



Next Year

Neva Matthews

H. Ec. '39

BABS had followed her father out to the porch and stood patting the fly-swatter aimlessly against the siding, watching the morning sun begin to slant across the worn old boards of the porch floor. Absently she watched a green fly swerve and go nosing its way along the screen door. It was a typical Montana day, dazzlingly bright, with the air dry, like chalk powder. Babs hesitated and then said, "I should get that check to the college off on the mail today, Dad." Dad raised his kind gray eyes in a questioning look. "The dorm money and reservation fee have to be in early in August," Babs finished in answer to his look.

"Oh! Sure," Dad answered slowly, and then, "Better get my pen and check book then, Sis."

BABS turned and hurried back through the kitchen door. Mother's half rebuking eyes followed her as she turned to her father's desk. Babs jauntily stepped on every fourth check of the green and white linoleum back to the place where the linoleum ended abruptly at the sway-backed door sill. Mother cleared her throat and Babs stopped to look at her, but she only said, "Never mind," as if to dismiss the effect of her silence; then glancing at the clock, she said, "You had better not delay Dad. You know he wants to get at those repairs." Her mother had been wanting to remind her once more, Babs knew, that she had better choose a two-year Normal School course, that Don and Del were still deserving a chance; yet she knew that her mother would

say a wee bit proudly to her friends on Sunday, "I thought we would send Babs to Normal School, but she's so set on college I guess she's decided to tussle through."

BABS let the screen between the kitchen and porch slam shut, and the twanging buzz of the spring sliced off the ominous feeling she had been avoiding all summer. She handed her father the pen and check book.

"How much?" he asked slowly, unscrewing the pen and wiping it on his faded blue denims. "Eighty-two," Babs said a bit weakly, watching the lines of her father's leathery face as he scrawled the amount and signed John J. O'Neil across the bottom.

"It—it sure costs a lot," Babs added, half apologetically. Father laid the pen and check down on the refrigerator. "'Tain't much—if." He did not mean to finish the sentence, she knew; but as he looked through the door, he stuck out his cracked lips, making a queer clicking noise, as he often did when he was looking over the dry earth and calculating.

"Dad?—Hey?" Don's voice yelled from the mill.

"Yeh?" Dad answered through the door.

"Bill wants to know if you got any old reel chains for the combine." Babs smiled as her young brother's voice cracked in midair and finished the sentence three octaves higher.

Dad picked up his gloves and sidled his gaunt frame through the door. He paused on the top step. "Better get Don to spray this vine," he said through the screen. "There's hoppers on it. Only a few, though." He added the last, as if to himself.

HIS shoes scuffed slowly on the other two steps; then his footsteps crunched down the gravel walk edged by flower beds, this year bearing bravely a few straggling flowers. Babs thought about the vines, the flower beds and the garden, how Mother's revived enthusiasm had blossomed forth each spring; and how each summer failure had been mockingly mirrored back from the barren earth filled with parched seeds. This year there had been rain, and hope stole about stealthily with crossed fingers.

Babs sighed and went inside to complete her letter and then to stretch lazily on the couch, for it was still early. Ten o'clock brought the scuffling yet definite step which was peculiarly Dad's, through the banging screen doors. "Surely it isn't anywhere near

lunch time," thought Babs as she let the college fashions of a September magazine slide to the floor and listened to the irritating scrape of the dipper against the bottom of the empty water bucket.

"Del?" Dad's voice came a little high. Then silence, and Dad came walking slowly into the cooler front part of the house. Del, whose tomboyish little figure had been spraddled cross-legged on the floor teaching her cat tricks, disappeared impishly under the bed with such a hurried movement that the cat scampered off, tumbling between the two unexpected legs in the doorway. Babs' eyes followed up some six feet of overalls standing there. Dad looked somewhat knotted, she thought, and how gray his hair was becoming; but his eyes twinkled as he detected a red ankle with a white canvas shoe, projecting from under the corner of the bed. He cautiously stepped over, bent, and grabbed the foot, pulling out a kicking and giggling little girl. "Come on, Del, while the mill is going. Hang the pail on the spout and just get a half pail. I'm thirsty," he said more seriously.

THEN Dad went out and almost too nonchalantly seated himself in front of the radio. A click, and then it blared out, . . . "are being demolished. Dakotas are suffering hopelessly, and they are believed to be moving west." Dad turned the volume down quickly, and Babs' straining ears caught no more except the static click of the radio as he turned it off. She glanced quickly out the window, squinting in between the tiny black bars of the screen. Then she watched as Dad passed the door. Almost a willing weariness seemed to have come over him, but still the deliberate humdrum faith was there—the unlickable love of earth that makes one delve deeper with each ache inflicted by it.

Babs looked at the paper again. "The dashing coed will be wearing—", but Dad had gone out, letting the door slam hollowly and forgetting the water. Babs swallowed, and pushed the paper off deliberately. Her mouth drew into a straight line; mechanically she stood up and started out the door. The letter had been there in her apron pocket all the time; she clutched it through the cloth, making sure that it was still there, two neat pages in her best writing folded carefully around Dad's check. She went down the steps and started across the wan-looking yard to the mailbox. There was plenty of time to get it in the mail, a whole

hour perhaps, yet she wanted to run.

