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# The Last Mad Sky

By Martha Ostenso

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Of All Brought the  
Best of All Luck*

Illustrated by Joseph Nussdorf

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# THE LAST MAD SKY

*The Worst Storm  
Of All Brought the  
Best of All Luck*

By Martha Ostenso



**Joff seemed stunned as he stared at Army in his disheveled sweater and Lila so cool and sweet. "All right," he said in a voice dull as death. "You might have waited until tomorrow at least."**

There will be haggard valleys in that region, appalling to the eye that saw them once as little green seas tiding full with summer. Even the uplands, where some of the topsoil drifted into dunes around the valiant small cottonwoods, will bear scar tissue which the agricultural experts predict will never heal in the time of any living man. Vast areas of the Dakotas will lie awful and gray as slag, with never a spear of grass cutting through to the sun, but with here and there an alkali basin staring like a bleached eye upward at the merciless blue. For the live fibers of the earth were ripped out in these places by that unforgettable dust storm of last summer, and the earth lies indifferent now to any wind.

Yet I shall go back this year to Red Willow Junction, as I have gone every year since my girlhood when it has been in any way possible. And I shall go without terror, for the people I know there have not been beaten by drought and the yellow-black holocaust of the wind of last May. The furry blue of the prairie anemone, which we used to call the Mayflower, will still spring up in the wake of the melting snows on bald hills, for it is not all a ruined land; and later the tiger lilies will light their defiant torches, and there will be good harvests in narrower fields, and life will go on.

I shall return to Red Willow Junction partly for these reasons, but mainly because of my cousin Fritjof, whom we have always called Joff. I was staying at his farm last year during the black wind, and since I shared to an extent in what happened to him then, he wants me there now, when something else is about to happen.

Lila Andreason was not stout-wristed and roundly blue-eyed as most of the farm girls in our township were. She had had lung fever when she was twelve, and after her frantic mother

had almost killed her with our common remedy for colds—a revolting concoction of onions and boiled brown sugar—Lila returned to the ordinary world with the oblique beauty of a mermaid. Or so I thought, with the vague thoughts of fourteen, and still thought when my people moved away two years later. Lila had long, still eyes that were neither gray nor quite green, and the pupil of one of them seemed to spill over a little because of a dark fleck in the iris. Her hair was of the pale gold that is found rarely outside Norwegian fjords, but for a long time I believed I saw in it a flowing green or some deep-water color.

The Lavik farm, with Fritjof and his brother Arne growing tall and strapping on it, was a brief mile north of the Andreasons', the property of the two families extending well east and west. Fritjof was by four years older than Arne—and by four inches taller, with his six feet three. His height was certainly not lumbering, yet it embarrassed him to have to look down upon people usually, and so he did not talk much. Since he was dark complexioned, he seemed to be even more silent than he really was. Arne—Arny, as we called him—was fairly redheaded and open-faced as a clock, with a smile that stood at ten-ten. Even when they were boys, Joff used to gloat over everything that Arny did—whether it was shooting aggies or ringing horse-shoes—because Arny could do it better than any one else in the neighborhood.

Although our family had moved away, we heard all about Red Willow Junction's progress by letter. Those were good years for the farmers thereabout. Not like the war years, to be sure, but the wise ones had saved enough to tide over the subsequent slump. Now, in the latter nineteen-twenties, they were sending their sons and daughters away to school, to Watertown and Brookings and Sioux Falls.

Joff had been graduated from agricultural college and was running the farm with his giant of a father when Arny emerged from the same school with more honors in football than in the sciences or the arts. Upon Arny's return home that summer, which coincided with my first visit back there, Joff was as proud of him as though he had won a Rhodes scholarship. The old Lavik farmhouse in the hollow north of the Andreason crest blazed with Arny's trophies and pennants, which Joff had displayed as conspicuously as possible. My uncle Lars was pleased with his son, too, in his terse way; but Joff's pride in Arny was as tremulous and inarticulate as their mother's must surely have been, had she been alive.

