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“I am imprisoned,” Vorse wrote in 1923. “I hold myself by free casting around to find a way out—the detail of the house is horrible and I crawl through as if expecting blows. I have the children about me and I function as mother, yet life is intolerable to me. It offers me less at this moment than in all my life.” Contrary goals brought her pain beyond measure. She continued to work, but without her usual ease in writing the fiction that had always supported her family. Self-isolated by illness and dejection, she allowed herself only surface female friendships. And Vorse permanently forsook love of all men, haunted by longing for Minor, whom she also hated. Her greatest trial would be her relation to her children. When she finally got beyond debilitating self-sacrifice, she had learned little more than the necessity to leave them.

Through most of the 1920s, Vorse was obsessed with one thought. She had failed her children. With the labor, radical, and feminist movements quieted, she returned home to be a mother. Her massive guilt centered around the behavior problems of her sixteen-year-old daughter, Ellen. For seven agonizing years, Vorse concentrated on serving the demands of her daughter: to make it up to Ellen, to save Ellen, to shape Ellen. Vorse decided that her work must be put aside. She must pay whatever price necessary to compensate for the years spent away from her children. She excused her absence as unavoidable. This was a disingenuous explanation, at best, which ignored her desire for freedom from child care in order to write and travel.¹

Whatever the source of the clash between mother and daughter, Vorse
was unable either to accept or control Ellen’s behavior. Harbor ing their
mutual suspicion, rage, and hurt, they fought on and on—about Ellen’s
curfew, boyfriends, dress, household chores, and general failure to con-
form to Vorse’s expectations, about Vorse’s “desertion” of her children,
insensitivity, and domineering manner. Between bouts, Ellen was either
sullen or hysterical, always depressed and accusing, while Vorse was pla-
cating, “cheerful,” and “rational.” A repeating pattern of conflict emerged.
Vorse, already physically ill, scrambled to find the odd hours of work she
needed as a writer to produce the family income. Resentful of Ellen’s
heedless calls for immediate service and attention, Vorse covered her anger
with a facade of endless kindness and patience. When the inevitable explo-
sion of feeling occurred, Vorse first attacked, then retreated into remorse
and pacification, usually giving in to Ellen’s demands, whereupon the
whole circle of pain began again.

Vorse’s painful memories of her mother’s denial and distance shaped
her response to Ellen’s often self-centered demands. As a youngster Vorse
had been taught to hide her most powerful negative feelings, especially
toward her mother. She had learned that resistance to maternal will was
sure to bring either isolation or rejection. “I imagined children to be rather
as I remember myself,” Vorse wrote in her diary in 1925, “gay compan-
ions to their parents. Spiritually self-supporting. Making few demands.
Contributing, not taking away.” Unlike her mother, Vorse was unwilling
either to ignore or to overrule her daughter’s perceived needs. On the one
hand, Vorse expected polite subordination from Ellen. At the same time,
she could not bear to deny her daughter anything. “If one does not place
one’s children first,” Vorse moaned, “they come down on you worse than
jealous lovers. Their love turns to fury.”

From the birth of her first child, Vorse had felt unfairly limited when
she devoted her full energy to the daily routine of child care. As they grew
older, she entrusted their care to educators and relatives. She shared the
experience of most fathers. She loved her children dearly, placed them
at the center of her concern and affection, while largely turning over
their daily care to someone else. And like many males of her class, she
wanted, and believed she deserved, a strictly personal route to excitement
and fulfillment. She found this in work, in travel, and in immediate
connection to the great social issues and world events of her lifetime. In
some sense, her position as breadwinner for a large family, forced on her
by tragic circumstance, also served as a lucky exit from societal demands.
Her evident need to earn a living offered a neat answer to the expectation
that she center her life on home and children. For Vorse, being enmeshed
in domesticity, to the exclusion of writing and an active public life, meant only frustration and boredom.

Yet Vorse, like so many women before her, was unable to elicit the external or internal support needed to legitimize a duality of womanhood balanced between the two joys of work and children. Stranded in the unfriendly social climate of the 1920s, tortured by her fear that she had failed to nurture her brood, vastly disturbed by Ellen’s maladjustment, Vorse could see only one way out. She would lay herself before her children “like a field to be plowed.” She would become “a stationary washtub instead of a kite.” She steeled herself to play the role of Supermom—abjectly self-sacrificial, continually nurturing and noncritical. She spoke to this strange self through her diary, giving the alien firm instructions: “If your instinct had been of utter faith none of this would have happened. If it had happened it wouldn’t have touched you. For you would have been in agreement with it. It is only by utter goodness that you can conquer this situation.” She would do her writing at “odd moments. Do it now and then. Hide it. . . . I will arrange my work so [the children] will be barely conscious of it.”

Virginia Woolf and Tillie Olsen have written of the mighty, centuries-long struggle of women authors to surpass, negate the “silences” imposed on them as women, as mother-writers. “Where the claims of creation cannot be primary, the results are atrophy; unfinished work; minor effort and accomplishments; silences,” Olsen reminds us. In motherhood, as it has been structured through time, the need to write cannot be first.

Not because the capacities to create no longer exist, or the need . . . but . . . the need cannot be first. It can have at best only part self, part time. . . . Motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsible, responsive. Children need one now. . . . The very fact that these are needs of love, not duty, that one feels them as one’s self; that there is no one else to be responsible for these needs, gives them primacy. It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant, toil. Work interrupted, deferred, postponed makes blockage—at best, lesser accomplishment. Unused capacities atrophy, cease to be.

Vorse suffered another diminishment. As Virginia Woolf has noted, women writers, women’s lives, women’s experience, are by definition minor, to be judged inferior in significance, as in literature. How many thousands of women writers like Vorse constricted their intellect to sell their work, to deny the authenticity of self, to identify with masculine ex-
perience, to repeat, in forgettable fiction for frivolous women’s magazines, male-made stereotypes of women’s needs and thoughts? Women writers are forever moved to crowd “into that smugly isolated inner space of art which they have often described as the ‘living centre,’ a space which always looks disturbingly like the kitchen,” the literary scholar Elaine Showalter has remarked. Or, in Vorse’s writing, the bedroom, permissible by the 1920s. In that decade Vorse also met another kind of silence—the quieting of feminism itself and its naturally, the forces on the left. Overborne, she broke down, gave in, gave up. To women of her own generation, she may have seemed exceptional, like an escapee from female circumstance. Perhaps she was, in some ways, but mainly by chance, and just barely.

