

This will mark the fifteenth Fourth
of July in a row that Gros Ventre
has mustered a creek picnic, a rodeo
and a dance. Regarding those festivities,
ye editor's wife inquires whether
somebody still has her big yellow
potato-salad bowl from last year;
the rodeo will feature \$140 in prize
money; and the dance music will again be
by Nola Atkins, piano, and Jeff Swan,
fiddle.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, June 29

I have to honestly say that the next few weeks of this remembered summer look somewhat pale in comparison with my Stanley episode. Only in comparison, though.

You can believe that I arrived back to English Creek from the land of sheepherders and packhorses in no mood to take any further guff from that father of mine. What in Holy H. Hell was that all about, him and Stanley Meixell pussyfooting around each other the way they had when they met there on the mountain, then before it was over my father handing me over to Stanley like an orphan? Some counting trip, that one. I could spend the rest of the summer just trying to dope out why and what

and who, if I let myself. Considering, then, that my bill of goods against my father was so long and fresh, life's next main development caught me by entire surprise. This same parent who had just lent me as a towing service for a whiskeyfied geezer trying to find his way up the Rocky Mountains--this identical father now announced that he would be off the English Creek premises for a week, and I hereby was elevated into being the man of the house.

"Your legs are long enough by now that they reach the ground," he provided by way of justification the suppertime this was unveiled, "so I guess that qualifies you to run this place, don't you think?"

Weather brought this about, as it did so much else that summer. The cool wet mood of June continued and about the middle of the month our part of Montana had its solidest rain in years, a toad-drowner that settled in around noon and poured on and on into the night. That storm delivered snow onto the mountains--several inches fell in the Big Belts south beyond Sun River, and that next morning here in the Two, along the high sharp parts of all the peaks a white skift shined, fresh-looking as a sugar sprinkle. You could bet, though, there were a bunch of perturbed sheepherders up there looking out their wagon doors at it and not thinking sugar. Anyway, since that storm was a straightforward douser without any lightning and left the forests so sopping that there was no fire danger for a while, the desk jockeys at the national forest office in Great Falls saw this as a chance to ship a couple of rangers from the Two over to

Region headquarters for a refresher course. Send them back to school, as it was said. Both my father and Murray Tomlin of the Blacktail Gulch station down on Sun River had been so assiduous about evading this in the past that the finger of selection now never wavered whatsoever: it pointed the pair of them to Missoula for a week of fire school.

The morning came when my father appeared in his Forest Service monkey suit--uniform, green hat, pine tree badge--and readied himself to collect Murray at the Blacktail Gulch station, from where they would drive over to Missoula together.

"Mazoola," he was still grumbling. "Why don't they send us to Hell to study fire and be done with it? What I hear, the mileage is probably about the same."

My mother's sympathy was not rampant. "All that surprises me is that you've gotten by this long without having to go. Have you got your diary in some pocket of that rig?"

"Diary," my father muttered, "diary, diary, diary," patting various pockets. "I never budge without it." And went to try find it.

I spectated with some anticipation. My mood toward my father hadn't uncurdled entirely, and some time on my own, some open space without him around to remind me I was half-sore at him, looked just dandy to me. As did this first-ever designation of me as the man of the house. Of course, I was well aware my father hadn't literally meant that I was to run English Creek in his absence. Start with the basic that nobody ran my mother. As for station matters, my father's assistant ranger Paul Eliason was strawbossing a fire trail crew not

far along the South Fork and the new dispatcher, Chet Barnouw, was up getting familiar with the lookout sectors and the telephone setup which connected them to the ranger station. Any vital forest business would be handled by one of those two. No, I had no grandiose illusions.

I was to make the check,

on Walter Kyle's place sometime during the week and help Isidor Pronovost line out his pack string when he came to pack supplies up to the fire lookouts and do some barn cleaning and generally be on hand for anything my mother thought up. Nothing to get wild-eyed about.

Even so, I wasn't prepared for what lay ahead when my father came back from his diary hunt, looked across the kitchen at me, said "Step right out here for some free entertainment," and led me around back of the ranger station.

There he went to the side of the outhouse, being a little gingerly about it because of his uniform. Turned. Stepped off sixteen paces-- why exactly sixteen I don't know, but likely it was in Forest Service regulations somewhere. And announced: "It's time we moved Republican headquarters. How're your shovel muscles?"

So here was my major duty of "running" English Creek in my father's absence. Digging the new hole to site the toilet over.

Let me be clear. The job itself I didn't particularly mind. Shovel work is honest sweat. Even yet I would sooner do something manual than to diddle around with some temperamental damn piece of machinery. No, my grouse was of a different feather than that. I purely was perturbed that here was one more instance of my father

blindsiding me with a task I hadn't even dreamt of. First Stanley, now this outhouse deal. Here was a summer, it was beginning to seem like, when every time I turned around some new and strange avenue of endeavor was already under my feet and my father was pointing me along it and chirping, "Right this way--"

All this and I suppose more was on my mind as my father's pickup vanished over the rise of the Gros Ventre road and I contemplated my work site.

Moving an outhouse may not sound like the nicest occupation in the world. But neither is it as bad as you probably think. Here is the program: When my father got back from Missoula we would simply lever up each side of the outhouse high enough to slip a pole under to serve as a skid, then nail crosspieces to keep the pair of skids in place and with a length of cable attached to the back of the pickup, snake the building over atop the new pit and let it down into place, ready for business.

So the actual moving doesn't amount to all that much. The new pit, though. There's the drawback. The pit, my responsibility, was going to take considerable doing. Or rather, considerable digging.

At the spot my father had paced to and marked, I pounded in four stakes with white kitchen string from one to another to represent the outhouse dimensions. Inasmuch as ours was a two-holer, as was considered good-mannered for a family, it made a considerable rectangle; I guess about half again bigger than a cemetery grave. And now all I faced was to excavate the stringed-in space to a depth of about seven feet.

Seven feet divided by, umm, parts of five days, what with the ride I had to make to check on Walter Kyle's place and helping Isidor ~~load~~
~~with his pack string and general choring for my mother.~~ I doped out that if I did a dab of steady digging each afternoon I could handily complete the hole by Saturday when my father was due back. Jobs which can be broken down into stints that way, where you know that if you put in a certain amount of daily effort you'll overcome the chore, I have always been able to handle. It's the more general errands of life that daunt me.

I don't mean to spout an entire sermon on this outhouse topic, but advancing into the ground does get your mind onto the earth, in more ways than one. That day when I started in on the outhouse rectangle I of course first had to cut through the sod, and once that's been shoveled out, it leaves a depression about the size of a cellar door. A sort of entryway down into the planet, it looked like. Unearthing that sod was the one part of this task that made me uneasy, and it has taken me these years to realize why. A number of times since, I have been present when sod was broken to become a farmed field. And in each instance I felt the particular emotion of watching that land be cut into furrows for the first time ever--ever; can we even come close to grasping what that means?--and the native grass being tipped on its side and then folded under the brown wave of turned earth. Anticipation, fascination. Part of the feeling can be described with those words or ones close to them. It can be understood, watching the ripping plow cut the patterns that will become a grainfield, that the homesteaders

who came to Montana in their thousands believed they were seeing a new life uncovered for them.

Yet there's a further portion of those feelings, at least in me. Uneasiness. The uneasy wondering of whether that ripping-plow is honestly the best idea. Smothering a natural crop, grass, to try to nurture an artificial one. Not that I, or probably anyone else with the least hint of a qualm, had any vote in the matter. Both before and after the Depression--which is to say, in times when farmers had money enough to pay wages--kids such as I was in this particular English Creek summer were merely what you might call hired arms; brought in to pick rocks off the newly broken field. And not only the newly broken, for more rocks kept appearing and appearing. In fact in our part of Montana, rock picking was like sorting through a perpetual landslide. Anything bigger than a grapefruit--the heftiest rocks might rival a watermelon--was dropped onto a stoneboat pulled by a team of horses or tractor, and the eventual load was dumped alongside the field. No stone fences built as in New England or over in Ireland or someplace. Just raw heaps, the slag of the plowed prairie.

I cite all this because by my third afternoon shift of digging, I had confirmed for myself the Two country's reputation for being a toupee of grass on a cranium of rock. Gravel, more accurately, there so close to the bed of English Creek, which in its bottom was 100% small stones. We had studied in school that glaciers bulldozed through this part of the world, but until you get to handling the evidence shovelful by shovelful the fact doesn't mean as much to you.

I am dead sure this happened on the third afternoon, a Wednesday, because that was the day of the month the English Creek ladies' club met. There were enough wives along the creek to play two tables of cards, and so have a rare enough chance to visit without males cluttering up the scene; club day always found my mother in a fresh dress right after our noon meal, ready to go. This day, Alice Van Bebber stopped by to pick her up. "My, Jick, you're growing like a weed," Alice crooned out the car window to me as my mother got in the other side. Alice always was flighty as a chicken looking in a mirror--living with Ed likely would do it to anybody-- and away the car zoomed, up the South Fork road toward Withrows', as it was Midge's turn to be hostess.

I know too that when I went out for my comfort station shift, I began by doing some work with a pick. Now, I didn't absolutely have to swing a pick on this project. With a little effort the gravel and the dirt mixed with it were shovable enough. But I simply liked to do occasional pick work. Liked the different feel and rhythm of that tool, operating overhand as it does rather than the perpetual reach-down and-heave of shoveling. Muscles too need some variety in life, I have always thought.

So I was loosening the gravelly earth at the bottom of the hole with swings of the pick, and on the basis of Alice Van Bebber's blab was wondering to myself why a grownup never seemed to say anything to me that I wanted to hear, and after some minutes of this, stopped for breath. And in looking up, saw just starting down toward the ranger station from the rise of the county road a string of three horses.

Sorrel and black and ugly gray.

Or, reading back down the ladder of colors, Bubbles and the pack
mare and the saddle horse that Stanley Meixell was atop.

I didn't think it through. I have no idea why I did it. But I
ducked down and sat in the bottom of the hole.

The moment I did, of course, I began to realize what I had committed
myself to. They say nine-tenths of a person is above the ears, but I
swear the proportion sometimes gets reversed in me. Not that I
wasn't safely out of sight squatting down there; when I'd been standing up
working, my excavation by now was about shoulder deep on me. No problem
there. No problem so long as Stanley didn't get a direct look down into
the hole. But what if that happened? What if Stanley stopped at the
station, for some reason or other? And, say, being stopped anyway he
decided to use the outhouse, and as he was headed out there decided to
amble over to admire this pit of mine? What then? Would I pop up
like a jack-in-the-box? I'd sure as the dickens look just as silly as
one.

I was also learning that the position I had to squat in wasn't
the world's most comfortable. And it was going to take a number of
minutes for Stanley and company to saunter down from the rise and pass
the station and go off up the North Fork road, before I could safely
stand up. Just how many minutes began to interest me more than anything
else. Of course I had no watch, and the only other way I knew to keep
track of time was to count it off like each second between lightning and
thunder, one a-thousand, two a-thousand-- But the problem there, how
much time did I have to count off? That I'd have to work out in my

head, Alec style. Let's see, say Stanley and his horses were traveling
Kelley
 5 miles an hour, which was the figure ~~The Major~~ was always raising hell
 with the Forest Service packers about, insisting they by-god-and-by-damn
 ought to be able to average that. But the Major had never encountered
 Bubbles. Bubbles surely would slow down any enterprise at least half a
 mile an hour, dragging back on his lead rope like a tug of war contestant
 the way he did. Okay, $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles an hour considering Bubbles, and it was
 about a mile from the crest of the county road to down here at the ranger
 station; then from here to where Stanley would pass out of sight beyond
 the North Fork brush was, what, another third of a mile, maybe more like
 half a mile. So now: for Stanley to cover one mile at $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles an hour
 would take--well, 5 miles an hour would be 12 minutes; 4 miles an hour
 would be 15 minutes; round the $4\frac{1}{2}$ mile an hour pace off to say 13 minutes;
 then the other $1/3$ to $1/2$ mile would take somewhere around 6 minutes,
 wouldn't it be? So, 13 and 6, 19 minutes. Then 19 times 60 (60 seconds
 to the minute) for the total I'd need to count to, and that was, was,
 was...1100-something.

This hunching down in a toilet hole was all getting dismal enough
 without me reciting one a-thousand, two a-thousand, three a-thousand,
 all the way up to 1100-something. Besides, I had no idea how much time
 I had already spent, in the calculating.

Besides again, numbers weren't really what needed thinking on.
 The point to ponder was, why was I hiding anyway? Why had I plunked
 myself into this situation? Why didn't I want to face Stanley? Why
 had I let the sight of him hoodoo me like this? Some gab about the

weather, inquire as to how his hand was getting along, say I had to get back to digging, and that would have been that. But no, here I was, playing turtle in the bottom of an outhouse pit. Sometimes there's nobody stranger in this world than ourselves.

So I squatted and mulled. There ~~is~~ this for sure about doing those two together, they fairly soon convince you that you can think better standing up. Hell with it, I eventually told myself. If I had to pop up and face Stanley with my face all pie, so be it.

I unkinked and came upright with some elaborate arm stretching, as if I'd just had a nice break from work down there. Then treated myself to a casual yawn and began eyeing around over the rim of the pit to determine which direction I had to face embarrassment from.

And found nobody.

No Stanley. No Bubbles. Nothing alive anywhere around, except one fourteen-year-old fool.

"So," my mother inquired upon return from her ladies' club, "everything peaceful around here?"

"Downright lonesome," I said back.

Now let me tell of my mother's contribution to that week.

It ensued around mid-day on Thursday. First thing that morning my father's packer Isidor Pronovost showed up, and I spent the front of the day working as cargodier for Isidor, helping him make up packs of supplies to take up to the fire lookouts. ~~Isidor~~^H "Balance," Isidor sermoned as he always did. "We got to balance the buggers,~~the~~.

Jick, that's every secret of it." Harking back to my Bubbles experience I thought to myself, don't I know it. ~~H~~ Then Isidor was not much more than out of sight with his pack string when here came my mother's brother, Pete Reese, English Creek was getting about as busy as Broadway.

Pete had driven into town from his ranch on Noon Creek on one errand or another, and now was looping home by way of English Creek to drop off our mail and see how we were faring. He stepped over and admired my progress on the outhouse hole. "Everybody on the creek'll be wanting to patronize it. You thought of charging admission?" Then handed me the few letters and that week's Gleaner. His doing so reminded me I was the temporary host of the place and I hurriedly invited, "Come on over to the house."

We no sooner were through the door ~~of the station~~ than my mother was saying to Pete, "You're staying for dinner, aren't you," more as declaration than question. So Pete shed his hat and offered that he supposed he could, "if it's going to be something edible." Pete got away with more with my mother than just about anyone else could, including my father. "Park your tongue then," she simply retorted, and went to work on the meal while Pete and I chinned about the green year.

That topic naturally was staying near the front of everybody's ~~coolest~~
mind. By now the weather service was declaring this the ~~wettest~~ June in ~~and the wettest in almost as long,~~ Montana since 1916 news which was more than welcome. In Montana too much rain is just about enough. All the while the country had been greening and greening, the crop and livestock forecasts were flourishing, too.

Pete imparted that Morrel Loomis, the biggest lamb buyer operating in the Two country, had come up from Great Falls for a look at the Reese and Hahn and Withrow bands, and that Pete and Fritz and Dode all decided to go ahead and contract their lambs to Loomis on his offer of 21½¢ a pound. "Enough to keep me floating toward bankruptcy," Dode had been heard to say, which meant that even he was pretty well pleased with the price.

"Beats last year by a couple of cents, doesn't it?" I savvily asked Pete.

"Uh huh, and it's damn well time. Montana has got to be the champion next year country of the entire damn world."

"How soon did you say you'd be haying?" my mother interrogated without looking around from her meal work at the stove. I wish now that she had in fact been facing around toward Pete and me, for I am sure my gratitude for that question was painted all over my face. Whenever haying began I was to drive the scatter rake for Pete, as I had done the summer before and Alec had for the few summers before that. But getting a rancher to estimate a date when he figured his hay crop would be ready was like getting him to confess to black magic. The hemming and hawing did have the basis that hay never was really ready to mow until the day you went out and looked at it and felt it and cocked an eye at the weather and decided this was as good a time as any. But I also think ranchers cherished haying as the one elastic part of their year. The calendar told them when lambing or calving would begin, and shipping time loomed as another constant, so when they had a chance

to be vague--even Pete, of the same straightforward lineage as my mother, now was pussyfooting to the effect that "all this rain, hay's going to be kind of late this year"--they clung to it.

"Before the Fourth?" my mother narrowed the specification.

"No, I don't suppose." It was interesting to see comments go back and forth between this pair; like studying drawings of the same face done by two different artists. Pete had what might be called the kernel of my mother's good looks. same neat nose, apple cheeks, roundish jaw, but proportioned smaller, thriftier.

"The week after?"

"Could be," Pete allowed. "Were you going to feed us sometime today or what?"

Messages come in capsules as well as bottles. The content of "could be" was that no hay would be made by Pete Reese until after the Fourth of July and until then, I was loose in the world.

There during dinner, it turned out that Pete now was on the question end of the conversation:

"Alec been around lately?"

"Alec," my mother reported in obituary tones, "is busy Riding the Range."

"Day and night?"

"At least. Our only hope of seeing him is if he ever needs a clean shirt."

—

My personal theory is that a lot of misunderstanding followed my mother around just because of her way of saying. Lisabeth Reese McCaskill could give you the time of day and make you wonder why you had dared to ask. I recall once when I was about eleven that we were visited for the morning by Louise Bowen, wife of the ranger at the Indian Head district to the south of us. Cliff Bowen was newly assigned onto the Two, having held down an office job at Region headquarters in Missoula all the time before, and Louise was telling my mother how worried she was that her year-old, Donny, accustomed to town and a fenced yard, would wander off the station, maybe fall into the Teton River. I was in the other room, more or less reading a Collier's and minding my own business, but I can still hear how my mother's response suddenly seemed to fill the whole house:

"Bell him."

There was a stretch of silence then, until Louise finally kind of peeped: "Beg pardon? I don't quite--"

"Put a bell on him. The only way to keep track of a wandering child is to hear him."

Louise left not all too long after that, and that was the extent of our visits from her. But I did notice, when my father drove down to borrow a saw-set from Cliff a month or so later and I rode along, that Donny Bowen was toddling around with a lamb bell on him.

Pete was continuing on the topic of Alec. "Well, he's at that age--" "Pete," she headed him off, "I know what age my own son is."

"So you do, Bet. But the number isn't all of it. You might try keep that in mind."

My mother reached to pass Pete some more fried spuds. "I'll try," she allowed. "I Will Try."

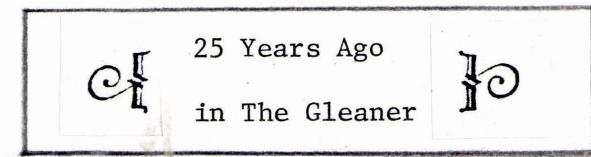
When we'd eaten and Pete declared "It's time I wasn't here" and headed home to Noon Creek, my mother immediately began drowning dirty dishes and I meanwhile remembered the mail I'd been handed, and fetched it from the sideboard where I'd put it down. There was a letter to my mother from Mr. Vennaman, the Gros Ventre principal--even though Alec and I were gone from the English Creek school my mother still was on its school board and so had occasional dealings with the education muckymucks in Gros Ventre and Conrad--and a couple of Forest Service things for my father, probably the latest Kelleygrams. But what I was after was the Gleaner, thinking I'd let my dinner settle a little while I read. As usual, I opened to page 5. The newspaper was always 8 pages and page 5 was always the At Random page, carrying the editor Bill Reinking's own comments, and syndicated features about famous people or events, and local history, and even poetry or quotations if Bill felt like it. Random definitely was the right word for it, yet every week that page was a magnet for a mind like mine.

I'd been literary for maybe three minutes when I saw the names.

"Mom? You and Pete are in the paper."

She turned from where she was washing dishes and gave me her look that said, you had now better produce some fast truth.

I pinned down the newsprint evidence with my finger. "See, here."



Anna Reese and children Lisabeth
and Peter visited Isaac Reese at
St. Mary's Lake for three days
last week. Isaac is providing
the workhorses for the task of
building the roadbed from St.
Mary's to Babb. Isaac sends
word through Anna that the summer's
work on this and other Glacier
National Park roads and trails is
progressing satisfactorily.

As she read over my shoulder I thought about the journey that would have been in those days. Undoubtedly by democrat wagon, all the way north from the Reese place on Noon Creek. Past the landmark of Heart Butte, across the Two Medicine River, and then on even beyond Cut Bank Creek. Very nearly to Chief Mountain, the last peak that could be seen on the northern horizon. I of course had been over that total route with my father, but only a piece at a time, on various riding trips and by pickup to the northernmost part. But to do the whole journey at once, by hoof and iron wheel, a woman and two kids, struck me as a notable expedition.

"Sounds like a long time in a wagon," I prompted cannily. "You never told me about that."

"Didn't I." And she turned and went back to her dishpan.
Well, sometimes you could prompt my mother, and sometimes you might as well try conversing with the stove poker.

I retreated into my hole, so to speak. Yet, you know how it is when you're doing something your body can take care of by itself. Your

mind is going to sneak off somewhere on its own. As the rest of me dug, mine was on that wagon journey with my mother and Pete and their mother.

There wouldn't have been the paved highway north to Browning and the Park then, just the old road as the wheels of the freight wagons had rutted it into the prairie. Some homesteads must have still existed between Gros Ventre and the Reservation boundary at Birch Creek, but probably not many. Those were the years when the Valier irrigation project was new and anybody who knew grain grew on a stem was over there around Lake Francis trying to be a farmer. Mostly empty country, then, except for livestock, all the way to Birch Creek and its ribbon line of trees. Empty again from there north to Badger Creek, where I supposed some of the same Blackfeet families lived then as now. There near Badger the Reese wagon would have passed just west of the place where, a century and some before, Meriwether Lewis and the Blackfeet clashed. That piece of Reservation country to us was simply grass, until my father deduced from reading in a book of the Lewis and Clark journals that somewhere off in there near where Badger flows into the Two Medicine River was the place Lewis and his men killed a couple of Blackfeet over a stealing incident and began the long prairie war between whites and Indians. Passing that area in a pickup on paved highway never made that history seem real to me. I would bet it was more believable from ~~that~~^a wagon. Then up from Badger, the high benches to where the Two Medicine trenched deep through the landscape. Maybe another day and a half of travel beyond that, through Browning and west and then north across Cut Bank

Creek, and over the divide to St. Mary's, and there at the end of it all the road camp, its crews and tents and workhorses. In my imagination I saw it as somewhat like a traveling circus, but with go-devils and scrapers and other road machines instead of circus wagons. And its ringmaster, my grandfather, Isaac Reese. He was the only one of my grandparents yet alive when I became old enough to remember and I could just glimpse him in a corner of my mind. A gray-mustached man at the head of the table whenever we had Sunday dinner at the Reeses', using his knife to load his fork with food in a way which would have caused my mother to give Alec or me absolute hell if we had dared try it. I gather, though, that Isaac Reese got away with considerably more than that in life--I suppose any horse dealer worth his reputation did--and it was a thriving Reese ranch there on Noon Creek that Pete took over after the old man's death.

This Reese side of the family wandered into the conversation whenever someone would learn that my mother, although she was married to a man only a generation or so away from kilts, herself was just half-Scottish. "The other half," my father would claim when he judged that she was in a good enough mood he could get away with it, "seems to be something like badger." Actually, that lineage was Danish. Isak Riis departed Denmark aboard the ship King Carl sometime in the 1880s, and the pen of an immigration official greeted him onto American soil as Isaac Reese. In that everybody-head-west-and-grab-some-land period, counting was more vital than spelling anyway. By dint of what his eyes told him on the journey west, Isaac arrived to North Dakota determined on a living

from workhorses. The Great Northern railroad was pushing across the top of the Western United States--this was when Jim Hill was promising to cobweb Dakota and Montana with railroad iron--and Isaac began as a teamster on the roadbed. His ways with horses and projects proved to be as sure as his new language was shaky. My father claimed to have been on hand the famous time, years later, when Isaac couldn't find the words "wagon tongue" and ended up calling it "de Godtamm handle to de Godtamm wagon." Within days after sizing up the railroad situation "the old boy was borrowing money right and left from anybody who'd take his note, to buy horses and more horses"--my father was always a ready source on Isaac, I guess greatly grateful to have had a father-in-law he both admired and got entertainment from--and soon Isaac had his own teams and drivers working on contract for the Great Northern.

When construction reached the east face of the Rockies, the mountains held Isaac. Why, nobody in the family ever could figure out. Certainly in Denmark he must never have seen anything higher than a barnyard manure pile. And unlike some other parts of Montana, this one had no settlement of Danes. (Though as my father pointed out, maybe ~~that~~ those were Isaac's reasons.) In any case, while his horses and men worked on west through Marias Pass as the railroad proceeded toward the coast, Isaac stayed and looked around. In a week or so he horsebacked south along the mountains toward Gros Ventre, and out of that journey bought a homestead relinquishment which became the start of the eventual Reese ranch.

Isaac Reese was either shrewd as hell or lucky as hell. Even at my stage of life I am not entirely clear whether there is any appreciable difference between the two. By whichever guidance he lit here in a

region of Montana where a couple of decades of projects were standing in line waiting for a man with workhorses. The many miles of irrigation canals of the water schemes at Valier and Bynum and Choteau and Fairfield. Ranch reservoirs ("essavoys" to Isaac). The roadbed when the branch railroad was built north from Choteau to Pendroy. Street grading when Valier was built onto the prairie. All those Glacier Park roads and trails. As each appurtenance was put onto the Two country and its neighboring areas, Isaac was on hand to realize money from it.

"And married a Scotchwoman to hang onto the dollars for him," my father always injected at this point. She was Anna Ramsay, teacher at the Noon Creek school. Her, I knew next to nothing about. Just that she died in the influenza epidemic during the war, and that in the wedding picture of her and Isaac that hung in my parent's bedroom she was the one standing and looking in charge, while Isaac sat beside her with his mustache drooping whimsically. Neither my mother nor my father ever said much about Anna Ramsay Reese--which helped sharpen my present curiosity, thinking about her trundling off to St. Mary's in that wagon. Like my McCaskill grandparents she simply was an absent figure back there, cast all the more into shadow by my father's supply of stories about Isaac.

In a sense, the first of those Isaac tales was the genesis of our family. The night my father, the young association rider, was going to catch Isaac by ambush and request my mother in marriage, Isaac greeted him at the door and before they were even properly sat down, had launched into a whole evening of horse topics, Clydesdales and Belgians and Morgans and fetlocks and withers and hocks ~~and pasterns~~. Never tell me a

Scandinavian harbors no sense of humor.[#] When my father at last managed to wedge the question in, Isaac tried to look taken aback, eyed him hard and repeated as if he was making sure: "marriage?" Or as my father said Isaac pronounced it: "mare itch?"

Then Isaac looked at my father harder yet and asked: "Tell me dis. Do you ever took a drink?"

My father figured honesty was the best answer in the face of public knowledge. "Now and then, yes, I do."