It was during my visit to the Lavik farm the following year that Lila Andreason, nineteen and lovely as a spring dawn, came home from an academy in St. Paul. Joff was twenty-six then, and Arny twenty-two. Arny had not intended to remain on the farm, but a month after his graduation from college the year before, his father, that Hercules of a man, had been felled to his death in the hayfield by a stroke of lightning. The tragedy drew the two boys more closely together than they had ever been. Arny vowed he would stay with the land and Joff, let the outer world beckon as it would.

And so they had worked together that whole year, Arny throwing himself into the routine of harvesting and plowing and seeding and tending livestock with a frenzy which, Joff said with his shy glow, was almost poetic. You would never believe, said Joff, that Arny had ever thought seriously of selling bonds for a living, although in those halcyon days college men did rather commonly. Joff became almost garrulous on the subject of his brother. Once he went so far as to admit that he had feared a slight wild streak in Arny, but now—the way the boy was tying into it—why, he, Joff, had been all wrong!

It was then that Lila Andreason came home. She came home changed.

Joff and I walked alone to the dance in the Andreasons' new barn, Arny having gone north in the car to fetch a girl he was interested in at the time. Years later I was to remember that

evening and that walk—the riotously painted western sky, the rolling prairie hills piling blue and gold against it, the quicksilver note of a meadow lark leaping up single and pure in the stillness. And I was to recall how we stood at the fence outside a field of pale young barley, and how Joff laughed and pointed to the great black rock that rose from the middle of the field.

“Remember how we used to play Indian Lookout from that rock?” he asked.

I did. Such a few short years ago!



**Army had a soberly set face when he stooped suddenly and kissed Lila's throat. She released herself coolly and walked away from him**

"We've never had the heart to blast that rock out," he remarked. "Guess you've got to concede a little to sentiment now and then. Even Pa wanted it to stay there. Army used to have an old cow horn that he blew from the top of it."

"I remember," I said.

Army—constantly Army! All at once the rock glistened, dark and bright, as the sun sank beyond the blue rim.

At the Andreasons' Lila stood receiving her guests as they climbed the ladder to the barn loft. Since I was ahead of Joff, I stepped back on the loft floor and saw him when he rose from the last rung of the ladder and looked at Lila.

It was a new barn, and something very new—and very old—happened in it then and there. Joff Lavik fell in love with Lila Andreason, and she with him. There could be no mistaking that moment-quick spell that descended over the two of them, isolating them from the gaudy clamor of the haymow with its swinging, electric-lighted Japanese lanterns, its streamers, and its throng of people.

In her flowered chiffon dress and high heels, with her short hair a swirl of bright metal, Lila stood up to Joff taller than I had remembered her. Because she had always been rather delicate, the neighbor boys had never regarded her romantically, even while they admitted her prettiness. Robust vitality counted for more with them, especially when they were casting about for wives.

But her last year at school had done something to Lila. Perhaps it was in the way she had learned to poise her head on her slim neck, or in the way she moved her hands toward people in a gracious and graceful eagerness. Whatever it was, Lila had suddenly grown up to a beauty that was not merely ethereal. There was no fay alarm in the wide eyes she raised to Joff Lavik.

Joff stared down at her for an instant as though in a daze. Then he stepped back and scanned her from top to toe.

"Neat job they've done on you, kid!" he remarked with a resentful effort at humor. "Does the likes of me dare ask you for a dance?"

The fiddles and the accordion and the bass drum were performing laudable acrobatics in a far corner, and a couple careened past singing, "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby!"

Lila did not smile as she laid a slim hand on Joff's arm. "I can't leave just now, Joff," she said softly. "They haven't all come yet. But I'll give you my first dance."

And they looked at each other, her green-black eyes to his intense blue ones, so that when Joff swung me away into the dance I felt about as supple as the yard pump. It is not until you are much older than I was then that you can get a vicarious thrill out of a thing like that.

A little later Army arrived with his big handsome girl, and presently all the tardy guests were there, and the barn rafters were ringing with music and merriment and the lusty stamping of feet.

Whenever Joff danced with Lila, and they danced together often, it seemed to me that there was a little island of stillness about them—they both looked so solemn, so rapt.

