

**Suzanne Matson**  
from *The Liberty Committee*

Vera marched through the ruts of the coulee, accompanied by a band of children making a sort of festival of her departure. They were peppering her with questions—Aren't you ever coming back? Will you bring us presents when you come? Are you going to take the train somewhere?—and she was half answering, half ignoring them when she noticed Nora, pinch-faced, lagging behind the string of urchins that were their neighbors.

Come here, Sweetie, she said, gathering Nora into her side. You know I'm just moving over the hill, don't you?

Nora nodded, burying her face in Vera's skirt.

Carl can bring you on the stage and I'll take you to the moving pictures on a Saturday. Won't you like that?

Nora nodded again.

Maybe buy you a new muff to go with your coat from my store?

A shrug.

Vera gave her sister's shoulder a little squeeze, somewhat harder than she intended. Don't, she said briskly. It's never worth it to be sad when you can be happy instead.

Nora unburied her face that was no longer pinched but open and tear-streaked.

You'll never come back, just like Kate.

Now, don't say that. Katie comes back.

No she doesn't! I don't even remember what she looks like anymore.

Well, Red Lodge is a lot closer than Butte, and you can take the stage with one of the big kids anytime you want.

No I can't; it costs a dollar and I don't have a dollar, and Mother won't give me one.

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She will.

Nora shook her head, grim-faced and stubborn, and Vera was forced to agree. It was altogether possible that Mother would refuse the dollar. Carl and Celia were open-handed; they would pay for Nora if they had it to spare. But they might not have it.

Vera put her cracked suitcase down in the weeds and crouched beside her sister. They were on the little rise of the road now, the miners' houses dotted along a kind of string pattern behind them. The coulee at the end of May was green and cool and still muddy in the wagon ruts. Mt. Maurice rose up beyond the houses so dramatically that on a clear day there were always broad shadows draped across the slopes like velvet cloaks. Their little settlement seemed so slightly perched from this vantage point, so puny against the mountains and the shadows and the sky that could darken in an instant based on some quirk of the atmosphere over the Beartooth Range. Vera shivered, lonely already for the buildings of Red Lodge, the stalwart comforts of Broadway shops and the squarely built homes and boarding houses on Platt and Haggin.

Here's a dollar, she said, closing Nora's hand into a fist around the coin. Keep it at the bottom of your purse and don't spend it. Get Mother or one of the big kids to give you fare if you can. Then if they won't, you'll know you always have this dollar. If you have to spend it, I'll give you another when you come, okay?

Nora nodded, her tears still rolling down her cheeks.

Vera gave her sister an impatient little shake. I'm leaving, but I'm not leaving *you*, understand? I'll be there when you come. Wherever I'm going, that's another home for you, get it? Right now you've got two homes: the coulee with Mom and Dad and the family, and Red

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Lodge with your Big Sis. When you're big enough to come by yourself, you can bunk in with me and we'll snuggle just like we do now, two peas in a pod.

When the stage came Nora was still sniffing and leaning against her waist. There was nothing to be done about it but to leave.

Remember your dollar, she called out as she stepped up into the wagon. Remarkably, Wild Bill's witticisms, plentiful as they were, had nothing whatsoever to do with the sad condition of her suitcase as he hoisted it up beside her.

She wasn't about to watch Nora wave tragically for the whole quarter mile it took to round the bend. Instead she faced forward and decided to enjoy the jolting of the stage back and forth as they raced down and around the bends. It took six horses to pull this stage between Bearcreek and Red Lodge because of the steep slopes and spring mud. When they headed downhill, as they were now into their descent into Red Lodge, the team could barely be restrained. Some people were afraid of the stage since the crash right before Christmas of '15, when Wild Bill overturned it, loaded with shoppers and tied-down Christmas trees and parcels. Six people were hurt, but, as Wild Bill always reminded them cheerfully, none killed. Vera was with him: So what? None killed! Vera loved how the wind rushed through the stage and how the wheels crashed over rocks and ruts and in the bouncing and jouncing felt that all her self was being shaken alive. That's what town would feel like every day—something to jolt her awake, make her notice. New entertainments, strangers to look at and wonder about. Risks.

Vera had decided early on, amidst the babble and tangle of the little brothers and sisters she'd been instructed to mind whenever she was not in school, that there was no good reason to have children. This was a position, she understood, that she would be wise to keep to herself.

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Dad might see it her way—he was a freethinker in most things—but by the way he took part in Mother’s servitude, and his own, of course, having to feed them all, she wondered if the urge to breed was rooted more deeply in him than his socialism and his other notions of progress.

Maybe if Vera hadn’t had to wash so many diapers—on a washboard yet!—she’d feel differently. In vain she’d shown her mother the new models of washing machines out of the Montgomery Ward catalog. She knew they couldn’t afford the deluxe models—*The Minnehaha Electric*, *The Simplex Rotary*, *The Thuro Power Vacuum*—even if they did get electric power in the coulee. But there were plenty of efficient manual models that her mother had also scorned.

A wash beater and rolling board—that was all we needed in Finland, her mother would retort. She still mourned the loss of them, Vera knew. Vera had a dim memory of her mother putting things—the wash beater, a loom, the hand-carved chairs her father had made one by one during the dark winters—into the wagon to take to her sisters’ houses. Though she didn’t remember the details, she remembered the mood as funereal: all her mother’s handmade rugs, all her father’s carpentry. No room for it in America, her mother had said, your father says we are to start fresh, so that Vera’s first imagining of America had been of parlors stuffed with gleaming new furniture and objects, with everything waiting for them already and nothing allowed to get old.