Isaac weighed that. Then he got to his feet and loomed over my father. "Ve'll took one now, den." And with Mason jar moonshine reached down from the cupboard, the pairing that began Alec and me was toasted.

When I considered that I'd done an afternoon's excavating, physically and mentally, I climbed out and had a look at the progress of my sanitation engineering. By now the pile of dirt and gravel stood high and broad, the darker tone on its top showing today's fresh shovel work and the drier faded-out stuff beneath, the previous days'. With a little imagination I thought I could even discern a gradation, like layers on a cake, of each stint of my shovelfuls of the Two country, Monday's, Tuesday's, Wednesday's, and now today's light-chocolate top. Damn interesting, the ingredients of this earth.

More to the immediate point, I was pleased with myself that I'd estimated the work into the right daily dabs. Tomorrow afternoon was going to cost some effort, because I was getting down so deep the

soil would need to be bucketed out. But the hole looked definitely finishable.

I must have been more giddy with myself than I realized, because when I went over to the chopping block to split wood for the kitchen woodbox, I found myself using the axe in rhythm with a song of Stanley's about the gal named Lou and what she was able to do with her wingwangwoo.

When I came into the kitchen with the armload, my mother was looking at me oddly.

"Since when did you take up singing?" she inquired.

"Oh, just feeling good, I guess," I said and dumped my cargo into the woodbox loud enough to try prove it.

"What was that tune, anyway?"

"Pretty Redwing," I hazarded. "I think."

That brought a further look from her. "While I'm at it I might as well fill the water bucket," I proposed, and got out of there.

After supper, lack of anything better to do made me tackle my mother on that long ago wagon trip again. That is, I was doing something but it didn't exactly strain the brain. Since hearing Stanley tell about having done that winter of hair work a million years ago in Kansas, I had gotten mildly interested and was braiding myself a horsehair hackamore. I was discovering, though, that in terms of entertainment, braiding is pretty much like chewing gum with your fingers. So--

"Where'd you sleep?"

She was going through the Gleaner. "Sleep when?"

"That time. When you all went up to St. Mary's." I kept on with my braiding just as if we'd been having this continuing conversation every evening of our lives.

She glanced over at me, then said: "Under the wagon."

"Really? You?" Which drew me more of her attention than I was bargaining for. "Uh, how many nights?"

I got quite a little braiding done in the silence that answered that, and when I finally figured I had to glance up, I realized that she was truly studying me. Not just taking apart with a look: studying. Her voice wasn't at all sharp when she asked: "Jick, what's got your curiosity bump up?"

"I'm just interested, is all." Even to me that didn't sound like an overly profound explanation, so I tried to go on. "When I was with Stanley, those days camptending, he told me a lot about the Two. About when he was the ranger. It got me interested in, uh, old times."

"What did he say about being ranger?"

"That he was the one here before Dad. And that he set up the Two as a national forest." It occurred to me to try her on a piece of chronology I had been attempting to work out ever since that night of my cabin binge. "What, was Dad the ranger at Indian Head while Stanley still was the ranger here?"

"For a while."

"Is that where I remember Stanley from?"

"I suppose."

"Did you and Dad neighbor back and forth with him a lot?"

"Some. What does any of that have to do with how many nights I slept under a wagon twenty-five years ago?"

She had a reasonable enough question there. Yet it somehow seemed to me that a connection did exist, that any history of a Two country person was alloyed with the history of any other Two country person. That some given sum of each life had to be added into every other, to find the total. But none of which sounded sane to say. All I did finally manage was: "I just would like to know something about things then. Like when you were around my age."

No doubt there was a response she had to bite her tongue to keep from making: that she wasn't sure she'd ever been this age I seemed to be at just now. Instead came: ⁴ "All right. That wagon trip to St. Mary's. What is it you want to know about it?"

"Well, just--why was it you went?"

"Mother took the notion. My father had been away, up there, for some weeks. He often was, contracting horses somewhere." She rustled the Gleaner as she turned a page. "About like being married to a ranger," she added, but lightly enough to show it was her version of a joke.

"How long did that trip take then?" Now, in a car, it was a matter of a couple or three hours.

She had to think about that. After a minute: "Two and a half days. Two nights," she underscored for my benefit, "under the wagon. One at the Two Medicine and one at Cut Bank Creek."

"How come Cut Bank Creek? Why not in Browning?"

"My mother held the opinion that the prairie was a more civilized place than Browning."

"What did you do for food?"

chuck

"We ate out of a ~~belly~~ box. That old one from chuckwagon days, with all the cattle brands on it. Mother and I cooked up what was necessary, before we left."

"Were you the only ones on the road?"

"Pretty much, yes. The mail stage still was running then. Some-
where along the way I ^{guess} ~~guess~~ we met it."

She could nail questions shut faster than I could think them up. Not deliberately, I see now. That was just the way she was. A person who put no particular importance on having made a prairie trek and seen a stagecoach in the process.

My mother seemed to realize that this wasn't exactly flowering into the epic tale I was hoping for. "Jick, that's all I know about it. We went, and stayed a few days, and came back."

Went, stayed, came. The facts were there but the feel of them wasn't.

"What about the road camp?" I resorted to next. "What do you remember about that?" The St. Mary's area is one of the most beautiful ones, with the mountains of Glacier National Park sheerling up beyond the lake. The world looks to be all stone and ice and water there. Even my mother might have noticed some of that glory.

Here she found a small smile. "Just that when we pulled in, Pete began holloing all the horses."

She saw that didn't register with me.

"Calling out hello to the workhorses in the various teams," she explained. "He hadn't seen them for awhile, after all. 'Hello, Woodrow!' 'Hello, Sneezer!' Methusaleh. Runt. Copenhagen.

mo # Mother let him go on with it until he came to a big gray mare called Second Wife. She never thought the name of that one was as funny as Father did."

There is this about history, you never know which particular ember of it is going to glow to life. As she told this, I could all but hear Pete helloing those horses, his dry voice making a chant which sang across that road camp. And the look on my mother told me she could, too.

Not to be too obvious, I braided a moment more. Then decided to try the other part of that St. Mary's scene. "Your own mother. What was she like?"

"That father of yours has been heard to say I'm a second serving of her."

Well, this at least informed me that old Isaac Reese hadn't gotten away with nearly as much in life as I'd originally thought. But now, how to keep this line of talk going--

"Was she a leaper too?"

"No," my mother outright laughed. "No, I seem to be the only one of that variety."

Probably our best single piece of family lore was that my mother leaped in with the century. The 29th of February of 1900, she was born on. Which of course meant that except when each leap year showed

up, she lacked a definite calendar date for her birthday. She herself never made anything of that, just let each off-year birthday be marked on whichever date seemed most convenient at the time, February 28th or March 1st. But either my father or Alec one year came up with the card ~~cut~~ idea. So three years of every four, the bunch of us congregated at the table after the supper dishes were done and my mother shuffled a deck of cards. Likely not more than two or three quick riffles, because there was a pretty abrupt limit on how much she was willing to fool around. Then we all would make our predictions as to what manner of birthday year this seemed to be--tomorrow, or the next day-- and she cut the cards: a heart or diamond delivering her a last of February birthday, a club or spade a first of March. This particular year had been a red one, I recall, because she said at the time: "So I don't even get a day's grace any more." It sobers me to realize that when she made that plaint about the speed of time, she was not yet two-thirds of the age I am now.

--"Why did I What?" The Gleaner was forgotten in front of her now, her gaze was on me: not her look that could skin a rock, just a highly surprised once-over.

I swear that what I'd had framed in mind was only further inquiry about my grandparents, how Anna Ramsay and Isaac Reese first happened to meet and when they'd decided to get married and so on. But somewhere a cog slipped, and what had fallen out of my mouth instead was: "Why'd you marry Dad?"

"Well, you know," I now floundered, searching for any possible shore, "what I mean, kids wonder about something like that. How we got here."

Another perilous direction, that one. "I don't mean, uh, how, exactly. More like why. Didn't you ever wonder yourself? Why your own mother and father decided to get married? I mean, how would any of us be here if those people back then hadn't decided the way they did? And I just thought, since we're talking about all this anyway, you could fill me in on some of it. Out of your own experience, sort of."

My mother looked at me for an eternity more, then shook her head. "One of them goes head over heels after anything blonde, the other one wants to know the history of the world. Alec and you. Where did I get you two?"

I figured I had nothing further to lose by taking the chance: "That's sort of what I was asking, isn't it?"

"All right." She still looked skeptical of the possibility of common sense in me, but her eyes let up on me a little. "All right, Mr. Inquisitive. You want to know the makings of this family, is that it?"

I nodded vigorously.

She thought. Then: "Jick, a person hardly knows how to start on this. But you know, don't you, that I taught most of that--that one year at the Noon Creek school?"

I did know that chapter. That when my mother's mother, Anna Ramsay Reese, died in the 'flu epidemic of 1918, my mother came back from what was to have been her second year in college and became, in her mother's stead, the Noon Creek teacher.

"If it hadn't been for that, who knows what would have happened,"

she went on. "But that did bring me back from college, about the same time a long-geared galoot named Varick McCaskill came back from the ~~folks were~~ army. His ~~father~~ still ~~was~~ in here up the North Fork. Scotch Heaven. So Mac was back in the country and the two of us had known each other, oh, all our lives, really. Though mostly by sight. Our families didn't always get along. But that's neither here nor there. That spring when this Mac character was hired as association rider--"

"Didn't get along?"

I ought to have known better. My interruption sharpened her right up again. "That's another story. There's such a thing as a one-track mind, but honestly, Jick, you McCaskill men sometimes have no-track minds. Now. Do you want to Hear This, Or--"

"You were doing just fine. Real good. Dad got to be the association rider and then what?"

"All right then. He got to be the association rider and--well, he got to paying attention to me. I suppose it could be said I paid some back."

Right then I yearned the impossible. To have watched that double-sided admiration. My mother had turned 19 the last of February (or March 1) of that teaching year; a little older than Alec was now, though not a whole hell of a lot. Given what a good-looker she was even now, she must have been extra special then. And my father the cowboy--hard to imagine that--would have been in his early twenties, a rangy redhead who'd been out in the world all the way to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Varick and Lisabeth, progressing to Mac and Bet. and then to some secret territory of

love language that I couldn't even guess at. They are beyond our knowing, those once young people who become our parents, which to me has always made them that much more fascinating.

--"There was a dance, that spring. In my own schoolhouse, so your father ever since has been telling me I have nobody to blame but myself." She again had a glow to her, as when she'd told me about Pete holloing the horses. "Mac was on hand, by then he'd been hired by the Noon Creek ranchers and was around helping them brand calves and so on. That dance--" she shrugged, as if an impossible question had been asked--"that dance I suppose did it, though neither of us knew it right then. I'd been determined I was never going to marry into a ranch life. Let alone to a cow chouser who didn't own much more than his chaps and hat. And later I found out from your father that he'd vowed never to get interested in a schoolmarm. Too uppity to bother with, he always thought. So much for intentions. Anyway, now here he was, in my own schoolroom. I'd never seen a man take so much pleasure in dancing. Most of it with me, need I say. Oh, and there was this. I hadn't been around him or those other Scotch Heavenerers while I was away at college, and I'd lost the knack of listening to that burr of theirs. About the third time that night he said something I couldn't catch, I asked him: 'Do you always talk through your nose?' And then he put on a real burr and said back, 'Lass, it saves wearrr and tearrr on my lips. They'rre in prrrime condition, if you'rre everrr currious.'

My father the flirt. Or flirrrt. I must have openly gaped over this, for my mother reddened a bit and stirred in her chair and declared,

"Well, you don't need full details. Now then, Is that enough family history?"

Not really. "You mean, the two of you decided to get married because you liked how Dad danced?"

"You would be surprised how large a part something like that plays. But no, there's more to it than that. Jick, when people fall in love the way we did, it's--I don't mean this like it sounds, but it's like being sick. Sick in a wonderful way, if you can imagine that. The feeling is in you just all the time, is what I mean. It takes you over. No matter what you do, what you try to think about, the other person is there in your head. Or your blood, however you want to say it. It's"--she shrugged at the impossible again--"there's no describing it beyond that. And so we knew. A summer of that--a summer when we didn't even see each other that much, because your father was up in the Two tending the association cattle most of the time--we just knew. That fall, we were married." Here she sprung a slight smile at me. "And I let myself in for all these questions."

There was one, though, that hovered. I was trying to determine whether to open my yap and voice it, when she took it on herself. "My guess is, you're thinking about Alec and Leona, aren't you."

"Yeah, sort of."

"Lord knows, they imagine they're in a downright epidemic of love," my mother acknowledged. "Alec maybe is. He's always been all go and no whoa. But Leona isn't. She can't be. She's too young and--" my mother scouted for aptness--"fliberty. Leona is in love with the idea of men, not one man. And that's enough on that subject." She looked across at me in a way that made my fingers quit even pretending they were

manufacturing a horsehair hackamore. "Now I have one for you. Jick, you worry me a little."

"Huh? I do?"

"You do. All this interest of yours in the way things were. I just hope you don't go through life paying attention to the past at the expense of the future. That you don't pass up chances because they're new and unexpected." She said this next softly, yet also more strongly than anything else I'd ever heard her say. "Jick, there isn't any law that says a McCaskill can't be as forward-looking as anybody else. Just because your father and your brother, each in his own way, looks to the past to find life, you needn't. They are both good men. I love the two of them--the three of you--in the exact way I told you about, when your father and I started all this. But Jick, be ready for your life ahead. It can't all be read behind you."

I looked back at her. I wouldn't have bet I had it in me to say this. But it did come out: "Mom, I know it all can't. But some?"

That next afternoon, Friday, was the homestretch of my digging. It needed to be, with my father due home sometime the next morning. And so once more unto the bowels of the earth, so to speak, taking down with me into the outhouse pit an old short-handled lady shovel Toussaint Rennie had given my father and a bucket to pack the dirt out with.

My mood was first-rate. My mother's discourse from the evening before still occupied my thinking. The other portion of me by now was accustomed to the pit work, muscles making no complaint whatsoever, and

bottomless

in me that feeling of ~~endless~~ stamina you have when you are young, that you can keep laboring on and on and on, forever if need be. The lady shovel I was using was perfect for this finishing-off work of dabbing dirt into the bucket. To make it handy in his ditch riding Toussaint always shortened the handle and then ground off about four inches of the shovel blade, cutting it down into a light implement about two-thirds of a normal shovel but which still, he proclaimed, "carries all the dirt I want to." And working as I had been for a while each day without gloves to get some good calluses started, now I had full benefit of the smooth old shovel handle in my bare hands. To me, calluses have always been one of the marks of true summer.

How long I lost myself to the rhythm of the lady shovel and the bucket, I don't know. But definitely I was closing in on the last of my project, bottoming the pit out nice and even, when I stepped toward my ladder to heft up a pailful of dirt and found myself looking into the blaze face of a horse. And above that, a hat and grin which belonged to Alec.

"Going down to visit the Chinamen, huh?"

Why did that get under my skin? I can run that remark of Alec's through my ears a dozen times now and find no particular reason for it to be rilesome. In my brother's lofty position I'd likely have commented something similar. But evidently there is something about being come upon in the bottom of an outhouse hole that will unhinge me, for I snapped right back to Alec:

"Yeah, we can't all spend our time roosting on top of a horse and

looking wise."

Alec let up on his grinning at that. "You're a little bit owly there, Jicker. You maybe got a touch of shovellitis."

I continued to squint up at him and had it framed in my mind to retort "Is that anything like wingwangwoo fever?" when it dawned on me that Alec was paying only about half-attention to our conversation anyway. His gaze was wandering around the station buildings as if he hadn't seen them for a decade or so, yet also as if he wasn't quite seeing them now either. Abstracted, might be the twenty-five cent word for it. A fellow with a lot on his mind, most of it blonde and warm.

One thing did occur to me to find out:

"How much is 19 times 60?"

"1140," replied Alec, still looking absent. "Why?"

"Nothing." Damned if I was going to bat remarks back and forth with somebody whose heart wasn't in it, so I simply asked, "What brings you in off the lone prairie?" propped an arm against the side of my pit and waited.

Alec finally recalled that I was down there and maybe was owed some explanation for the favor of his presence, so he announced: "I just came by for that town shirt of mine. Need it for rodeo day."

Christamighty. The powers of mothers. Barely a full day had passed since Mom forecast to Pete that it would take the dire necessity of a shirt to draw Alec into our vicinity, and here he was, shirt-chaser incarnate.

It seemed to me too good a topic to let him have for free. "What, are you entering the pretty shirt contest this year?"

Now Alec took a squint down at me from the summit of the horse, as if I only then really registered on him. "No, wisemouth, the calf roping." Hoohoo. Here was going to be another Alec maneuver just popular as all hell with our parents, spending money on the entry fee for calf roping.

"I guess that color of shirt does make calves run slower," I deadpanned. The garment in question was dark purplish, about the shade of chokecherry juice. Distinctive, to put it politely. "It's in the bottom drawer there in our--the porch bedroom." Then I figured since I was being helpful anyway, I might as well clarify the terrain for Alec. "Dad's in Missoula. But maybe you'd already heard that, huh?"

But Alec was glancing around in that absent-minded way again, which was nettling me a little more every time he did it. I mean, you don't particularly like to have a person choosing when to phase in and out on you. We had been brothers for about 14 5/6 years, so a few seconds of consecutive attention didn't strike me as too awful much to expect of Alec.[#] Evidently so, though. He had reined his horse's head house around to start toward the station before he thought to ask: "How's Mom's mood?"

"Sweet as pie." He might as well know there was an early limit on my aid to this visitation of his. "How's yours?"

I got nothing back from that. Alec simply passed from sight, his horse's tail giving a last little waft as if wiping clean the field of

vision which the pit framed over me.

As I was reaching down to resume with my bucket of earth, though, I heard the hooves stop and the saddle creak.

"Jicker?" Alec's voice came.

"Yeah?"

"I hear you been running the mountains with Stanley Meixell."

While I knew you couldn't have a nosebleed in the English Creek valley without everybody offering you a hanky for a week afterward, it had never occurred to me that I too was automatically part of this public pageant. I was so surprised by Alec knowing of my Stanley sojourn that I could only send forth another "Yeah?"

"You want to be a little more choosy about your company, is all."

"Why?" I asked earnestly of the gape of the pit over me. Two days ago I was hiding out from Stanley in this very hole like a bashful badger, and now I sounded like he was my patron saint. "What the hell have you got against Stanley?"

No answer floated down, and it began to seem to me that this brother of mine was getting awful damn cowboyish indeed if he looked down on a person for tending sheep camp. I opened my mouth to tell him something along that line, but what leaped out instead was: "Why's Stanley got everybody in this damn family so spooked?"

Still nothing from above, until I heard the saddle leather and hooves again, moving off toward the ranger station.

The peace of the pit was gone. Echoes of my questions to Alec

drove it out. In its stead came a frame of mind that I was penned down here, seven feet below the world in a future outhouse site, while two members of this damn McCaskill family were resting their bones house inside the ~~ranger station~~ and the other one was gallivanting off in Missoula. To each his own and all that, but this situation had gotten considerably out of proportion.

The more I steamed, the more a dipper of water and a handful of gingersnaps seemed necessary to damper me down. And so I climbed out with the bucket of dirt, flung it on the pile as if burying something smelly, and headed into the house.

"Your mind is still set," my mother was saying as I came through the doorway, into the kitchen.

"Still is," agreed Alec, but warily. Neither of them paid me any particular attention as I dippedper a drink from the water bucket. That told me plenty about how hot and heavy the conversation was in here.

"A year, Alec." So she was tackling him along that angle again. Delay and live to fight again another day. "Try college for a year and decide then. Right now you and Leona think the world begins and ends in each other. But it's too soon to say, after just these few months."

"It's long enough."

"That's what Earl Zane likely thought, the day before Leona dropped him for you." That seemed to me to credit Earl Zane with more thought capacity than he'd ever shown. Earl was a year or so older than Alec, and his brother Arlee was a year ahead of me in school, and so far as

I could see the Zane boys were living verifications that the human head is mostly bone.

"That's past history," Alec was maintaining.

I punctuated that for him by popping the lid off the Karo can the gingersnaps were kept in. Then there was the sort of scrabbling sound as I dug out a handful. And after that the little sharp crunch as I took a first bite. All of which Alec waited out with the too patient annoyance of somebody held up while a train goes by. Then declared: "Leona and I ain't--aren't skim milk kids. We know what we're doing."

My mother took a breath which probably used up half the air in the kitchen. "Alec. What you're doing is rushing into trouble. You can't get ahead on ranch wages. And just because Leona is horse happy at the moment doesn't mean she's going to stay content with a ranch hand for a husband."

"We'll get by. Besides, Wendell says he'll boost my wages after we're married."

This stopped even my mother, though not for long. "Wendell Williamson," she said levelly, "has nobody's interest at heart but his own. Alec, you know as well as anybody the Double W has been the ruin of that Noon Creek country. Any cattle ranch he hasn't bought outright, he has sewed up with a lease from the bank--"

"If Wendell hadn't got them, somebody else would have," Alec recited.

"Yes," my mother surprised him, "maybe somebody like you. Somebody who doesn't already have more money than he can count. Somebody

who'd run one of those ranches properly, instead of gobbling it up just for the sake of having it. Alec, Wendell Williamson is using you the way he uses a handkerchief to blow his nose. Once he's gotten a few years of work out of you"--another kitchen-clearing breath here--"and evidently gotten you married off to Leona, so you'll have that obligation to carry around in life, too--once he's made enough use of you and you start thinking in terms of a real raise in wages, down the road you'll go and he'll hire some other youngster--"

"Youngster? Now wait one damn min--"

--with his head full of cowboy notions. Alec, staying on at the Double W is a dead end in life."

While Alec was bringing up his forces against all this, I crunched into another ginger snap.

My brother and my mother sent me looks from their opposite sides of the room, a convergence about as taut as being roped with two lassoes simultaneously. She suggested: "Aren't you supposed to be shoveling instead of demolishing cookies?"

"I guess. See you around, Alec."

"Yeah. Around."

Supper that night was about as lively as dancing to a dead march.

Alec had ridden off toward town--Leona-ward--evidently altered not one whit from when he arrived, except for gaining himself the rodeo shirt. My mother was working out her mood on the cooking utensils. I was a little surprised the food didn't look pulverized

when it arrived to the table. So far as I could see, I was the only person on the place who'd made any true progress that day, finishing the outhouse hole. When I came in to wash up I considered announcing cheerfully "Open for business out there," but took a look at my mother's stance there at the stove and decided against.

the two of us

So we just ate, which if you're going to be silent is probably the best thing to be doing anyway. I was doubly glad I had coaxed as much conversation out of her last night as I had. I sometimes wonder if life is anything but an averaging out. One kind of day and then its opposite.

Likely, though, the mother of Alec McCaskill would not have agreed just then that life has its own simple average. For by the time my mother washed the supper dishes and I was drying them, I began to realize she wasn't merely in a maternal snit. She was thinking hard about something. And if I may give myself credit, it occurred to me that her thinking deserved my absence. Any new idea anybody in the McCaskill family could come up with deserved all encouragement.

"Need me any more?" I asked as I hung the dish towel. "I thought I might ride up to check on Walter's and fish my way home till toward dark." The year's longest day was just past, twilight would go on for a couple or three hours yet.

"No. No, go ahead." Her cook's instinct roused her to add: "Your father will be home tomorrow, so catch us a big mess." In those times a person could, the limit was 25 fish a day.

And then she was back into the thinking.

Nothing was amiss at Walter Kyle's place. As I closed the door

on that tidy sparse room, I wondered if Walter didn't have the right idea. Live alone and let everybody else knock bruises on one another.

The fishing was as close to a cinch as fishing can ever be. Since I was using an honest-to-God pole and reel and it was a feeding time of evening, the trout in those North Fork beaver dams all but volunteered. Do I even need to say out loud that I limited? One more time I didn't owe my father a theoretical milkshake, and there still was evening left when the gill of that ~~fifteenth~~^{twenty-fifth} trout was stringer threaded onto my willow ~~fish hanger~~ and I went to collect Pony from the tall meadow grass where she was grazing.

My mother still was in her big think when I came back into the ranger station toward the last of dusk. I reported that the mess of cleaned fish were in a pan of water in the spring house, then stretched myself in an obvious sort of way, kissed her goodnight, and headed for the north porch and my bed. I honestly didn't want to be around any more heavy cogitation that day.

That north porch, a screened-in affair, had been built to take advantage of the summer shade on that side of the English Creek ~~station~~^{ranger station house,}, but in late spring Alec and I always moved out there to use it as our bedroom. Now that he was bunking at the Double W, I of course had the room to myself and I have to testify here that gaining a private bedroom goes far toward alleviating the absence of a brother.

Not just the privacy did I treasure, though. It seemed to me at the time, and still does, that a person could not ask for a better site than that one for day's end. That north porch made a sort of copperwire

bubble into the night world. Moths would bat and bat against the screening, especially if I'd brought a coal oil lamp out with me. Mosquitoes, in the couple of weeks in early June when they are fiercest, would alight out there and try to needle their way in, and there's a real reward to lying there knowing that those little whining bastards can't get at you. Occasional scutterings and whishes in the grass brought news of an owl or skunk working on the field mouse population, out there beyond the lampshine. Many an evening, though, I would not even light the lamp, just use the moon when I went out to bed. Any bright night filled the width of that porch with the shaggy wall of English Creek's cottonwoods and aspen, and atop them like a parapet the blunt black line of the benchland on the other side of the water. Out the west end ~~swatch~~ of the porch, a ~~patch~~ of the mountains stood: Roman Reef, and Billygoat and Phantom Woman Peaks ~~behind~~ it. With Alec's cot folded away I had room to move mine longways into the east end of the room, so that I could lie looking at the mountains, and enjoy the bonus too that, with my head there below the east sill, the sunrise would overshoot me instead of beaming into my face.

I recall that this was a lampless night, that I was flopping into bed without even any thought of reading for awhile, more tired from the day than I'd realized, when I heard my mother at the phone.

"Max? I'll do it. I still think your common sense has dried up and blown away. But I'll Do It." And whanged down the receiver as if her words might sneak back out of the telephone wire.

What that was about, I had no clue. Max? The only Max I could

Two Medicine

conjure up was Max Devlin, the assistant supervisor at the ~~national~~
headquarters
~~forest office~~ down in Great Falls, and why she would be calling him
 up this time of night just to doubt his common sense, I couldn't figure.
 But maybe the go-round with Alec had put her into her mood to deliver
 the Forest Service a little of what she considered it generally deserved.
 I definitely was not going back out there to inquire. Sleep was safer.

My father arrived back from Missoula full of sass and vinegar. He
 always came away from a Region ~~Headquarters~~ session avid to get back to
 the real planet again.

Even the fact that it was Saturday and he had a blank week of
~~diary~~
~~book~~ entries to catch up on didn't dent his spirits. "Easy enough after
 one of these Mazoola schools. Let's see--Monday: snored. Tuesday, tossed
 and turned. Wednesday, another restless day of sleep--"

As for my handiwork out back, he was duly impressed. "The entire
^{dam}
 Fort Peck ~~crew~~ couldn't have dug better."

