1984

Norton's Boots

David Brake

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol2/iss2/6

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inscape by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
NORTON'S
BOOTS

It was 1946, the war was over, and Norton was once again on his front porch.
He leaned forward in the rocker to look at his new boots, tipping his head slightly to the right and then to the left, pausing just long enough to allow his eyes to catch their own reflection on the boots' oiled shine. He had oiled, polished and buffed the boots for almost an hour that morning. A good pair of boots required a lot of care; a man's boots said something about the man, Norton figured. They had set him back nearly a week's wages, but boots like that didn't come cheap; they were like an investment, a reflection of a man's personality. They were fine boots, black and simple with a not-too-fancy design engraved on the toes, a design that reminded Norton of seaweed.

He had wanted a pair just like them long before he ever went away to war, but his mother had always insisted he buy other boots instead, calling his taste too worldly for his own good. But that was before the war. He was older now and quite capable of making his own decisions. It was all very simple. He had liked the boots, so he bought them, and now he had them on his feet with his blue jeans tucked neatly in the tops so the slick, black leather could shine in the afternoon sun. He liked the way the boots clung to his calves and the way his feet throbbed with a pleasant, snug sensation that his navy issue deck shoes had never matched, even when new.

Norton had been rocking for an hour, pretending to read the *Herald*'s editorial page as he waited for Katie Jenkins and her sister Melody to make their usual Saturday afternoon visit. They had come by every Saturday since he returned from the war, and he always seemed to be reading the *Herald* when they arrived. It was becoming a tradition, he thought.

Before the war, he used to enjoy reading the letters to the editor, particularly those written by Lloyd Haskens, an old farmer who wrote to the paper regularly to complain about things in general. If something rubbed Lloyd the wrong way, it was worth writing the editor about. Once, he had written in to complain about the asinine advice the county extension agent had given him concerning a new herbicide, saying the stuff worked a bit too well and had killed not only the weeds but fifty acres of feed corn.
The editor agreed with Lloyd. The word asinine, however, appeared as *#!/&?£ but everyone knew what it meant; Lloyd used it all the time. Most of Millfort agreed with Lloyd also, and in the next issue Moe Henderson wrote in and chided Lloyd for ever listening to the extension agent in the first place, but he expressed his sympathy nonetheless. The Olsen brothers from Millfort Seed and Feed also took the opportunity to help kindle the issue. They promised Lloyd a sizable discount on some new seed and on their own brand of "proven" herbicide, a small gesture they hoped would offset some of the damage while drumming up a little new business from folks who would be impressed with their altruistic concern over a neighbor’s loss. For two weeks Lloyd was the talk of the town. Everyone supported his anger. Everyone seemed sorry for him. It was good to have friends like that, Norton thought, friends that liked you, friends that liked to be part of the majority.

Norton folded the Herald into the shape of an airplane—it was a thin newspaper—and tossed it across the porch. The letters to the editor no longer excited him. After spending four years shooting at the Japanese from a battleship, probably even killing a number of them (although it was difficult to tell at the time, with all the commotion), he couldn’t relate to the scopeless problems that besieged Millfort, Nebraska.

The war had changed him. Many of the old desires were gone. A can of beer and a game of pool at Tulley’s no longer highlighted his Saturday afternoons. He had been good at pool once, damn good according to Tulley, who had seen some of the best play when he had tended bar in Chicago during the First War. But that was part of the past; that was a part of him that was gone.

Two figures turned the corner and drew closer. Norton hoped one was Katie. She was a thin, long-legged, tight-breasted blonde with moist, supple lips and pink skin. Norton liked her. He tolerated her sister, who was two years younger. Norton tried to convince himself that Melody was fat or that she spoke with a lisp, but after close observation, he determined it was just his imagination. Still, he didn’t
like her, and he wished she didn't have to accompany her older sister every Saturday, even though it was only proper.

As the two figures passed the hedge bordering the front lawn, one of them waved. It was Katie. Norton made sure his jeans were tucked squarely into his new boots. He didn't plan on saying anything, but he hoped Katie would notice his boots and bring them into the conversation. Usually the three talked about the war, not the fighting part of the war but the trinket-detail that only a tourist would enjoy. Katie especially liked the stories about the exotic South Pacific ports with their open-air markets where fish, strung like pearls, hung in the breeze from bamboo rafters. Other, smaller fish were kept alive in grimy wood buckets, and still others were fileted and laid out over cracked ice.

