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Let me call her Ruth here.

She came to the ranch on one of the first pale chilly days of an autumn, hired to cook for us for a few months, and stayed on in our lives for almost three years. Her time with us is a strange season all mist and dusk and half-seen silhouettes, half-heard cries. There is nothing else like it in the sortings of my memory. Nor is there anything now to be learned about why it happened to be her who became my father's second wife and my second mother, for no trace

of Ruth's reminiscence, written line, photograph, keepsake--
has survived. It is as if my father tried to scour every
sign of her from our lives.

But not even scouring can get at the deepest crevices
of memory, and in them I glimpse Ruth again. I see best
the eyes, large and softly brown with what seemed to be some
hurt beginning to happen behind them--the deep trapped look
of a doe the instant before she breaks for cover. The face
was too oval, plain as a small white platter, but those
madonna eyes graced it. Dark-haired--I think brunette ~~yo~~
~~slim~~ but full breasted, ~~6'~~ and taller than my mother had been,
nearly as tall as Dad. A voice with the grit of experience
in it, and a knowing laugh twice as old as herself.

Not quite entirely pretty ~~this~~ ^{then} taut, guarded Ruth,
but close enough to earn second looks. And the mystery in
her could not be missed, the feeling that being around her
somehow was like watching the roulette wheel in the Maverick
make its slow, fanlike ambush on chance.

Even how Ruth came to be there, straight in our path
after Dad turned our lives toward the valley, seems to have
no logic to it. Never before or since did I see anyone ~~quite~~
like her on a ranch. Ranch cooks generally were stout
spinsters or leathery widows, worn dour and curt by a life
which gave them only the chore of putting meals on the table

for a dozen hungry men three times a day. So alike were cooks usually that the hired men seldom bothered to learn their names, simply called each one Missus. ^A But Ruth didn't fit Missus, she was Ruth to everybody. Those eyes were the kind which caught your glance on the streets of Great Falls or Helena, where young women went to escape to a store job and the start toward marriage and a life they hoped would be bigger than the hometown had offered--city eyes, restless eyes. Yet here Ruth was in the valley, passing the syrup pitcher along the ~~table~~ ^{cookhouse}, and for all anyone could tell, she seemed ready to stay until she came upon whatever she was looking for.

Her first reach had been badly out of aim--^Ma marriage, quickly broken, to a young soldier. He was home on a furlough one time, a voice from his family tells it, and met her and married her in such short time; really they weren't even acquainted. Dad must have known about that jagged, too-quick marriage; the valley kept no such secrets. But living womanless had left us wide open for Ruth. To me, an eight-^{three} year-old, she was someone who might provide some mothering again. Not much mothering, because she kept a tight, careful mood, like a cat ghosting through new tall grass. But the purr of a soft voice, fresh cookies and fruit added to my lunchbox, even a rare open grin from her when I found an

excuse to loiter in the kitchen—all were pettings I hadn't had. And for Dad, Ruth must have come as a sudden chance to block the past, a woman to put between him and the death on the summer mountain.

It happened faster than any of us could follow. This man who had spent six careful years courting my mother now abruptly married his young ranch cook.

Ruth, Dad. They were a pairing only the loins could have tugged together, and as with many decisions taken between the thighs, all too soon there were bitterest afterthoughts. All too soon, the drumfire of regret and retaliation echoed between them.

I remember that the two of them began at one another before we moved from the ranch in early 1948, only months after the wedding. The ranch itself had plenty of ways to nick away at everyone's nerves. Any sprinkle of rain or snow puttied its road into a slick gumbo; it was like living at the far end of a mile-long trough of mud, the pickup wallowing and whipping as Dad cussed his way back and forth. Yet the place also was too dry for good hay or grain, and too scabbed with rock up on the slopes where the cattle and sheep had to graze. Dad had begun to call it this-goddamn-rockpile, the surest sign that he was talking himself into dropping the lease. For her part, Ruth likely was ready to leave after the first night of howling coyotes, or of a cougar

edging out of the Castles to scream down a gulch. Working as a cook on the big ranches out in the open expanse of the valley was one thing, but slogging away here under the tumbled foothills was entirely another. Her mouth could fire words those soft eyes seemed to know nothing about, and the ranch primed her often. I can hear her across the years:

Charlie, I don't have to stay here, I didn't marry this hellforsaken ranch . . . I got other places I can go, don't you doubt it... Lots of places, Charlie.

And Dad, the jut notching out his jaw as it always did when he came ready for argument: Damn it, woman, d'ye think we can walk away from a herd of cattle and a band of sheep?
We got to stay until we get the livestock disposed of. You knew what you were getting into . . . And always at the last, as he would hurl from the house out to another of the ranch's endless chores: Will-ye-forget-it? Just-forget-it?

But nothing was forgotten, by either of them. Instead, they stored matters up against one another. The time that you . . . I told you then . . . There came to be a full litany of combat, and either one would refer as far back as could be remembered.

If they had fought all the time, the marriage might have snapped apart before long and neither would have been severely hurt. But they bickered in quick seasons. Weeks, maybe a month, would pass in calm. Saturday nights, we

went to dances in the little town of Ringling. Dad and Ruth whirled there by the hour. ~~Often~~ often my Uncle Angus called the square dances, and I would watch Dad in a circle of flying dancers while a burring voice so close to his cried: Swing your opposite across the hall, now swing your corners, now your partners, and Promenade all! Sometime after midnight, I would stretch on a bench along the dancehall wall with a coat over me and go to sleep. I would wake up leaning against Ruth's shoulder as the pickup growled down the low hill to the ranch buildings. The murmurs I heard then between Dad and Ruth would go on for a day or two. But eventually, a blast of argument, then no talking, sulking. Sometimes Ruth would leave for a day or two. Sometimes Dad told her to leave, and she wouldn't. At last, one or the other would make a truce--ⁱⁿnever by apology, just some softened oblique sentence which meant that the argument could be dropped now. Until Ruth felt restless again; until Dad's unease twisted in him once more.

I watched this slow bleed of a marriage, not yet old enough to be afraid of exactly what might happen but with the feeling creeping in me that the arguments in our house meant more than I could see. Joking with me as she sometimes did, Ruth would grin and her face come down close to mine: If your hair gets any redder, you're gonna set the town on fire, you know that? Dad talked in his usual soft burr when I rode in the pickup with him: Son, let's go fix that

fence where Rankin's cows got in. There's not enough grass on this place for our own without that honyocker's cows in here, too. Hold on, I'm gonna give her snoose to get up this sidehill . . . But when they were together, I ~~most~~^{so} often heard a hard edge in what they said to each other, a careful evenness as they talked over plans to leave the ranch as soon they could.

For what was happening, I can grasp now, was the misⁱ judgment greater by far than their decision to be married: their mutual refusal to call it off. Each had a fear blockading that logical retreat. Dad would not admit ~~to~~ his mistake because he wanted not to look a fool to the valley. ^{On that} He was entirely wrong ~~there~~; the only mystification anyone seemed to have was why he kept on with a hopeless mismatch. I couldn't see that, going on with that marriage, with that little child you in the midst of it, a woman of the valley once cried to me. Ruth thought everything should come in a cloud for her. But she had hate in her, she was full of hatefulness . . . What was Charlie thinking of to let that go on? For her part, Ruth would not face up to another split, would not let another broken marriage point to her as an impossible wife. Since neither could see how to call a ~~logical~~ halt to the mismatch, it somehow was going to have to halt itself. But before it did, the pair of them would make two mighty exertions to stay together.

