

LADY) CT

← Sitting up in a railroad coach seat for a day, a night,
and another day, Bessie Ringer is jostled westward in the
springtime of 1914. The Mississippi River lay several hundreds
of miles behind, vaulted by a slim bridge which had made
her flick scared glances down to the gliding water all the
long way over. Minnesota had been crossed, and the Dakotas,
where the homesteads of an earlier generation of journeyers
nested in fat patches of turned earth. Rivers new and wild
to her--the Little Missouri, the Powder, the Yellowstone--
came looping widely beneath the roadbed, and now when the

go 40

train made its wheezy stops in the middle of nowhere, the men who clomped aboard wore hats with swooping curled brims, and their women, she could not help but notice, looked leathered from the sun and wind. Where they stepped from, the arc ^O of prairie flung straight and empty to the horizon, nothing could be imagined which might rule their lives except that sun, that wind. By the time, then, that her train was pushing out of the townless distances of eastern Montana, Bessie had come an entire world away from the pinched midwestern background she had been born into twenty years before. Come, what's more, for forever and with no regret ever said aloud. Her people back there were German stock, abrupt and gloomy as their family name--Glun. In the memories which stretched along the rails to the farmstead life in central Wisconsin's cut-over pine country, that name mocked itself into queer rhyme. It had happened because school dismayed Bessie, and in her unhappiness one day was caught whispering, to ^{Picking up his pointer to threaten her,} the girl seated beside her. ^{then:} The teacher thundered it then. Picking up his pointer to threaten her, he brayed.

Glun, Glun, don't have so much fun, or you'll have a swat of Jack Hickory's son! At home, life was no less startling and strict under her burly mustached father: I always remember my pa so stern. I was always scared of him. Now train tracks, hour upon hour, were leaving always to the past, to the land falling away behind the West.

On Bessie's lap a daughter dozes in the train's cradling motion—^Hmy mother, Berneta, waking now and again to see the land flying and flying past her six-month-old eyes. She is plump and pretty, and with her full dark hair has begun to look like a small jolly version of a much older girl. A version, that would be, of Bessie herself not long before. On the wall by me is a studio portrait of Bessie when she had reached the age of sixteen or so, posed with the two Krebs sisters who were her best of friends. Out the oval window of photo, the sisters stare down the camera and any lookers beyond it, mouths straight as Bible lines. You would not tease with this pair, not dare their wrath without an open door behind you. They are iron and granite side by side, and are going to leave some bruises on the world. Beside them, Bessie's look is all the softer, the eyes more open and asking, her face wondering at life instead of taking it on chin ^Ffirst. She must have had much to wonder at, raised as such an apron-stringed girl, snuggled all the more firmly into the family by the one lapse in her father's strictness. John Glun had brooded against a way of schooling which even for an instant could taunt a daughter of his, and after her third year, Bessie was not made to attend again. She spent the rest of her growing years entirely at home. That upbringing

of choring for her mother and edging past her father's thunder[?] head temper left her unsure of herself, but guessing that the world must have something else to offer. So that's the how of it, she would say whenever some new turn of life had shown itself, and she seemed about to say it there to the camera eye. It is, all in all, an offering glance for the world, of which she might yet have had a strong gleam four years later as she held her prized daughter and watched the western Montana mountains begin to stand high ahead of the train.

Alongside Bessie, the train window shadowing his face close in beside hers, sits Thomas Abraham Ringer. Housepainter, handyman, wiry Irishman with a hatchet nose and a chin like an axe--last and least, husband. All three Glun children flew as quickly as they could from that narrow home, but Bessie went with one last disfavor from her father. He singled out for her this seldom-do-well Tom Ringer and bent her, at the age of 18, into marrying the man. Gee gosh, a girl like I was who didn't know her own mind--I done it because my pa said it was my way to get by in the world. Tom was twice her age, nearly as old as her father himself, and the one thing he had done exactly right in all his life until ~~them~~ had been not to take on a wife and a family. In fair charity--one^m half of those who speak of Tom Ringer

do give a rough affectionate forgiveness, while the other half call him something like a sour-minded reprobate--the knack of caring unswervingly for anyone beyond himself did not seem to be in this man. Alone, fussing a floorboard into place or stroking a paintbrush peevishly along a ceiling, that sharp face could simply prod all into tidiness and spear away whatever of life he did not want to see or hear. But being married was nothing like being alone, and there came the consequence which Bessie declared in the shortest and angriest of her verdicts on this husband. Tom drank.

It made a dubious marriage worse. The temper tamped inside Tom which he seemed to need to propel himself through life would turn ugly when whiskey touched it. Darn his hide. He'd be going along perfectly fine, then there'd be a big blow-up. This, too: even when his wages didn't trickle away in saloons, they shrank and vanished some other way. All their married life, Tom and Bessie Ringer would live close to predicament. The one feat of finance they ever managed was this train trip, uprooting themselves half a continent westward to where a relative had homesteaded--a blind fingers-crossed jump to the strange high country of sage and silence.

At the town of Three Forks, they left the train. There the broad tilts of this new country suddenly tumbled three idling rivers into one another to greateren into the headwaters of the Missouri, and in every direction around, ranges of

mountains hazed to a thin blue, as if behind smoke. Mountains
and mountains and mountains, Bessie would remember. ~~H~~ The promise of a housepainter's job awaited Tom in this first town of the new life. But that job, or any other, wasn't to be had. What did present itself was the rumor of work at a small logging camp eastward in the Crazy Mountains.
See, Tom had been in the woods some back in Wisconsin. ~~So~~ ^{So} We went off up there near Porcupine Creek in the Crazies, and Tom cut in the timber until winter come. ~~H~~ Then, into the teeth of the mountain weather, Tom and Bessie and their tiny daughter climbed higher into the Crazies, to spend the winter cutting small trees for fence posts. Some thousands of feet higher than they had ever been in their Wisconsin lives, they set up a peaked photographer's tent in the dark pitch of forest, banked the outside walls with snow for warmth, fired up a long box stove which would be kept blazing all winter long, and whacked down timber from first light to last. No, it wasn't so bad of a winter. We got by good,
there was worlds of firewood.

Through that timberland winter, isolated and snowbound, Bessie and Tom felled and unlimbed trees, then snaked the wood to a snow-packed skidway. She would clamber down the slope as Tom hitched their workhorse to the first pile of logs and looped the reins to the harness. The horse would plod down to her, the logs sledding long soft troughs behind ~~Bessie~~ in the snow. When she unhitched the load, the horse would

turn ~~and head~~ itself back up the mountain for the next load of work. That pattern of trudge was much like what lay ahead for Bessie herself, for if I am to read any beginnings at all in these lives which twine behind my own, my grandmother's knack for ploughing head-down through all hardship surely begins here at the very first of these lean Montana years.

Then the kids' dad ~~h~~-she banished Tom to that in later times, his name never crossing her tongue if she could help it ~~h~~-the kids' dad got us on at Moss Agate. The rancher ran a herd of cull milk cows there, and we milked all those cows and put up the hay on the place. We lived there, oh, a lot of years.

Moss Agate was a small ranch at the southern reach of the Smith River valley, on an empty flat furred with sage and a few hackles of brush along the South Fork of the river, and walled in at every point of the horizon by buttes and ~~mountains~~ ^{or foothills}. The single vivid thing about the place lay in its name. The rock called moss agate is a daydreamer's stone, a smokey hardness with its trapped black shadow of fossil inside like a tree dancing to the wind or a sailing ship defying fog or whatever else you ~~could~~ imagine from it. Later, after my father had begun to court my mother, someone who saw him saddling for his weekly ride to Moss Agate asked if he was finding any prize ~~specimens~~ ^{agates} in the hills there. One, he grinned. She's about five feet tall,

with black hair and blue eyes.

On that ranch where dreams were trapped in rock, Bessie and Tom milked cows year after year, toiled to keep the few sun-brown~~ed~~ ranch buildings from yawning into collapse, and plodded out their marriage. There was a new child now every few years--three boys in a row. Each summer, Bessie held the latest baby in her lap as she drove a team of horses hitched to the sulky-seated hay rake. I wore bib overalls then in haying time. But silly thing, I'd run and put a dress on if I seen anybody coming. Throughout the seasons, she rode horseback after strayed calves, fed hogs, raised chickens, gardened and canned, burned out the sage ticks which pincer~~ed~~ onto the children, mucked out the tidal flow of manure-and-urine after the eternal cows. And all of it in a growing simmer against Tom.

I can watch her, in those Moss Agate years, being made over from almost all that she had been before: toughening, leathering, the salt of sweat going into her mind and heart. Even her body now defied the harsh life; the single luxury of that milking herd was dairy produce, and as her cooking feasted on the unending butter and cream, she broadened and squared. ~~¶~~ But it was her look to the world that ~~had~~ changed most, and in the few photos from about her thirtieth year, her tenth in Montana, a newcomer now gazes out from where the young bride had been--a flinchless newcomer who has firmed

into what she will be all the rest of her life.

Her face now was strongest, almost mighty, at its center--
 the careful clasp of a mouth which seemed always *ready to*
 purse with no relenting, and the thick nose which has monumentalized
 itself all through the family line to her great-grandchildren.
gal. H2
 A brief ball of chin, a fine square span of forehead beneath
 neatly waved hair already gone gray and on its way to white.
 Blue eyes, paler and more flat in their declaring than, say,
 my father's mulling look.

She stood to the height my mother does in photograph--
 scant inches over five feet--but where my mother seemed a wand
 of a woman, this grandmother was an oak stump. Chunky as
 she had grown--at times weighing more than 150 pounds, and
 long since locked into an everlasting lost battle against
 her own pastries, snacks and second helpings--she somehow
 seemed stout without being overgirthed; steady without being
 stolid. *q* In this odd strong way, then, her very stockiness ~~someday~~
 made her appear taller than she really was, and a neighbor's
 memory at last explained: The first time I remember seeing
Bessie Ringer was at the Caukins schoolhouse, at a dance
out there, and I just admired her so, she always carried
herself so straight and dignified.

Of course: so straight, and the dignity of that. For
 in both senses of the saying, Bessie Ringer was stiff-backed--
 erect pride and the unbending notions to go with it. In a

sense, the central ideas in her were lodged in place like the logs of a stockade ~~upright~~, sharply pointed, and as durable as they were wooden.

The first of her unattackable beliefs was family. This had started early, when my mother from her first breaths was seen to be an asthma victim and Bessie began to raise her with a special blend of love and fuss. It went on as each of her three boys arrived—musical Paul and mischievous William and adept Wallace—and were given whatever sacrifices she could that they would be able to go through the schooling she had not, make it out into life whole and able. We had to get by sometimes on a lick and a promise, but there's others didn't do as good as we managed, too. That the family thinned off markedly at Tom's end of the table simply redoubled her affections elsewhere. ~~it was as if his portion of her commitment~~ had to be put to use somehow, and into the children it went.

Next came work. Bessie was uncomfortable with much depth of thinking—her slim school years and that tethered girlhood had robbed her mind there, and she knew it with regret—but doing came to her with lovely ease. She worked, ^M that is to say, as some people sing ~~for the pleasure of it,~~ the habit of it, the sense that life was asking it specially of her. It gives me the willies, she would recite, to be sittin' just doin' nothin'. In her own retelling and all told about her, I can find her at almost every relentless ranch task of those years: stacking hay, teamstering horses

in dead winter, pulling calves from breech births, stringing barbed wire onto fencelines, threshing grain amid the itching storm of chaff, axing ice from the cattle's watering-holes. She was a worker, comes the valley's echo of her again and again. So much a worker, it may be, that items such as a wrong husband fell away behind the pace of task and chore.

Family, work--and the clinch across both of them, steadfastness. Life was to be lived out as it came. If it came hard, you bowed your neck a bit more and endured. So without thinking it through--not entirely knowing how to, in so many words--she had set her mind not to be afraid of that spare weather-whipped land, that wan ranch life. [¶] In this total rind of determination, Bessie was not like many of the valley women, or most of the men either. Down through the valley's history, such settlers had expected something of their work, and sooner or later uprooted themselves if it didn't come. Bessie only chores on. In her unschooled way, she was greatly more fearless about wresting a fresh life in Montana than my father's family had been. Those newcoming homesteaders ~~into~~ the Basin had allied themselves, formed a kind of trestle of relatives and fellow Scots. Compared with them, Bessie went along as alone and unaided as a tumbleweed. [¶] Indeed, her stories of life at Moss Agate and ~~any~~ number of other hard-scrabble spots in the valley most often began with the aloneness: The one time, I was alone by myself on the place--the kids'

dad was off again somewhere—and it rained and it rained until the creek started to come up around the cattle in the corral. It kept coming and kept coming until I had to saddle our old roany horse and ride through it to let those cows out. The water was up over the stirrups and of course that old roany made it his habit to stop dead whenever you tried to hurry him. But I got him through the water and tied one end of the rope to the pole gate and the other end to the saddle horn, and the cows could follow me out then. A person can do a lot of things like that when you're in a corner.

But a corner of another sort was where Tom loomed in his private furies, and if steadfastness held her into the marriage and the ranch life, it did not overcome the pains of them. Gone to town for groceries, Tom might not return for days. When he did come back from such sprees, he arrived rasping at the way Bessie had done the ranch chores or was raising the children. Gosh sakes, times you wouldn't know he was a man you'd ever met. Ornery old thing him, anyhow. She began to fight back at him with silence, and she could be as grimly silent as oblivion.

