

The sun shines, hay is being made.

All along English Creek and Noon Creek,
mowing and raking and stacking are the
order of the day. As to how this year's
cutting compares with those of recent
years--have you seen any rancher lately
who wasn't grinning like a Christian
holding four aces?

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, July 20

"Hand me a half-inch, would you, Jick."

"Here you go." I passed the open-end wrench of that size to Pete
beneath the power buckrake. There was a grunt of exertion, a flash of
metal as the wrench flew and clattered off the chassis, and the news
from Pete:

"Sonofabitch must be a three-eighths."

I had been here before. "Did you hit your knuckles?"

"Sure did."

"Did you round the head off the bolt?"

"Sure did."

"Are you sure you want to put up hay again this year?"

"Guess what, nephew. The next rusted-up sonofabitch of a bolt
under here has got your name on it."

At noon of that first day of preparing Pete's haying machinery,
when he and I came in to wash up for dinner Marie took one look at the

barked knuckles and skin scrapes and blood blisters on the both of us and inquired: "Did you two count your fingers before you started all this?"

Despite what it took out of a person's hide I still look back on that as topnotch employment, my job of haying for Pete.

The Reese ranch was a beauty for hay. Pete inherited not only my grandfather Isaac Reese's acreage there along Noon Creek but old Isaac's realization that nurturing more than one source of income is as good an idea as you can have in Montana. Pete was continuing with the sheep Isaac had turned to after the crash of cattle prices and also was improving the ranch's hayfields, running ditches into the bottomland meadows of wild hay to irrigate them from Noon Creek. Even in the Depression's driest years, Pete always had hay to sell during the winter. This year, it looked as if he would have a world of the stuff. Those tall-grass meadows lay one after another along the creek like green pouches on a thong. Then there was the big field atop the Noon Creek-English Creek divide which grew dry-land alfalfa. In a wet year like this one, the alfalfa was soaring up more than knee high and that wide benchland field looked as green as they say the Amazon is.

Those first days after the Fourth of July, the hay was very nearly ready for us and I was more than ready for it. Ready to have the McCaskill family situation off my mind for the main part of each day, at least. It did not take a great deal of original thinking to realize that the deadlock between my parents and Alec now was stouter

than it had been before. If Alec ever needed any confirming in his rooting tooting cowboy notion of himself, his rodeo day calf roping and pugilistic triumphs had more than done so. Both of those and Leona too--Alec's feet might not even touch the ground until about August. Anyway, I had spent so much thought on the Alec matter already that summer that my mind was looking around for a new direction. My father, my mother, my brother: let them do the sorting out of Alec's future, I now had an imminent one--haying at Noon Creek--all my own.

I might have known. "The summer when," I have said my mother ever after called this one. For me, the summer when not even haying turned out as expected. The summer when I began to wonder if anything ever does.

To be quite honest, on a task like those first few days of readying the equipment for haying I provided Pete more company than help. I mean, I can fix machinery when I have to but I'd rather be doing anything else. My point of view is that I would be more enthusiastic about the machine era if the stuff healed itself instead of requiring all the damn repair it does. And Pete was much the same as me where wrench work was involved.

But I still maintain, companionship is no small thing to create. Amid all that damn bolting, unbolting, rebolting, bushing, shimming, washering, greasing, oiling, banging, sharpening, straightening, wouldn't you welcome a little conversation? And the farther removed

from the mechanical chore at hand, the better? At least my uncle and I thought so. I recall Pete, just right out of the blue, telling me about the Noon Creek Kee-Kee bird. "You never heard of the Kee-Kee bird we got around here? Jick, I am surprised at you. The Kee-Kee bird shows up the first real day of winter every year. Lands on top of the lambing shed over there and takes a look all around. Then he says, 'Kee-Kee-Keerist All Mighty, this is c-c-cold c-c-country!' and heads for California." I in return favored Pete with a few of the songs from Stanley's repertoire, starting with the one about the lady who was wild and woolly and full of fleas and never had been curried above her knees. He looked a little ~~surprised~~ ^{surprised} at my musical knowledge, but was interested enough.

This sticks with me, too: how startling it was to hear, from a face so reminiscent of my mother's, the kind of language Pete unloosed on the haying equipment during those repair days. It also was kind of refreshing.

All in all, then, Pete and I got along like hand and glove. And I have already recited Marie's glories, back there at the Fourth of July picnic. If anybody in the Two country could cook in the same league as my mother, it was Marie. So my ears and the rest of me both were well nourished, that couple of days as Pete and I by main strength and awkwardness got the haying gear into running order. It never occurred to me at the time, but I suppose Pete welcomed having me around--and Alec in the earlier summers when he was in the raking job--because he and Marie were childless. Their son died at birth, and Marie very nearly died with him. →

Her health in fact had never been strong since. So for a limited time, at least, someone my age was a privileged character with the Reeses.

Even so, I held off until Pete and I were finishing up the last piece of equipment, replacing broken guards on the mowing machine, before I tried him on this:

"Pete, you know Stanley Meixell, don't you?"

"Used to. Why?"

"I'm just sort of curious. My folks don't say much about him."

"He's been a long time gone from this country. Old history."

"Were you around him when he was the English Creek ranger?"

"Some. When anybody on Noon Creek who could spell K-O-W was running cattle up there on the forest. During the war and just after, that was."

"How was he as a ranger?"

"How was he?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, did Stanley go about things pretty much the way Dad does? Fuss over the forest like he was its mother hen, sort of?"

"Stanley always struck me as more of a rooster than a mother hen." That, I didn't get. Stanley hadn't seemed to me particularly strutting in the way he went about life. "But I will say this," Pete went on. "Stanley Meixell and your father know those mountains of the Two better than anybody else alive. They're a pair of a kind, on that."

"They are?" That the bunged-up whiskey-sloshing camp tender I had squirmed around up there in the Two was as much a master of the mountains

as my father--all due respect to Pete, but I couldn't credit it.

4 Figuring maybe Pete's specific knowledge of Stanley was better than his general, I asked: "Well, after he was the English Creek ranger, where was his ticket to?"

"His ticket?"

"That's the saying they have in the Forest Service about being transferred. After here, where did Stanley get transferred to?"

"The Forest Service isn't my ball of string, Jick. How do you feel about sharpening some mower sickles? There's a couple against the wall of the shop somewhere."

"How's she going, Jick?"

The third morning I rode over to Pete and Marie's, the mower man Bud Dolson greeted me there at breakfast. Pete had gone into Gros Ventre to fetch him the night before, Bud having come up on the bus all the way from Anaconda. Ordinarily he was on the bull gang at the smelter there--a kind of roustabout's job as I understood it.

"Good to get out in the real air for a change," Bud claimed was his reason for coming to mow hay for Pete summer after summer. Smelter fumes would be sufficient propulsion to anywhere, yes. But I have a sneaking hunch that the job as mower man, a month of being out here by himself with just a team of horses and a mowing machine and the waiting hay, meant a lot in itself to somebody as quiet as Bud.

The first genuine scorching day of summer arrived with Bud, and

by about 9 o'clock the dew was off the hay and he was cutting the first swath of the nearest of the Noon Creek meadows, a path of fallen green beside the standing green.

"How do, Jick."

While I was saddling Pony to go home to English Creek at the end of that afternoon, Perry Fox came riding in from Gros Ventre.

You still could find Perry's species in a lot of Montana towns then, old Texas punchers who rode north on a trail drive somewhere before the turn of the century, and for this reason or that, never found their way back to Texas. Much of the time when I was growing up, Gros Ventre had as many as three of them: Andy Cratt, Deaf Smith Mitchell, and Perry Fox. They had all been hands for the old Seven Block ranch when it was the cattle kingdom of this part of Montana, then afterward hung on by helping out the various small ranchers at branding time and when the calves were shipped, and in between, breaking a horse for somebody now and again. Perry Fox was the last of them alive yet. Into his seventies, I guess he had to be, for Toussaint Rennie told my father he could remember seeing both Perry and Deaf Smith Mitchell in the roundup of 1882, skinny youngsters aboard big Texican saddles. Now too stove-up for a regular ranch job, Perry spent his winters in Dale Quigg's saddle store helping out with harness mending and other leather work and his summer job was on the dump rake for Pete.

As I responded to Perry's nod and drawl of greeting and watched him undo his bedroll and war ^Cbag from behind his saddle--like Bud, Perry

would put up in the bunkhouse here at Pete's now until haying was done-- I couldn't help but notice that he had a short piece of rope stretched snug beneath his horse's belly and knotted into each stirrup. This was a new one on me, stirrups tied like that. That night I asked my father about it.

"Come to that, has he," my father said. "Riding with hobbled stirrups."

I still didn't savvy.

"At his age Perry can't afford to get thrown any more," my father spelled it out for me. "He's too brittle to mend. So with the stirrups tied down that way, he can keep himself clamped into them if his horse starts to buck."

"Maybe he just ought to quit riding horseback," I said, without thinking it through.

My father set me straight on that, too. "Guys like Perry, if they can't ride you might as well take them out and shoot them. Perry has never learned to drive a car. The minute he can't climb onto a horse and keep himself there, he's done for."

The fourth morning, Pete had me harness up my team of horses and take my rake to the mowed field to help Perry get the dump raking underway.

4 Truth be told, that day I was the one who did the majority of the dump raking--scooping the hay into windrows, that was--while Perry tinkered and tinkered with his rake teeth and his dump lever and his horses' harness and so on. Right then I fully subscribed to what Pete said about his custom of hiring Perry haying after haying: "He's slow as the

wrath of Christ, but he is steady." I suppose if my behind was as aged and bony as Perry's, I wouldn't have been in any hurry either to apply it to a rake seat for the coming four or five weeks.

At the end of that day of windrowing, when Perry and I had unhitched our teams and Pete was helping us look them over for any harness sores, up the road to the ranch buildings came the Forest Service pickup and in it my father and my mother as well. They'd been to Great Falls on a headquarters trip my father had to make ~~for one reason or another~~, and before starting home they swung by First Avenue South to chauffeur the last of the haying crew to Pete.

He tumbled out of the back of the pickup now. The stackman, Wisdom Johnson.

