



River So Deep

By B.K. Froman

1919

My hand was against my nose, sniffing my palm as I walked across the Oregon City suspension bridge. I smelled like a barnyard. The earthy musk of animal, straw, and dung clung to my hair, clothes, and skin. No matter how often I'd bathed, the aroma stayed in my pores.

Next to me, construction had begun on the spans of a new arching bridge. Above me, multi-storied houses with wrap-around porches sat on the cliff, overlooking the Willamette River. A rich woman was probably looking down right now, watching me sniff myself. I bet the wealthy never smelled like sheep.

Twenty feet below me, men scurried along the river bank. Two police cars had parked on the road, and seven men clambered down the steep rocky embankment to the water's edge. Then I saw the body floating in a slow back eddy. Face down. Her skirt ballooning around her legs.

When they pulled her from the water, her long brown hair plastered against her face. Her small body was stiff like the broken limbs forever floating in the current. They strapped her on a hand truck and struggled to pull it up the stony embankment.

The five-minute-warning whistle shrilled across the water. I tore myself from the railing, running across the bridge to the Oregon City Woolen Mill.

The large brick building had been crafted on a tall base of hewn rock, raising it above floods. Its battering walls tapered inward, offsetting the two stories of bricks on top of it. Large windows lined the east and west walls, catching morning and evening light. The four-story tower rising in the middle, made it seem like a castle. Each time I came to work, I felt proud.

I rushed through the door of the main offices. My designated hand basket was already full of deliveries. I sorted them by department, not speaking to anyone so I'd appear business-like. It had taken months to move from

my old job into this one which was cleaner, allowed me to walk around, didn't cause a rash, and didn't make me stink.

With my basket on my arm and shawl drawn to my neck, I walked to a stone outbuilding. My first drop was a clipboard at my old job in the Picker House. Shepherd, the Picker Boss, sighed when he saw the poundage he was supposed to fulfill today. He handed me his completed form.

He was an odd man, as though his bones had been wired together, making him move like a skeleton in jerks and jumps. His gentle eyes peered from a narrow face. He rarely spoke. When the pile in front of a picker got low, he pointed to the wool cart. When someone was moving too slowly, he'd reach over their shoulder, his long fingers blurring, tearing open locks of wool.

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Presently, he was helping at the rag tables. He was a master detangler, unraveling used odds and ends so the “shoddy” wool could be reused and blended with the virgin wool for our yarns. When he had too much shoddy, it was sold to other mills. His department created a steady source of income.

I paused next to Kathryn, knowing Shepherd wouldn't mind as long as she kept working the scoured fleece in front of her. “I saw a dead body,” I whispered.

“I know!” she exclaimed. “I heard it was one of the drawing-in hands. A girl named Evie.”

My face fell. I wanted to be the first to share the news. “Who told you?”

“One of the weavers. Evie didn't show up today, and they're really missing her tiny fingers threading the needles.” Kathryn pushed aside a fluff of wool.

“I hope it's not her,” I said. “Would you ever consider

being a drawing-in hand? It'd get you out of this oil and dirt." Yellow wax had built up and hardened beneath Kathryn's fingernails. The lanolin drenched the tables, floor, even the air. Working here was like being dipped in wax. It had saturated my skin, leaving my hands and arms red and itchy.

Her face screwed up. "We're sixteen and too thick-fingered! Besides, they favor the weavers' children for those jobs, training them to take over their parent's work. My ma works in a laundry, and yours ..." She didn't finish the sentence.

Neither of my parents had made it through the Spanish Flu. I didn't answer Kathryn, instead, I grabbed a lock of wool to twiddle, keeping my fingers busy. I missed that part of the picking job.

Across the room, Shepherd patted the table three times. I'd worked in the Picker House long enough to know it meant he was moving to the next project. "See you," I said. "I'll tell you what I hear about Evie." Shepherd glanced at me. I nodded and moved on.

The spiral climb up the four-story tower of the main building made me pant. The handrail, welded three feet from the center post, kept my feet from treading on the narrow inner wedge of the steps, but it was a squeeze to pass others as I climbed to the top.