Just before midnight, however, I observed a small, sharp passage between Army and Lila, which Joff could not have seen, because he was at that moment helping Lila's mother serve fruit punch at the other end of the loft. Army was dancing with Lila and had maneuvered their steps so that the two were in shadow beside a stack of feed bags. Perhaps I should not have looked that way. Although Army had been as gay as the best of them only a minute before, he had a soberly set face when he stooped suddenly and kissed Lila's throat. She released herself coolly and walked away from him.

Army stood for a moment, reddening and plucking at his fingernails. Then he laughed and came over to where I sat alone.





**As Joff and I pressed on around the rock, stooping against the stinging wind and dirt, something winked like a metallic eye.  
It was the brass box**

“How about a turn with your rube cousin before he shoves off?” he asked loudly, and pulled me abruptly to my feet.

“You’re not going home already, Arny?” I asked in surprise.

“Aw—what the hell!” he exclaimed obscurely.

For the first time, then, I saw the sulky irresoluteness of his good-looking mouth and chin, and the contrast between him and the ruggedly attractive Joff made me suddenly sad.

Three days later the county was visited by a stinging yellow dust storm that seemed to be throwing the whole of the Bad Lands and Wyoming and Idaho into our laps. It turned out to be a comparatively local affair, and since the crops were well up, it was of no grave consequence—so far as the fields were concerned. The grating din of the wind and the unnatural, sickly darkness since early morning had got on my nerves, however, and I was cowering in the living room on a couch beside the lamp, trying to read, when I heard a sound in the yard.

Amy had gone to Red Willow Junction, and at first I thought it was he returning home. But when I got up and looked out, I saw it was Lila Andreason. She had dismounted from her horse and was trying to tether the animal to a tree. I was surprised to see her so nervous and inept.

Just then Joff came up from the barns and took charge of the horse. While he drew the rein about the tree and knotted it quickly, Lila stood by, covering her face with her hands. Even from that distance of fifty yards or more I could see the shudder that ran through her slim straight body as though some invisible thing were shaking her.

Joff stepped over to her, and for a moment then I saw nothing of Lila but her slender legs in their high-laced boots and her left arm clinging about Joff's denim-clad shoulder. I had the decency to turn away then and stare at the braided rug on the floor beneath the claw-foot center table.

I heard them come into the house. The door from the hall to the living room where I sat was closed, but I heard the low murmur of their voices. It was some time before they entered the living room, and I fondly believed that I appeared quite casual. Joff had his arm about Lila, and she was dabbing at her eyes with a practical-looking handkerchief.

When Joff looked at me, he was grinning happily. He turned again to Lila.

"Shall I tell her?" he asked.

Lila colored a little as she drew more closely into the circle of Joff's arm. "If you want to," she replied.

"Congratulate me," Joff said, still grinning at me. "Lila has just promised to marry me."

I smiled and prepared to exclaim. But Lila suddenly looked at me with those eyes of hers that were like deep, clear water over black depths, and I felt helpless.

"Blame it on the storm!" she laughed a little breathlessly. "He wouldn't have asked me if —"

"The storm had nothing to do with it!" Joff declared suddenly. "I made up my mind the night of the dance."

There was nothing for me to say but to wish them well, and I did so with an awkward sincerity. I have always found such occasions difficult. I hurriedly sought refuge in an inquiry concerning Lila's father and mother.

She glanced toward the window and shivered. "Mother and Dad had to go to Watertown. I was alone with Hannah, and she just laughed at me when I told her I couldn't stand it any longer. I've always felt this way about a dust storm—ever since I can remember. It's—it's like something cutting into you with razors."

Joff made her sit down on the couch.

"It has been nerve-racking," I confessed.

Lila's eyes lifted, olive and dark. "It's as if—as if the earth itself were going back on us—deserting us after the years we've—"

"The earth goes down a long way, Lila," Joff broke in with a laugh as he drew her close beside him. "Let 'er blow! If she blows hard enough—and long enough—we'll raise rice instead of wheat."

I got up and started for the door.