What ought I to tell about the days between then and the Fourth of
 July? The outhouse got moved in good order, fitting over my pit like a
 hen onto a fresh nest, and I put in another shovel day of tossing the
 dirt into the old hole. My father combed the Two up, down, and sideways,
 checking on the fire lookouts and patrolling the allotments to see how
 the range was looking and siccing Paul Eliason and the CCC crews onto
 trail and road work and any other improvements that could be thought up.
 Shearing time came and went; I helped wrangle Dode Withrow's sheep in
 the pens the shearers set up at the foot of the South Fork trail to

handle the Withrow and Hahn and Kyle bands, then Pete came and took me up to the Blackfeet Reservation for a couple more days' wrangling when his were sheared out there on the open prairie north of the Two Medicine River. Nothing more was seen of Alec at English Creek. My mother no doubt posted my father about the going-over she had given Alec when he came by for the shirt, although a reaming like that has to be seen and heard to be entirely appreciated.

Beyond that, I suppose the main news by the morning of the Fourth when the three of us began to ready to go to town for the holiday was that we were going. For my father didn't always get the Fourth of July off; it depended on fire danger in the forest. I in fact was getting a little nervous about this year. The cool summer turned itself around on the last day of June. Hot and sticky. Down in Great Falls they had first a dust storm--people trying to drive in from Helena reported hundreds of tumbleweeds rolling across the highway on Gore Hill--and after that, about fifteen minutes of thunderstorm with rain coming down as if from faucets. But then, the Falls receives a lot of bastardly weather we don't. Particularly in summer, its site out there on the plains gives storms a chance to build and build before they strike the city. The mountain weather was our concern, and so much of May and June had been cool and damp that even this hot start of July wasn't a threat, yet. ~~really threatening the Two yet.~~ [#] Final persuasion came from the holiday itself. That fourth morning arrived as a good moderate one, promising a day warm enough to be comfortable but nowhere near sweltering, and my as we sat down to father said his decision ~~at~~ breakfast. It came complete with a sizable

grin, and the words of it were: "Watch out, Gros Ventre. Here we come."

I had a particular stake in a trouble-free Fourth and parental good humor. By dint of recent clean living and some careful asking, and I suppose the example of son-in-rebellion provided to my parents by Alec, I had won permission to make a separate horseback sojourn into town in order to stay overnight with my best friend from school, Ray Heaney.

As I cagily pointed out, "Then the morning after the Fourth, I can just ride back out here and save you a trip into town to get me."

"Strange I didn't see the logic of all this before," commented my mother. "You'll be saving us a trip we wouldn't have to make if you didn't stay in there in the first place, am I right?" But it turned out that was just her keeping in practice.

Of course, receiving permission from your parents is not the same as being able to hang onto it, and I was stepping pretty lightly that morning to keep from inspiring any second thoughts on their part. In particular, as much as possible I was avoiding the kitchen and my mother's culinary orbit. Which was sound Fourth of July policy in any case. A reasoning person would have thought she was getting ready to lay siege to Gros Ventre, instead of only going in there on a picnic.

My father ventured through for a cup of coffee and I overheard my mother say "Why I said I'd do this I'll never know" and him respond "Uh huh, you're certainly downright famous for bashfulness" and then her response in turn, but with a little laugh, "And you're notorious for sympathy."

As I was trying to dope that out--my mother bashful about a creek picnic?--my father poked his head into where I was and asked: "How about tracking down the ice creamer and putting it in the pickup?"

I did so, meanwhile trying to ~~dope out~~ calculate how soon I could decently propose that I start my ride to town. I didn't want to seem antsy about it. on the other hand I sure desired to get the Fourth of July underway.

But here came my father out and over to me at the pickup. Then commemorated himself with me forever by saying, "Here. Better carry some weight in your pocket so you don't blow away." With which, I was handed a half dollar.

I must have looked my startlement. Other Fourth of Julys, if there was any spending money bestowed on Alec and me it was more on the order of 10¢. If there was any.

"Call it shovel wages." My father stuck his hands in his hip pockets and studied the road to town as if he'd never noticed it before. "You might as well head on in. We'll see you there at the park." Then, as if in afterthought: "Why don't you ride Mouse, he can stand the exercise."

When you are fourteen you take a step up in life whenever you can find it and meanwhile try to keep a mien somewhere between At last! and Do you really mean that? I stayed adult and stately until I was behind the barn and into the horse pasture, then gave in to a grin the dimension of a jack-o-lantern's. A by God full-scale horse, mine for the holiday. In the corner of the pasture where Pony was grazing she lifted her head to watch me but I called out, "Forget it, midget," and went on over and bridled Mouse.

—

Mouse and I scooted right along that road toward Gros Ventre. He was a fast walker, besides elevating me and my spirits more than I'd been used to on Pony. The morning--mid-morning and past, by now--was full of sun, but enough breeze was following along English Creek for a person to ride in pure comfort. The country still looked just glorious. All the valley of English Creek was fresh with hay. Nobody was mowing quite yet, except for the one damp green swath around Ed Van Bebber's lower field where he had tried it a week too early as he did every year.

I was more than ready for the Fourth. A lot seemed to have happened since that evening back at the start of June when I looked up and saw Alec and Leona parading down the rise to join us for a family supper. One whole hell of a lot. No longer was I even sure that we four McCaskills quite were a family. It was time we all had something else on our minds besides ruckus. Alec plainly already did, the way he intended to trig up on behalf of Leona and a calf. And given how my mother was whaling into the picnic preparation and my father was grinning like a Chessy cat about getting the day off from rangering and I was strutting atop this tall horse with coinage heavy in my pocket, the Fourth was promising to do the job for the other three of us.

It is no new thought to say that life goes on. Yet that's where it does go.

In maybe an hour and a half, better time than I would have

thought possible for that ride in from the English Creek station, Mouse and I were topping the little rise near the turnoff to Charlie Finletter's place, the last ranch before town.

From there a mile or so outside, Gros Ventre looked like a green cloudbank--cottonwood trees billowing so thick that it took some inspection to find traces of houses among them. Gros Ventre's neighborhoods were planted double with cottonwoods, a line of trees along the front yards and another between sidewalk and street. Then the same colonnade again on the other side of the street. All of this of course had been done fifty or more years before, a period of time that grows you a hell of a big cottonwood. Together with the original groves that already rose old and tall along English Creek before Gros Ventre was ever thought of, the streetside plantation produced almost a roof over the town. This cottonwood canopy was particularly wonderful just before a rain, when the leaves began to shiver, rattle in their papery way. The whole town seemed to tingle then, and the sound picked up when a gust of wind from the west ushered in the rain, and next the air was filled with the seethe of water onto all that foliage. In Gros Ventre, even a dust-settler sounded like a real weather event.

The English Creek road entered town past the high school--one of those tan-brick two-story crates that seemed to be the only way they knew how to build high schools in those days--and I nudged Mouse into an even quicker pace so as not to dwell on that topic any longer than necessary. We were aiming ourselves across town, to the

was old enough to remember. A New Deal project, this had been, complete with a mural of the Lewis and Clark expedition portaging around the Great Falls of the Missouri River in 1805. Lewis and Clark maybe were not news to postal customers of the Two country, but York, Lewis's Negro slave standing out amid the portagers like a black panther in a snowfield, definitely was.

The little stucco-sided Carnegie library, ~~of a shape and style and ornamented portico as if a temple had been intended but the money gave out. that always reminded me of a fancy caboose.~~ with its flight of steps

The Lunchery, run by Mae Sennett. The occasional times when I would be with my father when he was on Forest Service meal money, the Lunchery was our place and oyster stew our order. It of course came from a can, but I see that bowl yet, the milk yellowing from the blob of butter melting in the middle of it, and if Mae Sennett was doing the serving herself she always warned "Watch out for any oysterberries," by which she meant those tiny pearls that sometimes show up. I have to say, I still am not truly comfortable eating in any establishment that doesn't have that tired ivory look to its walls that the Lunchery did. A proof that the place has been in business longer than overnight and at least has sold decent enough food that people keep coming back.

Doc Spence's office. Across the empty lot from Doc's, the office of the lawyer, Eli Kinder. Who, strange to say, was a regular figure in the sheep traffic through this street, when the bands flowed through town on their way to the summer grass of the Blackfeet Reservation. Eli was a before-dawn riser and often would arrive downtown just as a

band of sheep did. It was odd to see him, in his suit and tie, helping those woolies along Main Street, but Eli had been raised on a ranch down in the Highwood Mountains and knew what he was doing.

The sidestreet businesses, Tracy's creamery and Ed Heaney's lumber yard and hardware and Adam Kerz's coal and trucking enterprise.

The set of bank buildings, marking what might be called the down of downtown: the First National Bank of Gros Ventre in tan brick, and cattycorner from it the red brick of what had been the English Creek Valley Stockmen's Bank. The Valley Stockmen's went under in the early 1920s when half of all the banks in Montana failed, and the site now was inhabited, if not exactly occupied, by Sandy Stott's one-chair barber shop. The style in banks in those times was to have a fancy doorway set into the corner nearest the street intersection--Gros Ventre's pair of bank buildings stared down each other's throats in exactly this fashion--and when Sandy took over the Valley Stockmen's building he simply painted barber-pole stripes on one of the fat granite pillars supporting the doorway.

What have I missed? Of course; also there on the Valley Stockmen's block, the newspaper office with its name proclaiming on a plate-glass ⁱⁿ window the same typeface as its masthead: Gleaner. Next to that a more recent enterprise, Pauline Shaw's Moderne Beauty Shoppe. The story was that when Bill Reinking first saw his new neighboring sign,

he stuck his head in the shop to ask Pauline if she was sure she hadn't left an "e" off Beauty.

I heard somebody say once that the business section of every Western town he'd ever seen looked as if it originated by falling out the back end of a truck. Not so with Gros Ventre. During those Depression years Gros Ventre did look roadworn. Weathered by all it had been through. But to me the town also held a sense of being what it ought to be. Of aptness, maybe is the term. Not fancy, not shabby. Steady. Settlement here dated back to when some weary freight wagoneer pulled in for the night at the nice creekside sheltered by cottonwoods. As the freighters' trail between Fort Shaw on the Sun River and southern Alberta developed, this site became a regular waystop, nicknamed The Middle since it was about midway between Fort Shaw and Canada--although some of us also suspect that to those early-day wagoneers the place seemed like the middle of nowhere. Gros Ventre grew to about a thousand people when the homesteaders began arriving to Montana in droves in the first decade of this century--my mother could remember in her childhood coming to town and seeing wagon after wagon of immigrants heading out onto the prairie, a white rag tied on one spoke of a wagonwheel so the revolutions could be counted to measure the bounds of the claimed land--and that population total never afterward varied more than a hundred either way. Nor varied much in quality either, I think it can be said. Gros Ventre simply tended to draw people who were there from choice rather than merely lack of imagination. Settlers from Scotch Heaven or other homestead areas that played out, who had come in and found some

way to start over in life. Others who had moved into town for high school for their kids, then stayed on. The store people. The ranch hands and sheep herders who hung around to live out their spans when they were beyond work.

The south to north route Mouse and I were taking through Gros Ventre, I now have to say, saved for the last what to me was the best of the town. A pair of buildings at the far end of the east side of Main Street: last outposts before the street/highway made its curve and zoomed from Gros Ventre over the bridge across English Creek.

The night during our campjacking trip when I was baptizing my interior with alcohol and Stanley Meixell was telling me the history of the Two Medicine National Forest from day one, a surprise chapter of that tale was about the hostelry that held the most prominent site in Gros Ventre. Stanley's arrival to town when he first came here to the Two was along the route Mouse and I had just done, from the south, and as Stanley rode along the length of Main Street, here at the far end a broad false-front with a verandah beneath it was proclaiming:

"Looks like it could kind of use a prop, all right," Stanley observed to a bib-overalled idler leaning against one of the porch posts. Who turned out to be the exact wrong person to make that joke to: C. E. Sedgwick himself.

"If my enterprise don't suit you," Sedge huffed, "you can always bunk down there in the diamond willows," indicating the brush at the bend of English Creek.

"How about," Stanley offered, "me being a little more careful with my mouth, and you giving me a second chance as a customer?"

Sedge hung his thumbs into his bib straps and considered. Then decided: "Go mute and I might adopt you into the family. Bring your gear on in."

The Northern burned in the dry summer of 1910. Although, according to old-timers, "burned" doesn't begin to say it. Incinerated, maybe, or conflagrated. For the Northern blaze took the rest of the block with it and threatened that whole end of town; if there had been a whisper of wind, half of Gros Ventre would have become ash and a memory. Sedge being Sedge, people weren't surprised when he decided to rebuild. After all, he went around in those overalls because what he really liked about being a hotelier was the opportunity to be his own maintenance man. But what Sedge erected still sat, this Fourth when I was atop Mouse, across the end of Main Street as a kind of civic astonishment. A three-story fandango in stone, quarried from the gray cliffs near where English Creek joins the Two Medicine River; half a block square, this reborn Sedgwick hostelry, with round towers at each corner and a swooping pointed ornament in the middle, rather like the spike on those German soldiers' helmets. Even yet, strangers who don't know that the Pondera County courthouse is twenty-two miles east in Conrad assume that Sedge's hotel is it. Sedge in fact contributed to the civic illusion by this time not daubing a sign all across the front of the place. Instead only

an inset of chiseled letters rainbowing over the entranceway:

I	C	K	
W		H	
G		O	
D		U	
E		S	
S		E	

Sedge sold out in 1928, to a family from Seattle who seemed to somehow eke a living out of that big gray elephant of a hotel even after hard times hit. About 1931 Sedge died of pleurisy, and almost as if she'd been waiting just offstage, his widow emerged as one of Gros Ventre's most well-to-do citizens and certainly the looniest. Lila Sedgwick was a tall, bony woman. Her build always reminded me of Abraham Lincoln. Almost any day she could be seen downtown three or four times, some days six or eight, for she no sooner would get home than she would forget about having just gone for the mail or on some other errand and would go for it again. In her long old-style dresses with those Lincoln arms and elbows poking out she inevitably was a figure of fun, although the one and only time I said something smart about her my mother's frown closed me down in a hurry.

"Lila Sedge is not to be laughed at," she said, not in her whet-stoned voice but just sort of instructively. "The clouds have settled on her mind."

I don't know where my mother got that, but always after when I

would see Lila Sedge, creeping along this street for the third time in an hour or gandering up at a cottonwood tree as if she's never encountered one before, I would wonder about how it was to have a clouded mind. Somewhere in there, I supposed, a bruise-colored thunderhead that was Sedge's death. Maybe mare's tails high away in the past where she was a girl. Fluffs which carried faces--aunts, uncles, schoolmates, any of us she happened to meet on the street--in and out of her recognition. Until my mother's words about Lila Sedge I had never thought of the weather of the brain, but more and more I have come to believe in it.

But enough on that. The Sedgwicks and their namesake hotel provided Gros Ventre its one titanic building and its roving human landmark. The enterprise south across the street from the Sedgwick House ministered to the town internally.

The Medicine Lodge saloon gave Gros Ventre its "rough" section of town in the thriftiest manner possible. I would calculate that in Great Falls it took about four blocks of First Avenue South to add up into a neighborhood of similar local notoriety. Actually, as with any pleasure emporium the wickedest thing about the Medicine Lodge was its reputation.

The Medicine Lodge had waited out Prohibition behind boarded windows, but Tom Harry more than brought it back to light and life. Also, maybe after those dry years the town was thirsty for a saloon with a bit of flair. Tom Harry had come over from running a bar, and some said a taxi dance joint as well, at the Fort Peck dam project. Supposedly all he brought with him was a wad of cash and the picture of Franklin Delano

Roosevelt which had adorned the wall of his Fort Peck enterprise.

Be that as it may, in the Medicine Lodge FDR was promptly joined on the wall by a minor menagerie of stuffed animal heads Tom Harry acquired from somewhere. Several buck deer and an antelope and a mountain sheep and a bobcat snarling about the company he was in; not to mention the six-point elk head which set off arguments every hunting season about how much his absent body would weigh.

As matters proved out, along with Tom Harry also came a set of invisible rules of

saloon behavior, which every so often somebody would stray across. I think of the night when my father and I were entering the Medicine Lodge and met a stranger with a cigar in his mouth being forcibly propelled into the street. It turned out that although Tom Harry himself went around under a blue cigarette haze--tailormades; no Fort Peck bartender ever had time to roll his own--he would not tolerate cigar smoke.

In itself, ~~this~~^{the} taxidermy herd populated the Medicine Lodge considerably. But the place also held a constant legion of the living, more or less. These setters, as my father called the six or eight guys who sat around in there--he was not above stepping in for a beer after our Lunchery meal, and if nobody official-looking was on hand Tom Harry didn't seem to mind my being with him--the setters always occupied the stools at the far end of the bar, and anybody who entered got long gazes from them as if they were cataloguing the human race.

Decapitated animals and owlish geezers do not, I realize, sound like much of a decor. And yet the Medicine Lodge did three times as much

business as Spenger's or the Pastime, both much more "respectable" places back downtown. I suppose it is and ever will be the habit of the race: people gravitate to a certain place to do their drinking and logic will never veer them. At least one night a week in the Medicine Lodge, gravitation amounted to something more like an avalanche. Saturday night, thirsts converged from everywhere in the Two country. Hay hands who had come in for a bath and haircut at Shorty Stott's but decided instead to wash down the inside of themselves. Shearing crews one time of year, lamb lickers (as guys who worked in lambing sheds were known) another. Any season, a sheepherder in from the mountains or the Reservation to inaugurate a two-week spree. Government men from reclamation projects. Likely a few Double W cowpokes. Definitely the customary setters, who had been building up the calluses on their elbows all week just for this. Always a sufficient cast of characters for loud dialogues, occasional shoving matches, and eventual passing-outs. Maybe you couldn't get away with cigar smoke in the Medicine Lodge, but you could with what counted.

Turning east past the Sedgwick House and the Medicine Lodge, Mouse and I now were into the Heaneys' side of town. An early priest had persuaded the Catholic landowner who platted this particular neighborhood to name the streets after the first missions in Montana, which in turn bore the names of saints. This created what the current Gros Ventre postmaster, Chick Jennings, called "the repeater part of town," with mailing addresses such as St. Mary St., St. Peter St. and St. Ignatius St.

It was at the end of St. Ignatius St. that the Heaney house stood, a white two-story one with sills of robin's egg blue. Ed Heaney owned the lumber yard, and so was the one person in town in those Depression years with some access to paint. The robin's egg blue had been a shipping mistake by the manufacturer--it is a shade pretty delicate to put up against the weather of Montana--and Ed lugged the can home and made the best of it.

The place looked empty as I rode up, which was as I expected. Rather than the creek picnic, the Heinseys always went out to a family shindig at Genevieve's parents' farm, quite a ways east of Gros Ventre on the Conrad road. So with Ray out there I wouldn't link up with him until the rodeo, and I simply slung my warbag inside the Heinseys' back porch and got back on Mouse again, and went picnicking.

Cars and pickups and trucks were parked so thick that they all but swamped the part of town around the park. It is nice about a horse, that you can park him handily while Henry Ford still would be circling the block and cussing. I chose a stand of high grass between the creek bank and the big cottonwoods just west of the park and pastured Mouse on a tie of rope short enough that he couldn't tangle it around anything and long enough for him to graze a little. Then gave him a final proud pat, and headed off to enlist with the picnickers.

Some writer or another put down that in the history of Montana, the only definite example of civic uplift was when the Virginia City vigilantes hung the Henry Plummer gang in 1864. I think that over-

states, a bit. You can arrive into the most scruffy of Montana towns and delve around a few minutes and in all likelihood find a public park, of some sort. In Gros Ventre's instance the park was a half-circle of maybe an acre, fronting on English Creek just west of Main Street and the highway bridge, one last oasis before the road arrowed north into the plains and benchlands. In recent years WPA crews had made it a lot more of a park than it had been, clearing out the willows which were taking over the creek bank and then laying in some riprap to keep the spring runoff out. And someone during that WPA work came up with an idea I've not seen before or since. There near the creek where a big crippled cottonwood leaned--a windstorm had ripped off its main branches--a crew sawed the tree off low to the ground, leaving a broad stump about two feet high; then atop the stump was built a speaker's pulpit, a slatted round affair somewhat on the order of a ship's crow's-nest. The one and only time I saw Senator Burton K. Wheeler, who some people thought might become President if Roosevelt ever stopped being, we were let out of school to hear him give a speech from this speaking stump.

From where I had left Mouse I emerged into the creekside corner of the park where the stump pulpit stood, and I stopped beside it to have a look around.

A true Two country Fourth of July. The trees were snowing. Fat old cottonwoods stood all along the arc between the park and the neighborhood, while younger trees were spotted here and there

across the rest of the expanse, as if they had been sent out to be shadebearers. The day was providing just enough breeze into the treetops to rattle them a little and make them shed their cotton wisps out through the air like slow snow.

Through the cottonfall, the spike of tower atop the Sedgwick House stuck up above one ~~big~~ cottonwood among the trees at the far side of the park. As if that tree had on a party hat.

As for people, the park this day was a bunch of islands of them. I literally mean islands. The summer thus far had stayed cool enough that even a just warm day like this one seemed so unaccustomed that it was putting people into the shade of the ~~various~~ cottonwoods, each gathering of family and friends on their specific piece of dappled shade like those cartoons of castaways on a desert isle with a single palm tree.

I had to traipse around somewhat, helloing people and being helloed, before I spotted my mother and my father, sharing shade and a spread blanket with Pete and Marie Reese and Toussaint Rennie near the back of the park.

Among the greetings, my father's predominated: "Thank goodness you're here. Pete's been looking for somebody to challenge to an ice cream making contest." So before I even got sat down, I was off on that tangent. "Come on, Jick," Pete said as he reached for their ice cream freezer and I picked up ours, "anybody who cranks gets a double dish."

We took our freezers over near the coffee and lemonade table

where everybody else's was. This year, I should explain, was the turn of English Creek and Noon Creek to provide the picnic with ice cream and beverage. Bill Reinking, who despite being a newspaperman had some fairly practical ideas, was the one to suggest the system; that instead of everybody and his brother showing up at the Fourth armed with ice creamers and coffee pots and jugs of lemonade, each part of the community take a turn in providing for all. Now one year the families west of Main Street in Gros Ventre did the ice cream, coffee and ade, the next year the families east of Main Street, the one after that those of us from English Creek and Noon Creek, and then after us what was called "the rest of Creation," the farm families from east and south and north of town and anybody else who didn't fit some other category.

So for the next while Pete and I took turns with the other ice cream manufacturers, cranking and cranking. Lots of elbow grease, and jokes about where all that fancy wrist work had been learned. Marie shortly came over on coffee duty--she was going to do the making, my mother would serve after everybody'd eaten--and brought along a message from my father and Toussaint: "They say, a little faster if you can stand it." Pete doffed his Stetson to them in mock gratitude. The holiday definitely was tuning up. And even yet I can think of no better way to begin a Fourth of July than there among virtually all of our English Creek neighbors. Not Walter Kyle, up on the mountain with his sheep; and not the Hebners, who never showed themselves at these creek picnics; and not the Withrows, who must have been delayed some way. But everybody else. The South Fork folks other than the Withrows--Fritz and Greta Hahn, Ed and Alice Van Bebber. Then the

population of the main creek, those who merely migrated downstream here to the park, so to speak. Preston and Peg Rozier. Charlie and Dora Finletter. Ken and Janet Busby, and Bob and Arleta Busby-- I had half-wondered whether Stanley Meixell might show up with the Busbys, and was relieved that he hadn't. Don and Charity Frew. The Hills arrived last, while I was still inventorying the crowd; J.L. leaning shakily on his wife Nan. "Set her down, J.L.," somebody called, referring to the ice creamer the Hills had brought with them, "we'll do the twirling." "I get to shivering much more than this," J.L. responded, "and I can just hold the goddamn thing in my hands and make ice cream." In truth, J.L.'s tremble was constant and almost ague-like by now. It is terrible to see, an ailment fastened onto a person and riding him day and night. I hope not to end up that way, life over and done with before existence is.

But that was not the thought for this day. If a sense of life, of the blood racing beneath your skin, is not with you at a Fourth of July creek picnic, then it is never going to be.

When Pete and I finished ice cream duty and returned to the blanket, my father had Toussaint on the topic of what the Fourth of July was like when Gros Ventre and he were young.

"Phony Nose Gorman," Toussaint was telling. "Is he one you remember?"

My father shook his head: "Before my time." Much of Toussaint's lore was before anyone's time.

"Tim Gorman," Toussaint elaborated, "Cox and Floweree's foreman a while. Down on Sun River. Froze his nose in that '86 winter. Some doctor at Fort Shaw fixed him up. Grafted skin on. I saw him after, the surgery was good. But Phony Nose Gorman he was called. He was the one the flagpole broke with. There across from ~~the~~ Medicine Lodge, where the garage is now. He was climbing it to put Deaf Smith Mitchell's hat on top. On a bet. Those times, they bet on the sun coming up--"

Toussaint Rennie this day looked maybe sixty-five years old, at least a dozen yet had to be ~~a possible fifteen~~ beyond that. He was one of those chuckling men you meet rarely, able to stave off time by perpetually staying in such high humor that the years didn't want to interrupt him. From that little current of laugh always purling in him Toussaint's face had crinkled everywhere it could. Tan and wrinkled deep, that face, like a gigantic walnut. The rest of Toussaint was the general build of a potbelly stove. I suppose his girth had been increasing steadily for some while without our really noticing, for he hadn't yet let it interrupt life. He still was riding the ditches of the Blackfeet Reservation's Two Medicine irrigation project, his short-handled shovel sticking out of a rifle scabbard as his horse plodded the canal banks. Allotting a foot-and-a-half head of water to each farm ditch; plugging gopher holes or muskrat tunnels in the canal bank with gunny sacks of dirt; keeping culverts from clogging; in a land of scarce water a ditch rider's job was vital above most others, and Toussaint apparently

was going to hold his until death made it drop from his hand.

In about the way that shovel was carried in that scabbard, the history of the Two country rested there in Toussaint's memory, handy to employ. And sharpened by steady use. It never was clear to me how Toussaint, isolated way to hell and gone--he bached out there a few miles west of where the highway crossed the Two Medicine River, about 15 miles from Browning and a good 30 from Gros Ventre--could know news from anywhere in the Two country as fast as it happened. Whatever the network was (my father called it moccasin telegraph) Toussaint was its most durable conductor. He came to the Two in the time of the buffalo, a boy eight or so years old when his family roved in from somewhere in the Dakotas. The Rennies were part French; my father thought they might have started off as Reynauds. ~~but mostly~~ tribal haze. Of their Indian background, Toussaint himself was only ever definite in declaring himself not a Blackfeet, which had to do with the point that the Two Medicine woman he married, Mary Rides Proud, was one. The usual assumption was that the Rennie lineage was Métis, for other Métis families had ended up in this general region of Montana after the Riel rebellion in Alberta was put down in 1885. But count back across the decades and you found that Toussaint already had grown to manhood here in the Two country by the time the Mounties were hanging Louis Riel and scattering his followers. Toussaint himself was worse than no help on this matter of origin, for all he would say was to claim pedigree from the Lewis and Clark expedition: "I come down from Meriwether Lewis himself. My grandfather had red

hair."