The streets of these ports were pock-marked with wear. People, some black, some yellow, others white, tramped, like cattle in a stockyard, to the left and then the right, serpentin­ing their way through town, vanishing every once in a while into a small shop or dark alley, only to appear again on the street with a wrinkled sack of vegetables or a few yards of cloth. There were so many faces and smells and colors that after a short time everything seemed to blend into a pulsating blur, it seemed to Norton. People became thick shadows, numbing his arms as they bumped into him on the street. And he could smell the sweat of the world, some sweet like summer corn and some foul like a neglected chicken coop, as it mingled, misty in the hot, humid air. Katie said that it all seemed so romantic and spectacular. She made Norton promise, in the half-serious, flirtatious way that women sometimes make men promise, that he would take her there one day. Of course he had not described any port in particular but had given her instead a composite of several ports that the crew of the *Sin Cristo* had encountered. She didn't know the difference; sometimes the crew hadn't known the difference, so Norton couldn't see where it mattered.

Katie viewed the war as if it had been an adventure Norton had been on; she never asked about the fighting and destruction he had been part of. He couldn't imagine her asking him how many people he figured he'd killed, or how many ships
he'd seen go down, or how many drowning men he'd heard cry for help. These were things she would never encounter in Nebraska, so she had no use for them. She was like everyone else in town regarding this matter; the war had been too far from home to be any more realistic than a newsreel or a recruiting poster.

But for Norton these things had been real. He had actually killed people, people he didn’t even know or especially dislike. And he had watched men drown as their ships slowly sank between fiery patches of the South Pacific that lit up the night sky like floating heaps of Christmas lights.

The *Sin Cristo* herself had been sunk. Thirty men died that night. Norton remembered the muffled screams and the motion of the life raft as it rocked in the sea. A dozen times or more he had gone back into the water to help a drowning man, not because he was a hero, but because it had to be done. In his mind he could still see the debris that had been the *Sin Cristo*. He could see the limp bodies that occasionally popped to the surface and bobbed in the ocean like apples in a washtub.

The *Sin Cristo* had gone down near the end of the war, and most of the survivors were sent home. Norton was one of the few men who had been assigned to sea duty again. He’d spent the last three months of the war on a patrol boat that roamed Pearl Harbor, a task Norton found ironic. But at least he was doing his part in the war effort, and that was what mattered to him.

He was glad Katie would never have to see a world like the one the *Sin Cristo* had sailed. He looked at her and hoped she might always stay in this quiet town, changing naturally and lingering like the leaves of autumn. She belonged in Millfort with Lloyd Haskens, Moe Henderson, the Olsen brothers and the *Herald*, safe from the ugliness of the world,
living a quiet life where grasshoppers and beetles were the enemy, where an occasional rise in the Missouri was the only possibility for a drowning, and where a yearly tornado blackened the sky, blowing barn doors and loose shingles into oblivion while the townspeople hid in their cellars, frightened in an accustomed way, like ants watching some snot-nosed kid kick the daylights out of their mound.

By the time the sisters ascended the half dozen steps to the porch, Norton had left the rocking chair to bid them a gracious hello, something he knew was expected of him in such a situation.

"You ladies look very nice this morning," he said.

"Why thank you, Norton dear, but this is hardly the morning. It must be at least half past one," said Melody.

"Well anyway, how are you both today?" he asked.

"Fine. Just fine, thank you," said Katie.

Norton motioned for them to both have a seat on the swing that hung opposite the rocking chair. He sat on the porch rail and extended his long legs unobtrusively across the porch as the girls straightened and fluffed their skirts. Katie commented on the unusual spring weather, wondering if perhaps it was going to be a short growing season, and Melody asked him how he liked his job at the hardware store, suggesting that a man could build quite a future in hardware. But nothing was said about the boots.

"Well, how has your mother been?" asked Katie. "I didn’t see her at the church bazaar on Wednesday. Has she been ill?"

"No, she’s well. She’s been visiting my aunt in Des Moines. She’s spent a lot of time there since my father died. Her sister’s a widow also, you know."