Then the rancher who owned Moss Agate died, and passed from the valley with a storied funeral where the reek of whiskey oozed through the flower smells, and the ~~drunken~~^{tipsy} pallbearers nearly dropped the coffin at the graveside. Whiskey had poisoned Bessie's life at Moss Agate, and now

whiskey closed it. She and Tom and the four children moved to another ranch. That job lasted no time--it was in the deep of the Depression now--and soon they were in the tiny rail-line town of Ringling, in a ragtag house which at least put shelter atop their heads. Sometime then, Tom left Bessie alone again with the teetery household, and at last she broke the marriage.

She never bothered with a divorce. Going to law for something which she had ended in her own mind did not seem needed. But Tom--rather, the kids' dad--had passed from her as surely as if he had been tumbled into the grave with the whiskeyfied rancher.

That life done, Bessie was soon adrift. There was no income, and the last of the children were out of school and heading off on their own. In the Shields River Valley, near the Crazy Mountains where she had started in Montana twenty-five years before, she found a job as cook for an elderly farmer named Magnusson. He was prosperous but lonely, a widower, feeling old and trying to dilute his days with drink. When Bessie came, the drinking and the self-pity tapered away.
~~Old Magnusson~~
He came to rely entirely on her, and they became a familiar pair in the Shields River country, he driving her in his black pickup to a meeting of her women's club or off to the town of Wilsall for the week's groceries, she ruling in his kitchen and handling the farmyard chores for him.

¶ Surely the sight of them constantly paired set tongues clangin--^M
 it took less than that--but they confounded the gossips consider-^E
 ably. No one ever managed to hear them call each other anything
 but Mr. Magnusson and Mrs. Ringer or to see them more than
 correctly cordial with one another, maintaining an austere
 arms'-length household it was all but impossible to read
 anything further into. Apparently ~~the~~ suspicion fairly quickly
 was ~~given up~~, because Bessie became fast friends with some of
 the sternest neighboring wives and a well-regarded member of
 the Shields River community. Which left just one person
 on a moral high-horse against her. My father.

The resentment between Dad and my grandmother must have circled in darkly from the past, all the way from his earliest courting of my mother. Lessons of lineage were not something Bessie Ringer ordinarily gave much thought to. But as she watched this only daughter, her first child and the ill one and the favored, being wooed by a showy young cowboy, surely her own too-young marriage to Tom Ringer came to mind, and probably too her mother's too-young marriage to the stern silent John Glun.

What was said there in the years of my father's courtship as Bessie tried to stave off the past's rhythm, I have never heard hinted. But the broad line of time tells much. It was only a few months before my mother's twenty-first birthday, when by law she would have been free of family consent, that

she and

she and my father were married, after six entire years of courtship.

From all that I can deduce, there was no open rift while my mother remained alive. My grandmother's sense of family likely stormed over past differences. In the marriage summer when my mother and father were herding sheep on Grass Mountain, Bessie would get on a saddlehorse at Ringling, ride half a day north across the sage prairie, and somehow search them out along the lengthy mountain slope. After overnight, she would saddle and ride off, to appear again in a few weeks as if having strolled across the street. If Dad was my mother's choice in life, so be it for Bessie. He had become Family, and she would become civil. And when I was born, her first grandchild and the sole one for a space of years, her visiting became heartier yet. Oh, I used to come and stay with you while your folks was to a dance in Sixteen or Ringling. They had themselves a time there, and we had ourselves one to home, we did.

But after my mother's death, something quickly hung in the air between my father and my grandmother, like the first blazing word of a secret and no more. She made a few uneasy visits to us at our first ranch in the valley. But she and Ruth were enemies almost at sight, and when Dad married Ruth, we abruptly were visited by my grandmother no more. Instead a reversal of sorts began, as if something were being acted

Mabel

out before angled sets of mirrors: Dad now encouraged me to go across town after school to visit my grandfather, Tom Ringer.

Allow this to my father, there was charity as well as defiance in this turnabout notion of his. At the time I was Tom Ringer's only grandchild, and dour as his life may have been, he showed an old man's gruff affection for me. He lived then in a small cabin across the street from the sulphur slough, and made his slow rounds uptown each day. I remember he was quite worried about you, my first-grade teacher would recall to me many years later, in those months just after you had lost your mother. Whenever I'd meet him on the street, he'd inquire about how you were getting along. ~~H~~ I think I did all too little to return his interest. He was by then into his seventies, a bent and gray-faced man with a colossal blade of nose, living lonely in a musty cabin, and I was not entirely sure where his life cornered onto mine. Grandparents in general seemed a difficult proposition. Those on Dad's side of the family, who sounded wondrously interesting in their Scottishness, long since were gone from the world, and here on my mother's side were this warring grandmother and this weary wraith of a grandfather. The only clear fact in it all seemed to be something Dad said: It's hell on old Tom, left alone with himself.

Beyond that visiting maneuver, Dad began to try to talk ~~to~~ me--and himself--^M into forgetting Bessie Ringer. And at

the same time, I suppose, to chant himself into a rightness about what he was doing, for along with all else borne in him since my mother's death, he had been living with twin fears. The first, that he would lose me, somehow be unable to keep me with him and raise me amid his zigzagging ranch life. Second and worse, that if he was forced to give me up, it would have to be to the mother-in-law he had been at spearpoint with so much of the past.

It must have represented the last loss possible to his life: that his one son would be made a stranger to him. ~~He~~^{Dad} tried to twine his other bereavement onto that one, as if he could knot together from the two a talisman of some sort: Your mother would of wanted me to raise you instead of your Grandma doing it, I can tell ye that. She said . . . she said just as much. She talked about it sometimes, after she'd had one of her bad spells. We always knew she might go during one of those spells ~~A~~-Christamighty, how she suffered with those. Times I would drive her to the hospital in Townsend thinking every breath was gonna be her last. She went through hell on this earth, your mother. And she never would want me to give you up, ~~I'm=here=to=tell=you.~~ ^A Silence from him, then the next veer from fear to spite: Hell, we'll get by somehow, son. We don't need that old woman running our lives. Look at her there, living with old Magnusson that way and never marrying him. She needs to run her own life more pert, I'd say.

Then this, the rest of the secret told. She'd take you from me in a minute if she could. But there's no way on this green earth I'm gonna let her.

But there was a way, and it came with a slow fierce sear inside him during our summer of 1950 at the cattle camp along Sixteenmile Creek. Dad began to suspect that he might be dying. For several years he had been contending with a fitful stomach ulcer; during Ruth's years it embered more often in him, and now had glowed itself into a steady burn. It became a rare day when he didn't throw up at least one meal. He lost weight, his nerves jumped. Everything the doctors prescribed seemed to make the stomach worse, and their obvious bafflement gave off the fear that this finally was more than an ulcer on a rampage. ~~#~~ For the first time, mortality was crowding Charlie Doig slowly enough that he could think it through, and across that charring summer it brought him to the greatest change of mind he could make. He needed someone in readiness to step into his place in my life. ~~and~~ the readiest person on the face of the planet was the one who had loomed in his dark musings all this while.

~~My father~~ Dad had everything to gulp back, then, when he set out to make truce with this phantom grandmother of mine. I can hear, as if in a single clear echo, the pivoting of our lives right there: Dad beginning his desperate phone call in the lobby of the Sherman Hotel, spelling out her name in an embarrassed half-shout to the operator, staring miserably at the cars nosing off around the prow of the hotel as the

long-distance line hummed and howled in his ear. Then:

Ah. Hullo, Bessie, This is Charlie. Charlie, Charlie Doig.
No, Ivan's fine, fine, he's right here. Ah. Say, would ye
gonna be home on Sunday? We could, ah, come over maybe and
see ye. All right. All right, then. G'bye.

The Magnusson farm, in the county south of us, lay in what we called the Norskie country--a coverlet of farmed slopes and creek bottoms coming down along the watershed of the Shields River from the icy snaggle peaks of the Crazy Mountains. It was better growing country than our valley--lower, milder--and the Norwegian immigrants were exactly the thrifty and stubborn people to make it pay. After her years at the sage flats of Moss Agate, my grandmother's job at Magnusson's must have seemed almost silken. As we drove to his farm, the furrowed fields were ruled straight and brown on one side of the road, the green flow of hayfields curving with the creek on the other.

Magnusson's house, brown as the plowed earth, came out like a cliff and a castle from the slope which led down into the creek's slim valley. The bottom floor of the house, the cliff-like part, seemed to be a concrete garage, or perhaps just a great cellar; the sharp-roofed living quarters were on the floor above, and a set of stairs was stilted on tall uprights along the outside wall until at last the steps levitated themselves in beneath the mid-air door to the kitchen. As we

The stairs

went up, a man and a woman stepped onto the lofty porch and looked at us with curiosity. Magnusson proved to be a steady-eyed, stocky farmer in his seventies, with white eyebrows and a mustache stained considerably less than white. His rumbled accent came like a growl against Dad's burr, but he said we were welcome in his house always, then withdrew to the front room with his newspaper from Norway. That left us with my grandmother, whom I barely remembered from three or so years before. She gave Dad a thin Hello, beamed down at me and said, Where's a kiss for your gramma? I pecked her cheek and husked a Hello as close as I could to the tone she had given Dad.

The three of us bunched ourselves at the table in the vast kitchen, which was where serious visiting was done in ~~the~~^{Norskic} that coffee-habited country. As she and I munched our way through a plate of cookies ~~she brought out~~, Dad lit cigarettes nervously and between puffs chewed away at the inside of his cheek. In a fashion, he was courting this wary woman much as he had courted her daughter twenty years earlier, but with grimness instead of love. What was unspoken but being said more plainly than anything in his careful chatter was this: We need you. I may die soon. Ivan must have someone to raise him.

How much the old rift between them was mended that Sunday, I do not know. I was too young to read the presence of the

past, although I could sense it was somehow there in the kitchen with us. But rilesome as both of these figures could be about whatever ~~had~~^{might have} happened in some yesterday, that first visit surely undid some of the anger just by not becoming a brawl.

at the end of the

I remember that in ~~the~~ late afternoon I went out with her to feed the white geese in the farmyard, and that they hissed and flounced around us until her dog, Shep, came barking, delirious to have an excuse to scatter the bullies. Shoo 'em, Shep! I remember her encouraging in a kind of angry pleasure: Shoo 'em good! Sic 'em out of here, the goshdarn old fools! I remember too that by the time Dad and I left, I was calling her Grandma.

For his part, Dad ~~had~~ seemed not to know what to call his own mother-in-law. He ~~had~~ avoided calling her anything at all during our kitchen stay. But from the bottom of the stairs, he finally said up to her: G'bye, Lady. We'll come again next Sunday.

Almost every weekend after that we would go back to Magnusson's to visit her. The bargain Dad needed was being forged. It would take effect sooner than even he dreamed, because one among us in that odd group was dying, all right, but it was not my father. It was Martin Magnusson.

Just before old Magnusson slumped into the series of hospital stays which saw him decline to death, Dad bluntly asked my grandmother further into his plan. The doctoring

make the long drive

in Montana was not helping him; his stomach flamed more and more now, he felt himself growing weaker. He was going to a place in Minnesota called the Mayo Clinic, and he wanted not to go alone, to have me with him^M—and her. Would she come?

In a week, the three of us stepped up into the eastbound train at Ringling. I remember of the trip only that Dad wearily slept and slept, and that when Grandma drowsed with her head back against the coach seat, she sometimes snorted herself awake with a long kkhhh of a snore, and that I abandoned the pair of them to sit by the hour in the dome car and watch the worldscape of my first train journey. At the destination in Minnesota, Dad hardly had the strength to carry a suitcase into the hotel where we would stay. He checked into the clinic, and immediately the doctors began days of tests on him. Grandma and I watched the people below from our hotel room far above the street, and spent time with Dad at the clinic whenever he was not in tests. # On the fourth day we were startled by a telegram for Grandma. Tom Ringer had died. His last torment of my grandmother was that she still felt something for him which made her want to return to Montana for his funeral. Dad agreed there was no choice, although it seemed to me there was all the choice in the world. She and I took the train back to Montana, leaving Dad to the doctors' solemn tests.

After the funeral, I went to stay again with Dad's brother

Angus and his family, Grandma returned to Magnusson's farm.

Several weeks dragged by before Dad followed us home to Montana, and when he came, he was a Sbony ghost with only a third of his stomach. That severe surgery alone could keep him alive, the doctors had told him, and he would not be able to do any work for many months. A There the doctors had the matter backwards.

Staying away from work, from knowing what ability was left in Charlie Doig could not him, was what he was not able to do. Within a few weeks, he had hired on at a ranch at the western edge of the valley and there, pale and retching if he ate a spoonful too much at any mealtime, my father began slamming away at the job as he always had.

And he arranged a second matter, as much against the odds as the first. Grandma and I now were to live in Ringling, in the shambled small house where she had managed to put her own children through school and out into the world. From there I would ride the bus to school in White Sulphur Springs. That part of life changed little. But under a new roof with Woman called Lady and Grandma this restored grandmother, almost all else did.

Ringling lay on the land, twenty miles to the south of White Sulphur Springs, as the imprint of what had been a town, like the yellowed outline on grass after a tent has been taken down. When the roadbed of the Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad was diked through the site early in the century, a community-- it was called Leader then--snappily built up around the depot:

three hotels, several saloons, a lumber yard, stores, a two-story bank, a confectionary, even a newspaper office. When John Ringling's little railroad bumped down the valley from White Sulphur to link onto the Milwaukee and St. Paul main^fline, and the rumor followed that the headquarters of the great circus would be established there--surely the century's record for unlikelihood--the village was optimistically renamed Ringling. But before the end of the 1920's, the grandly adopted name was almost all that was left: many of the businesses had burned in a single wild night of flame. It was said, and more or less believed, that a Ku Klux Klan cross had blazed just before the lumber yard caught fire and spewed the embers that took half the town to the ground. # A few years later, another fire even less explainable than the first mopped up almost all of what was left. By the time Grandma and I moved there, Ringling stood as only a spattered circle of houses around several large weedy foundations. The adult population was about 50 persons, almost all of them undreamably old to me, and the livelihoods were a saloon, a gas station, a post office, Mike Ryan's store, the depot, and exactly through the middle of town, the railroad tracks which glinted and fled instantly in both directions.

