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As the Irish fellow says, this place must be the back
of the neck of the world. For once, my father's damnation of
a ranch was underdone: he could have peppered in a few dozen
of the Irish fellow's forlornest cusswords in justice to this
one.

We had come the hours of distance north from the Smith
River Valley and driven onto the ranch during the night.
As Dad puzzled through the darkness along fainter and
fainter scruffs of prairie road, our three styles of
apprehension began to cloak in on us. Before we were
halfway, Grandma demanded: Gee gollies, aren't we never
gonna get there? Dad notched his chin ahead another full
inch and choked the steering wheel as if it had betrayed

him. I tried to stare shapes out of the blackness, but could find only an occasional jackrabbit racing in the net-edge of our headlights.⁹ At last, Dad gave a start, began to brake the pickup down a sudden careen of slope, and the headlights fingered wildly onto a squat white building. By gee, at last. That was Grandma; not a word out of Dad. Where is the place, down in a hole like this? More silence from him. As we stumbled from the car toward the house, the white walls too seemed to hold back from us in the dark, ghostly and telling nothing of themselves.

Daylight did all the telling we wanted. Testing doors, we found ourselves locked off from all but the back three rooms of the house--¹⁰ a small bedroom for Grandma, one hardly larger for Dad and me, and a high-ceilinged cavern of a kitchen. McGrath's doings, I'll warrant you, Grandma announced rightly: in haggling for the lease, he had euchred a point of some sort with the ranch-owning family by allowing them to store their belongings in the front portion of the house. From a keyhole I reported up to Dad and Grandma that furniture and boxes were piled all around a broad, bewindowed living room, with other rooms opening off as well. Plainly, the divvy of the house had dealt the larger half here ^{in there} to dust and silence.

In alarm, we studied the ungainly little set of rooms left to us, and the single narrow envelope of view out the

kitchen windows—^Mto a dilapidating bunkhouse, the outhouse, and a bit of brown treeless ramp of slope sheering up to the benchland. Even Grandma couldn't come up with words for the situation, although the line of her ^{Lips} jaw said she was working on it.

She and I went out to peer in the windows of the denied rooms, as if we needed to confirm McGrath's treachery. I glanced around toward the silver-boarded sheepshed which squatted hugely across the yard from us. At least, I tried in what I thought was entirely grown-up sarcasm, old McGrath got us a scad of room for the sheep. But Grandma's attention had hit on the bleak bench of land rimming above us to the south, where the road curled in. She turned, and the same bench rimmed over us in the west. Another turn, and an identical flat lid of horizon to the north. She rotated to the last chance, the east, and was met with rimming benchland again, like the fourth lip of a vast square pit. Hmpf. House in a hollow makes the weather follow, she recited, slammed away into the back of the house, and wouldn't be spoken to for the rest of the morning.

Dad and I walked around the outbuildings. The sheepshed spread itself big beyond relief, bunkered along the base of a slope for a full forty yards, then elling off into the coulee for another forty, then closed around with a high board fence like a stockade. The one thing such expanse

insured was endless walking for the day man¹-Dad¹ during lambing time. Moose of a damn place, he muttered now as if trying to shrink it.

Weathered and dour as a fortress, the sheepshed looked to have crouched on its site eternally. Every other building in the ranch yard, however, reared from open ground to open sky as though spilled into place, hard, only an eyeblink before. Nothing greater than a spear of grass backed the buildings¹-no brushy windbreak, no board fence, not even a pitying fluff of sage as the valley would have provided. As for trees, the entire sum of them on the 2500-acre ranch¹-two¹-hunched low at the front of the house, evidently trying to cower in out of the wind.

McGrath had told us that this leasehold¹-it was called the Jensen ranch¹-began as a homestead, which meant that people had lived here from at least forty years earlier.

How had they never managed to make the place look less stark? From where we stood, a machine shed yawned with disuse on one side of us, a granary shed answered on the other. Between the pair bulked a barn built of notched logs, and its brown-gray mass only made the sheds look all the more cadaverous.

Everything in sight¹-ground, barn, sheds, a rusting windmill¹-was slightly aslant, as if the impact of the giant sheepshed at the bottom of the yard had teetered the entire ranch toward it.

It was when Dad noticed that he hadn't yet found a place

on the ranch where he could stand without one foot lower than the other that he pronounced the Irish fellow's lament on our new home. Then: Aw the hell, Skavinsky, we might as well go see what the grass looks like ~~and the two of us~~ ^M neither willing to risk a peace gesture in Grandma's direction yet ^M drove back up the long snout of benchland in front of the house.

We came up over the crest and were walled to a stop. The western skyline before us was filled high with a steel-blue army of mountains, drawn in battalions of peaks and reefs and gorges and crags as far along the entire rim of the earth as could be seen. Summit after summit bladed up thousands of feet as if charging into the air to strike first at storm and lightning, valleys and clefts chasmed wide as if split and hollowed by thunderblast upon thunderblast. Across the clear gape of distance, we could read where black-quilled forest wove in beneath cliffs and back among the plummet of canyons, we could make out the beds of scree crumbled and scattered beneath the marching shields of rimrock. The Smith River Valley had had mountain ranges all around. This high-set horizon twenty miles to our west thrust itself as if all those past ranges and twice their number more had been tumbled together and then armored with rimrock and icefield.

Off this carom-line of summits, we knew, the Continental Divide tipped rivers away to both the Pacific and the Atlantic.

The shouldering might of what Dad and I were looking at seemed as if it could send those entire oceans too sloshing along routes of flow if the notion struck. Then as the pair of us stared and cleared our throats to one another, we began to see a thing more. Along these mastering mountains, all the hundred miles of gashing skyline in our sight, fresh snow was draping down.

Here was a thought. Dad and I had lived our lifetimes beneath weather-making mountains, none of which tusked up into storm clouds as mightily as this Sawtooth Range of the Rockies would. In front of us now loomed the reefline of the entire continent, where the surf of weather broke and came flooding across, and both of us knew what could be ahead when full winter poured down off these north mountains. ~~peaks~~ Yet for the instant, to have come upon grandness anywhere near this spavined ranch, neither of us had the heart to care.

Down from the mountains as well, it turned out, this north country stretched as a land of steady expanse, of crisp-margined distances set long and straight on the earth. All the obliques of our valley life seemed to have been erased and redrawn here as ruler-edged plateaus of grassland, furrowed panels of grainfield, arrowing roads, creeks nosing quick and bright from the Rockies. The clean lines of this fresh landscape everywhere declared purpose and capacity,

seemed to trumpet: Here are the far bounds, all the extent anyone could need. Now live up to them. [#] Dad stepped from the pickup, slid his hands into his hip pockets and studied the shards and shields of the ~~Rockies~~^(Sawtooth Mountains) and then the bold-edged distances, north and south and east. Dandy country, he said, and turned to grin wide at me. As the fellow says, just dandy fine. Let's go tackle that Lady situation.

Dad by now had learned a considerable trove about how to handle Grandma—^M—the remainder of his problem being that there seemed to be some dozens of troves yet to be figured out about her—^M—and he had hit on what was needed to get her mind off the alarming ranch. We got to figure some place for Ivan to stay for school, Lady. These roads are gonna be too much to drive every day when winter sets in this country. What do ye think we ought to do? [#] The perpetual problem of basing me somewhere roused her. Well, we ought to go into what's-its-name, Dupuyer, and see what's what, oughtn't we? Criminentlies, that seems to me how to do . . . Now she looked Dad full in the face, acknowledging him with challenge. Don't it to you?

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It did, and we drove the nine dirt miles north to Dupuyer, luckily a briefer route than the bramble of roads we had come in by from the south. We noticed, with no surprise, that the Jensen ranch looked like an elderly addled cousin of the trim ranches along the way. Then our dirt road at

last sneaked itself to the highway, and down from a ridge--^M
this north seemed to be all flat ridgeline where it wasn't
iceberg mountains--Dupuyer lay tucked along a broad band of
brush which marked its namesake creek.

Off from either side of the highway, which doubled for
an instant as the main street, a few dozen houses and buildings
lined away, like a Ringling which had been ordered to close
in its ranks and paint itself up toward respectability.

The first of the town's businesses we came to had one sign
advertising it as a gas station, and another declaring it a
cafe, as if the enterprise hadn't entirely been able to make
up its mind and decided to take on both jobs. While Dad and

I searched out someone to put gas in the pickup, Grandma
marched into the cafe-sign side of the building and asked
the woman behind the counter if she knew anyone who would
board a high school boy. ^H The woman at once plunged into
thought, her lips set barely open as if in a soundless whistle.

This question from a stranger seemed to have taken over her ~~her~~ ^{entirely} ~~whole life~~, until finally she had to shake her head and say,

No, just nobody comes to mind. I guess most people aren't
willing to take in someone they don't know like that. Grandma
locked the woman with her steadfast look: Well, how about
you then?

That clamping look and those words began my stay with
the Chadwick family. Gertie, the woman of the cafe, said

afterward that her agreement came as an out-of-the-clouds hunch which startled her as she said it; after all, she had not laid eyes on me yet. But your grandma just had a way about her. I liked her right then, and figured I might like you. We would learn in turn that Grandma had landed me with three people it was impossible not to cherish.

Gertie Chadwick herself was Dupuyer's touchstone. Short and square-set, almost boxy—her parents had been stocky immigrants from Belgium, and the family line had gone even broader and more short-necked with her—she barely stubbed up^{just} above the top of the cafe counter. But somehow there was the energy packed in her to run her enterprise as busily and fondly as if it were a boardinghouse table and the many dozens of customers made up the most interesting crew on earth. She kept open for business 364½ days of the year; at Christmas, she would come downtown in the forenoon to feed the pensioned herders and widowers and others who took their every meal with her, then resolutely go home for the holiday afternoon. In day-by-day trade, travelers trooped in to her plentifully enough, as was guaranteed by Dupuyer's spot as the lone stopover of its sort amid a kinking eighty-mile stretch of the highway which led north to Glacier National Park and Canada. But Gertie's main service was to provide the community itself with brimming coffee cups and the daily victual of counter-stool chat to go with the brew. Ranchers

and farmers spilled in as they passed through town: You
fellows who've got winter wheat in will be able to be called
Mister this fall . . . It'll be a beaner if I can get 'er
harvested in this christly weather . . . They hailed out up
across the Marias. Pounded the damned wheat flat to the
ground . . . Looks like eighty-five pound lambs up on the
Reservation. Just a world of grass for 'em up there this
year . . . Other hours, their wives made their call, on the
way to buy groceries for a ranch crew or to fetch a machinery
part needed in the grain harvest or just to trade news with
one another.

no⁴ But the most precise and valued of Gertie's customers
were her regulars, the lone men who bought meals from her
by the month and arrived for them three times a day like
figures marching across the face of an elaborate tower[&]clock
as certain hours are struck.⁴ Since I took my meals side by
side with them, the regulars eyed me briefly, learned that
I was from a fending family and could see that I already
was doing some of it for myself, and dealt me into their
corps. A tiny ancient homesteader named Fred Groh at once
told me of arriving in Dupuyer when he was my age, and at
the break of spring hearing the thaw wind begin its roar down
across the crags of the Rockies: They told me it was the
chinook, and I wondered what kind of animal that could be,
to make a noise like that. The gentle and gray postmaster

John Wall eased in from across the street, puffing his pipe thoughtfully as he sparred jokes with Gertie. She upped the odds once by snipping a circle of cardboard and sliding it beneath the meat patty in his daily hamburger. As she turned back to the kitchen, he spotted the disc and slipped it out. Wordlessly he ate away as Gertie gnawed at her lip. At last the blurt from her: Don't you notice anything about that hamburger at all? He dabbed napkin to lips and gave me a slow wise wink: No sir, Gertie, it tastes just like your hamburgers always do. A gnome-faced man named Joe Smith mocked himself with little stories about his livelihood as a fur trapper, laughed with a haw-haw-haw which shook him all over, disappeared between times to the trap-lines he had set along the creeks beneath the mountains. Gertie's husband Harold noticed my interest in this half-phantom--there was little Harold did not notice--and began mumbling information: That Joe, by the god, he can catch any beaver he wants to. How the hell he does it, I dunno. He'll go out there to a beaver dam and catch all the big ones, leave the little ones. These ranchers'll ask him to catch all them beaver, but huh-uh: he leaves them little ones for seed, by the god, for next year.