Through most of that long decade, Vorse lost contact with her women friends. She even came to doubt the long-term advantage of her feminism. Perhaps it would have been better to have lived like Neith Boyce, Vorse thought, devoted above all to her children. “What did I get out of it?” Vorse asked. “What good does it do to poke one’s nose into Salonika or Serbia? Why travel on boats going down the Volga? . . . When it was all over and the processions had done and the guns silenced . . . I was a curious answer to feminism.” At age forty-eight, Vorse had lost not only her health, but also the man she loved—and she had lost him to a younger, more traditional woman.

After Minor’s exit with Lydia Gibson, Vorse would not meet him again for seven years. From her home in Provincetown, she wrote him tender love letters punctuated by fierce stabs of hatred. To deal with the pain, she opted for the “perfect goodness” of self-immolation. In 1923, she wrote in her diary: “I am your lover, who cares for you without hope of love, without a knowledge that you and I shall again even speak to each other face to face. Since I ask nothing, I have everything. My love flows out to you tirelessly and endlessly.” Skewed by contradiction, Vorse also brooded about the other side of her relationship to Minor—the memory of her terrible anger toward his fanatical “drive for perfection” and her “longing like thirst” to be free of his domination. After her affair with Robert Minor, Vorse never took a lover again. She liked others to believe that she still pined for Minor, and could find no other to match him. This was a puzzling claim to most of Vorse’s friends, and especially to her women friends, who recognized his egocentrism. Perhaps she abandoned the love of men because she could not risk another disappointment—after Bert’s infidelity, after Joe’s death, after Bob’s rejection. Or perhaps, nearing fifty, she simply decided that her sexual life was over—another puzzling notion, in light of her previous highflying sensuality.
The strange riddle of her professed love for Minor, coupled with her evident disdain for both his personality and his politics, is best explained as the stoical defense of a mature woman who had accepted her own deviance, and who had come to see that difference as both permanent and desirable. One way to master men was to repudiate them. If Minor’s rejection precipitated her own, perhaps her response was in large part a pretext; if she had not found one reason to stand alone, she would have created another. That Robert Minor was an insensitive sexist and egotist, all accounts agree. For her purpose, then, it was not an accident that she chose a man like him to “love.” Hutchins Hapgood sensed this possibility when he told her that, because of Minor, she had “shut herself off in a triumphant sort of way.” To a woman of her time, with Vorse’s strength, intelligence, and ambition, it was a victory to break free from the usual male’s restrictive presumptions about the role and nature of women. Yet so long as she maintained the fiction that she yearned for her lost love, Vorse need not admit, even to herself, the implications of her escape into freedom.

Vorse’s diary notations of the twenties betray her new direction. “Now it seems to me that I have had a greater share of popularity than most women,” she wrote in her diary in 1923, “and that I have worked out a very complete experience of sex and now is the time to put that definitely to one side—a gesture of complete total relinquishment. If, with returning health, I find that I have no familiar instinct for adventure or experiences with men, or that I could say no to this instinct with consistency, that would be a much more realized life.”

Through 1923 and 1924, however, Vorse’s addiction to morphine bound her life like a shroud. Isolated in her shame, she struggled against the demon need. Denial of reality was her defense. Secrecy was her cover. She assumed the pose of curious observer of her own downward spiral, professing intense interest in her “state of nerves.”

Vorse’s solemn struggle with morphine was complicated by her increased use of alcohol. She again attempted to believe in the rapture of release unknown to the forever cautious. “Women are the sober race,” Vorse wrote in Cosmopolitan,

because drink is the enemy of domesticity, even as religion, love and art are all domesticity’s enemies. Do you dare to be drunk? Unless you have been drunk in one way or another you do not know yourself, you have not dared to look down the abyss of your soul or gaze upward awe-struck into the path of the northern light. . . .

The Long Eclipse
The doors of love and beauty and religion have remained closed to you.

But in fact she drank to bring peace and sleep. "It was like chloroform in childbirth," she wrote in her diary. "The unbearable anguish was taken from me... I must learn to take anguish without an anesthetic," she added. 15

Even during the turmoil of the war years and after, Vorse continued to produce the short fiction that supported her family. The successful plot formulas she had developed earlier maintained their appeal to her wide, chiefly female, audience, although by 1917, changing standards enabled her to write more openly than before of sexual encounters and unhappy unions. Increasingly, however, a string of lollipops of lesser quality—many of them little more than recitals of current romantic myths—began to creep onto her long list of published work. Her constant movement and politically involved, hectic life style from 1917 to 1922 taught her to dash out these quickly written, easily sold pieces of fiction designed to match the prosaic taste of the more conservative middle-class mass audience of the twenties.

Four times between 1918 and 1923, she was awarded one of the top spots in Edward J. O’Brien’s popular annual series, The Best Short Stories. From 1914 to 1926, even when she did not receive the highest ratings, Vorse’s work was prominently featured in O’Brien’s “Role of Honor” listing. In 1919 and 1921, her work achieved “runner-up” status in the O’Henry Memorial Award short story contest. In 1922 and 1926 she won an O’Henry annual prize. Some of these attention-winning stories reflected her familiar themes. But most of these pieces focused less on gender role conflict than on the central romance of the two protagonists, and usually ended with the socially compliant pair locked in the standard embrace.

Despite the notice given her fiction, Vorse’s faith in her literary ability was shaken in 1924 as never before. Indecision was followed by literary experimentation, and finally by accommodation with financial reality. It all began when she took Norman Matson as a boarder into her Provincetown home. Matson was almost twenty years younger than Vorse, a gruff poet and newspaperman with heavy-lidded eyes and a perpetually bored expression. He was writing his first novel and was soon to court and marry Susan Glaspell, who had returned to Provincetown from Greece after the death of her husband, Jig Cook. In her needy state, Vorse was particularly vulnerable to Matson’s harsh opinion of her work.
In a remarkable article entitled “Why I Have Failed as a Mother,” published in *Cosmopolitan* in 1924, Vorse described her encounter with him.11

“You have failed in the two main objects for which you’ve lived. You have failed in bringing up your children. You’ve failed in your work,” Matson told her.