Mornings, an eastbound passenger train tornadoed through, then came one tearing westward; afternoons, as people said, it was the same except opposite. My first days there I wondered

about the travelers seen as tiny cutouts against the pullman windows--what they were saying when they looked out at us and our patchy, sprawled town--that-was-less-than-a-town. If they looked out.

These orange-and-black passenger trains whipped in and went off like kings and queens, potent and unfussed, on the dot. But freight trains banged around at all hours, and for a few weeks in autumn, Ringling made its own clamoring rail traffic as box cars of sheep and cattle ~~trundled~~ lunched back and forth from the loading pens at the edge of town. Otherwise, the town did almost nothing but doze, kept sleepily alive by the handful of people who lived there out of habit and the few ranchers who used it as their gas-and-mail point. The single wan tendril to its past was Mike Ryan's store, which I lost not a moment before visiting.

Mike Ryan was a very ancient man by then, near-blind, looming in his goggling spectacles and flat cap amid a dust-grayed avalanche of hardware, harness, stray dry goods, and stale groceries such as the bakery goods his cats liked to sleep on. The second words Mike spoke to you, after a broguey Hello and learning what it was you wanted, always were: Now it's here if I can just find it.

And it would be, for Mike Ryan's had been a perfect store in its time, a vast overstocked bin of merchandise behind its high false-front and under its roof with the yellow airplane signals painted hugely on. But now, as if the years were

caving in on it, the enterprise was becoming more and more muddled, dim, musty. At times Mike himself would dim away into some reverie and would no longer see a person come in the door, and you could stand for moments, watched only by his brindle cats, and hear him breathe an old man's heavy resigned breathing.

Just as Mike Ryan's was the fading memory of a general store and Ringling itself the last scant bones of a town, Grandma's house turned out to be the shell of a place to live in. It counted up, all too rapidly, into a kitchen, living room and bedroom, each as narrow as a pullman car and about a third as long. The rooms had stood empty for more than ten years—empty of people, that is, for the flotsam of Grandma's earlier family leaned and teetered everywhere. Diving into the dusty boxes and dented metal suitcases, I came up with a boomerang sent by the son who had moved to Australia after the war, a lavender-enamedled jewelry box which had been my mother's, albums of strange people in stiff clothes.

The place was stacked with dead time, and the first few days Grandma could not move in it without tears brimming her eyes. When at last she could, she called me into the bedroom and wordlessly began to dig down through the stacks and piles atop a low reddish wooden chest just larger than a seaman's trunk. As I watched, she propped the lid, looked down into the tumble of old clothes and ancient bedding inside, and snuffled.

Then a quick honk into her handkerchief, and she began talking in a tone angrier than I had yet heard from her: This here was your mother's hope chest. The kids' dad made it back at Moss Agate, when she first started going with Charlie. With your dad, I mean. He worked on this at nights for the longest time. See, he didn't have anything to make it from but some pieces of flooring, but he wanted her to have a hope chest of some kind. He did a good job with it. He could when he wanted to. It's sat here all these years. I want it to be yours now.

The back of my throat filled and tightened as she talked. I gulped, managed to say All right, and walked carefully from the room so as not to plunge from it.

Grandma
Life with her proved to be full of squalls of emotion of that sort. For one thing, she had a temper fused at least as short as Dad's. But where he would explode into words, she would go silent, lips clamped. If she could be persuaded to say anything, the words were short and snapped, displeasure corking each sentence, and you discovered you were better off to let her be wordless. [¶] I know now that such silences came out of years of having no other defense: of being alone on a remote ranch, nowhere to go, no other person to unbend to, when a stormy husband went into his own black moods. But I did not understand it then, and found myself suddenly in a household which could change as if a cloud had zoomed across the sun.

The quickest annoyance I could cause was to look at her when she had her false teeth out for brushing, and after a time or two of blundering into that, I would veer off or turn my back if I saw it in prospect. There even was a way she could rile herself: as I had guessed on the train trip to ~~Grandma~~ Minnesota, ^{she} was a thunderous snorer, and in the middle of the night was apt to snort herself awake and mutter angrily about it. [¶] But others ~~of~~ of the unexpectednesses which kept tumbling out of her were entirely easy-tempered. To be doing something even when there was nothing to be done, ^{Grandma} ~~she~~ sat at the kitchen table and played game after game of solitaire. [¶] When the cards continued to turn up wrong for her, she would cheat just once to try to get the game moving again, which I thought was balanced good sense. And whenever she won, the identical proclamation: I got that game, boy. What do you think of that? [¶] Also, she was perpetually ready to go into a full-sail version of my childhood I had never heard of before. When she had visited my father and mother so often in the first three or four years of my life, it had been she who spent many of the patient hours to teach me to read, the words fastening in my mind as I sat in her lap and watched her finger move along with her reading. And much else: Oh, how you used to coax me to sing. ^V Ah-AH-ah! SING, gramma! ^V you'd say. So I'd have to hold you in the rocker and sing by the hour. ... ^V Poor me, ^V you'd say when you didn't get your way, and you'd pooch out your lower lip so sad. ... Lands, you used to scare me half to death, the way you ran down that

hill at the Stewart Ranch. There was a big tree way up on slope, and you'd take your dog up there and here the both of you would come, straight down. I used to hold my breath. . . .

ch And back beyond all that, she had the news of how I'd arrived into the world: You were born in Dr. McKay's hospital in White Sulphur, it's that building just up the hill from in oh, what's the name of that joint? Hmpf. The Stockman, just up the hill from the Stockman. When you were born, you had two great big warts right here in front of your ear, and your right foot splayed off like this, and you had the reddest hair. You were something grand to see, all right . . .

Nor was that nearly all. At times she talked a small private language which must have come from those two islanded times of childhood, her own growing up on the Wisconsin farm and her children's years at Moss Agate. Words jiggled and bellied and did strange turns then: I'll have a sipe more of coffee, but if I eat another bite, I'll busticate. . . . Get the swatter and dead that fly for me, pretty please? . . . Hmpf, I been settin' so long my old behinder is stiff. . . . Anything which lay lengthwise was longways to her; the stanchions of a milking barn were stanchels, the cows themselves were a word of my mother's as a child, merseys.

Her sayings too took their own route of declaring. That it was time to get a move on: Well, this isn't buying the baby a shirt nor paying for the one he's got on. Or to take a doubtful chance: Here goes nothin' from nowhere. Or when she did not understand something I read to her from one of

my books: Like the miser man's well, too deep for me, boy.

Or when she did understand: I see, said the blind man to his deaf wife. Neighbors were rapidly tagged with whatever they deserved: She goes around lookin' like she's been drawed through a knothole backwards. . . . That pair is close as three in a bed with one kicked out That tribe must never heard that patch beside patch is neighborly, but patch upon patch is beggarly.

Each time the prairie wind swirled up her dress, there would be said: Hmpf! Balloon ascension! At least one meal of the day, she would pause between forkfuls and pronounce like a happy benediction: I hear some folks say they get so tired of their own cooking. By gee, I never have. And whenever something irked her, which was sufficiently often, she had her own style of not-quite cussing: Gee gosh, god darn, gosh blast it. . . .

And always the stories, such as the one of an early Moss Agate neighbor, a homesteader, who had a head huge and twisted as an ogre's. After a lifetime of despair over his own ugliness, the man began rethinking it all and soon before he died proudly willed his skull to medical science. As I shivered a bit at the tale, Grandma chuckled and said in her declaring style: Headless man into heaven, think of that.

To my surprise, dogs and cats fully counted into her conversations. Dad likely had not glanced in a cat's direction since the last time my mother had scratched Pete Olson's gray ears, and he spoke to dogs only to send them ~~around~~^{kiting off after strayed} livestock.

But Grandma loved them all, especially all dogs. There had been one or another of them, generally named Shep, in her households ever since a huge woolly sheepdog back on her parents' Wisconsin farm, and the last of that name had moved to Ringling with us.⁴ A fine white-and-tan with a hint of collie about him, Shep had gone old and as lazy as my grandmother would allow anything to be. He panted as he walked and spent most of life stretched under the kitchen table, where he filled all the space there was. Several times a day Grandma would shift her feet as she sat at the table playing solitaire, and there would be an explosion of pained howling and outraged sympathy: Well, you shouldnt' be there right under my feet, that's what you get! Serves you right, you aren't hurt, big baby. Come here, let me pet it, pretty please, that's all right, there you're all better now . . . ⁴~~Grandma's~~ Her sure sign of good humor was to break into rough-house play with Shep or any other available dog, setting off wild barking and leaping which invariably ended with fresh bleeding scratches on her arms. By then, all the skin between wrist and elbow carried white nicks of scar, as if she had been lightly scored with a scalpel time after time. But that annoyed her less than the bathroom habits Shep and the others ungratefully put on display in front of her. Their natural post-sniffing and leg-lifting sent her into prompt fury: Shep! Don't be so sappy! Get away from there, you darned fool! ⁴Cats too, aloof wayfarers that they were, did not manage to live up to her standard of expectation. Any that passed by, she fed as if they were famished but

naughty orphans, scolding and huffing over them all the while she filled the dish with milk and bread: What do you mean bumming around here? Why don't you stay to home where you've got good grub? I ought to let you go hungry, sappy old thing! Here, eat! The only creatures in her world which got no affection with their scoldings were magpies. She hated their scavenging habits, and when she saw one making its black-and-white flash of glide in the air anywhere within range of her voice, she cut loose: GIT! Git yourself out of here, god darned old thing, there's nothing gonna die here for you to peck on! Git! GIT!

Grandma and I
We settled in, if living amid such salvoes could be called settling in, by somehow coaxing the tiny Ringling house to stretch and once more make way for people. When the single closet was full, we stashed boxes and suitcases under the bed and davenport as if ballasting the place. All the time we lived there, Grandma grumbled things in and out from under the bed, vowing someday she'd not have to do so. The ironing board went in with a tangle of fishpoles behind a door, my mound of paperback books covered the hopechest at the foot of the one bed. My bed, for I learned at once that living with my grandmother always meant that she claimed the worst accommodations for herself, and the dreariest chores. This inside-out chivalry she must have formed in the Moss Agate years, when she found that she minded the drudgeries there less than did her edgy husband or my frail mother or her frisky sons and so took most of them upon herself. Beyond that, there simply

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was her assumption that if I was to be a special benefit,
she would happily pay any price in chores. [¶] Dad had been
thoroughly right about one high matter: my grandmother did
want me as a child to raise, the way a retired clipper captain
might have yearned to make one last voyage down the trade winds
under clouds of sail. Despite Dad's wariness of it, there
had been little chance that she could have arrived in my life
without his arranging it. Now that he had done so, here I
was as the bonus child for her penchant about family--by
several years the oldest of her grandchildren, and the shadow-son
of her lost daughter. Everything in her said to treat me as
a gift, and in terms of this new Ringling household it came
out as her granting me the bed and the bedroom while she slept
on the davenport in the living room, her climbing out first
in the chilly mornings to light the kitchen stove with fuel
oil and match, her doing every other task the place needed--
until blessed common sense edged through and suggested that
what might do me more good would be to have duties of my own.
How do you feel about that? she offered cautiously. I think
it wouldn't hurt you none, do you?

Unarguably it wouldn't, and I began then to take my turn
at keeping the woodbox piled with firewood and the ashes
emptied from the bottom of the kitchen range. But the main
and everlasting chore was the water bucket, because the house
had no well, and a neighborhood pump had gone rusty from years

of disuse. The rain barrel at a corner of the house did the job for laundering clothes and a washtub bath apiece for us once a week. But every dipperful of the water for our daily use had to be pumped next door—^HI paced it at seventy steps in one of my earliest trudges—^Hat the house of Grandma's long-time friends, Kate and Walter Badgett. And by unexpected fortune that perpetual bucketing carried with it something new and rich, for necessity's water was the least of what this ancient pair could add to our Ringling life.

There were enormities about the Badgetts which somehow seemed to bolster us simply by existing so near at hand. These began with size and age, and went on through manner. Side by side, the two weathered figures loomed like barn and silo. Kate was pillow'd in fat, so wide that she seemed to wedge apart the arms of the huge easy chair where she spent her days. Atop that crate of a body was an owlish face, and a swift tongue that could operate Walter all day long and still have time to tell what the rest of Ringling was doing. On her desk by the front window which looked across the tracks to the gas station and post office-store, Kate kept her pair of binoculars. Who had come to town, for how long and maybe even what they bought—^Hit all came up the magnifying tunnel of vision to Kate, then went out with new life, as if having added to itself while re-echoing through that bulk of body.

Then in some mid-^Bsentence of hers, Walter would appear from one or another of his chores, in his pauseful way looming

tall as a doorway, and nearly as still¹-a rangy silent sentinel with great hands hung on poles of arms. His face was more an eagle's than any other I have seen on a man: the spare lines of brow and cheek and the chisel of nose, somehow with the hint of a beak, and beneath it all, the mouth which turned down sharply at its corners not from mood but just the decades of pursing around a cusp of chewing tobacco.

