



**Audrey**

Spruce Grove, Alberta (Briefly)

December, 1941

I know where the moon lives now –  
At the east end of the sky. Where the tip of Lake Superior meets the future.

You don't mind if I run hard while saying exactly where, do you? I'm in an awful hurry. I have a train to catch, the God's Country Express. The train will carry me east, away from this whistle stop, away from cave-era parents, away from the ranch hand. And I'm likely to leap over gopher holes along the way, so if my words wobble in the next few minutes, that's why. This ranch always was riddled with gophers. If I twist my ankle on one of their front porches, I won't be going anywhere. I'll miss my train. My life will be over when it's hardly begun.

I'm only sixteen, but I'm told I sound older. That's because I read. All Star Comics. The *Spruce Grove Examiner* (my parents don't take the paper; they already know the news and it's not good), Hollywood-star magazines, books about Ontario. Is *that* ever one dilly of a place – fast and loose, sounds like, and lots of work. Shiny pages filled with art. I have to sneak into town, to the library, to look at these. Sometimes I dip into novels there, but I can't bring them home so I catch

glimpses in town when I can. I *did* manage all of *Anne of Green Gables* in bits and pieces and it was swell. Still, I keep my reading a secret and breathe each new word I learn into the grass. The newest word is *heroine*.

This ranch goes on forever. You could dash in the direction of doomsday and still not reach the edge, but I'll make it. If I had the Green Lantern's power ring, I'd be there before this.

I'll tell you something else; the moon loves industry.  
The moon is modern.

Gopher    hazard

There, I'm over it. Forgive me if I pant like a set-upon fawn. I'm built for speed, but my feet have been pattering over frozen acres faster than Gene Krupa's drumsticks. If my parents catch me leaving, they'll skin me. I could spout Bible verses about mercy until I'm blue, but they'd skin me anyway, my holy parents Horace and Daisy Foley. They've always called me a wild cork whistling in the wind – and *sly* – worst trait in a girl, according to my mother. They're right about me. You'd think they'd be happy, being right, but it frosts their brimstone socks, which doesn't make much sense when you consider. Stagger me I don't have time to consider. The train for Winnipeg then Fort William, Ontario, where the moon lives, stops here in twenty minutes, and only now do I scramble over the rail fence that marks our ranch boundary.

I've got to rest for a shake, though. I have small bones. This carpet bag drags me down. I've been hauling it across the pasture, along the ragged path through the darkening trees. Over frozen vetch. Knotweed.

Like I said, away from the ranch hand with the face like clabbered milk and huge, thunking hands that would wed me between yanking slick red calves out into the world (I can breathe better; on I go again). He talked to my father. My father talked to my mother. She talked to me. I talked to the moon.

I'll bet that sounds queer to you, but if you've ever been an only child like me it might sound less queerlike. A girl has to tell someone, and the red staggering calves aren't my idea of a good sounding board. My parents said "oh, dandy, you two can marry, carry on the ranch." That was more useful than finishing high school, they firmly believed. I told you they were cave-era parents.

All my life they've crowed "lo, the end is near." If that's true, I said, what does the ranch matter? They said we had to soldier on regardless. Speaking of soldiers, I guess they'd heard there was a war? There's always a war, my mother pattered on, patting the Bible.

And the ranch hand? All he did was smirk. He's been smirking since I was fifteen. Scheming with my parents behind my back. Making grabs for me in the barn. Calling me his dumpling, his colt. Then this whole wedding thing began to unroll like some crazy carpet I couldn't stop. They've got it all planned out, a simple service (*Audrey Leona Foley do you take*), perogy supper. *Carry on the ranch*. They used a fancy word for it, *vocation*. But let's—

Smallish          gaping          hole

call a spade a spade; I know what it's really about, begetting and begetting and begetting.

Here's little Audrey with her brood, roping her calves, cooking her flapjacks, living her Old Testament life when there's a swell modern world out there. Like I said, I read on the sly.

The Spruce Grove Library is the size of a fingernail. I'm supposed to be studying some special Bible for brides they keep locked in a glass case there. Comics beat Bible stories all hollow if you ask me. I just read my first Wonder Woman comic! At the library I always head for the shelf marked *New*, and there she was in her dandy outfit and her bullet-bracelet, holding her golden lasso, and wasn't she one glorious lady? I couldn't get enough of her. I'd give anything to be able to fly

like Wonder Woman or, stagger me, even be *near* what, or who, flies.

Instead of reading at the library, I'm supposed to be peddling these little sheets of paper with Bible verses printed on them around town, a penny a verse. My mother says that will teach me the value of money, and the pennies will go towards my wedding ovenware from the Corning Glass Company. I'd rather stand with a cob of corn stuck in my ear than peddle those verses.

I told my mother no one was home, that's why I came home penniless. If I'd stuck around here, I'd have had to cook up a new story, for people have to be home *sometimes*, don't they? And where would they go in a speck like Spruce Grove? But the pickle I was in with the Bible verses faded that day when I saw the newspaper ad:

*Girls Wanted to Build Airplanes in Ontario*  
*Earn Good Wages. Apply in Person to Miss Ruby Kozak,*  
*Head Office, Fort William Aviation*

Stagger me if that paper wasn't lying open at the *Classifieds*, waiting for me to waltz in there like Matilda. Think about it. The next best thing to being able to fly like Wonder Woman would be spending time in the company of airplanes, wouldn't it? I'd so love to see how they fasten the wings. How they soar.

