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DAY IN THE SUN

Catherine Ridgway McCarthy

FRED AND DOLORES KIRBY were leaning over the aft rail of the steamer *Red Wing*, staring down at the big paddle-wheel. The wheel hung motionless, part submerged in Mississippi River water that flowed slowly past the foot of Third Street, and part bone-dry in the hot sun.

Around them lay the hot steel of the river and the sun-baked limestone city. The iron deck shook under the thin soles of their shoes. The beautiful black smoke climbed into the cloudless sky, and the blacker it grew and the more it poured from the red and white stack of the big white boat, the louder people stamped on the iron decks, the harder people shoved. Then the final good-bye blast of the whistle tore the city and the river, the boat and all the people on it, into little bright-colored pieces, and they were on their way. The water was churned into a froth, the white wheel rose, shaking and dripping, and a narrow rainbow hung over it until the *Red Wing* made her turn and headed upstream to the dam and locks at Marion.

Listen, the calliope was playing "Here Comes the Show Boat!" And they were on it, they were part of the show. The music was something extra, unexpected, thrown in free. They were still watching the wheel, watching the white froth fly out and up, shake itself, and then fall. Someone on the top deck threw down a red crackerbox and it bounced on the wheel and then flew into the foam. Now you could see the tiny red spot bobbing in the wake of the boat. Dolores wondered how long it would bob around in the river before it got soaked through and lost its color and sank. It was great fun to be standing on the deck of a big white boat watching that little red speck falling slowly away downstream. Now the calliope was playing "God Bless America." Dolores pulled Fred's sleeve. "Don't it bring you back?" she said.

Fred frowned. He'd just begun to be glad he'd come, and Dolores had to start being serious. It had cost them two bucks already, the day had, and there would be a dime for this and a dime for that, before they were through. He looked down at Dolores and noticed she had that expression girls get on their faces when they stand around waiting to be asked to dance. She was a cute kid, and now she was Mrs. Fred Kirby, and he guessed he loved her. "Having a good time, Baby?" he said.

"It's swell, simply swell!" She looked up at him and smiled. Fred was so pale and sweet and refined looking. Then Dolores felt her breath stick in her throat and grow hot there. It sure was tough to have to remember that he looked that way partly because he was in the San for two years with the T.B. But that was before she knew him. "Aren't you glad you came, now?" she said.

"Oh, it's O.K.," Fred said. "You stay right here and I'll go get some chairs. You can't stand up all day."

Dolores had honestly forgotten all about the baby, but now that Fred had mentioned it, it seemed like it turned right over under her smock. Boy! It wouldn't be long now. Last time she had seen the doctor, he had said two weeks. She reckoned on Friday, and today was Sunday. All the more reason why she had wanted to come today. After the baby came, she'd never get away from the apartment and Fred's mother. You couldn't leave a baby with Fred's mother. She was so old, and deaf as a post.

There were a lot of soldiers from the Fort on the boat. Most of them were just privates and they all had pretty girls with them. Two officers came up with deck chairs and acted as though they might settle down right there, but Dolores frowned at them; so they moved away. Fred wouldn't like them next to him all day. He was awfully touchy about the Army ever since he was turned down by the draft board even though he was just as good as if he'd never had the T.B. When she first knew him, Fred was always laughing and cracking wise, meeting at the bus stop, taking in dances. Now he even talked against his job, although it was the best one he'd ever had. Hands went up and re-anchored bobby-pins, hands went down and smoothed the smock. That red-and-white-striped seersucker skirt was cute, bought last summer when she was still working. No one would guess that the belt didn't meet by a good eight inches. Dolores leaned her elbows on the rail and waited.

Someone pushed her from behind. "Pull in your tail, kid; this ain't no private yacht," she heard someone say. She turned around. A

big man with a stubbly face, carrying a deck chair, was grinning at her. "Oh, pardon me," the big man said. He opened the deck chair. "Squatty-voo. Take a load off your feet."

"Thanks," said Dolores, grinning impishly the way she had used to when she was that cute file-clerk in Mr. Norman's own office and won the jiving contest at the Paramount. The big man carefully set the portable radio he carried down between his feet. The other man with him was thin and dark, foreign-looking. Probably one of those Mexicans who were brought up north to work in the sugar beet fields and never went back home where they belonged. There were a couple of Mexican girls at grade school and they were no good. This man didn't look so good himself. He set up his own chair and sat down in it, just sitting there, staring at her, at her blonde hair that was long and frizzed on the ends. Dolores remembered that the wops always fell for blondes. Then the dark man spoke. "Where's your fella?" he said.

The big man slapped his knees. "Yes, where's your man? You come on this here excursion all by-yourself?" He winked at the Mexican, who drew his chair a little closer. "Ain't you got no fella?" the Mexican said.