Walter's eyes were a pale, flat, seen-it-all-before shade of blue. Once I heard someone tell of seeing him angry, which I never had. He was tending bar for the day at the saloon there in Ringling, and one of Rankin's cowboys came in with a load on. He was helling around up and down the bar, and Walter told him, 'Better settle down a bit.' The Rankin man cussed him and said, 'Who the hell're you, old feller?' Walter came leaning across that bar, those blue eyes snapping sparks. 'I said you'd better settle down, or I'll settle you.' The Rankin man never said another word.

Both coming onto eighty years old, the Badgetts were in the kind of outliving contest which very old couples sometimes seem to have, each aging only against the other instead of against time. Naturally, Kate was going to win, and she did, by nearly a decade. But at this point they both seemed as little changing as glaciers, and Walter in particular had slowed life to the exact amble he wanted. Mid-mornings, he would stroll to his woodpile halfway between his house and

ours, and begin chopping with giant strokes: the axe easily high, then down in a slow arc, a whunk! as the wood blasted apart and spun away into the dirt. Walter would straighten, loose a long splatter of tobacco juice, study around town for anything to report to Kate, reach with one hand to set another piece of wood on the chopping block, then whunk! again.⁴ Multiplying that woodpile, which would have kept half the county snug for a winter, spent his mornings. After lunch, he could be seen, in his slow angular stroll, headed for the post office to bring Kate the day's letters and any capturable gossip. Even his responses to her could come slow as a measuring now because he had a fitful mild deafness which gave him the excuse to answer an innocent uncomprehending Hnnh? while he mulled the latest of her constant orders.

Theirs was a household at once curt and ~~courtly~~^{cordial}. Knock on the door, and Kate's voice boomed a single word like an empress's: COME! I was puzzled that she had the habit of calling other women only by their last names. Grandma always was ~~simply~~^{she} ~~Ringer~~^{Kate's} to her. But the brusqueness had an odd gap in it. Over the years ~~Kate~~^{she} had ironed every thinkable vice out of Walter except for his habit of chewing tobacco; for that, he was permitted a coffee can behind the stove to spit in. Yet when she talked to him for any reason besides an order, the tongue that banged bluntly on every other life in town suddenly went soft and crooned, of all words, Hubby.

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Walter had drifted north from Texas as a young cowboy, and I would learn from men who had worked with him in the valley that he was a storied man with horse and rope. The stories included the hint that he had departed Texas after a scrape against the law. Even here, Kate matched him: out of her background wafted the whisper that in Prohibition times she had been one of the area's most reliable vendors of bootleg whiskey.



These two serene old outlaws, then, gifted us with pasts of almost burning dazzle. Grandma, after her long life of silent ranch houses, tirelessly listened to Kate's years of accumulated gossip, encouraging the reports every so often with a Land's sake! or Gee gosh! She and Kate played canasta together, traded baked goods back and forth like bartering tribes, puzzled out patterns for their crocheting, and, as simply and purely as the word can be used, neighbored.

For me, there were Walter's gently scary tales of cowboying, parceled out in his steady flat drawl. Time was, I was riding for the Higginses, coming back off some pasture up under the Castles . . . Walter's hand as big as my face begins rubbing his high cheekbones as if sharpening them even more. I just no more got out here to those shanties at Old Dorsey than a spring blizzard come up. The hand descends for the spit can, a long brown Pttt! I was riding a chestnut pony we just called Red. He had a coat just about like your hair there, Ivan. I

looked down and I couldn't tell what color he was any more,
the snow was sticking to us so. The voice steady as the sage
horizon, soft as spring wind. I got us in the old store bu
building there at Dorsey. Red didn't like going through that
doorway, but I made him. All the windows were out and the
wind whooping in, but it was better than outside. Another pttt,
the hand rasping the cheekbone again. It was close midnight
before it let up and we finally got to the ranch. I went in
the bunkhouse and the foreman asked me, Where you been, Walt?
Well, I said, I was just out checking on the weather . . .

When Grandma and Kate rode the mail bus to White Sulphur every so often to shop together, I would walk down to eat supper with Walter. The meal was forever the same: fried mush with dark corn syrup, and bread which Walter first toasted and then dried in the oven. When we bit, it shattered and crashed in our mouths, and the more we ate, the fuller our plates grew with the shrapnel of crumbs. After the last roaring bite, Walter would sit back tall as two of me and ask down: Well, reckon we can make it through to breakfast now?

In all their ways, then, the Badgetts put forth a steadiness, a day-upon-day carol out of the valley's past, and for all I knew, out of the past of all the world. Up the slope from our house, the other regular chimes in our Ringling life spoke weightier accents, graver outlooks. Mr. and Mrs. Brekke both had been born in Norway, and both come young to the new life

these two serene old outlaws

in America: they met and married, found a small ranch beyond Ringling where they endured through to prosperity, and now, their family long grown, the pair of them lived at the top of the tiny town like gentlefolk quite surprised at their own new position of courtliness.

Each early afternoon, Mr. Brekke's serious singsong—
HEL-lo-—would sound on our porch, and he would hand in the mail he had brought from the post office, already backing away with a gentle smile from our thanks and invitations to come in for a moment. Mrs. Brekke did come, at least once a day either to our house or to the Badgetts', to hear the doings of the town with a steadily astonished Ohh, myy! Leaving, she invariably turned and urged: Why don't you come up sometimes for ice cream and cake?

The Brekkes owned the one house in all of Ringling that looked as if it truly had been built to live in rather than just to hold boards up off the ground. A white-fenced yard rulered neatly around it, framing a few small tidy trees—
the only ones in town—and a many-windowed sun porch which opened the entire front of the house. The first owners were a husband and wife who had been the local schoolteachers, a couple storied for their learning, and their books and a decade or so of magazines came to the Brekkes with the house. These I mined weekend after weekend, carrying home an armload of old issues of National Geographic and Life and Collier's and

Saturday Evening Post at a time, reading them lying on my bed with the hot bedlamp at my ear. Mr. and Mrs. Brekke admired education almost as if it were a magic potion. When their own children were growing up and one or another would protest not knowing the answer to something, Mary Brekke had a single iron reply: Well, you better learn! Now they encouraged me into each new printed trove as soon as I had finished the last one—Done with that batch? Mr. Brekke would cry: Come in for some more! And Mrs. Brekke would cry after: Then sit a minute for some ice cream and cake, can't you?

The Brekke household's second-hand magazines and books became a second school for me, more imagination lit from it than from the one I rode the bus to in White Sulphur Springs each weekday. I read straight through whatever shone dark on the snowfield pages, a visit to Scintillating Siam lapping on into the swashbuckling of Horatio Hornblower, which likely took place back-to-back with a Clarence Budington Kelland shoot-out in the Arizona Territory. I read, that is to say, as an Eskimo who had never before seen a movie might watch the newsreel and then the cartoon and then the feature film without ever knowing to separate them in his mind, simply letting himself be taken with the habited flow of flashing images.

It all began adding up in my head in deposits which astonished Grandma. Her own information about the world was as spotty as mine was swirlish. She had been born when a

man named Grover Cleveland was President ~~&~~ that she had no idea of this merely spoke her own unusual way of having been brought up. She was perplexed that there had been two Presidents named Roosevelt; Franklin Delano had served such a span in her adult life that she could easily believe he had been in the White House back at the turn of ~~F~~ the century as well. The labor leader John L. Lewis and the boxing champion Joe Louis consistently mixed their names for her, and I was not at all surprised when she asked me if the Hemenway who ~~read~~ ^{intoned} the news on the radio was the Hemingway whose books showed up now and then in my rummage from the Brekkes. She seemed entirely pleased with my knack for knowledge, and quickly learned to use it as a kind of utility, asking me to spell out stubborn words when she wrote a letter, to work out the balance in her checkbook, to comparison-shop the Monkey Ward and Sears Roebuck mail-order catalogues for our items of clothing.

But Lore ran both ways between us, and generally hers was more useful than mine, having come straight out of life instead of from printed pages. She recalled for me a pastime that her sons once tried, setting up a lemonade stand and taking turns to shout across town the advertising she taught them: Lemonade, lemonade! Stirred by an old maid! With a spade! I thought it over, but at last decided the business wasn't worth reviving; Ringling's population had plummeted so far that the only buying traffic I could foresee was Walter

Badgett and Mr. Brekke. But another idea Grandma recalled had the right feel. The same enterprising sons had sent away for any free mailings they came across in magazines and, since Ringling had no street names, conjured for themselves whatever elaborate addresses they could think of. I got out paper and envelopes and set to work on the most current ~~Brekke~~ magazines. Quickly, offers for stamp collecting kits or pleas for me to get rich selling salve were pouring into the post office in care of I. Clark Doig, 776 Sagebrush Acres or 14 Jackrabbit Boulevard or 801 Gopher Gulch or whatever other elegancy I'd been able to dream up. Grandma much admired my gaudy mail; I much admired her for the lode of boy-raising behind it.

That exact lode, I began to find, came ready more and more as adolescence perked in me. Together, she and I pondered the pale frizz of hair taking over my upper lip. At the precise age when other boys were praying for some hint of whiskers, I badly wanted to be rid of that downy white shadow. Grandma of course had been through this ^M—and apparently everything else ^M—before. She came up with a salve called a depilatory which erased the fuzz, right enough, and felt as if my lip were being scorched away with it. ^q Impressed with her results, I asked if she knew anything to be done about my hair, which had a stubborn tendency to divide itself floppily on the exact top of my head, as if I had been bashed there with a cleaver. At once she dug out one of her discarded nylon stockings and

snipped and sewed it into a snug skullcap. We'll damp your hair down before you go to bed and you sleep with this over it, and we'll see how that does. How it did was that within weeks her remedial yarmulka tamed the thatch into the pompadour I had worn out a lifetime of combs trying to achieve.

She was as handy with my other disquiets, such as the passion for baseball which had been brewing in me. The onset of this likely had come from Dad, who in his try-anything youth had played catcher for the Sixteen community team. Did I tell ye the time we had a big Fourth of July game goin' while Jack Dempsey was fightin' Gibbons up in Shelby? Nineteen twenty-three that would have been. We were havin' a helluva game down there by Sixteen Creek, but somebody'd run down from the telegraph office at the end of every round and tell us what was happenin' with the fight, so it took us half the afternoon to play an inning or two. . . . Then at World Series time in 1946, Dad had got tired of listening to his saloon chums mutter about the invincibility of the great Boston Red Sox team and uncharacteristically began betting them that it wasn't so. He quickly had bets in every bar in town, and undoubtedly the easiest money of his life, they added up to a couple of hundred dollars, when the St. Louis Cardinals won for him.

Whether it was that windfall or some other encouragement—M it may simply have been that Ringling was a perfect place to tinker at imagination, because so little else about the town

was in working order any more--I had begun to daydream of myself as a shortstop or a pitcher, or maybe both, strolling across the infield to the mound every fourth day or so to fire fastballs. Now, all of a sudden, I had a teammate. Grandma tirelessly would toss a rubber ball for me to bat back and forth across Ringling's emptinesses. Our audience was Walter Badgett, launching his contemplative splatters of tobacco juice as he glanced over from his woodchopping. Once in awhile the ball would bounce toward Walter, and he would pick it up and fling it back in a sweeping stiffarmed motion, like a weathered old catapult which still could crank up. Grandma and I went on with this even if it rained, playing catch inside the house by bouncing the ball between us the scant twenty feet from ~~through the living room~~ the kitchen door to my bedroom.

It comes as a constant surprise to me to realize that even here, where she first came into my life, my grandmother already was nearly sixty years old. Everything I can remember of this time has the tint of her ageless energy. All other entertainment failing, she was even willing to wrestle, and we would tussle stiff-armed against one another until we both giggled to a halt and she panted herself down into a chair saying Whoof! Nosir, you're just too tough for your old gramma, I can't keep up with a wildcat like you. And in half a minute, she would be up and in the kitchen, into the making of the next batch of bread or cinnamon rolls or butter

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cookies.

But one matter of that growing time of mine, not even her savvy and energy had come up against before. A bulge the size of a robin's egg appeared on my right leg, just below the kneecap. It was tender as a burn, and after some weeks of wincing almost to tears whenever the knee came against anything, I at last showed her the ~~knot~~. She scowled. Hmpf! We'll better get that looked at when your dad comes.

The doctor in Livingston sat me on the end of a metal table, pressed the bump and watched me lift in pain. X-rays showed what he already knew: the knob of the long bone in my leg had cracked away, a hairline crevice now daggering through. The danger was, he told us, that this bone cap could be lifted further away by the pull of the large muscle across the kneecap--like the tugging power of a rope working across a pulley. To prevent that, I would have to keep the leg straight; have to bandage the knee constantly, keep pressure wrapped down onto the bone knob so that it would grow back into place. If I did not, there was a chance the leg would wither.

Medical science has changed its mind about that, and considers now that my fiery knee--the textbook term for the ailment is Shlotter's Disease--was not permanently afflicting and in time would have calcified its own fracture line. But I walked from the doctor's office then with only the understanding

that I must drag my right leg stiff for a few years if I were not to drag it all my life.

I was miffed that Grandma could be so matter-of-fact about all this¹—Wrap it snuglike and do what the doctor said and you'll get like new again¹—and kept me at the chores we had agreed on, the water bucket sloshing maliciously now as I swung my leg along. The first several times, I made a stoic show of circling the yards of elastic bandage around my knee and into a tight crisscross over the bone knob. And then it became simply a groove of habit, and I became interested in how much I would ask of the mummied leg: I still could run, if in an odd stilty style; still could bat the ball thrown by Grandma, could wrestle her, could get on almost as before. My lamming, it turned out, had happened in the best possible company—¹that which shrugged it off and silently told me I had better do the same.