"Hey, Pete!" cried Wisdom. Even after the ~~two-hour~~^{two-hour} ride from Great Falls in the open breezes Wisdom was not what could be called even approximately sober. On the other hand, he wasn't so swacked he had fallen out of the pickup on the way to the job, which was the hiring standard that counted. "Hey, Perry!" the greeting process went on. "Hey, Jick!" If the entire population of Montana had been there in the Reese yard, Wisdom would have greeted every one of them identically. Wisdom Johnson's mind may not have been one of the world's broadest, but it liked to practice whatever it knew.

"As I savvy it, Wisdom," acknowledged Pete, "that's what you're here for, all right--hay."

"Pete, I'm ready for it," Wisdom testified earnestly. "If you want to start stacking right now, I am ready. You bet I am. How about it,

ready to go?" Wisdom squinted around like Lewis and Clark must have.

"Where's the field?"

"Wisdom, it's suppertime," Pete pointed out. "Morning will be soon enough to start stacking. You feel like having some grub?"

Wisdom considered. "No. No, I don't." He swallowed to get rid of the idea of food. "What I need to do is sort of sit down for awhile."

Perry stepped forward. "I'll herd him to the bunkhouse. Right this way, Wisdom. Where'd you winter?"

"Out on the coast," reported Wisdom as he unsteadily accompanied Perry. "Logging camp, up north of Grays Harbor. Rain! Perry, do you know it'd sometimes rain a week steady? I just did not know it could rain that much--"

Chin in hand and elbow propped on the doorframe, my mother skeptically watched all this out the rolled-down window of the pickup. Now she opened the door and stepped out. Not surprisingly, she looked about two-thirds riled. I don't know of any Montana woman who has never gritted her teeth, one time or another, over that process of prying men off bar stools and getting them launched toward whatever they're supposed to be doing in life. "I'll go in and visit Marie," she announced, which my father and Pete and I all were glad enough to have happen.

Pete made sure my mother was out of earshot, then inquired: "He in Sheba's place, was he?"

"No, in the Mint, though he did have Bouncing Betty with him. She wasn't about to turn loose of him as long as he had a nickel to his name." Upon study, my father looked somewhat peevish, too. Wisdom

Johnson must have taken considerable persuading to part with Bouncing Betty. "So at least I didn't have to shake him directly out of a whore's bed. But that's about the best I can say for your caliber of employee, brother-in-law."

Pete broke a grin at my father and razzed: "I wouldn't be so damn hard up for crew if you'd paid attention to the example of Good Help Hebner and raised anything besides an occasional scatter raker."

Somehow Pete had known what the moment needed. Pete's kidding had within it the fact that the other of the rake-driving McCaskill brothers had been Alec, and he was not a topic my father particularly cared to hear about these days. Yet here it came, the half-wink of my father's left eye and the answer to Pete's crack: "Scatter rakers were as good as I could do. Whatever that says about my caliber."

The fifth day, we made hay.

The windrows that Perry and I had raked formed a pattern I have always liked. A meadow with ribs of hay, evenly spaced. Now Perry was dump raking the next field down the creek and Bud was mowing the one beyond that.

Those of us in the stacking crew began our end of the matter. We sited the overshot stacker toward the high edge of the meadow, so the haystack would be up out of the deepest winter snowdrifts along Noon Creek. With the power buckrake, Pete shoved several loads of hay into place behind the stacker. Then Wisdom maneuvered and smoothed that accumulation with his pitchfork until he had the base of his stack

made the way he wanted it. An island of hay almost but not quite square--8 paces wide, 10 paces long--and about chest high.

"You said last night you're ready, Wisdom," called Pete. "Here it comes." And he bucked the first load of hay onto the fork of the stacker. "Send it to heaven, Clayton."

The final man, or I should say member, of our haying crew was the stacker team driver, 12-year-old Clayton Hebner. Pete always hired whichever Hebner boy was in the 12-to-14 year range for that stacker team job and they were pretty much interchangeable, a skinny kid with a forelock and nothing to say for himself; apparently the volume knob for that whole family was on Good Help Hebner. All that was really noticeable about Clayton was his Hebner way of always eyeing you, as if you were the latest link in evolution and he didn't want to miss the moment when you sprouted wings or fins. At Pete's words Clayton now started into motion his team of horses which were hitched to the cable which, through a tripod-and-pulley rig within the stacker, lifts the twin arms of the stacker and the hay-loaded fork, and the hay went up and up until--

It occurs to me: does everybody these days think that hay naturally comes in bales? That God ordained that livestock shall eat from 80-pound loaves of hay tied up in twine by \$10,000 machinery? If so, maybe I had better describe the notion of haying as it used to be. All in the world it amounted to was gathering hay into stacks about the size of an adobe house; a well-built haystack even looks as solid and straightforward as an adobe structure, though of course stands higher and has a rounded-off

top. But try it yourself sometime, this gathering of 10 or 12 tons of hay into one stack, and you will see where all the equipment comes in. Various kinds of stackers were used in various areas of the West--beaver-slides, Mormon derricks, swinging forks, jayhawks--but Pete's preference was an overshot. An overshot stacker worked as its name suggests, tossing a load of hay up over a high wide framework which served as a sort of scaffolding for the front of the haystack. If, say, you hold your arms straight out in front of you, with your hands clutching each end of a basket with hay piled in it; now bring your arms and the basket straight up over your head with a little speed, and you are tossing the hay exactly as an overshot does. In short, a kind of catapult principle is calculated involved. But a ~~slow~~ one, for it is the responsibility of the stacker team driver to pace his horses so that the overshot's arms and fork fling the hay onto whichever part of the stack the stackman wants it. Other than being in charge of the speed of the team, though, driving the stacker team is a hell of a dull job, walking back and forth behind the horses as they run the overshot up and down, all damn day long, and that's why a kid like Clayton usually got put on the task.

So hay was being sent up, and as this first haystack and the day's temperature both began to rise, Wisdom Johnson suffered. This too was part of the start of haying--Wisdom sweating the commerce of Great Falls saloons out of himself. Soaking himself sober, lathering into the summer's labor. We all knew by heart what the scene would be this initial morning, Wisdom lurching around up there atop the mound of hay as if he had a log chained to each leg. It was a little painful to watch, especially now that my camptending sojourn with Stanley Meixell had taught me what

a hangover truly is.⁹ Yet agonized as Wisdom looked, the stack was progressing prettily, as we also knew it would. The stackman, he was maestro of the haying crew. When the rest of us had done our mowing or raking or bucking or whatever, the final result of it all was the haystacks the stackman built. And Wisdom Johnson could build them, as he put it, "high and tall and straight." No question about it, Wisdom was as big and brawny as they come; nine of him would have made a dozen. And he also just looked as if he belonged atop a haystack, ^{pitch hay} for he was swarthy enough to be able to ~~work~~ all day up there without his shirt on, which I envied much. If I tried that I'd have burned and blistered to a pulp. Wisdom simply darkened and darkened, his suntan a litmus each summer of how far along our haying season was. As July heated up into August, more than once it occurred to me that with the sweat bathing Wisdom as he worked up there next to the sun, and his arm muscles bulging as he shoved the hay around, and that dark leathering of his skin, he was getting to look like the heavyweight fighter Joe Louis. But of course that wasn't something you said to a white person back then.

This was the second summer of Wisdom being known as Wisdom instead of his true name, Cyrus Johnson. The nickname came about because he had put up hay a number of seasons in the Big Hole Basin down in the southwestern part of the state, and according to him the Big Hole was the front parlor of heaven. The hay there was the best possible, the workhorses all but put their harnesses on themselves each morning, the pies of Big Hole ranch cooks nearly floated off into the air from the

swads of meringue atop them. The list of glories ran on and on. Inasmuch as the Big Hole had a great reputation for hay even without the testimony of Cyrus Johnson, the rest of us at the Reese table tended to nod and say nothing. But then came one suppertime, early in the first summer I hayed for Pete, when Cyrus started in on a fresh Big Hole glory. "You take that Wisdom, now. There's my idea of a town. It's the friendliest, drinkingest, prettiest place--"

"Wisdom? That burg?" Ordinarily Bud Dolson was silence himself. But Anaconda where he was from was not all that far from the Big Hole town of Wisdom and Bud had been there. As Cyrus now had the misfortune of asking him.

"I think so," replied Bud. "I blinked, I might've missed most of it."

Cyrus looked hurt. "Now what do you mean by that?"
"Cy, I mean that the town of Wisdom makes the town of Gros Ventre look like London, England."

"Aw, come on, Bud. Wisdom is a hell of a nice town."
Bud shook his head in pity. "If you say so, Wisdom." And ever since, the big stackman was Wisdom Johnson to us.

This first stack was well underway, Pete had buckraked several windrows in to the stacker. Now began my contribution to the haying process. I went over and climbed onto my scatter rake.

If you happen never to have seen one, a scatter rake simply resembles a long axle--mine was a 10-foot type--between a set of iron wheels, high

spoked ones about as big around as those you think of a stagecoach having, but not nearly so thick and heavy. The "axle," actually the chassis of the rake, carries a row of long thin curved teeth, set about a hand's width apart from each other, and it is this regiment of teeth that rakes along the ground and scrapes together any stray hay lying there. As if the hayfield was a head of hair and the scatter rake a big iron comb going over it, so to speak. Midway between the driver wheels a seat stuck up for the rake ~~drive~~—me—to ride on, and a wooden tongue extended forward for a team of horses to be hitched to.

My team was in harness and waiting. Blanche and Fisheye. As workhorses go, they weren't too bad a pair; a light team, as you didn't need the biggest horses in the world just to pull a scatter rake, but more on the steady side than frisky. That Blanche and Fisheye were civilized at all was a relief to me, because you never know what you might get in a team of horses. One of them maybe can pull like a Percheron but is dumb, and the other one clever enough to teach geometry but so lazy he constantly lays back in the traces. Or one horse may be a kicker, and his mate so mild you could pass a porcupine under him without response. So except for Fisheye staring sideways at you in a fishy way as you harnessed him, and Blanche looking like she needed a nap all the time, this team of mine was better than the horse law of averages might suggest.

I believe I am right in saying Pete was the first rancher in the Two country to use a power buckrake—an old automobile chassis-and-engine with a fork mounted on it to buck the hay in from the field to

the stack. Wisdom Johnson a few summers before had brought word of the invention of the power buckrake in the Big Hole: "I tell you, Pete, they got them all over that country. They move hay faster than you can see." That proved to be not quite the case, but the contraption could bring in hay as fast as two buckrakes propelled by horses. Thus the internal combustion engine roared into the Reese hayfields and speeded matters up, but it also left dabs of hay behind it, scatterings which had either blown off the buckrake fork or which it simply missed. The scatter raker was the gatherer of that leftover hay, which otherwise would be wasted. In place on my rake seat, I now clucked to Blanche and Fisheye, reined them toward the part of the meadow Pete had been bucking in loads from, and my second summer of scatter raking was begun.