Thinking back on it now, I suspect the murk of Toussaint's lineage was carefully maintained. For the one thing unmistakable about the Rennie family line was its knack for ending up on the side of the winners in any given contest of the Montana frontier. "The prairie was so black with buffalo it looked burnt. I was with the Assiniboinies, we came down on the buffalo from the Sweetgrass Hills," one Toussaint tale would relate, and the next, "The trader Joe Kipp hired me to take cattle he was selling to the Army at Fort Benton. He knew I kept Indians from stealing them." Able to straddle that way, Toussaint had a view into almost anything that happened in the early Two country. He was with the bull teams that brought the building materials for the original Blackfeet Reservation agency north of Choteau, before there was a Choteau or a Gros Ventre. "Ben Short was the wagon boss. He was a good cussler." After the winter of '86, Toussaint freighted cowhides off the prairie by the thousands. "That was what was left in this country by spring. More cowhides than cows." He saw young Lieutenant John J. Pershing and his Negro soldiers ride through Gros Ventre in 1896, herding a few hundred woebegone Crees north to push them back over the line into Canada. "Each creek those soldiers crossed, English Creek and Birch Creek and Badger Creek and all of them, some more Crees leaked away into the brush." He saw the canals come to the prairie, the eighty-thousand acre irrigation project that built Valier from scratch in 1909 and drew in trainloads of homesteaders. "Pretty

quick they wondered about this country. Dust blew through Valier there, plates were turned face-down on the table until you turned them up to eat off of. One tree, the town had. Mrs. Guardipee watered it from her wash tubs." And the Two Medicine canal he himself had patroled for almost a quarter century, the ditch rider job he held and held in spite of being not a Blackfeet: "It stops them being jealous of each other. With me in the job, none of them is." The first blats of sheep into this part of Montana were heard by Toussaint. "I think, 1879. People called Lyons, down on the Teton. Other sheepmen came fast. Charlie Scoffin, Charlie McDonald, Oliver Goldsmith Cooper." The first survey crews, he watched make their sightings. "1902, men with telescopes and Jacob's staffs."

--"The first Fourth of July you ever saw here," my father was prompting. "When was that, do you think?"

Toussaint could date it without thinking. "Custer's year. '76. We heard just before the Fourth. All dead at the Little Bighorn. Everybody. Gros Ventre was just Barclay's hotel and saloon. Men took turns, coming out of the saloon to stand sentry. To look north." Here Toussaint leaned toward Pete's wife Marie and said in mock reproach: "For Blackfeet."

All of us echoed his chuckle. The tease to Marie was a standard one from Toussaint. Married to Pete, she of course was my aunt, and if I'd had 1,000 aunts instead of just her she still would have been my favorite. More to the point here, though, Marie was

Toussaint's granddaughter, and the only soul anywhere in that family who could get along with him. Most of Toussaint's sons wouldn't even speak to him, his daughters had all married out of his orbit as rapidly as they could, and down through the decades any number of his Rides Proud in-laws had threatened to shoot him. (Toussaint claimed he had a foolproof antidote to such threats: "I tell them bullets can fly more than one direction.") I myself remember that the last few years of her life, Toussaint and his wife Mary didn't even live under the same roof; whenever my father and I stopped by their place, Toussaint was to be found in residence in the bunkhouse. Thus all the evidence said that if you were a remove or two from him Toussaint could be a prince of the earth toward you, but anybody sharing the same blood with him he begrudged. Except Marie. Marie was thin and not particularly dark--her father was Irish, an office man at the agency in Browning--and only her black hair, which she wore shoulder-long, brought out the Blackfeet ancestry and whatever farther east Indian heredity it was that Toussaint transmitted. So her resemblance to Toussaint really was only a similar music in her voice, and the same running chuckle at the back of her throat when she was pleased. Yet be around the two of them together for only a minute and you knew without mistake that here were not merely natural allies but blood kin. There just was something unmistakably alike in how each of them regarded life. As if they had seen it all before and shared the amusement that things were no better this time around.

But Toussaint's story of the first Fourth wasn't quite done.

"I took a turn at sentry. I was in there drinking with them. In Barclay's joint. Already an old man, me. Fifteen."

"Ancient as Jick," Marie murmured with a smile in my direction. If she but knew. Maybe my toot with Stanley that night in the cabin didn't break any saloon records, but it was spree enough for a starter.

"Jick has a few months to go yet," my mother corrected Marie's observation.

"I'm getting there as fast as I can," I defended, drawing a laugh from our assemblage.

—

As you can see, an all but perfect Fourth of July picnic was commencing. I say all but, because the year before Alec had been with us instead of off sparkling Leona. The only awareness of him this year was the way people took some care not to mention him to my parents.

—



And the good mood among the cluster of us was about to get better.

My mother turned to Marie and asked: "Do you suppose these scenery inspectors have earned any food?"

"We'll take pity on them," Marie agreed, and the picnic provisions began to emerge from the pair of grub boxes.

The blanket became like a raftload of food, except that such a cargo of eating likely would have sunk any raft.

There were the chickens my mother spent part of the morning frying. ~~up~~ delectable young spring fries with drumsticks about the thickness of your thumb. This very morning too, Toussaint had caught a batch of trout in the Two Medicine and now here they beckoned, fried up by Marie. Blue enamel broilers of fish and fowl, side by side. The gateposts of heaven.

Marie's special three bean salad, the pinnacle of how good beans can taste. My mother's famous potato salad with little new green onions cut so fine they were like sparks of flavor.

New radishes, sweet and about the size of a marble, first of Marie's garden vegetables. A dozen and a half deviled eggs arrayed by my mother.

A jar of home-canned pickled beets, a strong point of my mother's. A companion jar of crab apple pickles, a distinction of Marie's.

A plate of my mother's cinnamon rolls. A loaf of Marie's saffron bread. Between the two, a moon of Reese home-churned butter.

A lard pail of fresh donuts by Marie. A gooseberry pie from my mother.

My eyes feasted while the rest of me readied to. My father urged "Dive in, Toussaint," and the passing of dishes got underway.

"Been a while since breakfast," Pete proclaimed when he had his plate loaded. "I'm so excited to see food again I'm not sure I'll be able to eat."

"Too bad about you," Marie said in that soft yet take-it-or-leave-it way so like Toussaint's. And my mother didn't overlook the chance to put in: "Wait, we'll sell tickets. People will line up to see Pete Reese not eat."

"Come on now, Bet," came the protest from Pete. "I have never eaten more than I could hold."

As they should do at a picnic, the conversing and the consuming cantered along together in this fashion. I think it was at the start of the second plateload, when we were all letting out dubious hmmms about having another helping of this or that but then going ahead and having it, that Pete asked my father if fire school in Missoula had made him any smarter than he was before.

"Airplanes," my father announced. "Airplanes are the firefighting apparatus of the future, at least according to this one hoosier we heard from over there."

"The hell. How's that gonna work?"

"I didn't say it was going to work. I just said what the hoosier told us. They're going to try parachutists--like these guys at fairs?"

"Say on," urged Toussaint, squinting through a mask of eager puzzlement. Toussaint always was avid to hear developments of this

sort, as if they confirmed for him the humorous traits of the human race. "That radio stuff," he had declared during the worst of the drought and the dust storms, "it monkeys with the air. Dries it out, all that electric up there."

"They're just now getting ready

~~Over in Washington they're about to test all this out,~~ my father continued his report of latest up-in-the-air science. "Send an airplane with a couple of these parachutists over a mountain smoke and see if they can get down there and tromp it out before it grows to a real fire. That's the cheery theory, anyhow."

Pete shook his head. "They couldn't pay me enough to jump out of one of those." ~~H~~"Hell, Pete, the jumping would be easy money. The landing is the only drawback." My father readied to plow into another of Toussaint's trout, but first offered as if in afterthought: "Fact is, I told them I'd volunteer"--my mother's full skepticism sighted in on him now, waiting to see if there was any color of seriousness in this--"if the parachute was going to be big enough for my saddlehorse and packstring too."

The vision of my father and assorted horses drifting down from the sky the way the cottonwood fluffs were floating around us set everybody to laughing like loonies.

Next it was Toussaint's inning again. The mention of horses reminded him of a long ago Fourth of July in Gros Ventre when everybody caught horse race fever. "How it happened, first they matched every saddle horse against every other saddle horse. Ran out of those by middle of the afternoon. Still plenty of beer and daylight left. Then

somebody got the notion. Down to the stable, everybody. Brought out the stagecoach horses. Bridled them, put boys on them bareback. Raced them against each other the length of Main Street." The Toussaint chuckle. "It was hard to know. To bet on the horse, or how high the boy would bounce."

Which tickled us all again. Difficult to eat on account of laughing, and to laugh on account of eating. Give me that dilemma anytime.

All this horse talk did remind me about Mouse, and I excused myself to go picket him onto another patch of grass. Truth to tell, getting myself up and into motion also would shake down some of the food in me and make room for more.

Thinking back on that scene as I wended my way to the edge of the park where Mouse was tethered, I have wished someone among us then had the talent to paint the portrait of that picnic. A group scene that would have preserved those faces from English Creek and Noon Creek and Gros Ventre and the out-east farming country and yes, Toussaint's from the Two Medicine. That would convey every one of those people at once and yet also their separateness. Their selves, I guess the word should be. I don't mean one of those phoney-baloney gilt concoctions such as that one of Custer and all his embattled and doomed troopers there at the Little Bighorn, which hangs in three-fourths of the saloons I have ever been in and disgusts me every single time. (To my mind, Custer can be done justice only if shown wearing a tall white dunce

cap.) But once I saw in a magazine, Look or Life or one of those dead ones, what one painter tried in this respect of showing selves. He first painted little pictures of tropical flowers, in pink and other pastels; wild roses I guess would be our closest comparison flower here in the Two country. Some several hundred of those, he painted. Then when all these were hung together in the right order on the wall, the flower colors fit together from picture to picture to create the outline of a tremendously huge snake. In any picture by itself you could not see a hint of that snake. But look at them together and he lay kinked across the entire wall mightier than the mightiest python.

That is the kind of portrait I mean of the creek picnic. Not that very many of those people there in the park could be called the human equivalent of flowers, nor that the sum of them amounted to a colossal civic snake. But just the point that there, that day, they seemed to me each distinctly themselves and yet added up together too.

I have inquired, though, and so far as I can find, nobody ever even thought to take a photograph of that day.

When I came back from re-tethering Mouse, my parents and Pete and Marie were in a four-way conversation about something or other, and Toussaint was spearing himself another trout out of the broiler. His seemed to me the more sensible endeavor, so I dropped down next to him to inflict myself on the chicken supply. I was just beginning to do good work on my favorite piece of white meat, a breastbone, when Toussaint turned his head toward me. The potato salad had come to rest

nearest my end of the blanket and I reached toward it, expecting that he was going to ask me to pass it to him. Instead Toussaint stated quietly: "You are a campjack these days."

Probably I went red as an apple. I mean, good christamighty. Toussaint's words signaled what I had never dreamt of: moccasin telegraph had the story of my sashay with Stanley.

Everything that coursed through me in those moments, I would need Methusaleh's years to sort out.

Questions of source and quantity maybe hogged in first. How the hell did Toussaint know? And what exactly did he know? My dimwitted approach to a bobwire fence in an electrical storm? My tussle with Bubbles? My alcoholic evening in the cabin? No, he couldn't know any of those in detail. Could he?

unnerving
~~The~~ possibility of Toussaint having dropped some mention of that last and biggest matter, my night of imbibing, into the general conversation while I was off tending Mouse made me peer toward my mother. ~~9~~ No real reassurance there. Her mood plainly had declined since the parade of the food onto the blanket, she now was half-listening to my father and Pete and half-gazing off toward the ripples of English Creek. Whatever was occupying her mind, I could only send up prayers that it wasn't identical to the topic on mine.

Geography next. How far had the tale of Jick-and-Stanley spread? Was I traveling on tongues throughout the whole damn Two country? "Hear about that McCaskill kid? Yeah, green as frog feathers, ain't

he? You wonder how they let him out of the house by himself."

And beyond that, philosophy. If I was a Toussaint topic, just what did that constitute? The mix of apprehension and surmise was all through me. Plus a flavor of something which seemed surprisingly like pride. Better or worse, part of me now was in Toussaint's knowledge, his running history of the Two. In there with Phony Nose Gorman and the last buffalo hunt and the first sheep and the winter of '86 and Lieutenant Black Jack Pershing and the herded Crees and--and what did that mean? Being a part of history, at the age of fourteen years and ten months: why had that responsibility picked me out?

They say when a cat walks over the ground that will be your grave, a shiver goes through you. As I sat there that fine July noon with a breastbone forgotten in my hand, Toussaint again busy eating his trout after leaving the track of those six soft words across my life--"You are a campjack these days"--yes, I shivered.

My father's voice broke my trance. "If Toussaint and Jick ever ~~delicacy~~ would get done eating for winter, we could move along to the ~~gourmet~~ part of the meal. Some fancy handle-turning went into the making of that ice cream, you know. Or at least so I hear by rumor."

My mother was up, declaring she'd bring the cups of coffee if a certain son of hers would see to the dessert. Toussaint chuckled. And put up a restraining hand as I started to clamber to my feet, ready to bolt off to fetch dishes of ice cream, bolt off anywhere to get a minute of thinking space to myself.

"Do you know, Beth," Toussaint began, stopping her and my heart

at the same time; "do you know--your potato salad was good."

A picnic always slides into contentment on ice cream. All around us as each little batch of people finished dessert and coffee, men flopped onto their backs or sides while the women sat up and chatted with one another.

I, though; I wasn't doing any sliding or flopping, just sitting there bolt upright trying to think things through. My head was as gorged as my stomach, which was saying a lot.

My father, though, acted as if he didn't have a thing in the world on his mind. To my surprise, he scootched around until he had room to lie flat, then sank back with his head in my mother's lap, and his hat over his face.

"Pretty close to perfect," he said. "Now if I only had an obedient wife who'd relieve me of these dress shoes."

"If I take them off you," my mother vowed, "you'll be chasing after them as they float down the creek."

"This is what I have to put up with all the time, Toussaint," came his voice from under the hat. "She's as independent as the moon." My mother answered that by sticking out a thumb and jabbing it between a couple of his ribs, which brought a whuw! out of him.



Down at creekside, the high school principal Mr. Vennaman was stepping up into the stump rostrum. Time for the program, evidently. I tried to contain at the back of my mind the cyclone of thoughts about Toussaint and mocassin telegraph and myself.

"--always a day of pleasure," Mr. Vennaman's voice began to reach those of us at the back of the park. "This is a holiday particularly American. Sometimes, if the person on the stump such as I am at this moment doesn't watch his enthusiasm, it can become a little too much so. I am always reminded of the mock speech which Mose Skinner, a Will Rogers of his day, proposed for this nation's one hundredth birthday in 1876: 'Any person who insinuates in the remotest degree that America isn't the biggest and best country in the world, and far ahead of every other country in everything, will be filled with gunpowder and touched off.'"

When the laughing at that died down, Mr. Vennaman went on: "We don't have to be quite that ardent about it, I think. But this is a day we can simply be thankful to be with our other countrymen. A day for neighbors and friends and family."

"Some of those neighbors, in fact, are here with a gift of song for us." Mr. Vennamen peered over toward the nearest big cottonwood. "Nola, can the music commence?"

This was interesting. For under that towering tree sat a piano. Who came up with the idea I never did know, but some of the Gros Ventre men had hauled the instrument--of course it was one of those old upright ones--out of Nola Atkins' front room, and now here it was on the bank

of English Creek, and Nola on the piano bench readying to play. I'd like to say Nola looked right at home, but actually she was kept busy shooing cottonwood fluff off the keys and every so often there'd be a plink as she brushed away a particularly stubborn puff of it.

Nonetheless, Nola bobbed yes, she was set.

I think it has to be said that the singing at events such as this is usually a pretty dubious proposition, and that's more than likely why some out-of-town group was invited to perform at each of these Fourth picnics. That way, nobody local had anything to live down. This year's songsters, the Valier Men's Chorus, now were gathering themselves beside Nola and the piano. Odd to see them up there in that role, farmers and water company men, in white dress shirts and with the pale summits of their foreheads where hats customarily sat.

Their voices proved not to be golden, but not really unlistenable either. The program, though, inadvertently hit our funny bones as much as it did our ears. Because the chorus's first selection was "I Cannot Sing the Songs of Long Ago," and then, as if offering proof, they wobbled next into "Love's Old Sweet Song." The picnic crowd blossomed with grins over that, and I believe I discerned even a trace of one on Nola Atkins at the piano.

Mr. Vennaman came back up on the stump, thanking the Valerians "for that memorable rendition" and introducing "yet another neighbor, our guest of honor this day." Emil Thorsen, the sheepman and state senator from down at Choteau, rose and declared in a voice that could have been heard all the way downtown that in early times when he was

first running for office and it was all one county through here from Fort Benton to Babb instead of being broken up into several as it is now, he'd have happily taken up our time; "but since I can't whinny any votes out of you folks any more, I'll just say I'm glad to be here among so many friends, and compliment you on feeding as good as you ever did, and shut myself up and sit down." And did.

Mr. Vennaman popped to his feet again, leading the hand-clapping and then saying: "Our next speaker actually needs no introduction. I'm going to take a lesson from Senator Thorsen and not bother to fashion one." Two traits always marked Mr. Vennaman as an educator: the bow tie he perpetually wore and the way, even saying hello on the street, he seemed to be looking from the front of a classroom at you. Now he peered and even went up on his tiptoes a bit, as if calling on someone in the backrow of that classroom, and sang out: "Beth McCaskill?"

I knew I hadn't heard that quite right.

Yet here she was, getting up from beside my father and smoothing her dress down and setting off toward the speaker's stump, with folded sheets of paper clutched in her business hand. No doubt about it, I was the most surprised person in the state of Montana right then. But Pete and Marie were not far behind and even Toussaint's face was squinched with curiosity.

"What--?" I floundered to my father. "Did you know--?"

"She's been sitting up nights writing this," he told me with a cream-eating grin. "Your mother, the Eleanor Roosevelt of English Creek."

She was on the stump now, smoothing the papers onto the little stand, being careful the creek breeze didn't snatch them. She looked like she had an appointment to fight panthers, but her voice began

steady and clear.

"My being up here is anybody's suggestion but my own. It was argued to me that if I did not make this talk, it would not get made. That might have been the better idea."

"But Maxwell Vennaman, not to mention a certain Varick McCaskill, has the art of persuasion. I have been known to tell that husband of mine that he has a memory so long he has to tie knots in it to carry it around with him. We'll all now see just how much my own remembering is made up of slip knots."

Chuckles among the crowd at that. A couple of hundred people being entertained by my mother: a minute before, I would have bet the world against it.

"But I do say this. I can see yet, as clearly as if he was standing in long outline against one of these cottonwoods, the man I have been asked to recall. Ben English. Many others of you were acquainted with Ben and the English family. Sat up to a dinner or supper Mae put on the table in that very house across there." Heads turned, nodded. The English place was directly before us, across the creek from the park. One of the Depression's countless vacant remnants, with a walked-away look to it. If you were driving north out of Gros Ventre the English place came so quick, set in there just past the highway bridge, that chances were you wouldn't recognize it as a ranch rather than a part of the town. But from the park, the empty buildings across there seemed to call their facts over to us. The Englishes all dead or moved away. The family after them felled by the Depression. Now the land leased by Wendell Williamson. One more place

which had supported people, now populated by Double W cows.

"Or," my mother was continuing, "or dealt with Ben for horses or cattle or barley or hay. But acquaintance doesn't always etch deep, and so at Max Vennaman's request I have put together what is known of Ben English."

"His is a history which begins where that of all settlers of the West of America has to: elsewhere. Benson English was born in 1865 at Cobourg, in Ontario in Canada. He liked to tell that as he and his brothers one by one left home, their mother provided each of them with a Bible, a razor, whatever money she could, and some knitted underwear." My mother here looked as if she entirely approved of Ben English's mother. "Ben English was seventeen when he followed his brother Robert into Montana, to Augusta where Robert had taken up a homestead. Ben found a job driving freight wagon for the Sun River Sheep Company from the supply point at Craig on the Missouri River to their range in the mountains. He put in a year at that, and then, at eighteen, he was able to move up to driving the stage between Augusta and Craig." She lifted a page, went right on as if she'd been giving Fourth of July speeches every day of her life. "Atop there with six horses surging beneath him seemed to be young Ben English's place in the world. Soon, with his wages of forty dollars a month, he was buying his own horses. With a broke team in the lead and his green ones in the other traces, he nonetheless somehow kept his reputation as a driver you could set your clock by." Here she looked up from her sheets of paper to glance over to Senator Thorsen. "Ben later liked to tell

that a bonus of stage driving was its civic opportunities. On election day he was able to vote when the stage made its stop at the Halfway House. Then again when it reached Craig. Then a third time when he got home to Augusta."

When the laughter at that was done, my mother focused back down to her pages. "There was a saying that any man who had been a stagecoach driver was qualified to handle the reins of heaven or hell, either one. But Ben English, as so many of our parents did, made the choice halfway between those two. He homesteaded. In the spring of 1893 he filed his claim southwest of here at the head of what is now called Ben English Coulee. The particulars of the English homestead on Ben's papers of proof may sound scant, yet many of us here today came from just such beginnings in this country: 'A dwelling house, stable, corrals, 2½ miles of wire fences, 30 acres of hay cut each season--total value, \$800.'"

"Around the time of his homesteading Ben English married Mae Manix of Augusta, and Ben and Mae moved here, to the place across the creek, in 1896. Their only child, Mary, was born there in 1901."

Here my mother paused, her look fastened over the heads of all of us on the park grass, toward the trunk of one of the big cottonwoods

farthest back. As if, in the way she'd said earlier, someone was standing in outline against the gray bark. "A lot of you can remember the look of Ben English. A rangy man, standing well over six feet, and always wearing a black Stetson, always with a middle crimp. He sometimes grew a winter beard, and in his last years he wore a mustache that made him look like the unfoolable horse dealer he was. Across thirty-some years my father--Isaac Reese--and Ben English knew each other and liked each other and tried to best each other. Put the pair of them together, my mother used to say of their visits, and they would examine a horse until there was nothing left of it but a hank of tail hair and a dab of glue. Once when my father bought a horse with an odd stripe in its face, Ben told him he was glad to see a man of his age taking up a new occupation--raising zebras. My father got his turn back when Ben bought a dark bay Clydesdale that stood twenty-one hands high at the shoulder, very likely the hugest horse there ever has been in this valley, and upon asking what the horse's name was, discovered it was Benson. Whenever my father saw Ben and the Benson horse together he called out, 'Benson andt Benson, but t'ank Godt vun of t'em years a hadt.'"

Of all the crowd, I am sure my father laughed loudest at this Isaac Reese tale, and Pete was nodding in confirmation of that accent he and my mother had grown up under. Our speaker of the day, though, was sweeping onward. "Anyone who knew Ben English more than passingly will recall his knack for nicknames. For those of you old enough to remember them around town, Glacier Gus Swenson and Three Day Thurlow both were christened that way by Ben English." ~~Laughs~~ Chuckles of recognition spattered

amid the audience. Glacier Gus was an idler so slow that it was said he wore spurs to keep his shadow from treading on his heels. Three Day Thurlow had an everlasting local reputation as a passable worker his first day on a job, a complainer on this second, and gone sometime during his third. "Ben's nicknaming had no thought of malice behind it, however. He did it for the pleasure it gave his tongue. In any event, in their pauper's graves Glacier Gus and Three-Day each lie buried in a suit given by Ben English."

She put the page she had just finished beneath the others, and the next page she met with a little bob of her head, as if it was the one she'd been looking for all this time. "So it is a justice of language that a namer himself lives on in an extra name. Originally this flow of water was simply called Gros Ventre Creek, to go with the townsite. But it came to be a saying, as the sheepmen and other travelers would pass through here, that they would stop for noon or the night when they reached English's Creek. An apostrophe is not the easiest thing in the world to keep track of, and so we know this as English Creek."

She paused again and I brought my hands up ready to clap, that sounding to me like the probable extent of the Ben English history. But no, she was resuming. Do I never learn? My mother had her own yardstick as to when she was done with a topic

"I have a particular memory of Ben English myself. I can see him yet, riding past our ranch on Noon Creek on his way to his cattle range in the mountains, leading a string of cayuse packhorses carrying block

salt. On his way back he would ride into our yard and pass the time of day with my father while still sitting in his saddle, but hardly ever would he climb down and come in. His customary explanation was that he had to get home and move the water. He seemed to feel that if he stayed in the saddle, he indeed was on his way to that irrigating task."

My father had his head cocked in a fashion as if what she was reciting was new to him. I figured that was just his pride in her performance, but yet--

"And that memory leads to the next, of Ben English in his fields across from us here, moving the water. Guiding the water, it might be better said. For Ben English used the water of his namesake creek as a weaver uses wool. With care. With respect. With patience. Persuading it to become a product greater than itself." Once more she smoothed the page she was reading from. "Greater than itself. As Ben English himself became, greater than himself. From the drudgery of a freight wagon to the hell deck of a stagecoach to a dry-land homestead to a ranch of green water-fed meadows that nicely supported a family, that was the Montana path of Ben English. Following his ability, trusting in it to lead him past the blind alleys of life. This is the day to remember a man who did it that way."

Was I the only one to have the thought brim up in me then? That suddenly, somehow, Alec McCaskill and the Double W had joined Ben English in this speech?

Whether or not, my mother had returned to the irrigation theme.

"Bill Reinking has been kind enough to find for me in the Gleaner files something which says this better than I can. It is a piece that I remembered was published when the first water flowed into the ditches of the Valier irrigation project. Who wrote it is not known. It is signed simply 'Homesteader.' Among the hundreds, no, thousands who were homesteading this country then, maybe 'Homesteader' isn't quite as anonymous as 'Anonymous.' But awfully close. It is titled The Lord of the Field." She drew a deep breath. "It reads:

lone

"The irrigator is the ~~one~~^{lone} lord of his field. A shovel is his musket, gumboots are his garb of office, shank's mare is his steed. To him through the curving laterals the water arrives mysteriously, without sign of origin or destination. But his canvas dam, placed with cunning, causes the flood to hesitate, seek; and with an eager whisper, pour over the ditch bank and onto the grateful land. The man with the shovel hears the parched earth drink. He sees its face of dusty brown gladden to glistening black. He smells the odor of life as the land's plants take the water in green embrace. He feels like a god, exalted by this power of his hand and brain to create man-made rain--yet humble as even a god must be under the burden of such power."

I honestly believe the only breath which could be discerned in that crowd after that was the one my mother let out. Now she locked her attention to her written sheets, and the words it gave her next were:

"Ben English is gone from us. He died in the summer of 1927, of

a strained heart. Died, to say it plainly, of the work he put into this country, as so many have. My own father followed Ben English to the grave within two years. Some say that not a horse in the Two country has had a good looking-over since their passing." Which was one of the more barbed things she could have said to this audience, full as it was of guys who considered themselves pretty fancy horsemen. But she of course said it anyway and sailed on.

