

ENDINGS *FCT*

Split the tongue of the silence that beats in you
when you first know that a parent is dying, and it will
begin to recite everything unsaid across a lifetime.

Unsaid: that even in our most desperate time, when you
were plunging into that wrongheaded marriage with Ruth
and poisoning us away from the one you have come to call
Lady, you somehow kept to the one great rightness as well--
the constant clasp of keeping me at your side, whatever
the place or the hour or the weather or the mood or task
or venture. So swiftly did you have me grown beyond my
years that neither of us entirely understood the happening
of it, but knew it to be rare, a triumph and terribly needed
...that it was you, in your burring troubador's way of
passing to me all you knew of the valley and the Basin,
who enchanted into me such a love of language and story
that it has become my lifework...that I know, if have never

said, that as I stepped off from you to books and schools,
you somehow saw yourself riding free from the Basin home^②
stead and so had not a word for me but in praise, encouragement^②
proudness^{...that I know,} and again could not speak it,
how drastically you turned your own life for me, choking
down pride as never before to speak the truce with Lady^{...know}
know too that when you risked that truce time upon time, it
was because you needed risk, needed somehow to sizzle
ordinariness by dropping danger into it now and again^{...know},
and could say least of all, the final fact of triumph that
you and Lady had made your way to a cherishing of each other
which went beyond family lineament.

Then the first and only words of this which would say
themselves as they did now in my own voice: Dad, we've got
to find the doctoring for you.

Late or soon, the siege of death-against-life must
clamp itself around every family, and never the same for
any two. I see now that ours had begun its queer quiet
trenching some time before it could be recognized for all
it was. There is this tremor, from the Christmas week of
1963, when Dad and Grandma came to spend the holiday with
me in Decatur. Before their train trip back to Montana,
I drove them north to Chicago for a weekend, at last to
show them the Northwestern scenes^M-Latham House, the school
of journalism, the cathedral-towered library, Lake Michigan

lapping beside it all like an unexpected ocean—^Hwhich had filled five years of letters to them. ^HBoth of them were untiring sightseers, and the morning's saunter of the campus pleased us all, brought us proudly together in the accomplishment of having laddered me to such a place. We went next to our hotel in downtown Chicago, and in the snapping cold of the sunlit afternoon, a moment when I thought the city looked its ponderous best, I suggested we walk the surrounding blocks which offered the gaudy store windows of Michigan Avenue, the exotic bulk of ~~the~~ Art Institute, the skyline above the street canyons.

Grandma eyed everything with her mixture of suspicion and sharp interest, asking me explanations to why the side-walks were so wide and the people so fast-paced. But Dad: I remember looking across at him in surprise, as if finding a stranger with us, when he suddenly said he had had enough, he felt short of breath. ^HOn the way back to the hotel he had to stand and breathe deep time after time, the three of us a knot of concern in the grain of sidewalk traffic. Once he said, worry thick in his voice: How-long-is-this-damned-block? ^HBut inside the warmth of the hotel, as I was set to call for a doctor, Dad's chest eased at once, he became himself and made a joke about Chicago being too cold for a sane man to walk around in anyway. And like him, not knowing what more to find in it—^Hoften enough through his

life he had felt mild damp-weather discomforts in his lungs from the breakage of those horseback accidents and from his decades of heavy smoking--I wrote off the moment to the stabbing chill of the winter lakefront.

Then late in the next spring, weeks before I was to step into the editing job at The Rotarian, a bulletin from Grandma: Dearest Ivan. Well dear one I have to write you that Dad isn't none too good. He is in the hospital in Gt. Falls they told him he has to quit smoking or else.
I am here with him but he's so awful weak and coughing so....

Phone calls told me that he was not in danger at the moment. The hospitalization indeed was to begin easing him away from cigarettes and out of the coughing spells that were becoming chronic. When I hurried to Montana between the end of my old job and the beginning of the new, he told me the rest himself. Once out of the hospital and at home in Ringling, he had laid one fresh pack of cigarettes on the end table beside his easy chair. When he could no longer stand it, he smoked a cigarette. Some days only one, other days two, but never more than two. When the pack had emptied itself, he took that as the moment when he had finished with cigarettes for all time. Hardest damn thing I ever did, ye know that? But I did 'er.

Dad's nerves jumped worse than ever now, which was saying much, and he looked like a thinner replica of himself.

but his appetite was gaining and he felt he soon could be
~~do~~ doing some part-time work. Well, don't rush things, I said, uneasy with myself for feeling there was more that ought to be said. Yet the doctors were finding nothing alarming, Dad seemed merely ^H-if that word was right for any trouble beneath the breastbone--a man who had got in the habit of oversmoking and needed to be weaned from its eventual dangers.

This quick braid of times together, then, before it came clear that my father was in serious illness. I finger apart their pattern here because these are the moment-strands each of us will think of afterward and wonder, Did I miss there some hint, some flicker of doubt or pain or incredulity, which told what was to come? And the greater wondering beyond that: If not, how can that skein of no apparent peril and the skein which followed it be portions of the same life?

For now calamity began to make itself known as rapidly as if it had been invented entirely for Dad: a man who lived on his feet, he was finding himself shorter and shorter of breath after each briefest stint of walking.

At first the doctors he saw suggested that he might have a kind of asthma. There was all the grief on earth in that verdict, with its convulsed echoes of my mother's agony. Yet Dad showed none of the wheezing attacks which so devastated her ^H-his lung difficulty nagged less violently but more steadily ^H-and the diagnosis shifted. It was

sometime late in 1966, the year Carol and I had arced our lives to the Pacific Northwest, that a word neither he nor I had heard before was uttered to my father: emphysema.

In my mechanical way I read all I could find about the affliction, and each word more brought its own gloom. Emphysema, it emerged, could become a torture of the body beyond even my mother's suffering or the holocaust of cancer itself. As the honeycomb of air sacs in the lungs was destroyed by it, breathing would become forever more labored, a constant struggle against a sensation of suffocating. The act of breath would deliver less and less oxygen to the bloodstream, overload the heart into harsher and harsher pumping. Until the recent past, emphysema usually had been confused with asthma or bronchitis, and it had the worst of those ailments—an increasing wheeze, congestion—as well as its own cycle of deterioration in the deeps of heart and lung.

Somehow through the null medical words—generalized overdistension, difficulty of exhalation, excess mucus—I came to picture the disaster happening in my father's lungs as a pattern like the splotched burning of a sagebrush fire. Perhaps it was the years of blue haze drifting up from his cigarettes that made me think so of smolder and slow flame-licks. For whatever reason, the image came to me of the black turf such a fire spreads in its steady searing

fan across the land, and the thought too that there would be no grass=bright greening in this fire's wake as time passed. Only char and more char.

And the role those words and that image spoke for me: For the dozen years since I had faced away from a storm-blasted band of sheep on the Blackfeet Reservation, this father of mine and this grandmother of mine unerringly had shown me that they assumed I knew ~~for myself~~ what I was doing in life-^M which was a tremendous assumption. Then too, by the books and schooling I piled up, I was granted to be the authority on the world outside Montana. If I happened to be on the scene when Grandma was writing one of her letters to her son in Australia, she still would ask me, as she had when I was eleven, how to spell some Down Under mystery such as kangaroo; if I had told her q-y-n-g-u-r-u, she would have thought it odd of the Aussies but Scertified correct because I had said it. When I wrote an article about rodeo and put in a few lines about Dad's own bronc=stomping days, he passed the marvel around to friends until the magazine wore out: That kid of mine can write, if I do say so myself, unarguably saying so. Beyond that, there was my becalmed temperament, amid the pair of theirs which swayed and whanged.

4 It all said that now I must truly become the authority in the family, this time on a matter beyond all of us. Here was the turn of time, sooner by a decade than I ever could

have imagined, when I must become father to my own father, and I feared the matter, and wrestled it, and began to do it.