Vorse was stunned. “What’s the matter with my children? They love me, don’t they?” she challenged.

“You’ve no discipline. You can’t even keep them out of your room when you’re working. Do you suppose there is a man who would stand for that? You’re blind if you can’t see they hate your work,” Matson said.

Crushed, Vorse could not deny the truth of his accusation. She had realized fully Ellen’s resentment at not having a “regular” mother. Matson believed that Vorse and her children were victims of circumstance, since Vorse was the sole support of the family and could not be the mother she otherwise might have been. But Vorse knew her “failure” as a mother was more willful than Matson imagined. If she had originally begun to work only to earn money so Bert could have more time to write, she soon became more ambitious. She learned to do good work for its own sake, and for hers. From that time, she knew, she would not have stopped writing, even if she could have. Moreover, she had found plausible reasons for leaving home in order to work.

“The truth was I lusted for new experiences and new forms of work,” Vorse wrote in *Cosmopolitan*, thinking of her trip to Europe in 1919 and of the years-long break from family care that it began. “Instead of merely being absent behind closed doors, I was really away. And I liked being away. The relentless details which all women must meet if they would see their homes run well slipped from me like a burden. . . . I know I needed to go away as much as I knew my children needed me home. . . . I found peace in constant traveling which I hadn’t known in my quiet house, because at home there was the never ending conflict between my two jobs. I had been faithful to my house and its demands so many years. Don’t housewives deserve a sabbatical year? I assume that all women with imagination, however much they care for their families . . . crave the experience as much as men.” After the long absence from her family she had become as indignant at an interruption in her work, now that she knew what it meant to be uninterrupted, “as a man would be if his work were held in light esteem.” When combining love and work, must women always experience a “double failure”? Vorse asked.

Despite her conscious resentment of the wider privileges and freedom
of men, she felt less fury at the power of male arrogance than she did
guilt at not meeting her own ideal of womanhood. If Vorse could not
demand more from her children, it was chiefly because she had failed to
behave as “good” mothers “naturally” would. Most especially, she blamed
herself for her failure even to want to place their needs before her own.
Finding it impossible to perform well all the roles she played, she had
simply tried harder, given more, worked more, and tortured herself for
wanting more, so much more, than motherhood alone. She turned her
anger inward, still the daughter of her Victorian mother, despite all their
apparent differences. Vorse would eventually emerge from the impasse,
perhaps influenced more by a changing society than by her inner growth.
It would be thirty more years, however, before she reached the angry
understanding that she and her children were equally the victims of male-
made definitions of the natural order.

Her interaction with Matson in the mid-twenties led her to alter her
writing style. From 1924 to 1927, she attempted to sell realistic fiction
to the general interest and women’s magazines. Experimentation brought
quick knowledge, borne on a stream of rejection letters, which carried
warning phrases: “must modify behavior of girl”; “no premarital sex or
female sexuality”; “opinions would enrage our readers”; “the heroine must
never undermine the hero.” As the fall of 1927 approached, her financial
situation grew desperate. Of the seven stories she produced that year, only
two had sold. The women’s magazines did not want to buy descriptions of
the darker realities of women’s lives—of repressed dreams, towering rage,
marital unhappiness, parental stress. “The time has come when I want
to experiment [in writing] and live on very little,” she wrote in her diary
one sleepless night, “but instead I have [to support] this large and adult
family which requires that I give my attention to stories for which I do not
care.”

Nevertheless, beginning in 1929, Vorse would establish a new priority
in her work, one that satisfied her sense of self-worth, while still serving,
though just barely, her basic monetary needs. She would concentrate on
labor journalism and investigative reporting, stopping to whirl out the
familiar love stories only when she literally ran out of money. Over time
and with growing lack of interest in the work, Vorse’s skill at writing
light fiction declined. By the 1940s, she found she could sell precious
few lollipops. But she never regretted her decision to center her work on
free-lance journalism. She would find and maintain a solid self-respect,
although her income would dwindle steadily from 1930 on.
It was in November 1924, during a three-day visit to New York, that Vorse reached bottom. The details of her descent are not explained by the available evidence. Her New York episode, which she felt had publicly disgraced her, as well as completely exposed her pretense at normality, ended in what she called "my tragic gesture of suicide."  

Apparently it was the public embarrassment that shook her free of every rationalization. Leaving Ellen in an apartment in New York, she retreated in December to join ten-year-old Joel at her sister-in-law's home in western Texas. Vorse was determined to stay there, under Josie's care, until she had broken her dependence on both morphine and alcohol. It was a simple leap of faith, born of desperation and some grand reserve of courage.

Through the first five weeks in Texas, Vorse rarely left her bedroom. She did not describe the physical agony of withdrawal. But as her body healed she wrote in her diary of the quiet days, the home bright with Indian patterns on woven rugs. She passed one day after another shut in her room. Josie brought coffee to her bedside, breakfast at eight. All day Josie was in the room next to hers, the door open between them. "I felt her lovely presence like a benediction," Vorse remembered. "She never seemed to tire. Unfailing affection and bounty for me and for Joel streamed from her." In committed union, Josie and Mary together fought—and won.

The four months Mary spent with Josie formed an exquisite balanced rhythm of days. She gained seventeen pounds. "Getting well is so lovely," she wrote. "I feel so light and happy." The spacious days gave her time to take stock. She felt certain again of her writing style. "I am maturing something under the cover of the long silence. . . . Something of significance is happening. . . . I am gathering strength to tell the truth. [Heretofore I have written] only the surface of the things I know best." Time brought a reevaluation of her relationship with Minor. "I was so stupid . . . I forgot . . . that quick agreement with him against all reason was the only way to get along with him. Someway I wished myself to become exhilarated in someone else's service and yet remain myself. . . . When I think of him I feel only a swift impression of black honey. Too heavy for me with all the rest of my life to live."