Gertie herself must have heard twenty dozen times everything that was ever said around that counter, yet I noticed that she listened as readily as if every word was new to her and

encouraged the talk with a rich open-mouthed chuckle which
~~occupied~~
seemed to take her over entirely, the way Grandma's question
had done. This cafe of hers and its place in the life of
Dupuyer, I quickly came to see, reflected exactly this new
landlady of mine: plain to look at, hearty the day long,
and years-deep in polished affections.

The polish swiped away at once when you stepped over
the doorsill from the cafe into Harold Chadwick's service
station. The place was a conglomerate of workshop and junkyard,
massed with mechanical gear and tools which seemed to have
dropped down to catch their breath before seizing onto the
next project. The rear of the station at any given time
might house, amid the gasping hoods of cars, a de-motored
tractor or an axleless truck or a grain combine towering like
a freighter in dry dock.

Somewhere in the midst of it would be Harold himself,
a tall black-handed wizard cobbling away at the community of
machinery with deep pondering sighs. Luckily Harold's hands
spoke for him, because listening to him otherwise you caught
only those profound sighs, or a thin mutter which seemed to
come mostly via his nose, or sheer silence. Soon after I
began to board with the Chadwicks, a stint came when Gertie
hired someone to run the cafe in the evenings, and so would
feed us supper catch-as-catch-could at home, with Harold
arriving to eat by himself whenever he found space between

waiting repairs. Once after he made his wordless come and go, I went to the kitchen and joked to Gertie: Harold must've been here for his supper, hmm? I heard the kitchen door slam twice. She whooped with appreciation, and to my alarm retold the lines to Harold when he came home after closing. He looked across at me in surprise as I waited warily, and then gave me a great dark silent grin.

The Chadwicks had a son a few years older than I was--
Tommy Chad, as the townspeople sometimes lilted about this boy-man. Tommy worked at the service station with his father, and had inherited the magic with machines. His mother's thick-set look had rebuilt itself on him--anvil shoulders and solid beams of arms, his neck a collar of heft, blocky power anywhere you looked--until he seemed almost a brother to the machinery under repair from his blunt, deft fingers. Tommy's mulling effort to make his head speak as well as his hands gave him a quiet watchfulness much like my own. Since each of us had been raised alone as best our families had been able to find time for us, and each had come out of it with a knack the other didn't--my diet of books, his touch for machinery--we appreciated each other by a kind of survivors' instinct, like a Brazilian and a Laplander somehow falling into step in the same forest. Someone beside the pair of us as we forked down a meal at the cafe counter in comfortable silence turned and said: You two don't have much to say

for yourselves, do you? Tommy gave it an instant, then:

No. Just enough.

The three Chadwicks had a steadiness about them which carried out into their town. Dupuyer, unlike Ringling or White Sulphur Springs, seemed never to have had the least hesitation about its livelihood since the first wagonmaster wearily overnighted on the site sometime in the 1870's. In a dollar-counting meander between the horizon of mountains and the horizon of plains, the freighters' trail had marked itself northwestward through Montana from the steamboat landing at Fort Benton on the Missouri to the early Royal Canadian Mounted Police posts in Alberta. Even after the railroad speared cross-[?]continent to the north, the trail stayed busy as a capillary for mail and stage shipments out into the remote country edging the Rockies and their foothills. And all the while, the special site of plentiful grass and a constant creek was making itself into a merchandising settlement. The country rimming it to the west was found to be fine for sheep, and a local rancher named Oliver Goldsmith Cooper became president of the potent Montana Wool Growers Association. Before the turn of the century, a quarter million pounds of fleece were being shipped from the Dupuyer Creek ranches each year.

From then on, Dupuyer added little population, lost less: it somehow had found a spot of balance between the range hills

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and the farming plains, and the equilibrium set the town's mood. Once a year, for about a week toward the end of winter, everybody gets at everybody else's throats, Gertie explained to me. Then the chinook comes and we all get along together for another year.

One store, three gas stations, three saloons, the cafe, some few hundred feet of sidewalk, a few dozen houses, a couple of barns, several overtopping groves of cottonwoods, long winters, pushing winds, a hundred people, and a highway trenching it into halves. That was Dupuyer, entire and uncomplaining, and it won me in a week with its tidy life and the caress of its past. For the first time I could remember, I was living in a town which had a pace of life both useful and civil, and some deserved contentment with itself over that fact. With the Chadwicks, I was enfolded in a family which held warmths more constant than I was used to, even in the sunnier parts of the blizzard-and-thaw cycles of Dad, Grandma, myself. Even the Jensen ranch was proving less woebegone than expected in my weekends there with Dad and Grandma. The place was so basic after the pinwheel life of a big ranch such as the Camas, that there was ~~little way~~ ^{not much} to apply great effort to it, and Dad and Grandma were able to slacken their fierce work habits a bit. Beyond that, they too seemed to take pleasure from Dupuyer and the Chadwicks, to feel less edgy than any of us had for a long time. Told

ye this north country was worth a try, Dad crowed. I agreed entirely for the first few weeks^M—and then plummeted into a time when I wished I were anywhere else on the continent.

The tripwire was in my new high school. Because Dupuyer had never reached the size to have its own high school, its handful of students jounced by bus to the larger town of Valier, twenty miles east across the farm plains. Unlike Dupuyer, which simply had sprigged up by a trailside, Valier had been grandly planted, as the headquarters town for an 80,000-acre irrigation project which had been ditched onto the prairie early in the century. Now the town had the somewhat alarmed air of having built too much of itself for the size of its caretaking job. ~~6~~ ^{empty} blocks yawned away from, and sometimes through, its neighborhoods, and what had been allotted as a sizable downtown held only a single thin street of businesses.

The high school too seemed to spread more than was called for, crouching broadly and determinedly across most of a block as if putting roots into the earth. Inside, the building flung itself open in the wide gaunt logic of a frontier fort^M—a vast central room like a parade ground, with students' desks soldiered into file, class by class, all across the center, and classrooms sentried regularly around the side walls. All in all, there seemed to be a grayish barracks⁹-like feeling to the place, and I stepped in on my first morning with doubt crowding high in my throat.

By more luck than I could have prayed for, four of us arrived new to this school of a hundred students on the same mid-November day. Another of these newcomers rode the bus from Dupuyer with me--Carlton, who was a year or two older than I was, and boasted a gold tooth, black hair slicked back like an ebony skullcap, and girl-stories he began reciting as soon as he slipped into the seat beside me. ~~#~~ Your folks run sheep, huh? So'd the folks of my girlfriend last summer. She had to herd the goddamn things in this field, see, so they give her this Jeep and I'd motate out there, see, and get in with her and we'd do it right there in that goddamn Jeep, see. Then we'd roar out after those goddamn sheep and round 'em in. Run right over the woolly bastards if they didn't move fast enough, see. . . . ~~#~~ I listened with interest anything about girls and the new white worlds of their breasts and the unknown gulch at the top of their ~~legs~~ ^{thighs} was an item to know ~~o~~ but Carlton's tale was boggling: I didn't know whether to be more astonished at the vision of a girl naked in a Jeep or at daring to run over a sheep. Disappointed in me as an audience, Carlton sidled off toward the back of the bus ~~o~~ in a minute, his murmurs were going again. . . . do it right there . . . run right over the woolly bastards . . .

With the lighthouse wink of that tooth and his insistent exploit, Carlton drew off attention in our first few days at Valier. But my camouflage of quiet faded quickly. Too

many times each schoolday, I would look up and meet a set of cool gray eyes which could have outrivaled even Grandma's. The face around them was dark-browed, unadorned, and somehow both musing and ominous. Frances Carson Tidyman, who through a full generation had been scanning the students in her English classes as if they were muddy pebbles in a sluice box, had me under her steadiest focus.

What I already had begun to know about Mrs. Tidyman was as unsettling as her stare. She was the least likely presence to be found in a small farmtown school; a mysteriously spiced waft of booklore and speculative notions and astonishing languages and ~~oddnesses~~ ^{9A MO}. It was circulated that she cared almost nothing for money--that she habitually turned down the salary raises due her to forestall a day when the school could not afford her, and that she paid in stores by asking what amount was needed, scrawling the sum into whatever counter checkbook the clerk happened to hand her, and forgetting the matter forever. In Valier, this quick blink of a system worked well enough. But in the county's main shopping town of Conrad, it left a patter of misbanked checks bouncing behind her, and her husband had at last to fund a bank account there solely to cover her offhand signatures.

As with finance, she seemed to declare, so with time and costume. They meant no more to her than that she eventually had to appear somewhere, with something on. This brought

about her fame for occasionally gardening with her nightgown on, dark hair maned free and spilling to the waist--and of course, her flowers and vegetables encouraged to ally into whatever clumps and jumbles they would.

At school, she would arrive in dark plain dresses so alike that it could hardly be traced when she changed one for another; bunned her hair into a great black burl at the back of her neck; clopped from class to class in the severest of shoes. She was buxom, much like Grandma with a half more plumped on all around; her mounding in front and behind was very nearly more than the lackadaisical dresses wanted to contain. Leaning forward from the waist as she hurried about, she flew among us like a schooner's lusty figurehead prowling over a lazy sea.

The mind of Mrs. Tidyman was somewhat like that jostling garden of hers--sprigged here with the ~~Greek mythology~~ ^{classic tales of literature} she knew so entirely that she recited it to her children for bedtime stories, sprouting somewhere else with blood-red bouquets from Shakespeare, twining now into a tale such as having seen the cowboy artist Charlie Russell when she attended the university in Missoula: In the midst of a sorority tea someone deposited him with us ⁱⁿ dozens of fluffy girls, you understand, and he had been drinking for the ordeal--and then the utmost indignity, they took his hat from him and he had nothing to do with his hands, and sat helpless, imprisoned. . .

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The foliage of her learning laced everywhere through the school. She taught all the English courses, first- and second-year Latin, occasionally a course in Spanish, directed the plays, advised for the yearbook and newspaper, and oversaw the library. It could not be imagined where she might exist except in the midst of all this. She had taken leave for enough years to have four sons, and afterward decided the absence had been a mistake. Chinese peasant women did it properly, she reasoned, giving birth to their babies in the fields and going right on with their toil.

That earliest watching I felt from this unprecedented woman, it turned out, was to see whether I was a thief. A few times a year, a school-wide set of vocabulary tests was given, every student then ranked against national statistics. The first test-time fell in the second week after I enrolled at Valier, and I attacked with joy ~~if~~ if there was one knack in me, it was to hold in mind any word I had ever seen, much the way Dad could identify any sheep from all others. When this first of the set of tests was scored, no one among the seniors, juniors or sophomores achieved better than a respectable 50. One of my classmates soared to a 60, well up in the national percentiles. My paper lofted off to an unscorable 75.

Before I had time to get the grin off my face, Mrs. Tidyman had asked me into the library, locked the door, and with as much tact as she could muster--somewhere close to none--

wondered abruptly whether I had come across the answer sheet before the national test. Whatever denial I stammered to her--what nightmare was this, did I have to prove myself stupid before I would be trusted here? ^Mshe had a better one in the making. All right. There are three more tests in the next three days, and I have the answer sheets secure. We'll just see how you score on them.

Three times more I gapped everyone else in the school and shot out the top of all percentiles. I didn't know whether to be triumphant or apprehensive, but before I had much time for either, Mrs. Tidyman again was hauling me into the library, clicking the lock, eyeing me relentlessly. You know, you really ought to take my Latin class next year. Latin will be an advantage for you in the use of English. And you should write for the school paper, there's good practice. And I want to know what you read. I have a houseful of books if you can't find enough here . . .