She didn't look down at the clicking, hopping figures, but she knew they were there, and she quickened her step to reach the box. Her mind clung desperately to the shining metal box, and she remembered how Dad had painted his name so carefully on it in black letters when it was new. How many years had that been? Shining box—red flag—carefully she opened the lid and laid the thin envelop squarely in the center. She reached toward the small red flag and half raised it. Then she stopped to gaze over the top of the box at the field across the road. A small thud sounded, and a green-armored hopper landed on the box, his raspy legs scraping the metal for a moment; then he hopped to the ground.

THE right corner of Bab's mouth rose and her eyes turned brooding and thoughtful as if she were grimly laughing at herself. Casually she reached her hand toward the red flag, carefully pushed it down so that it didn't scrape against the side of the box, and pulled up the lid. At last she took the envelope up again in her hand. Starting back toward the house, she wadded the neat envelop, letting the sweat of her hand smear the ink. It was almost hazy in the usually bright sunshine. She looked off to the north and east, over the ripening silvery green, the waves of wheat "just in the dough."

Viciously she kicked each tuft of grass as if to drive her thoughts into some heedless Omnipotent's consciousness. Her fingernails hurt in the palms of her hands. Reaching the house, she went carelessly in and tossed the crumpled letter into the fire.

It was a strange meal at noon. In silence they swallowed the food, bargaining it down in lumps, and then suddenly they all spoke at once.

"The Butlers have another sick horse—" — "The Sunday picnic—" — "The bright red of Johnson's new barn—"

Babs had a sudden hysterical desire to scream out, "They're here. They're all over, and why don't we say it?" but she stabbed another potato and filled her mouth. Then she glanced at the window. An army of drab, sticky-legged creatures were beginning to drag their bilious abdomens across the screen.

"Look," she choked bitterly,—and everyone's head turned.

"It's the worst cloud of hoppers I've ever seen," Dad said to

Mother, not meeting her eyes. Mother just looked sorry in a hopeless way, "just sorry that we had made plans." "Big ones too," Dad continued, "breaking down the wheat fast. S'posed to move on to greener feeding tomorrow," he added dryly and effortlessly. There he sat, his silent placid face apologizing for another futile effort.

"Bill says he's got a couple tied up in the barn with a toothache," he added with a rush.

BABS jumped up, and her high-pitched hysterical voice lashed out at her father in bitter reproach, "Yah! Here we are gambling! sweating blood! gambling with loaded dice!" Her voice rose as her father sat maddeningly quiet. "And I didn't send the check either!" She waited, digging her nails into the chair back. There, that had reached him. He flinched, and his face quickly masked. "You want us all to hang because you like the feel of the rope on your neck!" she choked. Then she ran a little blindly out the door, as Don raspingly pushed his chair back and flung out behind her.

Babs stood outside, and her eyes took in the south side of the house, with a thick, gray mass like a coating over it up to six or seven feet, where the gray and white became spotted, and the white finally held sway. The air was thick like pudding, and the ground was alive and crawling.

Don stood beside her. "Damn," he said and then repeated, "Damn," and Sis could hear the tears of disappointment in his voice. He had been waiting in all his fifteen-year-old importance to help harvest.

Babs and Don sat down on the step carefully and slowly, to avoid smashing hoppers and seeing slimy eggs ooze from their bodies. They sat and talked in loud, bitter, broken voices, using as many damnations as they dared with Dad within earshot.

Then the door squeaked behind them. Dad came down the steps between them and started toward the field without a word. His big hands dangled helplessly at the ends of sagging arms, but his shoulders were square. His movements caused a flutter of wings; gray clouds rose and settled, and rose and settled again with his every step; and behind him new clouds filled in the gaps. Even the most unsavory weeds bowed almost to earth with them. Dad moved farther and farther away until he became one

with it all. Babs suddenly swallowed and said, "See how he fits in the picture there," but Don was gone.

SLOWLY she got to her feet and sluggishly sauntered toward the wheat field. The hoppers rose in waves for her, too, and she passed on. The edges of the field looked sparse now. Many plump heads of wheat were now lying between the rows, almost hiding the sandy colored soil. Many headless stalks looked emptily toward the sky.

Babs hardly saw it. Instead she saw a rich silvery-yellow harvest field with the wind bending heavy heads so that the field was like a sea of waves with the crest of each wave catching and holding for a moment the lazy sunlight, and far beyond, a strip of brown earth—plenty of earth breathing deep with time. Babs breathed deeply. "It's—it's good wheat anyway," she said softly, and somehow the thought seemed to smooth away the ache as she stood there close by her father. "Sorry—Babs," Dad said, so slowly it didn't hang together. "Maybe next year."

Babs glanced up and caught the steady flicker of his eyes. "Yeh," she said and looked back at the field.

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Silence

Mary Lyon

H. Ec. '39

At dusk I stood watching the horizon,
A vague union of heaven and earth
With a frail crescent moon and a lone bright star
Reflected in the lake below.
Cliff and cloud were blended in dusky smoothness
And leaves traced in pattern against the sky.
I caught my breath
In the presence of intense beauty.