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Haven's Wake

Ladette Randolph

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Praise for Ladette Randolph's *A Sandhills Ballad*

WINNER OF THE NEBRASKA BOOK AWARD FOR FICTION IN 2010
SELECTED AS NEW YORK TIMES EDITOR'S CHOICE BOOK IN 2009

"Quietly moving."—*New York Times Book Review*

"Stark and engrossing, this debut novel . . . fixes an empathetic but relentless gaze on a woman determined to expunge the regrets from her life. . . . An immersing achievement, this novel should please any fan of good fiction."—*Publishers Weekly*

"A poignantly written, lovely novel of the heartland that honors the best traditions of storytelling."—JIM HARRISON,
author of *The English Major* and *Legends of the Fall*

"This is good, old-fashioned storytelling at its best, and Mary Rasmussen will live forever in your hearts as a young woman who faces enormous tests and survives in order to protect those she loves."—JONIS AGEE, author of *The River Wife*

"Randolph's characters peel back the stereotypes, all the while exploring the truths and half-truths of the iconic Sandhills family, feisty, fecund, and invincible."—*Western American Literature*

"Randolph has worked hard to get the Sandhills language right; she clearly has enormous respect for the ranching culture."
—*Los Angeles Times*

"A nearly perfect book. The harsh Nebraska landscape is a complete character in its own right. Unforgiving. Somewhat distant. Aloof. Home. The human characters are more yielding, but only just. And the sum of what author Ladette Randolph creates here is unforgettable."—*January Magazine*

“[Randolph] brings the Sandhills of western Nebraska vividly to life, as experienced by one plucky young woman. . . . [A *Sandhills Ballad*] becomes a page-turner as the reader pulls for Mary to regain her self-esteem and ultimately return to the land she loves.”—*Booklist*

“Mary’s story is at once sad and brave, tender and compelling. Ladette Randolph knows well the rhythms and variations of life in Nebraska’s Sandhills, where men and women face loss without complaint and celebrate their days with a love of family and land and community that runs like a quiet stream beneath the seamless prose of this novel.”

—MARY CLEARMAN BLEW, author of *Jackalope Dreams*

“With penetrating insight and solid authority on the rural West, Ladette Randolph has carved out a compelling saga of a young woman ripening into maturity. You cannot help but cheer for Mary Rasmussen. Randolph’s work is tough, tender, and brave, a pitch-perfect take on the hard beauty of life on the Nebraska prairie.”—PAM JOERN, author of

The Floor of the Sky

Praise for *This Is Not the Tropics*:

“In this collection, Randolph’s stories are set in small towns in Nebraska and brim with timeless truths about love, insecurity, and the glue that holds relationships together. . . . From the wife who discovers her husband has a gay lover to the accordion player in a polka band, Randolph gets each and every character just right.”—DEBORAH DONOVAN, *Booklist*

“In the utterly remarkable debut collection, *This Is Not the Tropics*, Ladette Randolph, in her fifteen hypnotic tales, offers up a clear-eyed, captivating portrait of the Plains marked by heartache, fear, loneliness, and regret. . . . These are normal people living normal lives, and somehow Randolph makes them extraordinary, memorable people.”
—FELICIA SULLIVAN, *Black Spiral Notebook*

“Ladette Randolph’s stories sink their teeth into the deep Nebraska Midwest the way that Flannery O’Connor tore into the heart of Georgia. There’s a wonderfully sly, deadpan sweetness at work here, so that it may take a moment to realize how odd and twisty the stories are.”—DAN CHAON,
author of *Await Your Reply*

“Ladette Randolph’s stories have the sly, subtle intensity of a snake gliding through grass. They sneak up on their characters and the reader alike, invoking humor, grace, and wisdom before pouncing on us with exhilarating epiphanies that are as dark and brutal as they are hopeful.”—MEGHAN DAUM, author of *Life Would Be Perfect If I Lived in That House*

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Haven's Wake

Ladette Randolph

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Set in Granjon by Laura Wellington
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For Noel, with love

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And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none.

Ezekiel 22:30

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JULY 10, 2009

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At 3:00 a.m. Elsa Grebel made her way downstairs through the dark house to her piano. She wore only her white nightgown, forgetting even now the house was full of guests. Her hair, unpinned for the night, hung to her waist and warmed her bare arms. A breeze rustled the curtains at the window next to the piano. Outside she heard a screech owl whinny. Around her, in the shadows of the room, were the familiar artifacts of her long life in this house with her husband, Haven.

She started out softly, reluctant to compete with the night sounds, knowing from memory the hymns she played. “The Uncloaked Day,” “On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand,” “The Church’s One Foundation,” “Abide with Me,” “Blessed Assurance”:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh what a foretaste of glory divine.
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of His spirit, washed in His blood.