I gulped the relief of being out from under Mrs. Tidyman's suspicion, and sat back to see what the gale of her approval would bring. In the classroom, each hour with her began like a conjuring, or a parody of one. She would clomp ⁱⁿ and back herself ~~up~~ onto a high stool behind a thin-legged lectern. At last secure in mid^pair she would revolve toward the class, the entire billow of her far up over us, with the lectern-top before her as if commanded to hover there. Then

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her hand deep into her dress front and out of that vault of bosom would come eyeglasses, tethered on a neck chain which still did not entirely stop her from losing them a few times each day; a balled handkerchief; a fountain pen, likely leaking; perhaps a fat ring of keys, or a shredding blizzard of notes to herself. Up would come her head from an unperturbed inventory of this rummage. A mild glare or a stern look of fondness—her shadings of expression could be baffling—fastened onto the last of the class to go quiet. With it might fall the entire total of her irony, the query Do you mind if I begin now?

At last supplied and delivered, she set at us. The day's assigned reading might be thumped open and launched into sheerly for the entrancement of hearing herself aloud: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness—oh, people, can you hear those phrases ring against one another? . . . If there was agony and tragedy, so much the richer fancy: As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport. When I read the headline of an airplane crash, people, first I wish that no one I know was killed. Then that no one from Montana was killed. Then that no one from this country. Then that no one at all would have been killed—oh, people, the casual lightning bolts which come down on us . . . She would escort Richard Cory and Miniver

Cheevy to their poetic dooms one instant, bring Ivanhoe galloping in to the bleats of chivalry's trumpets the next. Now Lady Macbeth in gore, now Portia pleading against blood. In Latin class, Mrs. Tidyman never could have us read in Caesar's Commentaries without declaiming on Caesar the man; could not declaim on Caesar without sketching Roman society; could not sketch the Romans without embracing all the Mediterranean, on and on in a widening spiral of lore and enthusiasm, glasses flying in her hand and bosom wheeling above the lectern like turrets searching for new fields of gunnery.

But it was the grammar of English that exalted her most. Day after day we would troop to the blackboard to take apart sentences for her, phrases chalked to one another like scaffolding, being shown how a clause dovetailed here, an infinitive did the splicing there, the whole of it planed and beamed together as her pointer whapped through a reading of the revealed sentence. For her the language held holy force, and she shuddered at any squander of it. In what must have been her fullest spate of forgiveness, she once apologized about one of the townswomen: Once you get used to her split infinitives, you'll find she's a very nice person.

And so Mrs. Tidyman hovered at me from her heights of language, declaiming, diagramming, rhapsodizing, unabashedly giving favor to any of us who seemed rapt. I was more than

rapt, held by her whirligig of language and learning as if I were a ball swung on a tether. I bet she thinks she glommed onto something when you came to that school, Grandma assessed after one of my reports about Mrs. Tidyman. Maybe, I said, as if I hadn't had the answer drilled into me by gray eyes.

Mrs. Tidyman, exhausting and exasperating and exhilarating, was one education new to hand in our northern move. Another

introduced itself at the Jensen ranch on a weekend soon after we had moved in. Two plump men presented themselves at the door and asked plees, to see the chentleman of the ranch.

Both were bearded, both wore black outer clothing over brilliant red shirts, and both stared as blinklessly into the kitchen as a pair of holidaying parsons who had lucked upon naked natives. Grandma shooed them off toward the sheepshed to find Dad, rammed the door shut and snicked a table knife into the jamb. Who in Christmas do you suppose them two are?

I had no supposing to offer; they were as much apparition to me as to her. But when Dad came in for coffee, the pair clomped at his heels. These fellows are Hoots, he grinned.

They're our neighbors.

Beyond the second ridgeline to the south of us, we discovered, lay a ranch colony of a hundred such Hutterites, a shy tranced people who gabbled among themselves in a German dialect and lived barracks-style according to their signals from God. Heaven told them an endless amount that we had

never heard of, such as that when one of their men married he had to grow whiskers along his jawline to make the face= circle which represented a wedding ring, or that their women were proper only when swathed in long skirts, aprons and kerchiefs, like walking mounds of fresh laundry. When we visited the colony to buy eggs or vegetables—the parsonly pair had come by to invite us to do so—we also found that the Hoots ran their ranch with a brisk orderliness which made the Jensen ranch seem even more woebegone. Each family was allotted a set of rooms with gleaming board floors and stern furniture. The small children waddled about like fat dolls in museum costumes, but the young men were hived off by themselves, four to a room, from their early teens until they married. The young women, rose-cheeked mysteries inside their hoods and curtains of ginghamware, stayed within the family until that marrying somehow managed to happen.

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All the colony ate in a single great dining hall, the men and boys first, then the women and children after their superiors strode back to work. Hierarchy, it seemed, was their second religion. The Hoots doled work responsibilities as if they were the line officers of some farmerly regiment: one man was appointed the Cow Boss, another the Sheep Boss, a third the Vegetable Boss, on and on until every task was divvied out with its handle of duty and its claim on the colony's work force as needed. Perhaps having eyed other

communal brethren toiling to stay with the old ways, the Hoots also had made their decision about modern machinery: they would use every roaring horsepower of it they could get their hands on. The colony clattered with tractors, throbbed with helpful engines. A constant sight was a Hoot truckload of eggs speeding off to one town or another, a gaggle of black-clad young men in the back like crows hitching a ride.

All in all, the Hutterite system clicked out work like an assembly line. The Dupuyer people said the Hoots could thrive a hundred at a time on land where an ordinary family had starved out. They did not mean it as a compliment.

For the Hoots, we learned, had dark stains. The first scandal always recited about them was that they did not believe in serving in the army. Next, that Hoot colonies didn't pay taxes like the rest of us because they were church organizations. And beyond that, in muskier tones, their marrying habits. The Hoots, it seemed, intermarried cousin to cousin until an entire colony might have only two or three surnames in it, with the sinful clans further strung throughout colonies elsewhere in Montana and western Canada.

War, money and sex: whatever else you said of them, the Hutterites did not skirt the big topics of life. Dad, with his penchant for hard clean-edged work, liked the Hoots at once. As often as he could arrange it, some chore would

take him to the colony, and the Sheep Boss would hail him--
Vell, Chollie! Vot's your business?--and escort him into the
dining hall, where one of the kerchiefed women brought him
slices of bread or cake flat on the palm of her hand. There
also might be a snifter of the fine sweet rhubarb wine produced
by the colony, and manly grumbles with the Sheep Boss about
the price of lambs and the prospects of grass. Grandma was
less enchanted--the men ran the colony too high-handedly,
They parade around over there like they was somebody--but
eventually she too decided they were satisfactory neighbors.
Certainly they were hard-working, and with her that nearly
canceled out their quirks about soldiering and family line.

On the other hand, she made a perplexity for the Hoot
men when they came to visit Dad, with her refusal to withdraw
and leave the conversation to the males. Her abrupt verdicts
on the world were beyond their ken--Ach, vell, perhaps,
Mizzus Ringer, perhaps, but yet--and our rankly household
must have been as mysterious to the Hutterites as their ordered
family regiments were to us. ~~if~~ Yet Dad evidently was a sensible
enough soul on any topic except women, and their nearest
neighbor besides, so the Sheep Boss and a crony or two
continued to come by and confide to him their worries about
the younger Hoots, tender rabbits for the snares strewn by
the modern world. Television was the newest and seemed the
most treacherous. Harold Chadwick had sent off for a mail

order course, scratched his chin briefly over the ream of diagrams, then wired up a picture tube which now flickered and snapped in the Dupuyer service station day and night. The elders recognized how spellbinding the fuzzed universe in the tube could be--Hoot youngsters were flocking in to gawk at Harold's miracle by the hour--but were stymied about how they could battle it. Still, one thing to be done was to stay as unsurprised as possible about the outside world's gray magic, and the Sheep Boss, showing how aweless he could be, began to tell Dad about his wife's fright when she glimpsed Dupuyer's startling television set. Ho, she t'ot the world was going straight to ~~h~~ here he noticed Grandma as usual listening sharply, and could not bring himself to say to hell in her presence. Vas . . . vas going down! he finished desperately, pushing his palms toward the brimfire below. Grandma eyed him with fresh suspicion of Hoot backwardness: She took a look at a television and thought she was FALLING? Hmpf.

The Hutterites gave Grandma something to mutter about, and she shortly solved for herself some of the ranch's yawning emptiness. McGrath had left us with a bonus of a few of his everlasting dog pack. Behind the bunkhouse door one evening, a small several-colored bitch apologetically gave birth. The pups were only two, but their mother's haphazard colors were passed on in fullest style. One came out with a coat of sheening black, ice-tipped at the tail and ruffed whiter

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yet at his chest and neck; the other was a snowfield with thaws of tan, the brockled markings romping up his sides and under his ears. Grandma at once claimed them both, pointing out to Dad that we'd had enough of McGrath's thuggish hounds and ought to train good sheep dogs of our own. It was an argument he could not answer. I suggested we call the newcomers McGrath and Jensen. Grandma rapped out that she had never heard of such names for dogs--there was no answer to that either--and dubbed them Spot and Tip. From then on, these brothered dogs were to be the fourth and fifth members of our family, and to bring us rewards and woes almost as major as those we brought on each other.

Both, to Dad's discomfort, began to grow up with a stubbornness they seemed to imbibe straight from Grandma. Spot, winsome as his brockled coat, proved to be tirelessly happy and helpful. By every instinct in him, he was a superb sheep dog, eager, far-ranging, steady; he had a sense of what he was about to be commanded to do, and seemed to start his policing arc around a strayed ewe before your arm had quite come up to direct him. Tip was as tireless, but for him, that same straying sheep clicked in his mind as a target of opportunity: he was, brain and fang, a born biter.

Since Tip also was the fleetest dog any of us had ever seen--his black body sleek and whetted as a racehorse's, the white peak of his tail streaking flat behind him like the flare of

a rocket--he constituted a lethal weapon. Dad and Grandma at last harangued and cuffed Tip into a rough civility, which put him in a mood of hurt astonishment that he should be veered from anything so natural as savaging a ewe. But for all efforts, sending Tip far around the sheep always remained chancy, like target-practicing near an ammunition dump, and the sheep learned to shy and stampede into retreat at the farthest sight of the black fury. ^q Spot watched his brother with curiosity--he knew just as deeply in his instincts that the sheep were never to be bitten--and loped his routes around the bank like a guiding angel. But Spot too had the streak of insistence in him: his lust was for appreciation. From Grandma, he had reward in plenty, endless pettings and talkings--to and the freedom of the house. From Dad, quickly ablaze with having been jumped on fondly by Spot for the twentieth time in a day or having tripped across his doorway sprawl for the fortieth, he could not count on such affection, and it would seem to puzzle him briefly, his tongue out a corner of his mouth as he watched Dad's thwarting back. Then with a thankful look around the room, Spot would plop in the doorway again and wait for his next shift with the beloved sheep.

Dad and I thought we had become used to a life full of dogs when Grandma suddenly filled it more from another direction. From somewhere she now came up with a cat, a self-sufficient young gray tiger which she named--no advice asked or offered

this time L-Kitten. All right, Lady, Dad decreed, watching
m Kitten purr across his shins, that'll be just about enough.

In this first half-year of our new northern life, some surprises began to be shown by the Jensen ranch itself, basic and stark and drowsing as it seemed. The first was that the place had clay bogholes hidden like elephant traps in its grass. After a few plunges into those wallows and his cursing hikes to the Hoots for a tow, Dad traded the pickup in favor of a metal-cabbed Jeep. The next startlement came at lambing time, when snow clung and clung to the benchland slopes and the grass refused to green. Without the fresh grass, the ewes' milk was weak and their lambs came down with diarrhea. The pile of tiny carcasses outside the great shed began to grow by the hour. ¶ Damn-it-all-
to-hell, these lambs are all gonna drizzle themselves to
death if we don't do something. Dad hurried a call to a veterinarian, and what we were to do was to spoon cod liver oil, for its vitamin D content, into every lamb.

¶ Across a nightmare set of days m-I stayed home from school for the crisis m-we penned and caught and spoonfed each of the two thousand lambs. They survived, but we nearly didn't, thumbs aching from having forced two thousand stubborn mouths open for the medicine, backs bowed from two thousand reachings and liftings. As we grayly ate supper after the last handling of the last lamb, Grandma

~~mutter~~
could barely murmur: A sideways outfit this is, not even
the grass wants to grow like it should . . .

