pressing into her liver and intestines, and hard into her lower abdomen, and in places where she was uncomfortable. Flora watched, searching quietly, his face. The doctor merely sighed.

Ott and Mrs. Cass sat silent in the outer office parlour, and stared at the heavy clock on the wall, Mrs. Cass clutching her purse, and Mr. Durst holding his hat. Mr. Durst waited in the office parlour until he was called in; he replaced his hat and followed the nurse. At length Flora, red-faced, emerged from the inner door. She stood before Mrs. Cass, and at that moment, could say nothing, just shaking her head. "Later", she whispered. In another few moments Mr. Durst appeared, and they all walked in silence out onto the sidewalk and to the car. Only a few tentative questions, with terse quick answers, and the trip back to the

farm was in mostly silence. The miles churned; Ott turned off the paved road. Dryness puffed up from the dirt driveway through the fields, and at the outer fence the thick silence was interrupted when the Ford rumbled through, clattering the old pipes of the cattleguard.

When at last at home, Mr. Durst went inside. He sat in a chair, then went and sat in a chair at the dining table. His face was immobile stone.

Under the big tree while stopped in front of the garage just outside the yard fence, Flora continued to sit in the Ford with her Mother. Inside, the car was warm. Flora rolled down the window glass, but did not open the door. Her mother sat behind her in the back seat, and was not going to move until Flora did. Flora still sat, facing forward, and after a prolonged silence spoke as if to the other side of the windshield, "It's still such a shock. I think I'm in shock. I really never expected the worst, the worst. I don't...I don't know what to do."

Frances Ora wanted to shout aloud, to shout at her first-born "You must save yourself!", but a shout was not her manner of expressing herself. "You, as we all, must do what we must do, to do what must be done; and make it the best we can."

“Mother, what could...? I don't see why...Why !? Time was already short. I thought...I so looked forward to...” Flora stared, across the yard, to the white house. Along the fence toward the tree and the back of the garage crept the vining rose given to her by her oldest brother and her parents when she had moved here, that she had planted after Flora and Ott, been married a year, had moved from the home of the Widow Durst. Beyond that was the fenced-in vegetable garden ending a walkway at the side of the house where vines against the afternoon sun at the western side of the porch hid the porch swing, and she could see, still farther more beyond, the orchard and back pasture. This was her home now. Home.

Frances Ora watched the shadows of the leaves swaying in the light, shadowy trembling along the seat cover. A long silent moment drifted down. When she spoke, she said, “Flora, I've led a simple life. For more than sixty years...there have been events—some bad, but mostly the good ones. For me, it has been easy.” Another moment of silence bore down. “I should know something to tell you.--But I don't.”

Flora sat, almost shaking. To steady herself she smoothed her hand over the seat. “Well, the doctor said the tumour needs...has to be removed; and it will

be tested to tell if it's...really dangerous; and they will remove all the growth, all...all. He said it's rather standard; I'll be well...But I won't...will not be able...ever to have...have children.”

Frances Ora, catching a deep breath, almost gasped aloud. The words were heavy; they were heavier than lead. She did not know what to say—what one could say—woman and daughter, mother to child. “You know, Flora, how sorry I am, how very sorry. It breaks one's heart—shatters it. But, life...life is an unpredictable... Consider your sister, too: apparently she won't be having any.”

“But that's different. It's, I suppose, her choice. I can't—should not say. I don't think she wants any.”

“Perhaps not. I would not be sure.”

“I...I've been given no choice.” Her eyes filled to overflowing. She sat rigid in the seat, then slumped. Large wet tears slid silently down her cheeks. The tears released themselves, while her shoulders, her upper body shook.

“But life must be lived, lived as it is given out. When we have a hold on it, you must think of saving your own self.”

“Oh, Mama...”. Why? Why has this happened to me? It's as if God didn't...”

Frances Ora took the white cotton handkerchief from her face, saying, “Hush now...”

As Flora turned, with some difficulty, in the seat to look back, she considered, thoughts flying; everyone sacrifices certain things in life...you either decide, or someone decides for you, or it just turns, oftentimes, out that way...

“Wouldn't you be more comfortable inside?”