I suppose I have to admit, anybody who could handle a team of workhorses could run a scatter rake. But not necessarily run it as it ought to be done. The trick was to stay on the move but at an easy pace. Keep the horses in mild motion and the rake teeth down there gathering leftover hay, instead of racing around here and yon. Roam and glean, by going freestyle over a field as a fancy skater swoops around on ice. Well, really not quite that free and fancy, for with the horses and a 10-foot rake you are directing maybe a ton and a half of moving weight, the horse portion of it possessed of some notions of its own, and your maneuvers accordingly have to be somewhat approximate. But still I say, the more you could let yourself go and just follow the flow of the hayfield, so to speak--swoop in where the power buckrake had recently been, even if there wasn't much spilled hay

there--the better off you were as a scatter raker. A mind as loose as mine was about right for scatter raking.

"How did it go?" my mother asked, that first night of full haying. We were waiting supper for my father, who was somewhere up the North Fork inspecting the progress of a CCC trail crew there.

"A stack and a half," I reported offhandedly as if I had been a hayhand for centuries. "About usual, for first day."

"How did you get along with Blanche and Fisheye?"

"They're kind of a logey pair of sonsa--" I remembered in time to mend my mouth; the vocabulary I'd been using around Pete and the crew was a quick ticket to trouble here at home-- "of so and sos. But they're okay."

She appraised me from where she was leaning against the kitchen sink, arms folded across her chest. Then surprised me with her smile and: "It's quiet around here, without you."

I chose to take that as a compliment. More than that, I risked ribbing her in return, a little. "Well, I guess I could call you up on the telephone every noon from Pete and Marie's, and sing you a song or tell you a joke."

"Never mind, Mister Imagination," she declined. "I'll adjust."

I didn't pay it sufficient mind at the time, but in truth my mother did have to adjust. Alec in exile. Me rationed between English Creek and the Noon Creek hayfields. My father beginning to be gone

more and more as fire danger increased in the forest. The reverse of her usual situation of a houseful of male McCaskills--a genuine scarcity of us. There is another topic which occupies my mind these days. The way life sorts us into men and women, not on any basis of capability that I have ever been able to see. High on the list of questions I wish I'd had the good sense to ask, throughout that immense summer, is the one to my mother. Her view about being born as a woman into a region which featured male livelihoods.

"You finally starved out, did you," she now greeted my father's late arrival. "Wash up and sit up, you two, supper will be just a minute now."

"How'd it go today?" my father asked me, and I repeated my report of Reese haying. Through that and other supper conversation he nodded and said uh huh a lot, which signaled that he was only half-listening. The symptom was annual. At this point of the summer, and hot as this one suddenly had turned, fire was forever on the mind of a forest ranger. The joke was told that when the preacher at a funeral asked if anyone wanted to memorialize the deceased, a ranger was the first one onto his feet and began: "Old Tom wasn't the worst fellow I ever knew. Now prevention." I'd like to add a few words about fire control."

When you think about it, my father's yearly deep mood about fire was understandable enough. He was responsible for an entire horizon. The skyline made up of peaks and reefs and timbered slopes and high grasslands: that conglomeration of nature was designated his district of the Two Medicine National Forest, and every blessed inch of it was

prey to lightning storms and careless campfires and flipped cigarettes.

His line of defense was a light thread of men across that mass of mountain and forest; the lookouts in the tall towers, and at this time of year, ~~smokechasers and~~ the fire guards he would start stationing in camps and cabins for quick combat against lightning strikes or smolders of any other sort. My father entirely subscribed to the theory that the time to fight a forest fire was before it got going. True, the timber of the Two here on the east face of the Rockies was not as big and dense and flammable as the forests farther west in Montana and Idaho. "But that doesn't mean they're made of goddamn asbestos either," ran the complaint of east-side rangers on the Two, the Lewis and Clark, the Custer and the Helena, against what they saw as a westward tilt in the thinking and the fire budget of Region One headquarters. It was a fact that the legendary fires occurred over there west of the Continental Divide. The Bitterroot blaze of 1910 was an absolute hurricane of flame. Into smoke went 3 million acres of standing trees, a lot of it the finest white pine in the world. And about half the town of Wallace, Idaho, burned. And this too--the Bitterroot fire killed 85 persons, 84 of them done in directly by the flames and the other one walked off a little from a hotshot crew on Setzer Creek and put a pistol to himself. The Forest Service, which was only a few years old at the time, was bloodied badly by the Bitterroot fire. And as recently as 1934, there had been the fiasco of the Selway fires along the Idaho-Montana line. That summer, the Selway National Forest became the Alamo of Region One. Into those back-country fires the regional forester, Major Kelley, and his

headquarters staff poured 5400 men, and they never did get the flames under control. The Pete King fire, the McClendon Butte fire, the Hell Gate fire east of the Lochsa River, the Coolwater fire, a spot fire at Canyon Creek, all were roaring at once.

When the ~~the~~ fire blew up, a couple of hundred CCC guys had to run like jackrabbits to escape it.

~~Pete King~~ Five fire camps went up in smoke, the ~~the~~ ranger station almost did.

Nothing the Forest Service tried on the Selway worked. Nothing could work, really. An inferno has no thermostat. In those years the official notion of fighting a forest fire was what was called the 10 a.m. policy: aim for control of the fire by 10 the next morning. My father was following the reports from the Selway and said, "The Major better just aim for 10 a.m. on Christmas Day for this one." Actually the rains of late September finally slowed the Selway fires, and only weeks after that, the Major killed off the Selway National Forest, parceled out its land to the neighboring Clearwater and Nezperce forests and scattered its staff like the tribes of Israel. The Selway summer sobered everybody working in Region One--the total defeats by fire and the Major's obliteration of a National Forest unit--and for damn sure no ranger wanted any similar nightmare erupting in his own district.

I stop to recount all this because of what happened now, as my father finished supper and thumbed open the day's one piece of mail, an official Forest Service envelope. "What've we got here," he wondered, "the latest kelleygram?"

His next utterance was: "Sonofabitch."

He looked as if he had been hit with a 2 X 4, stunned and angry. Then, as if the words would have to change themselves when read aloud,

he recited from the letter:

"Placement of manpower this fire season will be governed by localized fire danger measurements. An enforced lag of manning below current danger will eliminate over-manning designed to meet erratic peak loads and will achieve material decrease in FF costs over past years' expenditures. Organization on east-side forests in particular is to be held to the lowest level consistent with carefully analyzed current needs."

My mother oh so slightly shook her head, as if this confirmed her suspicions of brainlessness in the upper ranks of the U.S. Forest Service. My father crumpled the letter and crossed the kitchen to Rooster Mountain and the window looking out on Roman Reef and Phantom Woman peak and other profiles of the ~~mountains~~ of the Two.

I asked, "What's all that mean?"
smokechasers or
"No fire guards on our side of the Divide until things start burning," said my father without turning from the window.

Right up until the time haying started, I had been rehearsing to myself how to talk my parents into letting me live in the bunkhouse at Pete's with the rest of the hay crew. It was something I imagined I much wanted to do. Be in on the gab of Wisdom and Perry and Bud, hear all the tales of the Big Hole and First Avenue South and Texas and Anaconda and so on and so on. Gain one more rung towards being a grown-up, I suppose was what was working on me. Yet when haying time arrived I did not even bring up the bunkhouse issue.

For one thing, I could anticipate my mother's enunciation about

one shavetail McCaskill already living in a bunkhouse "and to judge by Alec's recent behavior One Is More Than Enough." For another, with my father on the go as much as he was this summer it seemed plain that he would prefer for me to be on hand at English Creek whenever he couldn't. But do you know, I actually made it unanimous against myself. What the matter came right down to was that I didn't want to give up the porch bedroom at English Creek for the dubious gain of bunking with hay hands.

Which is how I became a one-horsepower commuter. The one horse being Pony, whom I found I regarded with considerable more esteem ever since Mouse decided to hose down the rodeo grounds that time in front of Leona. Each morning now I got up at 5, went out and caught and saddled Pony outside the barn--quite a lot of light in the sky that time of year--and the pair of us would head for the Reese ranch.

Where morning is concerned, I am my father all over again. "The day goes downhill after daybreak," was his creed. I don't suppose there are too many people now who have seen a majority of the dawns of their life, but my father did, and I have. And of my lifetime of early rising I have never known better dawns than those when I rode from English Creek to my haying job on Noon Creek.

The ford north of the ranger station Pony and I would cross--if there was enough moon the wild roses along the creek could be seen, pale crowds of them--and in a few minutes of climbing we came atop the bench of land which divides the two creek drainages. Up there, at that brink of dawn hour, the world reveals all its edges. Dark lines

of the tops of buttes and benches to the north, towards the Two Medicine River and the Blackfeet Reservation. The Sweetgrass Hills bumping up far on the eastern horizon like five dunes of black sand. The timbered crest of Breed Butte standing up against the stone mountain wall of the west. What trick of light it is I can't really say, but everything looked as if drawn in heavy strokes, with the final shade of night penciled in wherever there was a gulch or coulee.

The only breaks in the stillness were Pony's hooves against the earth, and the west breeze which generally met us atop that broad benchland. I say breeze. In the Two country anything that doesn't lift you off your horse is only a breeze. My mountain coat was on me, my hat pulled low, my hands in leather work gloves, and I was just about comfortable.

Since Pete's haying season always lasted a month or a little more, I rode right through the phases of the moon. My favorite you can guess on first try. The fat full moon, resting there as if it was an agate marble which had rolled into the western corner of the sky. During the early half of my route the mountains still drew most of their light from the moon, and I watched the reefs and other rock faces change complexion--from light gray to ever so slightly pink--as the sunrise began to touch them. Closer to me, the prairie flowers now made themselves known amid the tan grass. Irises, paintbrushes, bluebells, sunflowers.