But there was pasture grass to come, months spilling with grass, as if a fifth season had been tamely matted into the middle of the year. Dad's decision to come north with McGrath had been keyed to this—the summer pasture for the sheep on the prairie of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation north of Dupuyer. They say that Reservation is a bunchgrass country you can hardly believe. If I can't bring fat lambs in from grass like that, I've had my head off my shoulders for forty years. The Jensen ranch was leased for only eight months of the year; from June through October, the grass months which would fatten the lambs for shipping, Dad and Grandma and I would graze the sheep on a pasture allotment on the Reservation. We were about to see the prairie face of our northern life.

When the sheep's hooves hit the road at the edge of the ranch on the last morning of May,¹⁹⁵⁴, we flung ourselves into three desperate days of trudging, yelling, dogging, cursing, fretting. Our Reservation range lay forty highway miles north from Dupuyer, and every step of it threatened to joggle loose the dim panic at the center of each sheep's brain. Pushing the skittery thousands of animals up the strange dike of pavement became a guerrilla struggle against every yapping farmyard dog, any blowing bit of paper—and worse, each and every auto that came along

like a hippopotamus nosing among penguins. ~~H~~ Grandma would be seething against the motorists within the first half-mile: God darn them, don't they have enough brains to even take themselves through a band of sheep? Tourists stopping innocently in the middle of the band to ask why the lead sheep had a bell on and all the others didn't would find themselves fiercely invited to git on through the sheep here, how would you like it if I laid down in your front yard and started asking you questions? ~~H~~ We were to live for the summer in a much-traveled small trailer house which McGrath had flimflammed from somewhere; Dad had it in tow behind the Jeep--Kitten an indignant yowling passenger inside--and roved nervously with this worn-looking convoy in the wake of the sheep, jumping out to whoop stragglers down the highway and hustling around to catch any exhausted lambs which needed to be ferried in the Jeep for a time. I did whatever he couldn't get to, and as well painted off in endless arcing jogs around the sheep to flag down cars in blind spots on the road. ~~H~~ I had made, each for Grandma and for myself, a noisemaker called a tin dog--a ring of baling wire with half a dozen empty evaporated milk cans threaded on so that it could be shaken, tambourine-like, into a clattering din. Mile upon mile, with our ruckus behind them, the dubious ewes and their panicky lambs edged north.

Water decreed each day's push of the sheep. From the Jensen ranch, we had to make the 16 miles north to Birch Creek the first night, in order to bed the tired band where they could graze and drink. It meant funneling the sheep through Dupuyer at mid-morning, the Chadwicks and other townfolk stepping out to give us a hand as the woolly sea of backs shied from gas pumps and parked cars and the thin neck of bridge across Dupuyer Creek; pushing on across a broad chocolate-and-gold bench of farmland; and then into the long tight trench of fenced lane, a full afternoon of battling traffic and time. *¶* The only ones happy with the summer trail were Tip, who saw it as a feast of sly nips among the sheep, and Spot, who adoringly would begin to herd half the band up the highway by himself and to loll tonguey grins at us for appreciation. The pair of them had their grandest moment of the year here where the sheep had to be shoved like a vast ball of wool into the neck of a bottle. Time after time an exasperated ewe would prance out and, like a knight's charger for a single haughty instant, stamp a front hoof at the dogs in challenge. Then, it dawning on her that she was entirely helpless against the knife-toothed pair, she would whirl and waddle in panicked retreat. One of my chores was to try to keep Tip from tearing these bold ninnies to ribbons, and he regarded me with his puzzled hurt whenever

I shouted him back in time. At last, after hours of working the tin dogs and the real dogs and ourselves--^M by sunset if we had been lucky--^M the sheep would spill off the highway to the graveled banks of Birch Creek.

The second day, the same straining push to water, this time a dozen highway miles to Badger Creek. In places the road now whipped into sudden curves, and I would spend most of this day flagging the coming cars in front of the sheep. We were on the Blackfeet Reservation now, and I passed my time between baffled tourists by wondering what our life here would be like. All I knew of Indians was that carloads of them whirled into Dupuyer most nights of the week. They had come for beer, would drink it in their cars, then drive off again in a lurching stutter of traffic. Every few weeks there would be slaughter, a beery pickup-load crashing off a highway curve and the limp bodies catapulted against cutbanks and along the barrow pit. The state highway department sternly put up a white cross wherever an auto victim died, and some curves on the highway here north of ^SDupuyer were beginning to look like little country graveyards. And I had read avidly what a Reservation correspondent named Weasel Necklace wrote in one of the region's weekly newspapers about the doings of his tribesmen: Some of the people went to Conrad to do some shopping, and they all managed to come *gal 15*

back through Dupuyer. From there they came home fighting and singing . . . Jesse Black Man was picked up at a ranch last week disturbing a home. And when police found him he was in a hay stack, with just his head covered. . . . Something wrong--Stoles Head Carrier has been staying home, he won't go to town. He does wrong when in town, and now has started to go wrong here . . . The Blackfeet seemed to be a rambunctious people; I wondered what they thought of our white faces and gray sheep against the backcloth of their prairie past.

As we passed the accident crosses nearer and nearer to our Reservation lease, like silvered warnings along a route of pilgrimage, the landscape emptied and emptied until there was no hint of flowing water or tree cover. Then sometime beyond noon on the third day, a sudden earth-splitting trench of both: the Two Medicine, a middling green-banked river which somehow had found itself a gorge worthy of a cataract. We came behind the sheep down a long sharp skid of slope, looking below to high clumps of cottonwoods on the river bank, a few tribal houses, even what seemed to be an entire tiny ranch or two. Lazing east, the Two Medicine wound out of sight beneath a cliff face which banked about a hundred feet high, like a very old and eroded ~~fortress~~ ^{castle} wall. We were told later that the site had been a buffalo jump, where the horseback

Blackfeet stampeded the animals over the edge to death.

4 Then the final bridge of our route, across the mild flow of river, and the highway ramping up the facing canyon slope. The Two Medicine carved the southern boundary of our summer geography, our lease rimming off there at the fortress cliffs. And so, late in the third day, the sheep at last fan onto the summer pasture. We call in the disappointed dogs and let the band ease, graze, rest. Now for the next hundred days and more, the slow munch of the ewes and lambs across the ridges will be our pace of life.

A new country again: this Reservation land lay like long tan islands in a horizon-brimming tan ocean. Westward the Rockies jagged up as if they were the farthest rough edge of the world, but the other three directions flung themselves flat to grass, grass and grass. Eastering ridgelines such as the one we would live along ran from the base of the mountains tawny as lion's backs and crouched forward a bit toward the region's draining rivers, the Two Medicine in its plummet of gorge to our south and the Marias—a name I would hold on my tongue half the summer—beyond sight to the east.

Open and overawing as it was, this summer land seemed tense, pulled taut and inward, with its contradictions. All this flatness and yet some purposeful tilts to it,

Somehow

our own ridge dropping after any few paces southward, slanting off to a sharp coulee which pitched deeper and darker, the single cut of line anywhere on the prairie, until it shot like a flume through the base of the cliffs above the Two Medicine. The sun wheeling so hot ~~v~~ above the plain that sweat cooked from you even as you stood, yet on the crownline of the mountain horizon there might be white=gray snow clouds coldly billowing. A landscape which seemed to have nearly no water, and of water plentiful but unseen--for across our entire empire of pasture, there was a single tiny spurt of fresh water for us at a trickling spring near the ridge base, and for the sheep, dred pools from the melt of winter's snowdrifts hidden in the bowl bottoms between every ridgeline. ~~H~~ Then the contradiction ~~that~~ ~~which~~ answered my wondering about what it would be like living among the Blackfeet. We were amid them, all right, in the heart of the prairie which they had roved and ruled for generations, and there was to be scarcely an Indian in sight--nor anyone else, inhabitant or traveler--on our allotted grassland across the entire summer.

That left the question of how the three of us would live with ourselves. Almost before we had fanned the sheep onto the new grass of the Reservation and could begin to find out, McGrath arrived with another of his sudden projects. He had a contract to build several miles

of fence on a ranch west of Great Falls, and Mickey-and-Rudy were at some other chore for him. He wanted Dad to subcontract the fencing from him. ~~H~~ It would be quick money, which we could use; Dad could easily finish the job in a few weeks. Dad turned to Grandma and me: Can you pair handle these sheep for that time? Not at all sure we could, we both echoed that we supposed so. Dad drove off with McGrath. Grandma and I stared down from the ridge to the four thousand grazing animals which now were our responsibility.

When we went down to take a closer look, we found that not all of them were grazing. A few were on their sides, legs stiff in the air, dead as stones. We looked at them in bafflement: they were some of the plumpest, best ewes in the entire band, the kind Dad called dandiest. Poison? There were no white-green blossoms of death camas in sight, and neither Grandma nor I could think of any other threat. Queasily, I snicked open my pocket knife. I had watched Dad skin the pelts from carcasses before, but never had done it myself.

By the time I had sliced and ripped the pelts from the dead sheep, Grandma was puffing back from a look at the far side of the band. Gee gods, there's another one dead over there. I seen the trouble. They're getting themselves down to scratch.

It dawned what this treeless, flowing grassland

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meant to us just then. There was not one upright particle on all these miles of range for a sheep to rub against, and an attack of ticks was beginning to make the ewes itch beneath their heavy fleeces. Of course it had been one of McGrath's economies that the sheep hadn't been sprayed for ticks as they were at the Camas: Aw hell, in this country I don't think ticks will amount to anythin'.

Now the sheep were rolling themselves on the ground to scratch—a roll which easily carried them too far onto their deep-wooled backs to be able to get up again, and within minutes in the summer heat, their struggling would bloat them to death. We had the prospect of endless ballooned corpses around us. ~~H~~ I choked to Grandma: What the hell are we gonna do? She snapped: I don't like to hear you say 'hell.' Then: We're gonna have to stay right with the sheep and turn 'em off their Gadblasted backs.

We spent every daylight hour of the next fourteen days patrolling the sheep. When we spotted the telltale kick of hooves in the air, I would run to the ewe, grab deep into her fleece and heave her over ~~S~~, she would wobble off, lopsidedly bulging with the bloat gas built up in her, but alive. Grandma used Spot and Tip. A ewe's redoubled panic as she looked along the ground and saw those eager jaws bulleting for her usually was enough to thrash her onto her feet.

But we could not be everywhere every moment, and so we lost sheep to themselves--one, sometimes two ^{or} a day, which I would skin out bitterly and carry the spongy pelt back to camp. We had lost about twenty when McGrath and Dad drove in one noontime. ^HMcGrath was furious at the sight of the stack of pelts, each of them a few cents' remainder from one of his high-priced ewes. He found he was less furious than Grandma, who scorched him up, down and crosswise for not having sprayed the sheep for ticks.

^HDad let it go on for a while--it was not often a person got to see McGrath take a torching of this sort--and at last broke in: All right, all right, this isn't helping a thing. Let's get matters going again, why don't we? First thing, Mac, will you watch the sheep a couple hours while we go into town for grub? Lady's gonna have to do a helluva shopping by now. McGrath saw no way to refuse, and Grandma and I sulked into the Jeep with Dad.

On the way into Browning we defended ourselves endlessly, until Dad at last settled us down by pointing out that the fencing money already was bolstering our bank account and that most of the loss of the ewes would come out of McGrath's end of the shares arrangement. I know you did your level best with the sheep. I'd trust the both of you with 'em again in a minute.

Grandma and I were improved by the time we drove back

from Browning. We improved more when the Jeep growled down to the sheep and we spotted McGrath. He was up to his elbows in skinning a dead ewe. Unable to range fast and far enough on those brief bowed legs of his, he had lost three sheep on their backs while we were gone. A truce, never broken, came down over all mention of our stint of herding alone.