"Ben English is gone, and the English place stands empty across there, except for the echoes of the auctioneer's hammer." A comment with larger barbs yet on it. Ted Muntz, whose First National Bank had foreclosed on the English place from the people Mrs. English sold it to, without doubt was somewhere in this audience. And all out among the picnic crowd I saw people shift restlessly, as if the memory of the foreclosure auctions, the Depression's hammer sales, was a sudden chafe.

My father by now was listening so hard he seemed to be frozen, an ice statue wearing the clothing of a man, which confirmed to me that not even he knew how far my mother was headed with this talk.

"English Creek is my second home," she was stating now as if someone was arguing the point with her, "for you all know that Noon Creek is where I was born and grew up. Two creeks, two valleys, two claims on my heart. Yet the pair are also day and night to me, as examples of what has happened to this country in my lifetime. Noon Creek now is all but empty of the families I knew there. Yes, there is still the Reese name on a Noon Creek ranch, I am proud as anything to

say. And the Egan name, for it would be easier to dislodge the Rocky Mountains than Dill Egan. But the others, all the ranches down Noon Creek but one--all those are a roll call of the gone. The Torrance place: sold out at a loss, the family gone from here. The Emrich place: foreclosed on, the family gone from here. The Chute place: sold out at a loss, the family gone from here. Thad Wainwright's place, Thad one of the first cattlemen anywhere in this country: sold out at a loss, Thad passed away within a year. The Fain place: foreclosed on, the family gone from here. The Eiseley place: sold out at a loss, the family gone from here. The Nansen place." Here she paused, shook her head a little as if again disavowing Alec's news that this was where he and Leona would set up a household. "The Nansen place: foreclosed on, Carl dead by his own hand, Sigrid and the children gone from here to her parents in Minnesota."

achieving
 What she was ~~saying~~ was a feat I hadn't known could be done. Her words, the tolling rhythm of "sold--foreclosed--gone from here," expressed outright the fate of those Noon Creek ranching families. Yet with the unsaid, all the while she was telling an equally strong tale by omission. "All the ranches down Noon Creek but one," had been her phrase of indictment. Everybody in this park this day knew "but one" could only mean the Double W; knew that each and every of those sales and foreclosures ended up with Wendell Williamson holding the land, by outright buy or by lease from the First National Bank of Gros Ventre. A silent echo I suppose sounds like a contradiction in terms, yet I swear this was what my mother was ~~achieving~~, after every "sold--foreclosed--gone from here," ^{ringing into the air;}

~~reverberating~~
~~the ringing~~ unspoken fact of that family ranch swallowed by the

Double W.

"English Creek," she was going on, "thankfully has been spared the Noon Creek history, except once." We knew the next of her litany, it stared us in the face. "The English place. After Ben's death, sold to the Wyngard family who weren't able to make a go of it against the Depression. Foreclosed on, the Wyngards gone from here."

"A little bit ago, Max Vennaman said this is a day for friends and neighbors and families. So it is. And so too we must remember these friends and neighbors and families who are not among us today because they were done in by the times." This said with a skepticism that suggested the times had familiar human faces behind them.

"But an auction hammer can shatter only a household, not the gifts of the earth itself. While it may hurt the heart to see such places as the home of Ben English occupied only by time and the wind, English Creek is still the bloodstream of our valley. It flows its honest way--" the least little pause here; just enough to seed the distinction from those who prosper by the auction hammer--"while we try to find ours."

She looked up now, and out across us, all the islands of people. Either she had this last part by heart or was making it up as she went, because never once did she glance down at her sheaf of pages as she said it.

"There is much wrong with the world, and I suppose I am not known to be especially bashful about my list of those things. But I think it could not be more right that we honor in this valley a man who

savvied the land and its livelihood, who honored the earth instead of merely coveting it. It could not be more right that tall Ben English in his black hat amid his green fields, coaxing a head of water to make itself into hay, is the one whose name this creek carries."

She folded her sheet of papers once, then again, stuck them in the pocket of her dress and stepped down from the stump.

Everybody applauded, although a few a lot more lukewarmly than others. Under our tree we were all clapping hard and my father hardest of all, but I also saw him swallow in a large way. And when he realized I was watching him, he canted himself in my direction and murmured so that only I could hear: "That mother of yours."

Then she was back with us, taking compliments briskly. Pete studied her and said: "Decided to give the big boys some particular hell, didn't you?" Even Toussaint told her: "That was good, about the irrigating." But of us all, it was only to my father that she said, in what would have been a demand if there hadn't been the tint of anxiousness in it: "Well? What did you think?"

My father reached and with an extended finger traced back into place a banner of her hair that the creek breeze had lifted and lain across her ear.

"I think," he said, "I think that being married to you is worth all the risk."

I lead the world in respect for picnics, but I do have to say that one was enough to last me for a while.

Toussaint's murmur to me, my mother's speech to the universe.

A person's thought can kite back and forth between those almost forever. It was just lucky I now had specific matters to put myself to, fetching Mouse from where he was tethered and riding through the dispersing picnickers and heading on across the English Creek bridge to the rodeo grounds.

I was to meet Ray Heaney on the corral alongside the bucking chutes, the best seats in the arena if you didn't mind perching on a fence pole. Again this year my father drilled home to me his one point of rodeo protocol. "Just so you stay up on that fence," he stipulated. "I don't want to see you down in there with the chute society." By which he meant the clump of fifteen or twenty hangers-on who always clustered around the gates of the bucking chutes, visiting and gossiping and looking generally important, and who regularly were cleared out of there two or three times every rodeo by rampaging broncs. When that happened, up onto anything climbable they all would scoot to roost, like hens with a weasel in their midst, and a minute or so after the bronc's passage they'd be right back in front of the chutes, preening and yakking again. I suppose the chute society offended my father's precept that a horse was nothing to be careless around. In any case, during the housecleanings when a bronc sent them scrambling for the fence it was my father's habit to cheer loudly for the bronc.

No Ray yet, at our fence perch. So I stayed atop Mouse and watched the world. In the pens behind the chutes the usual kind of before-rodeo confusion was going on, guys hassling broncs here and calves there,

the air full to capacity with dust and bawling and whinnying. Out front, about half the chute society was already planted in place, tag-ends of their conversations mingling. "That SOB is so tight he wouldn't give ten cents to see Christ ride a bicycle backwards--Oh hell yes, I'll take a quarter horse over a Morgan horse any time. Them Morgans are so damn hot-blooded--With haying coming and one thing and another, I don't see how I'm ever going to catch up with myself--"

I saw my mother and father and Pete and Marie and Toussaint--and Midge Withrow had joined them, though Dode wasn't yet in evidence-- settling themselves at the far end of the grandstand, farthest from the dust the bucking horses would kick up.

Other people were streaming by, up into the grandstand or to sit on car fenders or the ground along the outside of the arena fence. I am here to recommend the top of a horse as an advantageous site to view mankind. Everybody below sees mostly the horse, not you.

Definitely I was ready for a recess from attention. From trying to judge whether people going by were nudging each other and whispering sideways, "That's him. That's the one. Got lit up like a ship in a storm, out there with that Stanley Meixell--"

Keen as I could be, I caught nobody at it--at least for sure--and began to relax somewhat. Oh, I did get a couple of lookings-over. Lila Sedge drifted past in her moony way, spied Mouse and me, and circled us suspiciously a few times. And the priest Father Morrisseau knew me by sight from my stays with the Heaneys, and bestowed me a salutation. But both those I considered routine inspections, so to speak.

People kept accumulating, I kept watching. A Gros Ventre rodeo always is slower to get under way than the Second Coming.

Then I happened to remember. Not only was I royally mounted, I also was carrying wealth.

I nudged Mouse into action, to go do something about that four-bit piece my father had bestowed. Fifty whole cents. Maybe the Depression was on the run.

The journey wasn't far, just forty yards or so over to where, since Prohibition went home with Hoover, the Gros Ventre Rotary Club operated its beer booth. I swung down from Mouse and stepped to the plank counter. Behind it, they had several washtubs full of ice water and bottles of Kessler and Great Falls Select stashed down into the slush until only the brown necks were showing. And off to one side a little, my interest at the moment, the tub of soda pop.

One of the unresolved questions of my life at that age was whether I liked orange soda or grape soda better. It can be more of a dilemma than is generally realized: unlike, say, those picnic options of trout or fried chicken, you can't just dive in and have both. Anyway, I voted grape and was taking my first gulp when somebody inquired at my shoulder, "Jick, how's the world treating you?"

The inquirer was Dode Withrow, and his condition answered as to why he wasn't up in the grandstand with Midge and my folks and the others. As the expression goes, Dode had fallen off the wagon and was still bouncing. He was trigged out in a black sateen shirt and nice gray gabardine pants and his dress stockman Stetson, so he

looked like a million. But he also had breath like the downwind side of a brewery.

"'Lo, Dode. You looking for Midge and the folks? They're down at the far end."

Dode shook his head as if he had water in his ears. "That wife of mine isn't exactly looking for me." So. It was one of the Withrow family jangles that Dode and Midge built up to about once a year. During them was the only time Dode seriously drank. Tomorrow there was going to be a lot of frost in the air between Midge and Dode, then the situation would thaw back to normal. It seemed to me a funny way to run a marriage; I always wondered what the three Withrow daughters, Bea and Marcella and Valerie, did with themselves during the annual temper contest between their parents. But this summer was showing that I had everything to learn about the ways of man and woman.

"Charlie, give me a couple Kesslers," Dode was directing across the beer counter. "Jick, you want one?"

"Uh, no thanks," dumbly holding up my grape soda the way a toddler would show off a lollipop.

"That stuff'll rot your teeth," advised Dode. "Give you goiter. St. Vitus' dance."

"Did you say two, Dode?" Charlie Hooper called from one of the beer tubs.

"I got two hands, don't I?"

While Dode paid and took a swig from one bottle while holding

the other in reserve, I tried to calculate how far along he was toward being really drunk. Always tricky arithmetic. About all that could be said for sure was that of all the rodeo-goers who were going to get a skin full today, at this rate Dode was going to be among the earliest.

Dode tipped the Kessler down from his mouth and looked straight at me. Into me, it almost seemed. And offered: "Trade you."

I at first thought he meant his bottle of beer for my grape pop, and that befuddled me, for plainly Dode was in no mood for pop. But no, he had something other in mind, he still was gazing straight into my eyes. What he came out with next clarified his message, but did not ease my bafflement. "My years for yours, Jick. I'll go back where you are in life, you come up where I am. Trade, straight across. No, wait, I'll toss in Midge to boot." He laughed, but with no actual humor in it. Then shook his head again in that way as if he'd just come out from swimming. "That's in no way fair. Midge is okay. It's me--" he broke that off with a quick swig of Kessler.

What seemed needed was a change of topic, and I asked: "Where you watching the rodeo from, Dode? Ray and I are going to grab a fence place up there by the booth, whyn't you sit with us?"

"Many thanks, Jick." He made it sound as if I had offered him knighthood. "But I'm going to hang around the pens a while. Want to watch the broncs. All I'm good for any more. Watching." And off he swayed, beer bottle in each hand as if they were levers he was steering himself by. I hated to see Dode in such a mood, but at least he

always mended quick. Tomorrow he would be himself, and probably more so, again.

Still no Ray on the fence. The Heaneys were taking their sweet time at the family shindig. When Ray ever showed up I would have to compare menus in detail with him, to see how the Heaneys could possibly out-eat what we had gone through at the creek picnic.

By now my pop had been transferred from its bottle into me, and with time still to kill and figuring that as long as I had Mouse I might as well be making use of him, I got back up in the saddle.

I sometimes wonder: is the corner of the eye the keenest portion of the body? A sort of special sense, operating beyond the basic five? For the corner of my right eye now registered, across the arena and above the filing crowd and top pole of the fence, a choke-cherry-colored shirt; and atop that, a head and set of shoulders so erect they could not be mistaken.

I nudged Mouse into motion and rode around to Alec's side of the rodeo grounds.

When I got there Alec was off the horse, a big alert deep-chested blood bay, and was fussing with the loop of his lariat in that picky way that calf ropers do. All this was taking place out away from the arena fence and the parked cars, in some open space which Alec and the bay and the lariat seemed to claim as their own.

I dismounted too. And started things off on an admiring note:
"I overheard some calves ~~taking~~^{talking}, there in the pens. They were saying how much they admired anybody who'd rope them in a shirt like that."

"Jicker!" he greeted me back. "What do you know for sure?" Alec's words were about what they ever would have been, yet there hung that tone of absent-mindedness behind them again. I wanted to write it off to the fact that this brother of mine had calf roping on his mind just then. But I couldn't quite convince myself that was all there was to the matter.

It did occur to me to check whether Alec was wearing a bandanna this year, and he wasn't. Evidently my father at least had teased that off him permanently.

"Think you got a chance to win?" I asked, just to further the conversation.

"Strictly no problem," Alec assured me. All the fuss he was giving that rope said something else, however.

"How about Bruno Martin?" He was the young rancher from Augusta who had won the calf roping the previous year.

"I can catch a cold faster than Bruno Martin can a calf."

"Vern Crosby, then?" Another quick-as-a-cat roper, who I had noticed warming up behind the chute pens.

"What, you taking a census or something?" Alec swooshed his lariat overhead, that expectant whir in the air, and cast a little practice throw.

I explored for some topic more congenial to him. "Where'd you get the highpowered horse?"

"Cal Petrie lent him to me." Cal Petrie was foreman of the Double W. Evidently Alec's ropeslinging had attracted some attention.

I lightly laid fingertips to the bay's foreshoulder. The feel of a horse is one of the best touches I know. "You missed the creek picnic. Mom spoke a speech."

Alec frowned at his rope. "Yeah. I had to put the sides on Cal's pickup and haul this horse in here. A speech? What about? How to sleep with a college book under your pillow and let it run uphill into your ear?"

"No. About Ben English."

"Ancient history, huh? Dad must have converted her." Alec looked like he intended to say more, but didn't.

There wasn't any logical reason why this should have been on my mind just then, but I asked: "Did you know he had a horse with the same name as himself?"

"Who? Had a what?"

"Ben English. Our granddad would say, T'ank Godt vun of t'em years a--"

"Look, Jicker, I got to walk this horse loose. How about you doing me a big hairy favor?"

Something told me to be a little leery. "Ray's going to be waiting for me over on the --"

"Only take a couple minutes of your valuable time. All it is, I want you to go visit Leona for me while I get this horse ready."

"Leona? Where is she?"

"Down toward the end of the arena there, by her folks' car."

As indeed she was, when I turned to see. About a hundred feet

from us, spectating this entire brotherly tableau. Leona in a clover-green blouse, that silver-gold hair above like daybreak over a lush meadow.

"Yeah, well, what do you mean by visit?"

"Just go on over there and entertain her for me, huh?"

"Entert--?"

"Dance a jig, tell a joke." Alec swung into the saddle atop the bay. "Easy, hoss." I stepped back a bit and Mouse looked admiring as the bay did a little prance to try Alec out. Alec reined him under control and leaned toward me. "I mean it, about you keeping Leona company for me. Come get me if Earl Zane shows up. I don't want that jughead hanging around her."

Uh huh. Revelation, all 22 chapters of it.

"Aw, the hell, Alec. I--" I was about to declare that I had other things in life to do than fetch him whenever one of Leona's ex-boyfriends came sniffing around. But that declaration melted somewhere before I could get it out, for here my way came one of those Leona smiles that would burn down a barn. Simultaneously she patted the car fender beside her.

While I still was molten in the middle of all that, Alec touched the bay roping horse into a fast walk toward some open country beyond the calf pens. So I figured there was nothing for it but go on over and face fate.

"'Lo, Leona."

"Hello, John Angus." Which tangled me right at the start. I

mean, think about it. The only possible way in this world she could know about my high-toned name was from Alec. Which meant that I had been a topic of conversation between them. Which implied--I didn't know what. Damn it all to hell anyway. First Toussaint, now this. I merely was trying to have a standard summer, not provide word fodder for the entire damn Two country.

"Yeah, well. Great day for the race," I cracked to recoup.

Leona smiled yet another of her dazzlers. And said nothing. Didn't even inquire "What race?" so I could impart "The human race" and thereby break the ice and--

"You all by your lonesome?" I substituted. As shrewd as it was desperate, this. Not only did it fill the air space for a moment, I could truthfully tell Alec I had been vigilant about checking on whether or not Earl Zane was hanging around.

She shook her head. Try it sometime, while attempting to keep a full smile in place on your face. Leona could do it and come out with more smile than she started with. When she had accomplished this facial miracle she leaned my way a little and nodded her head conspiratorially toward the other side of the car.

Holy Jesus. Was Earl Zane over there? Earl Zane was Alec's size and built as if he'd been put together out of railroad ties. Alec hadn't defined to me this possibility, of Earl Zane already being on hand. What was I supposed to do, tip my hat to him and merrily say "Hi there, Earl, just stand where you are, I'll go get my brother so he can come beat the living daylights out of you"? Or better from the

standpoint of my own health, climb back on Mouse and retreat to my original side of the arena.

For information's sake, I leaned around Leona and peered over the hood of the car. And was met by startled stares from Ted and Thelma Tracy--Leona's parents--and another couple with whom they were seated on a blanket and carrying on a conversation.

"Your folks are looking real good," I mumbled as I pulled my head back to normal. "Nice to see them so."

Leona, though, had shifted attention from me to the specimen of horseflesh at the other end of the reins I was holding. "Riding in style, aren't you?" she admired.

"His name is Mouse," I confided. "Though if he was mine, I'd call him, uh, Chief Joseph."

Leona slowly revolved her look from the horse to me, the way the beam of a lighthouse makes its sweep. Then asked: "Why not Crazy Horse?"

From Leona that was tiptop humor, and I yukked about six times as much as I ordinarily would have. And in the meantime was readying myself. After all, that brother of mine had written the prescription he wanted from me: entertain her.

"Boy, I'll have to remember that. And you know, that reminds me of one. Did you ever hear the joke about the Chinaman and the Scotchman in a rowboat on the Sea of Galilee?"

Leona shook her head. Luck was with me. That was my father's favorite joke, one I had heard him tell to other Forest Service guys

twenty times; the heaviest artillery I could bring to bear.

"Well, see, there was a Chinaman and a Scotchman together in a rowboat on the Sea of Galilee. Fishing away, there. And after a while the Chinaman puts down his fishing pole and he leans over and nudges the Scotchman and says, 'Jock, tell me. Is it true what they say about Occidental women?' And the Scotchman says, 'Occidental, hell. I'm cerrrtain as anything that they behave the way they do on purrr-pose!'"

I absolutely believed I had done a royal job of telling, even burring the r's just right. But a little crimp of puzzlement now punctuated Leona's smiling face, right between her eyes. She asked: "The Sea of Galilee?"

I cast a wide look around for Alec. Or even Earl Zane, whom I would rather fight with one hand in my pocket than try to explain a joke to somebody who didn't get it. "Yeah. But you see, that isn't--"

Just then, Mouse got into the act. Why he could not have waited another two minutes until I had found a way to dispatch myself from Leona; why it didn't come into his horse brain any other time of the day up until that very moment; why--but no why about it, he was proceeding, directly in front of where Leona and I were sharing the fender, to take his leak.

The hose on a horse is no small sight anyway during this process. But with Leona there six feet away spectating, Mouse's seemed to poke down, down, down.

I cleared my throat and examined the poles of the arena fence and

then the posts that supported the poles and then the sky over the posts and then crossed and uncrossed my arms a few times, and still the downpour continued. A wild impulse raised in me: Mouse's everlasting whiz reminded me of Dode Withrow spraddled atop that boulder the second day of this unprecedented summer, and I clamped my jaw to keep from blurting to Leona that scene and the handhold joke. That would be about like you, John Angus McCaskill. Celebrate disaster with a dose of social suicide. Do it up right.

Meanwhile Leona continued to serenely view the spectacle as if it was the fountains of Rome.

"I'll take over now, Jicker." Alec's voice came from behind us, he had circled outside of the arena on the bay horse. Peals of angel song could not have come more welcome. "How'd he do as company, Leona?"

Leona shined around at Alec, then turned back to bestow me a final glint. And answered: "He's a wonder."

I mounted up and cleared out of there--Alec and Leona all too soon would be mooning over each other like I didn't exist anyway-- and as promptly as I was out of eyeshot behind the catch pen at the far end of the arena I gave Mouse a jab in the ribs that made him woof in surprise. Chief Joseph, my rosy hind end.

But I suppose my actual target was life. This situation of being old enough to be on the edge of everything and too young to get to the middle of any of it.

There was this, though. At least Earl Zane hadn't showed up. Is it wolfsbane that the stories say will ward off a werewolf? If nothing else, maybe I had some sort of future as Zanebane.

"Hi," Ray Heaney greeted as I climbed onto the arena fence beside him. The grin-cuts were deep into his face, the big front teeth were out on parade. Ray could make you feel that your arrival was the central event in his recent life. "What've you been up to?"

"Oh," summary seemed so far out of the question, I chose neutrality, "about the usual. You?"

"Pilot again." So saying, Ray held up his hands to show his calluses. One hard oblong bump across the base of each finger, like sets of knuckles on his palms. I nodded in commendation. My shovel calluses were mosquito bites in comparison. This made the second summer Ray was stacking lumber in his father's lumber yard--the "pile it here, pile it there" nature of that job was what produced the "pilot" joke--and his hands and forearms were gaining real heft.

Now Ray thrust his right mitt across to within reach of mine. "Shake the hand that shook the hand?" he challenged. It was a term we had picked up from his father--Ray could even rumble it just like Ed Heaney's bass-drum voice--who remembered it from his own boyhood in Butte when guys still went around saying "Shake the hand that shook the hand of John L. Sullivan," the heavyweight boxing champ of then.

I took Ray up on the hand duel, even though I pretty well knew how this habitual contest of ours was going to turn out from now on.

We made a careful fit of the handshake grip; then Ray chanted the start, "One, two, three." ~~4~~ After about a minute of mutual grunted squeezing, I admitted: "Okay. I'm out-squoze."

"You'll get me next time," Ray said. "Didn't ~~I~~ see Alec riding around acting like a calf roper?"

Some years before, Ed Heaney had driven out from Gros Ventre to the ranger station one spring Saturday to talk forest business with my father. And with him, to my surprise and no little consternation, came his son my age, Ray. I could see perfectly damn well what was intended here, and that's the way it did happen. Off up the South Fork our fathers rode to eyeball a stand of timber which interested Ed for fence posts he could sell at his lumber yard, and Ray and I were left to entertain one another.

Living out there at English Creek I always was stumped about what of my existence would interest any other boy in the world. There was the knoll with the view all the way to the Sweetgrass Hills, but somehow I felt that might not hold the fascination for others that it did for me. Ordinarily horses would have been on hand to ride, one solution to the situation, but the day before, Isidor Pronovost had taken every one of them in a packstring to a spike camp of CCC tree planters. Alec was nowhere in the picture as a possible ally; this was haying time and he was driving the scatter rake for Pete Reese. The ranger station itself was no refuge; the sun was out and my mother would never let us get away with lolling around inside, even if I

could think up a reasonable loll. Matters were not at all improved by the fact that, since I still was going to the South Fork grade school and Ray went in Gros Ventre, we only knew each other by sight.

He was a haunting kid to look at. His eyes were within long deep-set arcs, as if always squinched the way you do to thread a needle. And curved over with eyebrows which wouldn't needed to have been much thicker to make a couple of respectable blonde mustaches. And then a flattish nose which, wide as it was, barely accommodated all the freckles assigned to it. When Ray really grinned--I didn't see that this first day, although I was to see it thousands of times in the years ahead--deep slice-lines cut his cheeks, out opposite the corners of his mouth. Like a big set of parentheses around the grin. His lower lip was so full that it too had a slice-line under it. This kid looked more as if he'd been carved out of a pumpkin than born. Also, even more so than a lot of us at that age, his front teeth were far ahead of the rest of him in size. In any school yard there always were a lot of traded jibes of "Beaver tooth!" but Ray's frontals really did seem as if they'd been made for toppling willows.

As I say, haunting. I have seen grown men, guys who ordinarily wouldn't so much as spend a glance at a boy on the street, stop and study that face of Ray's. And here he was, thank you a whole hell of a lot, my guest for this day at English Creek.

So we were afoot with one another and not knowing what to do about it, and ended up wandering the creek bank north of the ranger station, with boredom building up pretty fast in both of us. Finally, I got

the idea of showing him the pool a little ways downstream in English Creek where brook trout always could be seen, hanging there dark in the clear water. In fact, I asked Ray if he felt like fishing, but for some reason he looked at me a little suspiciously and mumbled "huh uh."

We viewed the pool, which took no time at all, and then thrashed on along in the creek brush for awhile, just to be doing anything. It was semi-swampy going, so at least we could concentrate on jumping across the wet holes. Ray was dressed in what I suppose his mother thought were old enough clothes to go into the country with, but his old clothes were so noticeably ritzier than my everyday ones that he maybe was embarrassed about that. Anyway, for whatever reason, he put up with this brushwhacking venture of mine.

Whacked was what he got. My mind was on something else, likely how much of the day still gaped ahead of us, and without thinking I let a willow spring back as I pushed past it. It whipped Ray across the left side of his face and drew a real yelp from him. Also a comment to me:

"Watch out with those, beetle brain."

"Didn't mean to," I apologized. Which most likely would have buried the issue, except for what I felt honor bound to add next:
"Sparrow head."

You wonder afterwards how two reasonably sane people descend into a slanging match like that.

"Slobberguts," Ray upped the ante with.

"Booger eater," I promptly gave him back.

"Pus gut."

"Turd bird."

As I remember it, I held myself in admirable rein until Ray came out with "turkey dink."

For some reason that one did it. I swung on Ray and caught him just in front of the left ear. Unluckily, not quite hard enough to knock him down.

He popped me back, alongside the neck. We each got in a few more swings, then the fisticuffs degenerated into a wrestle. More accurately, a mud wallow.

We each were strong enough, and outraged enough, to be able to tip the other, so neither one of us ended up permanently on top. Simply, at some point we wore out on wanting to maul one another any further, and got to our feet. Ray's clothes looked as if he'd been rolled the length of a pig pen. Mine I guess weren't much better, but they hadn't started off as fancy and so I figured my muss didn't matter as much.

Of course, try convince my mother of that. Come noon we had to straggle in to get any dinner, and when she laid eyes on us, we were in for a scouring in more ways than one. Ray she made change into a set of my clothes--funny, how improved he looked when he was out of that town gear--and sat us at opposite ends of the table while we ate, then immediately afterward she issued two decrees: "Jick, I believe you would like To Read in the Other Room. Ray, I think you would like To Put Together the Jigsaw Puzzle I Am Going to Put Here on the Table

for You."

When I started high school in Gros Ventre, Ray came over to me at noonhour the first day. He planted himself just out of arm's reach from me and offered: "Horse apple."

I balled up both my fists, and my tongue got ready the words which would fan our creekside battle to life again: "Beaver tooth." Yet the direction of Ray's remark caught my notice. "Horse apple" was pretty far back down the scale from "turkey dink."

For once in my life I latched on to a possibility. I held my stance and tendered back to Ray: "Mud minnow."

It started a grin on him while he thought up: "Slough rat." "Gumbo gopher," I provided, barely managing to get it out before we were both laughing.

