

## **JETLAG, ALL OF THIS WAS MINE, FELL WINGS... DON RICARDO'S REPORT FROM THE HIGH RHINE... MARCH-APRIL 2016**

It seems churlish to complain, but this jetlag grows old. Is this not a wonderful life, to be entitled to fly back and forth across the ocean a couple of times a year? Yes and no. It takes a toll, and it doesn't go easier with experience. One long day flying west is tolerable, and you slip more easily into the new time zone going that way. Coming back, you land early the next morning, with seven hours of your life vanished, your legs stumbling along like they belong to someone else, your mind hopelessly scrambled. On the train between terminals you hear a soundtrack of Alpen horns, then cowbells, then cows mooing. Home.

Edith's brother Rudolf was there to meet us when we cleared customs. Back at our flat, she went straight to work unpacking. I circled around like a dog and headed for the sofa. I had every intention to work up another newsletter when I got back to my desk a couple of days later. But the pieces weren't falling together. I turned my attention to another task on the list: writing a synopsis to the novel to pitch to a prospective agent or publisher. We've been back a week now, and this has taken me longer than I anticipated. I began with the first verse and chorus of "All of This Was Mine," a song I wrote inspired by a story appearing in the *Galveston Daily News*:

*The Twentieth Century just begun, I married my first husband Tom. He was my brave engineer, a railroad man and my sweetheart dear. He courted me in Baton Rouge, we swore our love forever true. Followed work to Galveston, settled there and built a home. A wood frame cottage near the beach, on the hottest days there was still a breeze. A place that we could call our own, supper on when work was done. We were young then, those were good times. On the Island there was sunshine. And our baby daily growing, and the knowing All of This Was Mine.*

The Story:

1885. Tom Clancy, fifteen, an Irish-blooded St. Louis street kid, begins his railroad apprenticeship under the tutelage of master mechanic, Otto Meyer who becomes a father figure to the boy.

Against an historical backdrop of strikes and labor troubles—and death of Tom's mother—we are given a foretaste of events to come when the St Louis Tornado of 1896 nearly kills Tom and wipes out Otto's family. In the fall of 1898 he takes leave of St. Louis on a steamboat, a romantic move for one who normally thinks of himself as more practical. But he has read Mark Twain and feels the expense is justified. He makes the acquaintance of a steamboat engineer who provides him with a connection that leads to a job in Baton Rouge. Tom sees a young woman on the train from New Orleans and helps her with her bag. This woman will later become his wife.

Like Tom, Sarah Ann Clement lost her father when she was young. A school teacher living at a home for young ladies, she has a sister in New Orleans. She has recently lost her mother, was returning from the funeral when Tom saw her on the train. By chance they meet again at a Methodist church fair. They observe a proper courtship and marry. But they find their happiness threatened by hate notes, a brick through their window, and sabotage at work. Tom, a Yankee, heeds the advice of his boss and takes leave of Baton Rouge with his bride. Now a junior engineer, they have a pass to Galveston where he has been recommended for a job with the Galveston Wharves Railroad. They arrive on the Island Thanksgiving Day, 1899. She is, or will shortly be, pregnant. Their happiness unbound, they look to the future.

In a second brush with death by hurling chaos, Tom's train is blown off the causeway in the Storm of 1900. His leg smashed, he clings to a railroad tie, floats ashore on the mainland side. Through the

help of others and her own grit, Sarah manages to reach the Tremont Hotel on the Strand, where about a thousand other people have sought refuge. Assisted by a midwife, she gives birth to their child there, a son. That afternoon she goes downstairs and surveys the devastation. She learns her husband's train and crew were lost in the Storm. She names her son Tom, after his father. She and the baby are among the first to leave the Island by ship, providentially bound for New Orleans. Her sister takes her in, giving her the room their mother stayed in.