Grandma and I went into our first winter together. A small window faced straight west just above the head of my bed. Mornings, as the first sounds of day scuffed outside, I had been able to sleepily lift myself on an elbow and see which of the town's cows or horses or sheep were munching past. Now this window also told the weather, even without my looking all the way out; mewls of wind came sneaking under the sash, and on genuine blizzard mornings the sill would have its own miniature snowscape, tiny sifts white as spilled sugar.[#] We learned at once that on blowy days our house leaked

wind everywhere, like a weary little scow jetting water into itself the instant it touched the surface of the sea. Hardly knowing where to plug first, we would stuff a rag rug along the crack under the front door, pull the blinds down over the whistling windows, desperately fire up both the big square range in the kitchen and the little round stove in the living room, and hope for the storm to ease away promptly.

Shivery and caging as such blizzard weather was, it had to be admitted that Ringling looked much its best in a storm. The bald gaps between houses lost their starkness with windrows of snow gracefully coned between them. The very whiteness of a snowstorm came as a relief, a bright sudden paint over the worn town. Somehow, too, space danced itself along the wind into new distances. If we could not see the depot, a hundred fifty yards down the slope, the storm counted as a genuine shrouding blizzard, and we slogged around telling one another what a very devil of a bluster this was. Mr. Brekke looked like a general in winter camouflage when he handed our mail through the doorway now. Kate's binoculars could not cut the feathery swirl and find the news for the usual courier's gait of her tongue, so Grandma went over to play canasta with her by the hour to compensate. Walter's woodpile heaped under the whiteness like a buried haystack. The trip to the Badgetts' for water became a feat of walking with chin tucked into your coat and the filled water bucket

tugging you off-balance as you broke through the drifts.

Another trip had its hazards as well: Grandma and I joked about how far the outhouse seemed to have wondered out into the prairie since the blizzard whirled in. The only thing in the neighborhood which still seemed to be in place was Shep, and he was more firmly planted than ever. Throughout such weather, he could not be budged from under the kitchen table, and so was stepped on by Grandma ten times a day instead of his usual half dozen, his injured howls a mate-cry out into the keening of the blizzard.

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Then when the snowfall and wind at last stopped, the world's one noise would be the scrushing sound of boots on silk-dry snow. In the fresh calm, ~~smoke~~ ^{wood} climbed straight up from chimneys, until it appeared as if the fat gray ribbons were dangling all the town's houses down into a bowl of snow. The comfortable cushioned silence would last until the first pickup truck began the fast ratatatat of its chained tires.

In this snow-scarfed weather as all other, once a week Dad would appear out of the night. The job he had taken after his operation was with a sheep rancher named McGrath at the Camas ranch, fifty miles from us on the far side of White Sulphur Springs. Dad intended to bide through there until summer, ^w then he would have the contract to harvest the ranch's big hay crop. But he had come up with an idea further. The Camas might be a place for Grandma and me as well.

I would wake at once those nights he arrived, and come intent as a hiding fox. The open doorways leading from the kitchen to the living room and on into my bedroom were aligned, and a panel of light came thrusting through them all onto the foot of my bed, ~~like~~ as if a square flame from the charged talk which was beginning across the kitchen table. ~~¶~~ The ritual I quickly knew by heart. Dad would ask if there might be a can of beer in the house, just anything for a sip. This was high risk, a step out onto the nearest swaying edge of Grandma's temper, but he always did it, as if answering some challenge. If Grandma pulled her mouth tight and her long dipping No-o came out, he was in fast trouble, no matter that he had fought blizzard roads across the night to spend time with her. But if not, if the moment came mellow enough in her, she would get out the beer for him and he would persuade her to take a tiny glass of it herself, the only alcohol she would touch. Letting my breath ease, I would curl closer toward the portal of light to hear what would come along it next.

That old heifer of a cook, by God I can't see why McGrath keeps her on. The meal she put on the table this noon I wouldn't make this dog here eat. Liver fried until you could use it for shoeleather, and a little dab of boiled spuds, and some store bread, and that was all. You can't keep a crew on grub like that, now can you? Oh, the men aren't going to stand for it much more, they'll be asking for their checks.
And Mrs. McGrath just sits there and lets her get by with it.

McGrath is no better, he ought to know that a crew is only
as content as its cooking. Funny damn way to run a ranch,
or I'll put in with you. . .

The notion sheened a bit more each time out of his talk. If the cook at the Camas were to be let go, if the job could be Grandma's . . . There's a helluva big house there, plenty
of room in the upstairs where I am for the three of us. Ivan
would have to stay some place in White Sulphur for school a
bit of the year, but weekends and the summer we'd be all
together . . .

A waiting. A beer bottle is set on the table, a small glass follows. This, oh so carefully: What would you think
of the idea, Lady? And Grandma, who has been offering only hmpfs until now: I don't just know. Waiting. I suppose it
would be good there. Waiting. For darn sure we could use the
wages, and I'm plumb able to work.

Invisible in my half-dark--^Mit is the mystery of this time that no one ever caught on that I was a light sleeper and would hear anything said at any hour in that slim house--^MI would listen to Dad once more ease from his night of trying to talk the future around to his own route. Well, we'll just
have to watch our chance. I'll put it to McGrath in a minute if that cook is let go. And you can see then what you think . . . The echo from Grandma: Yes, we can see then . . . His good
night, hers. Then my father's body at bed edge. Ivan. Ivan!

Move across a bit, son, I'm home. I sigh pretended sleep up at him, and heavily shift across the bed, away from the eyelet of light.

Winter at last brawled itself out, and spring basted Ringling in mud for some weeks. Near the start of summer, Dad brought about his notion. Grandma was offered the job as cook at the Camas ranch. Golly gee, I don't suppose it ought to be turned down, only I hate to break up housekeeping here again. . . . and break it up we instantly did, closing the house in Ringling, more boxes than ever stacked into it, saying our good-byes and thanks to Kate and Walter and the Brekkes, driving with Dad in the pickup to the place where the three of us could be together, or at least less separate.

The ranch buildings stood out from behind the lofty line of cottonwoods on the west bank of Camas Creek, just at the base of the grassed ridges stairstepping up into the Big Belts. Nothing of the ranch seemed ever to have been thought into any order, the bunkhouse happening first along the road, its paint long vanished into a gray flecking scurf, next to it a small log shed with the wood dark and time-stained and the chinking bright between the stacked roundnesses. Then squatted a blacksmith shop, a lower log shed which seemed to have pilfered out at nights and brought home countless scraps of iron, trinkets of harness, tosses of wire to make a great rusty nest around itself. Finally began an arc of an acre or two of battered machinery, auto carcasses and skewed reaper reels

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and generations of hay rakes and mowing machines.

Out of the clutter, looming up from the shale roadways and backdropped by a yellow shale hillside, stood a high square grayish house, as if it were a giant crate absent-mindedly put down there. So overbig was this building that it could only be occupied, like a hotel, rather than lived in. The McGraths, even though one reach of room along almost the entire back of the house held only the long table where everyone on the ranch ate, had barely managed to habitate the first floor, and a central stairwell remorselessly marched on to another warren of rooms upstairs. Dad and I shared a corner bedroom up there, Grandma was given one across the stairwell, and the rest of the rooms either yawned empty or were crammed with stray boxes.

The Camas house was high-ceilinged and cold. Even on summer nights, the wind off the Big Belts slapped our corner room. It was chilly quarters in more ways than that, only a few clothes hung starkly in the closet, our underwear and socks in a dresser drawer, all else cached in the house at Ringling. We felt encamped rather than settled—Dad was still sizing up McGrath, deciding how far to cast us in with him—and the flow of life through the house did nothing to ease that feeling. Daylong there surged a restless tribal coming and going, the crew men trooping in for breakfast, the chore boy hauling in pails of milk and buckets of eggs, me wandering in and out eleven dozen times a morning, McGrath and Dad coming in for a cup of coffee, the men trooping in for lunch, Grandma

back and forth to the garden, McGrath arriving with a hungover sheepherder he was delivering off to a sheep camp, me wandering some more, Mrs. McGrath off to give McGrath some message she had forgotten at lunch, the choreboy bucketing in more milk, more eggs, the men trooping in for supper . . . People coming and going around here like chickens with their heads chopped off, Grandma sometimes muttered, even as she herself, apron flapping, hustled down the storebin stairs for the twentieth time.

A different disorder went on during meals, when a dozen or twenty of us^M—it was one of Grandma's instant and justified grumbles that she never knew what the total was going to be^H—might be lined along the span of oilclothed table. McGrath had a small, stinging sense of humor, like a popper on the end of his whiplike temper. His one favorite story, guffawed mealtime after mealtime, was of the fellow he had seen fork in a mouthful of overhot potatoes, spit them into his hand, and hurl them back to his plate with the shriek: Now blaze, damn you, blaze! His other notion of fun was to single out one of the crew and fire questions about the day's work, delaying the man in his eating until everyone else had finished. Then McGrath would rear out of his chair and bray, Well, let's go back to work. Andy, from the looks of your plate you must not've been hungry.

Somehow McGrath's swagger had attracted a demure wife, half his size and a fraction his conceit. They whiffed past each other in life, McGrath in his steady gale of bluster and

Mrs. McGrath eddying and zephyrlike. Her one mistake, which she made every week or so, was to try to edify the table talk above sheep ailments and butts of hay. Once she announced out of nowhere that she had just read in a magazine that every one of the sons of Franklin Delano Roosevelt was of strapping build, over six feet. McGrath looked at her, not unkindly but puzzled, and said: What in the name of Bejesus H. Christ does that have to do with anything?

What anything had to do with anything on the Camas often was not clear, beginning with McGrath himself. With his cask of chest, the even grander gut beneath, and a great boxy head jowled like a bulldog's, he always looked roundly out of place on foot. Saddle years had bowed his legs wide, and he toed along in cowboy boots as if hating each touch of the ground. But on horseback, the legs pegged down into the stirrups as if into a socket, his swell of chest looked right, the ugly head somehow went against the sky like the profile of a Comanche chief. ~~A~~ McGrath could flip a lasso onto anything his horse could catch up with, and whooped his own cheers when he did. Within weeks after the three of us at last were living at the Camas, one of McGrath's new sheepherders who hadn't sufficiently dried from a spell of boozing went out of his head and his clothes and ran off naked into the hills. McGrath grabbed a lariat from his pickup, heaved onto the herder's surprised nag, and jogged away in pursuit. Dabbed it on him

first throw, too, he blared to us at the next mealtime. Had him snubbed down for the doc in no time. ~~H~~ Why this bred-in-the-^{9A 55}
bone ropehand had turned to sheep ranching, no one knew ^M although some made the guess that having been discovered searing his own brand on another party's cattle had something to do with it. On whatever wind of chance, McGrath had landed at the Camas and leased six thousand fat ewes to put on its grass.

He's quite the McGrath, Grandma said soon after we arrived, and did not mean it in admiration. From Dad's stories, it came as no surprise to see that McGrath ran the ranch as if showing the world a trick from under his hat. Decisions were all jangle and swash. ~~8~~ at morning, everyone might be flung into fence mending as if every post on the ranch were going to crash over within ~~a minute~~. ^{The} ~~8~~ by lunch, McGrath would have the entire crew ricocheting to some forgotten corner of the range to shove sheep onto fresh pasture. It was noticeable that McGrath had the clever bully's instinct about who to leave out of his loosely flung orders. Instead of his bluster, Dad and Grandma were favored with controlled grumbles of suggestion. Grandma of course met McGrath in kind, but Dad seemed more bemused. Ye can tell this spread from half across the valley, he declared as he watched the agitation. It's the one with dust clouds going every direction at once.

McGrath had quirks further. He let what looked like a rogue's gallery of the dog world roam the ranch--half a dozen ^h

mutts and slinkers whose one common characteristic was that they were almost useless around sheep. Shep had not survived his winter, the life gone from him one night as he lay in his peace beneath the kitchen table in Ringling; even Grandma admitted that it was fortunate he was not on hand to contend with this bullying pack. # McGrath's philosophy about his crew seemed the same as his notion about dogs. He hired some of the most hopeless of men, on the calculation that he could get by with paltry wages and yet harry them into doing the needed work. One of these apparitions, of course, was the herder he had had to ~~rope~~ ^{Lasso} when the man pranced off into the trees naked and delirious. But more baffling yet, McGrath one day arrived from town with another herder who was lurching out of several weeks of cheap wine, and when he had sobered enough to wobble to the supper table, it began to become clear that our newcomer had barely enough English to pronounce that he was straight from Finland. All else came out in some beyond-Helsinki gabble as if he were chewing glass. Can't savvy what the hell his name is, McGrath mused between the splutters. We'll just call him Finnigan.

Two of the crew had been with McGrath for years, beating along behind him through southern Montana from one leased ranch to the next. They had done so for so long that their names were hardly spoken separate on the Camas, simply splined into Mickey-and-Rudy as if they were twins. They were anything but.

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Mickey had a froggy face and build, one cheek forever wadded with tobacco and lifting his vast mouth into a disgusted smirk, his wide low shoulders always half-hunched as if to ward off the next bluster from McGrath. No one could quite decipher why Mickey stayed on and on with McGrath, but it must have fed a habit of disgracing himself. By every instinct in him, Mickey was a bunkhouse lawyer, grouser, something just short of a saboteur. He could slouch through his work for McGrath, as much of it as he did, in a slow huff and speechify inside himself about the misery of it all. You could see his lips moving as he practiced his outrage. McGrath, for his part, cussed Mickey elaborately at least once a week, with practice nips in between, and put him on the dreariest jobs that came up. Hornlocked together, they showed never a sign of value for one another, and every sign of going on with their blood feud until apoplexy truced it for one or the other of them.