I sent along to Montana the levelest words I could draw from what the medical journals and texts said of emphysema, and the two conclusions which I said demanded doing: winnow until we had the most expert diagnosis and advice we could find about this mystery licking its way inside Dad, and move him from the blizzly isolation of Ringling nearer to medical care. ^q The second of these, Dad himself took on as if snapped from a ~~spell~~ ^{spell} trance. Almost overnight he found and bought a small frame house in White Sulphur. Ungrand as it was, and carrying a sheaf of deeds which showed that it long had been a quick way-station for a procession of souls who couldn't afford better at the moment, the house nonetheless improved on the Ringling shanty in size and warmth and all else. ^q Grandma was uneasy about the move: Don't we get by good enough as we are? Gee gosh, at our age, buyin' another house and all.... I was the one to woo her from that. Carol said once: If you told her you were going to run an opium den, she would come around onto the side of opium dens. As promptly as I had Grandma persuaded out of Ringling, she flung into tidying and flower-bedding the new site; ^{a month} after she and Dad moved in, it looked as if the pair of them had lived there from time out of mind.

Yet one of them was not going to live any time at all unless care for emphysema could be found, and the next piece

of persuasion was to keep Dad from throwing himself under surgical knives. An operation he had heard of was claimed to lift the sensation of heavy breathing; already the pushing effort needed to make his lungs work was dismaying him.

I'm not sure I've got anything to lose by trying that out,
Ivan. By phone and letter, I found doctor after doctor against the surgery. Guardedly, carefully, I brought Dad around from the idea of the operation and to agreeing that he would come to Seattle to be examined at a highly-reputed clinic as quickly as I could arrange it. In his mind, I believe, glinted the hope that he could somehow be rescued into wholeness again as he had been on the operating table at the Mayo Clinic sixteen years before. In mine was simply the vague medical prayer that the emphysema could be slowed, eased; I desperately wanted him not to be savaged into the worst of what the disease could inflict.

He was scheduled for several days of tests at the clinic. The first morning, I noticed Grandma putting on her best shoes and said to her without thinking: I can stay with him down there, it'll be a long day. The iron tone I had heard so many times: I might just as well be there as setting around here like a bump on a log.

Each day and all day, the pair of us lobby-sat. I thumbed magazines, and tried without showing it to watch her beside me. She kept her eyes on the waiting patients, studying the ones who could hardly puff their way across

the room to the reception desk, who sat hunched with their chests swelling in and out for each windy breath, who toddled into the waiting elevator with a nurse balancing them at an elbow. ~~H~~ When Dad appeared, there was the relief, a quick lifting in the both of us, of seeing that he was so much sturdier than the others, his ranchman's stride almost too bold among the gaspy shuffles. And again we would set off with him, up or down the identical floors of the clinic to the next probing test. ~~H~~ Often he would come back to the reception area in surprise: That wasn't so bad, they just had me lay down under some machine. Could of had a nap except it was so damn cold. But other times, he arrived pale and grim and taut. They gave me one of those damn barium deals, and I heaved it right back up. Grandma would give her resentful Hmpf! against the clinic's dosing such torment into anyone, and I would try to talk him calm, keep him seated with us until the whiteness went from that handsome uneasy face. Then the three of us would move through the clinic once more, like a search party off to the next lair of apparatus for Dad to patrol into for us.

Eventually the tests were finished and adjudged. Dad and I waited in the doctor's office; this day Grandma had not wanted to come, had said I should be alone with him. The slim room was as neutral and toneless as if we were the

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first visitors ever to have been sent into it, like new^{comers} into a vacuum chamber. But outside the one thin window and below the clinic's roothold on its hill, the towers of the city marched to the dockside, and then the blue of Puget Sound pooled, rimming far off at a shore of timber and glacier-whetted peaks. My father, my one closest pulse back into time, sat looking at the towers and the blue and the stabbing mountains. Finally he said, in the worrying burr I had heard fret over vanished sheep and surprise blizzards and much else: I'm just afraid of what he's gonna say, Skavinsky.

But the doctor spoke some surprise, more texture of hope in his words at least than I had been able to allow myself. Of course—the harshest first—the diagnosis was confirmed as emphysema. Yes, Dad's life would be more labored. Several times a day he would have to breathe deep into his lungs a medicine misted out of a machine. He would have to walk only in short stints, learn to pace himself. ~~H~~ The doctor paused, went on ~~O~~ if possible, Dad should move to a lower altitude—sea-level would be best, ~~the drier the climate, the better~~ and as dry as possible. Dad: No, it isn't possible. I'm too far along in life for that. ~~H~~ The doctor nodded as if he had known what that answer would be, went on with his medical judgments. Dad's heart as yet showed little damage, not yet the expected overwork caused by emphysematous lungs; it pounded in him as strongly as that of a man half

his age. His lung capacity still was considerable. His general health was remarkable for a person who had gone through his batterings.

Grandma demanded the news as quickly as we arrived home. I watched Dad to see how he would deliver it, how drastically the prospect of a hobbled life was going to veer him. He gave his cocked grin. 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.

But when Dad and Grandma returned to Montana, his lungs soon enough gave trouble. He did learn to struggle more successfully with the emphysema, walk some uncertain line between too much activity and incapacity. But emphysema now brought an ally, bronchial infection which hit Dad again and again in the chill of the valley's autumn and winter. Now there were hospital stays for him, time upon time the 45-mile trip out of the valley and across the Big Belts to the hospital in Townsend.

A pattern began, like codes spoken by a people in war. Dad would suffer a new infection in his lungs. By telephone from Seattle, I would try to gauge how severe it was. If Grandma guardedly said, He's just none too good, in all likelihood he was ill enough to be hospitalized again. I would say You'd better let me talk to him, now hating the long moments it took for him to creep to the phone. Hullo, son, how are you? How am I. Leave that unanswerable, begin

my questions, calming, gentling. God, Ivan, I don't know what I better do. Now persuade him around to going to the hospital, tell him I will get free for a week to help out when he comes home. ¶ At last from him, All right, son, whatever you say. Whatever I say. I could say all in the world except the magic we needed: that if he did this certain thing, his lungs would heal, he would not gasp for every atom of air. He would not die this most grudging of deaths.

Yet it was not a time of steady gloom. I think that is the true grief of it—that the four of us could glimpse the richness of life available if the haunting gape in Dad's lungs did not return again and again. The one pastime-without-exertion left to Dad was trout fishing, and the valley, in its style of either withholding ruthlessly or proffering something wondrous, provided him with a friend who would wet lines with him from daybreak to midnight if he wanted. ¶ A railroad worker retired from tending the tracks which coiled between Ringling and Sixteen, Leo was a thick slab of a man whom it was uproarious to think of in the nickname of that job, a gandy dancer. Something—rumor said it had been a gassing on a World War One battlefield, although I counted years and couldn't find him old enough—had erased every hair on his head, including eyebrows. Out of that blank ball of head came a high crackling voice and an Oklahoma accent; when he and Dad were out on a creek

or lake, the vicinity jangled with Leo's sentences, as if broadcasts were shrilling in from some rim of space.

d For his part, Dad accepted with wryness his reliance on Leo ~~M~~ - I'm wind-broke as an old nag, but that Oklahoman gets me to wherever there's a fish, don't think he doesn't.

Once Carol and I went with the pair of them to a favored lake, and as we hiked the hilltops circling their fishing water, Leo's voice racketed along with us as if he were at our elbows instead of half a mile below, Dad's murmur came in like a far purl of stream. I hold that exact scene like a photo, Dad and his bald bear of a friend in the yellow rubber raft at the lake's center, a cone of color in the dusky retina of water, while Carol and I listen to the steady crackle of fishing talk and grin down over the tassel-tops of sage.

In that first year or two of affliction, there were times even apart from his fishing outings with Leo when Dad could find periods of almost-unforced breathing.

