

Her Stars

by Con Chapman

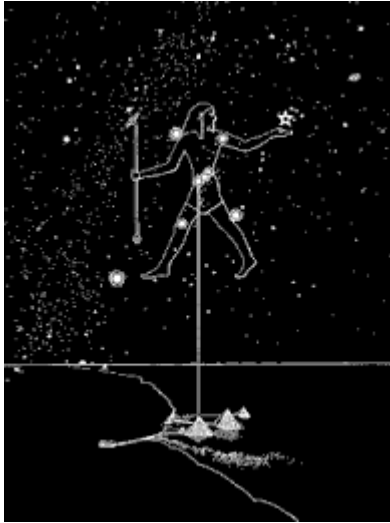
Doretta taught eighth-grade English, and lived alone, a block from the school. She was “Miss” Hay to everyone, and even though the boys never thought twice about it, the girls in her classes knew that meant she was an Old Maid, a figure on a card in a game that you didn't want to end up holding in your hand. And so they knew she was something they didn't want to end up being, not if they could help it.

She would walk home each night to her little apartment, grade papers for awhile, then make dinner for one or maybe have another teacher over, either a spinster like herself or a woman whose husband was out of town or who took pity on her; an evening not unlike that of nearly every other household in town, with or without a family, until night fell. As others turned on their TVs, Doretta turned out the lights and looked out her window at the stars—her stars!—which had provided the human race with peaceful and sublime entertainment for eons, since the Greeks and before. She couldn't understand why people would spend good, hard-earned money on a television when they could look

up at the sky every night—for free!—and trace the images that had inspired poets, that had transfixed astronomers

and physicists. The stars—that gave man a sense of how insignificant he was, and yet how there was a grand design to the universe. She counted herself fulfilled if, out of each year's eighth-graders, she could awaken a sense of wonder at the heavens, if she could cause just one idle or errant young boy to step outside at night and look up at the skies and lose himself, as she did, in the infinity he beheld there.

When winter arrived she told her students to look for Orion, the hunter, with his tri-starred belt and his sword and club. With his two dogs, Canis Major and Canis Minor, behind him, and Taurus the bull advancing towards him, and Lepus the hare escaping detection at his feet—that, she always hoped, would interest the boys, who would sometimes come to class sleepy-eyed from a night of coon hunting with their fathers.



And yet she was lucky to catch the fancy of even one of them. The girls would dutifully hand in their reports, with neat drawings of the constellations, but the boys were a different story. Some would nod off in the late afternoon, others would stare out the window, thinking of football or basketball practice—or girls. Some would hand in nothing, others just a half-hearted stab at the assignment—incomplete, illegible, incomprehensible.

One day walking home from school she noticed a bulldozer and a truck on the lot next door to her building, where a small home sat, fallen into disrepair. What, she wondered, was in store? Each day as she passed she saw progress in the form of demolition, then the lot cleared, then a concrete foundation, then a garish hamburger restaurant—little more than a metal shack—rising from the dust, its walls bright white and glass and shiny metal.

Then the lot was paved, and lines painted, and an enormous sign erected. Well, she thought, it might be nice to drop in there at night some time and pick up dinner instead of cooking.

Sometimes she was tired, and just wanted to close her eyes at the end of the day before she turned them towards the heavens. And so she waited for the grand opening, and decided to treat herself to a hamburger and some French fries and a

milkshake the first night. She took the food up to her apartment and ate at her table and thought it wasn't bad—not something she'd do every night, but a nice break when she didn't want to cook. She finished and cleaned up and, as usual, turned off the lights and took her place at her window to look at the stars and saw—nothing. The lights from drive-in and the sign had turned the sky above to a milky white instead of a deep blue, and the stars—her stars—were gone.

From "Town Folk & Country People."