Walking into the Carding and Spinning Room, I immediately, crammed my ears with the wool I'd pinched from the Picker House. The clear span room had no columns to support it. The floor hung suspended from the attic beams and trusses above. Before me was an open expanse of whirring, clanking machines. Holes in the plank floors allowed wide belts to rise from the basement and drive the machinery in each room. In the corner, the carder growled and tore wool into fluffy clouds of fibers.

I handed the Spinner Boss his clipboard and envelopes. He held up a finger, signaling me to wait until he completed paperwork. Mostly women worked on this floor, each wearing a black apron or dress to disguise oil and grease stains. I shifted from one spot to another, getting out of the way of the doffers. The eleven-year-olds carted baskets through narrow aisles, removing and replacing bobbins on the spinning machines. It was one of the easiest and lowest paid jobs, forty cents for a ten-hour day, but the children got to work alongside their mothers.

I sidled next to Dorothy, pointing to her daughter and lifting my hand, indicating how much she'd grown. Dorothy nodded. Talking was impossible here. Everyone in the room had learned to lip read. They held whole conversations without uttering a word, even at lunch. I leaned next to Dorothy, mouthing, "They pulled someone from the river this morn."

She nodded, her hands clutching her throat. "Murder!"

"NO!" I shouted, my eyebrows arching to my hairline. "From here?" I circled my hand around the room.

She shook her head, jabbing her finger downward. I figured she meant the deceased worked on another floor.

Bang! I jumped, then rolled my eyes. A small girl laughed at me, holding up her empty basket, showing me she'd just dropped filled-bobbins to the floor below and let the trap door slam shut. The imp. At least she hadn't seated a bobbin so it would fly off and bean me today. I couldn't blame them for their jokes. It had to be boring being trapped in this room all day.

When the Spinner Boss tapped my shoulder and held out papers, I snatched them and hurried out. Pausing on the tower steps, away from the noise, I rearranged my basket. Actually, I was gathering my wits. I hated the top floor. The bang-and-roar rattled me. And despite weekly cleaning, thick lint clogged the air vents. It clung to the brick walls and encrusted the ceiling beams like gray moss, giving the room a cemetery-feeling.

Besides that ... there were ghosts.

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I'd been told that during the 1903 fire, the security man had dashed to the top of the tower to ring the bell, but found the rope pull cut. Flying downstairs, he spotted three fires in the spinning room, but discovered a section of fire hose had been removed. The remaining hose wouldn't reach the flames. Worst of all, Tray, his watchdog, was found in the yard, poisoned.

No one knew exactly why the fires had been set. It was rumored that malcontents were upset because the mill had hired several Chinese workers.

None of it made sense to me. But when spinners and carders worked through the night so there was yarn for the first shift, strange tales flourished about dark shadows moving between machines. A pale dog was often seen from the corner of one's eye, dashing along the river bank. Old-timers said it was the watchman and Tray, still trying to put out the fire. As long as the spirits stayed off the stairs, I didn't care. I straightened my spine, braced my shoulders and trod down to the Weaving Room to face the queen.

It was a noisy area with twelve-foot-high ceilings, but not as rackety as the top floor. The clackety-clack of looms and bang-bang-bang of shuttles echoed off the exposed brick walls. Tall windows made the space bright and airy, even on a cloudy day like today.

I pulled the wad of wool from one ear, but left the other ear plugged. Blankets in dazzling colors stretched out on twenty looms in front of me. On a different week it would be tartans, tweeds, and herringbones designed by the Weaver Boss, a Scotsman. Taking credit for all of it was Mrs. Quackenbush, a vinegary old grouser.

I handed the clipboard and documents to the Scotsman who quickly disappeared before Mrs. Q told him how to fill them out.

My friend James was eating lunch by his machines. It was early, but he'd stopped the four looms he oversaw so the sweeper could remove loose fluff from the driving mechanisms—a weekly necessity. He tapped his foot, encouraging the sweeper to work faster because a quiet loom wasn't a producing loom, and the weavers were paid piece-rate.

I stood next to James, wondering how much fiber floating through the air was drifting onto his sandwich. "They pulled someone out of the river this morning," I said.

"Evie. I heard. She was just a slip of a thing," he mumbled as he chewed. "It's heartbreaking. She was apprenticed to Emma, but not a relative." He glanced at looms sitting idle in the back.