Perhaps because this arrival of Ruth in our lives is a riffle of time which everyone around me later tried to put from mind, memory hovers stubbornly here; memory, or the curious nature, perhaps, that keeps asking exactly what the commotion was about. For on ~~the~~^{the} edge of this fray between Dad and Ruth I begin to see myself, and here at the age of eight and nine and ten I was curiosity itself. If I inscribe myself freehand, as Dad did with the unfading stories he told me of his own young years, the words might be these:

I was a boy I would scarcely know on the street today.

Chunky, red-haired, freckled ~~the~~^A plump face straight off a jar of strawberry jam. Always wearing a small cowboy hat,

because I seared in the sun. Under that hat, and inside a name like no one else's. Ivan: EYE-vun, amid the Frankie-

Ronny-Bobby-Jimmy-Larry-Howie trill of my schoolmates. Dad

was amazed with himself when he at last discovered that he had spliced Russian onto the Scottish family name; he and

my mother simply had known someone named Ivan and liked

the sudden soft curl of the word ~~H~~^A and besides wanted to show up Dad's least favorite brother, who had recently daubed

'Junior' ~~together~~^A onto a son. The name, along with the hair and freckles, gave me attention I wasn't always sure I wanted.

At Dad's side in the saloons I sometimes met men who would

look down at me and sing out: 'Now the heroes were plenty

and well known to fame/Who fought in the ranks of the Czar/But

a
the bravest of all was man by the name / Of Ivan Skavinisky
Skavar! ✓ I consoled myself that it was better than being
dubbed Red or Pinky, which I also heard sometimes in the
saloons. And once in a great while, in his thoughtful mood
as if remembering a matter far away, Dad would call me
✓ Skavinsky. ✓ It made a special moment, and I prized it
that way.

People who remember me at this age say I was something
of a small sentinel: ✓ You always were such a little sober sides. ✓
✓ You was always so damned bashful it was hard to get a word
out of you. ✓ All right, but how jolly was I supposed to
be, with a mother dead and the next one in a sniping match
with my father? I believe that much of what was taken to
be my soberness was simply a feeling of being on guard, of
carefully watching life flame around me. Of trying not to
be surprised at whatever else might happen. # I can tell you
a time, as my father storied so many of his into me: Dad
and Ruth and I are walking toward the movie house, on some
night of truce in the family. We are at the end of the
block from the building when I notice Kirkwood coming down
the street. Kirkwood is a school classmate, but a forehead
taller than I am, and with that head round as a cannonball
and atop square shoulders you could lay bricks on. Kirkwood
can never be counted on to behave the same from one minute
to the next, and now he bears down on us, yelps ✓ Hullo,

Ivy! V and takes a swipe at my hat. # The worst prospect I can think of is coming true: the great given rule of boyhood is not to make you look silly in front of your grownups, and Kirkwood is toe-dancing all over it. Now he has put on a hyena grin and falls in step with me. He glances toward Dad and Ruth, then skips at me and knocks the hat from my head. # Kirkwood-I'll-murder-you! V I rasp as lethally as I can and clap the hat down over my ears. It sends his delirium up another notch, and he skips in for another whack at the hat. Dad and Ruth no longer can pretend not to notice and begin to glance back at the sniggering and muttering behind them. # Kirkwood giggles; this time when I hear him scuffling close, I swing around with my right arm stiff in what I now understand was a right jab. Kirkwood runs his round jaw into it and bounces flat onto the sidewalk. He wobbles up, looks at me dazedly, then trots off in a steady howl. I hustle toward the movie house where Dad and Ruth are waiting and watching. Both are grinning as if they have mouths full of marshmallows.

But I was less sure of my feelings. It was as if I had been through a dream that I knew was going to happen. Not in every detail—^H who could foresee even Kirkwood gone that batty?^H—but in its conclusion: that from the instant Kirkwood rambled into sight, he was aimed onto my fist. It somehow seemed to me there ought to be an apprehension

about such certainty, some questioning of why it had to be inexorably so. But it was a questioning I could not handle,
and what I felt most was the curious intensity of having seen it all unfold, myself somehow amid the scene as it swept past me. Somehow a pair of me, the one doing and the one seeing it done.

It was exactly that twinned mix^h-apprehension and interestedness^hthat I felt all during Ruth's startling time in our lives.

Now the awaited move, when we at last would put the ranch and its zone of combat behind us. Put them behind us, in fact, in a way as wondrous to me as it was unexpected, for Dad and Ruth faced toward White Sulphur Springs and undertook the last livelihood anyone could have predicted of either of them: they went into the cafe business.

The Grill, across the street from the Stockman, had come up for rent. It was the third and smallest eating place in a town which had not quite enough trade for two. There was the barest smidgin of reason to think of Ruth ~~taking on~~^{coping with} such an enterprise; with her years of cooking for crews, she at least could handle a kitchen. But for Dad, the notion had all the logic of a bosun's mate stumping ashore to open up a candy shop. Yet somehow Dad and Ruth, this pair who had never been around a town business of any sort and who already were finding out that they flinted sparks off one

another all too easily--somehow they talked one another into trying to run ~~a cafe~~ ^{The Grill} together, and somehow they turned out to have a knack for it.

The knack, of course, was nine-tenths hard work. Those two took on that place like a house afire. But when Dad sorted through his savvy, there was use there, too: from all the ranches behind him, he knew enough about purchasing, and better yet, he knew the valley and its people. He put up new hours for the Grill. It would stay open until after the last saloon had closed.

There at the last of the night and the first hours of morning, the Grill found its customers--truckers on their runs through the pitchy dark, ranchers heading home from late business in Helena or Great Falls, some of the Rainbow crowd trying to sober up on black coffee and T-bone. Steaks and hashbrowns covered Ruth's stove, and Dad dealt platters of food until his arms ached. Saturday nights I was allowed to stay up as late as I wanted--on Dad's principle of fathering, that I might as well have a look at life sooner than later-- and I looked forward to the pace of that last night of the week like a long, long parade coming past.

Just at dusk, ranch hands would begin to troop in for supper, minutes-old haircuts shining between their shirt collars and hat brims, because Well, I gotta go in and get my ears lowered was the standard excuse to come to town for

a night of carousing. As the dark eased down and the warwhoops from the crowds in the Maverick and the Grand Central came oftener, the cafe would begin to receive the staggerers who had decided to forget the haircut after all and get right on with the drinking. They were a pie crowd, usually jabbing blearily at the fluffiest and most meringue-heaped possibilities in the countertop case. Sometime in mid-evening, Lloyd ~~Robertson~~ would arrive, suspiciously fingering down a coin for a cup of coffee and demanding to know if my freckles weren't from a cow's tail having swiped across me. Soon after him, as if the town's two prime bellies couldn't be long apart, it would be Nellie crashing in, chortling with delight and spinning a joke off the first item he spotted:

That jam jar, now h did you hear about the Swede at the breakfast table? Viminey, V he says, VI yoost learn to call it yam and now they tell me it's yelly. V^H Then if there was a dance in the hall behind the Rainbow, the night would crest with two tides of customers: one which filled the cafe as soon as the dance ended, and a second made up of those who had gone off to drink some more until the first wave cleared out. And at last, sometime after two in the morning, would come the phone call from Pete McCabe thirty yards across at the Stockman: Save us three, Charlie. Dad would put aside a trio of T-bone steaks, and before long, Pete and his night's pair of bar help would be straddling in to the counter

and trading the night's news with Dad. A few hours before Sunday dawn, the Grill would close and we would step out the door into the emptied town.