Victory over morphine restored pride. "Nothing ever stopped me, not anguish, not the ever present desire for death. I have survived. . . . When I consider the handicap, the tremendous difficulties, I am proud. I have a knowledge and a certainty that a nature which can weather such storms
will surmount anything it is told to.” In April 1925, Vorse left Joel in Texas and returned to Provincetown. “Oh, lord, keep me from messing up my life again,” she wrote in her diary before she left Texas.14

When Vorse returned to the Cape she worked on a “serious” new book and a set of more realistically based short stories. Intending a brief visit to New York to visit her agent and editors, Vorse left for the city in late January 1926, unaware that she would not return to Provincetown for six months.

Reaffirming her female ties in New York, she lunched at Heterodoxy and met almost daily with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, about whom she was writing a biographical sketch for the Nation.15 On her second weekend in New York, Vorse attended a party where many of her old friends on the left gathered. The content of the conversation was predictable, the tone familiar.

The topic of the evening was the woolen workers’ strike, which had erupted two days before at Passaic, New Jersey. Long abandoned by the AFL, enraged by a 10 percent wage cut, eight thousand workers left the mills on February 3, 1926, led by Albert Weisbord, a young Communist organizer who was a graduate of Harvard Law School. The historians Selig Perlman and Philip Taft described events at Passaic as “the outstanding labor conflict of the Coolidge era,” chiefly because of the strike’s impact on public consciousness.16 To contemporaries of the strike, and to Cold War enthusiasts of the 1950s, the Passaic struggle was notable because it marked the first major strike in American history in which the workers accepted Communist leadership.

Listening to her friends’ discussion at the party, Vorse felt alienated and irritable. “Suddenly there is another world,” she wrote later that evening. “The Anarchists. How Tired . . . The Communists. Clapping empty jaws, slavering at [Sidney] Hillman and the socialists.” It seemed to her that the older radicals, people like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Carlo Tresca, had been pathetically outmaneuvered by the disciplined band of ardent young Communists. The new left had bypassed her old comrades, leaving them like “big fish . . . gasping high on the conventional rocks.” She was again struck with the contrast between the humorless Communists and the verve and idealism of the prewar left. “Where will you find today picturesque revolutionists like Jack Reed? . . . So much for my vanished generation. It happened so quickly. It suddenly came to me that this growing old is a sad business.”17
Yet within days Vorse would join the fray at Passaic, which more than any other labor battle of the 1920s was destined to replay all the prewar themes of romance and drama symbolized by Lawrence and John Reed. As at Lawrence, she would thrill to the sight and sound of hundreds of women, marching, singing, defying police. She found again the exploited in motion, "a slow massive upheaval of Nature, as though a continent had shifted."  

Like the cast of a giant morality play, the thousands of actors would take their place on the Passaic stage: impoverished, courageous women; club-swinging police; venomous reactionaries; progressive politicians and local clergy; side-stepping obstructive officials; determined radical leaders; famous liberal supporters. Unlike the coalfields of the Mesabi Range or the steel mills of western Pennsylvania, the woolen mills of Passaic were close to New York City, which made it easier to get the attention of the national press and prevent official brutality from attaining ultimate power.

It is questionable whether the Passaic strike awakened the dormant class struggle in the 1920s, as Vorse claimed, but the publicity methods she developed at Passaic helped to set the pattern for the successful labor uprisings of the next decade. She organized a systematic flow of information—not just to the radical press—but to the national and world press as well. Her publicity techniques involved the production of human-interest stories that evoked sympathy for the workers and their families. Vorse's mobilization of endorsements for the strike from recognized liberal leaders, political figures, artists, and intellectuals would later serve as a model for the CIO-led conflicts of the 1930s. The wide participation of liberals in the strike at Passaic was a harbinger of what was coming. If the old economic order was slow to collapse, it was nevertheless crumbling.

On February 20, 1926, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, acting for the American Fund for Public Service, hired Vorse to serve as publicity director for the over eleven thousand Passaic strikers. Vorse directed the publication of the Textile Strike Bulletin, a newspaper distributed to strikers and outside sympathizers; the first issue appeared on February 25. Vorse fortuitously stepped into a power vacuum during the first weeks of the strike. Unhampered for a while, she shaped the Bulletin into a brilliant agitational forum.

Drawing on her experience in the suffrage movement, the steel strike, and the Amalgamated lockout, she appealed to her readers' emotions through tales of human relations. A women's column, with stories of the women strikers and workers' wives, was one of the Bulletin's most popular features. Poems by the strikers' children were frequently printed.
were prominent. Humor, too, was prevalent, as in the pictures of the workers’ ragged children over the caption “Outside Agitators.” The newspaper was written in a simple style easily read by those new to the English language. It printed announcements of classes, meetings, and demonstrations, and stirring reports of picket lines, police assaults, and outside support for the strike. As the historian of the Passaic strike, Morton Siegel, wrote: “None of the issues of the Bulletin ever called on the strikers to join the [Communist] Workers’ Party; none of the issues contained even indirect praise for Soviet Russia; none of the issues suggested that the dictatorship of the proletariat was an inevitable necessity, and none of the issues quoted any Marxist classic or source.” The Bulletin followed a class line, to be sure, but the reality of class struggle was readily apparent to the strikers. The Passaic workers hardly needed to be told that the mill owners, many public officials, and the majority of local policemen and judges were allied against them in their battle for a union.

Vorse first saw Passaic on February 16, two days before the first clash between workers and police at the mill gates. Half an hour from New York by rail, Passaic was the national center of the woolen and worsted industry. On the east side of the city, the houses of the foreign-born workers, half of Passaic’s population of sixty-three thousand, were compressed into one-sixth of the city’s area. Passaic’s illiteracy rate was one of the three highest in the nation and its tubercular rate twelve times higher than the national average. Death took 116 of every 1,000 Passaic infants in 1921.