"It’s nice that they have one another," said Katie.

"It would have been even nicer if their husbands hadn’t died," said Norton.

The sisters exchanged a curious look, and then Katie swiftly changed the subject back to the weather.

"Did you happen to hear about those three twisters that hit town last May?" asked Katie.

"No, I guess I didn’t," said Norton.
"Well they totally wrecked Silas Moore’s new barn, even killed his prize pig. And the Martin house was so badly damaged they decided to abandon it altogether. I tell you, you have never seen the kind of destruction that we had here, Norton. Are you sure that your mother didn’t write you and tell you about it?" asked Katie.

"She might have. We lost a mailboat about that time, though. Her letter was probably aboard."

"How do you lose a mailboat?" asked Melody.

"A Japanese submarine blew it into a thousand pieces," Norton said. He could remember that day well. Shredded packages and letters turned patches of the sea into pulpy, oatmeal-colored blobs. He couldn’t remember if there had been any survivors. It was bad enough that there was no mail that week.

"Anyway, those twisters were something," said Katie.

"That's Nebraska for you," said Norton.

Katie crossed her right leg over her left, adjusted the pleats in her skirt and pretended to find some fascination with a squirrel in the oak tree across the street. Melody sat still, curls of blond hair moving gently in the breeze.

"Well, Norton, there is something specific I wanted to mention to you today," said Katie.

"Oh?" said Norton.

"Well, it's about church. We don’t see you there as much as we’d like to."

"I guess not," said Norton.

"Have you been attending somewhere else? Perhaps over in Hampton? I understand that they have quite a nice congregation of Methodists over there."

"No, I haven’t been to Hampton. I haven’t been anywhere."

"That surprises us, Norton. You used to be so active with the church. Is everything okay with you?" asked Katie.

"That was before the war," he said.

"Why does that matter?" asked Melody. "It’s 1946; the war is over. Everyone has come back home and picked up where they left off. Why should you be any different?"

Norton moved from the porch rail to the rocking chair and
sat up straight, his boots pulled up beneath the seat. "I saw some things that made me wonder," he said.

"I'm sure that Billy Jones saw some things that made him wonder, but he still comes to church," said Melody in a scratchy whine. "I understand that he's even this year's bake sale chairman. Now there's someone who has taken ahold of life again, and I'm sure that you can do the same."

"Billy was a cook at the navy headquarters in San Diego," said Norton.

"And just what do you mean by that, Norton?" asked Melody.

"Nothing," said Norton, realizing that he had offended her. "I'm sure he did see some things."

"You can bet that he did, Norton. He told me all about it, so don't try and tell me that you are the only one who went through the war. Billy was actually quite important. Did you know that he made dinner for FDR himself one night?" asked Melody.

Norton admitted he didn't know that about Billy. Melody's whine was beginning to bother him. It was evident that she had some affinity for Billy. Norton thought he was a damn fool, but he smiled at Melody and said nothing for a minute.

"I'll have to drop by Billy's house and chat with him about the war sometime," said Norton after a brief pause. He had no intention of ever going out of his way to talk to Billy but the thought sounded good to Melody, he figured, and that was all that mattered to him.

"He'll be at the church picnic tomorrow afternoon," said Melody. "You could talk to him there, but I don't suppose that you're going, since you'd have to attend church before you could eat."

"I hadn't thought much about it," said Norton, letting the insult pass him by. Who did Melody think she was that she could talk to him that way, he thought. A part of him, something deep, latent and primordial, wanted to slap the broad across the porch, but that probably would have offended Katie, so he just thought about it and smiled.