"Have you heard how it happened?" I asked.

"Pregnant!" Mrs. Quackenbush boomed over my shoulder.

I gave the crate-shaped woman a long-suffering stare. "She was only twelve."

Mrs. Q slatted her eyes at me. "If you don't know that twelve is old enough, then you and me better have a talk before you get into trouble."

I blushed and cleared my throat. "How do you know she was in a family way?"

"Heard her crying." The woman folded her arms over her ample bosom, her black apron making her look like a bag of wool.

"Crying doesn't mean she was pregnant." My tone was sharpish.

"The girl wouldn't tell me what was wrong, but you know it's a man." Mrs. Q's lantern jaw jiggled as she nodded. "It's always a man causing problems. Like there!" Wrinkling her nose, she pointed at brown stains running down the brick walls. She toed the sweeper, who was on his knees, fingering lint from the cams. "Men spit their tabacky juice

like we're in a barn, and there it stays."

"Not my job. I only clean looms." He worked a little faster.

"Don't expect us to wash those walls." Mrs. Q wagged her finger. "We women do a lot for this place and get no thanks. A hundred ladies work here without enough toilets or dressing rooms. It's not right we gotta traipse out back to the outhouses where the hoboes harass us. More tramps are hangin' around every day. And there's no place for us to wash up. Unlike men who dive in a dung pile, then eat with those hands, we ladies clean up."

James waggled his sandwich. "Don't look at me. I wash before and after I eat. No oil on my yarns."

Mrs. Q patted his shoulder. "You're one of the good'uns. Since we hafta use the same dipper to drink outta the water bucket, I'm thankful you're not one of the tabacky slobberers."

"Aren't you supposed to be working Emma's looms today?" James gave her a squint-eyed frown.

Mrs. Q waved his words away. "Emma's making arrangements for Evie. We all chipped in." She looked at me, holding out her hand. I patted my pockets, then shook my head.

"Evie's mom is in love with alcohol," Mrs. Q went on. "Coffin varnish is all it is. She won't be back in her head till tomorrow, so Emma, bless her heart, is taking care of the funeral particulars. It's always women who put the world back together. But that means I gotta do her work and mine." She rubbed her face. "I'm good 'n' fast, but I can't push like I used to."

"I don't think it's right to say Evie was pregnant." I stared at her. "And even if it was true—which I doubt—Evie wouldn't want folks talking about it. Would you?"

"You're the one gossiping and asking questions about her."

I snorted. "I only want to understand what happened. You don't really know if Evie was pregnant or murdered, do you?"

Mrs. Q's voice shot up as she walked toward her machines. "Murdered? Well, well, well. That's newssss—" Her foot slipped on the flooring, but she caught herself. "Lookit here!" She crabbed at the sweeper. "Lubricating oil's been dripping on this planking for weeks. Do we need to nail baseball cleats to our shoes to keep from rolling on our backsides?"

"I'm a tattler. I only work on looms." He brushed the last of the fluff into a bag and packed his equipment.

Mrs. Q didn't let up. "And the planks are splintered in the back. I gotta tiptoe back there, hoping I don't stab my foot

and crucify myself.”

“Still, not my job.” The sweeper waved goodbye, ignoring Mrs. Q’s scolding glare as he hurried down the stairs.

I chewed my bottom lip, then spoke up. “Mrs. Q, I didn’t mean to say Evie was murdered. I don’t think it’s true. Don’t spread those rumors, ma’am.”

“Me?” Her jaw clenched and voice sharpened. “Don’t you accuse me. I been around ten years. Everybody here is family to me. I’m not the one waggin’ tongues. I pitched in for her coffin.”

“Whose coffin?” the Boss Weaver said, as he returned.

“This gal is spreading gossip about that poor child they found in the river,” Mrs. Q said. “I told her we don’t have time to stand around flapping our lips. But she—”

I whirled, facing him. “Honestly, sir! I didn’t—”

He held up his hand. “Ye take these swatches ta the owners’ offices.” I nodded, staring at the planking.

Mrs. Q had walked away but stopped, chiding, “Did you put my complaints on your clipboard? Now that we women finally got the vote, I wanna be heard.”