A quieter flow of eaters presented themselves too, I was to notice--the town's oldtimers, the pensioners, the sheepherders and cowpokes hanging on from yesteryear. As I have told, the Stockman, where Pete McCabe was known to be the kind of a fellow who would set up a drink even when the pension check hadn't yet come to pay for it, drew most of these oldtimers, sometime in the night, sometime through the week. Now, over across the street, Dad was good for an emergency meal as well. How many times I heard one or another of them, joking so as not to seem begging, ask Dad for a meal on account--on account, that was, of being broke. Weeks and months and even years afterward, one or another of them might stop him on the street and say, Charlie, here's that Grill money I've been owing you.

Ruth, I think, never objected to those meals Dad would jot on the tab. They might fight over a spilled holder of toothpicks, but not that long apologetic rank of "accountants." Out on the valley ranches, she had seen in the crews clopping to her supper table the men who were growing too old for the work they had done all their lives, and soon too old for anything but those lame rounds of the saloons along Main Street. ⁴ Age was making that same wintry push on the one

person Ruth seemed steadily to hold affection for, too. She had been raised by her grandmother--her family so poor and at war with itself it had shunted her off there--and regularly she went across the Big Belts to the next valley to see the old woman. Several times, on an afternoon off from the cafe, she took me on those visits. ~~¶~~ Creased and heavy, stiff in the knees and going blind, the grandmother was the most ancient woman I had ever seen, and her house the shadowiest and most silent. The grandmother spent her days entirely in the dim kitchen, finding her way by habit through a thickening haze of cataract webs. When we stepped in past the black kitchen stove and the drab cabinets lining the walls, the grandmother would peer toward us and then begin to talk in a resigned murmur, eyes and legs giving way above and below a body not yet quite willing to die, and Ruth, listening, would be a different person, softer, younger, seeming to feel the grandmother's aches as her own.

But whatever Ruth took from those visits seemed to stop at our own doorsill. Time and again, she and Dad faced off, and then they would go full of silence for a day or more. Or worse, one would be silent and the other would claw on and on. ~~¶~~ If nothing else set them at each other, there always was the argument about our small herd of cattle, which Dad had kept after all when we left the ranch and which he was pasturing now in the foothills of the Big Belts.

He drove out each morning to pitch hay to the cattle, then came back to work in the cafe from mid-afternoon until closing. On weekends, I went with him to the cattle, and only then would hear out of him the few tiny snatches of music he knew, his absent-minded sign of contentment. A forkful of alfalfa to the cows, then But the squaws along the Yukon are good enough for me; a tuneless minute of whistling and looking out across the valley to the pinnacles of the Castles, then When it's springtime in the Rockies . . .

Whether or not Ruth knew he was out there singing and whistling amid the cows, she did suspect that Dad had not given up intentions of ranching. Dad suspected, just as rightly, that neither of them could keep up the day-and-night pace of the cafe work for long, and that our income soon was going to have to come from livestock again.

In the meantime, we had become town people, and I had the time to myself to roam White Sulphur. Once, in one of the off-balance tributes I would get used to in the valley, someone beside Dad in a saloon caught me studying up at him and blurted: That kid is smarter than he knows what to do with. Which was right enough, and yet I did know enough to keep my eyes moving through the town, reading whatever of it showed itself. The rememberings from that have lasted as a kind of casing which goes into place over the earlier odyssey with Dad through the saloons, a second and wider

circle across undefined territory, and this time on my own.

The plainest fact I found, so plain that it seemed to me then it could never change, was that White Sulphur totally lived on livestock. All the places I liked best had the sounds and smells and feels which came one way or another from the herds and flocks out on the leathered slopes of grassland. In the creamery where Dad bought milk and butter for the cafe, the air hung so heavy with the dampness of processing that it was like walking against pillows, and everyone talked loudly out of the sides of their mouths to be heard over the rumble of churning. Nearby, the grain elevator took a noise like that and tripled it, the roaring clank of conveyors carrying off wheat and barley and oats somewhere into the high box of tower. At the railroad shipping pens, the noises came directly from the livestock. In their best of times sheep go through life in a near-panic, and their frenzied bleating as they were wrangled up the chutes into boxcars grew to a storm of sound. And the cattle, when they were pastured near the pens a day or so before shipping could be heard all across town—a constant choir of moaning, like wind haunting into ten thousand chimneys at once.

White Sulphur was as unlovely but interesting as the sounds of its livelihood. A teacher who had arrived just then to his first classroom job would remember: The town ^{to me} didn't look too perky. It had been through the Depression

and a world war, and obviously nobody had built anything or painted anything or cleaned anything for twenty years.

¶ Sited where the northern edge of the valley began to rumple into low hills^M by an early-day entrepreneur who dreamed of getting rich from the puddles of mineral water bubbling there, and didn't^M the town somehow had stretched itself awkwardly along the design of a very wide T. Main Street, the top of the T, ran east and west, with most of the town's houses banked up the low hills on either side of the business area at its eastern end. To the west lay the sulphur slough, the railroad and shipping pens, and the creamery and grain elevator.

The highway, in its zipper-straight run up the valley, snapped in there like the leg of the T onto Main Street. Much of the countryside traffic, then, was aimed to this west end of town, while all the saloons and grocery stores and cafes^M and the post office and the druggist and the doctor and the two lawyers, since it took two to fight out a court case^M did business at the east end.

This gave White Sulphur an odd, strung-out pattern of life, as if the parts of the community had been pinned along a clothesline. But it also meant there was an openness to the town, plenty of space to see on to the next thing which might interest you and to roam toward^O. Even the school helped with this sense of open curiosity, because it had been built down toward¹ the base of the T where two of the town's main

attractions for a boy also had ended up--the county jail,
and the sulphur slough.

Since the nine saloons downtown fueled a steady traffic of drunks, the jail was kept busy, and most schooldays we had a fine clear view of the ritual there. It was only a few dozen yards from the diamond where we played work-up softball to where the brick jail building perched atop a small embankment. Just in from the edge of this embankment, a wire clothesline had been looped between two fat posts. Right there, the ~~often had~~ prisoners took a morning recess at the same time as ours. They were sent out to pin their bedding on the clothesline and beat some cleanliness into it--and, I suppose, to huff some of the alcohol out of themselves. Sheepherders who had come in from the mountains for their annual binge, the regular winos from the Grand Central who were tossed in jail every few months to dry out, once in a while a skinny scuffed-up cowboy from one of the Rankin ranches--there they would be, on the embankment before us like performers on a stage.

Most of the men I could recognize from my nights downtown with Dad. But one morning a single inmate came out, a slender man I didn't know but whose face I seemed to have seen before. The softball game stopped as we all puzzled at that strange familiar face. The instant before any of us figured it out, one of my classmates rushed to get his words into the air first: Hey, that's my dad! His face ~~was~~ the replica of

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~~pleadingly~~ Desperation knowing only bravado to
the man's, he looked from one to another of us. One more call on,
time he said it ^M—That's my dad! ^M—before we faced around,
~~fixed~~ shame ^Mheavy in the air, toward the next batter.