"Billy is going to escort Melody," said Katie. "Don't you think they make just a lovely couple, Norton?"
"You could take Katie if you were up to it, Norton," said Melody as though she were taunting him.
Katie gave her sister a mean stare. Perhaps something deep and primordial in her wanted to slap her sister across the porch.
"I'm sure that Norton can think for himself, Melody!"
"Well I'm sorry, Katie, but he just sits there smiling at us. I'm sure he'd like to go with you to the picnic."
"That's enough, Melody," said Katie.
"Actually, that would be very nice," said Norton.
"Would you like me to escort you, Katie?"
"That would be quite nice of you, Norton, but I'm afraid my sister has made you feel badly about it, so maybe you'd better not."
"Nonsense," said Norton. "She didn't say anything that wasn't already on my mind anyway."
Katie smiled at him. "Well, if you're sure then . . ."
"I'm sure," said Norton.
"Okay then, you can meet me by the front doors after church tomorrow. I know you'll enjoy the picnic. It'll give you a chance to see a lot of old friends who've been asking about you."
Norton couldn't imagine what old friends she was talking about. In a town the size of Millfort, if you didn't see everyone you knew within a week, they'd either died or moved away. And then you would have either attended the funeral or helped load the moving van.
Their mission apparently accomplished, the sisters made some excuse about having to get home in time to see their new icebox delivered. Norton rose from the rocking chair and followed them down the porch steps and to the sidewalk. He told them it had been a pleasure talking with them and that he would look forward to seeing them and Billy at the picnic. The sisters smiled and told him he would enjoy being involved in church again. Norton nodded, feigning agreement.
"By the way, Norton, are those black cowboy boots new?" asked Melody as she passed the hedge.
"Bought them yesterday," he said proudly, looking down.
"Very charming," she said in that scratchy whine again.

"Thanks," Norton wanted to slap her again, but instead he stood on the sidewalk and watched the girls disappear into the afternoon.

He walked back to the porch, thinking about Katie and the church picnic. It would be nice to see her in a Sunday dress. She had such nice legs, long and firm and pink. He hoped Melody would keep her mouth shut at the picnic; he had had enough of her and her prissiness. Maybe she would occupy herself with that fool, Billy. Maybe they would both stay out of his way. But if they didn't, he supposed it really didn't matter. What did he care? They didn't actually bother him. He just didn't like them.

That afternoon, Norton sat in the rocking chair, looking at his boots, thinking they would look good with his dark suit. He hadn't worn that suit since before the war, and then only to church. He used to like church. He had liked the minister, too; his sermons seemed to reach out from the pulpit and scare the hell out of people. Those sermons always made Norton leave church wanting to do better. And they always left him with a cold shiver. It was a good shiver, but Norton hadn't felt it for a long time. Not since the war. The war had changed things; the war had really scared the hell out of him. He was glad the war hadn't changed things for Billy. There's nothing worse than an S.O.B. who changes on you, Norton thought. But Billy hadn't really been in the war; he'd been in a kitchen in San Diego. Norton didn't think a kitchen could be part of the war. A kitchen was for boys. War was not.

Sunday morning, Norton sat in the back pew of the Millfort Congregational Church with his mother, who had returned early that morning from Des Moines. The organ prelude reminded Norton of the rhythmic hum of the Sin Cristo's engine room. He liked the prelude—it was smooth
and simple and helped him relax. Before it ended, he was resting comfortably with his arms across the back of the pew and his feet angled into the main aisle. His mother had been reading the program during this time, and when she saw him with his body elongated and seemingly comfortable, she rebuked him for being irreverent.

"It isn’t proper to be so comfortable in church, Norton," she said.

It was about then that she noticed his new boots. "Are those black cowboy boots new, dear?"

"Bought them the other day," he said.

"Well I hope to goodness that you didn’t spend a lot for them."

"They’re good boots. Do you like them, Mother?"

"They’re fine, dear, but sit up and listen. Church is beginning. And for Goodness’ sake will you please pull your trouser legs from the inside of those things? You’ll wrinkle them for sure."

When the service was over, Norton was glad to be on his way. The sermon had been only fair. The Reverend Hilliard spoke about John the Baptist and the importance of baptism. Norton couldn’t remember his own baptism—he was much too young—but his mother told him it had been a beautiful christening. Norton thought it would be much better to keep people out of the water until they knew what was going on for sure. Maybe its significance would sink in better that way.

Some of the ladies had tears in their eyes and were blowing their noses in embroidered handkerchiefs, and some of the men were shaking hands with the minister. Norton’s mother was so touched by the sermon that she kissed Norton on the nose and gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

"Did you like the sermon, dear?" she asked.

"It was fine, Mother," Norton said, distracted by a boy running toward him with a picture torn from a coloring book.

"Guess who this is," said the boy as he stopped in front of Norton.

"Couldn’t be Jesus, could it?"

"How did you know?"
“Who else could it be?”