Seated in his big living-room chair in the White Sulphur house, his flat back and level shoulders square against the fabric, he could recline and talk with only a hinting rise-and-fall of his chest, as if he had just rapidly walked a block or so. d I'll tell ye a time, he might begin then if the nudge of encouragement came from me, or more likely from Carol's presence, for he found this new

daughter-in-law a dazzling bonus to the family. ~~S E~~ I was ridin' out here for the Dogie, and I happened to look up into a little park there in the Castles and saw a bunch of elk going across. I counted five of them. As the Dutch fellow says, as many as the thumbs on the end of mine hand. So I thought, well, this ridin' can go to hell for a little while, I'll just see about those elk... ~~D A~~ Dad no longer could work at all, except to do the smallest repairs around the house, but the loss of that fifty-year habit of effort seemed to dismay him less than I had thought it would. He spent time reading, watching Grandma as she fussed at flowerbeds until she had a moat of color around almost all the house, somehow making himself fit so mild a routine of life. ~~H~~ But in other ways, surprising disquiets might break out of him now. Never a very political man and hardly a sympathizer with the strange long-haired counterculture which had begun to prance before him on the living-room television set, Dad was furious and bitter about the clubbings at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago: Godamighty, I thought this was a country where the police weren't supposed to beat up on people. The war in Vietnam worked confusions on him. ~~S E~~ he wanted not to see his country lose a war, and yet What the hell is it we want over there anyway? It was as if with sickness fastened into his own chest, he saw any sickness of the nation all the more sharply.

Time was carving fast at one in that Montana household, and hardly at all on the other. In her oaken way, Grandma went on now as if age didn't apply to her. At the start of the summer of 1968, when Carol and I had come to White Sulphur for Grandma's 75th birthday, Dad declared: If I ever reach 75, she'll still be up and pushing me around in a wheelchair. ~~4~~ Even now, she was bolstering his life in dozens of ways, tending, nursing, scolding, puzzled by whatever had taloned into Dad's lungs but automatically ready to do all that his situation demanded. And almost as if she had the impulse to push back against the grayness settling over Dad's life, she now began to turn out vivid quiltwork. ~~had~~ ⁴ Through her years of crocheting, Dad and I had ~~had~~ ² loyally made encouraging and admiring noises, and I often marveled that she could follow the tiniest intricacies of pattern. But I had never cared much for the frilly doilies and lacy tablecloths that flew from her needle, regarding them as something like her everlasting games of solitaire, played in thread. But the quilting flamed away any opinions of that sort. What Grandma turned out now, in the living room as Dad watched from his haven of chair, danced with brilliant colors—snipped-and-sewn diamonds of ragwork marching and playing and jostling like a meld of rainbows, or some resplendent field of tiny flags from all the universe. To come out of our ungaudy family, this was an absolute

eruption of bright art, and I blinked in wonder at this gray-haired woman I thought I knew so entirely. For her part, Grandma simply produced each quilt, demanded Now then, isn't that pretty? and gave it to Carol and me or someone in her sons' families. When we all had quilts galore, she began selling them, and there are valley households now ~~half a dozen~~ with six or eight blazing in their rooms.

And across seven hundred miles, in Seattle, Carol and I settled to our own changed life. Carol rapidly had maneuvered from one job to the next, and always up; within a year after our arrival, she had a professorship, teaching journalism at a community college. I was making my expedition through three solid years of reading and seminar work to the professorship of my own—one slog-step to the next, the only way I have ever known to get a thing done.

~~H~~ Along with that trudged the decisions needed for Dad. The dying of a parent is a time without answers, only anguished guesses, and I wished that I were an older and wiser guesser, able to come onto some angle of insight which would declare: Here, this is to be done. I wished a thousand useless longings, and amid them made whatever small tactics I could reason out. The main guidance I set in myself was that Dad should not be written off, not be allowed to write himself off, as an invalid. It may even be that in following this notion during his first few years of emphysema, not enough

allowances were made for his illness. But he was surrounded in the family by three of the world's dogged souls, and he himself had persevered through past health woes. ¶ Deeper than that lay the belief, also endlessly mulled in me, that it would be preferable for him to pace out an active but shorter life rather than an inert lingering. We could not talk about this in so many words — a failing in our family perhaps, yet none of us ever had seen much reason to say aloud what made itself plainly known — but my father had ~~said~~ ^{proclaimed} as much with his life. ap 17

Occasionally my estimates of how much Dad could be encouraged to do would overrun his capacities. During one of their visits to Seattle, Dad and Grandma were taken by us across Puget Sound on a fine afternoon to a play given in an outdoor theater. I had known that the theater seats were spaced down a hillside; what I did not know was that there was a descent of ~~several~~ ^{a few} hundred yards before the topmost of the seating. ¶ Grandma was ~~alarmed~~ ^{perplexed}, and fretful during the play. I had said, We'll get him out of here somehow, don't worry about it. Although Dad had continually said he was sure he could make the slope by taking it slow, he must have been edgy about it as well. Starting up, he at once went breathless. ¶ Carol and I looked at one another: he was going to have to be carried out. I went to the stage, borrowed a straight-backed

chair from the set. Seating him in it, Carol and I lifted the chair between us and started up the trail. ~~It~~ It made an awkward and severe load, which we denied over and over, and in our gritting paired exertion we took him out of there like a potentate. At the top, he could walk perfectly well on level ground. In double relief, I panted: Told you we'd get you out somehow. And the episode did prove that, if shakily.

~~And~~ ~~one~~ one thing more soon was proved: that when it was needed, we could draw together the strongest of family thews, live as a single household. The main decision, as so many others by then, was mine, and I came to it reluctantly, believing so entirely in the independence of lives. But there was the greater belief that my father must be helped in whatever ^{way} possible to live, and so in the autumn of 1968 I arranged that Dad and Grandma would come to Seattle to stay with Carol and me until the following spring.

Neither of them wanted the move. It would uproot them from everything familiar. Yet they saw that it was as I said: Dad could not undergo another mauling winter of chest infection. ~~Seattle's~~ The mild coastal climate was the only ^{needed} measure against that. Reluctantly ~~but~~ on my word, they came.

When the pair of them had unpacked, I suddenly asked: What did you do with Spot? Leave him with somebody? Grandma answered slowly. No. There was nobody right to

take care of him and we knew we couldn't bring him with,
so I ~~had~~ we had him done away with. The day before they
left, she had asked Dad, Spot's lifetime foe and idol, to
take the dog to the veterinarian. I'd rather have gone
through a beating, my father said now in my living room,
but he had done the task, petted the bold ~~old~~ head as the
needle's sleep crept through the dog, had him buried care^{fully}
fully on a ridge above the valley. # I turned and walked
to the bathroom, locked the door, turned a faucet full on,
and wept. For a jaunty white-and-brown dog, for my beset
family which could not be spared even this loss--for being
able to meet grief only in my own company this way.

I think now that Dad and Grandma settled into our expanded household with less tension than I did. Not that there wasn't much for them to wonder at in the unpredictable new locale. Day and night, ambulances would howl along a street below us on their way to the hospital which treated burn cases. Carol and I had stopped hearing the banshee sound of them after our first few weeks in the house. Grandma heard every one, hmpfing each time to think of yet another disaster in this severe city-world. # Nor did she ever accustom herself to the telephone's blat from the kitchen; each time it jangled, she started in surprise, which in turn twitched Dad's nerves. From him: What are ye jumping about? From her: Gee gosh, I can't help it, and

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what're you jumping about yourself? The telephone skirmish was daily, sometimes almost hourly, but betweentimes the pair of them passed the day more smoothly than could have been foreseen. Much of the morning they sat at the living-room table, Grandma playing her offhand solitaire, Dad pointing wordlessly whenever she overlooked a card to play, the both of them glancing every few moments out of the window to the city and its unending tributaries of traffic. A crew came to work on the railroad tracks nearby, and Dad studied their labors by the hour. He noticed that the heftiest of the workers arrived and went with great irregularity, and began an ironic game of foremanning him from the living-room. I would arrive home from the university for lunch and be told: My man was ten minutes late again this morning. I'm gonna have to jack him up about this bein' late all the time and all the time. The next noon, He's gettin' better, my man is. Only about five minutes late this morning. I'll get a full day of work out of him yet one of these times.