At the bottom of the slope from the school grounds, as if it had seeped down from the overflow off the prisoners' bedding, lay the sulphur slough which gave White Sulphur its name. On cold days, the slough steamed and steamed, thin fog puffs wisping up from the reeds, as if this was where the entire valley breathed. Any weather, the water stewed out an odor like rotten eggs. At the slough edge nearest the school stood a tiny gazebo, a rickety scrap from the town's days when it had tried to be a resort. Either as decoration or a roof against bird droppings, the gazebo sheltered a small hot spring. A corroding cup hung on one pillar of the gazebo, and if you dared to touch it, then you could dare the taste of the sulphur spring water.

One of my classmates—^Lof course, Kirkwood^L—downed the water as if it were free lemonade. His grandfather, a nasty-faced character who indeed gave every sign that he might live forever, had convinced him that the stuff was ^{a positive} an elixir for a person's insides. After Kirkwood had slurped down a cupful, I would reluctantly sip away. What bothered me even worse than the taste was the rancid look of the spring. The sulphur water had layered its minerals into a kind of putty on stones and clay and even the underwater

strands of grass, and the spring always was coated with this sickly whitish curd, as if something poisonous had just died there. And yet, nowhere else had anything like this steaming place, and so the slough and its ugly water drew us.

White Sulphur had other lures I thought must be the only ones of their kind in the universe--the giant carcasses of buildings to be poked into. Late in the last century, when the town had figured it might grow, a few grandiose buildings had been put up, and they had not yet fallen down entirely. Near the sulphur slough stood the remains of the Springs Hotel, a long box of gingerbread-work and verandas which had been built for resort-goers who came to take the waters. I seem to remember that whatever was left of this building was so treacherous none of us would go out on its floor more than a few feet from the wall; you could fall through the sagging floorboards to some black awfulness below. Another awfulness clung to the Springs Hotel's past. The story was that someone had been killed diving into its swimming pool, that White Sulphur dwindled away from being a resort after that. The public death of that diver was epitaphed in the hotel's blind gape of windows and the broken spine of ridgepole. A boy stepped uneasily here, and stepped away not quite knowing what it was that brought him back and back.

Across town loomed a huger wreck, cheerier and much more inviting. This one was called the Old Auditorium—a sharp

comedown from its original name, the Temple of Fun--and it had been built in the 1890's by an earnest group of local businessmen--^h a magazine writer who happened through town described the type as exerting every nerve to prosper--^h who totally misjudged the town's need for a structure of that size. Probably there never had been enough people in the entire county to fill the place, even if they all had been herded in at gunpoint for culture's sake. ^H Built of brick, with a shingled dome rising from the middle of the roof like a howdah on the back of a great red elephant, and a forest of chimneys teetering unevenly around the edge, the temple had never been finished by its exhausted backers, although it was complete enough to use for school recitals and graduation ceremonies by the time the 1925 earthquake shook it onto the condemned list. A dozing dinosaur of a building, it had been collapsing little by little ever since the earthquake. Now the remains stood over us, roofless, ghost-like, magical as a wizard's abandoned castle.

I think it must have been not only the size and gape of the place, but the glacial spill of red brick that attracted me. Oddly, since in the early days ~~the town~~ had its own brickyard and a number of substantial buildings besides the Temple of Fun had been put up, ~~White Sulphur~~ had come through the years into a clapboard, take-it-or-leave-it appearance which made brick-built respectability seem very rare ^O and ^O

here was the largest stack of the reddest brick I could imagine. I could prowl in--windows and doors had vanished long since--and amid the clattering emptiness walk the old stage, study out from the dilapidated walls where rooms had been. Echoes flew back to me as if the auditorium had stored all the sounds from its prime years. It stood as a kind of cavern of history for a few of us, a place where you could go off into an expanse of both space and time.

One other large brick building graced White Sulphur, and if the old auditorium was a cave to be sought out, this next was a man-made mass you could not avoid. You came to it--the Sherman Hotel--as you walked up Main Street: three massive stories of brick and cornicework snouting out into the thoroughfare as firmly as a thumb crimping into a hose. At the very start of White Sulphur's history there had been a dispute about where Main Street ought to run. The doctor who held the land at the west end of town banked too heavily on the notion that some judicious slough drainage and timber road-bedding would draw the route along his holdings. A rival laid out a plat to the east of him, complete with a 25-foot jog away from the direction of the slough and directly out into the path mapped out for Main Street. In some wink of confusion or bribery, the rival survey was accepted by the authorities, the town grew up along the misjointed plat lines, and for the next sixty years, the big brick hotel built at the boundary of

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the muddle squatted halfway into Main Street. In the hotel lobby, a wide high window had been installed near the outer edge of this prow-like jut to take advantage of the outlook. Sitting there in a leather chair you could watch the cars come, straight as fence wire, until suddenly they had to angle off. Old men hobbled into the hotel to lobby-sit the afternoon hours away and watch the cars do their surprised swerve around them. It made a pastime, and the town didn't have many.

For some reason I can't summon back, once in those years Dad and I checked into the Sherman Hotel for a night. The room was worse than we had expected, and worse even than the hotel's run-down reputation. A bare lightbulb dangled over a battered bed; I think there was not even a dresser, nightstand, or chair. The bedsprings howled with rust. Sometime in the skreeking night, Dad said: Call this rattletrap a hotel, do they? I've slept better in wet sagebrush. And yet [↑]dismal as it was, the cumbersome hotel did some duty for the town. The teacher arriving to his job stepped from the bus there and went in to ask the clerk if there were lockers for his baggage for a day or two. Just throw it there in the corner, he was told. But I'd like to lock it away, everything I own is in there. . . . The clerk looked at him squarely for the first time: Just throw it in the corner there, I said. When the teacher came back in a day or so, all was in the corner, untouched.

One last landmark from those years, the gray stone house called The Castle. It speared up from the top of the hill behind the Stockman, a granite presence which seemed to have loomed there before the rest of the town was ever dreamed of. Actually, a man named Sherman had built it in the early 1890's, with bonanza money from a silver lode in the Castle Mountains. He had the granite blocks cut and sledded in by ox team from the mountains, and from a little distance, the three-story mansion with its round tower and sharp roof peaks looked like one of the sets of fantasy pinnacles which poke up all through that range. So in name and material and appearance, all three, old Sherman built for himself an eerie likeness of the Castles which had yielded up his fortune.

If the outside was a mindful whim, the inside of the Castle showed Sherman's new money doing some prancing. It was said he had spared nothing in expense--woodwork crafted of hardwoods from distant countries, crystal dangles on every chandelier, a huge water tank in the attic which sluiced water down to fill the bathtubs in an instant, a furnace which burned hard hot anthracite coal shipped all the way from Pennsylvania. All this was known only by rumor as I would circle past, because Sherman had been in his grave for twenty years and the Castle now stood with boards across its windows and swallows' mud nests clotted onto the fancy stonework.

Those were the relic faces of White Sulphur, the fading

profiles of what the town had set out to be. Other features presented themselves to ~~memory~~^{me}, too, off the faces of the thousand people who lived in White Sulphur then, and a second thousand dotted out on the ranches from one far end of the county to another. Of all those twenty hundred living faces, the one clearest to ~~me~~ ever since has been our madman's.

