

A book came in the mail yesterday morning. It was not the book I had been expecting since last week to arrive from England. That one, a biography of Napoleon III, is still lost in the mail somewhere. He used to live nearby at Arenenberg by Lake Constance with his mother Hortense, exiled queen of the Netherlands, the adopted daughter and sister in law to Napoleon I. She was the daughter of Josephine, to whom Napoleon wrote the famous love letters. I was trying to research a story I had heard of his nephew. Apparently the hot Corsican blood was flowing in Prince Charles Lewis as well. I was looking for stories from his younger years involving the seduction of local farmers' daughters. Downstairs in the box I found a package from Montana Rose, a singer who used to live in Nashville. Aha, she's sent a new CD, I thought, but I didn't look at it further. I dropped the mail on the kitchen counter and looked up the invoice from Post Script books, UK. I found their web site and tried their customer service email address. When this didn't work I scrolled around until I found their phone number and called long distance. The woman on the line had such a charming accent I regretted the tone of annoyance in my voice. She would put a trace on the book, she said, and call me back.

I had a soup on the stove for when Edith came home for lunch. I busied myself with this, and setting out the bowls and silverware. Then I looked at the mail. Among the bills and advertisements was a catalogue from Post Script Books. It looked to be a legitimate company, all right; I had no idea why our order couldn't make it here in fourteen days. Then I opened the package from Montana Rose, whose real name is Claudia. It was a book, I saw by the customs slip. Taking it out of the mailer I first read the name, Marcus Stevens, and then the title: *Useful Girl*, as with a kind of wonder and bemusement my mind went spinning back fifteen years or more to Tennessee. I have to back up here, for this is a story within a story; concerning books and history, and a song.

I was living with my girlfriend, Lyse on a horse farm in Williamson County outside Nashville. The farm belonged to her, or rather to her mother. I think the book that got this story started belonged to Lyse. It was called *Nobody's Angel*, a novel written by a man named Tom McGuane. It was about a hard-bitten retired soldier who had come back from Germany to live in Montana, about the changes in his life and those come to the land. I liked McGuane, an outdoor kind of guy familiar with horses, with an affinity for wilderness and corresponding dislike of life in town, and, especially, the suburbanization of the American West. I could relate to all of that. There was a passage in the book that struck me, how hard I didn't realize until later. It was about the exhumation of the skeleton of a Cheyenne Indian girl.

Songwriters will tell you that they don't make up songs, not their best ones. Rather, the songs are delivered, as it were, like a gift. The writer is only a conduit; the songs come from the sky, like lightning. It's as if they have a prior existence of their own; they pass through the writer who only facilitates their coming into song. I recall this moment with absolute clarity: We were grocery shopping in the nearby town of Fairfield. I was wandering the around the store and found myself in the aisle where the kitchen and household things were displayed, looking at a display of sewing thimbles. In the next instant I found myself crying, trying to choke back the tears in a flash-flood of emotion. The passage from the Indian girl had come back to me, the part about the thimbles. Back at the house I thumbed through the pages of the McGuane novel until I found the passage:

He had seen the skeleton of a Cheyenne girl dressed in an army coat, disinterred when the railroad bed was widened. Her family had put silver thimbles on every finger to prove to somebody's god that she was a useful girl who could sew.

How did she get there, or rather how had her people come to this place? What was the cause of her death? There was no mention of a wound; she died from illness, I guessed. McGuane gave no further hint. I sat down and began to write in longhand. Somewhere in the process I picked up my guitar. The music came with the words, in a minor key as you might expect. It seems like minor keys reflect the mystery and spirituality we associate with the American Indian. It worked in this case. When the song was finished I recorded it onto cassette. I felt like someone else's life had passed through my body. I called it *Useful Girl* and she began to take on a new life from that day.

A week or so later I had a studio demo of the song recorded and some cassette copies made, the way we did with our demos in those days. We had a neighbor we used to ride with on weekends, a songwriter named Mary Ann Kennedy who sang back up occasionally with Emmylou Harris. I never thought the song had commercial potential but I gave a copy to Mary Ann. I saw her again about a week later and she startled me when she said, "Emmylou wants to cut your song."