Dolores tried to stand up again, but it wasn't so easy. "Why don't you beat it?" she said to the Mexican. "You're too fresh, the both of you. You better be out of here before my husband gets back." Wouldn't it be awful now if Fred was in the Army down South somewhere, and she was alone on the boat with these two awful men. Then she saw Fred, pushing his way through the crowd with two chairs folded up under his arm. Boy! Was she glad to see him! "Here comes my husband now," said Dolores. "He'll tell you where you get off." She got out of the chair and shoved it toward the big man.

They didn't seem in any hurry to go and then the big man saw Fred. "Pardon me, missus, but is that your husband?" he said, pointing at Fred. Dolores nodded. "Why, I know him. Fred and me are old friends. Fearless Fred, we call him, Fearless Fred, the Red. Hiya, Red," he shouted. "We just been passing the time of day with your missus," the big man said. Maybe the big man was Fred's boss in the yard. He seemed glad to see these two awful men. He suddenly looked happy and pleased, the way he was all the time when they first knew each other. Dolores remembered why she had been so excited that time Fred first spoke to her when they were both waiting at the bus stop. She was in love with him.

"Meet Dolores," Fred said. "This here is Albert Anders, old Worry Wart the fellows in the yard call him, and Sam Santy-Claus, no one can say his right name."

"So you're Fred's missus?" the Wart said. "Well, I guess we'd better be shoving on. He's a swell guy, Dolores," he said. "A little stir-simple, but a swell guy." He lowered his voice to almost a whisper. "For a guy that's been in jail for two years, he's doing all right." He winked at Sam, and they gathered up their chairs and the radio and moved on to two girls that were hanging over the rail a little farther on. "Pull in your tail, kid," they heard the Wart say; "this ain't no private yacht."

"A couple of wise guys," Dolores said, but she wasn't too peeved, and she shook her head so her hair would fall loose over her shoulders. She wanted to tell Fred that they'd tried to pick her up, but it was hard to when, after all, wasn't Fred sort of a pick-up, not exactly, but sort of, at the very beginning? But they both worked for the same organization and that made it different. "What are they, truckers?" she asked.

The only chairs Fred could find were backless, so they fixed one up against the rail and hung Dolores' coat over it, so she could lean against it. Fred sat in the other one, facing her, his long legs crossed, his elbows on his knees. He pulled out a half-smoked cigaret from his shirt pocket and lit it, the one he had been smoking when the street car came along. He drew the smoke in easily and deeply, and that was the last you saw of it. "The Wart's a mechanic in the garage," he said. "He's been there a long time. He's smart, and I guess he gets good pay. The Mex just sweeps up around. He's O.K." Fred said.

"Well, then," asked Dolores, now that she was comfortable, "what did that smart man mean when he mentioned by the way to me that you were in jail for two years?" By God, she'd almost forgotten he'd said two years, and by God, hadn't Fred told her himself that he was part Czech and Kirby wasn't his real name. This is what she got for taking up with a foreigner. This wasn't so much fun. "Maybe you lied to me," she went on, fast and excited, but low; "maybe you were in jail for two years, and not in the San like you told me. Maybe that's why you changed your name. Fred, tell me honest, you weren't in jail!" It would be nice if she had married a jailbird, wouldn't it now!

"Oh, that." Fred threw the butt over into the wheel and dragged another from his shirt pocket.

Dolores leaned over and pinched Fred's knee as hard as she could.

"You tell me honest," she said. "Oh, Fred, why do you have to get me all stirred up?"

"Honest to God," Fred said, "I was in the San at Twin Lakes, just like I told you. And honest, I'm cured of the T.B. They said I could get married and have kids."

Dolores was satisfied. This was the way Fred talked when he asked her to marry him, and it was true. "But why did he say you were in jail?"

Fred tossed the second butt over the rail. He was plenty embarrassed all right. "Come on, Fred," she said.

"Oh, I just didn't want the guys in the yard to know I had the T.B. So when I didn't know about things that had been going on around here, sort of, I said I was in jail for two years. If I'd told them I'd had the T.B., they might have steered off me, been afraid to hang around, see? So I told them I was in jail for them two years."

"But what did you say you got put into jail for?"

"Oh, I told them I was a Red."

"Fred Kirby, you didn't!" Dolores began to laugh. Honestly, Fred was a scream. She looked at him sitting there, nice and clean and neat in his good dark suit, not like those other men in sports shirts that might just as well be their underwear. He wasn't tough-looking at all. Reds were always tough-looking, weren't they? "Fred, honestly, you're a scream." Gee, it was wonderful to be able to laugh like this, after that scare she'd had a minute ago. Now she had something on Fred.