What had torn apart Hendrik's brain--defect of birth, some stab of illness or accident--I have never known. But he hung everlastingly there at the edge of town life, gaping and leering. His parents, old and made older by the calamity which had ripped their son's mind, would bring Hendrik to town with them when they came for groceries. Slouched in their pickup or against the corner of the grocery, Hendrik grimaced out at us like a tethered dog whose mood a person could never be entirely sure of. ~~H~~ He was able to recognize friends of the family, such as Dad, and make child's talk to them--innocent words growled out of a strongman's body. And somewhere in the odds and ends of his mind he had come up with the ~~sure~~^{certain} way to draw people to him. He would gargle out loudly what could have been a plea or a threat: YOU god uh CIGuhREDD? ~~H~~ No one would deny this pitiful spectre a cigarette, and Hendrik would puff away with a twisted squint of satisfaction, his eyes already glowering along the street for his next donor. Dad, who was uneasy around any affliction but was fond of Hendrik's family, always lit the cigarette carefully and said a few words, while I peeked up at the rough man.

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If he happened to look down at me, it was like being watched by the hot eye of a hawk. All through this time, I can pick out again and again that scene of poor clever lunatic Hendrik, and a town uneasy under his glare.

In that time I puzzled up into three other faces which were strange to me--the black faces of Rose Gordon, Taylor ^M Gordon, and Bob Gordon. The Gordons, I know now, were one of the earliest and most diligent families of White Sulphur. The parents of Rose and Taylor and Bob had come in during the town's short heyday of mining wealth, and Mother Gordon had become the town's laundress: Momma's back-yard looked like a four-mast schooner comin' in. But to me, the three Gordons could have been newly set down from the farthest end of the world, where people were the color of night. They were very black--Rose in particular had a sheen dark as ink. Their ^M faces were unlined, not crinkled at the corners of the eyes as Dad's and the other ranch men's were. And their voices chimed amid the burrs and twangs of everyone else downtown.

Taylor Gordon was a singer. Every so often he would perform at the high school auditorium, singing the spirituals he had heard from his mother as she worked at her wash tubs. His tenor voice could ripple like muscle, hold like a hawser across the notes: Swiiing low, sweet chaaaariot. . . . The strong, sweet sound had carried him to New York ~~once~~, where he sang in concert halls and on the radio and had been declared

by a national magazine as "the latest rival to Paul Robeson."
He also had gone through money as if he were tossing confetti into the streets of Harlem, and when the Depression hit, he promptly ended up back in the valley herding sheep. ~~H~~ But he brought with him New York stories such as no one in the valley had ever heard or dreamed of. Of his writer friend Carl Van Vechten: He was a big Dutchman, he had very buck teeth, rabbit teeth like, and weighed about two hundred pounds, let's say, and was six feet tall. But he wasn't what they called a potbellied six. . . . He liked sometimes to wear a phantom red shirt, reddest red I ever saw. He wore rings, y'know, exotic rings, something that would stand out, or a bracelet, somethin' like that. Bein' a millionaire he could do those things. I remember one night we went to a party. Carl and I was dressed as in Harlem, dressed in kind of satire. Some man gave both of us sam hill. He said, 'You got somethin' to offer the world. You don't have to do anything out of the ordinary, just be yourselves.' Carl laughed and said, 'Well, can't we have a little FUN?' Of a black man he said had a magic with words and deeds: When everybody was broke, a lot of people would go to Father Divine and get the best meal in the world for thirty-five cents, see. And you'd be surprised-- ^M white, black, blue, green and the other, they'd eat in Father Divine's because you could get a meal you couldn't pay two dollars for downtown for thirty-five cents, including ice

cream dessert. And he had 'em lined up, you'd thought a
baseball game was goin' on. Of how people in Harlem could
tell where a man was from just by the scar on his face:
By the brand that was on him, y'see. They could tell where
he'd been in a fight. If you were shootin' craps, you more
or less would be bendin' down when you got cut and that way
you'd get it across the forehead here. Whereas if you were
playin' poker, you were more apt to be settin' up, then you'd
be apt to get this one here across the cheek. Then if you
were playin' what they called 'skin,' why you'd apt to get
this other. So y'see, if a fella was cut here, he was from
Geechyland, if he was cut this other way he was from Selma,
Alabama, and so on and so on.

Now, either Taylor or Bob owned the building the post office was in, and the pair of them lived on the second floor. Taylor came and went in a bold erect style, always with some new plan for singing in New York again or making a fortune from some gadget he had invented. He also took pride in being the one writing man the valley had ever had. Taylor was a talented storyteller--it was as if his voice could put a rich gloss on anything it touched--and while he had been in New York singing at society parties, he met white writers such as Van Vechten who urged him to make a manuscript of his stories of early-day White Sulphur. They steered him to a publisher and illustrator, and shepherded

his guesswork grammar into print as a memoir with the title Born to Be. ^A The book with his name on it naturally impressed Taylor into thinking he could do another. This time there was no help, and no publisher. The failure ~~must have~~ worked on his mind for years; eventually he saw conspirators. The man who published his first book had become John Steinbeck's publisher as well, and for the rest of his life, Taylor told anyone who would listen that Steinbeck and the publisher had pirated his second book idea and made it into The Grapes of Wrath.

While Taylor built that phantom swindle in his mind, Bob Gordon crashed back and forth between street and room, a desperate drinker even by White Sulphur standards. I would see him sometimes when I went to the post office for the mail, off somewhere in his plodding stagger. I remember that he wore suspenders, one of the few men in town who did, and the straps made a slumping X across his big back as they slid down his shoulders. Brothers indeed, Taylor and Bob, in desperation as well as in skin, the one daydreaming of New York and second fame, the other fumbling for his next bottle of whiskey.

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Rose Gordon lived apart from her brothers, both in place and behavior. She was the one in the family who had chosen to be courtly toward the white faces all around, and a time or two a week she came along Main Street, a plump dark fluff

of a woman, with her constant greeting, How do you do? And how are you today? Rose had extreme faith in words and manners. The death of any old-timer would bring out her pen, and a long letter to the Meagher County News extolling the departed. She was especially fond of two groups in the valley's history, the Scots who had homesteaded in the Basin and elsewhere in ~~around~~ the valley, and the Indians who had worn away before the tide of settlement.

Her passion for the Indians, fellow sufferers for the dusk of their skin, was understandable enough. They were the first ladies of this land, she would declare of the Indian women she had seen when she was a girl, and the saying of it announced that Rose Gordon knew ladyship from personal experience. But the transplanted Scots, my father's family and the others who had never seen black faces before and in all likelihood didn't care for them when they did? It was their talk. The lowlands burr, the throaty words which came out their mouths like low song, captivated Rose. ~~#~~ She was as entranced with the spoken word as Taylor was with the written, and the oration she had given when she was valedictorian of her high school class of ~~eight~~ ^{five} students--that oration given ^{in 1904} from a rostrum in the old auditorium, a large American flag fastened square and true along the back stage wall--had been the summit of her life. When I had become a grown man, she astonished me once by reciting word-for-word the climax of

that oration sixty years before: I gave my address on the progress of the Negro race. I ended, I said: VThe colored soldiers have earned the highest courage, and they won unstinted praises by their bravery, loyalty and fidelity. They have indeed been baptized into full citizenship by their bloodshed in defense of their country, and they have earned the protection of that honorable emblem, the Stars and Stripes!

