
Opening Extract from...

Days Without End

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A Novel

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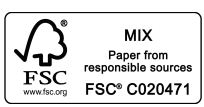

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For my son Toby

I saw a wayworn trav'ler
In tattered garments clad
John Matthias

Chapter One

The method of laying out a corpse in Missouri sure took the proverbial cake. Like decking out our poor lost troopers for marriage rather than death. All their uniforms brushed down with lamp-oil into a state never seen when they were alive. Their faces clean shaved, as if the embalmer sure didn't like no whiskers showing. No one that knew him could have recognised Trooper Watchorn because those famous Dundrearies was gone. Anyway Death likes to make a stranger of your face. True enough their boxes weren't but cheap wood but that was not the point. You lift one of those boxes and the body makes a big sag in it. Wood cut so thin at the mill it was more a wafer than a plank. But dead boys don't mind things like that. The point was, we were glad to see them so well turned out, considering.

I am talking now about the finale of my first engagement in the business of war. 1851 it was most likely. Since the bloom was gone off me, I had volunteered aged seventeen in Missouri. If you had all your limbs they took you. If you were a one-eyed boy they might take you too

even so. The only pay worse than the worst pay in America was army pay. And they fed you queer stuff till your shit just stank. But you were glad to get work because if you didn't work for the few dollars in America you hungered, I had learned that lesson. Well, I was sick of hungering.

Believe me when I say there is a certain type of man loves soldiering, no matter how mean the pay. First thing, you got a horse. He might be a spavined nag, he might be plagued by colic, he might show a goitre in his neck the size of a globe, but he was a horse. Second place, you got a uniform. It might have certain shortcomings in the stitching department, but it was a uniform. Blue as a bluebottle's hide.

Swear to God, army was a good life. I was seventeen or thereabouts beginning, I could not say for certain. I will not say the years going up to my army days was easy. But all that dancing put muscle on me, in a wiry sort of way. I'm not speaking against my customers, I'm speaking for them. If you pay a dollar for a dance you like a good few sweeps of the floor for that, God knows.

Yes, the army took me, I'm proud to say. Thank God John Cole was my first friend in America and so in the army too and the last friend for that matter. He was with me nearly all through this exceeding surprising Yankee sort of life which was good going in every way. No more

than a boy like me but even at sixteen years old he looked like a man right enough. I first saw him when he was fourteen or so, very different. That's what the saloon owner said too. Time's up, fellas, you ain't kids no more, he says. Dark face, black eyes, Indian eyes they called them that time. Glittering. Older fellas in the platoon said Indians were just evil boys, blank-faced evil boys fit to kill you soon as look at you. Said Indians were to be cleared off the face of the earth, most like that would be the best policy. Soldiers like to talk high. That's how courage is made most like, said John Cole, being an understanding man.

John Cole and me we came to the volunteering point together of course. We was offering ourselves in a joint sale I guess and the same look of the arse out of his trousers that I had he had too. Like twins. Well when we finished up at the saloon we didn't leave in no dresses. We must have looked like beggar boys. He was born in New England where the strength died out of his father's earth. John Cole was only twelve when he lit out a-wandering. First moment I saw him I thought, there's a pal. That's what it was. Thought he was a dandy-looking sort of boy. Pinched though he was in the face by hunger. Met him under a hedge in goddamn Missouri. We was only under the hedge as a consequence the heavens were open in a downpour. Way out on those mudflats beyond old St Louis. Expect to see a sheltering duck sooner than a human.

Heavens open. I scarper for cover and suddenly he's there. Might have never seen him otherwise. Friend for a whole life. Strange and fateful encounter you could say. Lucky. But first thing he draws a little sharp knife he carried made of a broken spike. He was intending to stick it in me if I looked to go vicious against him. He was a very kept-back-looking thirteen years old I reckon. Anyhows under the hedge aforementioned when we got to talking he said his great-grandma was a Indian whose people were run out of the east long since. Over in Indian country now. He had never met them. Don't know why he told me that so soon only I was very friendly and maybe he thought he would lose that blast of friendship if I didn't know the bad things quickly. Well. I told him how best to look at that. Me, the child of poor Sligonians blighted likewise. No, us McNultys didn't got much to crow about.