But Rudy, the other longtime hand, would listen sharply to each of McGrath's orders, say in great agreement Right you are, Mac-- then with perfect deftness go off and do whatever task on the ranch he thought needed doing. As he marched off in his own directions, often with an irrigating shovel rifled on his shoulder, Rudy looked like a frontier trooper strayed from a Remington sketch: rod-straight backbone, all his striding motion from the waist down, noble white hair

and a trimmed white mustache. Also, strange skills kept appearing from him. He could play the violin, and carve surprises from wood, and had built a tiny model cannon which could blast a ball bearing through a one-inch board. But the great startlement of this parade-ground knight was his eternal spitting of snuff juice. It squirted from him in abrupt brown blurts, punctuating his sentences, announcing a thought to come. Rudy was the one man on the ranch never beset by mosquitoes, and always claimed it was the snoose juice percolating through his bloodstream which kept them off.

When Dad hired on at the Camas, it had been with the contract that when summer came he would thread through the disorder of the place and get the ranch's rich hay crop harvested. Somehow a crew had to be held together through the months of mowing and raking and bucking and stacking of some 150 butts of hay, some 1400 tons of it when at last all the fields had been sickled and combed clean--and Dad's reputation in the valley said he was a man to do it.

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The first move he made was to turn down McGrath's offer to include Mickey-and-Rudy in the haying crew: I'll have my own men, and I'll particularly not have that pair. He next left word with the bartenders at the Stockman and the Pioneer. Out of their Saturday night throngs they sized men for him, he winnowed the candidates, and came back to the

Camas one June evening with a complete haying crew of nine men.

By summer's end, nearly three months of tricky rain—
~~Dad~~
 delayed hay harvest behind him, ~~he~~ still had the same nine in the crew, man after man among them asking to come back for the season again next year. It was a matchless job of foremanning even for Dad, who perhaps had needed to prove skill to himself again after his desperate time of sickness.

Whatever accounted for the silken summer of haying, McGrath put it against his own slapbang style of crew being hired and more promptly fired, and made Dad an offer to stay on at the Camas as—what? Not foreman, exactly, because McGrath wanted to be able to catapult Mickey-and-Rudy and a few other hands around the ranch as he pleased. Not entirely the sheep boss either, although taking on a share of the camptending would be part of the job. Dad was to be oh, hell, just generally in charge, Charlie, you know what's to be done on this spread.

The lambing shed and the haying season would be his to oversee, the hay once again on a valuable contract of dollars-per-ton; beyond that, ~~Dad~~
~~he~~ would have direction of any of the crew not being reined around at the moment by McGrath himself.

The fuzzed line of authority—entirely typical of McGrath—
^M
 was a bothering notion, but the offered wage was good, particularly with the haying contract added; also, Grandma would be kept on as cook. Well, it's something to try, Dad

offered, and Grandma agreed. With what was beginning to seem our tendency for somewhat askew arrangements, we stayed on in the upstairs of the big house at the Camas.

In these earliest months at the ranch, my grandmother and my father gingerly began to put together something like a family life for us. The two of them being who they were, that life of course came at the elbow of hard work and had to pant as best it could to keep up. The one time of truce I could always count on was summer dusk. After her dawn-to-supper day of cooking and house chores and his as-long day of haying and handling the crew, Grandma would go with Dad to the hayfield and help him repair machinery for the morning-- shave a drawknife along fresh pine poles to make teeth for the huckrake, plop beside the stacker arm to grip a wrench onto a bolthead for him, anything that needed doing on the downed equipment, all of it done with a certain declared calm between them.

Yet those level evenings hardly ever held the pleasure for me they ought to have, because Dad's style of mechanicking meanwhile would have started me gritting my teeth. He saw me, fair is fair, as his logical fetcher of tools during that repair work; my ailing knee excused me from all other work during the haying. What he did not see was that his notion of fetching had exactly the jittery, hoppity-skippety rhythm, or lack of it, which I rapidly was learning to dislike about ranch work. If I was sent to the pickup to dig out a boxhead

wrench for him, the next moment I would be sent again to pick up the chisel which lay beside the wrench. Nor was there any outguessing him--always some further gizmo to send me trudging again, or worse, dogtrotting all the way to the blacksmith shop.

Six evenings might pass, then, with the pair of them gentled and me muttering behind my teeth, and on the seventh, the regular trip to White Sulphur Springs for groceries, and into real trouble.

This, as acute as if it is happening again now: this father of mine has parked the pickup in front of the grocery store and says, oh so much too offhandedly, Well, ye don't need me to get the groceries, do ye? I'll step over to the Stockman for a minute. At best, this grandmother of mine pushes out a level Well, all right then, as if being reasonable might just fetch him back that much sooner. At worst comes the flat snapped I suppose, which in truth means Yes and you're going to overstay and I'm going to take you to war about it.

All during the grocery shopping with Grandma, I half-hold my breath wondering if he will be back at the pickup by the time we get there. Every once in awhile, surprise to us all, he is there, and the mood leaps up, the drive back to the Camas is full of chatter. Most often, he is missing. I look desperately toward the Stockman, hoping I can declare in triumph, Here he comes now! That hope snuffed, I go on to the

next one as we climb into the pickup: maybe he will arrive before Grandma begins to mutter—no, too late, Darn his hide anyway she steams, why doesn't he come?

By every evidence in my memory, and in the words of everyone I have found who knew him well, my father cannot be called an unfeeling man. He tended opposite, fretful about a calamity on anyone he knew, trailing generosities I still happen onto in his wake: Knowed your daddy when I landed into
this country in ³³⁶thirty-six, at shearing time at the Dogie.
He staked me for my bedroll, I was so dead busted. Didn't
have to do it neither, but he done 'er . . . But with those
waitings, he inflicted a pain as sharp on my grandmother's mind as any that can be conjured. She had had one relentless stint of waiting around in life for the saloons to let a man go, and she seethed at the idea of another, even if it amounted only to minutes of casual beer.

To Dad, that is exactly what it did amount to. The saloons and the men ranged on their barstools had been a heartbeat of him, and of the valley, all his grown life. A beer or two was simply a chaser for the mellow conversation. My own feelings were hopelessly mixed, tiered. I wanted Grandma not to be angry, even as I was more than half-angry at Dad myself. I thought up excuses for him: Why shouldn't he have a breather to himself, see his friends? The world isn't gonna end over a few minutes of that. I switched at once to

the argument on our side: The hell, why do we have to stew in this pickup while he guzzles beer in there? It was frazzling, a crisscross of tensions cutting tight inside me. And everything would become worse, I knew, if Grandma gave her final fidget and sent me to get him: Gee gods, see what he's doing in there. If he wasn't ready pronto to leave the saloon, then I had the predicament of trudging back to try to tell her so—Ah, he says he'll be along in just a minute—or of hanging restlessly at this side until the spirit moved him, both of us now rooted in the Stockman while she simmered across the street.

When he finally came—all of this might have crackled for only twenty minutes or so—he generally would try an offhand Ready to go? She would give it back to him—We been ready for ages—and the silent battle would begin. Halfway to the ranch, one or the other might try to break it. But most often a trip which started in ice ended the same, and I would look aside out the window touching cold on my shoulder, wordlessly crying a kind of prayer that the mood would get no worse, damning in my head the one or the other of these chilly warriors. Or more often, the both.

Beneath it all was a hard unsaid truth we all knew. The three of us by then had been together long enough, and closely enough, that if my father and my grandmother parted ways, I now could have the choosing of which ^{one}~~I~~ would live

with ^MI-and I would choose at once to go with Dad again. I
~~Grandma~~
felt love for her, she would bring me up more steadily and
standardly than he could, in countless ways would make more
sacrifices in her life for the sake of mine. In justice to
us both ^Mperhaps all three of us ^M-she was the one to raise
me less hazardously, if choice ought to be made. But I would
never choose so.

By then, I had been shaped on the opposite side of the
family from her, the side which indeed cared less for family
than for friends and the valley's flow of life, and so suggested
that if my ranchman father could not manage to be enough family
for me, at least he was going to be a friend such as none
other in the world. The side, too, which always had half a
notion to hie off for opportunity rather than settle in for
~~obstinacy~~
~~endurance~~^M. In outlook and manner then ^M-and I suppose in inner
murmurations which I could not hear until much later ^M-I had
become more thoroughly Charlie Doig's son than I could ever
become Bessie Ringer's grandson. It lay as a hammer of fact
amid us that she knew all this, and that, a woman who long
since had determined she was through putting up with bad
bargains in life and longer since had earned that right, she
could only accept these short-sided terms.

If, that is, she stayed on with Dad and me at all, now
that his health had mended once more. It apparently became
a guessing game in the valley whether she would. A town

voice has reported: There was some that said they didn't see how she could take over the daughter's husband, and the child too. But I said there was love there, that was the way of it. It wasn't quite the way of it, for there still was all too little sign of love—^l or affection or admiration or much of any other warmth—^m shown between my father and my grandmother. They were, after all, an alliance, corded together only by the bloodline which knotted in me, and perhaps the best that could have been expected of them was the wary civility of allies. Some of the time, as in the aftermath of those trips to town, it took their most dogged efforts to muster that.

Yet the months added up, and the three of us remained under the same roof. Rather, Dad and Grandma remained under it, and I edged under on weekends, for when the school year began again, I once more had to board out in White Sulphur.

If it had occurred to me, over the next span of time I had all the grounds to demand of Dad just how this pieced-together family of ours was making my life any less unsettled. In the several years between my mother's death and Grandma's arrival, I had followed Dad through seven or eight places to live. In the year and a half after Grandma and I left Ringling, I ricocheted among half a dozen. Two of Grandma's sons and their families lived in White Sulphur, and whenever possible I boarded now with one or the other of them. But the sons

themselves were in a period of changing jobs and homes, and in fast sequence here when I was twelve and thirteen years old, I hopscotched after them through households as various as they were numerous. One of the places was a tiny house which had its toilet in the cellar, reached by way of a trapdoor in the middle of the kitchen floor. Another was a looming old box which had seen its last paint a generation before. There even was a stint, apparently in some moment when everyone else was between households, back once more with Nellie and his wife, who didn't have the advantage of being relatives but at least stayed put.

The pattern to all this was jagged but constant: I would sleep on a couch in the living room of the moment, spend my day at school, roam town afterward as much as I wanted, come back to whichever house it happened to be—I once had a memory slip and returned to the one with the cellar toilet instead of the looming one across town—lose myself in a book or magazine until bedtime, dig the next morning's change of clothes from my suitcase behind the couch, and settle in for the night again. I found that everyone treated me fondly if a bit absent-mindedly—as I had noticed at Jordans' during Dad and Ruth's winter of reconciliation, the boarding child is something like a stranded visitor that people get accustomed to half-seeing at the edges of their vision—and no one, least of all me, seemed to think there was much unusual about

my alighting here and there casually as a roosting pullet.

Yet perhaps the unsettledness had more effect than I realized, for on weekends and in the summer I found myself islands of calm at the Camas ranch even amid the eddying energies of McGrath and his crew. It helped that this house too held shelves of books, as the Brekkes' had. Mrs. McGrath had learned that burrowing off somewhere to read could keep her aside from her husband's swooshes through the place. But when I borrowed from the shelves now, I found scenes never dreamed of in the Brekke books: They killed him in Spangle Valley. They waited hidden among the rocks of Buffaloback Mountain and when he rode below they shot him out of the saddle . . . She was right down there at my feet, her eyes shining, her breasts trembling, drawn up in tight points, and pointing right up at me. She was down there, and the breath was roaring in the back of my throat . . .

When I had enough of printed roarings for the moment, the ranch could give me a silent place as well. For by greatest luck a gray ship, high-hulled and pinging with emptiness, rode at the far end of the ranch buildings. A ship, at least, to my imaginings. In the years when the machine chomped broadly through grainfields, it was called a combine.

Now this dreadnought stood, in its tons of dulling metal and clusters of idle gearwheels, for me to climb into, all through: on careful hands and with my bandaged knee tensed

straight behind me, over the floorful of threshing blades, past gearings fat with ancient grease which, when I touched through its dried crust, still came away slick in my hand; through pencil-thin rods of sunlight which drilled in around the gear housings and shaft ports; at last to the dark maw which fell away in shelves of teeth and gratings to the nose of the machine. The toes of my shoes clouted on sheet metal as I dodged under sets of spiky metal fingers and over driveshafts. When I stopped, the only sound was the ringing echo of my own listening. It was as if the old combine, the noisiest machine on earth in full shuddering gulp across a wheatfield, had gone quieter than anything else when it at last quit work.

Even the day's heat changed within its metal tunnels, flattened and spread into a cooking sensation which came from everywhere at once. I made a game of seeing how hot I could stand it in the dim shaft. When the searing metal was too much for me, I would climb, up and out, through a deft sliding panel in the machine's top and into the sheet metal ~~hopper~~^{grain =} which hung high over the side. This was the lookout spot, with baffling slippery angles which made me lodge my body across them and feel the tautness of watching, eyeing the ranch.

¶ My mood there was to see everything as the edges of tomorrow's, as if time were waiting in coiled shimmers behind the outline of whatever my watching picked out. The gasoline tank for the ranch machinery, with its round red face of metal which

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rang a deep blung when I hit a ball against it; that would be the vast green left field fence of Fenway Park if I grew up to be a baseball player. The meadows of wild hay splotched richly along Camas Creek, and the climbing slopes of grass: if I became a ranchman as Dad was, there would be such land mile upon mile. Grandma, on the way in from the garden with her apron held full of vegetables: she would magically become less sharp-edged and hard-mouthed, a Lady as steady in temper as in her fondnesses. Dad, arrived from the hayfield in the pickup and then into his hurrying stride to find some repairing piece of metal from the rusty muss around the blacksmith shop: the future magic would settle him into his best work, turn him from any provoking of Grandma. The clasped knee which began to twinge under me now: it would heal at once, and as quickly bear me out of growing up, into these glimpsed tomorrows.

