

# *Tumblweed*



*Martha  
Ostenso*

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# Tumbleweed

Like a great tree uprooted, he had lost his  
hold on life. And so he mistrusted a new promise  
of tranquillity

*By*  
MARTHA  
OSTENSO

IT was a serene, a quiet-colored little town, a town of vesper bells, of swallows darkly cleaving the moist red sunset of May. He didn't know the name of it as yet, but that didn't matter. The hills that made a rim for its sky were a stimulating change from the skeleton earth of the South Dakota Bad Lands, where he had spent the past month converting to canvas a mood of nature as insolent and gaunt as his own.

He had stopped his car at the side of the road on the crest of a hill blue with prairie anemones and had looked down into that quaint, spire-studded valley. Then he had glanced over his shoulder into the back seat of his low-slung automobile and had gravely addressed the impedimenta riding there. "It looks like the next stop, doesn't it, my friends?" His pigskin bags, his art equipment, had murmured approval and Crowne had driven on.

Now, after a brief and reproachful glance towards what proclaimed itself as Hotel La Grande, he permitted the long grey car to drift almost soundlessly up before a filling station.

"What's the name of this town?" he asked while the attendant, with the reverent awe that still pleased Crowne, stood waiting for the gasoline tank to fill.

The man stared, hurt a little.

"This is Blue Hill. You ought to heard about it. This is where they brung over all them Dutch settlers fifteen years back. It's one of the State's experiment towns. We grow celery."

Oh, we do, Crowne thought. Celery was the thing Lenore had grown thin on—that and Melba toast and dancing all night with Burton. Well, there was no use in being morbid about celery. He still liked the place, except for the Hotel La Grande.

"Could you tell me a good place to board around here?"

"Well, there's the Hotel La——"

"I saw it," said Crowne. "I mean, eat and sleep."

The man had it in him to grin. "I get you. You see, it's like this around here, everybody has their own home and we don't have very many strangers come. Salesmen or anything like that. Because we're mostly Dutch and we don't go in for anything fancy. We grow tulips some, and celery, and——"

"It's nice that you grow tulips," Crowne observed. "She could never stand tulips because they had a sort of waxy independence. She couldn't get at them."

"Who couldn't?" the man asked with suspicion.

Dreamily Crowne said, "A woman I knew once. A thousand years ago. She was married to an artist who was not so modern. Although he was an artist he actually believed in such prosaic things as fidelity and the sanctity of the home. He had a home, too—a nice one, in Westport, Connecticut. He had paid for it by the sweat of his brow—his canvas, maybe. It was his roots. But his roots were pulled up rather crudely——"

"Maybe you better stay at the Hotel La Grande," the service man suggested uneasily, glancing about him.

“You were telling me,” Crowne broke in, “that there are some people around here who will take in a boarder?”

“I don’t know as I told you,” the man replied, guardedly.

“Where do I find them?”

With the air of one who has begun to doubt the soundness of his own faculties, the attendant jerked a nervous thumb over his shoulder.

“Two miles down this here road,” he said. “It says Van Praag on the gatepost.”

“Thanks,” said Crowne. “What do I owe you?”

Rosie Van Praag, walking in slow sweet abstraction, came up from the long row of cold frames at the back of her father’s house. Beyond the frames stretched the darkening spring fields, ready and warm, and beyond the fields were the hills mantled in blue twilight. Rosie was aware of a causeless rapture.

It was the kind of evening when something deliriously joyful ought to happen. Of course it wouldn’t, because nothing ever did, although she had had this pulsing sense of anticipation many times before.

Henry, her small noisy brother, came tearing down the path between the heavily white spiraea bushes, shouting at her incoherently. She frowned towards him in distaste.

“You oughta see, Rosie, what’s come!” he panted. “Ma wants you in right away!”

To Rosie, this twelve-year-old Van Praag had always seemed a kind of human apple, bursting, red and round. She was fortunate in taking after her mother, who was tall and supple still, after having borne five children.

“What is it—a fire?” Rosie asked loftily. “If it is—I’ll stay out here.”

“Shucks! You just oughta see his car! Kip an’ me drug his stuff out of it for him. And he’s got a radio in it, and——”

“Who’s this?”

“He asked if he could board awhile. He’s awful tall and funny-lookin’, as if he’s just gonna bust out laughin’.”

“H E’s got a scar over one eye, and when I asked him how he got it he told me jousts in the Middle Ages, defending his lady’s honor. He’s nuts, because the Middle Ages was around thirteen hundred!”