Maybe out of respect for the vulnerable soul of John Cole I might skip ahead violently and avoid an account of our earlier years. Except he might also acknowledge that those years were important in their way and I cannot say either that they constituted in any way a time of shameful suffering in particular. Were they shameful? I don't see eye to eye with that. Let me call them our dancing days. Why the hell not. After all we was only children obliged to survive in a dangerous terrain. And survive we did and as you see I have lived to tell the tale. Having made

our acquaintance under an anonymous hedge it seemed natural and easy to join together in the enterprise of continuing survival. That is John Cole in his minority and I placed our steps side by side on the rainy road and proceeded into the next town in that frontier district where there were hundreds of rough miners working and a half dozen tumultuous saloons set up in a muddy thoroughfare endeavouring to entertain them.

Not that we knew much of that. In these times John Cole was a slight boy as I have laboured to illustrate with his river-black eyes and his lean face as sharp as a hunting dog. I was my younger self. That is though I was maybe fifteen after my Irish and Canadian and American adventures I looked as young as him. But I had no idea what I looked like. Children may feel epic and large to theyselves and yet be only scraps to view.

Just sick of stumbling round. Two is better together, he said.

So then our idea was to find work slopping out or any of the jobs abhorrent to decent folk. We didn't know much about adult persons. We just didn't know hardly a thing. We were willing to do anything and even exulted in the fact. We were ready to go down into sewers and shovel the shit along. We might have been happy to commit obscure murders, if it didn't involve capture and punishment, we didn't know. We were two wood-shavings of humanity in

a rough world. We were of the opinion our share of food was there if we sought it out. The bread of heaven John Cole called it because after the fall of his father he has much frequented those places where hymns and meagre food was put into him in equal measure.

Weren't many places like that in Daggsville. Weren't any. Daggsville was all uproar, mucky horses, banging doors, queer shouting. By this time in my biographical ventures I must confess I was wearing an old wheat-sack, tied at the waist. It sorta looked like clothing but not much. John Cole was better in an old queer black suit that musta been three hundred years old, judging by the gaps in it. Anyway he was having a breezy time of it about the crotch, far as I could see. You could nearly reach in and measure his manhood, so your eyes did their best to be kept looking away. I devised a good method to deal with such a thing and fixed fiercely on his face, which was no work in itself, it was a pleasing face. Next thing comes up in our view a spanking new building all fresh wood and even a last sparkle in the recently beaten nailheads. *Saloon* a sign said, no more nor less. And underneath, on a smaller sign hanging from a string, *Clean boys wanted*.

Look, see, says John Cole, who didn't have the great learning I had, but had a little none the less. Well, he says, by my mother's loving heart, we do fulfil half of that requirement.

Straight in, and there was a highly pleasant quotient of good dark wood, dark panelling floor to ceiling, a long bar as sleek and black as an oil-seep. Then we felt like bugs in a girl's bonnet. Alien. Pictures of those fine American scenes of grandeur that are more comfortable to gaze on than to be in. Man there behind the bar, complete with chamois cloth, philosophically polishing a surface that needed no polishing. It was plain to see all was a new enterprise. There was a carpenter finishing up on the stairs going to the upward rooms, fitting the last section of a rail. The bartender had his eyes closed or he might have seen us sooner. Might even have given us the bum's rush. Then the eyes open and instead of the drawing back and cussing at us we expected this more discerning individual smiled, looked pleased to see us.

You looking for clean boys? says John Cole, a tincture pugilistic right enough, still prophesying menaces.

You are right welcome, the man says.

We are? said John Cole.

You are. You are just the thing, especially the smaller one there, he says. That was me he was meaning. Then, as if he feared John Cole might take offence and stamp out away – But you'll do too, he says. I'm giving fifty cents a night, fifty cents a night each, and all you can drink, if you drink easy, and you can bunk down in the stable behind us, yes indeed, cosy and comfortable and warm as cats.

That's if you give satisfaction.

And what's the work? says John, suspicious.

Easiest work in the world, he says.

Such as?

Why, dancing, dancing is all it is. Just dancing.

We ain't no dancers far as I know, says John, flummoxed now, violently disappointed.