What I gained from the machine's silences, Dad perhaps had found in the busyness of the ranch's chief chore—the raising of sheep. The Camas and its seasons were occupied by the gray thousands of them as if they were some daft breed of dwarves, helpless and demanding, their long clown faces staring out in sad alarm from ruffs of wool. The bands summered in the mountains, plump targets for coyotes and bears and snagging branches; spent autumn in mown hayfields where they could do their best to topple into irrigation ditches or Camas Creek itself; wintered near the ranch buildings where in the nightly

shed or corral they could try to huddle themselves into injury or suffocation. But it was the first fade of winter when the six thousand ewes drew the entire attention of Dad and everyone else on the ranch: springtime, and lambing time.

Lambing at the Camas stretched as one long steady emergency, like a war alert which never quite ignites into battle but keeps on demanding scurry and more scurry. No ritual more frantic exists anywhere in the rearing of animals, and McGrath hounded everyone around in their jobs to make it all the more skittish. The season would begin reasonably enough: in middle March, a lamb or two, tiny yellow sprawls of life, would appear suddenly amid the several thousand ewes. Dad, as what was called day man, would have had a helper or two readying the long low lambing shed on a knoll above Camas Creek. Inside it now stretched rows of boarded pens about four feet square, just large enough to hold a ewe and her lamb. Since the pens were so like small cross-barred jail cells, they were called jugs, and once in the jug, the first few lambs and their mothers were coddled and fussed over like the original customers of a seaside inn. But one day soon, half a dozen lambs are born; and the next day forty; then a hundred, one lamb or another starting its slow glistening dive from the womb into life wherever you looked now.

Then a sledge with half a dozen of the jug pens atop it and pulled by a team of horses would begin to shuttle--

the gutwagon, named for the placenta and accompanying muss from the newly-delivered ewes. Because Mickey was the worst choice for it and McGrath wanted to miss no chance to harass him toward betterment, he was made the gutwagon driver. Like a duke dropped barefoot into a manure pile, Mickey would mince up to a fresh lamb, snatch it up and try half-heartedly to persuade the mother into one of the gutwagon jugs. When she wouldn't be lured, he would have to grab her by the wool and wrestle her in or, worse, try to snare her by the hind leg with a sheephook and snake her in backwards.

Mickey's dour mauling was only the ewe's first welcome to maternity. As the gutwagon was unloaded, Dad or one of his helpers would tip each ewe onto her rump and hold her there while her teats were worked to be sure that milk would flow for the lamb. Then she was strongarmed into one of the jugs, and her lamb put in after. ~~4~~ Sheep being sheep, not all ewes had the idea that they were supposed to be ready to mother their lambs. More than a few saw it all as a bad joke, sniffing the tiny animal as if he were something sour and then, often as not, would butt him flat in the straw and begin walking on him. Damn ye, Dad would erupt, what the hell ye doin' to him? He's yours, old sister, just get used to the idea. Ivan, get in here and hold this goddamn pelter while I suckle the lamb.

With the lamb bulging with milk and the ewe more or less bullied toward motherhood, Dad would send me for his paint

tray. Then ewe and lamb were each stamped, in blotchy digits about three inches high, with a number which showed that they belonged to each other. It also gave them a kind of selfhood, like hospital patients known by the traceries of their charts:

That 256 lamb has the drizzles. . . . That ornery damned 890
ewe still won't take her lamb The 722 lamb is a goner,
I'm gonna have to jacket a fresh one onto that ewe.

Jacketing was a sleight-of-hand I watched with wonder each time, and I have discovered that my father was admired among sheepmen up and down the valley for his skill at it:

He was just pretty catty at that, the way he could get that
ewe to take on a new lamb every time. Put simply, jacketing was a ruse played on a ewe whose lamb had died. A substitute lamb quickly would be singled out, most likely from a set of twins. Sizing up the ~~newcomer~~^(tottering), Dad would skin the dead lamb, and into the tiny pelt carefully snip four small leg holes and a head hole. Then the stand-in lamb would have the skin fitted onto it like a snug jacket on a poodle. ~~H~~ The next step of disguise was to cut out the dead lamb's liver and smear it several times across the jacket of pelt. In its borrowed and bedaubed skin, the new lamb then was presented to the ewe. She would sniff the baby impostor endlessly, distrustful but pulled by the blood-smell of her own. When in a few days she ~~had made~~^{makes} up her dim sheep's mind to accept the lamb, Dad ~~would~~^{would} snip away the jacket and recite ~~his~~^{his} victory: Mother
him like hell now, don't ye? See what a helluva dandy lamb

I got for ye, old sister? Who says I couldn't jacket day onto night
if I wanted to, now-I-ask-ye?

Recites. Yes, exactly. Lambing was a season that recited itself with a clarity and cadence unlike any other in my past:...nine'y-seven, nine'y-eight, nine'y-nine, HUNNERD, IVAN! one, two... The numbers build in my head with the first warm morning of June, and before I can seat myself to write are thrumming me into being again beside the gray-bearded corral as sheep plummet past. A fresh time, I am twelve years old, and piping back to McGrath: a hundred! More quickly than I can thumb down my jackknife twice to cut this first marking notch in the green willow stick, a dozen more ewes whirl out the corral gate beneath McGrath's counting hand. As he counts, McGrath flexes his right palm straight as a cleaver, chopping an inch of air as each sheep pellmells past him. His bulldog face moves a tiny nod at the same time, as if shaking each number out through the heavy lips onto the counted sheep. As always I am his tallyman, notching a stick to record every hundred ewes as McGrath singsongs the count to me. I know to stand soldier-still as I am now, against the corral and a dozen short steps from the gate where the sheep are squirting through, just near enough that McGrath can hear me echo his tally, knew that it is marked...HUNNERD!... Again my jackknife--a hundred!--snicks softly, again a fresh tiny diamond of wood falls from the stick. Lambing is the one stint of work on a ranch that I entirely like. There is a constant doing about it, none of the usual jerky pace of idling one minute and rebuilding the world the next. A couple of times a day, all of the ewes in Dad's long lambing shed must be fed and watered. I help to carry

pitchforkfuls of hay to put in the little feed rack of each jug, heft in a bucket of water to each ewe, wait while she noses the bucket suspiciously and at last drinks. Lambing's tasks are all necessities, one by one by one adding up to something. And the lambing shed itself seems a rare, rare place--a squatting wooden tunnel of a building which smells of damp manure and iodine and warm wool and alfalfa, a fog of odors. Then to come into the sunshine to drive small bunches of ewes and their week-old lambs toward pasture or, better still, to help when the oldest lambs get their docking. I am quicker in the catch pen than any of the men, snatching...HUNNERD!...snatching--a hundred!--a lamb from the bleating swirl of lambs. I pick up the caught lamb, clutch him to me with his slim back tight against my breastbone, hold both his right legs in a crossed grip in my right hand and both the left legs in my left, present him butt forward to the dockers, Dad and McGrath, waiting at the fence. McGrath reaches in between the legs, cuts the bag, squeezes the testicles up out of the cut, brings his mouth to them and nips the twin pale pouches out with his teeth, spits them to the ground. Dad steps in, knifes off the tail, swiftly daubs dark tarry disinfectant on the two seizing cuts. I turn the stunned--docked--lamb right side up, drop him gently outside the pen. Turn back to the swirl of lambs for another...HUNNERD!...Four notches--a hundred!--now. There must be ten when McGrath has finished counting, or sheep are lost. That will mean beating into the thick brush along Camas Creek and climbing into the coulees beyond the water, work which always runs slow and late. Worse, these are the final thousand ewes-with-lambs of the ranch's six thousand head, and the trail drive which

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will take them all to summer range must wait on the search. Worse again, McGrath is, as Grandma says it, a crazy old thing when he drives the ranch to look for lost sheep. Hurrying, he will aim the pickup across bogs which would swallow a train. Raging to have lost time, he fights free of the first bog and roars into the next. The story is told that when McGrath was a young cowboy, he rode his horse into a saloon in Greybull, Wyoming, and roped the mounted deer heads off the wall, scattering drinkers and poker players like pullets. Dad says McGrath still has a hellion streak in him...HUNNERD!...The notches begin--¹
a hundred!¹_m to be a design on the stick, a stepway of bright slots against the gray-green bark. I hear Mickey cursing a sheep which has broken from the back of the band. Oh, how Mickey dislikes lambing, detests sheep, despises himself for knowing no job but sheep ranching, hates us all for seeing his life's predicament. Mickey it is who behind McGrath's back will sneer at him as Little Jesus, and who roared out to a Saturday night saloon crowd in White Sulphur that McGrath was a gutrobbing son-of-a-bitch to have to work for. I watch Mickey at the back of the sheep. He has the mean orange dog named Mike with him, a good match. The runaway ewe is being nipped savagely by Mike, to Mickey's encouragement. McGrath would blister Mickey with swearing if he saw the scene, but McGrath is too busy with his count. Mickey knows by instinct just when he can get away with anything...

HUNNERD!...The soft snick--¹a hundred!¹_m and the sixth groove from the willow peels away to the ground. These shards of wood, I notice, are the shape and size of the half moon at the base of my thumb nail. I look up from my hands and see, at the far end of the sheep opposite

Mickey, Karl the Swede standing quietly and saying soft words to his sheepdog. Karl the Swede is a pleasant man and a good worker when drink isn't tormenting him. He will herd ~~numbers~~ these sheep in the mountains all summer, if he can last the drought in himself. Lately to get his mind off whiskey he has spent his spare minutes chopping firewood, and his woodpile is nearly as long and high as a small shed.

One: a ewe jumps some imagined terror as she goes through the gate, and McGrath steps back as she sails past his chest...HUNNERD!
I giggle —a hundred! because she was a special ewe, a hundredth and flying like an acrobat as well. McGrath has kept the count steady with his chopping hand. When Dad does the count, he stands half sideways to the river of sheep, his right hand low off his hip and barely flicking as each sheep passes. I have seen buyers, the men in gabardine suits and creamy Stetsons, with other habits — pointing just two fingers, or pushing the flat palm of a hand toward the sheep — as they count. The one trick everyone has is somehow to pump the end of an arm at each whizzing sheep, make the motion joggle a signal to the brain. McGrath says he knew an old-time sheepman who could count sheep as they poured abreast through a ten-foot gate. ~~Count~~ Could that be: could a person...
HUNNERD!...keep such numbers —a hundred! scampering clearly in his brain? The sheep plunge past McGrath only one or two at once, because Dad is working the corral gate in a rhythm which sluices them through smoothly. He watches too for lame or sick ewes, to be singled out later and put in the hospital herd. A black ewe blurs past, a marker sheep. Dad can glance across a band of sheep for its markers — a black ewe here, over there one with a floppy ear, beyond one with a Roman nose — and

estimate closely whether the entire thousand ewes are there. The sheep don't look all alike to me, but neither do they look as separate as Dad sees them. Each ewe is different as a person to him, not even McGrath can sort them by eye that way...HUNNERD!...Now my yell—a hundred!—is louder, a signal to McGrath that we are near the end. Nine notches on the willow stick, a tight knot of ewes crowds the gate. If the count is right, no sheep lost, we will start trailing to the summer range in the Big Belts. ^{A dozen} ~~Ten~~ miles a day, two days of the trail. Moving ~~sheep~~ is the piece of work I can do better than anybody else on the ranch. McGrath tries to take the sheep along in a bellowing brawl, setting the dogs on them every half-minute. Dad does better, but eventually he too is apt to get exasperated and begin to overpush the sheep. But I can make a game of simply shadowing the animals, trying to sense ahead of their jittery veers, heading them off with a roaring Hyaw! or a tossed rock. Yet no matter who is at work behind them, sheep are the moodiest of creatures, one moment cruising down the road so promptly you can hardly keep up, the next moment refusing to budge at all. Which will it be this time, race or battle?...HUNNERD!...The tenth hundred ewe—a hundred!—gallops away as I press the knife for the next, last notch. McGrath counts out the last straggle—twen'y-two, twen'y-three, that's them!—and whirls to me. I nod and say, a thousand and twenty-three, counting with the knife blade my ten notches, then doing it once again as McGrath looks on and Dad steps close to watch. They are pleased: the count is right, lambing is at an end, the trailing can start. I grin across from the me of then to the me of now. Another time, we have finished spring, begun summer.