They were walking up the path together now, Henry swaggering importantly and getting in Rosie’s way.

“You certainly had your nerve,” said Rosie indignantly, “asking a total stranger how he got a scar! I’ll tell mother on you. What does he look like?”

“What do you care?” Henry jeered. “He ain’t anything like Peeb Toussaint anyhow. His hair ain’t red—it’s light-colored. And if you tell Ma on me, I’ll tell Peeb you said he looked like a wet straw stack! So Peeb won’t ask you to marry him!”

It was beneath Rosie to reply. They had come to the kitchen door where her mother was looking anxiously out.

“It’s goot you didn’t go to the dance with Peeb to-night, Rosina,” she said with her blunt accent. “We got a somebody come and you must get quick into your white apron and give him supper. I can’t leave the stove with the wine soufflé in.”

Oh, Rosie thought, so he’s good enough for wine soufflé, is he? Her heart skipped a beat.

In the year and a half since the strong pith of his life had turned to ashes, Crowne had arbitrarily chosen to spend a week, a month, two months, in many strange places on the American continent; had chosen these for his abode—for his work, the saviour of his reason. Yet now, as he glanced about this dimly lamp-lit odd room with its scrubbed smell, it seemed to him that its quality, intangible, was at the same time poignantly familiar.

The tall fearlessly handsome Mrs. Van Praag had talked to him after he had disentangled himself from two or three youngsters who appeared to be Van Praags. On the way upstairs to the room he was to occupy for a sum so small it embarrassed him, he had met a plump beaming personage whom the woman introduced as Frans Van Praag, her husband. He had inspected his room, clean and chaste as newly sawed pine, the immaculate white plateau of the bed, the view from lace-curtained windows of a sea of tulips folded into evening, and had been pleased with it all.

“You raise tulips as well?” he asked.

“Not so many. It is Rosina who takes care of them, since she quit teaching school. She taught two years after she was to normal, but the chalk smell made her sick. Hay fever, kind of. It’s celery we raise mostly.”

“Is it profitable?”

Mrs. Van Praag shrugged, smiled philosophically.

“We live, ya? Who does more?”

“Who,” Crowne murmured, “does indeed?”

And now he sat downstairs awaiting his dinner in a room that was full of the rich and antique dusk of Rembrandt, of a mood eternalised. How the distinguished Ballantyne, of the Ballantyne Galleries, would appreciate this!

Crowne glanced up and saw a girl standing in the doorway.



**E**VEN before he noted particularly that she held a tray in her hands, he saw the lustrous wide-spaced dark of her eyes fixed upon him; he saw the unusual delicate tinting of her face from hollow of cheek to broad plane of jaw and temple. Crowne half started from his chair, then sat back with a discomfiting feeling of embarrassment as she came forward with the loaded tray.

Her hands were too light and deft for that burden. He stared at them, at the smooth tawny fingers with the short clean artless nails. In one swift glance he saw the rhythmic length of her hips beneath the thin cotton dress, the excellent young proportion of breast and throat. Her mouth was unruly, beautiful. It was Jay Crowne the artist who saw these things. The man had seen beauty in no woman since Lenore; he was, in fact, starkly incapable of seeing any.

She said nothing at all as she arranged the steaming dishes before him. Her downcast lashes guarded her eyes. Crowne cleared his throat cynically waiting to hear her voice. The Mexican girl in Taos, lovely as mountain light, had had a voice like a cart rattling over a corduroy road. Not that it had shocked him—his indifference was proof against shock.

But exasperatingly it seemed that this one was not going to speak.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any chili sauce, would you?” Crowne asked. He loathed chili sauce.

“No,” she said. “But we have watermelon pickles.”

“Good!” But she had said, and her voice, to Crowne’s annoyance, had been quiet dove-wing dawn. “I haven’t had watermelon pickles since my mother used to make them.” His mother had died when he was a month old.

Rosie smiled bounteously.

“I’ll go and get them,” she said.

He knew at once that he had made a mistake which was likely to cost him trouble; she had interpreted his wry curiosity for a friendly overture.

“Never mind,” he said stiffly. “There’s enough to eat here.”

**R**OSIE looked at him in bewilderment, a slow hurt flush spreading over her cheeks. Crowne disliked her for it and resented his dislike. Without another word he attacked the food set before him.