While Rose held those words in her memory as if they were her only heirloom, other street voices plaided White Sulphur life for me as well. The twang which gritted out of Lloyd Robinson and the other Missourians: You could of talked all day long and not said that . . . Seen anything of that long-geared geezer who was gonna break that gelding for me? . . . That Swede don't know enough to pound sand in a rat hole . . . In June, mosquitoes would come in a haze off the Smith River, and the mosquito stories would start: Bastards're so big this year they can stand flatfooted and drink out of a rainbarrel . . . saw one of 'em carry off a baby chick the other day . . . yah, I saw two of 'em pick up a lamb, one at each end . . . Any time of year, the muttering against Rankin and his vast holdings in the valley: That goddamn Rankin's so crooked he couldn't sleep in a roundhouse . . . so tight he squeaks . . . so mean the coyotes wouldn't eat him . . . One rancher or another proud of a new woven-wire fence: Horse-high, bull-strong, and hog-tight. . . . Another, defending himself against the

notion that his saddle horse was the color and quality of mud: No, by God, she's more of a kind of tansy-gray, the color of a cat's paw . . . Nellie in The Grill, shaking over early morning coffee: I got lit up like a church last night . . . Went home and threw my hat in the door first.
It didn't come back out, so I figured I was safe. . . .

And always, always, the two voices which went at each other just above my head. Ruth, where the hell you been?
If you think you can just walk off and leave me with the cafe that way, you got another think coming . . . Mister, I didn't marry you to spend all my time in any damn cafe. Where I go is my business . . . The look in my direction, then: Better leave us alone, Ivan. . . . But the voices would go on, through the walls, until one more silence set in between my father and my second mother.

The silences stretched tauter until a day sometime in the autumn of 1948, when the Grill and our town life came to an end. Dad and Ruth could agree on one thing: the tremendous hours of cafe work were grinding them down. They gave up the lease, and now bought a thousand head of sheep and arranged to winter them at a ranch on Battle Creek in the Sixteen country, not far from the Basin where Dad had grown up. [#] There seemed to be no middle ground in the marriage, ⁶ not having managed to make it work while under the stare of the entire town,

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now the two of them decided to try a winter truce out in what was the emptiest corner of the county, just as it had been ~~a half-century before~~
 when Peter and Annie Doig came there to homestead and as it is whenever I return now to drive its narrow red-shale road.
~~Gulch country, sage land,~~
 Gulch country, spare, silent. Out there in the rimming hills beyond the valley, 25 miles from town, Dad and Ruth would have time alone to see whether their marriage ought to last. Could last.

twenty-five

And I began what would be a theme of my life, staying in town in the living arrangement we called boarding out. It meant that someone or other, friend or relative or simply whoever looked reliable, would be paid by Dad to provide me room-and-board during the weekdays of school. It reminds me now of a long visit, the in-between feeling of having the freedom to wander in and out but never quite garnering any space of your own. But I had some knack then for living at the edges of other people's existences, and in this first span of boarding out—with friends of Ruth, the Jordan family—I found a household which teemed in its comings-and-goings almost as the cafe had. ~~Indeed~~ We call it the short-order house around here, Helen Jordan said as deer season opened and a surge of her out-of-town relatives, armed like a guerrilla platoon, swept through. Ralph Jordan himself came and went at uneven hours of the day and night, black with coal dust and so weary he could hardly talk: he was fireman on the

belching old locomotive called Sagebrush Annie which snailed down the branch-line from White Sulphur to the main railroad at Ringling. Ralph with a shovelful of coal perpetually in hand, Helen forever up to her wrists in bread dough or dishwater--the Jordans were an instructive couple about the labor that life could demand. And under their busy roof, I was living for the first time with other children, their two sons and a daughter. The older boy, Curtis, thin and giggly, was my age, and we slept in the same bed and snickered in the dark at each other's jokes. Boarding out at the Jordans went smoothly enough, then, except at the end of each week when Dad was to arrive and take me to the ~~ranch~~ ^{Battle Creek} with him. Friday night after Friday night, he did not arrive.

Whatever Dad or Ruth or I had expected of this testing winter, the unlooked-for happened: the worst weather of thirty years blasted into the Sixteen country, and Dad and Ruth found themselves in contest not so much with each other now, but with the screaming white wilderness outside.

As bad winters are apt to do, this one of 1948^{1/2}-49 whipped in early and hard. Snow fell, drifted, crusted into gray ^{windrows} crystal ~~windows~~, then fell and drifted and crusted gray again. Dad and his hired man pushed the sheep in from the pastures to a big shed at the ranch buildings. Nothing could root grass out of that solid snow. The county road began to block for weeks at a time. Winter was sealing the Sixteen country

into long gray months of aloneness, and I was cordoned from the life of Dad and Ruth there.

At last, on the sixth Friday night, long after I had given up hope again, Dad appeared. Even then he couldn't take me to the ranch with him; he had spent ten hours fighting his way through the snow, and there was the risk that the countryside would close off entirely again before he could bring me back to town Sunday night. Tell ye what we'll do, Skavinsky. Talk to that teacher of yours and see if you can work ahead in your schoolwork. If she'll let you, I'll come in somehow next Friday and you can come spend a couple of weeks out at the ranch.

All week, whenever the recess bell rang I stayed at my desk and flipped ahead in one text or another, piling up lesson sheets to hand to the bemused teacher. Before school was out on Friday, Dad came to the door of the classroom for me, cocking his grin about clacking in with snowy overshoes and a girth of sheepskin coat. [#] The highway down the valley was bare, a black dike above the snow, as he drove the pickup to the turnoff toward Battle Creek. Then the white drifts stretched in front of us like a lake whose waves had suddenly stopped motion to hang in billows and peaks where the wind had lashed them against the sky. [#] The very tops of fenceposts, old gray cedar heads with rounded snow caps, showed where the road was buried. Between the post tops, a set of ruts

had been rammed and hacked by Dad and the few other ranchers who lived in the Sixteen country.

Dad drove into the sea of snow with big turns of the steering wheel, keeping the front wheels grooved in the ruts while the rear end of the pickup jittered back and forth spinning snow out behind us. Sometimes the pickup growled to a halt. We would climb out and shovel away heavy chunks like pieces of an igloo. Then Dad would back the pickup a few feet for a running start and bash into the ruts again. Once we went over a snowdrift on twin rows of planks another of the ranchers had laid for support, a bridge in mid-sea. Once we drove entirely over the top of a drift without planks at all.

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~~ranch~~ Where the road led up to the little ridge above Badger Creek, we angled between cliffs of snow higher than the pickup.

Near Battle Creek, with our headlights fingering past the dark into the white blankness, Dad swerved off the road entirely and sent the pickup butting through the smaller drifts in a hayfield. It had started to snow heavily, the wind out of the Basin snaking the flurries down to sift into the ruts. I watched the last miles roll up on the tiny numbers under the speedometer as Dad wrestled the wheel and began his soft Scots cussing: Snow on a man, will ye? Damn-it-all-to-hell- anyway, git back in those ruts. Damn-such-weather. Hold on, son, there's a ditch here somewhere . . . The twenty-fifth

near The old Jap Stewart

mile, the last, we bucked down a long slope to the ranch with the heavy wet flakes flying at us like clouds of moths. Dad roared past the lighted windows of the ranch house and spun the pickup inside the shelter of the lambing shed. Done! he said out into the storm. Done, damn ye!

To my surprise, Battle Creek was not living up to its name, and Dad and Ruth were getting along less edgily there than they ever had. It may have been that there simply was so much cold-weather work to be done, feeding the sheep, carrying in firewood, melting snow for water because the pump had frozen, that they had little stamina left over for argument. Or perhaps they had decided that the winter had to be gotten through, there simply was no route away from one another until spring. Whatever accounted for it, I slipped into its bask and warmed for the days to come.