"Well, you can laugh," Lila said agitatedly, "but I just couldn't stand that grinding on the windows any longer. It doesn't seem so bad here. Over there I couldn't help thinking. Suppose this whole state is someday going to be eroded by wind!"

Joff placed his large brown hand over her clenched white ones, and she smiled at him tremulously. Nevertheless, as the three of us exchanged glances, I believe that some centuries passed over that room. I believe that all of us looked in that instant upon a bone-white desert in a future that mercifully rejected ourselves.

"You and I, Lila, and our children's children will all be dust before that," Joff said seriously.

"Look here!" I said, since I had to say something to get away from that too spacious feeling of remote time. "I'm going to lug out some chokecherry wine and doughnuts, and we'll celebrate!"

But two evenings after that, the wind having gone down, and a good, deep rain having settled the disturbed areas to our west, the real celebration of Joff's and Lila's engagement took place at the Lavik farm. The Andreasons wanted it at their place, but since such a short time had elapsed since the barn dance on the Andreason farm, Joff and Lila overruled their wishes.

Army was away mostly during those days. In fact, after the night of the barn dance, it seemed that the Lavik car roared out of the driveway every dawn and did not roar back into it again until rather close to the following dawn, without any appearance of Army during the day.

At breakfast the day before the engagement party Army told with quite a flourish of having closed a deal for another good secondhand tractor. Joff was pleased with that, then reminded his brother of the party, for which old Josie, the housekeeper, had already begun to scour and decorate the house.

"Oh, sure—I'm not forgetting that," said Army with a curious narrowing of his lids.

I fancied that his smile was faintly derisive. It was disquieting.

"Do I wear my bib and tucker in honor of the fiancée, or will good old homespun be all right?"

Joff frowned, dark color creeping into his face. "What's the matter with you, Army?" he demanded. "Ever since I told you Lila and I were going to be married, you've acted as if—"

"As if what?" Army urged lightly, and ground his cigarette into his plate.

"I don't quite know, kid." Joff's voice was heavy with perplexity as he leaned forward, and his eyes were so anxious that they hurt the whole sunlit room. "Aren't you with me on this?"

Army laughed, sat back, and slapped the table with his open palm. His reddish, brisk hair, his blue eyes so like his brother's and yet so different in their restless quality, gave back to the room its lighthearted cheer. "For the love of Mike, Joff!" Army exclaimed. "Why shouldn't I be with you? Maybe I didn't fall all over myself at the thought of having a female ruling the roost, but—gosh! I think it's great, now that I'm used to the idea."

In his relief Joff heaved a profound, comic sigh and helped himself to another great slab of coffee cake.

“Sure!” Army went on, and the ironical little smile played again about his attractive mouth. “We need new blood in the family, Joff. Something—something elfin. We’ve always been too materialistic. Lila ought to turn the trick for the Laviks, boy. I’m all for it! I guess I’ve been too busy racing around to tell you what I think about it. But that’s it!”

“Well, that makes it right, kid,” Joff said awkwardly. “I’ve been waiting for you to say something, but—I might have understood. I’m glad you like her, Army. You see, I just about couldn’t stand it if you didn’t.”

“I know,” Army said, and got up from the table.

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The occasion was a bit more pretentiously accoutered than the country social affairs were as a rule. Not only had all the downstairs floors been polished and waxed to a mirrorlike finish, cut flowers and potted ferns placed at tasteful intervals, and softened lights installed, but Joff had engaged a four-piece orchestra from Watertown. Also, a baby-grand piano, his gift to Lila, had supplanted the old upright in the living room. He had taken me with him to help select the piano and had arranged to pay for it in installments. I knew his balance at the bank was not large. In those uncertain days Joff and Army purposely kept it low. They had taken me to the attic one night and had shown me an old brass box in which they had hidden twelve hundred dollars to serve in an emergency. But that little hoard was a secret among the three of us—not even to be thought of in buying a piano.

Every one who came in out of the tender moonlit night, from the countryside around, drew a properly impressed breath at the alterations in the Lavik house. But first they gazed in open admiration at Joff and Lila, who stood together in the hall to welcome them.

