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TIME SINCE + CT DEATHDAY

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text ← Soon before daybreak on my sixth birthday, my mother's breathing wheezed more raggedly than ever, then quieted. And *Caledonia* then stopped.

1/14x 24pi with linifig. 241 **②** *The remembering*

Memory begins out of that new silence. Through the time since, I reach back along my father's *2* retellings and around the urgings which would have me face about and forget, to feel into these oldest shadows for the first sudden edge of it all.

It starts, early in the mountain summer, far back among the high spilling slopes of the Bridger Range of southwestern Montana. The single sound is hidden water—the south fork of Sixteenmile Creek diving down its willow-masked gulch. The stream flees north through this secret and peopleless land until, under the jackpine flanks of Hatfield Mountain, a bow of meadow makes it curl wide to the west. At this interruption, a low rumble of the mountain knolls itself up watchfully, and

atop it, like a sentry box over the frontier between the sly creek and the prodding meadow, perches our single-room herding cabin.

Alone here on our abrupt tiny shelf, the three of us eased through May and the first twenty-six days of June secure as hawks with wind under our wings. Once a week, the camp tender from the home ranch would come the dozen miles of trail to us. The blaze-faced sorrel he rode and the packhorse haltered behind would plod in from the shadows which pooled in our valley under the shouldering slopes, until at last the rider stepped off from his stirrups into the cabin clearing and unknotted from the packsaddle the provision ~~sacks~~, faded ^{boxes, dark-weathered} in their coverings of rawhide) ^{carried} _A white as tiny clouds, which bulged ^{up} with our groceries and mail. My father, with his wise tucked grin, surely tossed a joke: Hullo, Willie. Bring us that side of T-bones and a barrel of whiskey this time, did ye? I've told ye and told ye, our menu needs some fancying up . . . As surely, my mother would have appeared from the cabin, her small smile bidding the caller to the tin mug of coffee in her hands. As surely again, I would have been at the provision ^{boxes} ~~sacks~~ as my father began to unpack them, poking for the tight-rolled bundle of comic books which came for me with the mail.

Minutes later the camp tender would be resaddled and riding from sight. For the next seven mornings again, until his hat and shoulders began to show over the trail crest another

time, only the three of us nestled there in the clean blue weather of the soundless mountains.

Three of us, and the sheep scattered down meadow slopes like a slow, slow avalanche of fleeces. Before I was born, my mother and father had lived other herding summers, shadowing after the sheep through the long pure days until the lambs ~~were~~ ^{Ivano} had fattened for shipping. You wouldn't believe the grouse that were on those slopes then. The summer we were married and went herding on Grass Mountain, all that country was just alive with grouse then. I'd shoot them five at a time, and your mother ^H-your mother'd cook them at noon when the sheep had shaded up. We'd eat one apiece and seal the rest in quart jars and cool them in the spring water so we'd have them cold for supper. They were the best eatin' in this world. Lot of times we'd have them for breakfast too, before we moved camp. Y'see, on forest reserve you're supposed to move camp about every day. The first summer there on Grassy, we moved camp fifty-eight times in the first sixty days. We had a brand new box camera we were awful proud of, and we'd take a picture of our campsite every time. Your mother . . .

The pair of words would break him then, and fool that I could be, I would look aside from his struggling face. In these afteryears, it is my turn for the struggle inside the eyes and along the drop of throat, for I have the album pages of those campsites along the ridgelines and the swale

meadows of their first summer mountain.

Off the stiff black pages, two almost-strangers grin up into my eyes, like past neighbors seen again across too many years, and I wonder at all I know and do not know of ~~This set of lives(?)~~ these two.

My father looks stronger than I ever knew him, and even more handsome, the straight broad lines of his face framed cleanly around the ~~dimple~~-scar in the center of his chin. His stockman's hat has been crimped carefully, sits on his head at a perfect angle. His shoulders line out level and very wide for a man just five and a half feet tall, but this strength at the top of him trims away to a lower body slender as a boy's. I am reminded that he was so slim down the waist and hips that the seat of his pants forever bagged in, and the tongue of his belt had to flap far past the buckle, as if trying to circle him twice. Certain photos catch him ~~as~~ ^{This father of mine} as almost mischievous, cocking the dry half-grin which sneaks onto my own face as I look at him. In others there is a distance to him, a sense that except for accident he might be anywhere else in the world just now, and maybe a being entirely unlike the one I knew here. In any pose, he looks at the camera squarely, himself a kind of lens aimed back at the moment.