Within the week I was asking my mother whether I could stay in town overnight with Ray, and after that I made many a stay-over at the Heaneys' throughout the school year. Not only did I gain the value of Ray and me being the best of friends; it was always interesting to me that the Heaneys were a family as different from ours as crochet from oil cloth. For one thing they were Catholic, although they really didn't display it all that much. Just through a grace before every meal, ~~and a saint here and there on the wall and~~ and by eating fish on Friday, which eventually occurred to me as the reason Ray had looked at me suspiciously there at the creek when I asked him about fishing. For another, in almost every imaginable way the Heaney family was as tidy as spats on a rooster. (The "almost" was this: Ray and his sister Mary Ellen, three years younger, were allowed

liberties with their food that I'd never dreamt of. Take hotcakes as an example: Ray and Mary Ellen poured some syrup on, then rolled each hotcake up, then syrped the outside and began eating. A kind of maple syrup tamale, I now know enough to realize. When I first began overnighting with them they urged me to try mine that way, but the thought of my mother's response to something like that made me figure I might as well not get converted. At other meals too Ray and Mary Ellen squooged their food around in remarkable ways and ate only as much of it as they felt like. I tell you, it shocked me--people my own age leaving plates that looked more as if they'd been walked through than eaten from.) Ray's mother, Genevieve, kept that big two-story house dusted and doiled to a fare-thee-well. Mary Ellen already had her mind set on being a nurse--she was a kind of starchy kid anyway, so it probably was a good enough idea--and you couldn't scratch a finger around there without her wanting to daub it with Mercurochrome and wrap you up like a mummy.

Then there was Ray's father, Ed. You could hang your hat on Ed Heaney's habits. Every evening he clicked the lock on the door of the lumber yard office as if it was the final stroke needed to complete six o'clock, and if he wasn't walking in the kitchen door at five minutes after six, Genevieve started peering out the kitchen window to see what had happened to him. Another five minutes, Ed washing up and toweling down, and supper began. As soon as supper was over Ed sat at the kitchen table going through the Falls Leader and visiting with Genevieve while she did the dishes, his deep voice and her twinkly one, back and forth, back and forth. Then at seven

straight up, Ed strode into the living room, planted himself in his rocking chair and clicked on the big Philco floor radio. He listened straight through until ten o'clock--~~evidently~~ if somebody spouting Abyssinian had come on the air, Ed would have sat there and listened--and then went up to bed. Thus everything in the Heaney household in the evening was done against the backdrop of Ed's Philco, and Genevieve and Ray and Mary Ellen had become so used to tuning out sound that you often had to say something to them a couple of times to make it register. In Ray, there was an opposite kind of consequence, too. Ray had heard so much radio he could mimic just about any of it, Eddie Cantor and Walter Winchell and Kaltenborn giving the news and all those.

But Ed, I was telling about. You couldn't know it to look at Ed Heaney--the lumberyard life had put a middle on him, and he was bald as a jug--but he served in France during the war. In fact spent I don't know how much time in the trenches. Enough that he didn't want to squander one further minute of his life talking about it, evidently. Just once did I ever manage to get him going on that topic. That Ed won some medals over there, I knew because Ray once sneaked them out of a dresser drawer in Ed and Genevieve's bedroom and showed them to me. You wouldn't expect medal-winning about Ed either. In any case, though, one Heaney supertime when I was in to stay with Ray some topic came up that emboldened me to outright ask Ed what he remembered most about being in the war. Figuring, of course, I might hear tales that led to the medals.

"Shaving."

After a while Ed glanced up from his eating and realized that Ray and Mary Ellen and Genevieve and I were all regarding him in a stymied way.

"We had to shave every day," he elaborated. "Wherever we were. Belleau Wood, we only got a canteen of water per man per day. But we still used some of it to shave. The gas masks they gave us were a French kind. Sort of a sack that went over your face like this"-- Ed ran a hand around his chinline. "If you had whiskers it didn't fit tight enough. Gas would get in. You'd be a goner."

Ed began to take another bite of his supper, but instead repeated: "Belleau Wood. About mid-day there we'd be in our foxholes-- graves, we called them--all of us shaving, or holding our shirts up to read them for lice. Thousands of us, all doing one or the other."

The other four of us waited, dumbstruck, to see where this sudden hallway of Ed's memory led.

But all he said more was "Pass the string beans, please."

—

→

Now that we were established atop the arena corral, I reported to Ray my chin session with Dode Withrow at the beer booth. Ray took what might be called a spectator interest in the Withrow family. He never came right out and said so, but his eye was on the middle Withrow girl, Marcella, who was in the same high school class we were. Marcella was trim in figure like Midge and had a world-by-the-tail grin like Dode's usual one. So far Ray's approach to Marcella was distant admiration, but I had the feeling he was trying to figure out how to narrow the distance.

Maybe the day would come when I was more interested in a Leona or a Marcella than in perching up there above general humanity, but right then I doubted it. I considered that the top-pole perch Ray and I had there next to the bucking chutes was the prime site of the whole rodeo grounds. We had clear view of every inch of the arena, the dirt oval like a small dry lake bed before us. And all the event action would originate right beside us, where even now the broncs for the first section of bareback riding were being hazed into the chutes alongside my corral spot. The particular Gros Ventre bucking chute setup was that as six broncs at a time were hazed in for their set of riders, pole panels were retracted between each chute, leaving what had been the half-dozen chutes as one long narrow pen. Then as the horses crowded in in single file, the panels were shoved in place behind them one by one, penning each bronc into the chute it would buck into the arena from. As slick a system as there is for handling rodeo broncs, I suppose. But what is memorable to me about it is the instant before

the pole panels were shoved into place to serve as chute dividers: when the horses came swarming into the open chute pen, flanks heaving, heads up and eyes glittering. From my perch, it was like looking down through a transom into a long hallway suddenly filled with big perplexed animals. Not many sights are its equal.

Above and to the left of Ray and me was the announcing booth and its inhabitants, a nice proximity which added to the feeling that we were part of the inside happenings of the rodeo. To look at, the booth resembled a little woodshed up on stilts, situated there above and just in back of the middle of the bucking chutes. It held elbow room for maybe six people, although only three of the booth crowd did any actual rodeo work. Tollie Zane, if you could call his announcing work. Tollie evidently was in residence at the far end of the booth, angled out of view from us but a large round microphone like a waffle iron standing on end indicated his site. Then nearest to us was the scorekeeper, Bill Reinking, editor of the Gleaner, prominent with his ginger mustache and silver-wire eyeglasses. I suppose he did the scorekeeping on the principle that the only sure way for the Gleaner to get any accuracy on the rodeo results was for him to originate the arithmetic. Between Bill and Tollie was the space for the timekeeper, who ran the stopwatch to time the events and blew the whistle to signal when a bronc rider had lasted eight seconds atop a bareback or ten in a saddle ride. The timekeeper's spot in the booth was empty, but this was about to be remedied.

"Wup wup wup," some Paul Revere among the chute society cried, "Here

she comes, boys! Just starting up the ladder!"

Heads swiveled like weathervanes hit by a tornado. And yes, Ray and I also sent our eyes around to the little ladder along the side of the announcing booth and the hypnotizing progress up it of Velma Simms.

"Tighter than last year, I swear to God," someone below us was contending. "Like the paper fits the wall," testified another. And yet another, "But I still need to know, how the hell does she get herself into those britches?" Velma Simms came of eastern money. Plumbing equipment I believe was its source; I have seen her family name, Croake, on hot-and-cold spigots. And in a community and era which considered divorce usually more grievous than manslaughter, she had been through three husbands. That we knew of. Only the first was local, the lawyer Paul Bogan. They met in Helena when he got himself elected to the legislature, and if my count is right, it was at the end of his second term when Velma arrived back to Gros Ventre and Paul stayed over there at the capital in some kind of state job. Her next husband was a fellow named Sutter, who'd had an automobile agency in Spokane. In Gros Ventre he was like a trout out of water, and quickly went. After him came Simms, an actor Velma happened across in some summer performance at one of the Glacier Park lodges. By February of his first Two country winter Simms was hightailing his way to California, although he eventually did show up back in Gros Ventre, so to speak, as one of the cattle rustlers in a Gene Autry movie at the Odeon. Lately Velma seemed to have given up marrying and instead emerged each Fourth with the current beau--they tended to be like the scissorpbill following her up the ladder now, in a

gabardine stockman's suit and a too clean cream Stetson, probably a bank officer from Great Falls--in tow. I cite all this because Paul Bogan, the first in the genealogy, always had served as rodeo timekeeper, and the next Fourth of July after his change of residence, here Velma presented herself, bold as new paint, to take up his stopwatch and whistle. It was her only instance of what might be called civic participation, and quite why she did it, nobody had a clue. But Velma's ascension to the booth now was part of every Gros Ventre rodeo. Particularly for the male portion of the audience. For as you may have gathered, Velma's Fourth appearances were encased in annual new slacks of stunning snugness. One of the theoreticians in the chute society just now was postulating a fresh concept, that maybe Velma heated them with an iron, put them on hot, and let them shrink down on her like the rim onto a wagon wheel.

I saw once, in recent years at the Gros Ventre rodeo, a young bronc rider and his ladyfriend watching the action through the pole arena gate. They each held a can of beer in one hand, and the rider's other hand was around the girl's shoulders. Her other hand, though, was down resting lightly on his rump, the tips of her fingers just touching the inseam of his Levis back there. I'll admit to you, it made my heart turn around and face north. That the women now can and will do such a thing seems to me an advance like radio. My awe of it is tempered only by the regret that I am not that young man, or any other. But let that go. My point here is just that in the earlier time, only rare self-advertised rumps such as that of Velma Simms were targets of public

interest, and then only by what my father and the other rangers called ocular examination.

It registered on me there had been a comment from Ray's direction. "Come again?" I apologized.

"No hitch in Velma's gitalong," Ray offered one more time.

I said something equally bright in agreement, but I was surprised at Ray making an open evaluation of Velma Simms, even so tame a one as that. The matter of Marcella maybe was on his mind more than I figured.

Just then an ungodly noise somewhere between a howl and a yowl issued above us. A sort of high HHHRUNGH like a cat was being skinned alive. I was startled as hell, but Ray knew its source. "You see Tollie's loudspeaking getup?" he inquired with a nod toward the top of the announcer's booth. I couldn't help but have noticed such a rig. The contraption was a pyramid of rods, which held at its peak a half-dozen big metal cones like those morning-glory horns on old phonographs, pointing to various points of the compass. Just in case those didn't cover the territory, there was a second set of four more 'glory horns a couple of feet beneath. "He sent off to Billings for it," informed Ray, who had overheard this information when Tollie came to the lumber yard for a number of 2 X 4s to help brace the contraption into place. "The guy who makes them down there told him it's the real deal to announce with."

We were not the only ones contemplating Tollie's new announcing machinery. "What the goddamn hell's Tollie going to do," I heard somebody say below us, "tell them all about it in Choteau?" Choteau

was 33 miles down the highway.

"WELCOME!" crackled a thunderblast of voice over our heads.

"To the Gros Ventre rodeo! Our fifteenth annual — #
 show! You folks are wise as hooty owls to roost — #
 with us here today. Yes sir! Some of everything — #
 is liable to happen here today and-- " Tollie Zane,
 father of the famous Earl, held the job of announcing the Gros Ventre
 rodeo on the basis by which a lot of positions of authority seem to
 get filled: nobody else would be caught dead doing it. But before
 this year, all that the announcing amounted to was shouting through a
 megaphone the name of each bucking horse and its rider. The shiny new
 'glory horns evidently had gone to Tollie's head, or at least his ton-
 sils. "The Fourth of July is called the cowboys'
 Christmas and our festivities here today will get — #
 underway in just--"

"Called what?" somebody yelled from the chute society. "That's
 Tollie for you, sweat running down his face and he thinks it's snow-
 flakes."

"Santy Claus must have brought him that goddamn talking contraption,"
 guessed somebody else.

"Naw, you guys, lay off now," a third one put in. "Tollie's maybe
 right. It'd explain why he's as full of shit as a Christmas goose."

Everybody below us hee-heeed at that while Tollie roared on about
 the splendiferous tradition of rodeo and what heart-stopping excitement
 we were going to view in this arena today. Tollie was a kind of plodding

talker anyway, and now with him slowed down either out of respect for the new sound system or because he was translating his remarks from paper--this July Christmas stuff was originating from somewhere; had a kit come with the 'glory horns and microphone?--you could about soft-boil an egg between parts of his sentences.

"Anybody here from Great Falls?"

Quite a number of people yelled and waved their hands.

"Welcome to America!"

Out in the crowd there were laughs and groans. And most likely some flinching in the Rotary beer booth; a real boon to business, Tollie cracking wise at the expense of people who'd had 90 miles of driving time to wonder whether this rodeo was worth coming to.

But this seemed to be a day when Tollie, armed with amplification, was ready to take on the world. "How about North Dakota? Who's here from North Dakota?"

Of course, no response. Tourists were a lot scarcer in those days, and the chances that anybody would venture from North Dakota just to see the Gros Ventre rodeo were zero and none.

"That's right!" blared Tollie. "If I was you I wouldn't ~~#~~
admit it neither!"

Tollie spieled on for awhile, actually drawing boos from the Choteau folks in the crowd when he proclaimed that Choteau was known as a town without a single bedbug: "No sir they are all married ~~#~~
and have big families!" At last, though, the handling crew was through messing with the broncs in the chutes alongside Ray and me,

and Tollie was declaring "We are just about to get the pumpkin rolling. Bareback riding will be our first - # event."

"Pumpkin?" questioned whoever it was in the chute society that was keeping tab of Tollie's excursions through the calendar. "Judy H. Christ! Now the whistledick thinks it's Halloween."

About all that is worth mentioning of the early part of that rodeo is that its events, a section of bareback riding and after that some steer wrestling or mauling or whatever you want to call it, passed fairly mercifully. Ray and I continued to divide our time snorting laughs over something either Tollie or the chute society provided. Plus our own wisef~~a~~cre efforts, of course. Ray nearly fell off the corral from cackling one time when I speculated whether this much time sitting on a fence pole mightn't leave a person with the crack in his behind running crosswise instead of up and down. You know how that is, humor is totally contagious when two persons are in the same light mood. And a good thing, too, for by my estimation the actual events of a rodeo can always use all the help they can get. Although like anybody out here I have seen many and many a rodeo, to me the arena events are never anything to write home special about. It's true that bareback riding has its interesting moments, but basically the ride is over and done with about as it's getting started. I don't know, a guy flopping around on the naked back of a horse just seems to me more of a stunt than a sport. As for steer wrestling, that is an absolutely phony deal, never done except there in front of a rodeo

crowd. Leaping onto a running steer has about as much to do with actual cattle ranching as wearing turquoise belt buckles does. And that calf roping. Calf roping I nominate as an event the spectators ought to be paid for sitting through. I mean, here'll come one ~~yahoo~~ out after the calf swinging a community loop an elephant could trot through, and the next guy will pitch a loop so teeny that it bounces off the back of the calf's neck like a spitwad. Whiff whiff whiff, and then a burst of cussing as the rope-flinger's throw misses its mark: there is the essence of rodeo calf roping. If I ran the world there'd be standards, such as making any calf roping entrant dab onto a fencepost twenty feet away, just to prove he knows how to build a decent loop.

Anyway. All I am saying in this rodeo sermon is that the best feature of the whole affair to me--except maybe for the processional of a Velma Simms--is the excuse it gives everyone to gather together for most of an afternoon. Present me several hundred people to gawk around at and speculate on and, yes, somehow be part of, and that is my idea of the highest sort of holiday. If various forms of nonsense with livestock have to be put up with for that, so be it.

"Alec's bringing his horse in," Ray reported from his sphere of the arena. "Guess he's roping in this section."

"So's everybody else in the world, it looks like." Horsemen and hemp, hemp and horsemen. It was a wonder the combined swishing of the ropes of all the would-be calf ropers now assembling didn't lift the rodeo arena off the ground like an autogyro. As you maybe can tell, my emotions about having a brother forthcoming into this event

were strictly mixed. Naturally I was pulling for Alec to win. Brotherly blood is at least that thick. Yet a corner of me was shadowed with doubt as to whether victory was really such a good idea for Alec. Did he need any more confirming in his cowboy mode? Especially in this dubious talent of hanging rope necklaces onto slobbering calves?

This first section of the calf roping now proceeded about as I could have foretold, a lot of air fanned with rope but damn few calves collared. One surprise was produced, though. After a ~~1~~st catch Bruno Martin of Augusta missed his tie, the calf kicking free before its required six seconds flat on the ground were up. If words could be seen in the air, some blue dandies accompanied Martin out of the arena.

The other strong roper, Vern Crosby, snagged his calf neatly, suffered a little trouble throwing him down for the tie, but then niftily gathered the calf's legs and wrapped the pigging string around them, as Tollie spelled out for us, "faster than Houdini can tie his shoe laces!"

So when the moment came for Alec to guide the ~~bay~~^{blood} roping horse into the break-out area beside the calf chute, the situation was as evident as Tollie's voice bleating from that tin bouquet of 'glory horns:

"Nineteen seconds by Vern Crosby is still the time to beat. It'll take some fancy twirling by this ~~one~~[#] next young buckaroo. One of the hands out at

the Double W he's getting hisself squared away and ~~—~~[#]
 will be ready in just--"

The calf chute and the break-out area where each roper and his horse burst out after the creature were at the far end of the bucking chutes from us. Ray cupped his hands and called across to there: "Wrap him up pretty, Alec!"

Across there, Alec appeared a little nervous, dandling his rope around more than was necessary as he and the bay horse waited for their calf to emerge. But then I discovered I was half-nervous myself, jiggling my foot on its corral pole, and I had no excuse whatsoever. You wouldn't catch me out there trying to snare a 75-pound animal running full tilt.

The starter's little red flag whipped down, and the calf catapulted from the chute into the expanse of the arena.

Alec's luck. Sometimes you had to think he held the patent on four-leaf clovers and rabbit's feet. The calf he drew was a straight runner instead of a dodger. Up the middle of the arena that calf galloped as if he was on rails, the big horse gaining ground on him for Alec every hoofbeat. And I believe that if you could have pulled the truth from my father and mother right then, even they would have said that Alec looked the way a calf roper ought to. Leaning forward but still as firm in his stirrups as if socketed into them, swinging the loop of the lariat around and around his head strongly enough to give it a good fling but not overdoing it. Evidently there had been much practice performed on Double W calves as Alec rode the coulees

these past weeks.

"Dab it on him!" I heard loudly, and realized the yell had been by me.

Quicker than it can be told Alec made his catch. A good one, where all the significant actions erupt together: the rope straightening into a tan line in the air, the calf gargling out a bleahh as the loop choked its neck and yanked it backward, Alec evacuating from the stirrups in his dismount. Within a blink he was in front of the tall bay horse and scampering beside the stripe of rope the bay was holding taut as fishline, and now Alec was upending the calf into the arena dust and now gathering calf legs and now whipping the pigging string around them and now done.

"The time for Alec McCaskill" -- I thought I could hear remorse inside the tinny blare of Tollie's voice, and so knew the report was going to be good -- "seventeen and a half seconds."

The crowd whooped and clapped. Over at the far fence Leona was beaming as if she might ignite, and down at the end of the grandstand my parents were glumly accepting congratulations on Alec. Beside me Ray was as surprised as I was by Alec's first-rate showing, and his delight didn't have the conditions attached that mine did. ⁴¹ "How much is up?" he wondered. I wasn't sure of the roping prize myself, so I asked the question to the booth, and Bill Reinking leaned out and informed us, "Thirty dollars, and supper for two at the Sedgwick House."

"Pretty slick," Ray admired. I had to think so myself. Performance is performance, whatever my opinion of Alec's venue of it. Later in the

afternoon there would be one more section of calf ropers, but with the main guys, Bruno Martin and Vern Crosby, already behind him, Alec's leading time looked good enough to take to the bank.

Tollie was bleating onward. "Now we turn to some prairie sailors and the hurricane deck," which translated to the first go-round of saddle bronc riding. I will say for saddle bronc riding that it seems to me the one rodeo event that comes close to legitimate. Staying on a mount that is trying to unstay you is a historic procedure of the livestock business. "The boys are hazing the ponies into the chutes and when we commence and get started the first man out will be Bill Semmler on a horse called Connipition. In this meanwhile though did you hear the one about the fellow who goes into the barber shop and" --

I never did get to hear Tollie's tonsorial tale, for I happened to glance down to my left into the bucking chutes and see disaster in a spotted horsehide charging full tilt at me.

"Hang on!" I yelled to Ray and simultaneously flipflopped myself rightward and dropped down the fence so that I had my arms clamped around both the top corral pole and Ray's hips.

Ray glommed tight to the pole with his hands. WHOMP! and a clatter. The impact of the pinto bucking horse slamming into the chute-end where our section of corral cornered into it went shuddering through the pair of us, as if a giant sledgehammer had hit the wood; but our double gripping kept us from being flung off the top of the fence.

"Jesus!" Ray let out, rare for him. "There's a goosy one!"

Our narrow brush did not escape microphone treatment. "This
 little Coffee Nerves pinto down at chute six has a — #
 couple of fence squatters hugging the wood pretty good!"
 Tollie was alerting the world. "We'll see whether they
 go ahead and kiss it!"

"Numbnuts," I muttered in the direction of the Zane end of the announcing booth. Or possibly more than muttered, for when I managed to glower directly up there, Bill Reinking was delivering me a certifying wink and Velma Simms was puckered the way a person does to hold in a laugh.

Ray had it right, the pinto was truly riled and then some, as I could confirm while cautiously climbing back onto my perch and locking a firm arm around the corner post between chute and corral. No way was I going to take a chance on being dislodged down into the company of this Coffee Nerves bronc. The drawback of this flood-the-chutes-with-horses system was that the first horse in was the last to come out, from this end chute next to me. While the initial five horses were being bucked out Coffee Nerves was going to be cayusing around in chute six and trying to raise general hell.

The pinto looked more than capable. Coffee Nerves had close-set pointy ears; what are called pin ears, and indicate orneriness in a horse. Worse, he was hog-eyed. Had small darty eyes that shot looks at the nearest threat all the time. Which, given my position on the fence, happened to be me. I had not been the target of so much eyeball

since the tussle to get that Bubbles packhorse up the side of the mountain. One thing I have skipped in life is any desire toward rodeo riding. With no least regret. Maybe that makes me less a westerner than I ought to be. But it also has made me a less ramshackle human being. Letting a horse scramble your brains and wallop your bones and joints for the fun of it is not my idea of intelligent living. Particularly if the bronc is on the order of Coffee Nerves, touchy anyway and now in a real shitfit of fury about being caged in a chute.

Ray was peering behind me to study Coffee Nerves, so he was the one who noticed. "Huh! Look who must've drew him."

There in back of chute six, Earl Zane was helping the handlers try to saddle the pinto.

My session of watchdogging Leona for Alec of course whetted my interest in the matter of Earl Zane, whom I ordinarily wouldn't bat an eye to look at. Now here he loomed, not ten feet away from Ray and me, at the rear of Coffee Nerves' chute amid the cussing crew of handlers trying to contend with the pinto and the saddle that was theoretically supposed to go on its back. Earl Zane had one of those faces that could be read at a glance: as clear as the label on a maple sugar jug it proclaimed SAP. I suppose he was semi-goodlooking in a sulky kind of way. But my belief was that Earl Zane's one known ability, handling horses, derived from the fact that he possessed the identical amount of brain as the average horse did and they thus felt affinity with him. Though whether Coffee Nerves, who was whanging a series of kicks to the chute lumber that I could feel arrive up through the corral pole I

was seated on, was going to simmer down enough to accommodate Earl Zane or anybody else remained an open question.

In any case, I was transfixed by what was brewing here. Alec looked likely to win the calf roping. Coffee Nerves gave every sign of being the buckingest saddle bronc, if Earl could stay on him. Two winners, one Leona. The arithmetic of that was something to contemplate.

Various geezers of the chute society were peering in at Coffee Nerves and chiming "Whoa, hoss" and "Here now, knot head, settle down," which was doing nothing to improve the pinto's disposition. After all, would it yours?

Distracted by the geezer antics and the Earl-Alec equation, I didn't notice the next arrival until Ray pointed out, "Second one of the litter."

Indeed, Earl Zane had been joined in the volunteer saddling crew by his brother Arlee, the one a year ahead of Ray and me in school. Another horse fancier with brain to match. And full to overflowing with the Zane family swagger, for Arlee Zane was a big pink specimen: about what you'd get if you could coax a hog to strut around on its hind legs wearing blue jeans and a rodeo shirt. Eventually maybe Arlee would duplicate Earl, brawny instead of overstuffed. But at present there just was too much of all of him, up to and including his mouth. At the moment, for instance, Arlee had strutted around to the far side of the announcing booth and was yelping up to his sire: "Tell them to count out the prize money! Old Earl is going to set his horse on fire!" God, those Zanes did think they were the ding-dong of the world's bell.

"How about a bottle of something?" I proposed to Ray. The mental strain of being Zanebane must have been making me thirsty. "I'm big rich, I'll buy."

"Ace high," Ray thought this sounded, and added that he'd hold our seats. Down I climbed, and away to the beer booth again. The tubs weren't showing many Kessler and Select necks by now. I half-expected to coincide with Dode again, but didn't. But by the time I returned to Ray with our two bottles of grape, I was able to more or less offhandedly report that I had seen Marcella and the other Withrow daughters, in the shade under the grandstand with a bunch more of the girls we went to school with. Leona on one side of the arena, Marcella and the school multitude on the other, Velma Simms in the air behind us; I did have to admit, lately the world was more full of females than I had ever previously noticed.

"Under way again!" Tollie was issuing forth. "A local buckaroo coming out of chute number one"

Bill Semmler made his ride but to not much total, his bronc a straight bucker who crowhopped down the middle of the arena in no particularly inspired way until the ten seconds ~~were~~^{were} up and the whistle blew.

"Exercise," commented Ray, meaning that was all Semmler was going to get out of such a rocking horse ride.

At that, though, exercise was more than what was produced by the next rider, an out-of-town guy whose name I didn't recognize. Would-be rider, I ought to say, for a horse called Ham What Am sailed him onto

the earth almost before the pair of them issued all the way out the gate of chute two. Ham What Am then continued his circuit of the arena, kicking dirt twenty feet into the air with every buck, while the ostensible rider knelt and tried to get any breath back into himself.

"Let's give this hard-luck cowboy a big hand!"
Tollie advocated. "He sure split a long crack in the air — #
that time."

"You guys see any crack out there in the air?" somebody below us inquired. "Where the hell is Tollie getting that stuff?"

"Monkey Ward," it was suggested. "From the same page featuring toilet paper."

But then one of the Rides Proud brothers from up at Browning--one or another of Toussaint's army of grand-nephews he wasn't on speaking terms with--lived up to his name and made a nice point total atop a chunky roan called Snuffy. Sunfishing was Snuffy's tactic, squirming his hind quarters to one side and then the other with each jump, and if the rider manages to stay in tune with all that hula wiggling it yields a pretty ride. This performance was plenty good enough to win the event, unless Earl Zane could do something wonderful on top of Coffee Nerves.

Following the Rides Proud achievement, the crowd laughed as they did each year when a little buckskin mare with a flossy mane was announced as Shirley Temple, and laughed further when the mare piled the contestant, some guy from Shelby, with its third jump.