Then this. The first week or so of those daybreak rides, the sun was north enough that it came up between the Sweetgrass Hills. They

stand 60 or 70 miles across the prairie from where I was riding, way over towards Havre, so there was a sense that I was seeing a sunrise happening in a far land. The gap between the mounded sets of hills first filled with a kind of ~~film~~^{orange}; a haze of coming light, it might be called. Then the sun would slowly present itself, like a big glowing coal burning its way up through the horizon,

Those dawns taught me that beauty makes the eyes greedy. For even after all this, mountains and moon and earth edges and the coming of the sun, I considered that what was most worth watching for was the first shadow of the day. When the sun worked its way about half above the horizon, that shadow emerged to stretch itself off from Pony and me--horse and youngster melded, into an apparition of leftover dark a couple of hundred feet in length. Drawn out on the prairie grass in that far-reaching first shadow, Pony and I loomed like some new creature put together from the main parts of a camel and a giraffe.

Is it any wonder then that each of these haying-time dawns made me feel remade?

Meanwhile it continued to be the damnedest summer of weather anybody could remember. All that rain of June, and now July making a habit of 90 degrees. The poor damn farmers out east of Gros Ventre and north along the High Line were fighting a grasshopper invasion again, the hot days hatching out the 'hoppers faster than the farmers could spread poison against them. And for about five days in the middle of July, an epidemic of lightning storms broke out in all the national

forests of Region One. A lookout reported a plume of smoke up the South Fork of English Creek, on a heavily-forested north slope of Grizzly Reef. This of course caused some excitement in the ranger station, and my father hustled his assistant ranger Paul Eliason and some trail men and a nearby CCC brush crew up there. "Paul's used to those big trees out on the coast," my father remarked to my mother. "It won't hurt him to find out that the ones here are big enough to burn." That Grizzly Reef smoke, though, turned out to be a rotten log and some other debris smoldering in a rocky area, and Paul and his crew handled it without much sweat.

That mid-July dose of lightning and his dearth of fire guards and smokechasers put my father in what my mother called "his prowly mood." But then on the morning of the 21st of July we woke up to snow in the mountains. Fire was on the loose elsewhere in Montana--spot fires across the Continental Divide in the Flathead country and others up in Glacier Park, and a big blaze down in Yellowstone Park that hundreds of men were on--while my father's forest lay snoozing under a cool sheet of white.

"How did you arrange that?" my mother mock-questioned him at breakfast. "Clean living and healthy thoughts?"

"The powerrr of Scotch prprayerrr," he rumbled back at her in his preacher voice. Then with his biggest grin in weeks: "Also known as the law of averages. Tough it out long enough in this country and a snowstorm will eventually happen when you actually want it to."

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As I say, putting up Pete's hay always took about a month, given some days of being rained out or broke down. This proved to be a summer when we were reasonably lucky about both moisture and breakage. So steadily that none of us on the crew said anything about it for fear of changing our luck, day on day along Noon Creek our new stacks appeared, like fresh green loaves.

My scatter raking became automatic with me. Of course, whenever my mind doesn't have to be on what I am doing, it damn well for sure



is going to be on some other matter. Actually, though, for once in my life I did a respectable job of combining my task at hand and my wayfaring thoughts. For if I had a single favorite daydream of those hayfield hours, it was to wonder why a person couldn't be a roving scatter raker in the way that sheep shearers and harvest hands moved with their seasons. I mean, why not? The principle seems to me the same: a nomad profession. I could see myself traveling through Montana from hay country to hay country--although preferably with better steppers than Blanche and Fisheye, if there was much distance involved--and hiring on, team and rake and all, at the best-looking ranch of each locale. Maybe spend a week, ten days, at the peak of haying at each. Less if the grub was mediocre, longer if a real pie maker was in the kitchen. Dwell in the bunkhouse so as to get to know everybody on a crew, for somehow every crew, every hay hand, was discernibly a little different from any other. Then once I had learned enough about that particular country and earned from the boss the invite, "Be with us again next year, won't you?", on I would go, rolling on, the iron wheels and line of tines of my scatter rake like some odd over-wide chariot rumbling down the road.

An abrupt case of wanderlust, this may sound like, but then it took very little to infect me at that age. Can this be believed? Except for once when all of us at the South Fork school were taken to Helena to visit the capitol, a once-in-a-while trip with my father when he had to go to forest headquarters in Great Falls was the farthest I had ever been out of the Two country. Ninety miles; not much of a

grand tour. There were places of Montana I could barely even imagine. Butte. All I knew definitely of Butte was that when you met anyone from there, even somebody as mild as Ray Heaney's father Ed, he would announce "I'm from Butte" and his chin would shoot out a couple of inches on that up-sound of yewt. In the midst of all this wide Montana landscape a city where shifts of men tunneled like gophers. Butte, the copper kingdom. Butte, the dark mineral pocket. Or the other thing that was always said: "Butte's a hole in the ground and so's a grave." That, I heard any number of times in the Two country. I think the truth may have been that parts of Montana like ours were apprehensive, actually a little scared, of Butte. There seemed to be something spooky about a place that lived by eating its own guts, which is the way mining sounded to us. Butte I would surely have to see someday. And the Big Hole Basin. As Wisdom Johnson told it, as haying season approached in the Big Hole the hay hands--they called them haydiggers down there, which I also liked--began to gather about a week ahead of time. They sifted in, "jungled up" in the creekside willows at the edge of town, and visited and gossiped and just laid around until haying started. I savored the notion of that, the gathering, the waiting. Definitely the Big Hole would be on my hay rake route. And the dry Ingomar country down there in the southeastern part of the state, where Walter Kyle had done his hotel style of sheep ranching. The town water supply was a tank car, left off on the railroad siding each week. Walter told of coming back to town from sheep camp one late fall day and seeing flags of celebration flying. His immediate

thought was that somebody had struck water, "but it turned out to be just the armistice ending the war." Havre and the High Line country. Fork Peck dam. Miles City. Billings. Lewistown. White Sulphur Springs. Red Lodge. Bozeman and the green Gallatin Valley. For that matter, Missoula. Montana seemed to be out there waiting for me, if I only could become old enough to get there.

But. There's always a "but" when you think about going everywhere and doing everything. But how old was that, when I would be advanced enough to sample Montana to the full?

North of the ears strange things will happen. Do you know who kept coming to mind, as I thought my way hither and thither from those Noon Creek hay meadows? Stanley Meixell. Stanley who had gone cowboying in Kansas when he was a hell of a lot younger than I was. Stanley who there in the cabin during our camptending journey told me of his wanders, down to Colorado and Wyoming and over into the Dakotas, in and out of jobs. Stanley who evidently so much preferred the wandering life that he gave up being a forest ranger, to pursue it. Stanley who could plop himself on a bar stool on the Fourth of July and be found by Velma Simms. But Stanley who also looked worn down, played out and overboozed, by the footloose way of life. The example of Stanley bothered me no little bit. If the wanderer's way was as alluring as it seemed from my seat on the scatter rake, how then did I account for the eroded look around Stanley Meixell's eyes?

Almost before I knew it the first few weeks of haying were behind

us and we were moving the equipment onto the benchland for the ten days or so of putting up the big meadow of dry-land alfalfa there. "The alfaloofee field," as Perry Fox called it. This was another turn of the summer I looked forward to with interest, for this alfalfa haying was far enough from the Reese ranch house that we no longer went in at noon for dinner. Now began field lunches.

My stomach aside, why did I look forward to this little season of field lunches? I think the answer must be that the field lunches on the bench constituted a kind of ritual that appealed to me. Not that I would want to eat every meal of my life in the stubble of a hayfield. But for ten days or so, it was like camping out or being on an expedition; possibly even a little like "jungling up" the way the Big Hole hayhands started off. Whatever, the alfaloofee field lunch routine went like this. A few minutes before noon, here came Marie in the pickup. She had with her the chuck box, the old Reese family wooden one with cattle brands burned everywhere on its sides, and when a couple of us slid it back to the tailgate and lifted it down and opened it, in there waited two or three kinds of sandwiches wrapped in dishtowels, and a bowl of potato or macaroni salad, and a gallon jar of cold tea or lemonade, and bread and butter and jam, and pickles, and radishes and new garden carrots, and a pie or cake. Each of us chose a dab of shade around the power buckrake or the pickup--my preference was to sit on the running board of the pickup; somehow it seemed more like a real meal when I sat up to eat--and then we ploughed into the lunch. Afterward, which is to say the rest of the noon hour, Pete was a napper, with his hat down

over his eyes. I never was; I was afraid I might miss something. Clayton too was open-eyed, in that silent sentry way all the Hebner kids had. Perry and Bud smoked, each rolling himself a handmade. This was the cue for Wisdom to pull out his own sack of Bull Durham, pat his shirt pocket, then say to Perry or Bud, "You got a Bible on you?" One or the other would loan him the packet of cigarette papers and he'd roll himself one. Strange how he could always have tobacco but perpetually be out of papers, which were the half of smoking that cost almost nothing. But that was Wisdom for you.

The womanly presence of Marie, slim and dark, sitting in the shade of the pickup beside the chuck box and the dozing Pete, posed the need for another ritual. As tea and lemonade caught up with kidneys, we males one after another would rise, carefully casual, and saunter around to the far side of the haystack and do our deed. Then saunter back, trying to look like we'd never been away and Marie showing no least sign that we had.

Eventually Pete would rouse himself. He not only could nap at the drop of an eyelid, he woke up just as readily. "I don't suppose you characters finished this field while I was resting my eyes, did you?" Then he was on his feet, saying the rest of the back-to-work message: "Until they invent hay that puts itself up, I guess we got to."

Our last day of haying the benchland alfalfa brought two occurrences out of the ordinary.

The first came at once, when I headed Blanche and Fisheye to the

southwest corner of the field to start the morning by raking there a while. Maybe a quarter of a mile farther from where I was lay a nice at the base of grassy coulee, along that slope of Breed Butte. The ground there was part of Walter Kyle's place, and with Walter summering in the mountains with his sheep, Dode Withrow always put up the hay of this coulee for him on shares. The Withrow stacking crew had pulled in and set up the afternoon before—I could pick out Dode over there, still with a cast on his leg, and I could all but hear him on the topic of trying to run a haying crew with his leg set in cement. If I hadn't been so content with haying for Pete, Dode would have been my choice of somebody to work for.

Maybe scatter rakers are all born with similar patterns of behavior in them, but in any case, at this same time I was working the corner of our field the Withrow rake driver was doing the nearest corner of theirs. Naturally I studied how he was going about matters, and a minute or so of that showed me that he wasn't a he, but Marcella Withrow.