To see him, the several hims encamped across the pages, is to begin listening for the burred voice, the retellings, the veers and jogs of his life:

Ivan, I think I'll take on those two bands of sheep for

McGrath. He's a bearcat to work for, but the son-of-a-buck
knows livestock and he knows how to turn money. . . .

That place was a haywire outfit from the start, or I'll
put in with you. They had men on that place that by God you
wouldn't send to fetch a bucket of water or they'd bring it
back upside down. Cliff and I stood it for about a week, then
we told the boss to write 'er out for us, we were heading for
town. . . .

This doctor now, I don't know about him. If I was in as
good a shape as he says I am, I wouldn't be sick at all. . . .

Again the sentences snap, I see the handsome steady
mouth clamp itself, the chin-dot of scar come close beneath,
small but deep like a tool mark nicked in when his strong head
was carved. A single quick notch at the bottom of his face,
as if it might be the first lightest scratch of calamity on
him.

But my mother: my mother, here in some summer of early
marriage, already seems frail, so slim, too light a being
to last there so near the challenge of timberline. Again,
because I know what was to come, I believe myself into the
notion that I can read it all gathering on the album's somber
paper. I print into my mind from her every pose how fine-boned
she was, hardly more than tiny, with a roundish, slightly
wondering face where most of my own is quickly read. I coax
from the photos all detail which seems to tell the sickness

eroding in her; the pinch across her slender shoulders, the eyes which are almost too calm and accepting.

But the one thing which would pulse her alive for me does not come. I do not know the sound of her voice, am never to know it. Instead she is wound in the other voices tracked through the years. Her teacher at the one-room schoolhouse in a sea of sage: The first morning of school, here I saw this girl coming up on a black horse, just coming as fast as ever she could. And it was your mother, and she was rushing up to tell me there were mice in the well, and not to use that water. The rancher's wife who had neighbored with her in some summer of haying: I wouldn't see anyone for hours, and I would go across to your house and there your mother would be reading to you. She'd read by the hour, on a hot afternoon she'd keep you so cool and quiet just sitting there reading . . . She was so quiet, had such a soft fine voice. The forest ranger who oversaw their range that early season on Grass Mountain: She could do about anything a man could--ride, sling a pack, any of that. She even knew how to trap. We talked sometimes about runnin' a trapline, and I know she did in winters later on. But she had to be careful, y'know, anything she did, or she'd choke right down, short of breath.

Yes. This album of summers again, as if I might finger through the emulsion patterns to the moments themselves. At the backs of my familiar photoed strangers, always a forest,

and always sunlight spattering down through the pine boughs to their rough shirt fronts. The canvas slopes of their tent are triangled grayly at the back of the day camp. Two black herding dogs, ears up in dog surprise, study the lens. A pair of saddlehorses gawk in from the grassy fringes of camp as if afraid any attention might go by them. One creature in these early pictures does not fit, and this intrigues me—
the pet ~~which~~^{that} is being stroked in my mother's hands. Those first seasons of following the sheep, my parents kept with them in their daily sift through the forest a cat, an independent gray-and-white tom they had named Pete Olson. Somehow, amid the horses and dogs and sheep, and the coyotes and bobcats which ranged close to camp, Pete Olson rationed out his nine lives in nightly prowls of the mountain. Then as camp was moved each morning, he would be cradled like a prince between somebody's lap and the saddle pommel as the horses shouldered through the timber. My parents were childless then, told by doctors that they might always be. If the prediction had held, if I had never been, would any but the astral glance of a cat ever have seen into those far summers of theirs? Would that time be different for not having met my eyes?