There was certainly nothing rustic about Joff that night. In his navy blue sack coat and white shirt and white flannel trousers, with his dark hair smoothed down, he looked almost dandified. His brown, square-cut face radiated a boyish happiness that made you somehow melancholy, if you thought of the impermanence of youth and first ecstatic love.

Beside him, in her simple white organdie gown with its blue sash, Lila looked strangely again like the little girl of years ago. Although her bright lips curved into smiles readily enough for all, there was something tense and frightened in her eyes the moment she looked away. And it seemed presently that her gaze roved rather often, and usually in the direction of the winding old-fashioned staircase.

When everybody had finally arrived and the orchestra was softly yearning out through the open windows into the summer night with “I Kiss Your Hand, Madame,” Lila drew me into the little side porch which I had always thought looked like an unnecessary ear on that rambling house.

“Army hasn’t come downstairs,” she said nervously. “He went up to dress, but that was two hours ago.”

“Jim Taggart was asking for him when he first came in,” I told her. “He went up to Army’s room.”

“That Jim Taggart!” Lila exclaimed. “He can’t go anywhere without carrying a bottle along. They’re probably drinking.”

“I’ll run up and see,” I offered, and for the first and only time in my life I was angry with Army.

I knew very well what was keeping him away from the party, but if he was trying to drink himself stupid—

I started for the stairway, but Lila caught my arm and drew in her breath sharply as she glanced through the screen door into the crowded living room.

“Oh! There he is!”

My gaze followed hers, but certainly Army Lavik, in his gray flannel slacks and his turtle-neck sweater with its college monogram on it, looked his normal, magnificent self. Jim Taggart, who had come downstairs with him, stood at the bottom of the stairway and swayed a little as he looked about him with a foolish grin. But Army seized upon a pudgy, freckled girl who sat alone in a corner and danced with her so that she actually looked lithe and pretty.

Lila squeezed my hand and whispered: “Thank heaven! He looks as if he hasn’t had a drink. He’s such a young idiot!”

I could have told her that his looks belied him, for I knew Army better than she did, but I decided to say nothing about it.

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**I**t was perhaps two o’clock, because the moon was coasting down the western sky and the older people had already gone home, when Lila drew me aside again. This time I knew it was because Army had not taken part in the jollification since shortly after midnight. When he had danced last with the freckled girl, she had done most of the leading.

“Where’s Army?” Lila asked. “He hasn’t danced with me all evening.”

I remembered seeing him go out alone and light a cigarette on the porch. But that was nearly an hour ago. I told Lila that and tried to assure her there was nothing to worry about.

“Army is moody,” I said. “He may have something on his mind.”

“He has,” Lila said, and looked older then, in a way, than she ever would again. “He hates me!”

“Oh, come!” I said as stoutly as I could.

“I’m going out to look for him,” Lila announced. “Tell Joff when you see him.”

It was fifteen minutes before I could get Joff away from two tireless Charleston dancers who were bent upon teaching him the mysteries of that step, which was history even then. But Joff had never learned it and was easy prey.

At last I rescued him and told him that Lila had gone to look for his brother because she was concerned about him. He frowned and accompanied me out into the winery darkness where the late moon rode the foliage of the cottonwoods on the west border of the grounds. I tried to make light of Army’s behavior, but Joff’s tall, black silence discouraged me, and so when we had rounded the west granary, neither of us had spoken for several minutes.

The warm moonlight flooded the granary wall and farmyard with its revealing lambency, and there stood Army. He must have drawn Lila to him as he stood in that negligent, slumping attitude, I thought wildly. His bent head concealed her face, but I saw the full billow of her white skirt rock as though she were struggling, and I hoped in desperation that Joff had seen that, too. But he must have been momentarily stunned.

“All right,” he said, his voice dull as death. “You might have waited until tomorrow, at least.”

That was all. He strode away, almost running, eastward toward the low pasture land where the mist that always gathers there in the dawn hours was already rising. Lila had broken free and was screaming after Joff as he disappeared in the darkness. I had one glimpse of Army’s face, bitterly white and distorted, before he, too, vanished in the direction of the house.