*This is my story, this is my song,
praising . . .*

Sensing a presence in the room, she stopped and looked behind

her. In the darkness Elsa saw a man sitting in the overstuffed chair where Haven sat every evening.

“Haven.”

“No, Mother. It’s Jonathan. Sing with me.”

She paused and turned back to the piano but kept her hands in her lap for a few moments, unsure if she could go on. Finally, she continued, her alto joining Jonathan’s baritone, the piano carrying the melody. They sang like this every verse of every song, Jonathan remembering the words, surprising her after so many years away. A lost soul, and still he could sing like this. Only God’s grace would help her forgive him his latest trespass. He’d broken her heart years ago, and he’d broken it again the night before. She supposed, though, a mother could never completely give up on her own child.

By four thirty Elsa’s three sisters and their husbands had joined them, bringing out their lap harps and guitars. At five the sun had started to rise. One of the barn cats leapt onto the window screen next to the piano, and Elsa’s rooster greeted the day. They were singing in four-part harmony at full volume, a regular congregation, making no effort to quiet themselves, when Timothy stumbled downstairs, hair standing on end, Anna June following close behind him. They’d both been sleeping in Elsa’s room.

“What’s going on?” Timothy said, stopping short of the bottom stair and surveying with contempt the gathering of his elders in their nightclothes. He didn’t disguise his disgust both at being awakened in this way and at having to confront the vagaries of those half-clothed, aging bodies. That stopped them all for a few seconds, the look on Timothy’s face, and they laughed midway through “Count Your Many Blessings” before Elsa regained her composure and picked up again where she’d left off, everyone joining in to end the sing along on a resounding and triumphal note. “Count your blessings, name them one by one.

Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.”

Timothy, his question left unanswered, still stood perplexed in the stairwell. Any hope there may have been that he would join in the chorus ended when he abruptly went into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. The rooster again, and that, coupled with Timothy’s inept slamming of cupboard doors and rattling around the kitchen — where counters were laden with gifts of food from well-wishers across Seward County — finally rallied everyone. Each singer retreated into his or her self. Elsa felt exposed without her robe and reached for an afghan lying on a nearby chair. The murky light of dawn brought the room out of shadow where before them lay a day of hard work. It started with the funeral.

For three days Elsa had been resisting her sisters’ bossy ways. Now, at first light it started again, Eleanor reminding her as she put away her lap harp, “Elsa May, you need to be making some decisions about the memorial fund.”

Emily and Evelyn said nothing, but Elsa intercepted the glance they exchanged when she didn’t respond to Eleanor’s comment. They weren’t the brightest of women, her sisters. Elsa had long ago realized this, and their habit of still treating her like a silly kid, their baby sister, only confirmed it. They wore their robes loosely sashed, and Elsa couldn’t help but make other comparisons: the purple-veined legs, the calloused heels and twisted, tortured toes. They were elderly women after all. What startled Elsa this morning was seeing it all so exposed before they had donned their customary prayer veils and cotton dresses, their hose and Sass shoes. But more than that, they were all fat. And why wouldn’t they be? All they did was think about food — barely finishing one meal before starting to plan for the next. She hadn’t counted to ten before Emily said, “I’d better be getting dressed. Everyone will be wanting breakfast.”

Elsa felt the tiniest bit of remorse for being critical of her sisters, but what other defense did she have against their relentless ganging up on her? It had been like this when they were growing up together. The three of them — teenagers when she was still a little girl — had felt free to criticize her, the youngest of eight. Her brothers had never gotten involved with trying to mold her, as her sisters had. No wonder Marian had been so exasperated with them after she married their father. They'd always thought they knew what was best for Elsa. No use fighting now. They'd all be leaving soon.

JULY 6, 2009

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There had been rain in the night, but this morning the sun was out, that dripping, golden light Jonathan Grebel loved so much about New England summers. There hadn't been sunshine for weeks, rain every day through June, tempting Jonathan this morning to stay home from work.

Nina, off for the summer, was already out working in her gardens. The rambling Victorian they'd restored at the peak of Chestnut had a sprawling lawn that sloped down to the curb, a rarity in Jamaica Plain, and Nina kept perennial gardens everywhere.

Over their years together Nina had filled the house with strays she'd adopted of all kinds, both people and animals. Right now they had only animals living with them. Their turtle, Glen, had free rein in the house but favored a spot by the refrigerator. As Jonathan held the door open this morning in his search for the butter, Glen slowly climbed up on his back legs and stretched his neck upward, hoping for a crumb of something. Jonathan gave him a small leaf of lettuce before closing the refrigerator door. He called for Lolita, their black pug, and she came running into the kitchen with a clatter. In addition to Glen and Lolita were two cats, Todd and Henry, and a canary Jonathan had

dubbed Bait because of the way the cats had eyed the poor fellow when Nina brought him home.