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Dad had a grimmer game for himself each late afternoon. The doctor had ordered him to walk as far as he could every day. At first, he would come back from fifty yards down the street, desperate, out of breath: Godamighty, I can't walk any more than a baby. But the next day, he would try again. Grandma seldom went with him on these efforts, did

not offer to go, was not invited. They both accepted that
~~would~~ he was going to have to ~~do this~~ battle for breath by himself.

At last, an afternoon when I was on my way home from the university library and met him several blocks from the house and at the base of the slope which skirted away below our neighborhood. As I came up to him, Dad was panting but able to say: I told myself I'd work up to walking this far, and I've done 'er. ^A I tried to find my words for acclaim: Hell, then you're just a lot stronger than you were. The doc will be tickled with you. But he shook his head, as if he could not afford to admit triumph. I know I can't do much. This is a helluva way to have to live, creeping along weak as a kitten. I had no words at all for that, and we started for home, silently paired in his trudge.

To describe that half-year of the four of us under a single roof does not go far toward an understanding of it. I am ~~unsure~~ ^{not sure} there is an understanding to be had, only reactions, reflexes. The time flowed well enough, yet none of us wanted to repeat it, nor did we. Carol picked her way through the situation the best of us all, turning the snappishness between Dad and Grandma with amusement, granting Grandma the share of chores she sought, even confounding one of Grandma's stone-cut sayings: No kitchen is big enough for two women at once. More than any of the

rest of us, perhaps, Carol simply remained herself.

Grandma, I think, felt entirely unrooted. She missed family and friends, missed the gossip and life-pattern of the valley, missed a house of her own, missed everything there was to miss of sixty years spent in Montana. Dad seemed tugged between his past and the life I was trying to make for myself. He met our citified friends more easily, followed my university work more interestedly. Yet he did not manage to feel settled and adjusted either, uneasy with the torrents of people he saw rivering along streets and sidewalks, the lockstep of houses thousand upon thousand, any of the dimensions of the city.

For my part, I felt again the crowdedness I had tried to pull myself away from—from a too-small prairie sheep-wagon, from the half-house in Ringling, from so many unprivate places, so much of those Montana years. Relationships between me and both Dad and Grandma were richer and fuller than I had expected—they always were—but yet I still fiercely wanted what I so long had wanted, a space all my own in life.

With spring came the declaration from Dad and Grandma that they were ready to return to Montana. I agreed. The winter had worked out to plan: Dad had escaped all chest infection, he was very much stronger than when he had come, he seemed better able to cope with the emphysema. I made

the trip to Montana with them, ~~doing all the driving~~ to keep Dad's nerves steady for the time ahead of him.

In a matter of a few months, Dad's propped-up health plunged apart. The chest infection hit, there was hospitalization again. But worse, day-by-day signs of failure started to show now. He began to fall deep asleep any time of the day, for alarming ~~lengths of time~~, then be unable to close his eyes at night. ~~periods~~ Grandma saw this in astonishment, then fury: No wonder you can't sleep at night, sleeping all day long too. Gee gods. Get up and around and you'd get over that sleepyheadedness. His usual answer was to sit forward for some minutes with his head in his hands, despairing, then to fall back again as if exhausted. I checked with his doctor at the clinic, and was provided the unbrambled version of Grandma's viewpoint: Dad was in carbon dioxide narcosis, caused by his lungs' failure to rid themselves of their after-breath wastes. The carbon dioxide residue worked like a slowing drug in his bloodstream. The remedy was for him to get up, walk, ride an exercise bicycle, anything to get the deadening build-up pumped from him. Exertion demanded exactly when he felt least able to make any.

This period of narcosis, with Dad asleep hour upon hour and his skin color with a dangerous hint of bluing in it, like some dark seepage beneath ice, was the most

terrifying yet. It seemed very much like death practicing on him. We were in a time of ~~fast~~^{quicken} erosion—of the deadly gullying in my father's lungs, of my grandmother's failing chance to bolster his life, of my ~~in~~ability to find medical help which would make much difference now. My father day upon day lay back in his big chair in the living-room in White Sulphur and gilled in air, as if out of breath from the long stopless run through life. But that it was not stopless, each of us knew too well, we could read that in the bulk of the oxygen tanks which came oftener and oftener into the house now.

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I can chart my father's last years by the medical apparatus that attached itself to his existence. The first, the machine that blew a fog of medication into his lungs, sat at his bedside with some innocence. A bland metal-gray ~~in tone~~ and not much larger than a typewriter, the device awaited him several times a day, took in his puffs of exertion and traded out its mysterious mist, sent him away breathing less hard. But next to come were the ~~dark-green~~ huge as battleship shells, ~~huge calibre~~ oxygen tanks, ~~and their quickening march to~~ conveyor-like pace ~~was~~ his bedside were the tempo of doom for him. He began their use sparingly, a minute or so of relief at a time into his lungs a few times a day. But across the months, the oxygen imbibing became oftener, longer. Grandma was at her most baffled and furious with this terrifying new addiction:

Charlie, the more of that you use, the more you just want to use! He gave her a weary fury back: I can't help using it, I've got to breathe. And in the next minute she would have gone to the kitchen to bring him a cup of coffee and he would have thanked her softly, and the two-sided helplessness would have passed for the moment. The one winner was the oxygen, which the next day would tether him a few moments longer.

At last came the time when he slumped in the chair with the oxygen tether forever in his nose, slept with it. All had been reversed: from the outset when he was bolstered by a few minutes of oxygen each day, now there were only a handful of moments when he could bear to be without it. Everything now had thinned to the whiffs holding him in life, like a breeze scudding a dried leaf barely above the ground. He was everlastingly weak now, could scarcely have put breath on a mirror without the pure oxygen from the metal bottle. No longer could he even make a recuperative trip to Seattle; the doctor said there was medical risk in travel and Dad felt the greater risk in himself, could not bring himself to such a move.

not On one of my Montana trips, back again in the house in White Sulphur after the bleak task of having delivered Dad into another hospital stay, Grandma said out of the blue: Dad asked me never to let you put him in a rest home.

I said nothing for a long minute, which of course said that I had thought of it. What reply I eventually made to her I no longer know, but it was not definite enough for either of us. ~~4~~ That was the problem—~~H~~ to be definite in the unclearest of moments. Here was fact: my father was hopelessly afflicted, every breath a fresh agony. Here was proposition: warehouse him as the less-than-alive presence he was becoming. But then here was judgment: whose benefit would it be for? Not Grandma's. Not his own. Mine.

In the end, I turned decision back on itself. Not to choose the one crevice-crossing was to choose the other. I stayed by a conviction that had been forming silently in me—~~H~~ that the best that could be done in this desolate situation was to help this beset pair, Dad and Grandma, endure through it together in their own home.

no \$! Across twenty years, I had watched the two of them wear grooves into each other until at last the fit of their lives became a mutual comfort, a necessity bridged ~~ing~~ between the both of them. Their time together had passed through armistice into alliance and on to acceptance, then to affection, and at last had become one of the kinds of love. ~~4~~ I saw that now, even as I had missed seeing the early signs of the procession. Now my father leaned his very life on my grandmother, on her care of him. When his life toppled away, as it must soon, a presence would go out of

my grandmother's existence like something lacking in the air of her own breathing. ~~H~~ This told me all the more that as long as he yet lived, as long as Grandma had the health and verve to care for him at home, she should. She was in some ways the oddest possible ~~angel~~^{figure} of mercy, put together as she was of a fast temper and oblique notions of illness and its consequences; yet she still was sturdy, still had to keep herself busy every moment that she was not asleep. And there was that fiercest of all her capacities, her ability to prop other lives with her own. I lacked her knack for such entire sacrifice, her habit of putting all else before her own needs. The most I could do for my father was to warehouse him in my own home, assuming he could be gotten there, or within other walls. Grandma, if I allowed her, could do very much more. ~~H~~ What that tokened to me was that as long as Dad could remain in known surroundings ~~H~~—in the valley, in the house he had chosen and bought, with this woman he had come to such deep alliance with ~~H~~—for whatever little was left of his life, he should.