The boy studied the picture, confused for a moment and then ran off in search of someone else to show the crayon drawing to. Norton walked to the restroom and splashed some cold water on his face. As he raised his head from the porcelain sink, a sink he had washed in since he was barely able to place his fingers on the top of it a long time ago, he studied his wet features in the cloudy mirror. “Who is this?” he asked himself out loud. “Norton Albert Mann,” he said laughing. “Who else could it be?” He towelled his face dry and left for the picnic.

On the way out of the chapel he met Katie. She was wearing a fluffy, white dress that let her legs show. Norton was happy to be on his way to the picnic. It was being held on a grassy knoll behind the church. He could see the Missouri below as it flowed toward the Mississippi, severing Nebraska and Iowa like a thin, brown ribbon.

Most of the men had removed their coats and ties and were setting up folding tables. Others were throwing white tablecloths across each table. And a few minutes later women with their sleeves rolled up and wearing aprons were carrying steaming pots and platters to the tables. There were baked beans, fresh corn, baskets of hot rolls, roasts, hams, baked potatoes, mashed potatoes, vegetable salads and gelatin that was beginning to run. It had all been placed on the tables in buffet fashion. A car pulled up and a woman got out with a large bowl of green peas mixed with baby onions. Norton liked green peas and baby onions; he hadn’t seen much of them in the navy.

The aroma had attracted a line of people who stood by the tables holding plates against their sides and stuffing silverware into their pockets. Norton had never seen such a spread before, even in Millfort.

“I noticed that you have your eyes on those peas and onions that Mrs. Simpson brought,” Katie said to Norton as they stood in line, waiting their turn.

“I haven’t had them in a long time,” said Norton. “I used to really like them.”

“I’ll tell you one thing,” came an obnoxious voice from
behind. "FDR just loved peas with baby onions. I thought I was going to have to open another can just for him alone."

Norton turned to the man and they exchanged nods of recognition.

"That must have been some experience, Billy, meeting FDR like you did," said Melody.

"Oh it was, Mel. I shook his hand and all. Then he thanked me for being such a service to my country. We'll never have another president like him, let me tell you."

The people in line "oohed" and "aahed" as Billy spoke, delighted to be so close to someone who had actually shaken hands with FDR. One of the oldtimers asked Norton if he had met FDR too. Norton said he hadn't but he'd heard a lot about him.

Once through the line, Norton and Katie sat at a small redwood picnic table in the shade of a large elm. Norton could see the green bluffs that rolled down to an old pier where he used to go catfishing. It was serene there on the Missouri with Katie, good food, and his black boots. Norton couldn't remember when he'd felt so good. He was looking forward to being alone with Katie for a while, but his hopes were dashed when Billy and Melody joined them.

"So tell me, Non," said Billy, "how was the food in your part of the war?"

"Pretty good, I guess," said Norton.

"It couldn't have been as good as Diego, I'll bet. You see, we had all the supplies for the entire Pacific Fleet right there in our warehouses."

"I always wondered where they kept it," said Norton.

"Well, it was there in Diego. Anything we needed, we got ahold of. I tell you Nort, it was a valuable war for me. I probably would have been nothing without it. But now I know almost everything that there is to know about cooking, nutrition and all and could probably pick up a job just about anywhere. Guys like me are in demand, you know. And do you know why, Nort?"

"No, why?" asked Norton, afraid of the answer's length.

"Because of the food industry. It's big business in America. I mean, people have got to eat, right?"
"I guess they do," said Norton.
"You bet they do. That's why a guy like me is in demand. Do you know that one of my buddies from Diego—a kid that I even trained—has got himself a job at the Waldorf in the Big Apple herself. That's a word we use for New York City, Mel."
"What in the world is he doing there?" asked Melody.
"Why, he's in charge of all the salads. That's quite a job, you know. I understand that folks back East are big salad eaters, so you can imagine the kind of responsibility he's got."
"Are you thinking about going back East?" asked Katie. Norton was wishing he would.
"Well, not exactly," he said, looking at Melody as if they shared a secret. "Do you think I should tell them, Mel?"
"Go ahead, Billy. I think it's really exciting."
"Aw, maybe I'd better not. Not yet anyway."
"Well, then I will if you won't. Billy has bought Sam's diner. Isn't that wonderful!" she exclaimed.
"That's terrific news, Billy! Isn't that great news, Norton?" asked Katie.
"Congratulations Billy," said Norton.
"Well thanks, Nort. You'll have to come down sometime for a bite to eat after I get things remodeled."
"You're going to remodel the place?" asked Katie. "How delightful! Isn't that delightful, Norton?"
"Yes, delightful," Norton agreed.
"You bet, Katie. I'm going to extend the counter and put in a half dozen more swivel stools. Then I'll probably enlarge the kitchen—it's kind of small, and I'm used to the best, you know. I've even toyed with the idea of putting in a dance floor."
"It sounds as though you've really got some big plans for that place," said Katie.
“Oh, he really does,” said Melody.