Each morning, Ruth stood at the window sipping from a white mug of coffee, watching as Dad and the hired man harnessed the team to the hay sled. Then, if Dad had said they needed her that day, she would pull on heavy clothing and go out and take the reins while the men forked hay off to the sheep. Dad helped her in the house, the two of them working better together at the meals and dishes than they had when they were feeding half the town in The Grill. The pair of them even joked about the icy journey to the outhouse which started each day. Whoever went first, the other would

demand to know whether the seat had been left good and warm.

It damn well ought to be, the other would say, half of my
behind is still out on it. Or: Sure did, I left it smoking
for you.

The ranch house had been built with its living quarters on the second floor, well above the long snowdrifts which duned against the walls. A railed porch hung out over the snow the full length of the house, and from it the other ranch buildings were in view like a small anchored fleet seen from a ship's deck. The lambing shed, low and cloud-gray and enormously long, seemed to ride full-laden in the white wash of winter. Most of the time, the sheep were corraled on the far side of the shed, their bored bleats coming as far as the house if the wind was down. Not far from the lambing shed stood the barn, dark and bunched into itself, prowing up out of the stillness higher than anything else in sight. A few small sheds lay with their roofs disappearing in drifts, swamped by this cold ocean of a winter. Battle Creek flowed just beyond those sheds, but the only mark of it was a gray skin of ice.

In this snow world, Dad and his hired man skimmed back and forth on the hay sled, a low wide hayrack on a set of runners pulled by a team of plunging workhorses. I rode with the men, hanging tight to the hayrack framing above where the horses' hooves chuffed into the snow. When the men talked,

their puffs of breath clouded fatly out in front of their faces. Our noses trickled steadily. Dad put a mitten against my face often to see that my cheeks weren't frostbitten.

The winter fought us again and again. Our dog crashed through the ice of Battle Creek, and the wind carried the sound of his barking away from the house. We found the shatter where he had tried to claw himself out before the creek froze him and then drowned him. A blizzard yammered against the back wall of the house for two days without stop. Outside the snow flew so thick it seemed there was no space left between the flakes in the air, just an endless crisscross of flecks the whiteness of goose down. When Dad and the hired man went to feed the sheep, they would disappear into the storm, swallowed, thirty feet from the window where Ruth and I watched.

An afternoon when the weather let up briefly, I climbed the slope behind the house, to where a long gully troughed toward Battle Creek. Snow had packed the gulch so full that I could sled down over its humps and dips for hundreds of feet at a time. Trying out routes, I flew off a four-foot shale bank and in the crash sliced my right knee on the end of a sled runner as if I had fallen against an axe blade.

That moment of recall is dipped in a hot red ooze. The bloody slash scared out my breath in a long uhhhh. A clench ran through the inside of me, then the instant heat of tears burned below my eyes. The climb from the gulch was steep.

9A
B7

Now the burning fell to my leg. Blood sopped out as I hobbled to the house with both hands clamped over my wound, and Ruth shook as she snipped away the heavy-stained pants leg. The cut, she quickly told me, did not live up to its first horrific gush; it was long but shallow and clean, and dressings easily took care of it. In a few days, I could swing my leg onto the hay sled and again ride with the men above the horses' white-frosted heels.

The two weeks passed in surges of that winter weather, like tides flowing in long and hard. On the last morning, no snow was falling, but Dad said so much had piled by then that we could get to town only by team and sled. Ruth said she wanted to go with us. Dad looked at her once and nodded.

Dad and the hired man lifted the rack off the hay boat and fixed a seat of planks onto the front pair of sled runners. Inside that seat, blankets piled thickly onto the heavy coats we wore, we sat buried in warmth, almost down in the snow as the horses tugged us along on the running bob. Harness buckles sang a ching-tink, ching-tink with every step of the horses. Dad slapped the reins against the team's rumps and headed us toward the hayfields along Battle Creek. The road would be no help to us, drift humped onto drift there by now. We would aim through meadows and bottomlands where the snow lay flatter.

The greyness stretching all around us baffled my eyes.

Where I knew hills had to be, no hills showed. The sagebrush too had vanished, from a countryside forested with its clumps. One gray sheet over and under and around, the snow and overcast had fused land and sky together. Even our sleigh was gray and half-hidden, weathered ash moving like a pale shadow through ashen weather.

Dad headed the team by the tops of fenceposts, and where the snow had buried even them, by trying to pick out the thin besieged hedge of willows along the creek. I peeked out beside Ruth, the two fogs of our breath blowing back between us as the horses found footing to trot. More often, they lunged at the snow, breaking through halfway up their thick legs. Dad talked to the horses every little while: Hup there, Luck, get your heft into it. . . . Pull a bit, damn ye, Bess . . . Up this rise, now, get yourself crackin' there . . . Their ears would jab straight up when they felt the flat soft slap of the reins and heard Dad's voice, and they would pull faster and we would go through the snow as if the sled was a running creature carrying us on its back.

The twin cuts of our sled tracks, the only clear lines the snow had not yet had time to seize and hide, traced away farther and farther behind us. Except for the strides of the horses and Dad's words to them, the country was silent, held so under the weight of the snow. In my memory that day has become a set of instants somewhere between life and death,

a kind of eclipse in which hours did not pass and sound did not echo, all color washed to a flannel sameness and distance swelling away beyond any counting of it. We went into that fog-world at one end of Battle Creek and long after came out at the other, but what happened in between was as measureless as a float through space. If it was any portion of existence at all, it did not belong to the three of us, but to that winter which had frozen all time but its own.

After that ghostly trip, I went back to my boarding family and Dad and Ruth went on with the struggle against the winter. It was another month or so before Dad arrived to take me to the ranch again. This time, we drove across the drifted world inside a plowed canyon, the slabs and mounds of frozen snow wrenched high as walls on either side of the thin route.

We've had a D-8 'dozer in here, the government sent it out when it looked like we were all gonna lose the livestock out here. I had to get a truckload of cottonseed cake sent in for the sheep, the hay's goin' so damn fast. They put the bumper of that truck right behind the 'dozer and even so it took 'em sixty-six hours to make it to the ranch and back,
can ye feature that? That load of cottoncake is gonna cost us \$2500 in transportation, but we had to have 'er. I looked at him as if he'd said the moon was about to fall on us;
\$2500 sounded to me like all the money in the state of Montana.
But Dad grinned and talked on: You should of been out here

to see all the snowplowin'. After they 'dozed out our haystacks, the crew was supposed to go up and 'doze out Jim Bill Keith's place. I was the guy that was showin' them the way, ridin' the front end of that Cat. Hell, I got us lost on the flats up here^m-same damn country I grew up in, y'know^b-and we 'dozed in a big circle before we knew what was goin' on. Plowed up a quarter of a mile of ~~Keith's~~ ^{Jim Bill's} fence and didn't even know it. Blizzardin', boy it's been ablowin' out here, son.

They came out in one of them snow crawlers to change Cat crews^m-changed 'em with an airplane when they first started, but the weather got so bad they couldn't fly^b-so here they come now in one of these crawlers, and the guy drivin' is drunker'n eight hundred dollars. I thought he was gonna bring that damned crawler through the window of the house . . . I laughed with him, but must have looked worried. He grinned again. We're doin' okay in spite of it all. Haven't lost any sheep yet, and that high-priced cottoncake gives us plenty of feed. If this winter don't last into the summer, we're even gonna make some pretty good money on the deal.