I had no idea what the odds must be against a coincidence like that—Marcella and me having been the only ones in our class those 8 years of grade school at South Fork, and now the only English Creek ones in our particular high school class in Gros Ventre, and this moment both doing the same job, in the same hay neighborhood. It made me grin. It also caused me to peek around with care, to make sure that I wouldn't be liable for any later razzing from our crew, and when the coast looked clear I waved to Marcella. She did the same, maybe even to checking over

her shoulder against the razzing possibility, and we rattled past one another and raked our separate meadows. Some news to tell Ray Heaney the next time I got to town, anyway.

The other event occurred at noon, and this one went by the name of Toussaint Rennie.

He arrived in the pickup with Marie and the chuck box of lunch. "I came to make sure," Toussaint announced, his tan gullied face solemn as Solomon. "Whether you men build haystacks right side up."

Actually the case was that Toussaint had finished ditch-riding for awhile, with everybody harvesting now instead of irrigating, and Marie had driven up to the Two Medicine to fetch him for company for the day. What conversations went on between those two blood-and-soulmates, I've always wished I could have overheard.

The gab between the hay crew and Toussaint was pretty general, though, until we were done eating. Pete then retired to his nap spot, and Perry and Bud and eventually Wisdom lit up their smokes, and so on. A little time passed, then Toussaint leaned from where he was sitting and laid his hand on the chuck box. "Perry," he called over to Perry Fox. "We ate out of this, a time before."

"That we did," agreed Perry. "But Marie's style of grub is a whole helluva lot better."

Toussaint put his finger to the large F burnt into the end of the chuck box. "Dan Floweree." (BF)

(Tb combined) The finger moved to the 9R brand on the box's side. "Louis Robare."

To the T beside it: "Billy Ulm."

Then to the lid, where the space had been used to burn in a big D-S.

"This one you know best, Perry."

I straightened up. It had come to me: where Perry and Toussaint would have first eaten out of this chuck box. When those cattle brands were first seared into its wood. The famous roundup of 1882, from the elbow of the Teton River to the Canadian line; the one Toussaint told my father about, the one he said was the biggest ever in this part of Montana. Nearly 300 men, the ranchers and their cowhands and horse wranglers and night herders and cooks—40 tents it took, to hold them all. Each morning the riders fanned out in half circles of about 15 miles' ride and rounded in the cattle for sorting; each afternoon the branding fires of the several outfits sent smoke above the prairie as the irons wrote ownership onto living cowhide. When the big sweep was over, coulees and creek bottoms searched out over an area bigger than some eastern states, about 100,000 head of cattle were accounted for.

"Davis-Hauser-Stuart," Perry was saying of the brand on the chuck box lid. "My outfit at the time. DHS, the Damn Hard Sittin'."

Wisdom Johnson was beginning to catch up with the conversation.
"Where was this you're talking about?"

"All in through here," Perry indicated with a slow swing of his head from shoulder to shoulder. "Roundin'up cattle."

"Cattle?" Wisdom cast a look around the benchland, as if a herd

might be pawing out there this very moment. "Around here?" It did seem a lot to believe, that this alfalfa field and the farmland on the horizon east of us once was a grass heaven for cows.

"Everywhere from the Teton to Canada, those old outfits had cattle," Perry confirmed. "If you could find the buggers."

Bud Dolson spoke up. "When'd all this take place?"

Toussaint told him: "A time ago. '82."

"1882? queried Wisdom. "Perry, how ungodly old are you?"

Perry pointed a thumb at Toussaint. "Younger'n him."

Toussaint chuckled. "Everybody is."

How can pieces of time leap in and out of each other the way they do? There I sat, that noontime, listening to Toussaint and Perry speak of eating from a chuckwagon box all those years ago; and hearing myself question my mother about how she and her mother and Pete were provisioned from the same chuck box on their St. Mary's wagon trip a quarter of a century ago; and gazing on Pete, snoozing there in the shade of the pickup, simultaneously my admired uncle and the boy who helloed the horses at St. Mary's.

Toussaint and the history that went everywhere with him set me to thinking. Life and people were a kind of flood around me this summer, yet for all my efforts I still was high and dry where one point of the past was concerned. ⁹¹ When Toussaint climbed to his feet to visit the far side of the alfalfa stack, I decided. Hell, he himself was the

one who brought the topic up, back at the creek picnic on the Fourth. You are a campjack these days. And an outhouse engineer and a dawn rider and a hay equipment mechanic and a scatter raker, and an inquisitive almost-15-year-old. I got up and followed Toussaint around the haystack.

"Jick," he acknowledged me. "You are getting tall. Mac and Beth will need a stepladder to talk to you."

"Yeah, I guess," I contributed, but my altitude was not what I wanted discussed. As Toussaint tended to his irrigation and I to mine, I asked: "Toussaint, what can you tell me about Stanley Meixell? I mean, I don't know him real well. That time up in the Two, I was only lending him a hand with his camptending, is all."

"Stanley Meixell," Toussaint intoned. "Stanley was the ranger. When the national forest was put in."

"Yeah, I know that. But more what I was wondering--did he and my folks have a run-in, sometime? I can't quite figure out what they think of Stanley."

"But you," said Toussaint. "You do thinking, too, Jick. What is it you think of Stanley?"

He had me there. "I don't just know. I've never come up against anybody like him."

Toussaint nodded. "That is Stanley," he affirmed. "You know more than you think you do."

Well, there I was as usual. No more enlightened than when I started. The chronic condition of Jick McCaskill, age 14 11/12 years, prospects for a cure debatable.

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At least the solace of scatter raking remained to me. Or so I thought. As I say, this day I have just told about was the one that finished off the benchland alfalfa. A last ~~week~~^{stint} of haying, back down on the Noon Creek meadows, awaited. Even yet I go over and over in my mind the happenings which that last ~~week~~^{spell of haying} was holding in store. Talk about a chain of events. You could raise and lower the anchor of an ocean liner on the string of links that began to happen now.

Our new venue for haying was the old Ramsay homestead. The "upper place," my mother and Pete both called it by habit, because it was the part of the Reese ranch farthest up Noon Creek, farthest in toward the mountains. The meadows there ~~were~~^{small} but plentiful, tucked into the willow bends of Noon Creek the way pieces of a jigsaw puzzle clasp into one another. Pete always left the Ramsay hay until last because its twisty little fields were so hard to buckrake. In some cases he had to drive out of sight around two or three bends of the creek to bring in enough hay for a respectable stack. "You spend all your damn time here going instead of doing," was his unfond sentiment.

For me on the scatter rake, though, the upper place was just fine. Almost any direction I sent Blanche and Fisheye prancing toward, there stood Breed Butte or the mountains for me to lean my eyes on. In this close to them, the Rockies took up more than half the edge of the earth, which seemed only their fair proportion. And knowing the reefs and peaks as I did I could judge where each sheep allotment was, there along the mountain wall of my father's forest. Walter Kyle atop Roman Reef

with his sheep and his telescope. Andy Gustafson with one of the Busby hands, under the middle of the reef where I had camp tended him; farther south, Sanford Hebner in escape from his family name and situation. Closer toward Flume Gulch and the North Fork, whatever human improvement had replaced Canada Dan as herder of the other Busby band. Lower down, in the mix of timber and grass slopes, Pat Hoy and the Withrow sheep; and the counting vee where my father and I talked and laughed with Dode. Already it was like going back to another time, to think about that first day of the counting trip.

The upper place, the old Ramsay place, always presented me new prospects of thought besides its horizons, though. For it was here that I was born. Alec and I both, in the Ramsay homestead house that still stands there today, although abandoned ever since my father quit as the Noon Creek association rider and embarked us into the Forest Service life. I couldn't have been but a year or so old when we moved away, yet I felt some regard for this site. An allegiance, even, for a bond of that sort will happen when you have been the last to live at a place. Or so I think. Gratitude that it offered a roof over your head for as long as it did, this may be, and remorse that only emptiness is your successor there.

Alec and I, September children, native Noon Creekers. And my mother's birthplace down the creek at the Reese ranch house itself. Odd to think that of the four of us at the English Creek ranger station all those years, the place that answered to the word "home" in each of us, only my father originated on English Creek, he alone was our

link to Scotch Heaven and the Montana origins of the McCaskills. We Americans scatter fast.

And something odder yet. In a physical sense, here at the upper place I was more distant from Alec than I had been all summer. The Double W lay half the length of Noon Creek from where my rake now wheeled and glided. Mentally, though, this advent to our mutual native ground was a kind of reunion with my brother. Or at least with thoughts of him. While I held the reins of Blanche and Fisheye as they clopped along, I wondered what saddle horse Alec might be riding. When we moved the stacker from one site to the next, I thought of Alec on the move too, likely patrolling Double W fences this time of year, performing his quick mending on any barbwire or post that needed it. By this stage of haying Wisdom Johnson a time or two a day could be heard remembering the charms of Bouncing Betty, on First Avenue South in Great Falls. I wondered how many times a week Alec was managing to ride into Gros Ventre and see Leona. Leona. I wondered--well, just say I wondered.

With all this new musing to be done, the first day of haying the Ramsay meadows went calmly enough. A Monday, that was, a mild day following what had been a cool and cloudy Sunday. Wisdom Johnson, I remember, claimed we now were haying so far up into the polar regions that he might have to put his shirt on. Anyway, a Monday, a getting-underway day.

The morning of the second Ramsay day, though, began unordinary. I started to see so as soon as Pony and I were coming down off the benchland to the Reese ranch buildings. My mind as usual ~~was~~ at that

~~was~~
 point on sour milk soda biscuits and fried eggs and venison sausage and other breakfast splendors as furnished by Marie, but I couldn't help watching the other rider who always approached the Reeses' at about the time I did. This of course was Clayton Hebner, for as I'd be descending from my benchland route Clayton would be riding in from the Hebner place on the North Fork, having come around the opposite end of Breed Butte from me. Always Clayton was on that same weary ~~mare~~ ^{bay} mare my father and I had seen the two smaller Hebner jockeys trying to urge into motion, at the outset of our counting trip, and always he came plodding in at the same pace and maybe even in the same hooftracks as the morning before. The first few mornings of haying I had waved to Clayton, but received no response. And I didn't deserve any. I ought to have known Hebners didn't go in for waving. ~~But~~ [#] But etiquette of greeting was not what now had my attention. This particular morning, Clayton across the usual distance between us looked larger. Looked slouchy, as if he might have nodded off in the saddle. Looked somehow--well, the word that comes to mind is dormant.