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~~or a tossed rock, until they surrendered into a flow, a constant push and swirl toward wherever I wanted them to go.~~

→ My talent for sheep and interest in them ended with lambing, but the herding season which began with summer swept me in anyway. If the meadows were too wet for haying, Dad would take a turn at camp tending, and we would drive off into the timbered slopes of the Dry Range with boxes of groceries, a full day to be spent chatting with the edgy herders and towing their wagons to fresh pasture. Or I might even go when McGrath himself did the tending, if he managed to find me for it. You be careful riding with him, Grandma inevitably warned, as if I could keep the pickup from careening off a cliff by putting my mind to it. ⁹ McGrath liked to have me along because I was quick at opening the several fenceline gates on the road into the mountains, and he liked such saving of moments. Also, sonless himself, he seemed interested to talk to a boy, although in his heavy way was not always sure how such a palaver was done. Did I tell you of once I's workin' down at Greybull in Wyoming and seen a fellah walk between a horse's hind legs? ^{by God} 'S a fact. This geezer was a real horse hand, and it was hayin' time and he was a mower man, drivin' a real skittish team, a big roan and a gray. He's the only one in the crew could git a harness on 'em. Rained us out of hayin' a couple of days, and we all went to town and got good and howlin' drunk. The boss got us back out to the place, and this geezer is still Christamighty drunk

and gits it in his head to show us how tame he's got this ornery roan horse. He had a fancy Stetson on, big wide brim on it out t' here. He tells us he's gonna get down on his knees, and he's gonna walk on his knees between that horse's hind legs with his big hat on. Show us how tame he's got that roan horse, see. So he goes down to the barn, everybody on the place followin' him. He starts going under the horse's tail down on his knees when the horse gives a Christamighty kick, catches that fancy hat and swipes it right off, sailed the damn thing plumb across the barn, see. That horse didn't miss his head a inch. So the guy is surprised as all hell, then he yells: WHOA, YOU BIG PINK SONOFABITCH, WHOA! Then you know, that goddamn horse just stood there and he goes right through his hind legs and out under his belly like he said he was gonna. Been you or me or anybody else, that horse'd have kicked him into the middle of next week, wouldn't you think? Hup, another gate for you . . .

An hour or so of this and we would be at the first of the sheep camps, McGrath plunging the pickup off in a rough sweep for the herder and his band. What mood we would find when the herder at last showed himself, his saddlehorse and dog eyeing us with twice the interest he was, had always to be a gamble. In the eighty or so years that Meagher County had been one of the prime sheep areas of Montana, hundreds of sheepherders strode or rode its slopes of pasture, and they

added up to something like a race of hermit gypsies. # Countless of them went through life trapped in their homeland language; it was a historic joke that the eastern end of the county originally had been populated entirely by Norwegian herders who knew but two words of English: Martin Grande, the name of their employer. Fairly or not, the numbers of Romanians who arrived as herders had a particular reputation for shunning any language but their own. Their chosen pair of words was simply no savvy. There exists the exasperated report of an early forest ranger who came upon a Romanian herder placidly spreading his sheep across an allotment of cattle range: All I could get out of him was 'No savvy' until I applied a shot-loaded quirt. ... it was surprising how quickly the incident got to all the Romanians in that district. # McGrath had neither Norwegians nor Romanians on his slopes just then, but he did have the baffling Finnigan= from=Finland. While McGrath blared and chortled, Finnigan could only shake his head slowly as an ox and clack some gibberly mystery back to him. Karl the Swede was another uncertain talker, his shy throaty sentences so low they seemed to come out of his shirt collar instead of his mouth. Other herders had the language but not the inclination to do much with it. One I remember hated even to say Hello when we arrived at his camp; he would stand half= sideways with his eyes darting to the timber until gradually he would face around and at last begin to make

sentences.

All in all, stepping out of the pickup at a herder's camp had some of the touchiness of coming ashore on a self-exile's island. I can think of only one of McGrath's herders who seemed entirely to thrive on the lonesome life—Louie, a tall soldierly man with a German accent. He owned a pair of tiny deft binoculars which snapped open like a case for eyeglasses, and spent his time peering for wildlife on the mountain slopes. Yesterday a black bear come, up over there. I watched at him 9/16/63
all morning. But the others had the common herder's affliction, the mind sprung by the weight of the silences against it.

However slowly, and if it could be pried out at all, there generally would be news to be heard from the sheepherder: a coyote seen on a hillside, a ewe gone lame or ripped by a snag, a porcupine treed by his dogs as they suicidally tried to get their faces full of quills. Dad, if it was his turn at camp tending, would smoke and chat until the herder began talking, then only nod and ask enough to keep the flow coming. McGrath's style was to blurt at the man until he at last set off on some startled telling or another, the two of them steaming toward full exasperation. Then abruptly, an instant before the herder was ready to fling his job in McGrath's face, we would wheel away to move the sheepwagon to a new pasture site.

The sheepwagon could be seen to be a child of the prairie

schooner. With its rounded canvas top and high spoked wheels, a first glance easily found it back amid the beadlike file of white-topped wagons westering through our history. But a sheepwagon always existed alone, remote as a drifting brig on the grass ocean. It was built for one man to bide through the narrow months in, and that single life only: in the mountain dawn or dusk, yellowed light from the kerosene lamp at a herder's wagon showed like one frail star fallen into the timber.

¶ Inside the wagon with Dad or McGrath, it felt to me as if space, the very air, had changed, somehow tidied and tamped itself. I wanted to live in ^{a sheepwagon} one, so much more interesting were they than the blank room back at the Camas. Nowhere else had the sense of deft shrinkage as if a house had been pulled in and pulled in until it came down just above your head and out past your fingertips. Storage bins doubled as places to sit, the table hinged daintily down from a wall when wanted, every built-in cabinet had a tiny firm clasp snugging its door. The bunk bed fit across the inmost end of the wagon as properly as a blade snicked into a jackknife. At the opposite end on a platform all its own sat the small square stove, usually with a pan of mulligan stew or a blue-enameled pot of sour tarry coffee waiting to be fired up one more time. Finally, to let the herder glance out more easily to the sheep, the wagon had a Dutch door; with its bottom half closed, I could lean out on it and feel as if far up on a lookout across this high pasture of summer.

In place, the wagon was a kind of ship's cabin for the herder, tidy, buttoned, comely. But during the move to the next site, it became only a floating bin. Everything loose had to be packed away in the wagon's nooks, then onto the floor was piled whatever firewood the herder had chopped, his coal oil can and likely a creamery can full of drinking water, his wash basin, the battered metal dish his dog ate out of, the gunny-sacked ration of oats for his horse, white sacks of salt for the sheep, and last of all, the small front steps for the doorway. ^H Because a sheepwagon sat so high on its running gear--the floor nearly chest high to a man on the ground--it towed across rough country with a staggering topheavy gait. A successful move of a sheepwagon was one that didn't topple the chimney pipe and leave it to be searched out of a few miles of roadside brush. At the new site, there was leveling to be done. A cup of water would be put on the table to see how the wagon tilted, then small holes were dug for the wheels to drop in, or a stout stick was shouldered under a corner of the wagon box to lift it into steadiness for another week.

Such, at least, was how a sheepwagon was properly moved. McGrath in his headlong way was apt to tow it as if dragging a tree stump. More often than not, he would forget to fasten the cabinet doors, and a flour can would fly out and explode snowily over everything, pots and pans then avalanching ^{from} ~~out~~ ~~of~~ the oven and likely a can of lard or jar of jam leaping in after.

Credit him, McGrath always seemed genuinely surprised to fling back the door and find the gooey wreckage. For a minute or so he would dab at it doubtfully, firing pots and pans back into the oven and kicking flour out the door in tiny puffs, then would snort The hell with it, a sheepherder's got more time than I do, and off we would buck to the next sheepwagon move.

More than two years were spent on the Camas this way, the seasons milling into one another like the fitful sheep themselves. Dad and Grandma steadied the ranch with their work, but had less luck with each other. Ours remained a brink of a family, the two of them at sudden edge with each other, then calming again. When they came to take me to the Camas for the weekends with them, usually the mood seemed to me as chancy as among McGrath's wild sheepherders. But as the third winter of this was about to begin, something vaster to judge came along. McGrath had made a proposition. He was going to give up the Camas for other ventures, and one of them was the lease of a small ranch two-hundred miles to the north. He would put two thousand ewes on the place: would Dad run the ranch and the sheep for half the profit?

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None of us had been to that far region of Montana, and naturally McGrath's prospects were as unpredictable as the country. But Dad was for going. He took me aside and talked out his reasoning: Ivan, I think I'll take on those two bands

of sheep for McGrath. He's a bearcat to work for, but the
son-of-a-buck knows livestock and he knows how to turn money . . .
I think it's a chance to take, going up north. But I don't
know now, how do you feel about changing schools?

Eight weeks earlier I had started high school in White Sulphur, with the classmates I had known since Dad and I came away from the mountains after my mother's death. The school, the town, the valley made all the lifestream I knew anything about. Yet when I put all this against Dad's words and the musing look on his face, the sum did not add up to as much as I expected. It may have been that I was more weary than I knew of the suitcase life of boarding out in White Sulphur, or that I was just now coming across a portion of restlessness inherited from Dad. Whatever was behind it, I swallowed and gave my father the answer he wanted, and apparently the one I secretly did too: I feel okay about that.

Grandma. She had lived in the valley for forty years now, nearly all her adult life. Her friends, her sons, her patterns of existence were there. The alliance between Dad and her had problems which showed no sign of easing. Whatever the ties of affection between her and me, I couldn't believe she could be talked into this total uprooting toward the north. We'll just have to see about her, Dad said. He rehearsed to me a dozen arguments he would put to her, and when the moment

came simply fired out: This damn valley has never got us much of anywhere, Lady. All either of us has to show for our lives here is a helluva pile of hard work. I say we ought to try out new country. Will ye come? [#] She was silent a long while ^H-but a thinking silence, not a perturbed one. At last: All right then. When can we be gone and get it over and done with?

The two of us watched, struck silent, as she honked into a handkerchief and then clouted pots and pans onto the counter for the next kitchen chore. She was truly corded to us now, and the fact came with a sense of wonder and relief ^H-and somehow among them, a nudge of concern.

One shard of time repeats itself like the snow-helmets of mountains across each season of my memory. An edged piece of the day, that is, in the strictest sense—the high sun-point called noon.

It seems curious now that this one daily interval counted for so much. Daybreak did not, nor dusk; days arrived and went with an unnoticed ease then. But noon climbed up like a crier to a tower, and my father reckoned his life, and those of his ranch crews, and mine at his side, by its powers:

After noon we'll just go and . . . Let's get this done by noon . . . Better noon up and get some grub, don't ye think?

And my grandmother, noon meaning to her the vast midday meal—
we called it dinner, in full honor—to be arrayed along the sweep of table for a lambing crew or a shearing crew or a haying crew or whatever other kinds of crew might turn up from the world: Ivan, pretty please, yammer the bell to call those good-for-nothin's in here. Noon it was, too, when Taylor Gordon might be met on the street in White Sulphur, on the way to his cabin for his own dreaming meal and turning back at you to leave one last New York story or particle of philosophy: You know, I've found in life that I'd rather make a fast dime than a slow buck. Or when Harold Chadwick, straddled onto a counter stool in the Dupuyer cafe, might be coaxed to tell of hunting elk, when he was my age, with the ancient Metis mountain man Toussaint Salois: He had his

big old buffalo coat and could set by the campfire just as comfortable- the rest of us 'd be freezin' to death. Even my mother, the one voice unknown from any of these years, can be almost-heard in some noontime, talking as she would have with my father as their morning's harvest of grouse sizzle on the campfire of their Grass Mountain herding site.

For so potent a piece of time, noon was not exact at all. It never meant to us high twelve o'clock, any more than to the early English countryfolk who accounted their noon at three p.m., the ninth hour after sunrise. Noon meant instead the controlled curve of the day from morning into afternoon, where the beginning of labor crossed into the lessening of ~~passage~~ labor. A gradual but distinct point, that is to say, which the sundial still could have expressed better than the clock. There would have been the advantage, too, that the blankness of the sundial on an overcast day would have said more truthfully how vague time became when clouds curded grayly over the valley and all work of the ranch was drenched out. Once or twice I can remember a two-day rain, which was all the rain we could imagine, and the loss of two working-noons in a row was befuddling, ominous, a dank eclipse. More than enough testimony, each time, that the sun's topmost moments of arch stood as a necessity in our world of ranchcraft.

Noon did a second and special service for me, more potent in its way even than the majestic division of time. It

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~~tinctured all that I saw after it. Beyond that equator of the day, the land itself began to change for me. Some of the pitiless mid-day wash of light began to be drawn out of it, could be seen fleeing in the ghost-dance of heat up from the mown fields. Past noon, as a pair of hours and then another and another were added, there came a honeyed light, richer, more golden. I stand yet on the lion-back ridge above the Two Medicine Gorge, or in the shade of an alfalfa stack at the Camas ranch, or on the back of a tractor amid the flung horizon of plains beyond the Milk River, and always, to the west, the noon-loosed tint is doing its magic.~~

~~As a boy, I prized the trick — having unearthed it in one book or another — of estimating the remainder of daylight by stacking my hands, held carefully vertical as tiny walls and at reading-distance from my eyes, between the line of horizon and the sun: each finger equaling ten minutes of daylight, a hand and two fingers signaling a full hour yet before sunset. Taking such sightings of time, I watched the backdrop of earth make its changes. Mountains always grew in dignity as the sun approached them, drew up their profiles more boldly, loftier than an instant before. The nap of sage or the chamois expanses of bunchgrass doubled in distinctness of tone. And the hills, for there were always hills, offered above the prairie as if they were the earth's roofbeams and dikes and parapets, and always to the west of~~

wherever we lived along the inclining midⁱsection of Montana:
once noon had begun its drop of day across them, the hills
ran their sheltering lines ever longer and bolder and nearer.

It comes to me^J-a childhood fascination mislaid in memory^L
^Mthat my father was colorblind. I prodded him on that when I
was a boy, trying to find out if he saw everything in gray^H
I imagined a perpetual black-and-white movie flashing before
his eyes^L-or in tan or the yellow of old newspapers or exactly
^Mwhat. Not having the standards of hue, of course he could
not tell me what colorations did enter his eyes: Skavinsky,
ye'd have to get in here and have a look for yourself to savvy
it. I am left to wonder, now that is beyond determining,
whether he saw the day's shadings west of noon in any way
as I did.