Two months pass before Tom recovers sufficiently to return to Galveston. He walks with a cane. He finds their old neighborhood gone, wiped clean like a slate. He believes Sarah has perished in the Storm. He learns his boss at the Galveston Wharves has drowned. In the confusion of the aftermath a phone inquiry from Sarah was never recorded. Convinced she perished in the Storm, he drifts up to Fort Worth where he contracts pneumonia. The doctors suggest he go west to drier air. Nearly dead on arrival, he is taken off the train in Las Vegas, Territory of New Mexico and carried by ambulance to a sanitarium. Rosina Carillo, a nurse working there, is determined to save him. A rape victim, Rosina has an illegitimate son about the same age as Tom's son by Sarah.

When she has recovered sufficiently, Sarah begins helping out at her sister's coffee shop. She is courted there by one of the regular customers, a well-to-do businessman whom she will eventually marry. Under the care of Rosina, Tom begins a slow recovery.

Both Tom and Sarah remarry and have children. A secularist and a skeptic, Tom finds himself moving more in the direction of religious faith. Being Irish, he figures he is Catholic. Raised in the Methodist church, Sarah goes the other way—she is, if anything, angry with God. When they were together on the Island Tom had always insisted that their children have an education free from religious indoctrination. Now these issues have ceased to bother him. For the sake of convenience (and because she is revolted by the practice of baptism by immersion, as observed by the church to which her new husband belongs), Sarah keeps her Methodist affiliation.

Though he will never drive a locomotive again, Tom soon finds work at the Santa Fe depot in Las Vegas. In time he becomes the Station Manager there. Children come and years pass. Rosina, who shares her mother's gift of clairvoyance, has a disturbing vision that Tom's first wife is still alive. At her insistence he sets off on a journey to New Orleans where he finds Sarah's sister and learns Rosina's vision is correct. Betty, Sarah's sister, arranges a clandestine meeting. Sarah wrestles with her conscience for having to concoct a story to tell her unsuspecting husband. Tom and Sarah meet at a boathouse by Lake Pontchartrain. They vow their love but realize they must go on with their new lives. She has sent her son and the driver off on an errand. When they return she goes off herself with the driver and leaves father and son together. Later with the family at dinner Sarah confesses to the ruse and tells the whole story.

Tom returns to his family, stopping first in St. Louis where he visits his mother's grave, and where he pays a visit to his old friend and mentor, Otto. Home with Rosina and the kids, they have a joyous reunion as he tells of his journey, and especially to his adopted son, Juan Jesus, he tells them about his own son, now adopted by Sarah's new husband. He promises the boy can come out and visit when he gets a little older, and this will come to pass a few years later.

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There's the story, winnowed down. While I have no idea of what is to become of this, I think it's worth mentioning how I came by the idea: Years ago I wrote a song called "A Useful Girl Who Could

Sew,” about a Cheyenne Indian girl whose body was dug up by a road crew. A woman named Montana Rose recorded the song, and a writer named Marcus Stevens became fascinated with the story and turned it into a novel. (*Useful Girl*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2004) He pointed the way, and I decided to see if I could do the same. I became fascinated with my own characters. Tom and Sarah, Rosina, and all their kids—these people have become so real to me now, I kind of take it as an obligation to get their story out.

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Ever reminded that time is fleeting and life uncertain, we’ve lost some good friends in the past few weeks. I spoke with Steve Young not long before we left for Texas. We learned he was in hospice just before we left. He was gone by the time I opened our first show with “Seven Bridges Road.” I opened our last with “Momma Tried,” because Merle Haggard was gone too, and though I had never met him, it felt like losing a friend. Just before our return we received the news that Edith’s brother-in-law, Enzo Mercurio had died of a sudden heart attack. The list goes on, with another yet another old friend in hospice. Now comes the news that Trudi, Edith’s middle sister, has been admitted to the hospital with a life-threatening diagnosis.

The Reaper circles on fell wings. But spring beckons, with planting to be done, and summer is sure to follow. I hope to be swimming again when the Rhine warms up. There’s plenty of work to do, and plans for a European tour next spring with W.C. Jameson. I’ll have more information on that. We got some great reports on *Plenty Good People*, our new Brambus CD. The gigs were wonderful. Best to all, enjoy all your days.

Richard J. Dobson

Diessenhofen am Rhein, 30 April 2016

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