There were other unheard-of equations to this time. For one, Dad had become both thinner and larger ~~H~~—face and hands going gaunt, but the exertions of his lungs building his chest out to a broad shell, an encasement as if heft from everywhere else in his body had been summoned there. The great chest of course was a cruel fake; the muscles

which had stretched out and out to squeeze air into the failing lungs still were unable to pull in the torrent of ~~oxygen~~
~~air~~ needed, and the more barrel-like Dad became, the more grudgingly breath dragged in and out of him.

For another, my father stayed in the moments of my days steadily now, even as his body dwindled from me. All of his way of life that I had sought escape from—the grindstone routine of ranching, the existence at the mercy of mauling weather, the endless starting-over from one calamity or another—was passing with him, and while I still wanted my distance from such a gauntlet, I found that I did not want my knowing of it to ~~so from me~~. The perseverance to have lasted nearly seventy years amid such cold prospects was what heritage Dad had for me; I had begun to see that it counted for much. Through all this ran the zipperlike whisper of history as well. Dad's timespan, and even the late portion of it when I was growing up at his side, quickly was being peeled away by change. To my constant surprise, in our years in the north and the time I was away at college White Sulphur had swapped itself from being a livestock town to a logging town. Each time I drove in now across the long deck of the valley, the blue plume of smoke from the sawmill's scrap burners at the edge of town startled me, made me wonder for an instant whose house had caught fire. Out from town, along the forks of

the Smith River and beneath the flanks of the Castles and Big Belts, the ranches were being reached by the continental metamorphosis from agriculture to agribusiness. No longer were there the summer's haying crews Dad had fore-manned so many times, only a few men on galloping machines. Nor were there any longer the dozens of sheepherders, nor the roving shearing crews, because there no longer were sheep; we are a people swathed in synthetics now. Even the sagebrush, the very coloration of that so-high prairie country, was beginning to be erased under potent new plows and tractors and farming theories, the topsoil which had defeated the homesteaders now laid back like a pelt being skinned off. And beyond even that, the large valley ranches, which to my mind had croupiered an area that could have sustained many medium-sized ranches into a single fistful of huge holdings, were beginning to notice a bigness beyond their own: corporate America. Ye know who owns the Dogie now? Dad demanded indignantly when I arrived on one of my visits: A-goddamn-Kansas-City-paper-box-company.

Such matters began to align, in these first few years of the struggle with Dad's affliction, into the last and most unexpected of equations: I was discovering myself to be more my father's son, and my grandmother's grandson, than I had ever known. Exactly at the point of my life when I had meant to turn myself to teaching, to the routined

assurances of scholarliness, I found myself veering inward instead. The university life was setting off in me the dis-
~~quiets~~ ^{that} quiets which had sent my father stomping time and again from the big ranches of the valley. I recognized in myself that like him, I never was going to be comfortable about soldiering for the large enterprises of the world, and that unlike him, I had the cache of education to provide some choice in the matter. I was finding, too, that more of Grandma's fierceness of family was in me than was expected. The nation was in wars I despised and feared--in Asian rice paddies, in its own streets--but the obliteration raging against my own father was ~~much the more vital to me,~~ much the more compelling battle.

As my decisions do, the one now of how to direct my ~~own life~~ came slowly, doggedly. I kept on through the seminars and exams, claimed the degree at the last dusty furrow of it all, ^{O =} but then I abandoned the offer of a job at one of the country's largest universities. Instead, I began to work full-time at writing, by the shaggiest and most marginal of its modes, free-lancing for magazines. I offered to Carol: I know you married me for better or worse, but this is somewhere off the scale. She answered as ever: Do it. ~~H~~ Academic friends plainly were puzzled and a bit disturbed, as if I had declared I was going off to be a wheelwright or a buffalo-hunter. When I undertook

to explain myself during one of the Montana trips, Grandma simply offered her blanket assumption that whatever I did made some sense all its own, and Dad, I noticed, seemed to understand this drastic veer better than any other I had ever done. At least, he said, ye'll be your own boss.

My father's heritage of perseverance, I have said. At last, the emphysema began to gnaw even that from him. During another of my Montana stays, more than four years now since the diagnosis of what was at work in Dad's lungs, a neighbor stepped in to visit. As we sat in the living-room and Grandma racketed in the kitchen to make coffee, the neighbor remarked to Dad how good it was to see him up and around, what relief it must be to be back from the hospital bed. At once Dad made a futile tossing motion with his hand and told her: My heart's just hanging by a thread. [#] I looked at him in alarm. ^{QC} Perhaps everything else inside his chest was becoming a horror, but time after time the doctor's examinations had found that engine of a heart had not yet shown falter, had withstood amazingly the fierce load on it.

Yet in one sense, at least, the heart truly was going out of him. The desperation of having to fight for every breath, of having to live tied by the nose to an oxygen tank, of regulating himself more and more by all the medication that demanded to be taken, simply had worn away his energy. So long and labored a dying had drawn nearly

all worth from his body, and now it set in on his endurance of mind. Again, Dad began to yearn toward the surgery he had heard of when he first learned he had emphysema. Again I investigated, again gathered opinions, again told him what I had found: the surgery was considered doubtful, his clinic doctor advised passionately against it.

So forlorn about his existence--^Hlife was too generous a word for it now--^Hthat he had begun to base everything on the operation, Dad was wrenchingly depressed at the latest advice against it. Whatever you think, son. But I don't know how I can go on like I am.

~~For weeks~~ Those words battered in me ~~for weeks~~ as I tried to weigh through the misery toying with him now, think what could be spoken into that tortured hopeless life. At last, in early January of 1971, I wrote one more of my careful letters. Saying: I had come to believe that here was one decision which I could not make for him. I would fly to Montana, we would attempt whatever slight relief there might be for him--^Hperhaps another recuperative spell in the hospital; ^Hwhen he felt able to decide, I would listen and help him to weigh facts. But the words of this decision finally would have to come from him.

Out of that, a phone call, the day after my letter came to him: it was Grandma, saying that he had had the operation that morning.

The greatest fear I can imagine licked through me. As I held the phone my hand shook, the single time that had happened in my life. At last I gulped in breath and said I would come to Montana at once.

When I arrived the next day, Dad was breathing with less labor than I had seen him in for some time, but he told me there had been a glorious half-day after the operation when he had no sensation of breathing hard at all. Ivan, it was like I was a well man again. Then he had begun to feel the labor creep back. I sat with him the next few days, urged him into a small routine of life again. And heard the first cough from him like a scraping sound in the night.

By the end of a week, he plainly was coming down with the lung infection again. I despised the task as never before: it took me the large part of a day to talk him into another hospital stint.

When my plane time came and I stood to say goodbye to him, Dad, he was sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, his dismay at being there once more mixed with the relief of drawing on steady oxygen and the familiar care. He looked stronger than he had at home. I turned in the doorway to say my usual parting: I'll talk to you on the phone soon. Take care. He said as ever: Goodbye to ye, son.

The hospital stay did bolster him again, did renew his strength and ease his lungs enough until, as usual, in about two weeks' time he was able to go home to White Sulphur and Grandma's care once more. He still struggled for breath, but seemed somehow slightly more enduring than he had been. And his prompt return home carried hope, for the chronic collapses back into hospitalization had told me how he would die--a last torturing confinement in the angled bed, tubes looped to his body, but breath erod^{ing}, eroding, despite all apparatus; within the white sheets a sharp panting for life like my mother's agony re-echoed, then a gasp to stillness. It would be the last terrible smother of his crippled lungs, and I could see it in every exactness but the moment on the calendar.

