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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of nonfiction. All characters are real; nothing has been disguised or embellished. Where I have used dialogue, it is based on the recollection of at least one participant, as documented in the endnotes.

I was drawn to this story by landscape and language. I stumbled across Caroline Lockhart's old ranch (a few hours' drive from my home) one May when spring turns it heavenly. Then I tracked down some of her novels and was surprised at how much I enjoyed them. That prompted one of my driving questions: Why had so few people heard of this woman? When I later learned her full story, that question only intensified.

Obsessed with cowboys and romanticizing the old West, Caroline Lockhart came to Montana and Wyoming long after the frontier had been "closed." So she tried to do something about that situation, to reinhabit a cowboy West. Can a single individual, no matter how ornery, turn back the march of time and progress? That's not just the classic question of Western literature. It's also, I found, the arc of Caroline Lockhart's life.

In late summer of 1901, Philadelphia's celebrity female journalist, pen named "Suzette," got off a train in Blackfoot, Montana. She was alone.

Dwarfed by the Montana prairie and sky, in the middle of an Indian reservation, Blackfoot was not much of a town. Suzette quickly arranged an overnight fifty-mile journey northwest to a place along the Swiftcurrent River where a few dozen people lived in log cabins and white tents. Boosters of this village, called Altyn, liked to claim that it sat in the center of a natural amphitheater, "fringed with majestic forests of pine and surrounded by titanic mountains, rugged canyons and azure lakes, the whole country being a masterpiece of beauty and sublimity." For once the boosters weren't much exaggerating: the place is now part of Glacier National Park, not far from the stunning Many Glacier Hotel.

Suzette's arrival represented major news for Altyn, which had been born less than three years previously, when a strip of land was taken from the Blackfeet Indians and thrown open to mining. Altyn's prospectors believed that within a few years its destiny would be decided: "the richest and biggest camp on earth or nothing." A writer from *Lippincott's Magazine* could help alert the forces of capital to Altyn's glorious potential.

What's more, in a rough-and-tumble camp filled mostly with males, the writer from *Lippincott's* was a gorgeous female. Possessed of an hourglass figure; long, thick, dark blonde hair often tied in a ponytail; sultry eyes; and a toothy, winning smile, Suzette was thirty years old but looked far younger. The fact that she was unmarried, and unchaperoned, further heightened local attention.

Women were still a novelty in the news-gathering business. There were women writers—novelists, essayists, society columnists—but few who traveled the country in search of insight or adventure. Nellie Bly had been the first, just twelve years previously. Writing for a New York newspaper, Bly had gone on adventures culminating in a trip around the world (designed to make the circuit in less than eighty days, beating the record set by Jules Verne's fictional character). On that trip Bly, an unmarried twenty-five-year-old, had been accompanied by her mother.

Suzette, by contrast, simply bought a train ticket to Montana and once there hired an old horse packer named McNeill. She told him she wanted to see some scenery, so he took her to Altyn and next perhaps they would go “across the summit to MacDonald Lake,” noted a local newspaper. “The opinion of the boys is that Mack will keep going as the lady is quite attractive.”

Who was this woman, and why had she come to this wilderness? Suzette’s real name was Caroline Lockhart, and she’d been in journalism for about six years. In the aftermath of Nellie Bly’s success, several major newspapers had hired women to write about feats of daring—“stunt girls,” they were called. Lockhart had filled that role on the lurid *Boston Post*. Later she’d moved to the more staid *Philadelphia Bulletin*, where she’d turned from stunts to interviews and travel, covering the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris. Now she was on a tour of the West. But in a fashion typical of her character, she refused to visit well-developed resorts. She wanted adventures: Indian reservations, remote mining camps, wilderness mountain trails.

It was partly her personality, out for adventure and fun, interested in the escapades and lingo of common folk rather than blue bloods. And it was partly ambition. She wanted to be famous, and she intended to achieve her fame through writing. Already readers and editors had admired her breezy style. She was making the step up from newspapers to magazines such as *Lippincott’s*. She’d even started writing a novel.

In those days the road to literary fame generally led through exotic locations. Readers hungered for stories of places they hadn’t been, especially romantic places like the western frontier. As a journalist, Lockhart had the goal of researching those places and people, then writing about them. She would soak in the character of Altyn and use it as a setting for stories and novels. She would meet lots of unusual people and turn them into characters. She would have adventures and recycle them as plots.