I waited miserably, and in a few minutes Lila came back sobbing and threw herself into my arms.

“I was only trying to—to talk sense into Arny!” she gasped. “He thinks he’s in love with me! He said Joff always gets the best—Joff has the land, and me, he said! He said if he couldn’t have me, he’d clear out. I—I was only talking to him reasonably when he—he took hold of me! Then you came along. And Joff doesn’t—” Her voice rose to a piercing pitch. “Joff doesn’t trust me—with his own brother!”

She collapsed against my knees, and I felt no earthly good to her or any of them. Despite their borrowing from this new, swift world of America, the somber passion of their heritage from an older land prevailed within them, I knew, and no meddling advice on my part could move them. All that I could do, just then, was to stroke Lila’s pale hair as the moon went down.

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After breakfast Joff stood at the window looking out on the brilliant morning, his arms folded rigidly before him. He had gulped down a cup of coffee, but he had eaten nothing. For Arny was gone, the car was gone, and the brass box containing the twelve hundred dollars the brothers had hidden away in the attic was gone. When Joff had returned to the house sometime before sunrise, these crushingly linked facts had become immediately plain to him.

“Joff,” I ventured hardily, “I’m sure you’re making a mistake. Somebody else here last night took that money. They were all over the house.”

His laugh was crisp. “Likely! He took the car, didn’t he?”

“But—”

He turned on me savagely. “How could any one else have taken the money? Not even Josie knew where we kept the key to the attic. And certainly no one else knew we had twelve hundred dollars in the old brass box up there. But it isn’t the money I’m thinking of—that was as much his as mine. Oh—what’s the use in talking about it.”

He swung half away from me, and the bleak pain of his face was more than I could bear to look at.

“I know, Joff,” I whispered diffidently.

“You don’t know!” he flung at me in a harsh tone. “You probably think it’s only his acting that way—with *her* that’s so—damnable.”

He choked on the last word, and I could see the cords standing thick and red in his neck as he pressed his hand against his left temple.

“I told you what Lila said last night,” I reminded him with some anger. “She’s brokenhearted, Joff, over you. And all because she tried to talk rationally to Arny. He was resentful because he felt you had everything—including her. If he took the money and the car, it was on an impulse prompted by his violent mood!”

“What you don’t know,” he went on heedlessly, “is that I thought more of that boy than I could ever think of money—more than—” he hesitated, then plunged with bitter recklessness—“more than I’ve ever thought of any woman! I’m not saying that Lila led him on. She probably did what she could to stop him. But the fact remains that her mere existence has brought this about. Arny let her beauty and appeal do this to him. He let the fact of her make a coward of him!”

I sprang to my feet as the pitiable, imploring face of Lila, before she crept home in despair the night before, came back to me.

“And is that Lila’s fault?” I cried. “Joff, you don’t know what you’re doing! Go over to Lila and talk to her—”

“And suppose I never hear from Arny again?” he asked quietly with his teeth set. “That would be a pretty thing between Lila and me forever, wouldn’t it?”

“Very well, have it your own way,” I replied. “You’re being a stubborn fool if you think you’re improving matters by casting Lila off. And if you really mean that you cared more for Arny than you did for her, you don’t deserve her, and she’s lucky to be rid of you!”

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He glared at me and stalked to the door. But just then there was a step in the hall, and old man Pedersen, from the outskirts of Red Willow, entered without ceremony. Joff stopped and looked at him as though with the impulse to throw him bodily out of the house.

“I got vord for you from Arny,” said the mild-eyed old farmer. “He vent away qvick last night, eh? You fight, might be?”

His face twinkled innocently. Then, as he saw Joff’s frozen look, he drew down his chin and stroked it with a gnarled hand.

“No,” Joff replied evenly. “What’s your message?”

“I vass driving home late last night, and Arny he come tearing along by my place so fast he bumped into my car a little on the turn, by the gate. He stopped a minute to see dere’s no harm done. Before he go again, qvick, he say, ‘You go see Joff tomorrow and tell him I couldn’t do it, see?’ Yust so—I couldn’t do it.’ I asked him vhat, but he vouldn’t say no more. He say you vould understand. I told him vy not phone you, and he say he can’t talk to you no more or see you no more. He say he write you a letter from Vattertown, soon so he get dere. I t’ink might be he been drinking.”