Beginning in the 1890s, when American tariffs rose to restrict importation of woolens from abroad, the large German woolen mills relocated in the United States. Here they found an abundant supply of cheap labor and an escape from social welfare legislation. Passaic’s population almost tripled between 1900 and 1920 as the chiefly Slavic immigrant work force found its place in the slums. Enjoying a protective duty of 73 percent in 1926, the mill owners earned great profits, especially during the boom years of World War I. The mill owners, who feasted on average returns of well over 100 percent on their invested capital, neglected to reinvest their returns in capital improvement. Poor management and merchandising, coupled with the postwar recession and the new consumer preference for nonwoolen cloths, sent the woolen industry’s profits plummeting after the war. The mills responded with layoffs and increased hours. In 1925, all but one of the large Passaic mills announced a 10 percent wage cut. Unable to afford decent houses, medical care, or adequate living conditions, the Passaic textile worker felt little sympathy for the financial setback suffered by the mill owners after the war.
When Vorse arrived at the crowded strike headquarters in Passaic, "where relief workers, strikers, lawyers, reporters, delegations from unions, outside sympathizers all jostled each other," she felt the immediate exhilaration, so long absent from her life, of involvement in the service of a high cause. A sense of youthful strength pervaded her spirit as she made arrangements for a tour of worker homes. Most of the women she met in the tenements worked eight- to ten-hour shifts, five nights a week, with a fifteen-minute recess at midnight. At dawn, they returned to care for their families. "It would be impossible for any right-thinking man or woman to go into the homes of Passaic and talk to the women who work on the night shift without feeling that a personal responsibility had been laid upon him or her," Vorse told the liberal readers of the Nation. "Where there is such want and suffering, when conditions of toil are so degrading, when the places that human beings live in are so indecent it becomes the concern of the public at large to make its power felt and to see that the state of things is altered."

Until the last week of February, strikers and police in Passaic and the neighboring mill towns of Garfield and Clifton got on rather well. Moral and financial support for the strikers came from some local clergy, merchants, and city politicians. But on February 25, the Passaic commissioner of public safety proclaimed that mass picketing—then a rare tactic used mostly by left-wing unions—was a form of intimidation and also like a parade and thus could not proceed without a permit. He announced he would break up any mass picket lines with a three-hundred-man reserve police force.

On March 1, with New York reporters swarming everywhere, the workers' ingenious response was effected. Two thousand strikers ambled past the police. They walked in pairs, "just passing by," they explained, thus continuing the picket line while technically obeying the police orders.

The authorities, caught off guard, watched sullenly. "Ride 'em, cowboy," the workers and their children jeered, taunting the few mounted police.

The next day, the workers—unarmed, orderly, and buoyant in spirits—again walked in line, two abreast, past the walls surrounding Botany Mill. For twenty minutes the police allowed the pairs through a break in the police line drawn across Dayton Street. Then the police suddenly closed the gap. Fifteen mounted police made sorties into the crowd. One of the iron hoofs landed on a young girl. The Passaic police chief threw three tear-gas bombs into the group of trapped strikers while firemen battered them with powerful streams of water. The crowd broke and swirled away.
The police followed, clubbing backs, heads, and shoulders of retreating strikers and bystanders as well.

On the following morning, scores of cameramen and reporters, and hundreds of college students and Villagers sympathetic to the strike, flocked to the New Jersey town where horses, tear gas, hoses, and police sticks had been turned on unarmed workers. The police again attacked, this time not only the local citizens, but the photographers and reporters too. The officers smashed cameras, clubbed reporters’ notes from their hands, and singled out members of the press for unrestrained kicking and beating. The police action stirred “newspapers in New York like a hive of angry hornets,” Vorse wrote. Police violence “made laughter on Olympus,” she crowed.

Passaic was by now a national sensation. The liberals’ indignation was white-hot. On March 4, the press arrived in Passaic in bulletproof limousines and armored cars, while an airplane, hired by a New York newspaper, circled low overhead. Famous liberals from New York City came in rows of shiny cabs. On that day the workers provided their newly solicitous allies with terrific copy and pictures. The pickets, carrying an American flag, were dressed in discarded war helmets and gas masks. They marched with a young Slavic woman wheeling a baby carriage at their head, a publicity tactic reminiscent of Mesabi. The cooler heads in the power centers prevailed; the strikers were permitted to picket en masse.

The New York newspapers never again so flamed with righteous protest: The Passaic police issued cards to representatives of the major newspapers and promised that persons displaying these cards in their hats would not be molested. Nevertheless, after the early March events, many newspapers became distinctly cool toward the New Jersey authorities and toward the mill owners in and near Passaic. The major periodicals followed the lead of the great dailies. A stupendous propaganda victory had been won for the workers—by the police. Sympathy for the strikers now came from many quarters, from free-lance investigators, ministers, lawyers, authors like Fannie Hurst and John Dos Passos, women’s clubs, Rutgers college students, and trade unionists. It was clear by mid-March that prominent liberals and leftists, many of them hostile to Communist ideology, had joined in support of the Passaic fight led by a young Communist. Contributions in money and goods to the strikers probably reached over six hundred thousand dollars in all.22

Conservatives, in counterattack, charged that the Communists, as general advocates of violence, had deliberately engineered the police riots.
Vorse was singled out for attention in a press report of mid-April, which accused her and other “higher thought” agents of causing the Passaic policemen to lose their heads. At a meeting in Concord, Massachusetts, where a group of American Legionnaires pelted members of a youth peace group with eggs, Fred R. Marvin, editor from the New York Commercial first blasted the women’s peace movement, then accused Vorse, “the wife of Robert Minor,” of being on the Communist payroll at Passaic.23

Benjamin Gitlow, an ex-Communist turned informer, later claimed that Vorse was a secret member of the Communist Party at Passaic, acting directly for the party’s Central Committee’s Textile Committee and posing as a “fake liberal” in order to make contact with real ones. Vorse was following party instructions, Gitlow alleged, when she cleverly “held conferences with Sidney Hillman, with manufacturers, with United States Senators, with Congressmen, judges, ministers and priests” during the Passaic struggle.24

There is no convincing evidence to suggest that Vorse was ever a member of the Communist Party. Indeed, if she was an agent, the record shows her to have been an exceedingly unreliable one. Her writings on Passaic reflect her political understanding of the need to advance her cause by appealing to different factions in different ways. Throughout her career as a labor journalist, Vorse took little interest in theoretical revolutionary constructions. She continually sought one immediate goal—greater and greater worker control over conditions of labor. To Vorse, this goal realized was the ongoing revolution. If that did not square with the current Communist line, then so much the worse for theoretical purity. At Passaic, Vorse had her first good look at the American Communist movement, which in 1926 was stricken by internal disorder as its leaders fought among themselves and scrambled to conform to the shifting demands of the Soviet line. She learned that most of the party members who were part of the active leadership at Passaic were more interested in perfecting revolutionary doctrine than in running a strike. Vorse was sure that ultrarevolutionary rhetoric—largely unconnected to the daily reality of workers’ lives—only obstructed the achievement of immediate, desirable, and cumulative change, only strengthened the power of the already dominant reactionaries.