"Fred," said Dolores, "you're sweet." She leaned back against her coat and looked lazily at the river. Fred was smiling at her, as though he had just told her a joke. This was what they had come for, just to be alone together, a whole day free and easy on the river, away from the apartment and Fred's mother. Fred was remembering when he had first thought up the idea saying he was jailed for a Red, instead of telling about the San at Twin Lakes. He was walking along with Dolores on one of their first dates when he decided he'd try her out to see how she'd take it. "Remember the truckers' strike in '39," he said, "when they busted a whole lot of plate-glass windows on Portland Avenue?" "I wouldn't know," Dolores said. "I was nursemaiding at the Dicksons' on Pinehurst at the time." So he gave up the idea of telling her. Now she knew, and she thought it was just a joke. But the fellows he worked with in the yard thought it was hot stuff. All but the Wart. "That ain't the way," he said. "I've been studying for years about

how to get those bastards, but that ain't the way." He told about an organization in the city that planned the whole thing legal and he tried to get Fred to come to a meeting with him. But Fred wouldn't go. All Fred wanted was a little piece of the big dough, and he didn't want to go to no meeting to get it. In spite of the war boom that everyone was talking about, it seemed to him that he was getting less and less of everything for himself all the time. They wouldn't even have him in the Army.

You wouldn't think it could be so hot out in the country. "It must be terrible in the city," said Dolores. The hot sun quivered on the white turning wheel, it bounced off the white wall of the boat, and the little patches of hot light on the iron deck crept nearer and nearer to their feet. But the sound of the wheel was a cool sound, and you knew there was water all around. From one of the little windows high up in the wall opposite them there came another sound of running water. "That must be 'the Ladies'," said Dolores. Funny to think of spending your day under the window of "the Ladies'." "Get me a coke, will you?" she said. "I'm thirsty."

Those girls the Wart and the Mexican were talking to, were pretty. They were thin and wore cute dresses and white sling pumps. They were talking and laughing and they looked almost like society girls. Dolores knew just the sort of clothes she would be wearing this summer if she was working. That's what the girls were doing now, making good money, buying bonds, and spending the rest on nice clothes. She and Fred were going to have to cash in their two bonds to pay for the baby because she couldn't get in the free ward at City because Fred was working.

The country on either side of the river was pretty, just fields and trees. The city was gone now. All you could see of it was the tower of the First National Bank Building, looking misty and far away. Two cows were standing in the shade under a tree, drinking from the river. There was a little boy with them, with a long switch in his hand. He didn't wave as the big boat went by. They were going past a little island now, with just one tree on it, and under the tree there was a big bird standing on one leg. He didn't move or look frightened as the big white boat churned by. Perhaps this happened to him every day, like watching the street cars go past the apartment at home. He stood there on one leg watching them, and Dolores had the feeling that his eyes were very big and shiny, and that he was looking straight at her.

It was country all around them now, rising gently from the river. Far over the fields you could see a big truck going along fast, and behind the truck a long blue Greyhound bus going as fast as the truck. How could they go along like that across those bumpy fields? "That's highway number one, the road to Madison," Fred said.

People were beginning to open their lunches and eat. Dolores opened theirs, and she had fixed it up nice, with things Fred didn't get in his lunch box every day. The coke was ice-cold and good. She let the fizzy coolness rise in the straw until it just touched her tongue. She took a little taste of it and let the rest slide down the straw again. "Maybe it would be cooler on the top deck," she said.

"It would be hotter. Remember there's no roof on it."

"It's awful hot here right now," said Dolores. It was almost frightening to be so hot with no other place to go. "Maybe it would be cooler inside," she said.

"Listen," said Fred, "this is the coolest place there is on this boat. They're selling beer in a little room way downstairs, but they won't let you take it up on deck because it's Sunday. If you're hot up here, well, you just go down there and see how you feel."

Dolores put a half-eaten fig newton back into the lunch box, closed the box, and pushed it under her chair. The coat she had to lean against was hot and it scratched her face. "I'm awful hot, and I don't feel so good," she said. If she was home in the apartment she could be lying down on the couch in the living room in her nightgown.

Fred tried to cheer her up. "There's an orchestra downstairs too, and later on there's going to be a kids' singing and dancing contest."

"Maybe I could go down for that," Dolores said. Maybe they'd have a little girl and she'd be a little dancer, and when they came for an outing on the boat when she was about three or so, she'd win the contest. "She takes after her mother," Fred would say. "She won prizes too."