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But he was home once more now, away from that marked moment, and even ~~wae~~ escaping winter's usual pneumonia attacks. That and other delvings for reassurance were on his mind. In mid-February he sent to Carol and me his first letter in years. Hi, you two. I am going to see if I can write you a short letter. I am doing pretty good, I think. My breathing seems to stay about the same. My legs still are so darn weak but I am slowly getting a little more strength in them. I am using the exercise bike all I can....

not yet decreed

4 The page labored on in his taut, over^careful writing, but the news was in that slide of report: doing pretty good...

about the same... all I can. ^H And soon after, the confirming lines of puzzle and suspicion from Grandma. He doesn't seem to improve any. He's getting the same as before. Sleep days and up and down all nite. Usually eats three sandwitches during the nite with milk. But he doesn't eat a good meal... ^F For the thousandth time I thought through the spectre ^P of his final hospital stay, and readied myself for the news that I would have to come once more and deliver him to the prospect.

I had forgotten that the great constant in my father was surprise. In early April, on the third morning after Dad's seventieth birthday, Grandma stepped to his doorway to begin him on another day of existing. At the bed, he was on his back with his head and upper body tilted to the right, his mouth open, as if having turned to speak an answer over his shoulder. In his custom now, the bedcovers had been flipped aside because of their burden on his laboring chest. His pajamas were scarcely mussed, and the square-cut face was freed of its straining look. And in the instant when his heart at last had convulsed in him and ended his life so silently and immediately that no hint of it could be heard in a room fifteen feet away, his right arm had flung wide, catching the tether of oxygen tube and tearing it from his nostrils.

By early afternoon I was in Montana, by dusk had made the burial arrangements, that night slept in the bed where

my father had died less than twenty hours before. Grandma was teary-eyed, but steadier than I would have been from looking in on a body in the dawn light. We both were startled, after the dragging years of near-helplessness, at the staccato pace of everything to be done now. Having arranged a furlough from her classes, Carol flew in from Seattle, propped us both with her efficiency. # Late in the second day, the minister who would read the funeral service came to the house. Across the years, I can think of little more remote from my father's range of mind than religion. Once in my boyhood, a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses had come to our door. Dad gave them his levelest look, proclaimed We're staunch Presbyterians here, and had the door closed on the visitors before they could blink. I gaped at him, and received his joke-calculating grin: Never knew we was ~~So~~ that pious, did ye? I certainly didn't, and can think of no other time religion became a topic under our roof. The funeral minister now found that I was a bland target for his tries at commiseration. He soon asked what Bible reading I wished at the funeral service.

The one where God speaks to Job from the whirlwind.

Job 38, that would be? He sat higher in his chair.

It's not a...usual funeral choice. I said nothing. Well...
The first few verses, I imagine? The readings usually
are brief....

No, all of it. All the chapter. We're in no hurry after these years.

He nodded, offered a hand, was gone.

I did not believe in funerals and the customs of public grief, but I believed less in doing anything not understandable to Grandma. I braced, and on the morning before the funeral drove her across town to the chapel to see Dad in his casket. He looked milder than in life, calm and unscarred except for the star-print in the center of his square chin. She looked down at him, gave a sob, and said her one last sentence to him: Oh Charlie, why did you have to die?

Then the afternoon, and across the chapel, faces from two lifetimes—^Hmy father's, my own—^Hhung row on row. I looked out among them as the preacher's words marched.

Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?...

The lone black face of Taylor Gordon, nodding softly to the Bible rhythms. Clifford's head among the pallbearers, undressed without his rancher's hat atop it. Hast thou commanded the morning?... Sun-dark faces Dad had ridden with and foremanned on the Dogie and the Camas and a dozen other ranches; paler faces from the saloons and stores. Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow?... Faces from the Basin, from winters a half century ago, from homesteads gone empty and echoing. Canst thou send lightnings?...

Faces absent, alive only in specific tales of death:

Nellie queerly quiet in the metal casket of his car, battered by the rolling plunge from a hill road. At a canasta table, a heart attack astonishes McGrath; he flings his cards as if sledged in the chest, topples backward as the jacks and queens flutter down upon him. Kate and Walter Badgett, each lying down in ancientness not to arise again, but of course Walter passing first, Kate watchfully next. Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? or fill the appetite of the young lions... And last, always and always piercing through it all, the memory of my mother's deathday on the mountain, my father's life in a way having begun to end there where hers did....

And at last, the procession to the cemetery, the brief graveside ceremony quickly done in bitter, wind-whipped weather, and the last glimpse of Dad's casket within the walls of earth.

Nothing new can be said of the loss of a parent; it all has been wept out a million million times. During the funeral preparations and the days afterward, I could find in myself only the plainest, broadest of emotions—anger that Dad had suffered so steadily and so long, relief that he was released from the squeezing bars of his own ribcage, and that I was released from the guesswork decisions over his existence. Those, and the gratitude that of all interesting men I knew, this one had been my father.

Now there was Grandma's grief to be worked through. On some footings, she was as unshakable as ever. When the chore came to choose a tombstone for Dad's grave, she startled me by saying at once that she wanted to be buried exactly beside him, and to have her name on the same stone. All right, sure, I offered. Then she went silent for a minute and amended: No, not together on the stone. Right alongside him, a stone like his one. We ought to each have our own gravestone but the same. ~~H~~ But days after the funeral when the time neared that I would have to leave for Seattle again and we had talked through what she would do—how she would fend alone in the house, the bonus that her youngest son lived near enough to look in on her often, the luck of having neighbors who fussed over her—she suddenly put in: Maybe I could of done better. Maybe I could of been better to Charlie, he was so sick... ~~H~~ The words rivered out of me: Good God, you waited on him hand and foot these years, you were the one person of any of us who could have done it. There's no blame on you and I never want to hear you saying there is... ~~I~~ broke off, choked by tears. My so-rare fury impressed her, and one woe of this after-death was dispelled. Others took more time. When she arrived the next month for a stay with us in Seattle, I came back from putting her suitcase away to find her standing in the living room weeping. Everywhere I look, I see Charlie here.

I had no fury for that, only the stab of knowing how late the emotion of familyhood had come to us. And for once in all these beset years, I did know the cure for something. Deliberately, sometime during each day with her, I brought Dad ~~briefly~~ alive again in one conversation or another, made his life a matter of fact among us rather than a storm center of grief. ~~H~~ As she always had, Grandma firmed herself up. As soon as she returned to Montana, there were the words in her first letter that I read like a line of a song: I'm feeling pretty good now again and getting a little more straightened around every day.

Now that my grandmother was alone, in the last of her odd widowhoods, again I would have to divine across seven hundred miles how a life was holding up, how much attention was wanted, what decisions and soothings and temperings were needed. Carol knew best the one clinching idea to reassure Grandma that her own life was far from over, ~~Suggestion from~~ a plan suggested by the wife of one of my cousins during the swirl of the White Sulphur household after Dad's death. I worried the notion for awhile, then began the phoning and letters needed and by mid-⁸ summer could tender it to Grandma: How would you like to go to Australia to see Paul? We'll send you.

She had been in an airplane only a few times, had never flown alone, never seen an ocean, let alone been up over the

~~expense~~

top of one, never changed planes at vast terminals, never done twenty dozen impossible things she listed to me at once. As I had known, it took weeks to talk her toward the notion—that yes it could be afforded, yes I could handle mysteries of passport and visa, no she was not too old, although the fact of her seventy-eight years haunted me no little bit—until at last came the question which I knew meant she would do it: Do you think really I can go there all by myself? I laughed into the phone the one last word needed: Really.