With Dad back ~~on~~ the scene, we settled into our slow summer, the trailer house towed back and forth along the ridge summit each week or so like a silver turtle creeping the horizon, the sheep nuzzling east or west on the prairie below as the grass led them. Separately, the lives of the three of us by now had touched down in dozens of random sites, but nothing out of the past of any one of us quite prepared a person for this flood of ~~Reservation~~ prairie. The country yielded two items: earth to navigate over, and the bunchgrass, sprouting like countless elfin quivers of white-tipped arrows, to nourish the sheep. All else of life had to be fetched, if it first could be found. ~~Every second~~ ^{or third} evening, we bounced down the ridge in the Jeep to fill our water cans at the tiny trickle of a spring, and perhaps to have a swimming bath in the mud-banked reservoir below the spring. Fire fuel was scarcer than water. Not a twig of wood grew anywhere within sight, and we had to rove like horse

gr H7

thieves to find a collapsed shed or a driftwood pile along the Two Medicine.

There was a mockery here, because as we explored off across the empty spans of prairie, we again and again came across what seemed the eeriest of abundances: seagull flocks. Grandma and I had never seen them before, but Dad recognized their white soaring from his winter on the Pacific Coast: Must be in here feedin' on grasshoppers. Grandma, however, noted only that the gulls would scavenge a sheep carcass as avidly as magpies, and at once adopted them as the same sort of nemesis. She dubbed them sharks, and the Reservation ridgelines began to ring with: Git, GIT, you gosh darn sharks, nothin' dead around here for you good-for-nothings! . . .

Our source of groceries was the Reservation headquarters town of Browning, some ten miles to the northwest. Going in for supplies once a week broke our monotony on the herding range, but replaced it with sour notions of the Reservation people. Whatever time of day we drove in, Browning always seemed a stunned place, snuffling in the dust from its chuckholed streets and bleary from booze or boredom or some worse affliction all its own. ~~H~~ The town's remnant of the Blackfeet nation seemed even more mauled than those who frequented Dupuyer ~~H~~-squinty leather ~~leather~~ colored people, men with black braids dropping tiredly from under their cowboy hats, women so fat they seemed

to waddle even standing still. These people dipped and veered along the sidewalks, entire families drunk by mid²day, cars racketing away with bodies spilled half out the windows. ~~H~~ Which was explainable enough: anyone who was industrious was out of sight somewhere earning a living, and to judge a people entirely by the Browning street scenes was as blinkered as walking into the non-Indian saloon crowds on a Saturday night in White Sulphur Springs or Dupuyer and declaring that no white person in the county could be capable of drawing a sober breath. Yet we did judge that way, and hard. When we met an Indian rancher at the eastern boundary of our lease land who was diligent and prosperous, Dad said: Well, they can do some work if they want to, I guess. But most of them Browning boozes ought to sign on for lessons from the Hoots.

Since the Blackfeet never appeared out on their own landscape, we took advantage of the emptiness to become steady poachers, letting the pothole lakes feed us fresh meat. Ducks and geese dabbled there all summer long, and our .22 rifle made a soft, quickly-gone whinng which couldn't be heard beyond the ridges. Dad and I had sharpshooting contests, trying to snick off the ducks' heads without touching the body meat. Spot, forever ready for trouble or help, instantly learned to retrieve; Grandma whooped

orders and scoldings at him until he would deposit the birds to her gently as a feathery bouquet.

Life inside the trailer house was as cramped as life outside was unbounded. Our entire space was about twenty feet long and seven feet wide. Dad and I shared the bunk which went across one end; Grandma made her bed on the padded built-in bench which doubled as seating along one side of the table. Between the beds was walled a welter of tiny drawers, cabinets, closets, a cookstove, and the breadbox-sized battery radio on which Grandma listened to her soap operas in the mornings and Dad and I listened to the baseball broadcasts while the sheep were shaded down at mid-day. The sun's heat hit the aluminum-painted roof of the trailer and went bowling off in dizzy wavers, but even so, the central part of the day inside our quarters was like being in a lidded stewpot. Time stretched and sagged. The dogs abandoned us and went to lay drooped and panting in the square of shade beneath the Jeep. When we weren't trying to doze through the hot hours, Dad and I read, Grandma either played solitaire or crocheted, periodically straightening her glasses in disgust and giving her commentary that Wouldn't you just know, this thread keeps tangling itself six ways from Sunday.

The one among us truly at ease with the drifting prairie life was Kitten, who instantly discovered himself to be a long-grass hunter. We would catch early-morning

glimpses of him padding off through the ridgeline's shoetop — high veldt, an intent tiger the size and shade of a jackrabbit. To Grandma's agitation, Kitten always was away on a hunt whenever we moved the trailer house to a new site. ~~8~~ 8 — each time she would ~~storm~~ fretfully about his absence, each time Dad would declare, as if he knew everything about cats, He'll turn up when he gets his fill of prowlin', and each time, that night or the next morning, Kitten would come purring in along the wheel tracks on the grass and leap casually into Grandma's lap.

But for the three of us cooped in the trailer house, this boundless northland—H—mockery again—H—seemed to be tightening and tightening our lives. The first weeks of July came, and the ewes were sheared by a Mexican crew who put up a canvas town amid the tan grass for two days and then vanished. The prairie hung even emptier ~~with~~ ^{once} their musical jabber ~~was~~ gone. The land's tautness grew and grew into us until an afternoon in midsummer, when Dad got up from lunch to go look at the sheep. ~~4~~ He asked if I wanted to ride along. My nose sighted into a book, I said my usual No, not unless you need me. I recognize now that he did need me, in a way neither of us could have put to words then, but he said only no, he'd go alone, be back soon.

~~4~~ He came in the door an hour later pale and pawing his chin nervously. What's got into you? Grandma demanded. Damn-it-to

hell, he breathed: I just almost shot a man.

When he climbed into the Jeep to go, Dad as usual had taken his .30-30 hunting rifle with him. We had been warned in Browning that a dog pack was savaging sheep in the area, and I want to be able to cut down on the bastards if they get into ours. What caught his eye from the topmost lift of the ridgeline, however, was not a few dogs but an entire band of sheep, like a giant wedge aimed on a long ripping route all the way across our range. A band on the move of course was allowed to cross a person's range--a necessary code of the country--but these sheep were broadly flung and grazing, not being driven. It would take them three days to cross at their pace, and in that time they would scythe out our summer's best grass.

Dad drove down to the munching band, and pulled up near the herder and his dogs. I said to old mister herder, 'these sheep are eatin' my prime range here, suppose you can swing 'em nearer those north ridges and clear 'em out of here by tonight?' Big strappin' son-of-a-buck, he looks at me and says, 'I got a right to trail these sheep through here, I always have.' I says, 'Then why don't you trail 'em?' Then he started cussin' and came right for me. He was set to drag me out and give me a good goin' over, he was.

Startled, his hands still innocently on top of the steering wheel, Dad kicked the Jeep door open to show the .30-30 cradled across his lap. That slowed the honyocker up some, you can just

bet. He took a good look and backed off and put those dogs on
the sheep and didn't stop until he was off our grass. But
if he'd kept comin' at me there, I'd of had to pull the
trigger on him . . .

That day sobered us--Dad shoot someone? The deathly
clap of the .30-30 shatter the prairie silence, blood spurt
onto our lease grass?--as if we had been slapped from a
trance. After that, I rode with Dad whenever he drove out
to check on the sheep. Not the least of the lesson from
the face-off was that if I had been with him instead of
burrowed into a book, the two of us could have handled the
charging herder without a rifle coming into it. # Grandma
was subdued, on guard against herself from saying anything
rilesome. Instead, one morning she came out with: I just
been thinking. I could take a turn looking at the sheep
if I could drive the Jeep. Suppose you can learn me?

Apron flapping, this woman who had teamstered horses in
weather and terrain most people wouldn't set foot into
now strode out with Dad and me and settled nervously behind
the first steering wheel of her life. Although she never
would venture onto a road or be talked into trying for a
driver's license--I'm scared of that written part--the
Reservation's expanses after this regularly heard the sound
of her grinding the Jeep along in low gear, bonused with the
beep! of surprise as she brushed against the horn button
every so often.

Dad made his own conciliation. He suggested that Grandma and I make a visit to White Sulphur Springs for a week. I know you want to see your family there, Lady,
you deserve to and I'll be all right alone here. I'll see
there's no more funny business like that rifle affair.
The two of you go.

We did go, did our visiting. The Smith River Valley seemed to me to lay beneath narrower castled horizons now. Where was the expanse, the sense of living at the ridgeline of the entire continent, in any of this? Yet where in our summer trailer or in the Jensen house was any of the knit of the past which each of us, and Grandma most of all, still could feel from the valley? ~~H~~ I drove us north again wondering to myself how we were going to fend. If I wanted to look at our situation in its coldest light ^H-and being a worrying youngster, I did-^H the three of us added up to a makeshift family who lived in half a house for two-thirds of a year and then trooped off onto the prairie to exist more oddly yet. It was nothing to recommend to the rest of society. But say this for ourselves, we still were together, after nearly four years of grimly cobbled truces between Dad and Grandma. And I found, as I mulled it, that a knack for cobbling was not a small thing from this thin-tempered pair.

I had another fret when we were back with Dad on the ridgeline and I rode with him to look at the sheep: These

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lambs just don't look as big to me as the ones were at the Camas. Dad had a grinning answer for that: They're not. But they're heavier. The grass is so crisp up here it packs a hard fat on 'em. They won't be roly-poly like the ones in the Smith River country, but they'll weigh like all hell when we ship 'em. ~~A~~ He was right. On the late September weekend when we chuted the lambs into stock cars at a railroad siding north of our range, their poundage made it a festivity. McGrath broke into a crooked-toothed smile as he penciled the profit figures. ~~meanwhile~~ ~~Spot~~ ~~outdid himself~~ as a virtuoso among sheepdogs. Even Tip, cruising along the outside of the shipping pens to grab bites of sheep whenever he saw the chance, seemed surprised to look up once and find his brother bounding atop the backs of a crammed knot of ewes to get to his next tactical post. I had heard that highest phrase of praise, a dog that'll run on wool, but never had seen it done until Spot performed. A railroad worker asked Dad who had trained the white-and-brown dog. My mother-in-law right there, Dad said with his admitting grin. She's got him so he'll do everything but dance the schottische. Grandma answered with a deeply pleased hmpf!

September also meant that I had to come off the Reservation for my second year at Valier, now with the notion beginning in me that I had better become more purposeful about what

I studied. This did nothing to cure me of randomly reading whatever print I could lay my hands on, but it did get me over the delusion that I ever was going to be a baseball player. I didn't even have a right knee that worked properly, although the doctor said I was in the last year of having to wrap the daily elastic pressure onto it. ~~anything as exotic as~~ When I tried to think of other choices of life ahead, ranching held itself up first. By now I knew much about livestock, especially sheep-raising, and Dad could teach me endlessly more. If that was where life was pointing with this fresh start in the north, our family chance at last to count up to the profits that would lead to the buy of a ranch, there might be a logic behind it. I enrolled for the high school's vocational agriculture class. But I also chose Mrs. Tidyman's Latin class, and found I was at least as interested in the textbook version of Caesar's farmers--Galba agricola est--as I was in vo-ag's mechanized version.

The school had a new superintendent now, a silent large-headed man who seemed to have to spend his full time trying to look dignified. The effort went to doom at once when someone learned that his middle name was Eldo. As far as I could tell in the rest of my high school days, he showed never an idea about education except to patrol around it with El-do, El-do mocking off his measured footsteps. But I see now that his ambling swoon may have been lucky

for any of us trying to learn, ignoring as it did whatever useful that Mrs. Tidyman and one or two others of the teachers resorted to in the classroom.⁴ By second luck, I had arrived at Valier into an unusually self-steadying group of classmates. High school often is written of as a torchlit, raucous time, when friendships and enmities sear deepest. Perhaps because I had so much blaze elsewhere in my life, my high school class seems to me now, as then, a regiment of calm.⁴ A dozen girls and ten boys, ours was the most equitable population I had ever belonged to.⁵ Mrs. Tidyman could give out more uproar reading a paragraph of Dickens than the bunch of us might in a week. No one was particularly prettier or handsomer than those in the classes which had gone through before us, nor I think any more winsome or wicked; but several of us were more persevering than was usual, and a surprising number had more cleverness. I found, after Mrs. Tidyman's keelhauling examination of me when I first arrived, that I got along easily at the school. Clearly I was an odd commodity—my mind did tricks nobody else's did, nor did anyone else come out of anything like my sheep ranch-Reservation-Dupuyer cafe jumble of backdrop, nor were any⁶ of the other boys quite as stoic as I seemed about the subject of girls—yet none of these classmates seemed more than bemused by any of it. And I did contribute the point of pride that in those school-wide

everyone else in the school

exams, I could be counted on to trounce the juniors and
seniors for us.