Just as they were going through the locks at Marion, the Wart and the Mexican came up again. The Wart was carrying his radio like a little suitcase that had something breakable in it, and a tinkle of dance music went wherever he went. The man on the locks shouted down at the big boat and slowly the boat rose until you could see the man and his little house with geraniums in the window boxes, and from the radio in the window came the same tune the Wart carried around with him. The boat rose higher and higher, until you could look down on the man

and his little girl who was running up and down on the concrete. The big brown dog stood beside the man and barked and barked, and an automobile stopped on the road and watched them. Then they were out in the river again and they could see the other side of the locks, new white concrete stained with long, thin triangles of rusty yellow. The man didn't bother to go back into his house again, for the river widened out here before the bend that brought you to the town, and that is where they turned around. Right about here the trip was half over. When they came back again the man had the laugh on them. The big white boat went down, slowly, slowly, and the man up there with the dog and the girl could spit down on them, just the way they could've spit down on him a moment before if they'd wanted to.

The Wart and the Mexican set up their chairs next to them and sat down. The Wart held the radio carefully on his lap and turned off the music. You could tell he was a mechanic by the way he handled the little knobs on the radio. They'd both been down in the little room drinking beer. The Wart wiped off his face with his handkerchief, and Fred took off his nice blue coat and folded it inside out on his knees. Dolores had told him before they left the apartment that he had to keep his coat on, but it was a winter suit, and you really couldn't blame him. The Wart took a big silver watch from his pants pocket and looked at it. "Well," he said, "it's two o'clock in Brooklyn."

Brooklyn. It sounded cool. It was far away, and so it probably was cool. It was near New York, and New York was on the Atlantic Ocean, and that certainly would be cool. Even the time was different there. It was two o'clock in Brooklyn, and here on the Mississippi and for a long way west, it was only one o'clock. Maybe there was some sense in the way Fred was griping all the time. It made you sore just to get it into your head that you were always an hour behind everything that happened in Brooklyn and New York.

All around them men were looking interested and moving away from the women and kids. "It's five to one on the Cards," the Wart said. "Them Dodgers stink," the Mexican said. Fred kept his money folded up small in his watch pocket. He took out two one-dollar bills and smoothed them flat on his knee. "Can you take it?" he said. The Wart pulled out his blue pay envelope. There were six new five-dollar bills there. That money Fred had was supposed to last him all week for everything they had to pay cash for, but Dolores knew better than to tell him not to hand it over to the Wart. If the Dodgers won, they'd

have ten bucks, and that was a lot of dough. The Mexican wasn't saying anything, just staring at Dolores, then at Fred, then back to Dolores again. "How you betting?" the Wart asked. "I don't bet none," he answered. "One of you two guys is going to lose, and that's fun enough for me," he said. Fred had handed his money over to the Wart and now he was feeling like a big shot. "Say, you know old man Norman and that crowd go to the Series every year. They take their wives and all and go, staying at the big hotels." The Wart didn't say anything, just turned the radio on good and loud.

At first it seemed as though something was the matter with the Wart's radio, but it was just the noise of the crowd yelling in the ball park. Then the man who was going to tell about the game, started in. The Wart lit a big cigar and Fred pulled out a long new cigaret. Everybody was quiet now, listening to the words coming from the little tan suitcase.

Dolores was out of it, leaning her back against the rail. But she knew more than any of them. She knew all about Fred, how he really never threw a rock at a plate-glass window. That was a terrible thing to do. Plate-glass windows cost a lot of money. The Wart and the Mexican and the other men who worked in the yard thought Fred was somebody just because he got put in jail. But she knew he was in bed on the free side of the San at Twin Lakes all the time he said he was being jailed for a Red. She had to laugh again. Her nice, sweet little Fred.

The Cards made a run in the first and Fred came over to tell her about it. Then the Dodgers made two in the third. If the Dodgers won, they'd have ten bucks. Gee, it was hot, and there wasn't any place she could go. Dolores shut her eyes, Brooklyn was such a cool-sounding name, and that's where all the talking and yelling on the radio was coming from. She must have fallen asleep, because when Fred came over to tell her that the Dodgers were ahead four to two in the sixth, it seemed as though his voice was coming all the way from Brooklyn too. It was just as hot as ever, and everything looked the same. They were passing the little island with one tree on it again. That crazy fool bird was still there, standing on one leg, as though he hadn't moved an inch all the time they were gone. The boat went slowly by and the bird stood still on the little island looking like a statue of a bird. He did have bright, beady eyes, and they did move, staring right into hers. He gave her the creeps.

Right about here was where you could just begin to see the city again, far away down the river. In about an hour or so the trip would be over. The calliope would start playing again, the big, white boat would float up to the foot of Third Street, and everybody would pile out, telling each other that they'd had a wonderful time. The ball game would be over by then. For a second Dolores almost felt cold as she thought that maybe Fred might lose their two bucks. But the Dodgers were ahead in the sixth. There was the city, seeming to rise and fall slowly in the heat haze, and the tall pointed tower of the First National Bank Building stuck up like a sharp knife, right through the middle of it.