At daybreak the next morning Jay Crowne set up his easel on a bald hill beyond the Van Praag's celery fields. The panorama below was gentle, breathing, purposeful with fertility; he did not especially care for it. But the series for his exhibition in New York next year was after all to be titled *American Skies*, and there had to be variety in the land beneath those skies. He looked with satisfaction up at the cirrocumulus structure doming the new east in fragile pink and saffron, and fell to work.

For a long time he was lost in inspiration, thought of nothing but the growing poem beneath his brush. The sun was high when he became troubled with a sense of lack. That Van Praag girl had not come to gaze over his shoulder and exclaim as strange young women usually did!

Nor did she come in the days that followed.

He found himself to his surprise irritated by her aloofness. If he came into his room when she was there tidying it up she would glide out like a rich shadow, not seeing him. He didn't like her obliviousness; it was too pointed.

He was being unreasonable, he told himself. Nowhere in his wanderings had he enjoyed such perfect conditions for work. When the Van Praag boys came home from school he would knock off for a game of baseball with them or he and Henry and Kip would go fishing in the river a quarter of a mile away. But so far as his work was concerned, the Van Praags, young and old, left him strictly alone, did not question him. When Kip and Albert suggested converting the loft of an old barn into a studio for him, at some distance from the house, their offer was made with a shy diffidence that touched him deeply.

When the studio, remarkably complete with north skylight, was ready for his occupancy a few days later, Crowne might have admitted himself happier than he had been since his early twenties, that summer in Brittany. He might have done so had it not been for the conspicuous elusiveness of the girl Rosina. But that she gave him no opportunity to find in her the flaw he knew must be there vexed him far more than if she had hung about him as others had done. Although it angered him to confess as much, Rosina was the only disturbing note in his harmonious life.

By the middle of June Crowne knew that he was making elaborate excuses for his staying on at Blue Hill.

One noon as he came across the meadow from his studio to the house for what the Van Praags called "dinner," he met Rosina. She had been working in the celery field and beneath her peak-crowned straw hat her face was crimson and beaded with perspiration.

When she saw him she stooped, picked up her gingham skirt and wiped her face.

"Hullo!" Crowne said. "You look as if you might be going to have a sunstroke!"

"It is hot, isn't it? Is it very bad up in the old barn?"

"No," he said. "Those big trees keep the place pretty cool."

He wanted to ask her why she had never come up to see his studio, but immediately rejected the desire. It would have meant a breach of his code of indifference.

Then as they walked along together he said something so much worse that he could not credit his own hearing. A last year's tumbleweed that had been lodged against the fence was blowing free in the hot wind, bounding with erratic spurious life down the slope, an unlovely intricate web of fine brittle stems and dust.

CROWNE said abruptly, pointing at it, “Do you see that, Rosina? That’s what I am, no roots.”

She looked at the grey spectral mass hurrying ludicrously across the field, then calmly met Crowne’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It must be a dreadful way to be.”

Later that day Crowne made up his mind to talk with Rosina Van Praag, to disabuse himself of what he realised at length had become an obsession—that there was something mysteriously different about her, an inward beauty to match the outer one. Lenore had been perfection, outwardly.

Frans Van Praag sat on his porch in the twilight, stockinged feet crossed on the railing before him. He was placidly smoking his pipe and dreaming of Holland, and wondering if five years from now he would have enough saved to take the family back for a visit to the old folks.

Boeme’s taxi, from town, stopped, and a tall, important-looking gentleman got out.

“I believe that Mr. Jay Crowne is stopping here?” said the gentleman urbanely.

“He iss,” said Frans. “But just now he walks out somewhere. He will be back soon, sure.”

“That’s good. I am a friend of his. My name is Ballantyne.”

Mrs. Van Praag drew up a chair for the gentleman.

“I am on my way back to New York from the west coast,” Ballantyne explained. “I wrote Crowne that I might be able to stop off here for an hour’s visit with him and take his new paintings with me. I must return to the city this evening to catch the next train east.”

The Van Praags nodded politely.

“Do you mind telling me,” Ballantyne asked, “how Crowne is? I mean—does he appear to be in good health? In good spirits?”

“He eats goot, sleeps goot, works all the time,” said Frans.

“Splendid!” The man seemed immensely relieved. “He is one of the greatest of the young landscape painters in America.”

Again the Van Praags looked at each other and nodded significantly.

“And I must thank you,” the stranger went on seriously, “for making him comfortable here. He is to exhibit in my galleries in New York next winter. It means very much to an artist to have sympathetic surroundings.”