“And I owe it all to the navy. They gave me one of the most valuable skills a man could have,” said Billy.

Norton had finished most of his meal and was picking through the peas, separating them from the onions. His tie was still on, and his coat was buttoned. He looked down at the Missouri as it flowed to faraway places. He thought about Huck Finn, and he wished he could float away on a raft, too.

“So what exactly did you do in the war, Nort?” asked Billy.

“A little bit of everything, I guess. But mainly I was a machine gunner,” said Norton.

“Well, I guess there’s not much of a demand for machine gunners now that the war is over,” said Billy.

“You never know,” said Norton.

“Well, have you got any ideas for the future?”

Katie turned toward Billy and with affected excitement told him about Norton’s job at the hardware store. “It promises quite a future for him,” she added.

“Is that right?” said Billy. “Well, Mel, if you’re about done, why don’t we leave these two alone and take that walk down to the pier that I promised you. I promised you that walk a week ago, and you know how I am with promises. That’s called integrity, you know, and that’s one thing a man gets plenty of in the navy. I think all that responsibility in Diego had something to do with it. Responsibility builds integrity, I’ve always said. A man has to know how to be responsible, right Nort?”

Norton managed a half smile that suggested agreement and then turned to Katie, hoping Billy would realize the conversation was over and leave. It almost worked.

“Say, those are pretty nifty boots you’ve got there, Nort,” said Billy.

“Thanks,” said Norton. “Bought them the other day.”

“Where’d you pick them up at?”

“Down at Allen’s Western Wear.”

“Oh, wrong place to buy them, Nort. Their boots have been known to fall apart after a little wear. I’ll tell you what, though. When those wear out in a few months, let me
take you over to Jorgenson’s Shoe Center in Hampton. My uncle is the manager there, and he’ll fix you up with a real good pair.”

“Those are a pretty good pair,” said Norton.

“Well, keep it in mind.”

Norton smiled. Billy turned away with Melody’s hand in his, and they made their way to the pier. Norton sat for a minute and watched them descend the bluffs. The afternoon sun shone brightly upon the church steeple, casting a shadow like a dagger across the knoll and the tables where the food had been. A few ears of corn lay cold on a platter. Salad and vegetables had been slopped out of the bowls and onto the white tablecloths. A couple of rolls had landed on the ground and rolled beneath the tables.

“I think you have to understand him, Norton,” Katie interjected. “He’s very high spirited, but he doesn’t mean anything by it. And it doesn’t matter what he thinks about your boots. They certainly are shiny, aren’t they?”

“They are indeed. I must have buffed them for an hour before church. Do you like them?”

“Oh yes. You have very good taste.”

Norton removed his tie and coat. He rolled his sleeves halfway up his arms and tucked his trouser legs into the tops of his boots. He felt better now that Billy had left with Melody. He was alone with Katie, and it was a good feeling. He had wanted to be alone with her for a long time, not necessarily to talk, just to watch her. She was beautiful and so pink it astounded Norton. Billy was pink, also, but a freckled, red-headed pink. Katie was more of a fresh pink. He supposed she was soft, too, although he had never really touched her. He was getting sleepy and the afternoon was drawing on but he was comfortable beneath the elm, watching Katie and the Missouri.

He could now see Billy down at the pier, laughing with Melody as the cool Platte breeze carried their voices up the hill. Their feet dangled from the pier into the water, splashing in the current as the water lapped against the supports blackened with creosote. Norton’s eyes grew heavy. He lay back in the grass, his legs stretched out so his boots could shine in the sun.
He dozed for a few minutes, and saw some men smiling on the deck of a ship. They were all smoking and pointing at something in the water. Norton wanted to join them, to somehow get to them and laugh with them, but, waking, he realized they were all dead. Every one of those men had gone down with the ship; sometimes Norton wished he could have gone too.