“Indeed, Mrs. Quackenbush, so ye shall be.” The Scotsman wore a strained smile as he walked me to the stair tower. “Some say there’s too much family here. T’is true, but not for that lady. The mill is all the kin she has. If she’s brassy, we forbear it. She has naught else to straw-boss. Do ye understand?”

I nodded. Mill people were all I had, too. I would’ve expected no less patience from a man who had stood ten hours a day, six days a week in front of a loom for ten years, making the good wage of thirty-seven cents an hour. Huffing a relieved breath, I pulled the cotton wad from my ear and hurried down the steps.

The light bulbs in the Finishing Room dangled from black ceiling cords, casting shadows on short-legged worktables. Only two women were busy in the first basement. “Not a lot of orders?” I asked.

Ruth, pressing cloth between paper to improve the fabric’s luster, shook her head. “You’ve seen the international orders peter out since the war ended. Now we’ve only got retail, and that’s slowing down.” She nodded toward fifty shirts and twenty suits her partner, Virginia, was finishing in the corner. “If the mill hadn’t opened those five hundred stores, I don’t know what we would’ve done.”

“You watch,” Virginia grumbled, “I bet our Christmas party and bonus checks will go to pay for all those Saturday Evening Post ads they’re running.” The lights dimmed and flickered. The basement became dusk. Both women groaned.

Seeing my confusion, Ruth sighed. “It’s that cursed rag picker. When it gets overloaded, the grinding machine in the Picker House draws off most of the mill’s electricity, and we suffer down here. Say ... did you hear about that pitiful girl they pulled from the river?”

After my run-in with Mrs. Q, I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. I pulled out my hank of wool, braiding it, keeping my fingers busy as I waited. The kids like Evie had showed me how to weave a bracelet. They created them for each other to fill the long hours.

The lights continued to be fitful, and I wondered if the ghost of Evie was joining the watchman and the dog in hexing this place. Virginia buttoned the plackets on a row of shirts, pausing to massage her thumbs. “I heard the girl was bathing in the river and drowned.”

“Good grief! That’s a cold place to take a dip.” Ruth switched off her pressing machine and flipped the lights off to lessen the draw on power.

“Hey! I’m still over here. Working in the dark now!” Virginia griped. “And for your information, the river is the only place some folks have to clean up, Lady Astor.”

“I’ll pick up your clipboard on my afternoon round!” I said and quick-stepped downstairs. Before I got a mill job, I’d bathed in the river. The cold wasn’t the worst part. It was the nerve-wracking, ever-alertness, fretting someone would take advantage of my nakedness. I shoehorned the memory back into its hole, latching it down with a thankful prayer for my space at the boarding house.

The lowest tier of stairs took me to the second basement. The Scouring Room was a wet, dirty, steam-filled area that smelled like a barnyard.

Beads of water always dotted Frank and Eddy’s beards. Both men were lanky and had been exposed to lanolin, grease, and dirt for years. They had a wet cough and a raw sense of humor, but they created snow-white fleece.

Frank looked at the clipboard, snorted, then handed it back. In the weeks I’d been doing this job, he’d never filled it out or sent samples to the office. “You tell the Jacob brothers that the last fleece they bought is so poor, I’m putting it on the train to a second market. All of it. We’re not even scouring it. They need to start buyin’ wool from California since the Oregon herders think their short-haired fleece is made of gold.” He pointed at me. “You know any cusswords?”

“Dang?”

He let loose a string of toe-curling curses. “Now, you give the Jacobs my message. Every word of it, and throw in a few of them swearwords. That’ll let ‘em know I’m serious.”

“I can’t do that, sir. I’ll lose my job if I carry messages like

that.”

Eddy squinted at me. “Hey, didn’t you used to work for Shepherd?” I nodded. “How did you abide that strange goose?”

“Because he does his job and doesn’t talk much?” It came out as a question.

Frank laughed as he coiled a hose. “I remember an old lady sent an Oregon Mills shirt back to the company. Her husband wore it, then each of her three sons took a turn with it, passing it along as they grew. That was back when we didn’t blend so much shoddy with the virgin wool to save money. The woman claimed it was too ‘finely made,’ to be destroyed. She hoped we’d patch the elbows and sell it again.