“In Rotterdam,” Frans said, “we have not so great a museum as other places. But when I was a boy my father used to take us on holidays to see the pictures there. And sometimes painters would come and stay at my father’s farm near the dyke.”

“I see,” said the gentleman. “Well, you’ve understood my friend, then I’m very glad.”

Mrs. Van Praag rose. “I’ll go make a little lunch.”

Ballantyne smiled, thanked her.

Crowne sat in the moonlight where he could look down across the glimmering field of celery plants below. He could see Rosie approaching now, her white-clad figure straight as a blade in the sheath of night radiance, and berated himself harshly for the impulse that had prompted him to suggest her coming here when her evening's work was done. What could he possibly have to say to her? And if he did unearth a quality in her which would vindicate his bitterness towards her kind, what of it? Rosina Van Praag meant nothing to him.

She hesitated only a moment when she saw him, then seated herself without a word, spreading her white skirt out and leaning back on the palms of her hands.

"I suppose you know that makes a nice picture, don't you?" he asked with an edgy laugh.

"Why——" Rosina responded slowly, "perhaps it does! I hadn't thought of it."

"What were you thinking of?" Crowne demanded.

"I was wondering," she said simply, searching his face in a grave way as she inclined just perceptibly towards him, "what it was you wanted me here for."

Crowne stared, abashed and angry.

"I'll have to be leaving in a day or two, Rosie," he said. "I just wanted to thank you for everything you've done for me."

He was surprised at the convenient words.

"I haven't done anything much," she said. "We have had artists stay with us before. In Holland, too, our family knew artists. We know they are queer and must be let alone unless they ask us for something."

He glanced at her with a quick frown but Rosina was gazing tranquilly out across the fields. He was aware suddenly that his heartbeat had become oppressive. When he reached out and touched the short sleeve of her dress, ran his hand down the smooth length of her arm, it was an urgency against which he was powerless. He felt the blood drumming in his temples.

She was looking at him, her eyes wide, her curved mouth closer to his, waiting. In confusion Crowne stumbled to his feet, drew her up with him.

“ROSIE,” he blurted out, “you’d better go back to the house. You remember what about myself—the tumbleweed. I’m not fine and sturdy, like you! You see—I can think about nothing but my painting. I—I’d like to be alone here for a while.”

She stood away from him and said slowly, pensively, “The day you came I had a feeling something marvellous was going to happen. But it was a lie. That doesn’t matter, though. Good-bye, Jay.”

He wanted desperately to stop her then, but he stood with his hands hanging numb at his sides and watched her go. The night became at once empty beauty. He sat down on the warm grass and buried his head in his hands. This was the truth, then, that he had found in himself: he could not ask the girl Rosina to share his disfigured life. Lenore was still in it—the memory of her a poison seeping through it. He had hoped to find a disillusioning flaw in Rosina, but all he had found was a flaw in himself. That flaw was the memory of Lenore, from whom there was no escape. And yet—perhaps there would be escape. In a place like this, where there were health and simplicity, and roots? New roots. Of course the roots would only be symbolical—as symbolical as the tumbleweed. It would be a place to come back to—for himself and Rosina to come back to.

Rosina came in through the kitchen door and found her mother making sandwiches and iced tea.

“YOU been out somewhere dreaming again?” Mrs. Van Praag chided good-na time you learn, my girl. You take Peeb or don’t take him. We have a somebody here to-night on the porch waiting for Mr. Crowne. It is like we thought—he is a great artist. One of the greatest in America.”

“Of course,” said Rosina.

“Maybe you better go to bed, Rosina. You look sort of pale, like.”

Rosina turned quickly to the door, her lips trembling.

When he had packed his belongings the next afternoon in the loft, Jay Crowne stood in the ominously darkening heat and ran his hand over his wet forehead.

Ballantyne had brought back the past—cruelly clear. For it was Ballantyne’s nephew whom Lenore had found more interesting than himself, Jay Crowne. It was Ballantyne’s nephew he had almost killed because of Lenore.

No, you couldn’t ask a girl like Rosina Van Praag to share a past like that with you, a past that was still living. Lenore had that power—to live in a man after the human part of him was dead. Only Crowne the artist was living. He wondered wearily if Rosina might be made to understand that. But in a few hours he would be away from here, forever. There would be no reason for his trying to explain anything to her.

Now he threw himself heavily down upon the bed the Van Praag boys had set up here for him. In a few minutes the dull, motionless heat enclosing him, he slept.