Joff was struggling hard for self-control. “Thanks, Ole,” he said. “Go into the kitchen and ask Josie for a cup of coffee.”

When the old man had hobbled wonderingly into the rear of the house, Joff let out a raucous laugh.

“A letter! A lot of good that’ll do!”

The telephone jangled on the entry wall, and Joff stepped to it with deliberate carelessness. But he could not hide the eager excitement of his eyes. Even now I believe that had the word which came over that wire been different, Joff would have set out across the field to Lila that day or the next.

But the call was from a village halfway between Red Willow and Watertown, from the sheriff there. Arny’s body had been found in a ditch along the highway near the village, his rifled wallet beside him. They were working on the case and would report.

They worked on it, but found nothing to report.

And although I went back to Red Willow Junction every other summer or so for the next five years, I never heard Joff remark upon this fact or upon any other connected with Arny or Lila. Nor did I dare touch upon that scar. The memory of Joff’s face that day when he turned away from the telephone was something I preferred not to dwell upon myself.

At thirty-odd, Joff was graying, and his face was sinewy and almost without any flicker of change for the small events that crossed his day. Josie, the old housekeeper, was still with him, and he kept one hired man, but times were desperate for him as well as for the other farmers about Red Willow.

He read a great deal now, however, since he had cut himself off from the social life of the community, and so, on occasion, I was able to work up an argument with him about some

book or other. But frequently in the midst of it he would fall into a sour stillness, leaving me surrounded futilely by my neat points of view.

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A t first I tried to drop in casually at the Andreasons' to see Lila, but it took very little perspicuity to observe that she would rather I didn't. I finally gave it up. They had no hired girl now, and Lila's days were occupied with housework and gardening. It was incredible to me that any one so young and pretty could have withdrawn as completely as she had done from the activities of the district, until one of her few close friends explained to me that she avoided parties out of fear that *he* might be there. Lila's beauty had weathered a little with maturity—but it looked sounder, more tangible than it had been. You could imagine her now with children about her—she had that serene quiet. When the thought occurred to me that the reason for this was that she still hoped about Joff, I was depressed for days.

The black wind of early last summer struck just two days after my arrival at Joff's farm. Somewhere behind those billows of rust- and soot-colored dust that swelled horrifyingly from the west and south and north in turn and inundated the farmstead with the roar of a diabolical dry sea—somewhere behind those churning clouds of dirt was the sun, but by midafternoon of the second day even direction was lost, and nobody knew where to look for what was supposed to be the source of daylight.

Black earth and yellow drove nimbly into the house under the window frames, sifted in over the thresholds beneath closed doors, settled on tables, shelves, hangings, lights, food, and said with a crisp, dry chuckle as the wind shook the house, "Here am I—your bread and butter that you've had too much of in the past!" The earth throwing itself literally into our teeth!

This colossal horror seemed to have been going on from the beginning of time, seemed to be going on to the end. The dirt had drifted to the roof tops of some of the lower buildings, and the hogs had to be moved out of the pen so that they would not be buried alive.

Joff and I were alone in the living room. As he gazed from the window at his stripped and hollowed fields, at the bank of livid, swirling dust that was choking the saplings he had set out in the spring, his face was a study in total despair.

"I don't see how I can go on after this," he said stonily. "I'm mortgaged to the hilt, and I've got exactly fifty dollars left."

"But," I offered hopefully, "the Government—"

He laughed, and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Perhaps. But it isn't the same as doing it on your own."

Then he began pacing up and down, and I could see that there was something on his mind apart from any consideration of his loss. He glowered at me once or twice, and his face flushed each time that he stopped short of making some outburst.

At last he swung about and stared out of the window again. It came to me then that the Andreasons' was in that direction, although he could not see the white house on the hill in this threshing murk.

"'The last mad sky,'" he said emptily. "Isn't that a line from something or other?"