A cog cranked in my head that day. The ranch could ranch onward without me. The red calves could find their way out; Clabber-Face could save his big birthing hands for someone else. If I had wages I could find out about planes. I could do whatever I wanted. And I stayed so long in the tiny library, when I left it was dark and the moon had shifted. I haven't looked back since.

I'm nobody's dumpling.

Not that far ahead, the train station, lit by electric light. The lace of my canvas Jeep comes unknotted, dangles, and could trip me. I won't let anything trip me. My shoes aren't fit

footwear for winter, but I'll worry about that when I reach Fort William, the Dominion's industrial hub (said the newspaper). *Audrey, do you take* – Clabber-Face – *definitely, oh, for sure, take my dumpling* (me), his colt. His newly-minted missus (me) gets whisked upstairs to see what's under that white dress. I already know the story, and when you know it before it even happens, it's no kind of story and you should find a fresh new moon. *I want to be someone, so no, I don't take you*

Final        gopher

About the moon.

It hovers above the tip of can't miss this train, at the east end of sky. Above Fort William Aviation. All I had to figure out was cash. Then, the day after the library, the solution hit home – since the thirties my parents had lost faith in banks, stocks or any modern to-do with money. They kept cash all over the house. Big wads of rolled bills inside the cherry jar, the wedding fund my mother made a big *woo-hoo* over. I cleaned it out.

And while I was at it, I took her one sin, lipstick. The wages of sin. I use it to redden my cheeks on this, my journey to the moon, hoping lipstick will age me to eighteen and help keep away Nosey Parkers asking where I'm going, and why.

Just before I left the house I cut my brindled hair for speed, and now it falls like short rain poured from a bowl. They send Clabber-Face to find me, doesn't hurt if I look different. Too bad I can't stand taller. I'm a half-pint. They'll tell me that stealing the money was the worst sin a daughter could visit upon her parents. I can already hear what they'll say, that's what I mean about knowing the story beforehand – it's got to be better than that.

One last short stretch of road and I'll reach the station. My ears don't need lipstick; they're small, hot bundles of readiness. My ankles are untwisted. Gophers, good-bye – *ha!* –

your little porches of pain didn't get Audrey Foley this time.

The moon is full, industrial. You could punch a hole through the sky, to the very spot where it hangs roundly, and touch it, but you'd need an airplane to reach that high. You'd need the longest ladder in the Dominion of Canada. Either that, or Wonder Woman's golden lasso. It would snag the moon and whoever's home in there would have to speak the truth, just like in the *ATI Star* comic. Maybe there's a chance, just a sliver of chance, I could be a tiny Wonder Woman, her third cousin. Sliver, but there for the taking.

Already I have wondrous ears. I can hear the train whistle miles away, west of me in alpine-framed Jasper, in Hinton's hilly saloons, the levelling-off lands. Best sound I've ever heard.

Here's the station. Shantylike, a sorry sign nailed over the door – *S* and *P* crumbled – *ruce Grove Alberta* all that remains. My ticker's about to leap from my chest now that the moment is here. I lug my carpet bag to the ticket wicket. Elmer, the usual stationmaster, isn't working. The moon shot a ray of luck right down on me when I needed it. I flatten the roll of stolen bills. "Fort William, Ontario. One way. Please."

Mr. Not-Elmer spouts times, change in Winnipeg.

Do I want a berth? You bet I do.

The train comes now, a dark, moving deliverance. All steam and screech. Brakes. I grasp my ticket. A striped arm helps me step up with my bag. I find a seat away from other passengers, which isn't hard at all – the coach is empty except for a fancy lady poring over some papers. She looks pretty with her wire-rimmed spectacles and she's not *that* old and likely could smile if she wasn't scowling over whatever dire thing she reads (I doubt it's a novel). I sit a few rows from her (when she's not gone to the smoker) and I press myself into the coach's shadows. It strikes me full now. I'm a runaway bride, a prodigal. But only to my parents and to Clabber-Face. I know better. I'm swinging on a new moon.

The engine bucks out of Spruce Grove. I feel so few pangs. Alberta is too small for me. I take one last glance out the window; a place never looks shabbier than when you're

leaving it, does it? A few boiled potato suppers through small, lit windows. The broken water tower. Poky little lives. I feel a dandelion-puff of pity for them, but then, *poof*, gone. The locomotive's *ka-choo* is the best song I ever heard. Sweeter than any tune by the Andrews Sisters. My parents are right; I *am* a wild, whistling cork. Let me be fully sly then. I'm the kind of girl Green Lantern would be proud of, a runaway success story, quite possibly a heroine. Yes. Wonder Woman's third cousin. Why not?