Before leaving for work, Jonathan shouted good-bye to Nina from the back door. She waved a gloved hand in his direction. “Don’t let the cats out,” she called, and only then did he notice between his feet the yellow kitten.

“Nina!”

“Isn’t he adorable? I found him at the Stony Brook stop last night. He was soaked from the rain.”

Jonathan caught the kitten as it made for the open door. “Nina,” he said again, but she’d turned back to her work and conveniently ignored him. “Farmer in the fucking dell,” he grumbled as he closed the door and set the kitten on the floor.

Later he got off the train at Mass Ave. so he could enjoy the sun and walk through the Southwest Corridor and Copley Square to his office across from the Public Garden. He and his partner, Monty Pipher, had rented the space thirteen years ago in spite of its poor condition because of the windows overlooking the garden. The business was still small, only he and Monty and their assistant, Jennifer. Each year they held a competition for a summer intern. Sara, their intern this summer, was a grad student from RISD. She was creative and probably brilliant, but she was such a pain in the ass around the office, Jonathan had wanted to let her go since she’d started in May. Monty, who hated confrontation, had so far persuaded Jonathan to ride out the summer with her.

As Jonathan came off the elevator this morning, he heard Sara on Jennifer’s phone. He listened long enough to figure out she was talking to Murray Schiffman, one of their major clients, a contractor who only accepted projects over two million dollars. Sara was arguing with him, using that tone of voice Jonathan couldn’t stand, condescending as hell and hard to take.

To top it off, she kept calling Murray by his first name. It irked Jonathan, though he didn't know what she should call Murray instead. Well, the truth was, she shouldn't be talking to him at all.

He noticed Jennifer making copies in the other room and had the distinct impression she was somehow doing Sara's bidding. Unbelievably, when he gestured for Sara to transfer the call to him, she frowned and shook her head. Monty came in while she was still on the phone, and Jonathan met him in his office before he could even drop his bag.

"She's got to go, Monty."

"Jesus. Good morning to you too."

"I mean it, Monty. I'm sacking her today. She's out there arguing with Murray, talking to him like he's a preschooler. I've been patient enough—"

"Patient? You? Jonathan, you're a lot of things, but—"

"She's a disaster."

"She's done amazing work for us already this summer." Monty set his bag on the floor beside his desk. "You just don't like her. Be honest about it."

"You act like that doesn't matter. She's bad for business."

Monty didn't respond. Instead, he sat down behind his desk and held out his coffee cup toward Jonathan.

Jonathan took the cup. "This your way of changing the subject?"

"This is my way of saying let's talk to her after she finishes her call, but I'm going to need more caffeine before that happens." He paused and smiled. "I assume this is going to be a teachable moment?"

"Fuck you, Monty."

Monty laughed. Nina had one time used the phrase teachable moment in a conversation with Monty, and he'd never let

Jonathan live it down. Nina had worked in some of the toughest school districts in the city before being hired by the state board of education as a teacher trainer. She was an optimist. Where Jonathan saw hopeless, Nina saw potential. Monty, who'd known Jonathan for over thirty years, could never quite get over the fact that they'd made the marriage work for as long as they had, almost twenty years now.

On his way back to Monty's office Jonathan noticed Sara was off the phone, and he gestured for her to follow him. Before she sat down, the phone rang again. "I need to get that," she said.

"Let the machine pick it up," Jonathan said.

"But Jennifer asked me to watch the phone."

This was what got to him. Where did you start with someone like this? "Sara," Jonathan said. "You're a talented designer. I don't have any doubt you'll have a grand career, but you have a lot to learn."

By the time he got back to his desk an hour later, Sara was still crying in Monty's office. Jonathan wasn't convinced her tears were sincere, and quite frankly he didn't care. Still, he hadn't intended to cause such a kerfuffle first thing in the morning. As he listened to his phone messages, he wondered if maybe they should reconsider the whole internship thing next year.

The first message was from Murray. It had come in last night. "I'm over here on Marlborough. Where are the goddamned lights? I don't have the schematics. I don't have shit from your office." So that was what Sara had been dealing with this morning. Jonathan knew for a fact everything had been delivered to the work site. He'd walked the schematics over himself late yesterday afternoon, and the lights had been there when he'd arrived. He'd talked to Murray's project manager. As usual, Murray'd gone off half-cocked. Maybe Sara had it right. Maybe Murray was a preschooler.

The last message he listened to was a garbled affair from his mother. She hated the phone and never called him. She'd obviously been nervous about the answering machine, starting the message before the tape came on, so he heard only, "Your father's dead. You'll probably want to come home."