Across half the earth in September of 1971, she was met in Australia by the son not seen for 25 years, and by the daughter-in-law and three grandchildren entirely new to her. Quickly her letters came in across the Pacific as if she was remaking the host land: ...The flowers are so pretty here. Nobody seems to pick them for bouquets but I do their so lovely... I been teaching the kids card games Rummy and Solitaire and they want to play all the time now... I went downtown with Joyce this morning. She said it was her pie day. I couldnt see and couldnt see why she would go buy pies when we both bake good and finally I asked her. She said No not that kind of pie she meant it was her pay day. They sure talk a broge here don't they... I grinned with the thought of her looking at kangaroos, living with this newfound family in their house so queerly

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stilted above a Queensland flood plain, going off with them to see salt mined from ocean water and to stand for her picture at a monument proclaiming something called the Tropic of Capricorn: I don't just know what its all about but you will. She sent me a clipping of what the newspaper there had written about her visit, and I read it thinking they knew only the scantest fraction of this caller.

When she returned in a month, Carol and I met her at the airport, hugged her in triumph and admiration, and hurried her to our house to sleep off ~~6,000~~ miles of flight. The next morning she did not wake up until past eleven o'clock, ~~and~~ was entirely scandalized: Gee gods, why didn't you get me up hours ago? I lifted my eyebrows and tried to tell her about jet-lag, but for once she was having none of my explanations. I never slept this late in my whole entire life, she huffed, and was on her feet.

The single thing I knew I had done properly in Dad's last years was to keep him mobile as long as it could be managed. Given Grandma's restless insistence to be, as she would put it, up and around and doing, I thought that it was even more vital for her to stay active. I had forgotten what an ally a small town such as White Sulphur could be in this. Neighbors and friends and relatives kept an eye on her, mowed her lawn, delivered gossip to her kitchen table, delivered Grandma herself to what became a prized new pastime for her, a newly-formed Senior Citizens

Club. When I visited the small house in Montana now, I looked at the tacked-up sheet of paper on which she scrawled the phone numbers of her support system, saw it lengthen steadily, and nodded in satisfaction.

The habit and patterns grew just in time, for in the spring of 1972, a few days less than a year after Dad's death, Grandma suffered a heart attack--the first blow on her health in her eight decades of life. I flew to Montana to do the cooking and housework when she came out of the hospital. ~~¶~~ She was going to be, I knew, the world's most restless convalescent, and as soon as I had her seated in the house, I started on her: We are going to make a deal. I'm going to do all the work in this house for the next week or so--her lips already flying open in protest--and you can help me with these. I showed her a shoebox filled with file cards, the index material for a textbook Carol and I had just written. All right, she said, in immediate purpose, show me just what there is to it. ~~¶~~ Across the next several days, she sat quietly and sorted and alphabetized as I hovered carefully out of the way. At last she pronounced, I think that's all of it, Ivan. I studied how much more vigorous and restored she had become, smiled and said: I think it is.

She recuperated briskly enough to go on living much as she had, but to her disgust needed to rely on heart-regulating pills. Whenever she felt the first signs of

angina, usually needle-like sensations at the tops of her arms, she would pop a glycerine pill into her mouth as if it were an aspirin, determinedly sit still for a few minutes, and be up and at some chore again. Outwardly, she aged hardly at all. I compare photos of her taken five years apart, and they seem to have been snapped within the same minute, the identical pursed smile beneath the resolute upper face and gray-white field of hair.

I found that now Grandma filled not only her own role for me, the one of stand-in mother begun twenty years ~~earlier~~ when she and I moved into the house in Ringling, but what had been Dad's as well: my compass-point to the past, to my own youth. Whenever she visited Seattle or I came to Montana, she began to talk easily of the gone years, to tell even of her marriage to Tom Ringer, and of life on the Wisconsin farm.⁴ Her mind was not wandering back—it was as solid and set on the chore of the moment as ever—but she seemed freed at last of the tempers which had covered over such stories. True, there still came bursts out of her which could have resounded at any point of her past sixty years in the valley. Leave a light switched on in her house past early morning, and you would hear hmpf! burnin' a hole in the daylight! and the abrupt click.

A long-haired white cat had recognized her front porch as a provision port, and he came and went, battered from alley fights and matted with cockleburrs, to the rhythm of her

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feedings and scoldings. But most of the time now, Grandma was in mellower mood than I could ever remember, as if old age was coming gently into her in compensation for the way it had ripped apart Dad. ~~H~~ I took the chance to have her re-tell what I had heard from her as a boy, confirm the details, imprint her private wordings. Before I quite knew it, the cadences of this book had begun out of listening to her. Listening and seeing, for the one scribe of my family's past had been the Brownie box camera. I dug out Grandma's photo albums which had gathered dust under one bed or another for sundry decades. I remember one early evening spent in her house, a pair of hours ~~spent~~[^] as she went through for me an album which had belonged to my mother. Picture upon picture of my father and mother—^H in their herding days on Grass Mountain, on horseback at rodeos, dressed up in flat-cap-and-bonnet finery beside the square hulks of 1920s automobiles—^H brought sniffles or hard-swallowed sentences from Grandma, and by the time I had jotted my notes on the final page, the emotion she had been putting into the room had worn me out. ~~H~~ That should be enough for tonight, I said in a weary glaze. She turned to me in surprise: But we got these others to get through. Hadn't we just as well to keep on? And we did.

And then the moment, for there always is such a pivot moment, when it truly became clear how far along in life she was. At the end of September, 1974—^H—she was eighty-one

by now—she flew to Seattle to spend a few weeks with us. When Carol and I saw her coming slowly up the ramp from the plane, we waved, she gave us her pursed smile. Then she stopped and leaned against the wall of the ramp, and I bolted toward her. By the time I reached her, she was fumbling the bottle of heart pills from her purse. A pill and getting her to a chair eased the angina; before long, we were on our way, but with her now a more fragile piece of life than she had been minutes before.

Time and again in that visit, she had to sit and ease the heart symptoms. But she would not be kept idle, nor did I think she ought to be. She had lived under the same roof with Dad's helplessness; a repeat of that would be the cruellest affliction that could happen to her. And so I invented chores, tasks she could do while sitting. She clipped her way through mounds of newspapers to sort references for my writing files, and her only complaint was that it wasn't work enough. If two minutes of page-flipping didn't yield a headline circled for clipping, her mild grumble would come: Ivan, I'm not finding none to cut out.

This visit of hers now had a sharp hook at the end of it. I had written articles about the World's Fair in Spokane, and Grandma longed to see it. The plan had been that at the end of her stay, Carol and I would drive her to

Spokane, shepherd her around the Fair for a day, and she would fly home to Montana from there. Plainly her heart spasms were too chronic now for that, but just as plainly this might be her last outing in the world. And I believed more than ever, seeing the determination with which she would take a heart pill, sit briefly, and then be back at some chore, that her ~~H~~ stride of life should be slowed as little as possible. ~~H~~ Near the end of her stay, I gave her another of my decrees: There's just too much walking at the Fairgrounds. The only way I see that you can go there is in a wheelchair. She gave me her most mildly regretful Ohhh?, as if I had just told her it might rain sometime in the next week. Then: If you say so.

I expect never to have another inspiration click to the perfection this one did. Grandma in her rented wheelchair, as Carol or I propelled her, instantly was eligible to go ahead of every line into every exhibit. She saw her World's Fair as effortlessly and grandly as if she were Queen Victoria somehow being trundled through time. Gee gosh, she said as Carol and I helped her into the car at the end of the day, obviously pleased with herself and the pair of us, that was sure the way to do that.

The next morning, in the last minutes before she was to board her plane at the Spokane airport, the awareness flew into me, as it always did now at these partings, that

here might be the last set of moments I would see Grandma alive. Then total commotion: near us had been an orderly family, the mother saying goodbye to the husband and their four children as they set off for somewhere, and suddenly the woman was grappling with the man and shrieking: I've got a restraining order! Don't let him on this plane with my children! As he tried to pull away, she haltered him by his necktie and continued to shout. The children erupted into a bawling swirl, the smallest one was belly-whopped to the floor amid the wrestling. The airline workers were slow and reluctant to edge in on the battle.