I went through the school year, then, to three steady pulses: days at classes in Valier, nights at the Chadwicks', weekends on the Jensen ranch with Dad and Grandma. Just once did this ~~rhythmed~~^{northern} life threaten to fly apart. In early December, out of nowhere, Grandma announced to us that she was going to spend Christmas with her sister in Wisconsin. ~~H~~ I had not been at the ranch while that decision brewed, but knew that there was little holiday flavor to it. She'll get it out of her system this way, Dad said, and maybe then. . . . And maybe then come back and tell us the trip had been so clarifying that she was going to keep on right out of our lives, yes, I could see all the and maybe then.

What the episode was all about, I never knew, nor did Dad seem to have any notion. Perhaps my grandmother simply reached a point where she had to make some test on life for herself, and certainly her turn was long overdue. We said an apprehensive goodbye to her at the bus station in Great Falls. She gave us a frosty farewell and marched aboard.

I had no idea how the ranch household could run without her. To my surprise, Dad housekept diligently. He cooked as heartily as she had—^H I had forgotten his stint in the

White Sulphur cafe--and we lived in high style on venison steak and the rich milk gravy he made from the fry grease to layer over discs of fried potatoes. But the house echoed empty enough to boom lessons into us, and Christmas spluttered in and away as a wan day we were glad to see end. When Grandma arrived back in her promised two weeks, cheerful and full of scorn for Wisconsin--Gee gosh, I forgot how dampish the winters come back there--we were overfed and entirely eager to have her with us again.

The winter went in truce, then it was the lambing season again, the moment for another of the Jensen ranch's routine spring Otime calamities to conk us. A mid-May blizzard hit, and in a day and a night sealed the ranch in fat heavy snowdrifts. The Hoots came crashing across the benchland with a giant bulldozer and punched our way to the stranded bunches of sheep. We had some loss, but not nearly what it might have been, and at the start of summer we pushed the sheep north to the Reservation with the thought in our minds that this year's worst lay behind us.

But as soon as the Mexican crew finished shearing the sheep in the first few days of July, worry and edginess set in on Dad. The weather had an unaccountable chill--Gee gods, is it gonna snow on us for the Fourth of July? Grandma demanded of the sky--and with our shorn ewes we

had on our hands a double thousand of the world's most undressed creatures, caught in only their paunchy yellowwhite white carcasses like hospital invalids with their gowns suddenly ripped away. Within a week, the sheep would be gray and hardy again, their next fat round sponge of fleece already beginning to cloak them. But for these first days, they stood naked, helpless to a storm. And dragging across the spire-line of the Rockies, black clouds, somehow sprung ahead from cold late autumn into July, were beginning to fray into rain.

Early on the second morning after shearing, Dad came back to the trailer house gnawing his lower lip. He had not yet turned the sheep out of the temporary corral where we were penning them these first uncomfortable nights. The ~~nightmare~~ worse prospect was that the band could panic in the corral and crush onto one another in suicidal piles, for certain, in a cold driving rain hundreds of trapped ewes would destroy themselves and their lambs that way. But the second worst threat was for a storm to maul into sheep loose for stampede on this unsheltered range, and this was the risk the swollen clouds were forcing on us now. ~~#~~ That weather's comin' in sure as hell. We're gonna have to hightail it for the brush on Two Medicine with these sheep. Lady, you'll have to work the dogs; dog the bejesus out of 'em. Ivan can run, he can get on the head end of the band and try push 'em toward that big coulee. I'll take the Jeep to round in the breakaways. The first blast of wind swayed the trailer. We piled out

the doorway into the longest hours of our lives.

Before we could reach the corral, a sharp rain began to sting down. The mountains had vanished, and the gray which blotted them already was taking the ridgeline. Chill sifted into the air as the rain drilled through. Now a wind steadily sharpening the storm's attack. The sheep milled in the corral as if being stirred by a giant paddle, quickening and quickening. A stalled wave of them had packed so tightly against the wooden gate ~~(that)~~ ~~together~~ ^{begin to} Dad and I couldn't undo the wire that held it closed; the gate bowed, snapped apart against the tonnage of the ~~hundreds~~ ^{thousands} of struggling bodies. ~~of~~ ^a pale shapes of the ewes rivered past us, slapped and spun us. Lambs dashed at their mothers' heels in blattering bewilderment. Shoo 'em, Spot! Grandma was shrilling. Way 'round 'em there. Bite 'em good, Tip, God darn their crazy hides! I ran the first sprint of endless running, crying Hyaw! Hyaw! as I tried to head the leaders. I heard the Jeep gunning as Dad set out after another runaway group.

What we faced, if we could not bring the band under control, was a rapid steady push toward the devastation of our sheep. The rain was pelting out of the north. As it spun the cold terrified sheep straight south before it, they were aimed like an avalanche to the cliffs which bladed up from the gorge of the Two Medicine. Countless of them could crash off there as the buffalo had in their fear-blind rush from the whooping Blackfeet. Only, our

animals were being driven on to death by ~~storm, a voice~~
which could not be stilled ~~the howl of the storm~~ ^{the clamor} ~~in~~ the howl of
storm.

One way alone offered any chance to get the sheep safely down to the shelter of the river brush: try to funnel them along the bottom of the single big coulee which dived like a long trench across our range and out through the western base of the Two Medicine rimrocks. But to do it, we would have to fight the sheep west into the cleft of coulee, sideways along the punishing storm. 9a 81

And so we fought, running, raging, hurling the dogs and ourselves at the waves of sheep, flogging with the gunny sacks we had grabbed off a corral post, shaking the wire rings of cans to a din, and steadily as the rain shot down on us, we lost ground. We were like skirmishers against a running army ~~we might bend the band slightly and gradually~~ toward the coulee, but all the while their circling panic was carrying toward the cliffs now not more than a few thousand yards away. Only several minutes away for sheep running headlong. It was not yet mid-day, and grayness had clamped in on the ridgeline over us as if to rain for the rest of time.

We could do nothing right in the curtaining rain. I hurled my ring of cans to head off a breakaway ewe, and the wire circle fell neatly over her neck and sent her clattering crazily across the prairie at twice the speed.

Minutes later, I tossed a rock as I had a thousand times to scare another ewe back into the band. The wet stone slipped in my hand, wobbled straight for the ewe and hit her exactly at the joint of the hind leg. Broken leg flapping as she struggled at the rear of the band, she haunted me everlastingly that day. I threw nothing more, tried and failed to make up for it with sack-flailing runs to turn the band. Grandma's voice was wearing to a croak. I saw the Jeep ~~bounce~~ ~~badger hole~~ ^{jam} into a pothole so hard that Dad sat blinking for a minute to collect himself.

Now, slowly, wearily, some of the sheep began to stop running. They sank to the ground to die. Nothing could move them--kicking, lifting, even Tip's attacks. Exhausted and freezing, they jutted their necks flat along the ground, rolled their eyes, and did their dying.

No #

We abandoned these stragglers, humped white on the prairie behind us like small boulders left by a glacier, and fought on with the sheep still eddying across the grassland. # Then, for minutes, the rain eased away. # It left a sensation of acute, tingling emptiness, as in a blackened snagland after crownfire has hurtled through. Then Dad was roaring: Give 'em hell now! Grandma charged the southmost bulge of the sheep with the dogs, and Dad jounced the Jeep, horn button mashed down in a steady blare, into the head of the band where I was whooping myself

hoarse. We rammed the animals a few hundred yards westward, close now to where the coulee shadowed darkest on the darkened land.⁴ What achieved the last atom of push for us, there is no knowing—perhaps some instant of Spot's savvy or Tip's savagery, perhaps a whip of wind momentarily lashing around in our favor instead of against us. Perhaps only the force field of our desperation. Whatever levered them the last inches to the west, a trickling few sheep at the front of the sodden swirl at last were dodging into the coulee, and the main mass pressing blindly after them.

It cost us the rear hundreds of the band. When the rain bulleted harder again, a frenzied surge of them broke sideways around the dogs and spilled away from us like wheat out of a tipped sack. The rest of the sheep we held, barely, at the ground we had gained, and watched the breakaways scuttle across the rain-beaten grass toward the cliffs.

Now the battle in the coulee became one both to hurry and to hold back. The sheep trying to plunge ahead of the rain's flay still could pile themselves to destruction in the veers of the coulee's banked sides and had to be headed, beaten to a slower pace; the ones beginning to give up and drop had to be savaged into moving on. Dad abandoned the Jeep, came leaping down the coulee flank to join Grandma and me. The long white vee of sheep accordioned wildly down the coulee as we pushed and held,

held and pushed. ⁴ None of the three of us said a word now, our voices long since given out. If the dogs yet barked as they knifed back and forth along the band, we did not notice. Silently Dad and Grandma and I flogged sheep with the damp gunnysacks as if they were a stubborn wall of flame and watched for the mouth of the coulee to inch out of the rain toward us.

We reached it in almost-dark, and the sheep spewed down beneath the juts of cliff to the river's sheltering brim of willows and cottonwoods. In a dozen hours, we had managed to flog 3500 desperate sheep a little more than four miles. A hundred or more carcasses spotted the prairie behind us, dozens more strewed the base of the cliffs which the runaway clump had avalanched toward. If this was victory —^H—and we had to tell ourselves it was, for we could have lost nearly all the sheep in a pushing massacre off the Two Medicine cliffs—^HI knew I wanted no part of any worse day.

I remember that I looked back from the mouth of the coulee toward the dusky north ridges, still smoked with graps wisps of the storm. As much as at any one instant in my life, I can say: here I was turned. ⁴ How long such a moment had been in the making, I am the last to judge, because once made it seemed to have begun farther back than I could remember and yet to have happened like an ^{August}

eyeblink. Two decades later, readying to write about a man who had recently retired after decades of fame as a forestry scientist, I asked him in mid-interview how he had found his way into his career. Until then he had been talking easily and in deft detail, but here he hesitated as if afraid. Finally, in no more words than this, he told me of simply deciding one afternoon, when he was a schoolboy plowing in his father's field in Indiana, that he would go off as soon as he could and become a chemist. Helpless to find any deeper decision back inside himself, he sat back with both plea and challenge in his face. ~~4~~ But any questioning was gone from me, lost in the recognition that I had just heard so close a chord with my own unwordable instant. As soon as I could manage to do so after that July storm, over Grandma's dismayed protest and Dad's unspoken one, I left the Reservation to find myself a job for the rest of the summer—piling bales in the hayfields of a ranch south of Dupuyer. I had no steady idea yet about what I would do in life, but I intended now that it would not include more seasons of sheep on that vast gambling table of Blackfeet rangeland.

It startles me yet that I was the first, even as mildly and temporarily as I went about it, to declare my way out of our edgy alliance of a household. Dad nearly achieved it before I could, for the mauling the sheep had taken left

its toll on him, too,^Y what had been a year of certain profit now was going to be one more time of eking by, of hard and skillful work drawing small wage. Before I could leave for my hayfield job, a noontime spat built and built between Grandma and him, like the clouds boiling again on the peak-flames of the Rockies. At last he announced: The hell with ye, I'm going into Browning. She said in ice, Go drinking beer, I suppose. You're damn right, he said in fire, and flung off over the ridgeline in the Jeep. He was gone for the day, and then the night. When he came back the next noon, the extent of his plunge stunned us all, and we passed around it with as little said as possible. Erupting loose that way from whatever it was that held us together was not a thing we dared look at too closely, for within the past half year each one of the three of us now had shown some such urge, and I was off for the next several weeks across some boundary best known to my sixteen-year-old self.