He wakened some time later in what seemed a livid artificial darkness. He sprang up, immediately conscious that someone had frantically called his name. He saw Rosina before him, white with terror.

“Jay, hurry down!” she cried. “A tornado is coming! We’ve got to get to the root cellar!”

It seemed to him that he had sat beside this hospital cot for seven years—not seven hours only—trying in anguish to reconstruct what had happened. Possibly if they hadn’t been short of nurses after the holocaust, they wouldn’t have let him sit, even.

Rosina’s father was here, but he slept in his chair exhausted after the hours of anxiety following that magnificent destruction. Her mother was at home in a roofless house, looking after the younger children.

Odd, Jay thought, that the Van Praags’ celery fields hadn’t been touched. Somebody had said that these freak tornadoes were like that. The barn that had been his studio had been flattened, however. Perhaps two minutes after he and Rosina had fled from it.

They had emerged, he recalled, into a spectacular purple-black whining chaos. They clung together, running low across the pasture, at first able to keep to their feet. Nothing was recognisable in the shrill murk that seemed to have all the air whipped out of it.

**H**e heard Rosina say: “It came so quick, but this isn’t the centre of it. You can’t tel better lie down flat——”

And then, as if through some awful clairvoyance, he had seen the old apple tree, uprooted before them, twist and whirl fantastically, while the scream of the wind tore Rosina’s words from her mouth. He flung himself forward to cover her, but not in time. The heavy trunk of the tree, its contorted branches, smashed over Rosina and went on. Crowne, half stunned by a branch, lay beside her, his arms spread over her body.

Perhaps in three minutes—five—he could not tell—the sky had lightened with a baleful mockingly innocent glare. And he had been able to carry Rosina to the house, her body a heartbreaking sweet burden. Her father, her mother and brothers, coming from the root cellar, had met him half-way. He had laid Rosina gently on the ground then, and had felt her pulse; her heartbeat had been like pearls slipping irregularly off a string.

Now, in the taut midnight silence of the little hospital room, Crowne sat in a torture of suspense. Under the implacable white cover Rosina lay so remotely still that he felt suddenly he could not endure another instant of the desperate uncertainty. Her breathing was even and quiet, but beneath her bandaged forehead the heavily closed lids gave her a masklike look. The doctor in his hasty diagnosis had said something about concussion, possible skull fracture, but aside from bruises no other serious injury. No other serious injury! Again Crowne wiped his forehead with a hand that shook.

There was a slight movement of the slender outline beneath the sheet and Crowne’s heart leaped. He leant forward involuntarily, touched a lock of Rosina’s hair that had slipped loose and damp from the bandage. She moaned, turned her head a little towards him, the eyelids wavering with the shine of moisture on them.

“Rosie,” he whispered, his voice wrung with hope and fear, “this is Jay. Do you know me?”

Her lips, drawn now with returning consciousness, flickered into a ghost of a smile.

“My head—hurts,” she murmured.

At that moment the doctor and a nurse came in, and Frans Van Praag stood up dazedly from his armchair.

In a little while the doctor said to the men, “You two can go home now and get some sleep. Our young lady is going to be all right, I think.”

But during the night, while he slept on a makeshift bed in the Van Praag kitchen, Jay Crowne stared into what seemed interminable darkness. The doctor had said, “I think!”

Some time before dawn the startling luminous truth came to him that during those long hours of racking suspense he had not once thought of Lenore. He felt all at once extraordinarily free. It was Lenore who had died. Rosina would live!

It was late morning before they would permit him to see her. He sat close to the bed after the nurse had stolen out, smiling, and took Rosina’s hand into both his own. She looked at him with eyes reassuringly clear. Crowne swallowed hard and smiled a broken smile.



“Why did you do it, Rosie?” he asked hardily, dreading her answer and yet hoping for it. “Why did you risk your life for me?”

Her eyes drifted evasively to the window, half drooped.

“You are a great artist. Wasn’t that reason enough? There aren’t many great artists.”

“Oh, Rosina!” He bent his head vehemently down upon the lax hand. “Tell me that wasn’t the reason. Tell me it was because of me—myself!”

When he ventured to look at her again, her soft dark gaze was upon him in a wonder that seemed to come to full waking. She smiled and tried to move her head closer to his and then winced with a little laugh. Jay Crowne laughed with her and laid his face against her bare brown throat.

## THE END

### TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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A cover has been created for this ebook.

[The end of *Tumbleweed* by Martha Ostenso]