On March 24, Vorse attended a meeting of the party’s textile strike Central Executive Committee, then headed by Gitlow. She reported to them her recent lobbying failure with Congress. Vorse blamed the setback on the bad publicity generated by the party leaders themselves. She
outlined to the CEC the specifics of her charge against them. So long as the Communists clung to sophomoric theories of “leading the workers to revolutionary efforts,” rather than concentrating on building a union, she said, they subverted both their party and the workers. After weeks of dealing with the unreality of party dogma, her frustration boiled over. The party had been only a debating society, Vorse went on. Now that it was part of a real strike situation, it should emerge from the stage when it seemed to believe that a revolution could be produced by a printing press and stirring manifestos. A party capable of committing so many political errors in just one week, Vorse ended, was little more than a strange group of “adventurous anarchists.”

After her dressing down of the CEC, Vorse was not again admitted to be heard before the party’s high council. It must have been apparent to all factions that she was hopelessly undisciplined—untutored in the mysteries of revolutionary theory.25

Vorse’s opinion of her allies on the right was equally grating. As publicity director at Passaic, she joined the effort to elicit help from progressive politicians in Washington. Apparently Vorse was too impatient, too demanding, in her presentation of claims. Senator La Follette had been “seriously offended” by her pressing attitude, Isabelle Kendig, the ACLU lobbyist in Washington, clucked to the ACLU director, Forrest Bailey. Bailey agreed that Vorse “was the last person in the world, I think, who ought to be entrusted with work requiring tact and pleasing approach.” When Vorse returned to Washington for a second lobbying effort in May, Kendig reported that she had been able to “more or less . . . smooth over the effects of [Vorse’s] descent on Congress. . . . Mrs. Vorse . . . came down feeling that if the issue were pushed a little more aggressively we would get farther. . . . By rushing in too impulsively [she has] managed to antagonize both La Follette and Senator [Burton] Wheeler, and thereby make it a little harder for [the ACLU] to deal with them.”26

Support for the strike was eroding. The American Fund for Public Service informed Vorse on April 29 that her salary as publicity director could no longer be supported, partly because the Sacco and Vanzetti case was siphoning away left-liberal interest and funds. With the wool production season drawing to a close, the employers had no immediate need to end the strike. Mill owners increased their propaganda campaign and vowed that they would never meet with “revolutionary Reds.” Still, the workers persisted, in spirited mass meetings and on singing picket lines.27

From a distance, Vorse sought to reinvigorate the Bulletin. Since others
had assumed its direction, she felt it had become lifeless. "Where are the children's writings and the fine stories written by young strikers? Where is all that self expression I nursed along so carefully?" she complained to Weisbord. Vorse suspected that some dogmatic Communist was at fault for the Bulletin's decline. At one time, Vorse wrote, "even the capitalist dailies and the liberal journals like the Nation quoted articles from the Bulletin. The entire labor press used it." Now, with the strike in crisis stage, Vorse felt the Bulletin had grown "stiff, conventional, choked with jargon, stifled with dusty words." 28

After almost thirteen months, the Passaic strike ended with the wage cut rescinded in most mills and union recognition granted in some cases. Meanwhile, the factionalized wrangling within the increasingly isolated American communist movement reached even more fantastic levels. Weisbord was officially expelled from the party in 1930, shortly to establish yet another splinter group of leftist theorists. Only a long-range view justifies the Passaic workers' sacrifice and struggle. The short-range results must be judged meager.

During the strike Vorse had limited her income-producing writing to weekends only. Now her savings were gone. She had an assignment from the International Labor Defense to produce a pamphlet on the Passaic strike. "There is no other work quite so important as writing the strike," Vorse said. "The other fiction stories are only to give me time." She labored for three months over the twenty-two-page booklet, earning a mere fifty dollars. She was proud of her publicity work at Passaic. "Probably no better piece of agitational work has ever been done," she knew. 29

As the strike collapsed, she and the other strike leaders were "isolated in a sudden sorrow." She consoled Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, additionally stricken at this time by the abrupt end of her long affair with Carlo Tresca. Flynn had been devastated by her discovery that her sister was pregnant with Tresca's child. Vorse made several emergency trips to New York to nurture Flynn. Vorse saw Flynn's "terrific will crushing against circumstance. I have never seen her lose calm before... She in a dress of moonlight on jungle talking like a girl of her lost love. Telling over precious details... Elizabeth for the first time in all the years I have know her destroyed... as though she were some... pitifully balanced creature." Like Vorse, Flynn would pay a high toll in the twenties; she would retreat into a ten-year exile from political work. To Vorse, it seemed that the prewar radicals had been "swept aside by the broom of time...
We all have a grim sense of death,” she wrote, “made more terrible and pointed by Elizabeth’s grief.”

Vorse’s despondence increased when her children returned to Province-town for the summer. Her hope for a new family harmony, so hard won in Texas, was suddenly shattered. She fumed at the extra expense posed by Ellen’s house guests. “What a strange sight,” Vorse wrote, “me struggling to work, on stories I abominate to support a household in which I cannot live. . . . I creep home nervously for fear things are going to be unpleasant.” It occurred to Vorse that there was one way to escape the parental role and thus avoid confrontation. She could simply turn over her house to her children and go elsewhere.

Suddenly her spirits rose. A telegram in November announced the sale of two short stories to Woman’s Home Companion and Harpers for the grand sum of two thousand dollars, enough to carry her for months. She quickly sold several more stories for a good sum.