When I went from the Reservation that mid-summer to my first work as a hired hand, in effect I stepped across time to Dad's life at the same age, going off to try to earn from the very surroundings which had been so stingy to the larger household. But where under him the broad muscles of horses had rippled and become a way of life, beneath me machinery throbbed. In the hot weather of that

year and the next ones to come, I learned to keep the pace of piling eighty-pound hay bales all day long onto a moving truck, of cocooning inside the roar and dust of tractors crawling across wheat fields, of steadying a grain truck beside a lurching combine to catch the harvested flow of gold. The north country opened and beckoned for me as the sage distances of the valley must have for Dad at my age. Clock hours changed, stretched, in that summer light: lunch happened whenever food arrived in the field, to be eaten gratefully in the shaded dust beneath a tractor or truck, supper came into the schedule when at last it was too dark to do anything else.⁴ The Reservation's glacier of slow weeks was left to Dad and Grandma now, to fend with that and themselves however they could. In another of the unspoken but obstinate bargains our household ran on, I would help with the trailing of the sheep at the start of each summer, and with the first week or so of settling into the routine of the ridgeline, but then I would go.

⁵⁼
I could be expected to visit whenever I had a rare Sunday off from work, but all the other days of my summers were my own now—^Mand I meant them to run full and swift.

I learned rapidly that I either had luck or had to make it. My second summer of hiring out, I heard of a job on a ranch somewhere far to the north of the Reservation, near a point on the Canadian boundary called Whiskey Gap.

I asked Dad for the loan of the old Dodge car we had acquired and set off, fighting mud-greased roads and taking directions at any house I saw--^Hfew of those--^Huntil at last, fifty miles beyond Browning and within a glance of the Canadian border, I found the ranch. Dusk was going to dark, and no one answered my knock. I stepped out of my muddy shoes on the porch, walked in and went to sleep on the couch in the living room. In a few hours when the rancher came home and snapped on the light, his wife large-eyed behind him, I said my name and Dad's, and asked if I could have the job. Apparently as a reward for having found the place at all, I could.

The job was to drive a grain truck, and exactly at an impatient time in my growing up it fed me all the velocity and throttle-power I could ask for. The rancher's grown son, a lanky grinning man named Ron, drove one elderly red truck, I drove its mate. By gunning along the narrow graveled dike of road as fast as we dared, we could make one haul to the grain elevator at Cut Bank in the morning and another in the afternoon. There was a very long breakneck hill in the middle of the run which Ron and I traded jokes about. I had the world moving on my last load, he would drawl; By the time I hit the bottom of that sonofabitch hill I must have been going a thousand miles an hour.

Near the end of the summer, I was slamming my truck

into higher gear on a flat stretch of the road when I saw a shallow trench of potholes ahead. With no traffic coming, I swerved at a slight angle across the holes to reduce the jolt. There was a bounce, and a second, and the horizon plunged away as a concussion crumpled the rear of the truck down into a howling tilting skid, dust fuming into the cab, metal screaming on gravel.

At last I sat, stopped, looking straight up into the air, gripping the steering wheel which now haloed above my face. I groped the door open and bailed for the road. The truck angled above me like a monstrous being with a broken lower back. I looked blankly toward where the rear wheels had to be, and there were none.

It took me long minutes amid the spilled wheat and strewn gravel to track out what had happened. The rear spring on one side of the truck, weakened from an old break, had snapped entirely when the wheels struck the potholes, and the following force of the other side hitting ~~them~~ wrenched away the truck's underbody, springs, axle, wheels and all.

4 When the rancher arrived and had a look, he said I was not to blame myself and it was time he bought a new truck anyway. I was behind a steering wheel for him again the next morning. When the chance came to spend a Sunday with Dad and Grandma, I showed them the newspaper clipping about my accident. You were lucky that once, Grandma said in

judgment, as if I hadn't been thinking it every instant since. I'm no example to talk, Dad offered, but no job is worth your neck. The next summer, when I was working fields for a farmer near Dupuyer, I came in from the tractor one sunset to hear that a truck had been wrecked on the breakneck hill, killing its driver: Ron.

Now that I had gone across one line of decision in the summer of the storm-hit sheep, it began to dawn on me that I was edging across the next one. Ranching no longer seemed what I wanted; that clarifying idea, and likely Mrs. Tidyman's gale-force enthusiasm, pointed toward college. For Grandma, my first mention of it was the knell that one more person she had labored for would be on his way from her. But: If that's the how of it for you, boy, you better do it. Dad came around to the idea so rapidly and entirely that he began to think of it as his own. By God, yes, you want to get into some other sort of living. Ranching is a hard go unless you inherit a hellish amount of land and have the health to work it. I never had those, and maybe you won't either. One of his brothers had managed to send a son to college to become a pharmacist; Dad suggested that I think about the same. I didn't know what livelihood I wanted, but pharmacy didn't sound like it. Dad shrugged. Do whatever it is you want, son, and we'll back you just as far as we can.

Any backing to be drawn from a life divided between the Jensen ranch and the Reservation, I knew, was chancy. It became chancier a few days after I finished my next-to-last year of high school. The morning of our third spring gather of the sheep for the Reservation drive, we had edged the band onto the highway when Grandma missed Kitten's annual yowls from the trailer house: The good-for-nothing, where's he got to? Somehow Kitten had squirmed his way out, and Dad sent me back to the ranch in the Jeep to look for him. I found the cat in the yard there, and also a family who were moving into the house still warm from our leaving. Got it leased for a couple of years, they retorted when I demanded to know how long they would be there.

Even McGrath, seasoned conniver that he was, seemed shaken by the wordless withdrawal of the Jensen ranch from us. And Dad and Grandma now faced a Reservation summer with no point of return at its end.

The one thing plain in this new muddle was that the arrangement with McGrath was fractured. The three of us were agreed that we wanted no more of his risky ranches and jinxed sheep. ^{b3} Also, if the summer could be passed without catastrophe roaring in from the mountains or grabbing up out of the earth, this would at last be a year when we had made good money from the sheep and could afford some new start. How about if we stay on until Mac can sell

the ewes this fall? Dad suggested. Might take a month or
so^{gal. 84} after the lambs are shipped, but we can tell him that's
all, we're walking away from his damned sheep if he's not
rid of them by then . . . Good enough, I said. . . . Hunky-dory
by me, Grandma said, I won't shed tears over old McGrath. . . .

It was this final herding season for Dad and Grandma that I spent on the trucking job near the Canadian border, and my exploded truck was not the only blast mark on our summer. I arrived to visit at the trailer house one Sunday to be told that Kitten had vanished several days before; Dad figured that an eagle had ended his stalking career. Another Sunday, as I stepped from the car only Spot pawed ecstatically up at me. Where's Tip? I asked quickly, and Grandma's face told that there no longer was a Tip.

Dad again gave me the details: the black dog at last had become the casualty of his chasing-and-biting habit, sneaking from camp to run with a dog pack on the range west along the Two Medicine. Dad had heard in Browning that the sheepmen came onto the dogs and shot several of them in their tracks; Tip had to have been among them. He got what he was asking for . . . Grandma began and broke off in silent tears as Spot eyed around at us to choose one for his next fond muzzle.

Only the sheep seemed immune from calamity that summer. The lambs fattened and fattened, and brought a top price

at shipping time. McGrath next located stubblefields south of Dupuyer where the ewes could graze for a few weeks. That autumn's trailing of the sheep southward was our longest ever, nearly sixty miles. Dad and Grandma wearily waited in the trailer house amid the blond stubble for the sale of the sheep. A buyer was found, the ewes we had struggled over for a dozen seasons in the Jensen ranch-Reservation rhythm of ~~the~~ years ^{now} vanished in a gray blattering stream into boxcars. On a day in early November of 1956, we drove north to Cut Bank to settle our finances with McGrath. Dadgy as ever, he was to meet us in a hotel room there.

I spent the trip dreaming of showdowns: Give us our money or I'll break your ugly damn face. I could all but hear the same battle breaking out in Grandma's mind: God darn you ornery old cuss, we did all the work for three years and you think you're gonna keep the money in your dirty paws; you got another think coming. . . . As we parked in front of the hotel, Dad said, I want you two to wait here. I know how I'm going to handle this. Half an hour later, he climbed in the car and showed us a check for our full share. McGrath had taken our calculations without a question, made out our amount and said only: You people did a powerful amount of work for me.

The one thing the three of us agreed on next was that we should not move away in this, my last year of high school! [?]

if there was any mooring in our lives now, it was my
~~E~~ schooling. We moved into a small house in Dupuyer beyond
the Chadwicks', a place with all its space in one expansive
room, as if the walls of the trailer house had been pulled
several times wider and longer. Again my paperback books
teetered in stacks as they had in Ringling, again Grandma
pulled out a day~~bed~~ for herself each night. Spot strewed
himself beneath our feet as amply as Shep ever had.

Weary of the steady life with the sheep~~H~~-Godamighty,
Lady, do ye realize it's been nineteen months since either
of us had a day off? Dad ground out one evening~~H~~-Dad and
Grandma decided to wait until spring to look for their
next work. When the ranches busied up then, a lambing
man of his skills and a cook of hers would have no trouble
finding jobs.

The leisure had its uses. Three years almost to the
moment from when we had first seen the Rockies carving
their canyons of stone into the sky edge, we at last had
time to set foot in the mountains^A. On a crisp and bright
deer-hunting day, Dad shot a fat young buck beneath one
of the great rimfolds driven up into the blue; Tommy Chad
and I skidded the carcass down through the scree and timber
and we had meat for weeks to come. Grandma visited with
Gertie at the cafe, and as we should have known it would,
work came looking for her. Dupuyer lacked babysitters,

especially babysitters with five raisings of children to their credit. Grandma began spending entire days with the small daughters of a family busy with travel, then evenings for other families. When a night came that two stints of work were offered her at once, she eyed Dad: Why don't you take this other one, Charlie? I looked at him for the fight to start. Instead he said, Yes, and why the hell don't I?

Through the evenings of winter after that, the two of them regularly went babysitting several times a week. The notion at first embarrassed me; it didn't seem genuine work for grownups, especially for my top-hand father. But I began to see that they both enjoyed the change of task and scene. The household was easier to breathe in when we weren't crammed against each other every moment. The pair of them soon had more babysitting than they could handle, and I took some evenings of it myself. It was, I suppose, a way for Dupuyer to lend us a hand, and for us to lend one in turn, not the least of the town's graceful moments in our life.

In that last year of high school, 180 classroom days between me and the world, I began threshing for ways to go away to college. I did not know it, and it seemed least likely, but the one ally more I needed I met on the football field.⁴ I had begun playing the autumn before,

when my knee finally was declared healed. My season was brief that time: as if the quadrants of my body were going to take turns about this, my left hand was fractured in one of the first scrimmages. I suppose in the way Dad never had hesitated to swing back into a saddle after another of his near-destructions on horseback, it didn't occur to me not to try football again--although it did to Grandma, who loudly sounded her Gee gosh, you be careful now warning.

~~H~~ As it turned out, on the field at the first practice a new coach was waiting, a chunky, sharp-eyed man in his early twenties. His name was McCarthy; he had grown up in the smelter town of Anaconda and gone through a small Jesuit college on a football scholarship. He told me, without ever having seen me before, that I would be his fullback. Given Valier's small enrollment and the lack of heft among the seniors, he had decided simply to field the four quickest of us as running backs, like dice flipped across green felt. You'll be the blocking back, since you're heftier than Butch or Vern or Glenn--at 155 pounds I actually was only the least featherlike--and we'll show these teams some footsteps.

We did. Ours was the fastest backfield in the conference, and the most fitful. On the first play of the season we scored on an 89-yard run, and went on to lose the game. When we managed to mesh ourselves--something less than

half the time--easy wins scattered onto our record. Other games, we simply whooshed up and down the field between the goal lines instead of across them, perpetually within a touchdown of stronger and more methodical teams and exasperating everyone except McCarthy, who seemed to enjoy our velocity for its own sake. ¶ The season of football was one of the least useful and most purely pleasant things I had ever done, a time taken out from life simply to run and roll, like a colt discovering his gallop.