You don't need to be dancers as such in the accepted dictionary definition of the word, says the man. It's not high-kicking anyhow.

Alright, says John, lost now just from a sense aspect – but, we ain't got no clothes to be dancing in, that's for sure, he said, displaying his very particular condition.

Why, all's supplied, all's supplied, he says.

The carpenter had paused in his work and was sitting on the steps now, smiling big.

Come with me, gentlemen, says the bartender, likely the owner too, with his swank, and I will show you your clothing of work.

Then he strode over his spanking new floor in his noisy boots, and opened the door into his office. It had a sign on it said *Office* so we knew. Why, boys, after you, he said, holding the door. I got my manners. And I hope you got your manners, because even rough miners love manners, yes indeed.

So we troop in, all eyes. There's a rack of clothes like

a gaggle of hanged women. Because it's women's clothes. Dresses. There was nothing else there, and we looked around thoroughly, we did.

Dancing starts eight sharp, he says. Pick something that fits. Fifty cents, each. And any tips you get is yours to keep.

But, mister, says John Cole, like he was talking to a pitiful insane person. We ain't no women. Can't you see. I is a boy and so is Thomas here.

No, you ain't women, I can see. I could verify that second you came in. You fine young boys. Sign says looking for boys. I would gladly sign up women but ain't no women in Daggsville but the storeman's wife and the stableman's little daughter. Otherwise it's all men here. But men without women can get to pining. It's a sort of sadness gets into their hearts. I aim to get it out and make a few bucks in the process, yes, sir, the great American way. They need only the illusion, only the illusion of the gentler sex. You're it, if you take this employment. It's just the dancing. No kissing, cuddling, feeling, or fumbling. Why, just the nicest, the most genteel dancing. You won't hardly credit how nice, how gentle a rough miner dances. Make you cry to see it. You sure is pretty enough in your way, if you don't mind me saying, especially the smaller one. But you'll do too, you'll do too, he says, seeing John Cole's newly acquired professional

pride coming up again. Then he cocks an eyebrow, interrogatory like.

John Cole looks at me. I didn't care. Better than starving in a wheat-sack.

Alright, he says.

Gonna put a bath for you in the stable. Gonna give you soap. Gonna supply the underwears, *muy importante*. Brought with me from St Louis. You'll fill them fine, boys, I reckon you'll fill them fine, and after a few glasses no man I know will object. A new era in the history of Daggsville. When the lonesome men got girls to dance with. And all in a comely fashion, in a comely fashion.

And so we trooped out again, shrugging our shoulders, as if to say, it was a mad world, but a lucky one too, now and then. Fifty cents, each. How many times, in how many bowers before sleep in our army days, out on the prairie, in lonesome declivities, we liked to repeat that, John and me, over and over, and never failing in our laughter, Fifty cents – each.

That particular night in the lost history of the world Mr Titus Noone, for that was his name, helped us into our dresses with a sort of manly discretion. Give him his due, he seemed to know about buttons and ribbons and such. He had even had the foresight to sprinkle us with perfumes. This was the cleanest I had been in three years, maybe ever. I had not been noted in Ireland for my clean-

liness truth be told, poor farmers don't see baths. When there is no food to eat the first thing that goes is even a flimsy grasp of hygiene.

The saloon filled quickly. Posters had been speedily put up around town, and the miners had answered the call. Me and John Cole sat on two chairs against a wall. Very girl-like, well behaved, sedate, and nice. We never even looked at the miners, we stared straight ahead. We hadn't ever seen too many sedate girls but a inspiration got into us. I had a yellow wig of hair and John had a red one. We musta looked like the flag of some country from the neck up, sitting there. Mr Noone had thoughtfully filled out our bodices with cotton. Okay but our feet were bare, he said he had forgotten shoes in St Louis. They might be a later addition. He said to mind where the miners stepped, we said we would. Funny how as soon as we hove into those dresses everything changed. I never felt so contented in my life. All miseries and worries fled away. I was a new man now, a new girl. I was freed, like those slaves were freed in the coming war. I was ready for anything. I felt dainty, strong, and perfected. That's the truth. I don't know how it took John Cole, he never said. You had to love John Cole for what he chose never to say. He said plenty of the useful stuff. But he never speaked against that line of work, even when it went bad for us, no. We were the first girls in Daggsville and we weren't the worst.