I had unsaddled Pony and was turning her into the pasture beside the barn when it became evident why Clayton Hebner didn't seem himself this morning. He wasn't.

"Hello there, Jick!" came the bray of Good Help Hebner. "Unchristly hour of the day to be out and about, ain't it?"

--"Clayton buggered his ankle up," Good Help was explaining in a fast yelp. Even before the sire of the Hebner clan managed to unload himself from the swaybacked mare, Pete had appeared in the yard with

an expression that told me ranch house walls did nothing to dim the identification of Good Help Hebner. "Sprained the goshdamn thing when him and Melvin was grab-assing around after supper last night," Good Help sped on to the two of us. "I tell you, Pete, I just don't know--" --what's got into kids these days, I finished for Good Help in my mind before he blared it out.

Yet just about the time you think you can recite every forthcoming point of conversation from a Good Help Hebner, that's when he'll throw you for a loop. As now, when Good Help delivered himself of this:

"Ought not to leave a neighbor in the lurch, though, Pete. So I'll take the stacker driving for you a couple days till Clayton mends up."

Pete looked as though he'd just been offered something nasty on the end of a stick.

But there just was no way around the situation. Someone to drive the stacker team was needed, and given that 12-year-old Clayton had been performing the job, maybe an outside chance existed that Good Help could, too. Maybe.

"Dandy," uttered Pete without meaning a letter of it. "Come on in and sit up for breakfast, Garland. Then Jick can sort you out on the horses Clayton's been using."

"Kind of a racehorsey pair of bastards, ain't they?" Good Help evaluated Jocko and Pep, the stacker team.

"These? Huh uh," I reassured him. "They're the oldest tamest team on the place, Garland. That's why Pete uses them on the stacker."

"Horses," proclaimed Good Help as if he had just been invited to address Congress on the topic. "You just never can tell about horses. They can look logey as a preacher after a chicken dinner and the next thing you know they turn themselves into ~~goddamn~~ ^{goshdamn} mustangs. One time I--"

"Garland, these two old grandmas could pull the stacker cable in their sleep. And just about do. Come on, I'll help you get them harnessed. Then we got to go make hay."

The next development in our making of hay didn't dawn on me for quite some time.

That is, I noticed only that Wisdom Johnson today had no cause to complain of coolness. This was an August day with its furnace door open. Almost as soon as all of us got to the hayfield at the upper place, Wisdom was stripping off his shirt and gurgling a drink of water.

How Wisdom Johnson did it I'll never know, but he drank water oftener than the rest of us on the hay crew all together and yet never got heat-sick from doing so. I mean, an ordinary person had to be careful about putting cool water inside a sweating body. Pete and Perry and Clayton and I rationed our visits to the burlap-wrapped water jug that was kept in the shade of the haystack. But Wisdom had his own waterbag, hung on the stacker frame up there where he could reach it anytime he wanted. A hot day like this seemed to stoke both Wisdom's stacking and his liquid consumption. He'd swig, spit out the stream to rinse hay dust from his mouth. Swig again, several Adam's apple swallows this time. Then, refreshed, yell down to Pete on the

buckrake: "More hay! Bring 'er on!"

Possibly, then, it was the lack of usual exhortation from Wisdom that first tickled my attention. I had been going about my scatter raking as usual, my mind here and there and the other, and only eventually did I notice the unusual silence of the hayfield. Above the brushy bend of the creek between me and the stack, though, I could see the stacker arms and fork taking load after load up, and Wisdom was there pitching hay energetically, and all seemed in order. The contrary to didn't seep through ~~me~~ until I felt the need for a drink of water and reined Blanche and Fisheye around the bend to go in to the stack and get it.

This haystack was distinct from any other we had put up all summer.

This one was hunched forward, leaning like a big hay-colored snowdrift against the frame of the stacker. More like a sidehill than a stack. In fact, this one so little resembled Wisdom's straight high style of haystack that I whoaed my team and sat to watch the procedure that was producing this leaning tower of Pisa.

The stacker fork with its next cargo of hay rose slowly, slowly, Good Help pacing at leisure behind the stacker team. When the arms and the fork neared the frame, he idly called "whoap," eased Jocko and Pep to a stop, and the hay gently plooped onto the very front of the stack, adding to the forward-leaning crest.

Wisdom gestured vigorously toward the back of the stack. You did not have to know pantomime to decipher that he wanted hay flung into that neighborhood. Then Wisdom's pitchfork flashed and he began

to shove hay down from the crest, desperately parcelling it toward the lower slope back there. He had made a heroic transferral of several huge pitchforkfuls when the next stacker load hovered up and plopped exactly where the prior one had.

Entrancing as Wisdom's struggle was, I stirred myself and went on in for my slug of water. Not up to me to regulate Good Help Hebner. Although it was with difficulty that I didn't make some crack when Good Help yiped to me: "Yessir, Jick, we're haying now, ain't we?"

From there on Wisdom's sidehill battle was a lost cause. When that haystack was done, or at least Wisdom called quits on it, and it was time to move the stacker to the next site, even Perry stopped dump raking in the field next door and for once came over to help.

The day by now was without a wisp of moving air, a hot stillness growing hotter. Yet here was a haystack that gave every appearance of leaning into a 90-mile-an-hour wind. Poles and props were going to be necessary to keep this stack upright until winter, let alone into winter.

Wisdom glistened so wet with sweat, he might have just come out of swimming. Side by side Perry and I wordlessly appraised the cattywampus haystack, a little like mourners to the fact that our raking efforts had come to such a result. Pete had climbed off the buckrake and gained his first full view and now looked like he might be coming down with a toothache.

"Pete," Wisdom started in, "I got to talk to you."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," said Pete. "Let's get the

stacker moved, then we'll gab."

After the stacker was in place at the new site and Pete bucked in some loads as the base of the next stack, he shut down the buckrake and called Wisdom over. They had a session, with considerable head-shaking and arm-waving by Wisdom. Then Pete went over to Good Help, and much more discussion and gesturing ensued.

Finally Good Help shook his head, nodded, spat, squinted, scratched and nodded again.

Pete settled for this and climbed on the buckrake.

For the next little while of stacking hay, there was slightly more snap to Good Help's teamstering. He now had Jocko and Pep moving as if they were only half asleep instead of sleepwalking. Wisdom managed to get his back corners of the stack built good and high, and it began to look as if we were haying semi-respectably again.

Something told me to keep informed as I did my scatter raking, though, and gradually the story of this new stack became clear. Once more, hay was creeping up and up in a slope against the frame of the stacker. But that was not the only slope. Due to Wisdom's determined efforts to build up the back corners, the rear also stood high. Something new again in the history of hay, a stack shaped like a gigantic saddle: prominent behind, low in the middle, and loftiest ^{again} at the front where Good Help was dropping the loads softly, softly.

Wisdom Johnson now looked like a man standing in a coulee and trying to shovel both sidehills down level.

My own shirt was sopping, just from sitting on the rake. Wisdom surely was pouring sweat by the glassfull. I watched as he grabbed his waterbag off the frame and took a desperate swig. It persuaded me that I needed to come in and visit the water jug again.

I disembarked from my rake just as Wisdom floundered to the exact middle of the swayback stack and jabbed his pitchfork in as if planting a battle flag.

"Drop the next frigging load right on that fork!" he shouted down to Good Help. So saying, he stalked up to the back of the haystack, folded his arms, and glowered down toward the pitchfork-target he had established for the next volley of hay.

This I had to watch. The water jug could wait, I planted myself just far enough from the stack to take in the whole drama.

Good Help squinted, scratched, spat, etcetera, which seemed to be his formula of acknowledgment. Then he twirled the ends of the reins and whapped the rumps of Jocko and Pep.

I suppose a comparison to make is this: how would you react if you had spent the past hours peacefully dozing and somebody jabbed a thumb between your ribs?

I believe even Good Help was more than a little surprised at the flying start his leather message produced from Jocko and Pep. Away the pair of horses jogged at a harness-rattling pace. Holding their reins, Good Help toddled after the team a lot more rapidly than I ever imagined he was capable of. The cable whirred snakelike through the pulleys of the stacker. And the load of hay was going up as if it was

being fired from one of those Roman catapults.

I spun and ran. If the arms of the stacker hit the frame at that runaway velocity, there was going to be stacker timber flying throughout the vicinity.

Over my shoulder, though, I saw it all.

Through some combination of stumble, lurch, and skid, Good Help at last managed to rare back on the ~~reins~~ with all his weight and yanked the horses to a stop.

Simultaneously the stacker arms and fork popped to a halt just inches short of the frame, the whole apparatus quivering up there in the sky like a giant tuning fork.

The hay. The hay was airborne. And Wisdom was so busy glowering he didn't realize this load was arriving to him as if lobbed by Paul Bunyan. I yelled, but anything took some time to sink in to Wisdom. His first hint of doom was as the hay, instead of cascading down over the pitchfork Good Help was supposed to be sighting on, kept coming and coming and coming. A quarter of a ton of timothy and bluestem on a trajectory to the top of Wisdom's head.

Hindsight is always 20-20. Wisdom ought to have humped up and accepted the avalanche. He'd have had to splutter hay the next several minutes, but a guy as sturdy as he was wouldn't have been hurt by the big loose wad.

But I suppose to look up and see a meteorite of hay dropping on you is enough to startle a person. Wisdom in his surprise took a couple of wading steps backward from the falling mass. And had forgotten how

far back he already was on the stack. That second step carried Wisdom to the edge, at the same moment that the hayload spilled itself onto the stack. Just enough of that hay flowed against Wisdom to teeter him. The teetering slipped him over the brink. "Oh, hell," I heard him say as he started to slide.

Every stackman knows the danger of falling from the heights of his work. In Wisdom's situation, earth lay in wait for him 20 feet below. This lent him incentive. Powerful as he was, the desperately grunting Wisdom clawed his arms into the back of the haystack as he slid ~~down~~. Like a man trying to swim up a waterfall even as the water sluices him down.

"Goshdamn!" Good Help marveled somewhere behind me. "Will you look at that!"

Wisdom's armwork did slow his descent, and meanwhile a sizable cloud of hay was pulling loose from the stack and coming down with him, considerably cushioning his landing. As it turned out, except for scratched and chafed arms and chest and a faceful of hay Wisdom met the ground intact. He also arrived to earth with a full head of steam, all of which he now intended to vent on Good Help Hebner.

