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# TIME SINCE + C.T.

## ~~DEATHDAY~~

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

The remembering

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

It starts, early in the mountain summer, far back among the high spilling slopes of the Bridger Range of southwestern Montana. The single sound is hidden water—the south fork of Sixteenmile Creek diving down its willow-masked gulch.

The stream flees north through this secret and peopleless land until, under the ~~jackpine~~ <sup>fir-dank</sup> flanks of Hatfield Mountain, a bow of meadow makes ~~it~~ <sup>the riffled water</sup> curl wide to the west. At this interruption, a low rumple of the mountain knolls itself up watchfully, and

TEXT

Caledonia

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

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

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



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

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

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



meadows of their first summer mountain.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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