

Heart...

Fiction

words of the poem, *How dear to this heart are the scenes of my childhood, when fond recollection presents them to view.* The whole was entwined with gaudy roses and signed, *Samuel Woodworth.*

"I been meaning to throw it out since we remodeled," the woman said, embarrassed, "but my husband had a hankering for it. I'd be obliged, if you like it, to take it as a souvenir."

OUTSIDE with the picture wrapped in a newspaper, Janet talked to the twins, silent and bashful. "Ever go swimming in the swimming hole?" she asked smiling. They shook their heads.

Butch and Ken came out of the barn sooner than she expected. Butch ran toward her holding a baby kitten. Ken didn't meet her eyes. "Milking machines make quite a difference," he said to the woman. To Janet it was as if he'd said, "You can't recapture the past. It's over and done with."

Janet suggested that they return to the car.

"Naw. You gotta go with us, Mom, to see the creek and—Skunk Hollow." Butch took her hand. "The man says the creek's only a little dried up."

Sensing the hollowness in Ken's laugh, she thought, "Coming here was a terrible mistake."

Butch raced ahead to the overgrown ditch, once a creek. "No bullheads today, Dad."

"Guess not, boy," Ken called.

"Darling, darling," she wanted to say. "It's you I don't want to get hurt. Butch'll forget." What she said was, "Butch's getting a kick out of seeing it all."

"You think so?" Ken's voice was so hopeful that it twisted her heart. She saw now that though this visit was a disappointment, Ken wanted to preserve the story illusion for his son. It was Butch's reaction, not Ken's, that mattered.

"Butch," Ken called, "race you back to the car!"

She watched them running through the tall weeds as she picked her way carefully. Ken would let Butch win. That, too, was part of the illusion, for the boy as much as for the man.

At the car Butch was talking to the twins. He looked up at her, his forehead furrowed, his hot little face flushed. "They haven't ever done any trapping, Mom."

His tone of sympathy and regret told her what she wanted to know. For Butch there was no personal disappointment, only compassion for these boys who had been denied milking by hand, the dammed-up swimming hole, the attic with its treasures.

As Janet got into the car, she thought, "I'm glad we came. It isn't a question of recapturing the past; the past lives only in memory. But the memory can be real and beautiful."

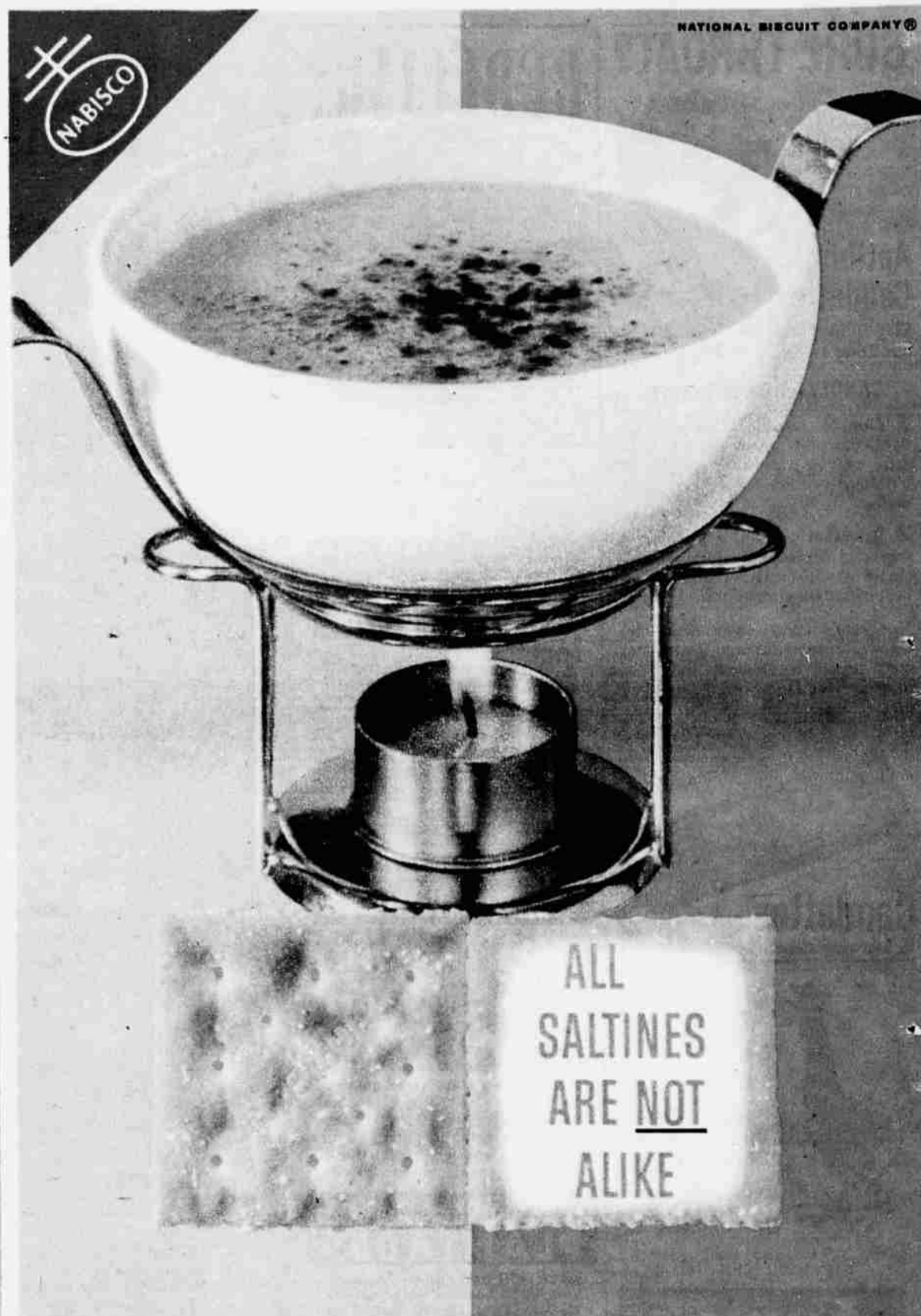
They were turning off the dirt road when Ken said, "Here, let me sling that newspaper package in the back. What did you pick up, a bread board?"

When he reached for it, the paper came off. "What in the world!" He eased to a stop and looked at the homely oil painting, the hideous roses, his mouth crinkling at the corners.

"Don't laugh," said Janet, "read what it says."

"*How dear to this heart are the scenes of my childhood...*" He chuckled. "To think I missed that picture when we moved from the farm," he said. "I used to think the roses looked absolutely real."

"Butch and I think they're beautiful!" she said.



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