McNeill, for example, she later depicted as “a spry old man in a woolen shirt and ragged overalls. . . . He had a deeply lined face which looked like an old leather glove that had lain out in the weather and his mild blue eyes bespoke both honesty and friendliness.” She liked that he had achieved local fame as a bear hunter and had once hunted and trapped for the Hudson’s Bay Company. She also liked the way he took care of his horses, the fact that he called his blankets “soogans,” and the way he let her call him “Sourdough Sam.”

West of Altyn, the terrain soared more than two thousand feet to peaks along the continental divide. A rugged pass led through them to McDonald Lake, which was so scenic that it had already become something of a tourist destination (it would later become the heart of the national park). Suzette met more than one man in Altyn who told her quietly, "It's a rough trail." One told her that no woman had ever made it across. Such challenges only egged her on.

On horseback she and McNeill forded the Swiftcurrent River at the edge of Altyn and easily covered the first four miles, the relatively flat entry to a steep-sided bowl. At the far end of it McNeill stopped his horse and said, "Thar's yer trail."

"What!" It looked almost perpendicular.

"That's it. Want to go back?"

"No."

Today the route is a popular, if grueling, overnight hike. The bottom of the wall is a forbidding but also inspirational spot, with waterfalls tumbling over sheer mountain cliffs. It's the sort of scene that could convince a person to (a) leave Philadelphia for good, or (b) get the hell back there as soon as possible. Ahead, Park Service materials warn, the trail has been notched into the rock and is not for those who fear heights. In 1901 the trail had not yet been notched into the rock.

Lockhart was comfortable on horseback. She'd ridden horses since she was a very young girl. She didn't get much chance to now, living in the city, but on the occasions she did, she delighted in others' admiration of her skills. Horses were not just transportation to her. They stood for independence and freedom. She loved the act of riding and the skill of riding well; she found beauty in the paraphernalia of riders and in the animals themselves. A few years earlier she'd summered in Maine, where she had a horse of her own, and it may have always been in the back of her mind to return to a place where she could be a horsewoman.

This horse, however, was not to her liking. McNeill rode "a sturdy little mountain horse that dug in its toes and climbed slowly while my mount was a long-legged sorrel from the plains country. He was high-strung and took the climb in jumps." She fell far behind her guide. Finally she decided to get off the horse and hang onto his tail as he walked, letting him pull her up the slope. But the horse didn't cooperate. He moved too quickly for her and kicked dirt in her eyes.

Soon the horse jerked free of her and ran to the edge of a cliff. She saw him tremble there. She saw a fear come into his eyes that she thought was almost human. Then she saw him snort, whirl, and tear off up the mountain-side, leaving her behind.

She had to trudge on afoot. She claimed later that she was mostly “on my hands and knees, grabbing at bushes, tufts of grass, anything that would keep me from slipping back. It was like trying to climb the side of a steep roof and getting steeper inch by inch as I neared the summit.” Then she realized the rock underneath her had changed. She was now climbing on shale, far more slippery and unstable than the previous limestone. Every time she moved, she started a small slide. Any rock she dislodged “dropped over the edge of a precipice into a canyon so deep that I couldn’t hear when it landed. It was the same spot where the pack horses had gone over and whose bleached bones were still lying where they fell.”

She was now utterly alone. As much as she liked Sourdough Sam—the crusty old-timer full of the wisdom of a rough outdoor life, so different from the dull society types back East—he may not have been the most trustworthy choice for a guide. As much as she loved horses, this one had left her in a bad spot. As much as she loved wilderness exploration, she was now literally nauseated with fear.

Of course, adventurers thrive on such emotions. The fear, the individual challenge, the sense of pushing a perimeter—Lockhart would hardly be the last person to find these thrills in the natural wonders of the West. (Nor was she the first: the adventure, as much the economic opportunity, had always driven Americans to the frontier.) With both horse and guide gone, she was now truly alone on a dangerous precipice: “I couldn’t go ahead, I couldn’t go back, so with arms and legs outstretched I laid flat on my face and waited. I tried to call but nothing came out but a squeak while shale rattled with the violent trembling of my body. Though I laid as still as possible, at intervals the slide started of itself and I felt cautiously with my foot for an embedded rock that would hold but they all gave way and each slide brought me a little closer to the edge.”

Caroline Lockhart had arrived in the West. It may have been crumbling away beneath her, but she was determined to hold on. Her ambition would land her here in the Rockies, amidst the scenery and colorful characters and powerful legends. She intended to find her footing, make a success of herself. Getting off this slate would be only the first step.