Town's behind me, moon's ahead. I notice, for the first time, a blanket folded on the seat beside me. I snatch it up, stuff my mouth full of wool to stifle – what? – my giddy, prodigal glee, or the higher joy-sob of a heroine on the loose?

You won't breathe a word of this to anyone, will you?



**Muriel, B.S.E., M.A.E.**

(Bachelor of Science in Engineering  
University of Toronto, 1929;  
Master's in Aeronautical Engineering,  
University of Michigan, 1932)

She is officially a spinster. Thirty-six years old. She has her work, though. Her Master's degree protracted by polio, but earned nonetheless. She thinks silver linings, thinks clouds, as she clip-clops with her cane along the sidewalk that leads to the main entrance of Fort William Aviation, while the wind bangs her satchel against her wool-coat-covered thigh. Thinks aerodynamics. She snatches the brim of her floppy hat against a sudden gust. Snow falls in hard pellets like pop rivets. Her plum new job begins today. After nine years in a fusty office at Fairchild, she, Muriel McGregor, is now Chief Engineer at this plant with a contract for three hundred northern model Mosquitoes and a sky-high security alert in the wake of recent escapes – *subversives* – from Angler Detainee Camp. She'd arrived yesterday and, hunkered beside her steamer trunk in her new flat, had inked, in bright red, this milestone in her diary – *the Lakehead at last! December 15, 1941. Threshold!* Below these words she'd sketched a horned cartoon devil and added, wickedly, *Watch out for subversives and monsters!*

The head office of Fort William Aviation stands apart from the plant, separated by a frozen courtyard about half the size

of a Dominion-league hockey rink. Muriel notes, as she passes through the courtyard's snow-covered benches, a Christmas tree listing crookedly as the bitter wind buffets tinsel and garlands of Union Jacks looped over its boughs. The pine's off-kilter stance gives it a forlorn look. She flips through her mental Kardex and remembers that she's to proceed to the reception area on the main floor of the two-storey office building. She stops for a moment to breathe the bracing air. Bears down on her cane. Before pushing the buzzer beside the office door, Muriel rolls her dream over in her mind – landing skis. Engineers have been trying to crack a foolproof design. This is how Muriel wants to be remembered, not as a spinster or a cripple, but as the brilliant engineer who perfected landing skis. Which is why the Fort William job is perfect; its long winters are ideal for testing skis.

She buzzes. Through the glass panel of the door, Muriel sees a girl with crimped hair skitter towards her. The girl introduces herself as Fraudena, the plant's switchboard operator, and urges Muriel to, "for pity's sake, come in out of that awful wind chill."

As Muriel stamps snow from her boots onto the mat inside the door, she recalls the long-distance telephone chat she had with this switchboard worker several weeks ago. The girl had warned Muriel that, since there'd never been a lady engineer at the factory, people were curious as cougars. Newspaper reporters from Fort William and Port Arthur had been ringing the factory, hounding Fraudena for information. The newshound from Port Arthur said he wanted to run a feature called "Queen of the Mosquitoes Lands at the Lakehead." Muriel had quipped back to the switchboard girl to tell reporters who call that she rises in the morning, makes hot oatmeal just like everyone else and does *not* bite.

The phone rings insistently on the switchboard, and Fraudena makes will it never eyes and says whoever it is, they can just call back. She asks Muriel how her long train ride was, all the way from British Columbia.

“Oh – grand, grand,” Muriel breezes. “What a country this is.” An odd thing to say, the engineer thinks, given it’s her own country, but lately she’s had the sensation of observing earth from outer space. As for the girl’s query about her journey, Muriel leaves out a great deal.

She doesn’t tell this crimp-haired creature with the funny name that she went to visit her mother on the west coast after receiving a telegram from a hospital there. She hadn’t seen her mother, Annabelle McGregor, a prominent juvenile-court judge in Vancouver, recently retired and suddenly taken ill, for years. Nor had they been on speaking terms. Muriel had an account to settle with this mother of hers, but Annabelle was too weak to be taxed with any settling of accounts.

And then those interminable days on the train, nearly devoid of interesting characters, except for a fey girl with a carpet bag and a wild rodeo of hair who boarded at some speck of a place in Alberta. But the girl had huddled mute, or retarded, in her seat. The kid had also disembarked at Fort William, dashing rudely from the train in front of Muriel, not offering to help with her heavy satchel. Luckily, the plant had sent one of its young constables, a boy named Jimmy Petrik, to drive her to the Brodie Street flat the factory had rented, and to carry her luggage.

No, Muriel’s trip from Vancouver had been futile, beyond the time it afforded to pore over the thick industrial folders the factory had sent her with their maps and protocols that wearied her, and the urgent Possible Unauthorized Parts memorandum that, while possibly grounded in rumour, distressed her and made her worry that her dream job might be slightly less dreamy than she’d anticipated.

“Miss McGregor?”

Fraudena offers to take Muriel’s coat, hat and satchel. Muriel will keep the satchel; it contains files she’ll leave in her new office. As Fraudena drapes Muriel’s coat over her arm, she croons over its fine fox collar, then gives the felt hat a fondling sort of stroke. Muriel can only assume that textiles offer this frazzled soul, who handles telephone cables all day,