"Are you okay, Norton?" asked Katie.

"Just fine. Just a little tired, though. But I'm so comfortable, and your hand is so soft..."

Katie smiled. She watched Norton doze for a moment and then she glanced down at the pier. Something seemed to be wrong. She couldn't see her sister there, and Billy was jumping up and down frantically. She nudged Norton and he snapped up. By this time they could hear Billy screaming for help.

"Something is terribly wrong, Norton," said Katie. "I think there's been an accident." She paused, then cried, "I think it's Melody, Norton. She's fallen in the river!"

Katie let go of Norton's hand and ran toward the pier. He got up and followed her for a moment, then passed her. His legs were moving too fast as he came off the hill and onto the pier. He stumbled, scuffing his boots.

"Oh gosh, Norton, do something. She fell against the side of the pier and fell into the water. I thought she'd come up, but I can't see her. You can swim. Jump in and look for her. Please," Billy whimpered.

Norton pulled his shirt off and threw it behind him. He was tugging off his boots as Katie came running down the hill with a parcel of picnickers she had alerted on the way.

"Hurry, Norton," said Billy.

Norton jumped into the water and stayed down for a minute or two. He came to the surface, panting and out of breath. "Which side did she fall off?" he called.

"You're on the right side, Norton. That's where she fell," said Billy.

Norton figured if Melody hadn't come to the surface yet, she had probably been knocked unconscious and floated underneath the pier itself. It was low to the water and couldn't be reached without going under water and coming
up under it. He went back under the water and swam below the pier. The water was muddy, and he couldn’t see a thing, so he started up. He knew he was under the pier because it was dark. In a moment he came to the surface. There were only about six inches of air space between the water and the bottom of the pier. Above him he could hear people crowding onto the pier; their screams and shouts were familiar.

He turned his head to the side so he could see if Melody was beneath the pier. Just then a head of blond hair bumped into him. It was Melody. She coughed, her body lurching in convulsions. Norton grabbed her by the hair, the only thing he could see to reach, and pulled her under the water where he found an arm. He pulled her toward him, swam a few feet to make sure they were clear of the pier, and then popped to the surface.

The crowd on the pier sighed in relief. Norton pulled Melody to the edge of the pier where the Reverend Hilliard and another man hoisted her up and placed her on her stomach. They fumbled with her clothes and pounded on her back, and in a few seconds she was coughing and spitting. She had a bad cut over her forehead, but she was alive. Norton pulled himself onto the pier. One of the ladies wrapped a white tablecloth around him. He sat there for a moment, staring into the water.

When he stood up, most of the people on the pier had moved to the shore with Melody. She, too, was wrapped in a white tablecloth. Norton was glad to see her sitting up. He supposed he didn’t really dislike her after all.

Billy was still on the pier. He handed Norton his shirt. “That was some rescue, Nort,” he said. “I was just about to jump in and get her myself when you came along.”

“Billy, do me a favor,” said Norton.

“Anything.”

“Get the hell away from me.”

It felt good to say that, Norton thought. He walked to the edge of the pier where he had left his boots. They were gone. Maybe somebody had moved them, he thought. He looked around—no sign. Just then, Billy, who was still on the pier, spoke.
"Did you lose something, Nort?"

"Did you see what happened to my boots?" Norton asked.

"I don't mean to be the bearer of bad news, Nort, but I think the crowd probably knocked them into the water. They were pretty close to the side, you know."

Norton brought his hand to his face and rubbed his chin. He walked to the far side of the pier, looking downstream for any sign of his boots. The water glared at him. He thought he saw something floating downstream, but it might have been a thick strand of riverweed. He couldn't tell. He sat on the edge of the pier and watched the Missouri as it weaved away toward distant towns and counties. His boots were gone. But he had saved a life, and that was something.

In the next issue of the Herald, Norton was applauded for his heroics. The article appeared on the same page as an article announcing the purchase of Sam's Diner by Billy Jones, a brave veteran of the Second World War.