(no!) Perhaps it was a reward for my willingness to be an atomweight fullback for him, perhaps he simply liked to see a person spin free and be off to somewhere: McCarthy out of the blue asked my college plans, listened to my vague notion that I guessed I would aim for science or engineering, and told me that I should think about journalism.

¶ It may have been the first time I heard the word journalism spoken. But: you've read more than any kid I've ever seen, and if you've been paying attention in there to the Last Duchess--Mrs. Tidyman--like I think you have, you've learned something about the language. ¶ Here was advice which could have come from nowhere else in my life, for all her interest in me, Mrs. Tidyman could not have brought herself to single out one direction from her whirling compass of learning, and no one else I knew had ever offered more than the vague encouragement that with a head like that on your shoulders you ought to go on to college.

Throughout the autumn and start of winter, I sent off applications to colleges and took exams ~~for~~ ⁱⁿ any scholarship competition I could find. Mrs. Tidyman thirty years before had gone away to Illinois for summer courses ~~at~~ at Northwestern University; I automatically applied there. I read somewhere that rich universities such as Harvard and Princeton admitted a proportion of moneyless students; off went my paperwork. And to a dozen others, according to no plan but hope. No one seemed to know another method besides my own of flooding mail out across the map; no one in either line of my family had ever gone beyond high school, and even Mrs. Tidyman could not recall the last Valier student who had attended an out-of-state college.

Amid it all, Eldo stopped me in the assembly hall and said he wanted to see me in his office. When I stepped in, he picked up the latest of my scholarship applications and shook his wide head. Ivan, all this isn't worth it. These eastern places you're applying to, a student from a school this size just doesn't have a chance. Make up your mind to go to the university at Missoula, and you won't let yourself in for disappointment. He held the application toward me. I don't feel I can put in any more of my time on these things.

From then, I knew that I would go to one of the far universities if I had to walk there on my knees and murder

to get in. Eldo was not a man for a goading strategy. In telling me that he was tired of the scholarship paperwork, he was simply reciting fact, and saying as well that he was weary of me and my beavering ambition. But writing me off was the one valuable thing he could have done for me. I went to my backers with his verdict. That's very interesting, Mrs. Tidyman said with deadly evenness; I think you should apply and apply, and I'll write any recommendations you need. Goddamn-that-Eldo-to-hell, Dad burred; you go on and get one of those scholarships just to show that scissorbill.

A winter of waiting, the babysitting winter. Then with the first of spring, a letter from Northwestern saying that I had been granted a four-year scholarship for full tuition. I had won that much. Now the question became how the rest of my victory could be afforded.

Dad and Grandma quickly went back to ranch work, now for a Two Medicine rancher named McTaggart. He was a high crag of a man, wintry, boulder-jawed, long-boned, who had been battling the northern plains for half a century and at last had edged far enough ahead of nature to own a ranch and a few thousand head of sheep. No one was deceived that McTaggart and Dad and Grandma made a ranch combination that could last long—We'll be lucky if we can put up with his guff through lambing time, Dad grumped—yet the three of

them somehow went week after week without igniting. When I visited from the Chadwicks' on weekends, McTaggart in the evenings would fix himself by the hour on a topic such as my going off to Northwestern and recite his history around it in a nervous, twining style. He too had gone to Chicago as a young man, he told, spending some months there when he worked for a buyer who dealt in Montana ranch horses.

We took 'em into Chicago to the 'yards for him, see.

There was one bunch they wanted for lead horses for the race track, see. Them hot-blooded horses, you know, they got to lead 'em in--that fella with the white pants and the red jacket and big hat, you know, he leads them in on some gentle cow pony, might be a Apaloosy or somethin'. I had these nine, ten ponies headed out for Washington Park race track, then old Bill caught up to me, says Oh, I made a mistake, we unloaded 'em the wrong place, you gotta take 'em out to ~~Arlington Park~~ Chicago Heights race track. So I just tailed them load of horses to one another and away I went down--there's a street, Halstead Street--went down that with them ponies about 35 miles to ~~Chicago Heights~~ Arlington about 35 miles to Chicago Heights. Had kids followin' me all the way. An' I made it, no trouble, they was gentle enough ponies. One of 'em I used to ride out here and he used to buck me off whenever he wanted, but back there he'd got on good behavior. First thing at the race track, he's so pretty, they give him a bath and put one of those

muley saddles on, and I had to get on and ride him around the race track, show him off good and plenty. Oh, I been to Chicago, nnnhnnnn.

Dad said he could talk McTaggart into hiring me for the summer before I went to college. Grandma pointed out it would be our last time together before you go off so awful far away. But I still wanted my summer distance, and gave the one argument I thought was sure, that I could make more money at tractor work on a farm than on the ranch with them. You never done any of that work before, Grandma rallied. I said the unanswerable: I'll learn.

A few mornings after my graduation from high school, I hunkered atop the cleated treads of a Caterpillar tractor big as a locomotive and studied what seemed to be the control gadgetry for the entire solar system. With the farmer all but moving my hands through the patterns, I memorized the switchwork and the moves to start the Cat's racketty warming motor, ~~the control~~ levers inside the sheet-metal cab, then another battery of hydraulic levers to raise and lower the equipment being pulled behind the tractor. He rode with me a few rounds on the field, showing me the quick dance of brake-and-clutch to lurch the monster around corners, and said She's all yours. ~~H~~ I could see that the field corners were going to be the gauntlet: the Cat had to be sharply angled in its turn, kinked back on its own path until it swiveled

the wide harrow around behind it, instant calculation upon calculation to keep the roaring train of equipment from mangling itself.

In my first hour, I kinked the tractor through a turn an instant too long. The cataract of steel tread caught the hitch of the harrow, bowed and twisted it to taffy.

I shut down the Cat and stood looking at the tangle. I could read the Latin of whatever Caesar's farmers had done, but would I ever decipher this gigantic equipment of my own? Sick with failure, I drove into Dupuyer with the crumpled hitch. The farmer scowled at it, then saw my face. Well, don't get in an uproar over it. The kid I had last summer did this three times on his first day.

Try not to beat his record. I'll forge 'er back into shape. He did, and in the hundreds of hours of field work afterward this summer, I ran the tractor and its caravan of equipment as faultlessly as if on rails.

That set of summer months, an even twenty years ago as I come to write this, stands out as a season in dream. Shuddered throb of the Cat, curved tines of harrow digging by the battalion behind me, marching chocolate lines of worked field, cold flame-peaks spacing the western horizon-- everything of each day was rhythm, pulse, pattern, and within such propulsion, like a space traveler sledding through orbit, I could cast myself free into every luster

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of my life to come. Four college years of reading how many books can that be? dozens and scores and hundreds perfect grades Dad saying: you're right up there with the best of them in the world now eyes of a girl inches away Carlton says it is like losing your breath over and over words of my own in print how to begin? Montana today is a land of far fields uncommon people a flow of money Grandma: I never knew they pay wages like that and then, then . . .

Then tugging of gravity, a letter in a long envelope. The last editorial I had written for the school paper had been noticed at the university in Missoula. The dean of journalism was asking if I would be interested in a scholarship there, and if he could come talk to me. ^HWhen I phoned Mrs. Tidyman from the cafe in Dupuyer, she told me the dean had been a Rhodes Scholar, an honor so vast I had heard of it. Early into the next week he drove to Dupuyer and was directed to where I was farming that day. Tall, trim, in white shirt and tie, he toed across the furrowed field to where I was pulling the armada of harrow behind the Caterpillar. As I stepped down from the Cat and dustily shook hands, he said, What is this, a discer? and I learned at once that Rhodes Scholars didn't know everything in the world. But he talked earnestly, seemed unbothered as he stood with the soft field dirt trickling into his lowcut shoes, and asked if I wanted, really, to be away from Montana.

For all the dreaming, that was the question somewhere in me, and his asking of it and the promise of a scholarship at Missoula made me rethink. One way and another, Dad and Grandma and I had survived much together. She now was sixty-four years old, and although she gave every evidence of enduring forever, I had begun to think of her age, and the sum that would go from my life when she did. Dad was fifty-seven, still a top hand but with his lifetime's worth of breakages in him.⁴ Even beyond the two of them, there were the decades of effort of the other Doigs and Ringers, a weight of striving in these Montana hills and valleys and prairies which added up to the single great monument my family line would ever have. For me to go from this would be a reverse trek, in a sense, from the immigration which had borne my people into the high-mountain West. Yet they had sprung themselves free of the past when they felt they had to, and that was my own urge.⁴ I took the decision to McTaggart's ranch the next weekend. Grandma brightened: That'd be closer to home, if you went over to Missoula. Chicago is such a long old ways away. Dad shook his head. You got to do the deciding, Skavinsky. We'll-back-you-to-the-limit-whatever-place-you-go.

The train to Chicago stood like an endless wall of windows. Each of the three of us snuffled in the September air, turned aside to swallow. Grandma's teary hug: as

ever, she had talked herself around to the conviction that whatever I had made up my mind to do was the only thing, you write us about it all and I'll do the like. Dad's clamping handshake: in awe of all the education awaiting me, You're away to a big place, son. ~~A~~ Aboard, I had a minute of looking out the window to them, the one stout and erect and eternal as a pillar, the other handsome as glory under the perfect crimp of his stockman's hat. The train gave off sounds, and the depot platform rafted away behind me with the two of them.

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Kin and clan. Son. Sire. The grand calved on in grandson, grandmother. The words of all the ties of blood interest me, for they seem never quite deft enough, not entirely bold and guileful enough, to speak the mysterious strengths of lineage. I admit the marvel that such sounds are carried to us from the clangs and soughs of tongues now silent a millenium into the past, calling on and on, in their way, ~~pulses~~ like points of light still traveling in from gone stars.

But the offhand resonance of bobolink arrives that way too, and sneeze and whicker and daisy and thousandfold words more. What I miss in our special blood-words is a sense of recasting themselves for each generation, each fresh situation of kindredness. ~~it seems somehow too meager that they should merely exist, plain packets of sound like any other, and not hold power to texture each new conformation with the bright exact tones that are yearned for.~~

This example: here is a man and here a woman. In the coming light of one June morning, the same piece of life is axed away from each of them. Wounded hard, they go off to their private ways. Until at last the wifeless man offers across to the child-robbed woman. And I am the agreed barter between them.

Not even truth brought down to bone this way can begin to tell what I long to of the situation shared by my father

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and my grandmother and myself during the years I call from memory here. For my father had to be more than is coded in the standard six-letter sound of father, he had also to be guardian-to-an-adrift-boy and as well, mate-who-was-not-a-husband to the daunting third figure of the household. In turn that figure, my loving thunder-tempered grandmother, who never had thought through roles of life but could don the most hazardous ones as automatically as her apron, had somehow to mother me without the usual claims to authority for it, and at the same time to treat with her son-in-law in terms which could not be like a wife's but seemed not much closer to any other description either. I believe that I inherited the clearest, most fortunate part in this, allowed simply to be myself-older-than-I-was, and to have the grant of a bolstered parent and the bonus of a redoubtable grandparent at my side as well. Yet even that lacks faithful wording: how can it be expressed that a boy's dreams of himself and his dream-versions of a threesome-against-life, yearnings so often drawn opposite each other in him, somehow were the same tuggings?

And less explicable yet: the materialized fact that at last, whenever it had happened that they found the habit of being together counted more strongly with them than the natures ~~of~~ pushing them apart, my grandmother and my father had become some union of life all their own, quite apart from

the abrupt knot of bloodline they had made for my sake.

Memory is a kind of homesickness, and like homesickness, it falls short of the actualities on almost every count. In the end, I come to think of the wondrous writer Isak Dinesen when she was taken up in a biplane over the green resplendent highlands of Kenya and arrived back to earth to say, The language is short of words for the experiences of flying, and will have to invent new words with time. So do I wait for the language of memory to come onto the exact tones of how the three of us, across our three generations and our separations of personality, became something-both-more-and-less-than-a-family and different from anything sheathed in any of the other phrases of kinship.