“I reckon it went to the rag pickers to reclaim the wool, but I swear, I seen Shepherd wearing it. That man lets nothin’ go to waste. He can make wool last forever. He’s probably got wool from Moses’ robes tucked away somewhere.” Frank and Eddy laughed. I didn’t.

Frank frowned at me. “That girl’s suicide got you down?”

“Suicide!” my voice wailed. “Why would a twelve-year-old kill herself? And if she did, why are we talking about her, but nobody helped her? What’s the matter with all of us?”

“Whoa!” Eddy waved his hands. “That hit a sore spot. We didn’t mean to rile up any hard-time memories. I got a quart of tarantula juice in my truck. It’s pretty calm!”

Frank wiped his hands, grinning at his partner. “I wouldn’t say no a nip. It’s almost lunch.”

I turned and trudged to the administrative offices.

“You all right?” Ephraim studied my face. Lunch had passed. After being in the office, I’d spent an hour at the top of the tower, next to the bell that had no rope to ring it. I tried to take in the view and calm my chattering heart, but mostly I stared at the envelope clutched in my hand. I didn’t remember circling down the stairs. I must’ve walked to the Dye House, which sat away from the mill because of its combustible chemicals. I had no memory of going there.

Wooden vats, eight feet across, brimmed with dark liquids. The electric lights reflected off their surfaces. There were only a few windows in the wet, cold building.

I stared into a vat, imagining the unseen ropes of wool swaying under the liquid surface. The fumes made my nose burn. What would it be like to close my eyes, stick my head in, and let my troubles float away?

“You don’t look so good. You eaten yet?” Ephraim held out a hunk of cheese between blue-stained fingers. His

kindness was the brightest spot in this room.

“I was just let go,” I whispered.

Ephraim tugged my arm. “Let’s git outside. Since Kaiser Bill had his war, we can’t get the German dyestuff. The chemicals in the new U.S. dyes make most people lightheaded—a little crackbrained like me.”

We pushed through the door, his hand on my shoulder, guiding me to the bench. Above, steel-gray clouds bumped together and parted, undecided about releasing rain. After sitting a few moments, the cool breeze rolling off the river cleared my head like opening a window.

“Now let me get this straight.” He stared into my eyes. “You were fired, but you delivered out here anyway?”

“They paid me for a full day, but I only worked ...” My words faded as I held up the brown envelope. “As I left, the secretary asked me to drop off your messages. She seemed sorry they had to move people around. They’re making spots for men coming back from the war.”

Ephraim hurled the clipboard into the river, then fired cusswords at the sky, condemning Kaiser Bill for ruining so many lives. After a while, he sat beside me, running his fingers through his hair. “Sorry. My son’s wounded and still billeted over there. Jobs’ll be gone by the time he gets back.”

“I hope it’s soon.” I didn’t know what else to say. We watched the current carry a limb down river. He shook his head. “My boy’s been on my mind ‘cause of that poor little girl. Like her, he was tryin’ to do the right thing ...” He rubbed his forehead, eyes closed. “She was just rescuing a kitten.”

“What?” My head snapped toward him.

He hooked his thumb toward the entry gates. “Bill, the security man, works part time for the police, he told me ‘bout the drowned girl.”

When Ephraim shared the details, I took off running. I didn’t want him to see me cry.

Through blurry eyes, I spotted Shepherd, fishing next to the mill. When folks finished early, they often fished or picnicked or simply sat and watched the river. I stopped beside him, not speaking, but not wanting to be alone with the fears gnawing through my head.

Shepherd’s steady casting and retrieving slowed my breathing. Tears silently slid down my cheeks. When I thought I could speak without my voice breaking, I asked, “Could I have my old job back?”

He surveyed my hands and arms as he pulled in the line. For weeks I’d coated them with pink calamine and wore loose sleeves to hide my picker’s rash. They weren’t as red and swollen now. “I’ll do the rag table, cutting off buttons and ripping out zippers. Anything. I know I’ll still break out

from the lanolin in the air, but—they cut my job.”