“I don't know,” Flora said.

At last, she opened the door, gathered up her purse, and gloves, and went into the house, leading the way; while Frances, stopping to roll up the car window, followed.

* * *

The decision had fallen all around her, had fallen right on top of her, scattering debris that she could not push aside. It echoed like voices, distant, anxious, from the radio. Flora could not escape. She was trapped in the darkness, the weight of her dilemma. Ott's family, though his grandparents and

sometimes his parents had still read and sometimes spoke in German, had not considered belonging to the old country since before the First “Great” World War. Ott ceased to concern himself with the news from Europe's war. He said, “It has nothing to do with us. It will not come here.” Flora worried anyway; now it had become her habit. For several agonizing days Flora considered her situation. There were no other options. The operation had to be. Time was rolling by. She tossed, She turned. She faced the wall. Seconds turned into minutes, minutes turned into hours, hours into longer hours. At times, she still wept; then she would awake in the morning and do the things that had to be done, cooking, dragging through cleaning, planning a menu, making a shopping list, eggs must be collected and washed, daily things, all those things. At times, in the stillness of the house, then she, while stopped at the window, would consider: how should they, possibly, other women, any woman, how could it be sanely possible?—who would want to bring forth a child into this world?—a hard world of toil, heartbreak, a threatening world, a dangerous world, a world of war. Still...? That is what people did, almost every day, given the chance, given an opportunity. How possibly could, would, she even carry on with her own life—in all those years of emptiness?

One morning Flora woke to the reality, that with all the trepidation, the dread, with all the pain, with all endurance—she would, past all inevitability, get through this. She must. And, whatever problems there would be in the future: this war—it could not last forever, perhaps this trial of fortitude and resilience—who know what to come? For someone still almost young life would go on. It would just not be life she could give to a child, not any, not one.

The day of the surgery was confirmed; the arrangements proceeded. Flora and Ott drove the long silent drive into town and went into the small hospital. Ott stood holding her arm until the nurses took her away; and later he sat in the room. Countless hours Flora was readied; Ott went and came again. The doctor seemed to think it all went, at last, without complication. He soothed with the idea that all looked ordinary, and that the biopsy would result to be normal; again he assured Flora that she might expect a long healthy life of which she could will to make the best, it would just not be possible for her to make children.

After the operation Flora remained in the hospital for four weeks. Flora was glad to be alive; but she was sad. She lay for hours with nothing to do but think about the loss. Dr. Smith checked on her. Somehow she seemed to dread seeing him approach in his white smock, but he remained reassuring, calmly

holding her hand; the nurses were efficiently kind. At points distraught in the long afternoons, with nothing else to do, Flora had bouts of weeping; eventually she might pick up a magazine, but the advertizements of motherhood were depressing to look at. Flora thought,--I must do something. I need to get past. Flora'a mother and father and sister came, her brothers came, Widow Durst came, other family came, neighbours and visitors came—they brought flowers, and plants, and cards. But all she could do was smile wanly, and thank them. It was only mentioned that a tumour had been removed, nothing more, and then the conversation was finished—the subject finished without reprise. They spoke of weather, and seasonal things, and news, and how lovely the flowers and neighbours were. At last, she was to get up, pack up the flowers and plants, look forward, have Ott accompany her to home, and look into the future--

The mornings were chill now, the year coming toward its' ebb. Being the youngest son in a German household, even after several generations in the United States--catered to, adored, simply at first for nothing more than male-ness--Ott had never even learned how to fry an egg, or even just to boil one...Ott was a total stranger around the kitchen, though he had learned to spread butter on bread for making toast. So there, somewhat a little slowly at the first weeks at home, Flora went about her usual and waiting chores. Sometimes she would

catch herself, stop herself from sighing. There was work she must do. President Roosevelt said that we would remain neutral, that the United States would stay—with reservations, bad as it might become—out of the war. He said, from his fireside, we would be neutral.

Flora listened, considered, remembered that she would get through this. She must. What would she do? Strength was what was needed. And endurance. Happy days, were on the sunny side of the street. Christmas would be coming rather soon—and then yet another year. They would sing “Auld Lang Syne” as always.

--J. F. Lowe