"You satchel-ass old son of a frigging goddamn"--Wisdom's was a rendition I have always wished I'd had time to commit to memory. An entire opera of cussing, as he emerged out of the saddleback stack. But more than Wisdom's mouth was in action, he was trying to lay hands on Good Help. Good Help was prudently keeping the team of horses between him and the stackman. Across the horses' wide backs they eyed one

another, Wisdom feinting one way and Good Help going the other, then the reverse. Since the stacker arms and fork still were in the sky, held there only by cable hitched to the team, I moved in and grabbed the halters of Jocko and Pep so they would stand steady.

By now Pete had arrived on the buckrake, to find his stacking crew in this shambles.

"Hold everything!" he shouted, which indeed was what the situation needed.

Pete got over and talked Wisdom away from one side of the team of horses, Good Help pussyfooted away from their opposite side, and I backed Jocko and Pep toward the stack to let down the arms and fork.

Diplomacy of major proportions now was demanded of Pete. His dilemma was this: If he didn't prune Good Help from the hay crew, Wisdom Johnson was going to depart soonest. Yet Pete needed to stay on somewhat civil terms with Good Help, for the sake of hanging on to Clayton and the oncoming lineage of Hebner boys as a ready source of labor. Besides all that, it was simply sane general policy not to get crosswise with a neighbor such as Good Help, for he could just as readily substitute your livestock for those poached deer hanging in his jackpines.

Wisdom had stalked away to try to towel some of the chaff off himself with his shirt. I hung around Pete and Good Help. I wouldn't have missed this for the world.

"Garland, we seem to have a problem here," Pete began with sizable understatement. "You and Wisdom. He doesn't quite agree with the way you drive stacker team."

"Pete, I have stacked more hay than that guy has ever ~~seen~~^{even}."

By which, Good Help must have meant in several previous incarnations, as none of us who knew him in this lifetime had ever viewed a pitchfork in his hands. "He don't know a favor when it's done to him. If he'd let me place the loads the way they ought to be, he could do the stacking while setting in a goshdamn rocking chair up there."

"He doesn't quite see it that way."

"He don't see doodly-squat about putting up hay, that fellow. I sure don't envy you all his haystacks that are gonna tip assy-turvy before winter, Pete."

"Garland, something's got to give. Wisdom won't stack if you're going to drive."

The hint flew past Good Help by a Texas mile. "Kind of a stubborn bozo, ain't he?" he commiserated with Pete. "I was you, I'd of sent him down the road long since."

Pete gazed at Good Help as if a monumental idea had just been presented. As, indeed, one had.

"I guess you're right, I'd better go ahead and can him," Pete judiciously agreed with Good Help. I gaped at Pete. But he was going right on: "I do need to have somebody on the stack who knows what he's doing, though. Lucky as hell you're on hand, Garland. Nobody else on this crew is veteran to the stacking job like you are. What we'll do, I'll put you up on the stack and we'll make some hay around here for a change, huh?"

Good Help went as still as Lot's wife, and I swear he even turned

about as white.

"Ordinarily, now"--I didn't get to hear all of the ensuing catalogue of excuse, because I had to saunter away to keep my giggles in, but--"this goshblamed back of mine"--I heard more than enough--"if it'll help you out with that stubborn bozo I can just head on home, Pete"--to know that it constituted Good Help's adieu to haying.

That night at English Creek, my father and mother laughed and laughed at my retelling of the saga of Wisdom and Good Help.

"A pair of dandies, they are," my father ajudged. Recently he seemed to take particular pleasure in any evidence that jugheaded behavior wasn't a monopoly of the Forest Service.

But then a further point occurred to him, and he glanced at my mother. She looked soberly back at him. It had occurred to her, too. She in fact was the one who now asked it: "Then who's going to drive the stacker team?"

"Actually," I confessed, "I am."

—



So that was how I went from haying's ideal job to its goddamn dullest.

Back and forth with that stacker team. All of haying until then I had idly glanced at those little towpaths worn into the meadow, and out from the side of each stack we put up, identical routes the exact length of the stacker cable. Now it registered on me how many footsteps, horse and human, it took to trudge those patterns into creation. The scenery meanwhile constant: the rear ends of Jocko and Pep looming ahead of me like a pair of circus fat ladies bending over to ~~the~~ tie their shoelaces. Too promptly I discovered a charm of Pep's, which was to hoist his tail and take a dump as soon as we were hitched up at a new stack site, so that I had to remember ~~shin~~ to watch my step or find myself ~~ankle~~ shin deep in fresh horse apples.

Nor did it help my mood that Clayton with his tender ankle was able to sit on the seat of the scatter rake and do that job. My scatter rake. The first long hours of driving the stacker team, I spent brooding about the presence of the Hebner tribe in this world.

I will say, the stacker team job shortly cured me of too much thinking. The first time I daydreamed a bit and was slow about starting the load up onto the stack, Wisdom Johnson brought me out of it by shouting down: "Hey, Jick! Whistle or sing, or show your thing!" I was tempted to part Wisdom's hair with that particular load of hay, but I forebore.

Maybe my stacker team mood was contagious. Suppertime of the

second day, when I got back to English Creek I found my mother frowning over the week's Gleaner. "What's up?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she said and didn't convince me. When she went to the stove to wrestle with supper and I had washed up, I zeroed in on the article she'd been making a mouth at. It was one on the Random page:

Phantom Woman:

When Fire Ran

On The Mountain

Editor's note: The fire season is once again upon us, and lightning needs no help from the carelessness of man. It is just 10 years ago that the Phantom Woman Mountain conflagration provided an example of what happens when fire gets loose in a big way.
We reprint the story as a reminder. When in the woods, break your matches after blowing them out, crush cigarette butts, and douse all campfires.

Forest Service crews are throwing everything in the book at the fire on Phantom Woman mountain--but so far, the roaring blaze has thrown it all back.

The inferno is raging in up-and-down country near the headwaters of the North Fork of English Creek, about 20 miles west of Gros Ventre. Reports

from Valier and Conrad say the column of smoke can be seen from those communities. How many acres of forest have been consumed is not known. It is certain the loss is the worst in the Two Medicine National Forest since the record fire season of 1910.

One eyewitness said the crews seemed to be bringing the fire under control until late yesterday afternoon. Then the upper flank of the fire broke loose "and started going across that mountain as fast as a man can run."

H.T. Gisborne, fire research specialist for the U.S. Forest Service at Missoula explained the "blowup" phenomenon: "Ordinarily the front of a forest fire advances like troops in skirmish formation, pushing ahead faster here, slower there, according to the timber type and fuels, but maintaining a practically unbroken front. Even when topography, fuels, and weather result in a crown fire, the sheet of flames leaps from one tree crown to the next at a relatively slow rate, from one-half to one mile an hour. But when such 'runs' throw spots of fire ahead of the advancing front, the spots burn back to swell the main front and add to the momentum of

the rising mass of heat. Literally, a 'blowup' of the front of the fire may then happen."

No word has been received of casualties in the Phantom Woman fire, although reports are that some crews had to flee for their lives when the 'blowup' occurred.

When my father came in for supper, my mother liberated the Gleaner from me and handed it to him, saying: "Mac, you might as well see this." Meaning, you might as well see it before our son the asker starts in on you about it.

The headline stopped him. Bill Reinking always got in touch with him about any story having to do with the Two Medicine National Forest. "Why's this in the paper?" my father now demanded of the world at large.

"It's been ten years, Mac," my mother told him. "Ten years ago this week."

He read it through. His eyes were intent, his jaw was out, as if stubborn against the notion that fire could happen in the Two Medicine National Forest. When he tossed the Gleaner aside, though, he said only: "Doesn't time fly."

The next day, two developments.

I took some guilty pleasure at the first of these. Not long before noon, Clayton dropped one wheel of the scatter rake into a

ditch that was closer than he'd noticed, and the impact broke one of the brackets that attaches the dumping mechanism to the rake frame. Clayton himself looked considerably jarred, although I don't know whether mostly by the jolt of the accident or the dread that Pete would fire him for it.

But Pete being Pete, he instead said: "These things happen, Clayton. We'll cobble it with wire until we can get a weld done on it." And once I got over my secret satisfaction about the superiority of my scatter raking to Clayton's, I was glad Pete didn't come down hard on the boy. Being a son of Good Help Hebner seemed to me punishment enough for anybody.

Then at the end of the workday, as Pony and I came down the benchland to the ford of English Creek, I saw a second Forest Service pickup parked beside my father's outside the ranger station. I figured the visitor might be Cliff Bowen, the young ranger from the Indian Head district just south of us, and it was. When I stepped in to say hello, I learned Cliff had been to headquarters in Great Falls and had come by with some fire gear for my father. And with some rangerly gripes he was sharing as well. Normally Cliff Bowen was mild as milk, but his headquarters visit left him pretty well steamed.

"Mac, Sipe asked me how things are going." Sipe was Ken Sipe, the superintendent of the Two Medicine National Forest. "I told smokechasers and him, about as good as could be expected, but we need more / fire guards." July and now August had stayed so hot and dangerous that rangers had been permitted to hire some fire manpower, but only enough, as my father had said, "to give us a taste."

"How'd that go over with him?" my father wondered.

"About like a fart in church. He told me it's Missoula policy. Hold down on the hiring, on these east-side forests. Goddamn it, Mac, I don't know what the Major's thinking of. This forest is as dry as paper. We get one good lightning storm in the mountains and we'll have fires the whole sonofabitching length of the Two."

"Maybe the Major's got it all arranged with upstairs so there isn't going to be any lightning the rest of the summer, Cliff."

"Yeah, maybe. But if any does get loose, I hope to Christ it aims for the rivets on the Major's hip pocket."

My father couldn't help but laugh. "You think snag strikes are trouble. Figure how long the Major'd smolder."

Two developments, I said back there. Amend that to three. As I led Pony to her pasture for the night, the heat brought out sweat on me, just from that little walk. When I reached the house the thermometer in our kitchen window was catching the western sun. 92°, it read. The hot heavy weather was back. The kind of weather that invites lightning storms.

But all we got that night was a shower, a dab of drizzle. When I climbed out of bed in the morning, I debated whether Pete's hay would be too wet to stack today. So that I wouldn't make my ride for nothing, I phoned the Reese ranch.

"Pete thinks it'll be dry enough by middle of the morning," Marie's voice told me. "Come on for breakfast. I have sourdough

hotcakes."