Yet the two are met, and in this season on the final mountain, the surprising drifter ducking through swags of pine branches on the back of a horse has become me. Later, my father would never tire of telling what a cantankerous

source of pride I made in that riding family. The only thing we could get you on was a sawbuck pack saddle. You know what they are, like a little sawhorse setting on top of the saddle rigging. Hard as a rasp to sit on, but you straddled in there like it was the only thing going. Ride sometimes half a day in it. You were a stubborn little dickens. This, with the grin up at me as I loomed half a head over him. As I tried to find in myself that small flinty son from the past.

Wherever it may point, my own clearest moment of myself in that far summer has ~~just~~ the mood of sober cussedness he recalled. I had been given a bow and a few arrows, likely an early gift for my birthday. Time and again, my arrows whacked far from the paper target my father had tacked to the side of the cabin. I see myself pouting it out, kicking at the tan bunchgrass as I think, as the creek makes its shying mutter. Then I edge close to the cabin wall until the round sharp tip of the arrow hangs inches from the paper. I let go the bowstring, and the bullseye slashes open with a hard snapping sound.

That, with every instant of remembering clear as the noon air. Yet of my mother's death, whatever I try, just a single flicker, dim and hurtful, ever is called back: the asthma ~~has~~ claimed her, there are only two breathings in the cabin now, my father is touching me awake in lantern glow, his shadow hurled high up onto the wall, to say she is dead, Ivan, your mother is dead, sobbing as the words choke him.

The start of memory's gather: June 27, 1945. I have become six years old, my mother's life has drained out at 31 years. And in the first gray daylight, dully heading our horses around from that cabin of the past, my father and I rein away toward all that would come next.

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Memory is a set of sagas we live by, much the way of the Norse wildmen in their bear shirts. That such rememberings take place in a single cave of brain rather than half a hundred minds warrened wildly into one another makes them sagas no less. By now, my days would seem blank, unlit, if these familiar surges could not come. A certain turn in my desk chair, and the leather cushion must creak the quick dry groan of a saddle under my legs—and my father's, and his father's. The taste in the air as rain comes over the city is forever a flavor back from a Montana community too tiny to be called a town. A man, the same alphabet of college degrees after his name as mine, trumps in a debating point during a party argument, and my grandmother's words mutter in me on cue that he grins like a jackass eating thistles.

Rote moments, these, mysteryless perhaps in themselves. It is where they lead, and with what fitful truth and deceit, that tantalizes. If, somewhere beneath the blood, the past must beat in me to make a rhythm of survival for itself—to go on as this half-life which echoes as a second pulse inside the ticking moments of my existence—if this is what must be, why is the pattern of remembered instants so uneven, so gapped and rutted and plunging and soaring? I can only believe it is because memory takes its pattern from the earliest moments in the mind, from childhood. And childhood is a most queer flame-lit and shadow-chilled time. Think once

more how the world wavers and intones above us then. Parents behave down toward us as if they are tribal gods, as old and unarguable and almighty as thunder. Other figures loom in from next door and the schoolyard and a thousand lanes of encounter, count coup on us with whatever lessons of life they brandish, then ghost off. We peek into ourselves and find deviling there as well. Riddles are delight at its most tricksterish high chant: Thirty-two white horses on a red hill. Now they're tramping, now they're champing, now they're standing still. Where are they? Bafflement to the other, triumph to you: In your mouth! And darker frolic: this first sudden set of years also is the one season of life, for most of us, when we can kill emotionlessly—or worse, simply from curiosity, to see how the tiny mice prodded from their field nest are different, dead, from the tiny mice, alive, of an instant ago. Cruelty comes new to us, and astonishing, yet we are at our cruelest to each other, mocking playmates home in sobs. Marauders, we are marauded, too. Darkness blankets down around a child as if the planet's caves have emptied all their shadows over him. Everything fights the child's ambitions—fences reach too high, streets stretch too wide, days too short and too long. Imagination is the single constant friend of the child, and even imagination does its share of betrayal, scowls itself in some stalled passage of time into scaredness and doubt.

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Just so does life blaze and haunt around us before we learn we are sober creatures of civilization. Just so, when childhood itself has passed into the distance behind me, does my remembering of the thirty-year story that begins with my mother's last breath go on the way it was recklessly shaped in me then.