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Then in the next weeks came an afternoon when Dad saddled a horse and plunged off through the below-zero weather to the neighboring Keith ranch. He came up here wanting to borrow some cigarettes, and some whiskey. Probably the truce with Ruth was wearing through by then. Dad idled in the kitchen, talking and drinking coffee with Mrs. Keith while waiting for

Jim Bill and his hired man to come back from feeding their cattle. I remember, yes, your dad had ridden up on a little sorrel horse and he was sitting in the kitchen with Flossie, and he kept looking out at this kind of a red knob out here on the hill. He looked and he looked, and pretty soon he jumped up and yelled: It's broke, it's broke! and he ran outside. And that winter WAS broke. The hired man and I came riding home with our earflaps rolled up and our coats off, and our mittens stuck in the forkhole of the saddle. Just like that.

The chinook which had begun melting the snowdrifts even as Dad watched did signal the end of that ferocious winter, and somehow too it seemed to bring the end of the long storm within our household. Before, neither Dad nor Ruth had been able to snap off the marriage. Now they seemed in a contest to do it first, like a pair tugging at a stubborn wishbone.

4 Near the start of summer, Ruth announced she was leaving, this time for all time. Dad declared it the best idea he'd ever heard out of her. Alone with Ruth sometime in the swash and swirl of all this, I asked why she had to go. She gave me her tough grin, shook her head and said: Your dad and me are never gonna get along together. We're done. We gave it our try.

Why it was that the two of them had to endure that winter together before Ruth at last could go from Dad, I have never

fathomed. Perhaps it was a final show of endurance against one another, some way to say I can last at this as long as you can. But that long since had been proved by both, and it is one of the strangenesses of this time that they had to go on and on with the proof of it. A last strangeness came ~~and the divorce been handed down~~ over these years even after Ruth had vanished from us, ~~down~~ one last unrelenting echo of it all. Dad no longer would even refer to Ruth by name. Instead, he took up something provided by one of the onlookers to our household's civil war. Naturally, the valley had not been able to resist choosing up sides in such a squabble, and a woman coming to Dad's defense reached for anything contemptible enough to call Ruth. At last she spluttered: Why, that . . . that little flip! For whatever reason, that Victorian blurt rang perfectly with Dad, put him in the right in all the arguments he was replaying in his mind. From the moment the surprising word got back to him, he would talk of Ruth only as Flip, that damned Flip.

Ruth went, and Flip stayed, one single poisoned word which was all that was left of two persons' misguess about one another. I have not seen Ruth for twenty years, nor spoken with her for twenty-five. But for a time after those few warring years with my father, her life straightened, perhaps like a piece of metal seethed in fire for the anvil. She married again, there was a son. And then calamity anew,

that marriage in wreckage, and another after that, the town voice saying more than ever of her She thinks everything should come in a cloud for her but she has hatefulness in herself, until at last she had gone entirely, disappeared somewhere out onto the Coast, nobody's cared to keep track of her.

4 The son: I am curious about him. Was he taken by Ruth to see the grandmother blinking back age and blindness? Did Ruth stand with him, white mug of coffee in her hand, to watch snow sift on a winter's wind? But the curiosity at last stops there. When Dad and Ruth finally pulled apart, the one sentiment I could recognize within me--have recognized ever since--was relief that she had gone, and that the two of them could do no more harm to each other.

Once more Dad had to right our life, and this time he did it simply by letting the seasons work him up and down the valley. He went to one ranch as foreman of the haying crew, on to another to feed cattle during the winter, to a third for spring and the lambing season. ~~#~~ When school started and I could not be with him, he rented a cabin in White Sulphur and drove out to his ranch work in the morning and back at night. During the winter and in spring's busyness of lambing, I usually boarded with Nellie and his wife in their fine log house. Nellie's wife was a world of improvement from Ruth--
a quiet approving woman, head up and handsome. In the pasture behind their house she raised palomino horses, flowing animals af 39

of a rich golden tan and with light blonde manes of silk.

The horses seemed to represent her independence, her declaration away from Nellie's life of drinking, and she seemed to think Dad was right in letting me be as free and roaming as I was.

It occurs to me now that she ~~would~~ ^{would} have given me her quiet approving smile if I had come home from a wandering to report that I'd just been down at the Grand Central watching a hayhand knife a sheepherder.

And after her season of calm, Dad began one for us together. When the summer of 1950 came, he bought a herd of cattle, and we moved them and ourselves to a cattle camp along Sixteenmile Creek.

There our life held a simpler pace than I could ever remember. The two of us lived in a small trailer house, the only persons from horizon to horizon and several miles beyond. Dad decided to teach me to shoot a single-shot .22 rifle, using as targets the tan gophers which every horseback man hated for the treacherous little burrows they dug. We shot by the hour, rode into the hills every few days to look at the cattle, caught trout in the creek, watched the Milwaukee Railroad trains clip past four times every day. [#] Then I had my eleventh birthday--five years since my mother had died--^M and it seemed to trigger a decision in Dad. Something had been working at him, a mist of despond and unsteady health which would take him off into himself for hours at a time.

One evening in the weeks after my birthday, after he had been silent most of the day, he told me a woman would be coming into our lives again.

His words rolled a new planet under our feet, so astonishing and unlikely was ~~it all~~^{this prospecto}. Ruth had come and gone without much lasting effect, except for the scalded mood Dad showed whenever he had a reason to mention her. But the person he had in mind now cast a shadowline across everything ahead of us, stood forth as the one apparition I could not imagine into our way of life. My mother's mother.

In the night, in mid-dream, people who are entire strangers to one another sometimes will congregate atop my pillow. They file into my sleeping skull in perplexing ~~medleys mingles~~. A face from grade school may be twinned with one met a week ago on a rain-forest trail in the Olympic Mountains. A pair of friends I joked with yesterday now drift in arguing with an editor I worked for more than a thousand miles from here. How thin the brainwalls must be, so easily can acquaintanceships be struck up among these random residents of the dark.

Memory, the near-neighborhood of dream, is almost as casual in its hospitality. When I fix my sandwich lunch, in a quiet noon, I may find myself sitting down thirty years ago in the company of the erect old cowboy from Texas, Walter Badgett. Forever the same is the meal with Walter: fried mush with dark corn syrup, and bread which Walter first has toasted and then dried in the oven. When we bite, it shatters and crashes in our mouths, and the more we eat, the fuller our plates grow with the shrapnel of crumbs. After the last roaring bite, Walter sits back tall as two of the ten-year-old me and asks down: Well, reckon we can make it through till night now? I step to the stove for tea, and come instead onto the battered blue-enamel coffee pot in a sheepherder's wagon, my father's voice saying Ye could float your grandma's flat-iron on the Swede's coffee. I walk back toward my typewriter, past a window framing the backyard fir trees. They are replaced by the wind-leaning jackpines of one Montana ridgeline or another. I glance higher for some hint of the weather, and the square of air broadens and broadens to become

the blue expanse over Montana rangeland, so vast and vaulting that it rears, from the foundation-line of the plains horizon, to form the walls and roof of all of life's experience that my younger self could imagine, a single great house of sky.

Now the mood moves on, the restless habit of dream and memory, and I come to myself in a landscape of coastal western-ness so different in time and place from that earlier one. Different, yet how readily acquainted.

(Pick up at p. 144, "Sitting up in a railroad coach...")