Every citizen knows that miners are all sorts of souls. They come into a country, I seen it a thousand times, and strip away all the beauty, and then there is black filth in the rivers and the trees just seem to wither back like affronted maids. They like rough food, rough whiskey, rough nights, and truth to tell, if you is a Indian girl, they will like you in all the wrong ways. Miners go into tent towns and do their worst. There were never such raping men as miners, some of them. Other miners are teachers, professors in more civilised lands, fallen priests and bankrupt storeowners, men whose women have abandoned them as useless fixtures. Every brand and gradation of soul, as the crop measurer might say, and will say. But they all came into Noone's saloon and there was a change, a mighty change. Because we were pretty girls and we were the darlings of their souls. And anyhow, Mr Noone was standing at the bar with a shotgun handy in front of him, in plain sight. You wouldn't believe the latitude the law allows in America for a saloon owner to be killing miners, it's wide.

Maybe we were like memories of elsewhere. Maybe we were the girls of their youth, the girls they had first loved. Man, we was so clean and nice, I wished I could of met myself. Maybe for some, we were the first girls they loved. Every night for two years we danced with them, there was never a moment of unwelcome movements. That's a fact. It might be more exciting to say we had crotches

pushed against us, and tongues pushed into our mouths, or calloused hands grabbing at our imaginary breasts, but no. They was the gentlemen of the frontier, in that saloon. They fell down pulverised by whiskey in the small hours, they roared with songs, they shot at each other betimes over cards, they battered each other with fists of iron, but when it came to dancing they were that pleasing d'Artagnan in the old romances. Big pigs' bellies seemed to flatten out and speak of more elegant animals. Men shaved for us, washed for us, and put on their finery for us, such as it was. John was Joanna, myself was Thomasina. We danced and we danced. We whirled and we whirled. Matter of fact, end of all we were good dancers. We could waltz, slow and fast. No better boys was ever knowed in Daggsville I will venture. Or purtier. Or cleaner. We swirled about in our dresses and Mr Carmody the storeman's wife, Mrs Carmody of course by name, being a seamstress, let out our outfits as the months went by. Maybe it is a mistake to feed vagrants, but mostly we grew upward instead of out. Maybe we were changing, but we were still the girls we had been in our customers' eyes. They spoke well of us and men came in from miles around to view us and get their name on our little cardboard lists. 'Why, miss, will you do me the honour of a dance?' 'Why, yes, sir, I have ten minutes left at quarter of twelve, if you care to fill that vacancy.' 'I will be most obliged.' Two useless, dirt-risen

boys never had such entertainment. We was asked our hands in marriage, we was offered carts and horses if we would consent to go into camp with such and such a fella, we was given gifts such as would not have embarrassed a desert Arab in Arabia, seeking his bride. But of course, we knew the story in our story. They knew it too, maybe, now I am considering it. They were free to offer themselves into the penitentiary of matrimony because they knew it was imaginary. It was all aspects of freedom, happiness, and joy.

For that filthy vile life of a miner is a bleak life and only one in ten thousand finds his gold, truth to tell. Course in Daggsville they was digging for lead so all the more true. Mostly that life is all muck and water. But in Mr Noone's saloon was two diamonds, Mr Noone said.

But nature will have his way and bit by bit the bloom wore off us, and we was more like boys than girls, and more like men than women. John Cole anyhow in particular saw big changes in them two years. He was beginning to give giraffes a run for their money, height-wise. Mr Noone couldn't find dresses to fit him, and Mrs Carmody couldn't stitch fast enough. It was the end of an era, God knowed. One of the happiest works I ever had. Then the day came when Mr Noone had to speak. And we was shaking hands then in the dawnlight, and tears even were shed, and we were going to be just memories of diamonds

in Daggsville. Mr Noone says he will send us a letter every feast day of St Thomas and St John and give us all the news. And we was to do likewise. And we lit out with our bit of dollars saved for our hoped-for cavalry days. And the queer thing was, Daggsville was deserted that morning, and no one to cheer us away. We knew we was just fragments of legend and had never really existed in that town. There is no better feeling.