4 I tried to talk Grandma calm as the brawl went on; the picture of her sagging against the plane ramp when she had arrived in Seattle blazed in me. But she said, No, I'm all right, and sat watching and giving her usual hmpf until the airline people could herd the roaring family to a side room. Then it was time for me to help her down the ramp, and to her plane seat, and to smile a nervous goodbye to her one more time.

The phone call, the metallic blat of worst news, came three weeks later. Again the flight to Montana, the drive from Helena through the Big Belts to White Sulphur Springs, for this last of the burials in the valley's cemetery.

Peter Doig, Annie Campbell Doig, Tom Ringer, Berneta Ringer Doig, Charlie Doig: in a somber space not much larger than

a garden patch they all lay, nearly three hundred years of lives, not a life among them easy or unafflicted. A sum of so much of the valley could be found in them, and a sum which would keep emerging in me for however long I lived. Now Bessie Ringer, in her way the most sorrowing to see vanish, because she had been the most durable of them all.

Wonder built in me as I traced out her last day. The morning, Grandma had spent working on a quilt, another of her rainbow-paneled splendors, for a helpful neighbor who looked in on her often. Sometime she had telephoned to a friend at a ranch out of Ringling, asking to be brought a fresh supply of eggs when the woman came to town. At noon she was phoned by her son, and as usual in those checking calls, they talked for several minutes. In the afternoon a funeral was held for a member of one of the last families of the Sixteen country: Grandma did not go to the rites, but at the coffee hour held afterward at the Senior Citizens Club she helped with the serving and chatted with friends for an hour or more. Someone had driven her home, where she had her supper alone. In the evening, there was to be the weekly card party back at the Senior Citizens Club, and she phoned to ask for a ride with her best friend in the group--^Ha woman who had run one of the White Sulphur saloons that had so often thorned Grandma's

earlier life. They had nearly arrived at the card party when, in the midst of something joked by one or the other of them, Grandma cut off in the middle of a chuckle and slumped, chin onto chest. The friend whirled the car to the hospital a block away. A doctor instantly was trying to thump a heartbeat-rhythm into Grandma, and could work no flicker of response from her. She had gone from life precisely as she had lived it, with abruptness and at full pace.

Once more the funeral, the Bible rhythms, the lines of faces brigading back out of the chapel into the past. The relatives had raised their eyebrows when I told them the one funeral request Grandma had ever made to me: I want a closed casket. Makes me spooky to think of everybody gawping down at me like that. I flinched in turn when the minister's reading from Ecclesiastes began flatly: The sun rises and the sun goes down, then it presses on.... I had forgotten to specify the King James language to him. Then the wryness came to me. Why had I expected my grandmother's exit to be any less touched by contention than her life had been?

At the graveside at last, in the cold coming-winter weather, the rites had to be hurried through, the casket rapidly roped down from sight, condolences quickly spoken in smoking breaths and as quickly taken by me. Carol's arm

in mine made the single spot of warmth in the last of the cold minutes. As the groups of us began to turn toward our cars, the valley's mountain-chilled wind skirled hard among us. I recognized it from the afternoon of my father's burial.

This set of sagas, memory. Over and over self-told, as if the mind must have a way to pass its time, docket all the promptings for itself, within its narrow bone cave.

A final flame-lit prism of remembering: the February afternoon at a northern Pacific coastline, Carol and I with a pair of friends hiking beside the exploding surf. Gray, restless after-storm weather, my favorite mood of the fir-shagged wild shore. In a dozen journeys here, Carol and I repeat to each other, never have we seen the waves break so high and far. After a short mile, at Ellen Creek, the four of us pause. The creek's meek tea-colored flow has boiled wide, swirly, as the ocean surf drums into the mouth of the channel and looses giant whorls of tide up the start of the stream. John, ever the boldest of us, explores a route inland, across a log to the coiling creekbank opposite and there brushwhacking his way atop other logs and debris until he at last drops safely back to the ocean beach. I am uneasy, thinking through the chances of one of us snapping a leg in the rain-slick debris or slipping the ten-foot drop into the creek. The Ellen is a known channel that Carol and I have crossed and re-crossed casually all the times before. With the storm surf nosing at it as it is, the stream may have risen now to thigh-high, but still a wader's depth. I suggest that I go across upstream of the surf line, find the shallowest route for Carol and Jean to come after; they agree. Boots slung

around my neck, I slog rapidly into the water. At the deepest part the water surprises me for an instant by lapping up just over my belt, then as I begin the last dozen pulling strides to the shore, a vast slosh of tide swells across the top of my chest and undertow lifts away my feet.

Like a bug down a drain I am sucked feet first into the ocean, gravel beating up at me like shrapnel as the surf plows its roaring way, shore and sky and all else lost in the water avalanche. After forever, I am reversed, surged back to the tideline, slammed down, then rolled to sea again. Now I paddle to stay upright, and simply am turned and turned, toy-like, within the next acres of water until I am struck against the shore again. Taken out into the froth yet again, this time I try to ride the surf with my body, eagling my arms wide; again I am pitched over and over, hurled to gravel, instantly lifted away and out. How many times this repeats, there is no counting--perhaps as few, and as many, as five. Even as my body is being beaten limp, my mind finds incredible clarity, as if the thinking portion of me had been lifted separately and set aside from the ocean's attack. While my arms and legs automatically try trick after trick to pull me atop the water and onto the precipice of shore, the feeling of death settles into me, bringing both surprise at the ease and calm of the process and a certain embarrassed chiding of myself that this is a silly and early method to exit from

life. John later told that, as I came whirling out of the surf one more time, he saw on my face a look of deep resignation. My remembering of that eye-locked instant is of noting him, mouth open in a shout I cannot hear, beginning to run from forty yards away, and then in my next writhe within the dense falling wall of surf, discovering his arm across my back and under me, dragging my weary three-pointed stumble from the undertow. At the shallow moving seam of shore and surf, John exults in my ear: We've got it made now! But I sense, as if a monstrous paw poised just beyond the edge of my vision, the next set of waves toppling toward us: we both are struck flat, but somehow hold the shore. Only then, in the wash back to sea of that aftermost wave, do my boots finally float free from around my neck, and John reaches casually as they pass and plucks them from the last of the water. Now Carol and Jean at our sides, flung to us through the flooding creek by their desperation and the luck of an interval between tidal whirlpools, their hands and John's steadying me until at last, up off the cold bite of the shore gravel, I stand again.

That forenoon, a few dozen months into the past, has stayed much in my mind, and not only for the marvel of finding myself undrowned and for the gratitude of having had three lives offered up instantly for mine. By the time of that incident this book already had begun to take over my fingers,

and my scuff against death inevitably called up in me the endings put to other figures in my family, with less reason than my mistaken wade into the Ellen. Spaced where I am, past having been young but not quite yet middle-aged, the odds of life-and-death still loom quite far from my usual thoughts. Yet this much has been brought home to me fully: that added now into the lineage of all else I share with Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer is the sensation of having ~~swirled~~ been ~~swirled~~ of deepest hazard. The links are made instantly by memory. I am spun and spun within the frothing wave: creek water rises over Grandma's stirrups as she edges the roan to the flood-trapped cattle. Surf gravel beats up at ~~pound~~ me like shrapnel: the hooves of the black gelding ~~rampage~~ [^] across Dad in the corral dirt.

I feel, in my musing on it, as if the two of them too somehow stood up out of the slosh of death with me, the one giving his cocked grin of wryness at having survived one time more, the other muttering at the receding ocean and marching us all off into dry clothes.

Then my father and my grandmother go, together, back elsewhere in memory, and I am left to think through the fortune of all we experienced together. And of how, now, my single outline meets the time-swept air that knew theirs.