He cast into the current, tending the line until it became taut. Then he shook his head. “There’ll be a lot of folks not working next week. We can’t get good fleece. Big mills are buyin’ it up. No fleece. No weaving. It might take a month to buy up enough good local clips for a run.”

“They told me it was because of returning soldiers.”

“That, too.” He nodded. “Partial work is what they’re coming home to. Not just this mill, but everywhere.”

“How can this stand?” I said through gritted teeth. “The girl that died, she saw a kitten in the river. Somebody had tossed it in. It was wet and shivering and clinging to a boulder near the bank. When she tried to rescue it, she slipped down the bank and cracked her head on the rocks. The police saved the kitten, but it was too late for her. A drowning kitten isn’t her fault. The Flu or War isn’t my fault. Not having fleece isn’t your fault. Tramps can’t help that they don’t have a bed or place to bathe. How is any of this fair?” I yelled.

Shepherd retrieved and cast his bait again, letting the breeze carry away my frenzied words. After a moment, he pointed with his chin. “See that wide beach down there?” I nodded.

“The Upper Chinook tribe used to winter right there, along this river, hunting, weaving, and trading.” He let out a long breath. “Hundreds of years they got on with their lives, never expecting anything to change. Families. Big communities. All gone now.”

“What folks don’t understand is that the river carried their tears out to sea. You can bet there was plenty of heartbreak along these banks. Still is. The waves stir the memories. The sun bakes it. The clouds bring it back. It pours across the land and into the river again. Over and over. Some of this water passing us right now has been back twenty, maybe thirty times, looking to see what’s changed.”

“What’s that got to do with what’s fair?” I pulled my wool from my pocket, working the braid, keeping my fingers from scratching my arms.

He shook his head. “There is no fair. There’s only change. When the tears you’re dropping in the river float back again, you or I won’t be around. Like that empty beach, there may be nothing here to mark all our labor and hurts. Everything that happened today will be forgotten with change.”

“Then why bother? Why go through this struggle?”

His gentle eyes locked onto mine. “We can’t walk on

water or stop greed or war. The only thing in our power is to make our little corner of life better. It doesn’t seem like much, but it takes all our life to do it. That’s all we gotta do. You can either give up or keep trying to improve things.” He drew in his fishing line. “The girl who died was saving a living creature. She died, making her corner of the world better. It doesn’t balance the scales, but it may help you or others keep up what she started.”

“Then nothing lasts. Not jobs. Not families.”

“Maybe a few of those blankets we churn out will endure time and moths?” He glanced at me, adding a slight smile. “The river,” he finally said. “Here before we were. Here long after we’re gone. This river, so deep, remains.”

He pointed with his fishing pole. “On weekends I work for the family that lives in that big white house on the cliff. They’ve got a farm I manage, but the lady of the house may need help here in town. We could go up there and ask.”

“A house maid?” My heart walloped my ribs. “No! I don’t know how to act in a fancy house ... and why would you take such a chance, speaking up for me?”

“We’re on a long journey. Friendship helps.” He walked away. “I’m headed up the hill. Catch up if you wanna see if there’s work for you.”

“I’ve never heard you talk so much,” I yelled.

He kept walking. I didn’t follow.

I watched the currents cord the water’s surface, then tossed the wool bracelet into the flow. “Goodbye, Evie.” The circlet whirled, floating like a tiny flower toward its new home.

For a moment, light glinted off the river. Squinting, I glanced up at the eye-blink of sunbeams escaping from a crack in the clouds.

A faint smile touched the corner of my mouth. How many times did I have to learn this? The black hours in my past had hurt, but they hadn’t stayed dark forever. Even when I couldn’t see any light, it was still there, shining above my cloudy skies.

With a heartbeat of hope, I ran to catch up with Shepherd.

Behind me, the river rolled on.

B.K. Froman



B.K. Froman, writer, radio/TV talent, and university educator, lives in Oregon. Her writing captures thoughtful and humorous perspectives of people and change. Her books have garnered the Oklahoma Book List Award, WILLA Literary Awards, a Will Rogers Medallion, Society of SW Authors Honors, and Barnes and Noble Top 20 Indie Authors.

Froman's award-winning short stories use comical-chaos, wry humor and clever dialogue to remind readers that life—*is all about change.*