But the year ended sadly. At a New Year’s Eve party with her children and friends, she felt a discard. She was fifty-two. Norman Matson, seventeen years her junior, ignored her to flirt with Ellen. Sunk in depression, Vorse returned in her mind to the fateful year of 1922. Now it was her trip to Russia that was to blame; it had marked her decline as an author, sucked her of life. Leaving the party early, she wrote in her diary, “From now on my hair will grow thin. My teeth will come out. I shall become old and sluggish. I do not care to dance anymore. I hardly ever sail.”

The yearned-for rebirth after her recuperation in Texas failed to occur. Her work displeased her. Her relation to Ellen was troubled. She was middle aged. She had no male to enhance her ego.

The dancer Winifred Duncan, a Provincetown visitor and lesbian who fell in love with Vorse in 1926, pinpointed the source of Vorse’s confusion better than Vorse knew. According to Duncan, Vorse held to the “sweet and early Victorian” idea that women could be divided into three groups. First there were the “women who have captured a man and are therefore happy,” Duncan told Vorse. Next, there were the women “who haven’t a man and therefore must be noble and unhappy.” And third, there were the women who rejected male demands and therefore felt doomed to live half-lives. Duncan thought Vorse saw herself as the last type. Vorse rebuffed Duncan’s pursuit of her, and seemed to settle for the belief that women without men could never find more than weak substitutes for real happiness and self-fulfillment.

In early 1927, Vorse was flush with new money from her writing. She planned a tour of Europe with Ellen. Remembering the efforts of her
own parents to tend her development, Vorse hoped that the experience of European culture would discipline Ellen's mind and prepare her for serious endeavors. The trip had to be delayed for three months when Vorse fell and broke her leg; they sailed for France in mid-April.

Vorse's broken leg had been set improperly. As soon as they reached Paris, she was forced to spend almost four weeks in the hospital. During her confinement, Vorse foundered in fury and grief. She felt that Ellen deserted her "in pursuit of wild pleasures, without thought of propriety or ordinary kindnesses." The tension with Ellen worsened during the "awful darkness" of the European stay. Vorse decided twenty-year-old Ellen was hopelessly selfish and grasping, "intent on getting everything and giving nothing."

At Ellen's insistence that she modernize her appearance, Vorse agreed to have her long hair cut in the new bob fashion. Afterward, as the Italian barber hovered nearby in panic, Vorse sobbed without restraint. She was near complete breakdown. "I must be very quiet. My mind must go free. I must not see many people," she scrawled in her diary. When they returned to New York in August, Vorse knew that "the trouble with Ellen has been so painful that it is now [my] neurosis. It is literally impossible for me to live with her. . . . Bruised, battered and disgusted, I am torn between being a 'good mother' and my need for work." Vorse could see no way to combine the two; one would inevitably nullify the other in her mind.

For the next year and a half, Vorse retreated to near seclusion in Provincetown, sometimes traveling to New York. Ellen lived in the city, dependent on her mother for support, while attempting a career as an actress with the Theater Guild. One scrape followed another. Soon after their return from Europe, Ellen wrote she was marrying a young man who needed her because he suffered from venereal disease and was out of work. Vorse quickly moved to prevent the marriage, but Ellen just as quickly moved on to a new lover. One has a sense of Ellen, gay and lively, self-centered and abusive, steaming from one crisis to another, and of Vorse, the grim-faced mother, alternating between outraged resistance and guilty subservience, wallowing in her daughter's wake, all the while lecturing, pleading, or weeping. By the winter of 1927, Vorse had no more money. She begged a few hundred from friends to carry her through until a story sold. Running out of money offered one sure means of escaping responsibility for family support.

In the spring of 1928, Ellen reached new heights of dash. On March 25, the New York Times ran the story on page six. The headline read: "Fiancé Marries Mary Heaton Vorse's Daughter: Cables for Her Passage Home."

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Ellen had met a young free-lance writer, John Hewlitt, at his bon voyage party, had taken a dare, and stowed away on the liner Deutschland. The first news story erroneously reported that Ellen, discovered while at sea, had been married to the young stranger by the sea captain. “Mary Heaton Vorse, playwright and novelist, is ill and therefore could not comment,” the Times reported. It was several days before Vorse learned that Ellen was not married after all. Young Hewlitt’s father, a wealthy Georgia banker, had even agreed to pay Ellen’s passage over. Ellen assured her mother in a lilting letter from France that she intended now to “find herself” and become “independent.” Vorse cabled money. Ellen stayed abroad until mid-July when she sneaked out of her Paris hotel at midnight without paying the bill. Vorse paid that too.35

The shock of Ellen’s latest escapade broke Vorse’s fragile reserve. Gripped as never before with evidence of her “failure” as a mother, she suffered a complete nervous breakdown. She later wrote of that time:

I was so tired . . . that when I woke up in the morning it seemed to me I was coming up painfully, from some smothering depth below the surface of the water. . . . I have a picture of myself in those days, sitting in a chair, trying to make myself get up from it, knowing that there was a great deal to be done. . . . I couldn’t get up from the chair to walk across the room. It was as if nature revolting now kept me quiet in some waking trance, though I felt as if I were whirling around and around in space like an insect. I had never felt like a whirling insect before, and I said it in those words: then I said: “This is crazy!” tears came to my eyes, but they did not fall; I was too tired even to raise my hand to wipe them away.36

It was then that Vorse wrote her remarkable short story “The Hole in the Wall,” later published by Parents’ Magazine. The editor inserted a message under the title: “If you are a sentimentalist, don’t read this story. But if you are willing to call a spade a spade, you won’t want to miss a word of it.”37

Vorse’s story began:

Emily Nearing and George Nearing lived in a usual-sized house on a pleasant street in a usual-sized town. They had three children, Stephen, nineteen, Annette, seventeen, and David who was only ten. One day when George got rather fed up with his family, he went off on a motor trip. He wanted Emily to come too, and she wanted to come, but of course she couldn’t leave the children.
Emily is first shown as she is accosted by her children: Annette and Stephen wrangle over the household chores and David cries out for money. Emily feels she is being hunted. “People after her, telling her disagreeable things, making her decide quarrels, wanting something of her. Always and forever wanting something of her. . . . She wanted to run. There was no place to run except upstairs. She ducked into her room and shut the door.” To close off thought, Emily picked up a magazine to read “one of those modern stories about the wise mother who solves all her children’s difficulties.”