"You're kidding me."

"That's what she said. It might be some time, but if Emmylou says she's going to record a song, she will do it."

I didn't hold my breath. I wanted to believe it but I had been in Nashville long enough to know better than to tell anybody... well, maybe just a couple of people. I had only met Emmylou once, and didn't feel like I knew her well enough to bother her. After a time when one, then another record came out, I reasoned that she wasn't going to record the song after all. I recorded it on our *State of the Heart* CD, released by Brambus Records of Switzerland in 1990. Then Montana Rose recorded it; and Susan Hedges from England; and Amy Gallatin, who gave it a bluegrass touch. With each of these renditions, all different but all true and straight from the heart, the Indian girl seemed to come alive again.

I still had a few minutes before Edith came home. I still hadn't opened the book, and my curiosity was something I could no longer ignore. I found the author's note on the title page:

For Richard Dobson  
Thank you for the inspiring song  
which has haunted me now for  
so many years. I hope I have written  
a story to do your lyrics justice.  
You painted such a vivid image for me  
I couldn't help myself.  
Marcus Stevens

I'm still humbled and amazed thinking of this turn of events. I was still living in Tennessee the phone rang one day with a woman on the line asking if I knew anything more

about the Cheyenne girl. Her husband was doing a PHD thesis on her, she said. I told her I didn't, that I had got the story from *Nobody's Angel*. But apparently she really lived; McGuane didn't invent her existence. His quote is on the frontispiece of Stevens' book. I thought again of this young woman with the thimbles, and how her story carried forward through a novel, then a song, and now another novel. I have not yet started *Useful Girl*. Not the book. I wanted to relate story up to this point before I went on. It occurred to me that some readers may not be familiar with the song, so I include the lyrics here:

The wind blew off the mountain, the clouds were sweeping low  
When a ragged band of Cheyenne Indians stopped along the road  
Among them was a young girl who lay dying of fever  
Just about a hundred years ago.  
The light was swiftly fading, the night it promised snow  
They laid her in an army coat to keep her from the cold  
Placed silver thimbles on her fingers so someone's god would know  
She was a useful girl who could sew.  
Darkness swirled around them like a curtain on a stage  
The closing of a door, the turning of a page.  
They say a lifetime's over in the twinkling of an eye  
It hardly counts for nothing as the ages roll on by  
While kings and queens and princes have left mighty works in stone  
Just to let somebody know.  
That's how the workmen found her, widening the road  
Wrapped up in an army coat where they laid her long ago  
With silver thimbles on her fingers she slept beneath the snow  
A useful girl who could sew.

Claudia and her husband Kenny Williams appear in the acknowledgment in the back of the Steven's book, crediting their music for his inspiration. ([mtrose@imt.net](mailto:mtrose@imt.net)) Susan Hedge's version can be found on her double CD, *Crimson Love / On Velvet Black*, on Goldrush Records, ([www.goldrushrecords.co.uk](http://www.goldrushrecords.co.uk)). I was able to hear Amy Gallatin perform the song at a Bluegrass Festival two years ago in Schaffhausen. ([www.amygallatin.com](http://www.amygallatin.com)). The last time I checked Brambus Records still had copies of our version, *Richard Dobson & State of the Heart, Hearts & Rivers*. ([www.brambus.com](http://www.brambus.com)) *Useful Girl*, the book, is published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. My copy will join a tiny collection of others signed by the author. After these years in the music business I've become accustomed to receiving a signed CD from time to time, but a signed book still leaves me a little awestruck. When I finish reading *Useful Girl* she will reside in the company of works by Isabel Allende and Kinky Friedman, songwriter Vince Bell, Western writer Linda Boday, Beatles basher Gary Hall ([www.freespeechbooks.com](http://www.freespeechbooks.com)), and Florida maverick Jack Saunders. That's good company.

Ricardo  
Diessenhofen am Rhein  
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