"That Shirley for a little gal she's got a mind — #

of her own," bayed Tollie, evidently under the impression he was providing high humor. Then, sooner than it seemed possible for him to have drawn sufficient breath for it, he was giving us the next loudspeaker dose. "Now here is a rider I have some acquaintance with. Getting set in chute number five on Dust Storm Earl Zane. Show them how Earl!"

So much for assuming the obvious. Earl had not drawn the pinto, his and Arlee's participation in saddling it was only the Zane trait of sticking a nose into anything available.

The fact remained, though, that Alec's rival was about to bounce out into the arena aboard a bucking animal. I craned my neck trying to get a look at Leona, but she was turned in earnest conversation with a certain calf roper wearing a chokecherry shirt and I could only see golden ~~silver~~ gold floss. Quite a wash of disappointment went through me. Somehow I felt I was missing the most interesting scene of the entire rodeo, Leona's face, just then.

"And here he comes a cowboyin' sonofagun and a son of yours truly--"

In fairness, I will say Earl Zane got a bad exit from the chute, the cinnamon-colored bronc he was on taking a little hop into the arena and stopping to gaze around at the world just as Earl was all primed for him to buck. Then as it sank in on Earl that the horse wasn't bucking and he altered the rhythm of his spurring to fit that situation, Dust Storm began to whirl. A spin to the left. Then one to the right. It was worth the admission to see, Earl's thought process

clanking one direction and the horse's the other, then each reversing and passing one another in the opposite direction, like two drunks trying to find each other in a revolving door. The cinnamon bronc, though, was always one phase ahead of Earl, and his third whirl, which included a sort of sideways dip, caused Earl to lurch and lose the opposite stirrup. It was all over then, merely a matter of how promptly Earl would keep his appointment with the arena dirt.

"Blew a stirrup," came from the chute society as Earl picked himself up off the planet and the whistle was heard. "Ought've filled those stirrups with chewing gum before he climbed on that merry-go-round."

Tollie, however, considered that we had seen a shining feat.
"Almost made it to the whistle on that rough one!
You can still show your face around home Earl!"

Possibly the pinto's general irritation with the world rather than the diet of Tollie's voice produced it, but either way, Coffee Nerves now went into his biggest eruption yet. Below me in the chute he began to writhe and kick, whinnying awfully, and I redoubled my life grip on the corner post as the thunk! thunk! of his hooves tattooing the wood of the chute reverberated through the seat of my pants.

"Careful," Ray warned, and I suppose sense would have been to trade my perch for a more distant site. Yet how often does a person get to see at close range a horse in combat with mankind. Not just see, but feel, in the continuing thunks; and hear, the pinto's whinny

a sawblade of sound ripping the air; and smell, sweat and manure and animal anger in one mingled unforgettable odor.

Coffee Nerves' hammerwork with his hooves built up to a crash, a splay of splinters which sent the handlers tumbling away from the back of the chute, and then comparative silence. just the velocity of air through the pinto bronc's nostrils.

"The sonofabitch is hung up," somebody reported. In truth, Coffee Nerves was standing with his rear right leg up behind him, the way a horse does for a blacksmith to shoe him. Except that instead of any human having hold of that wicked rear hoof, it was jammed between a solid chute pole and the splintered one above it.

As the handling crew gingerly moved in to see what could be done about extrication, Tollie enlightened the crowd:

"This little pinto pony down in six is still —# proving kind of recaltrisant. The chute boys are doing —# some persuading and our show will resume in just —# a jiffy. In the meantime since this is the cowboys' —# Christmas so to say that reminds me of a little story."

"Jesus, he's back onto Christmas," issued from the chute society. "Will somebody go get Tollie a goddam calendar?"

"Dumb as he is," it was pointed out, "it'll take two of us to read it to him."

"There was this little boy who wanted a pony —# for Christmas." Somebody had gone for a prybar to loosen the

imprisoning poles and free the renegade pony of chute six, but in the meantime there was nothing to do but let Tollie wax forth. Even at normal, Tollie's voice sounded as if his adenoids had gotten twined with his vocal cords. With the boost from the address system, his steady drone now was a real ear-cleaner. "Well you see this little boy kept telling the other kids in the family that he had it all fixed up with Santa Claus. Santa Claus was going to bring him a pony certain sure. So when Christmas Eve came they all of them hung their stockings by the fireplace there."

"If I hang up a woolsack alongside my stove," somebody in front of the chutes pined, "suppose I'd get Velma Simms in it?"

"And the other kids thought they'd teach this little boy a lesson. So after everybody had gone to bed they got back up again and went on out to the barn and got some ladies, excuse my language horse manure."

"Quick, mark that down," somebody advised up to Bill Reinking. "That's the first time Tollie's ever apologized for spouting horse shit."

--and filled his stocking with it. So the next morning they're all gathered to look and see what Santa Claus left each one of them. Little Susie says 'Look, he left me a dollie here in MY stocking.' And little Tommy says 'And look he left me apples and oranges in MINE.' And they turned to the little boy and asked 'Well, Johnny what

did Santa leave YOU?' And Johnny looked in his stocking
and said 'He left me my pony but he got away.'"

There was that sickly laughter a crowd gives out because it's embarrassed not to, and then one of the chute men called up to the booth that they had the goddamn bronc freed, get the rider on him before he raised any more hell.

"BACK TO BUSINESS," Tollie blared as if he was calling elephants, before Bill Reinking managed to lean across and shove the microphone a little farther from Tollie's mouth. "back to business. The bronc in chute six has consented to rejoin us. Next man up last one in this go-round on a horse called Coffee Nerves will be Dode Withrow."

I yanked my head around to see for sure. Yes. Dode was up top the back of chute six, gazing at the specimen of exasperated horse below. Dode did look a little soberer than when I met up with him by the beer booth. He wasn't any bargain of temperance yet, though. His face looked hot and his Stetson sat toward the back of his head in a dude way I had never seen him wear it.

Ray was saying, "I never knew Dode to enter the bucking, before." Which coincided with what was going through my mind, that Dode was the age of my father and Ray's. That his bronc stomping had taken place long years ago. That I knew for a certainty Dode did not even break horses for his own use any more, but bought them saddle ready from Tollie Zane.

"No," I answered Ray, "not in our time."

I had a clear view down into the chute as the bronc crew tried to keep Coffee Nerves settled long enough for Dode to ease into the saddle. The pinto went through another symphony of commotion, kicking and slamming sideways and whinnying that sawtoothed sound; but then hunched up motionless for a moment in a kind of sitting squat, ~~evidently~~ contemplating what next to pull from its repertoire. In that moment Dode simply said "Good enough" and slid into the saddle.

As if those words of Dode's were a curfew, the gapers and gawkers of the chute society evaporated from the vicinity where Coffee Nerves would emerge into the arena, some of them even seeking a safe nest up on the corral.

"One of our friends and neighbors Dode is. Rode many ~~—~~[#] a bad one in his time. He'll be dancing out on this little pinto in just one minute."

It honestly occurred no more than a handful of seconds from then. Dode had the grip he wanted on the bucking rope and his arm was in the air as if ready to wave and he said in that same simple tone, "Open."

The gate swung, and Coffee Nerves vaulted into the arena.

I saw Dode suck in a fast breath, then heard it go out of him in a huhhh as the horse lit stiff-legged with its forefeet and kicked the sky with its hind, from both directions ramming the surprise of its force up through the stirrups into Dode. Dode's hat left him and bounced once on the pinto splotch across Coffee Nerves' rump and then toppled into the dust of the arena. But Dode himself didn't shake loose at all, which was a fortunate thing because Coffee Nerves

already was uncorking another maneuver, this time swapping ends before crashing down in all stiff-legged style. Dode still sat deep in the saddle, although another huhhh reamed its way out of him. Maybe imagine you have just jumped from a porch roof to the ground twice in about five seconds, to give yourself some idea of the impact Dode was absorbing. He must have been getting Coffee Nerves' respect, for now the bronc exactly reversed the end-swapping he had just done, a trick almost guaranteed to catch the rider leaning wrong. Yet Dode still was up there astride the pinto.

I remember tasting dust. My mouth was open to call encouragement to Dode, but there was nothing that seemed good enough to call out for this ride he was making.

Now Coffee Nerves launched into the jump he had been saving up for, a real cloud-chaser, Dode at the same instant raking the horse's shoulders with his spurs, both those actions fitting together exactly as if animal and man were in rhythm to a signal none of the rest of us could hear, up and up the horse twisting into the air and the rider's free left arm high above that, Coffee Nerves and Dode soaring together while the crowd's urging cry seemed to help hold them there, a wave of sound suspending the pair above the arena earth so that we all could have time to fix the sight into memory everlastingly.

Somewhere amid it all the whistle blew. That is, off some far wall of my awareness echoed that news of Dode having ridden Coffee Nerves, but the din that followed flooded over it. I still believe that if Coffee Nerves had lit straight, as any sane horse would do descending

from a moon visit like that, Dode would not have blown that left stirrup. But somehow Coffee Nerves skewed himself half-sideways about the time he hit the ground: imagine now that the ground yanks itself to one side as you plummet off that porch: and Dode, who evidently did not hear the timer's whistle or was ignoring it, stayed firm in the right stirrup, nicely braced as he was, but the pinto's slewfoot maneuver jolted his boot from the left one. And now when Coffee Nerves writhed into his next buck, cattywampus to the left, he simply sailed away from under Dode, who dropped off him back-first, falling like a man given a surprise shove into a creek.

Not water, however, but dust flew up around the form which thumped to the arena surface.

The next developments smudged together. I do know that now I was shouting out "Dode! Dode!" and that I lit running in the arena direct from the top of the corral, never even resorted to any of the poles as rungs to get down, and that Ray landed right behind me. As to what we thought we were going to accomplish I am even less clear; simply could not see Dode sprawled out there by himself, I suppose.

The pickup man Dill Egan was spurring his horse between Dode and Coffee Nerves, and having to swat the pinto in the face with his hat to keep him off Dode. Before it seemed possible my father and Pete were out there too, and a half dozen other men from out of the grandstand and Alec and a couple of others from the far side of the arena, their hats thwacking at Coffee Nerves as well, and through all the commotion I could hear my father's particular roar of HYAH! HYAH! again and again before the bronc finally veered off.

"fell off the rainbow on that one right enough," Tollie was blaring. So that registered on me, and the point that the chute society, this once when they could have been useful out here in the arena, were dangling from various fence perches or peering from behind the calf chute. But the sprint Ray and I made through the loose arena dirt is marked in me only by the sound that reached us just as we reached Dode. The noise hit our ears from the far end of the arena: a tingling crack! like a tree breaking off and then crashing and thudding as it came down.

For a confused instant I truly thought a cottonwood had fallen. My mind tried to put together that with all else happening in this overcrowded space of time. But no, Coffee Nerves had slammed head-on into the gate of the catch pen, toppling not just the gate but the hefty gatepost, which crunched the hood of a parked car as it fell over. People who had been spectating along the fence were scattering from the prospect of having Coffee Nerves out among them.

The bronc however had rebounded into the arena. Piling into that gatepost finally had knocked some of the spunk out of Coffee Nerves. He now looked a little groggy and was wobbling somewhat, which gave Dill Egan time to lasso him and dally the rope around a corral post.

This was the scene as I will ever see it. Dode Withrow lying out there with the toes of his boots pointing up and Coffee Nerves woozy but defiant at the end of the lasso tether.

Quite a crowd encircled Dode, although Ray and I hung back at its outer edge; exactly what was not needed was any more people in the way.

Doc Spence forged his way through, and I managed to see in past the arms and legs of all the men around him and Dode. And saw happen what I so desperately wanted to. When Doc held something under Dode's nose, Dode's head twitched.

Before long I heard Dode give a long mmmm, as if he was terrifically tired. After that his eyes came open and he showed that he was able to move, in fact would have tried to sit up if Doc Spence hadn't stopped him. Doc told Dode to just take it easy, damn it, while he examined Dode's right leg.

By now Midge and the Withrow girls had scurried out and Midge was down beside Dode demanding, "You ninny, are you all right?"

Dode fastened his look on her and made an mmmm again. Then burst out loud and clear, "Goddamn that stirrup anyway," which lightened the mood of all of us around him, even Midge looking less warpath-like after that. I could just hear the razzing Dode was going to take from his herder Pat Hoy about this forced landing of his: "Didn't know I was working for an apprentice bronc stomper, Dode. Want me to saddle up one of these big ewes, so's you can practice staying on?"

Relief was all over my father as he went over to the grandstand fence to report to my mother and Marie and Toussaint. Ray and I tagged along, so we heard it as quick as anybody. "Doc thinks it's a simple leg break," my father relayed. "Could have been a hell of a lot worse. Doc's going to take him to Conrad for overnight just to make sure."

My mother at once called out to Midge an offer to ride with her to Conrad. Midge though shook her head. "No, I'll be all right. The girls'll be with me, no sense in you coming."

Then I noticed. Toussaint was paying no attention to any of this

conversation, nor to the process of Dode being put on a stretcher over his protestations that he could walk or even foot-race if he had to, nor to Coffee Nerves being tugged into exit through what little was left of the catch pen gate. Instead he, Toussaint, was standing there gazing into the exact center of the arena, as if the extravaganza that Coffee Nerves and Dode had put on still was continuing out there. The walnut crinkles deepened in his face, his chuckle rippled out, and then the declaration: "That one. That one was a ride."

There of course was more on the schedule of events beyond that. Tollie inevitably thought to proclaim "Well, folks the show goes on." But the only way for it to go after that performance by Coffee Nerves and Dode was downhill, and Ray and I retained our fence perch just through the next section of calf roping to see whether Alec's 17½ seconds would hold up. Contestant after contestant rampaged out, flailed some air with a lariat, and came nowhere close to Alec's time.

It had been a rodeo. English Creek had won both the saddle bronc riding and the calf roping.

————— While the rodeo grounds emptied of crowd Ray and I stretched our attendance as long as we could. We watched the wrangling crew unpen the broncs and steers and calves. Listened to as much of the chute society's post mortem as we could stand. Had ourselves another bottle of pop apiece before the beer booth closed. Then I proposed that we might as well take a horse tour of Gros Ventre. Ray thought that sounded dandy enough, so I fetched Mouse and swung into the saddle, and Ray climbed on behind.

We had sightseen most of the town before wandering back past the Medicine Lodge, which by now had its front door propped open with a beer keg, probably so the accumulating fume of cigarette smoke and alcoholic breath wouldn't pop the windows out of the place. As Dode Withrow would have said, it sounded like Hell changing shifts in there. The jabber and laughter and sheer concentration of humanity beyond that saloon doorway of course had Ray and me gazing in as we rode past, and that gaze was what made me abruptly halt Mouse.

Ray didn't ask anything, but I could feel his curiosity as to why we were stalled in the middle of the street. Nor was it anything I could put into words for him. Instead I offered: "How about you riding Mouse down to your place? I'll be along in a little. There's somebody I got to go see."

Ray's look toward the Medicine Lodge wondered In there? but his voice only conveyed "Sure, glad to" and he lifted himself ahead into the saddle after I climbed down. Best of both worlds for him. chance to be an unquestioning friend and get a horse to ride as well.

I went into the blue air of the saloon and stopped by the figure sitting on the second bar stool inside the doorway. The Medicine Lodge was getting itself uncorked for the night ahead. Above the general jabber somebody toward the middle of the bar was relating in a semi-shout: "So I told that sonofabitch he just better watch his step around me or there's gonna be a new face in Hell for breakfast." My interest, though, was entirely here at the seated figure.

The brown hat moved around as he became aware of me.

"'Lo, Stanley," I began, still not knowing where I was going next with any of this.

"Well, there, Jick." The crowfoot lines clutched deeper at the corners of Stanley Meixell's eyes as he focused on me. He didn't look really tanked up, but on the other hand couldn't be called church-sober either. Someplace in between, as he'd been so much of our time together on the mountain. "Haven't seen you," he continued in all pleasantness, "since you started living aboveground."

Good Christ, Stanley had noticed my ducking act that day I was digging the outhouse hole and he rode by. Was my every moment visible to people anymore, like a planet being perpetually studied by one of those California telescopes?

"Yeah, well. How you been?"

"Fine as snoose. And yourself?"

"What I mean, how's your hand doing?"

Stanley looked down at it as if I was the first to ever point out its existence. He still had some doozies of scabs and major bruises there on the injury site, but Stanley didn't seem to regard this as anything but ordinary health. "It ain't bad." He picked up the bottle of beer from the counter before him. "Works good enough for the basics, anyway." And tipped down the last of that particular beer. "Can I buy you a snort?"

"No, no thanks."

"On the wagon, huh? I've clumb on it some times myself. All else considered, though, I'd just as soon be down off."

It occurred to me that since I was in this place anyway it didn't cost any more to be cordial. The stool between Stanley and the doorway

was vacant--an empty mixed-drink glass testified that its occupant had traveled on--so I straddled the seat and amended: "Actually I would take a bottle of orange, though."

Stanley indicated his empty beer bottle to Tom Harry, the nearest of the three bartenders trying to cope with the crowd's liquid wants. "When you get time, professor. And a sunjuice for my nurse, here."

Tom Harry studied me. "He with you?" he asked Stanley. "Closer than kin, him and me," Stanley solemnly vouched to the barman. "We have rode millions of miles together."

"None of it aged him that much," Tom Harry observed, nonetheless setting up a bottle of orange in front of me and a fresh beer for Stanley.

"Stanley," I started again. He was pushing coins out of a little pile, to pay for the latest round. Fishing up a five-cent piece, he held it toward me between his thumb and forefinger. "Know what this is?"

"Sure, a nickel."

"Naw, it's a dollar a Scotchman's been squeezing." The fresh beer got a gulp of attention. For the sake of the conversation I intended I'd like to have known how many predecessors that bottle had had, but of course Tom Harry's style of bartending was to swoop empties out of sight so no such incriminating count could be taken.

I didn't have long to dwell on Stanley's possible intake, for some out-of-town guy wearing a panama hat zipped when he meant to zag on his way toward the door and lurched into the pair of us. Abruptly the

guy was being gripped just above the elbow by Stanley--his right hand evidently had recuperated enough from Bubbles for this, too--and was retargeted toward the door with advice from Stanley: "Step easy, buddy, so you don't get yourself hurt. In this county there's a \$5 fine for drawing blood on a fool."

~~hastily~~
Mr. Panama Hat left our company, and Stanley's handling of the incident reminded me to ask something. "How you getting along with Canada Dan these days?"

"Better," Stanley allowed. "Yeah, just a whole lot better." He paid recognition to his beer bottle again. "Last I heard, Dan was up in Cut Bank. Doing some town herding."

Cut Bank? Town herding? "What, did the Busby boys can him?"
"I got them to give Dan a kind of vacation." Then, in afterthought: "Permanent."

I considered this. Up there in the Two with Stanley those weeks ago, I would not have bet a pin that he was capable of rousing himself to do justice to Canada Dan. Yet he had.

"Stanley--"
"I can tell you got something on your mind, Jick. Might as well unload it."

If I could grapple it into position, that was exactly what I intended. To ask: what was that all about, when we first met you there on the mountain, the skittishness between you and my father? Why, when I ask anyone in this family of mine about Stanley Meixell, is there never a straight answer? Just who are you to us? How did

you cross paths with the McCaskills in the past, and why are you back crisscrossing with us again?

Somebody just beyond Stanley let out a whoop, then started in on a twangy rendition of the song that goes: "I'm a calico dog, I'm a razorback hog, I'm a cowboy on the loose! I can drink towns dry, I can all but fly, I flavor my beans with snoose!" In an instant, Tom Harry was there leaning over the bar and with a pointed finger informing the songster that he didn't care if the guy hooted, howled or for that matter blew smoke rings out his butt, but no singing.

This, Stanley shook his head over. "What's the world coming to when a man can't offer up a tune? They ruin everything these days."

First Dode, now Stanley. It seemed my mission in life this Fourth of July to steer morose beer drinkers away from even deeper gloom. At least I knew which direction I wanted to point Stanley: back into history.

"I been trying to figure something out," I undertook, honestly enough, one more time. "Stanley, why was it you quit rangering on the Two?"

Stanley did some more demolition on his beer, then cast a visiting glance around the walls at Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the stuffed herd, and eventually had to look at me and ask as if verifying:

"Me?"

"Uh huh, you."

"No special reason."

"Run it by me anyway."

"Naw, you'd be bored fast."

"Whyn't you let me judge that."

"You got better use for your ears."

"Jesus, Stanley--"

All this while I was attempting to pry sense out of Stanley, the tail of my eye was trying to tell me something again. Someone had come up behind me. Which wasn't particular news in the Medicine Lodge throng, except this someone evidently had no other site in mind; his presence stayed steadily there, close enough to make me edgy about it, sitting half-braced as I was in case this guy too was going to crash in our direction.

I ~~half~~-turned on the bar stool to cope with the interloper and gazed full into the face, not all that many inches away, of Velma Simms.

I must tell you, it was like opening a kitchen drawer to reach in for a jelly spoon and finding instead the crown jewels of England. For I had never been close enough, head-on, to Velma to learn that her eyes were gray. Gray! Like mine! Possibly our four were the world's only. And to garner further that her lipstick, on the very lips that ruled the rodeo whistle, was the beautiful dark-beyond-red of ripe cherries. And that she was wearing tiny pearl earrings, below the chestnut hair, as if her ears could be unbuttoned to further secrets even there. And that while the male population of northern Montana was focusing on the backside of Velma's renowned slacks, they were missing important announcements up front. Sure, there could be found a few ~~battle~~elines at the corners of her eyes and across her

forehead. But to me right then, they simply seemed to be affidavits of how imaginative a life this lady had led.

Unbelievable but so. Out of all the crowded flesh in the Medicine Lodge just then, solely onto me was fixed this attention of Velma Simms.

She just stood there eyeing me while I gaped, until the point of her attention finally prodded through to me.

"Oh. Oh, hello, Mrs.--uh, Velma. Have I got your seat?" I scrambled off the bar stool as if it was suddenly red-hot.

"Now that you mention it," she replied, and even just saying that, her words were one promissory note after another. Velma floated past me and snuggled onto the stool. A little extra of that snuggle went in Stanley's direction.

"Saw you there at the announcing booth," I reminisced brightly.

"Did you," said she.

I may be a slow starter, but eventually I catch up with the situation. My quick gawp around the saloon confirmed what had been trying to dawn on me. This year's beau in the gabardine suit was nowhere.

"Yeah, well," I began to extricate myself. "I got to be getting."

"Don't feel you need to rush off," said Stanley. As if God's gift to the male race wasn't enthroned right there beside him. "The night's still a pup."

"Uh huh. That's true, but--"

"When you got to go," put in Velma, twirling the empty mixed-drink glass to catch Tom Harry's attention for a refill, "you got to go."

"Right," I affirmed. "And like I say, I, uh, got to go."

What made me add to the total of my footprints already in my mouth, I can't truly account for. Maybe the blockade I had hit again in wanting to ask all the questions of Stanley. In any case, the parting I now blurted out was:

"You two in a dancing mood tonight? What I mean, see you at the dance, will I?"

Stanley simply passed that inquiry to Velma with a look. In theory, Velma then spoke her answer to me, although she didn't unlock her gaze from him at all as she said it: "Stanley and I will have to see whether we have any spare time."

So. One more topic clambering aboard my already bent-over brain. Stanley Meixell and Velma Croake Bogan Sutter Simms.

"Ray? What kind of a summer are you having?"

We were ^{up} ~~in~~ in the double window of his bedroom, each of us propped within the sill. A nice breeze came in on us there, the leaves of the big cottonwood in the Heaneys' front yard seeming to flutter the air our way. Downstairs the radio had just been turned on by Ed Heaney, so it was 7 o'clock. ~~the~~ ^{as} dance wouldn't get underway for an hour or so yet, and as long as Ray and I were going to be window sitting anyway for the next while, I figured I'd broach to him some of all that was on my mind.

"Didn't I tell you? Pilot."

"No, I don't mean that. What it is--do things seem to you kind of

unsettled?"

"How?"

"Well, Christ, I don't know. Just in general. People behaving like they don't know whether to include you in or out of things."

"What kind of things?"

"Things that went on years ago. Say there was an argument or a fight or something, people fell out over it. Why can't they just say, here's what it was about, it's over and done with? Get it out of their systems?"

"That's just grownups. They're not going to let a kid in on anything, until they figure it's too late to do him any good."

"But why is that? What is it that's so goddamn important back there that they have to keep it to themselves?"

"Jick, sometimes--"

"What?"

"Sometimes maybe you think too much."

I thought that over briefly. "What am I supposed to do about that? Christ, Ray, it's not like poking your finger up your nose in public, some kind of habit you can remind yourself not to do. Thinking is thinking. It happens in spite of a person."

"Yeah, but you maybe encourage it more than it needs."

"I what?"

"See, maybe it's like this." Ray's eyes squinched more than ever as he worked on his notion, and the big front teeth nipped his lower lip in concentration. Then: "Maybe, let's say maybe a thought comes

into your head, it's only about what you're going to do next. Saddle up Mouse and take a ride, say. That's all the thought it really needs. Then put on the saddle and climb on. But the mood you're in, Jick, you'd stop first and think some more. 'But if I go for a ride, where am I going to go?' Ray here went into one of his radio voices, the words coming deep and crowding each other fast like Kaltenborn's. "'What is it I'll see when I get there? Did anybody else ever see it? And if anybody did, is it going to look the same to me as it did to them? And old Mouse here, is it going to look the same to Mouse as it does to me?'"

Raymond Edmund Heaney Von Kaltenborn broke off, and it was just Ray again. "On and on that way, Jick. If you think too much, you make it into a whole dictionary of going for a ride. Instead of just going. See what I'm saying?"

"Goddamn it now, Ray, what I mean is more important than goddamn riding a horse."

"It's the same with anything. It'll get to you if you think about it too much, Jick."

"But what I'm telling you is, I don't have any choice. This stuff I'm talking about is on my mind whether or not I want it to be."

Ray took a look at me as if I had some sort of brain fever that might be read in my face. Then in another of his radio voices intoned: "Have you tried Vick's VapoRub? It sooooothes as it woooorks."

There it lay. Even Ray had no more idea than the man in the moon about my perplexity. This house where we sat tucked in blue-painted

sills, above its broad lawned yard and under its high cottonwoods, this almost second home of mine: it ticked to an entirely different time than the summer that was coursing through me. The Heaney family was in place in the world. Ed was going to go on exiting the door of his lumber yard at 6 every evening and picking up his supper fork at 10 after 6 and clicking on that Philco radio at 7, on into eternity. Genevieve would go on keeping this house shining and discovering new sites for doilies. Mary Ellen would grow up and learn nursing at the Columbus Hospital in Great Falls. Ray would grow up and take a year of business college at Missoula and then join his father in the lumber yard. Life under this roof had the rhythm of the begattings in the Bible. The Heaneys were not the McCaskills, not even anywhere similar, and I lacked the language to talk about any of the difference, even to my closest friend.

—

→

"Swing, swing, and swing 'em high!

Allemande left and allemande aye!

Ingo, bingo, six penny high!

Big pig, little pig, root hog or die!"