But he did not wait for me to answer him. He turned around again and said rapidly: "I happen to know she's alone over there. Her father took her mother to the hospital in Watertown yesterday."

I knew what he wanted me to say, and I said it.

"We shouldn't leave her alone in this storm, Joff. I think I'll go over and stay with her."

"You'd better not go by yourself," he replied.



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In a few minutes we were cutting across the barley field, the shortest way to the Andreason ridge. The highway bordered it, but a man would never have got anywhere with a car, Joff said. Even though we stooped forward against the wind, the dirt bored into our faces like myriads of tiny gimlets, stung our eyes like ground glass. We could see probably fifteen yards ahead of us, and what we saw was spooned-up earth, powder gray, with not a spear of young barley anywhere.

It was when we were quite close to the big rock in the middle of the field that Joff paused a moment to give his vacant laugh.

“Look at that!” he shouted over the wind. “Our landscape is changing, eh?”

I looked at the rock. The topsoil had swept over it and was piling on the other side.

We pressed on around the rock, our heads low in the wind. Something winked like a metallic eye in what was left of the light. It was the brass box! The earth had been scooped up from the hole where it had been buried close beside the big stone, and there was nothing, not even years and mischance, to hide it any longer.

When Joff had picked it up and found the money in the leather case within, I sat down on the ground and covered my face. Army’s message to Joff by way of old Pedersen had been simply, “I couldn’t do it!” This was what he had meant. He couldn’t take the money, and yet he couldn’t come back and face Joff, and so he had hidden the box here in this place of treasured memories. Army had meant to write and tell Joff what he had done, but fate had decided otherwise.

For a while I heard nothing but the deafening roar of the wind, and for that I was grateful. When Joff spoke at last, his voice was startlingly strong and clear.

“Come on,” he said. “And pull yourself together!”

Lila opened the door to us, and frightened as I was by the tumult outside, I suddenly wished myself back in it. Her eyes were like wide, sweet seas, and she saw only Joff Lavik standing there.

“Lila,” he stammered, “it’s taken me a long time. Maybe you don’t want to see me. I’ve—been a fool, Lila.”

She sat down on a chair beside the table and folded her hands, but over her whole body there was such a stillness that it seemed strangely as though she had not moved. “Did you come,” she asked with a shadowy smile, “because you thought I might be afraid of the storm, Joff?”

“Yes—no!” he burst out, reddening. “I used that as an excuse. You’ll never know how I’ve wanted to come all these years. But I wouldn’t let myself. I—I was afraid. I was afraid that what happened to Army would always be there between us. Even though I knew it wasn’t your fault. You see, it was I who was the coward.”

He swallowed hard, staring at her and waiting. I sat near the stove, as far away from them as I could.

“I understand, Joff,” she said very low.

Then suddenly her eyes filled with tears, and her hands went out to him. Joff seized them hungrily.

He gave a shaky laugh and drew the brass box out of his coat pocket. “I didn’t find this until I was on the way over here just now, Lila. So you see I would have come anyhow. But I know you’ll be glad to hear about it.”

Wonderingly, Lila examined the box while he told her the story of it and how he had found it again. She pressed her trembling fingers against her cheek.

“Oh, Joff!” she said softly. “I didn’t know anything about this! Poor Arny!”

Joff went on doggedly. “I’ve got to tell you, Lila. I blamed you for showing Arny up to me as a coward and a weakling. Even until today—when I found this—I thought he had taken the money to get even with me—out of bitterness and hate. That cut pretty deep. Do you understand that?”

She stood up and laid her hand on his arm. “He was your brother,” she said breathlessly. “He did a foolish thing. But he was your brother—he could not have been bad!”

Joff’s face was glowing as he drew her close to him.

“You really mean that?” he asked.

I fixed my eyes on a Maltese cat curled up beside the wood box, a Maltese cat that was indifferent to stirring scenes either outdoors or in.

This year, when I visit Joff and Lila, there will be no fences separating their fields. On some of the uplands the soil is deeper than it was, and there are valleys left untorn, and therefore their expected son will not be without an inheritance.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.  
[The end of *The Last Mad Sky* by Martha Ostenso]