As if by itself, her arm jerked up and she threw the magazine violently against the wall. Where it hit it left a large jagged hole. She peeked in the hole and saw strange scenes and figures moving: “By her act of violence she had torn the veil of illusion which mercifully keeps us from reality and she was looking down the hole on reality’s stark face.”

What she saw was her son Stephen walking toward her. “His mouth hung loosely ajar. His brow, as void of expression as an eggshell, was wrinkled. A sour, petulant frown was spread over his face.” He demanded that she bring his white flannel trousers from the cleaners. Emily saw herself hopping nimbly upstairs to the cleaners, then moving to the stores to buy things. She saw herself as she really was: “a grotesque figure, like a kangaroo.” Emily started dealing objects out from her kangaroo pouch—“shaving soap, white trousers, more white trousers, shirts, bathing suits, drinking glasses . . . scissors, shoes, brassieres, trousers, glasses. . . . Emily dealt things faster and faster, but the faster she dealt the louder they all howled. Now she had no more to give them and she began throwing little pieces of her life to keep them quiet.”

In the hole in the wall, Emily saw herself pushing the house around on its axis. She could not move the heavy house, so she tried to wind it up, but she could not find the key. She began to push the house, round and round on its axis. “If I don’t push it around,’ she thought, ‘I’ll have to carry it on my back.’”

Emily went down to dinner with her children. But everything had changed. “She still saw her children through the eyes of Reality.” Only young David had not changed. He remained “a dirty, savage little animal, in whom she rejoiced. He was the only natural thing in this unnatural world of reality.” After dinner, Emily went to her doctor. She felt ill and old. He gave her a charcoal pill and told her to rest. On the way back home, she noticed the faces of the friends her own age. “All of them had a worried, baffled look. Then Emily knew that they too had looked at Reality.
They knew what their children were like. And they were all keeping it from one another. Each woman thought she walked in misery alone."

At home, Emily looked down the hole in the wall again, drawn to it as though it were a magnet. She saw herself screaming at her screaming children. "'Get out of the house!' she cried. 'Get out of the house, Go away where I can't see you for five years.' That was what she wanted! That's what would make her well again!" Emily's story abruptly ends with her mental breakdown.

It was then, sometime in the early summer of 1928, that Vorse briefly returned to morphine. This time she managed to surface after only a few months. She sent for Josie in late July. Six weeks later, with Josie's help, Mary recovered.

More than her physical health was saved. For the first time in over six years, she was "Free, Free, Free at last!" she exulted, suddenly freed of the obsessive maternal guilt which had distorted her relation to others and to her work for so many years. The nervous collapse of 1928 forced her to choose. She must remain emotionally disabled, or deal with the role conflict that had shattered her life. Her answer was only a partial one, but enough to ensure her recovery. She decided to give up the effort to remother her children, the belated attention to the reshaping of their goals and behavior. Through the twenties she had performed a constant balancing act, suspended unaware between the expectations of the community and the dreams of her own generation of achieving women. Now, with excruciating sorrow, she accepted her limitations as a mother, and opted to go on as best she could, regardless of the agony, conscious of the dreadful, never to be regained loss of what she might have created for her beloved children and for her future.

A long-repressed rage fueled her recovery. "Fury that my work should be interrupted. Fury at my own uncontrolled emotion. Fury that I should have spent these five years—doing what? Undoing what I had accomplished in the world." Vorse knew she was "truly getting well. . . . I have the first delicious feeling of health. . . . I wake up in the morning . . . to take in the sun." She wrote in her diary, "For years now I have written practically nothing of value. Because my mind was full of Ellen, and worrying over her safety and welfare. I had anger at her unkindness and brutality. Now I know that I must keep away from her." Again retreat—complete withdrawal from the field of battle—was the only solution to her problems as a mother that Vorse could find. She also knew that this "sudden transition which sloughs off the training of years and smashes the cake of custom is very painful for the family to observe." No matter. "The
curious shellshock in which I lived begins now to fade.” By September, she could write, “I feel as though it were the end of something more than the summer—The end of a whole phase of life.” 39

In 1928 a plum dropped. The publishing house of Horace Liveright gave her a twelve-hundred-dollar advance to write Second Cabin, a novel based on her voyage home from the Soviet Union in 1922. The money bought her time to begin work on the quality labor journalism she dreamed of producing. 40 Vorse made another twenty-five hundred dollars from the sale of her fish wharf that had been the birthplace of the Provincetown Players. She sold it to her dear friend Katy Smith, who would marry John Dos Passos the next year.

She felt something new waiting for her, she wrote in her diary. “Time is short . . . and I feel hurried to fulfill certain responsibilities. Above all else, I want to leave a true record of this reticent country which is my blood and bones, and which has wounded my spirit for so many years.” 41

In New York in late January, she attended Heterodoxy meetings and saw much of Sinclair Lewis, Art Young, and George Soule. She was content to be with persons “who think and who write.” On February 25, she made a sudden decision. “Without having the least thought about it,” she went into the office of the Communist Party’s Daily Worker to see if Robert Minor was there. She described the visit to a friend:

I hadn’t seen him in seven years. Chance playing a great part but also I had heard he had become old and fanatical and it is awful to see people you have once cared for extremely and wonder, “How could I?” . . . We went out to dinner and began talking with the eagerness of people who have been together constantly and who have been separated. I had the most extraordinary feeling of having come home and I felt smooth like cream. . . . It was like going through death and finding the one loved not dead after all. Now I can write anything I want to. 42

Later that day she remarked to her diary, “I do not wish my life to be at jeopardy to his demands.” In some curious fashion, the last sore healed.

Significantly, her diary stops here, in February, and does not begin again until May. By that time she had resumed fully the adventurous life. April drew her to the southern Piedmont to report the great textile strikes of 1929.