The dance was underway, but only just, when Ray and I wandered down there to the Sedgwick House to it. Which is to say the hall--
Sedgwick, I suppose old C.E. or maybe even Lila Sedge conceived of it as a ballroom, but everybody else considered it the dance hall--was crammed to an extent that made the Medicine Lodge look downright lonely across the street, but not all that many people were dancing yet. Visiting, gathering an eyeful of circulating, looking everybody else, over, joking, trying to pry out of a neighbor how many bushels an acre his wheat looked like or what his lambs weighed by now, but only one square of actual dancers out there footing it to Jerome Satterlee's calling. Partly, everybody knew it took Jerome a little while (translate that to a few drinks) to get his tonsils limbered up. And then he could call dances until your shoes fell off your feet.

"A little thin out here on the floor, it looks to me like," Jerome was now declaring, preparatory to the next dance. "You know what I mean? Let's get one more square going here, make it look like we mean business. Adam, Sal, step on out here, you can stand around and gab any time. How about all you Busbys, you're half a square yourselves. Good, good. Come on now, one more couple. Nola plays this piano twice as good when we got two squares on the floor." At the upright, Nola Atkins sat planted as if they'd simply picked up the piano bench from

the creek picnic with her on it and set them both down here on the band platform. Beside her, Jeff Swan had his fiddle tucked under his chin and his bow down at his side as if it was a sword he was ready to draw. "One more couple. Do I have to telephone to Valier and ask them to send over four left feet? Whup, here they come now, straight from supper, dancers if I ever saw any. Leona Tracy and Alec McCaskill, step right in there. Alec, you checked your horse and rope at the door, I hope? Now, this is somewhat more like--"

Stepping in from the Sedgwick House dining room, rodeo prize money in his pocket and free supper under his belt and a grin everywhere on his face there was any space for it, Alec looked like a young king coming home from his crowning ceremony.

Even so, to notice this glorious brother of mine you had to deliberately steer your eyes past Leona. Talk about an effort of will.

Leona took the shine in any crowd, even a dance hall full. The day's green blouse was missing--I mean, she had changed out of it. Now she wore a white taffeta dress, full and flouncy at the hem. In square dancing a lot of swirling goes on, and Leona was going to be a swirl worth seeing.

I shot a glance around the dance hall. My parents had missed this grand entry. They'd gone out to J.L. and Nan Hill's ranch, a couple of miles up English Creek, for supper and to change clothes, and were taking their own sweet time about getting back in. And Pete and Marie were driving Toussaint home to the Two Medicine, so they'd be even later arriving. I was the sole family representative, so to speak,

to record the future Mr. and Mrs. Alec McCaskill come swanking in.

"Ready out there? Sure you are. You'll get to liking this so much, before the night is out you'll want to trade your bed for a lantern."

Jerome, when he got to going good, put a lot of motion into his calling, using both arms to direct the traffic of dancers; kind of like a man constantly hanging things here and there in a closet. His gestures even now said he was entering into the spirit of the night. "All right, sonnies and honeys. Nola, Jim, let's make 'em prance. Everybody, here we go--

First four forward. Back to your places.

Second four follow. Shuffle on back.

Now you're getting down to cases,

Swing each other till the floorbeams crack!"

Here in the time I am now it seems hard to credit that this Fourth of July dance was the first I ever went to on my own. That is, was in company with somebody like Ray instead of being along as baggage with my parents. Of course, without fully acknowledging it Ray and I also were well on our way to another tremendous night, the one when each of us would step through this dance hall doorway with a person neither parent nor male alongside. But that lay await yet. My point just now is that where I was in life this particular Fourth night, closing in on fifteen years of age, I had been attending dances since the first few months of that total. And Alec, the all-winning rodeo-shirted sashayer out there on the floor right now, the same before me. Each, a McCaskill baby bundled in blankets and cradled in chairs beside the dance floor.

Imbibe music along with mother's milk, that was the experience of a lot of us of Two country upbringing. Successors to Alec's and my floor-side infancy were here in the Sedgwick House hall this very night: Charity Frew's half-year-old daughter, and another new Helwig baby, and a couple of other fresh ones belonging to farm folks east of town, a swaddled quartet with chairs fenced around them in the farthest corner of the dance hall.

"Salute your ladies, all together.

Ladies, to the gents do the same.

Hit the lumber with your leather.

Balance all, and swing your dame!"

It might be said that the McCaskill dancing history was such that it was the portion of lineage that came purest into Alec and me. Definitely into Alec. out there now with that white taffeta back and forth to him like a wave of the sea, he looked like he could romp on forever. What little I knew of my father's father, the first McCaskill to caper on America's soil instead of Scotland's, included the information that he could dance down the house. Schottisches and Scotch reels in particular, but he also adopted any western square dances. In his twinkling steps, so to speak, followed my mother and father. Dances held in ranch houses, my mother-to-be arriving on horseback with her party dress tied on behind the saddle, my father-to-be performing the Scotch Heaven ritual of scattering a little oatmeal on the floor for better gliding. Schoolhouse dances. In the face of the Depression even hard times dances, the women costumed in gunnysack dresses and the men

in tattered work clothes. And now Alec the latest McCaskill dancer, and me beginning to realize I was on my way.

"Bunch the ladies, there in the middle.

Circle, you gents, and dosie doe.

Pay attention to old Jeff's fiddle.

Swing her around and away you go."

It comes to me that around this exact same piece of time I am telling about, maybe even that same year, I first read what I always think of in this dancing respect. It was when the Irish poet Yeats died, and the At Random page of the Gleaner had a story on his life. From his picture the man looked like an uppity sonofagun, wearing those pinchnose eyeglasses, but I read the piece just to be reading something. And gained for all time the lines that lay at the end of that story:

"Oh hands clapped to music, oh brightening glance.

How can we tell the dancer from the dance?"

Which ever since has seemed to me so fascinating, so right, I almost wish I had never come across it. For those words make one of those questions that slip into your mind every time you meet up with the circumstances they suggest. It was so then, even as Ray nudged me to point out the Busby brothers going through a fancy twirl with each other instead of with their wives and I joined Ray and everybody else in laughing, and it is so now. Within all else that Irishman's question, a kind of beautiful haunting. But I suppose that is what poets, and for that matter dances and dancers, are for.

"Gents to the center, ladies round them.

Form a circle, balance all.

Whirl your girls to where you found them.

Promenade all, around the hall!"

This concluding promenade brought Alec and Leona over toward where Ray and I were onlooking, and spying us they trooped right up. Lord of mercy. Leona in the flush of the pleasure of dancing was nearly more than the eyes could stand. I know Ray shifted a little nervously beside me, and maybe I did too.

"Mister Jick again," she greeted me. At least it wasn't Hello, she bestowed on Ray, John Angus. "And Raymond Edmund Heaney," which really did set Ray to shifting around.

So high in flight was Alec tonight, though, that nobody else had to expend much effort. A lank of his rich red hair was down across his forehead from the dancing, and the touch of muss just made him look handsomer. [#] "Here's a pair of wall guards," he observed of Ray and me while he grinned mightily. "You guys better think about getting yourselves one of these things," giving Leona a waist squeeze.

Yeah, sure, right. As if Leonas were as plenty as blackberries. (I have wondered often. If Marcella Withrow had been on hand that night instead of at the Conrad hospital with her father, would Ray have nerved himself up and squired her out onto the floor?) But if you can't carry on conversation with your own brother, who can you? So to keep mouth matters in motion, I asked: "How was it?"

Alec peered at me and he let up on that Leona squeezing. "How

was what?"

"Supper. The supper you won for handcuffing that poor little calf."

"Dandy," he reported, "just dandy." And now Leona awarded him a squeeze, in confirmation.

"What'd you have, veal?" Ray put in, which I thought was pretty good. But Alec and Leona were so busy handling each other's waists they didn't catch it, and Alec said, "Naw, steaks. Dancing fuel." He looked down at his armful of Leona. "Speaking of which--"

"TIMMBERRR!"

I was not the only one whose ears almost dropped off in surprise. That cry was a famous one at any dance such as this. It dated back to Prohibition days, and what it signalled back then, whenever somebody stuck his head ⁱⁿ through the dance hall doorway and cut loose the call, was the availability of Mason jar moonshine for anybody who cared to step outside for a sip.

So my surprise was double. That the cry resounded through the hall this night and that the timber crier there in the doorway, when I spun around to see, proved to be my father, with my mother on his arm.

He wore his brown pinstripe suit coat, a white shirt and his newest Levis. She was in her blue cornflower frock with the slight V neckline; it was pretty tame by today's standards, but did display enough of throat and breastbone to draw second glances. Togged out that way, Varick and Lisabeth McCaskill made a prime pair, as rangers and wives often did.

Calls and claps greeted my father's solo.

"You'd be the one to know, Mac!"

"Hoot mon, Scotch Heaven has come to town!"

"Beth, tell us fair and square: has he been up in the Two practicing that?"

Even Alec wagged his head in--admiration? consternation? both and more?—before declaiming to Leona, "There's dancing to be done. Let's get at it before the rowdy element cuts loose with something more."

Ray and I sifted over to my parents' side of the hall. My father was joshing Fritz Hahn that if Dode could still ride a bronc like that, it was Fritz's turn next Fourth to uphold the South Fork reputation. Greta and my mother were trading laughter over something, too. Didn't I tell you a dance is the McCaskill version of bliss?

"Here they are, the future of the race," my father greeted Ray and me. "Ray, how're you summering?"

"Real good," Ray responded, along with his parenthetical grin.
"Quite a rodeo, wasn't it."

"Quite a one," my father agreed, with a little shake of his head which I knew had to do with the outcome of the calf roping. But at once he was launched back into more visiting with Fritz and Ray, and I just parked myself and inventoried him and my mother. It was plain my father had timbered a couple of drinks--his left eyelid was down a little, as if listening to a nightlong joke--but no serious amount. My mother, though. My mother too looked bright as a butterfly, and as she and my father traded gab with the Hahns and other people who happened by to say good words about her Ben English speech or his timber whoop,

~~by~~, both her and him unable to keep from glancing at the back-and-forth of the dancers more than at their conversationalists, a suspicion seeded in me. Maybe, more than maybe, my mother had a drink or two in her, too.

"Where you guys been?" I voiced when I got the chance.

And received what I deserved. "Places," stated my mother, then laughed.

Well, I'd had one escape this day. Getting in and out of the Medicine Lodge without coinciding with my own parents there.

Out on the floor, the swirl was dissolving as it does after the call and music have hit their climax, and Jerome was enlisting everybody within earshot for the next variety of allemande and dosie doe. "Now I can't call dances to an empty floor, can I? Let's up the ante here. Four squares this time, let's make it. Plenty of territory, we don't even have to push out the walls yet--"

"The man needs our help," my father suggested to my mother and the Hahns, and off they all went, to take up places in the fourth square of dancers forming up.

The dance wove the night to a pattern all its own, as dances do. I remember the standard happenings. Supper hour was announced for midnight, both the Sedgwick House dining room and the Lunchery were going to close at one a.m. Ray and I had agreed that supper hour--or rather, an invitation to oyster stew at the Lunchery, as my parents were certain to provide--would be our personal curfew. Jerome at one point sang out "Next one is ladies' choice!" and it was interesting to

see some of the selections they made, Alice Van Bebber snagging the lawyer Eli Kinder and immediately beginning to talk him dizzy, pretty Arleta Busby putting out her hand to that big pile of guff Ed Van Bebber, of all damn people. My parents too made South Fork pairings, my mother going over to Fritz Hahn, Greta Hahn coupling onto my father's arm. Then after one particularly rousing floor session, Jerome announced that if anyone cared to pass a hat he and the musicians could manage to look the other way, and collection was taken to pay him and Nola and Jeff.⁴ As I say, all this was standard enough, and mingled with it were some particularities of this night. The arrival of Good Help and Florene Hebner, magically a minute or so after the hat had been passed. Florene still was a presentable looking woman, despite a dress that had been washed to half its original color. Good Help's notion of dressing up was to top off his overalls with a flat cap. My mother once commented, "A poor-boy cap and less under it." The departure of the grocery store family, the Helwigs, with Luther Helwig wobbling grievously under the load of booze he had been taking on and his wife Erna beside him with the bawling baby plucked from the far end chair corral. In such a case you always have to wonder: was a strategic motherly pinch delivered to that baby? My inspiration for Ray and me to kill off the last of my fifty cent stake with a bottle of pop apiece. "How about stepping across for something wet?" was the way I proposed it to Ray. He took on a worried look and began, "I don't know that my folks want me going in that--" "Christ, not the Medicine Lodge," I relieved him, "I meant the Lunchery." And through

it all, dance after dance after dance, my tall redheaded father and my white-throated mother in the musical swim at one end of the hall, my tall redheaded brother and Leona starring at the other end.

It was in fact when Ray and I returned from our pop stop that we found a lull in the dancing and made our way over to my parents again, to be as convenient as possible for an oyster stew invite.

"I suppose you two could eat if you had to?" my father at once settled that issue, while my mother drew deep breaths and cast a look around the hallfull.

"Having fun?" I asked her, just to be asking something, while my father was joshing Ray about being girl-less on such a night.

"A ton," she confirmed.

Just then Jerome Satterlee appeared in our midst, startling us all a little to see him up close instead of on the platform. "What, did you come down for air, Jerome?" my father kidded.

"Now don't give an old man a hard time," responded Jerome. "Call this next one, how about, Mac. Then we can turn 'em loose for supper. Myself, I got to go see a man about a dog."

My father was not at all a square dance caller of Jerome's breadth. But he was known to be good at--well, I will have to call it a sort of Scotch cadence, a beat of the kind that a bagpipe and drum band puts out. Certainly you danced smoother to Jerome's calling, but my father's could bring out stamping and clapping and other general exuberation. I think it is not too much to say that, with my eyes closed and ears stuffed, I could have stood there in the Sedgwick

House and told you whether it was Jerome or my father calling the dance, just by the feel of how feet were thumping the hall floor.

To make sure their smooth terms could stand his absence, my father looked the question at my mother, and she told him by a nod that he ought to go do the call. She even added, "Why don't you do the Dude and Belle? This time of night, everybody can stand some perking up."

He climbed onto the band platform. "'Lo, Nola, Jeff. This isn't any idea of mine, understand."

"Been saving you the best strings of this fiddle, Mac," Jeff answered. "When you're ready."

Nola nodded, echoed: "When you're ready."

"All right, then. Try make me look like I know what I'm doing." My father tipped his left shoulder down, pumped a rhythm with his heel a number of times to get a feel of the platform. Then made a loud hollow clap with his hands which brought everybody's attention, and called out over the hall: "Jerome is taking a minute to recuperate. He said he hates to turn things over to anybody with a Scotch notion of music, but saw no choice. So you're in for it."

"What one we gonna do, Mac, the Two Medicine two-step?" some wit yelled out.

"No sir. I've got orders to send you to supper hour in style. Time to do the Dude and Belle. And let's really do it, six squares' worth." My father was thinking big. Six squares of dancers in this hall would swash from wall to wall and end to end, and onlookers already were

moving themselves into the doorway or alongside the band platform to grant space. "All right. You all know how it starts. Join hands and circle left--"

Even yet I am surprised that I propelled myself into doing it. I stepped away from Ray, soldiered myself in front of my mother, and said: ~~#~~ "Mrs. McCaskill, I don't talk through my nose as pretty as the guy you usually gallivant around with. But suppose I could have this dance with you anyway?"

Her face underwent that rinse of surprise that my father sometimes showed about her. She cast a look toward the top of my head as if just realizing my height. Then came her sidelong smile, and her announcement: ~~#~~ "I never could resist you McCaskill galoots."

Arm in arm, my mother and I took a place in the nearest square. People were marshalling everywhere in the hall, it looked like a major parade forming up. Another thunderclap from my father's hands, Nola and Jim opened up with the music, and my father chanted us into action.

"First gent, swing the lady so fair.

Now the one right over there.

Now the one with the sorrel hair.

Now the belle of the ballroom.

Swirl and twirl. And promenade all.

Second gent, swing the lady first-rate--"

Besides my mother and me, our square was Bob and Arleta Busby, and ~~Musgrevies~~ the ~~Musgroves~~ who ran the drugstore, and luck of luck, Pete and Marie,

back from returning Toussaint to the Two Medicine and dancing hard the past hour or so to make up for time lost. All of them but me probably had done the Dude and Belle 500 times in their lives, but it's a basic enough dance that I knew the ropes. You begin with everybody joining hands--my mother's firm feel at the end of one of my arms, Arleta's small cool hand at my other extreme--and circling left, a wheel of eight of us spinning to the music. Now to my father's call of "you've done the track, now circle back" the round chain of us goes into reverse, prancing back to where we started. Swing your partner, my mother's cornflower frock a blue whirlwind around the pair of us. Now the lady on the left, which in my instance meant hooking arms with Arleta, another first in my life. Now return to partner, all couples do some sashaying right and left, and the "gent" of this round steps forth and begins swinging the ladies in turn until he's back to his own partner. And with all gusto, swings her as the Belle of the Ballroom.

"Third gent, swing the lady in blue--"

What I would give to have seen all this through my father's eyes. Presiding up there on the platform, pumping rhythm with his heel and feeling it multiplied back to him by the 48 feet traveling the dance floor. Probably if you climbed the helmet spike of the Sedgwick House, the rhythm of those six squares of dancers would have come quivering up to you like spasms through a tuning fork. Figure within figure within figure, from my father's outlook over us, the kaleidoscope of six simultaneous dance patterns and inside each the hinged couple

of the instant and comprising those couples friends, neighbors, sons, wife with flashing throat. Oh hands clapped to music, hands of my McCaskill father, and oh brightening glance, glance of my McCaskill mother, and no, in that hall aswim in motion and music, dancer could never be told from dance.

"Fourth gent, swing the lady so sweet--"

The fourth gent was me. I stepped to the center of our square, again made the fit of arms with Arleta Busby, and swung her.

"Now the one with dainty feet--"

~~Musgrevae,~~
Grace ~~Musgrove~~, plump as a partridge, didn't exactly fit the prescription, but again I managed, sending her puffing out of our fast swirl.

"Now the one who looks so neat--"

Marie glided forth, solemnly winked at me, and spun about me light as a ghost.

"Now the Belle of the Ballroom."

The blue beauty, my mother. "Swirl and twirl." Didn't we though. "Now promenade all." Around we went, all the couples, and now it was the women's turn to court their Dudes.

First lady, swing the gent who's got sore toes.

Now the one with the great big nose.

Now the one who wears store clothes.

Now the dude of the ballroom.

X —

Second lady, swing the gent in size thirteens.

Now the one that ate the beans.

Now the one in brand new jeans.

Now the dude of the ballroom.

Third lady, swing the gent with the lantern jaw.

Now the one from Arkansas.

Now the one that yells, "Ah, hah!"

Now the dude of the ballroom.

So it went. In succession I was the one in store clothes, the one full of beans, and the lantern-jawed one--thankful there, not to be the one who yells "Ah hah!" which Pete performed for our square with a dandy of a whoop.

"Fourth lady, swing the gent whose nose is blue--"

My mother and sallow Hugh Musgrave.

"Now the one that spilled the glue--"

Reese reflections dancing with each other, my mother and Pete.

"Now the one who's stuck on you--"

Her and Bob Busby, two of the very best dancers in the whole hall.

"Now the Dude of the Ballroom."

She came for me, eyes on mine. I was the proxy of all that had begun at another dance, at the Noon Creek schoolhouse twenty years before. My father's voice: "Swirl him and twirl him." My moment of Dudehood was an almighty whirl, as if my mother had been getting up the

momentum all night.

"All join hands and circle to the left,
Before the fiddler starts to swear.
Dudes and Belles, you've done your best.
Now promenade, to you know where."

"Didn't know you were a lightfoot," Ray greeted me at the edge of the throng heading through the doorway to supper hour.

"Me neither," I responded, blowing a little. My mother was with Pete and Marie right behind me, we all would have to wait for my father to make his way from the band platform. "Let's let them catch up with us outside, I can use some air."

Ray and I squirmed along between the crowd and the lobby wall, weaseling our way until we popped out the front entry of the Sedgwick House.

I was about to say here that the next historic event of this Fourth of July, Gros Ventre category, was underway as the two of us emerged into the night, well ahead of my parents and the Reeses. But given that midnight had already happened, I'd better call this the first occurrence of July 5.

The person most immediately obvious of course was Leona, white and ~~silver~~-gold in the frame of light cast onto the street by the Sedgwick House's big lobby window. And then Arlee Zane, also there on that raft of light; Arlee, ignorance shining from every pore.

Beyond them, a bigger two with the reflected light cutting a line

across their chests; face to face in the dimness above that, as if they were carrying on the nicest of private chats. Except that the beamframe build of one and the chokecherry shirt of the other showed them to be Earl Zane and Alec and therefore they were not chatting.

"Surprised to see you without a skim milk calf on the end of a string," Earl was offering up as Ray and I sidled over beside Leona and Arlee so as not to miss anything. Inspiring Arlee to laugh big as if Earl's remark deserved it.

"What, are you out here in the night looking for that cinnamon pony?" I give Alec credit for the easy way he said this, tossing it out as a joke. "He went thataway, Earl."

Earl proved not to be in the market for humor just now, however.

"I suppose you could have forked him any better?" You could all but hear the thick gears move in Earl's head to produce the next remark. "You likely had a lot of riding practice recently."

"Earl, you lardbrain," this drew from Leona.

But Alec chose to cash Earl's remark at face value. "Some of us do get paid to stay on horses instead of bailing off of them. Come on, Leona, let's go get us some supper before the dancing starts again."

Earl now had another brain movement. "Surprised you can dance at all these days, what with marriage on your mind." He leaned a little toward Alec to deliver the final part: "Tell me this, McCaskill. Has it ever climbed out the top of your pants yet?"

That one I figured was going to be bingo. After all, anybody who has grown up in Montana has seen Scotch lawsuits get underway for a

lot less commentary than that. At dances the situation was common enough almost to be a regular feature. One guy with a few too many drinks in him calls some other guy a name none too fond, and that party responds with a fist. Of course the commotion was generally harsher than the combat, but black eyes and bent noses could result.

"Earl, you jugheaded--" Leona was responding, but to my considerable disappointment Alec interrupted her by simply telling Earl, "Stash it, sparrowhead. Come on, Leona, we got business elsewhere."

"I bet you got business all right," Earl adventured on. "Leona business. Snatch a kiss, kiss a snatch, all the same to you, McCaskill, ain't it?"

I can't truly say I saw it happen. Not in any way of following a sequence: this and then this and then this. No, the event simply arrived into my mind, complete, intact, engraved before its realization could make itself felt. Versions of anything of this sort are naturally suspect, of course. Like that time Dempsey fought Gibbons up at Shelby for the heavyweight championship. Forty thousand people were there, and afterward about a quarter million could provide you an eyewitness account. But I will relate just as much of this Earl and Alec episode as I can vouch for. One instant Earl was standing there, admiring the manufacture of his last comment, and then in the next instant was bent in half, giving a nasty tossing-up noise, auheughhh, that made my own stomach turn over.

What can have inspired Alec, given that the time-honored McCaskill procedure after loss of temper was to resort to a roundhouse right, to

deliver Earl that short straight jab to the solar plexus?

How much that economical punch of Alec's yielded. Every bit of this I can see as if it were happening over again right now. Earl now in full light, doubled down as he was, Alec stepping around him to collect Leona, and the supper crowd in its long file out of the Sedgwick House stopping and gawking.

"GodDAMN!" exploded between Ray and me, Arlee pushing through and combining his oath with the start of a ~~swing~~^{haymaker} targeted on Alec's passing jaw.

Targeted but undelivered. On the far side of Arlee's girth from me Ray reached up, almost casually it seemed, and latched onto Arlee's wrist. The intended swing went nowhere after that, Ray hanging onto the would-be swingster as if he'd just caught him with that hand in the cookie jar, and by the time Arlee squared around and managed to begin to tussle in earnest with Ray--thank heaven for the clopping quality of the Zane brain--I had awarded Arlee a bit of a shove to worry him from my side.

Where ~~would~~
~~How far the ruckus could~~ have progressed beyond that, I have ever been curious about. In hindsight, that is. For if Arlee had managed to shake out of Ray's grip, he was elephant enough to provide us both some pounding.^H But by now my father was on hand, and Pete and two or three other men soldiered out of the crowd to help sort us into order, and somebody was fetching Tollie Zane out of the Medicine Lodge on Earl's behalf.

"Jick, that's enough," my father instructed. "Turn him loose, Ray. It's over."

This too I am clear about. Those sentences to Ray and me were the full sum of what was said by any McCaskill here in this aftermath. What traveled to Alec from my father was a stare, a studying one there in the frame of hotel light as if my father was trying to be sure this was the person he thought it was.

And got back from Alec one of the identical calibre.

Then Leona was in the grasp of my brother, and my mother stepped out alongside my father, and each couple turned and went.

"Ray?"

"What?"

We were side by side in bed, in the dark of his room. Outside the open twin windows, a breeze could be heard teasing its way through the leaves of the giant cottonwood.

"You helped a lot, there at the dance."

"That's okay."

"You'll want to watch out Arlee doesn't try get it back on you."

"Yeah."

There was silence then, and the dark, until Ray startled me with something between a giggle and a laugh. What the hell now? I couldn't see what he was doing, but as soon as words started issuing from him, I knew. He was pinching his nose closed.

"He wants to watch out around me," came droning out in

exact imitation of Tollie's rodeo announcing, "or I'll cut his —# heart out and drink his blood."

That got me into the act. With a good grasp on my nose, I proposed in the same tinny tone:⁴ "Yank off his arm and make him —# shake hands with it."

Ray giggled and offered:⁴ "Grab him by the epiglommis —# until his eyes pooch out."

"Sharpen the point on his head," I paused for my own giggles, "and pound him in like a post."

"Kick enough crap out of him to daub a —# log barn," Ray envisioned. "Goddamn booger eater him —# anyhow."

With each atrocity on Arlee our laughing multiplied, until the bed was shaking and we tried to tone things down before Ray's folks woke up and wondered just what was going on.⁴ But every time we got ourselves nearly under control, one or the other of us erupted again--"thump old Arlee as far into Hell"--on and on, laughing anew, snorting it out in spite of ourselves--"as a bird can fly in a —# lifetime"--sides shaking and throats rollicking until we were almost sick, and then of course we had to laugh at the ridiculousness of that.

Nor, when Ray finally did play out and conked off to sleep, did that fever of humor entirely leave me. I would doze for a while and then be aware I was grinning open-eyed into the darkness about one or another moment of that immense day, that never-can-be-forgotten Fourth.

Here I rest, world, as happy as if I had good sense and the patent
on remembrance. My mother on the park stump giving her Ben English
speech and Dode at the top of that leap by Coffee Nerves and my
father calling out the Dude and Belle to the dancing crowd and my
brother one-punching Earl Zane and Ray pitching in on Arlee and, you
bet, Stanley Meixell collecting Velma Simms. Scene by scene they
fell into place in me, smooth as kidskin and exact as chapter and
verse, every one a perfect piece of that day and now of the night.

A set of hours worth the price of the rest of the life, those.
To wake up chuckling, give the dark a great Chessy cat grin, and drop
off until my own laughter woke me again.