It turned out that the sourdough hotcakes were the only real gain of the morning for our hay crew. We took our time at the breakfast table and then did a leisurely harnessing-up of our teams and made no hurry of getting to the Ramsay place's hayfields, and still Perry and Bud and Wisdom had a lot of smoke time while Pete felt of the hay and gandered at the sky. Finally Pete said, "Hell, let's try it." We would do okay for a while, put up a dozen or so loads, then here would come a sun shower. Just enough moisture to shut us down. Then we'd hay a little more, and another sun shower would happen. For a rancher trying to put up hay, that is the most aggravating kind of day there can be. Or as Pete put it during one of these sprinkly interruptions: "Goddamn it, if you're gonna rain, rain."

By about 2 o'clock and the fourth or fifth start-and-stop of our stacking, he had had enough. "The hell with it. Let's head for home."

I naturally anticipated an early return to English Creek, and started thinking about where I might go fishing for the rest of the afternoon. My theory is, the more rotten the weather, the better the fishing. But as I was unharnessing Jocko and Pep, Pete came out of the house and asked:

"Jick, how do you feel about a trip to town?"

Inasmuch as we were rained out anyway, he elaborated, I might just as well take the scatter rake in to Grady Tilton's garage and

get the broken bracket welded, stay overnight at the Heaneys' and in the morning drive the repaired rake back here to the ranch. "I checked all this out with headquarters"--meaning my mother--"and she said it'd be okay."

"Sounds good to me," I told Pete. The full fact was, after the days of trudging back and forth behind the stacker team it sounded like an expedition to Africa.

So I set off for Gros Ventre, about mid-afternoon. Roving scatter raker Jick McCaskill hitting the road, even if the route only was to town and back.

The first couple of miles almost flew by, for it was remarkable what a pair of steppers Blanche and Fisheye now seemed to me; speed demons in comparison to Jocko and Pep. My thoughts were nothing special. Wondering what Ray Heaney would have to report. Mulling the rest of the summer. Another week or so of haying. The start of school—~~was~~ Christamighty, only 30 days away. And my 15th birthday, one day less than that. I ask you, how is it that after the Fourth of July each summer, time somehow speeds up?

I like to believe that even while curlicues of this sort are going on in my head, the rest of me is more or less on the job. Aiming that scatter rake down the Noon Creek road, I took note of Dill Egan's haystacks, which looked to me like poor relations of those Wisdom built. Way over on the tan horizon to the northeast I could

see specks that would be Double W cattle, and wondered where Alec was riding or fence-fixing today. And of course one of the things a person always does a lot of in Montana is watching other people's weather. All that sky and horizon around you, there almost always is some atmospheric event to keep track of. At the top of the county road's rise from Dill Egan's place, I studied a dark anvil cloud which was sitting over the area to the northwest of me. My father was not going to like the looks of that one, hovering along the edge of his forest. ~~our Ramsay hayfield
and the Ramsay place is going to have itself a bath,~~ I told myself.

In a few more minutes I glanced around again, though, and found that the cloud wasn't sitting over the Ramsay place. It was on the move. Toward Noon Creek and me. A good thing I was bright enough to bring my slicker along on the rake; the coat was going to save me from some wet.

~~reconnoitered,~~
But the next time I ~~glanced back~~, rain was pushed off my mental agenda. The cloud was bigger, blacker, and closer. A whole hell of a lot closer. It also was rumbling now like it was the engine of the entire sky. That may sound fancy, but view it from my eyes at the time: a dark block of storm, with pulses of light coming out of it like flame winking from firebox doors. And even as I gawked at it, a jagged rod of lightning stabbed from the cloud to the earth. Pale lightning, nearer white than yellow. The kind a true electrical storm employs.

As I have told, I am not exactly in love with lightning anyway. Balling the reins in both my hands, I slapped Blanche and Fisheye some encouragement across their rumps. "Hyaah, you two! Let's go!" Which may sound drastic, but try sitting on a ten-foot expanse of metal rake with lightning approaching and then prescribe to me what you would have done.

Go we did, at a rattling pace, for the next several minutes. I did my best to count distance on the thunder, but it was that grumbling variety that lets loose another thump before you've finished hearing the one before. My eyes rather than my ears had to do the weather forecasting, and they said Blanche and Fisheye and the rake and I were not going as fast as the stormcloud was traveling or growing or whatever the hell it was doing.

The route ahead stretched on and on, for immediately after coming up out of Dill Egan's place the Noon Creek road abandons the bottomland and arrows along the benchland between Noon Creek and English Creek until it eventually hits the highway north of Gros Ventre. Miles of country as exposed as a table top. I tell you, a situation like that reminds a person that skin is damn thin shelter against the universe.

One thing the steady thunder and the pace of the anvil cloud did tell me was that I somehow had to abandon that road. Find a place to pull in and get myself and my horses away from this ten-foot lightning rod on wheels. The question was, where? Along the English Creek road I'd have had no problem; within any little way there,

a ranch could be pulled into for shelter. But around here the Double W owned everything, and wherever there did happen to be a turnoff into one of the abandoned sets of Noon Creek ranch buildings, the Double W kept the gate padlocked against fishermen. As I verified for myself, by halting my team for a quick ~~look~~ ^{scan} at the gate into the old Nansen place.

A lack of choices can make your mind up for you in a hurry. I whapped Blanche and Fisheye again and on down the county road we clattered, heading for a high frame of gateposts about three-quarters of a mile off. The main gate into the Double W.

It took forever, but at last we pulled up at that gateframe and the Double W turnoff. From the crosspiece supported by the big gateposts--the size and height of telephone poles, they really were--hung the sign:

WW RANCH

WENDELL & MEREDICE WILLIAMSON

The sign was creaking a little, the wind starting to stir in front of the storm.

Neither the sign nor the wind I gave a whit about just then. What I had forgotten was that this turnoff into the Double W had a cattleguard built in there between the gateposts. A pit overlaid with a grill of pipes, which vehicles could cross but hoofed creatures such as cattle couldn't. Hoofed creatures such as cattle and horses. To put Blanche and Fisheye through here, I would have

to open the barbwire livestock gate beside the cattleguard.

You know what I was remembering. "GODaMIGHTy, get aWAY from that!"--Stanley's cry as I approached the wire gate at the cabin during our campending trip. "You happen to be touching that wire and lightning hits that fence--" This coming rumblebelly of a storm made that June one look like a damp washcloth. Every time I glanced in its direction now, lightning winked back. And nowhere around this entrance to the Double W was there a stick of wood, not one sole single goddamn splinter, with which to knock the hoop off the gate stick and flip the wire gate safely aside.

Holy H. Hell. Sitting here telling this, all the distance of years between that instant and now, I can feel again the prickling that came across the backs of my hands, the sweat of dismay on its way up through my skin there. Grant me three moments which could be erased from my life, and that Double W gate scene would be one.

I wiped my hands against my pants. Blanche swished her tail, and Fisheye whinnied. They maybe were telling me what I already knew. Delay was my worst possible behavior, for that storm was growing nearer every second that I stood there and stewed. I wiped my hands again. And jumped at the gate as if in combat against it. One arm grappling around the gatepost, the other arm and hand desperately working the wire hoop up off the gatestick--oh yes, sure, this gate was one of those snug obstinate bastards, I needed to mightily hug the stick and post together to gain enough slack for the hoop to loosen. Meanwhile

every place my body was touching a strand of barbwire I could feel a kind of target line, ready to sizzle: as if I was trussed up in electrical wiring and somebody was about to throw the switch.

I suppose in a fraction of what it takes to tell about it, I wrestled that gate open and slung it wide. Yet it did seem an immense passage of time.

And I wasn't on easy street yet. Blanche and Fisheye, I have to say, were taking all of this better than I was, but even so they were getting a little nervous about the storm's change in the air and the loudening thunder. "Okay, here we go now, nothing to it, here we go," I soothed the team and started them through the gate. I could have stood some soothing myself, for the scatter rake was ten feet wide and this gate was only about eleven. Catch a rake wheel behind a gatepost and you have yourself a first class hung-up mess. In my case, I then would have the rake in contact with the barbwire fence, inviting lightning right up the seat of my pants, while I backed and maneuvered the rake wheel out of its bind. Never have I aimed anything more carefully than that wide scatter rake through that just-wide-enough Double W gateway.

We squeaked through. Which left me with only one more anxious act to do. To close the gate, for there were cattle in this field. Even if they were the cattle of the damn Double W, even if it mattered nothing to me that they got out and scattered to Tibet--if you have been brought up in Montana, you close a gate behind you.

So I ran back and did the reverse of the wrestling that'd opened the gate. Still scared spitless about touching that wire. Yet maybe not quite as scared as when I'd first done it, for I was able to say to myself all the while: what in the hell have I done to deserve this dose of predicament?

Again on the rake, I broke all records of driving that Double W approach road, down from the benchland to where the ranch buildings were clustered on the north side of Noon Creek. Across the plank bridge the rake rumbled, my thunder against the storm's thunder, and I sighted refuge. The Double W barn.

In minutes I had my team unhitched--leaving the scatter rake out by a collection of old machinery, so that lightning at least ~~ensconcing~~ would have to do some sorting to find it--and was ~~ensconcing~~ them in barn stalls. They were lathered enough that I unharnessed them and rubbed them dry with a gunny sack. In fact, I looked around for the granary, went over there, and brought back a hatful of Double W oats to blanche and Fisheye as their reward.

Now I could draw a breath and look around for my own benefit.

The Double W had buildings and more buildings. This barn was huge, and the two-story white Williamson house across the yard could have housed the governor of Montana. You would think this was ranch enough for anybody, yet Wendell Williamson actually owned another one at least as big as this. The Deuce W--its cattle brand was 2W--
 down in the Highwood Mountains between Great Falls and Lewistown,

a hundred or more miles from here. More distance than I'd been in my whole life, and Wendell goddamn Williamson possessed both ends of it.

Be that as it may, the Double W was now my port in the storm, and I had better make my presence known.[#] No one was in sight, it would take a little while for the rain to bring in Alec and the other riders and the hay crew from the range and the hayfield. But somebody was bound to be in the house, and I hurried over to there before I had to do it during the storm.

I knocked at the front door.

The door opened and Meredice Williamson was standing there smiling and saying: "Yes?"

"'Lo, Mrs. Williamson. I put Blanche and Fisheye in your barn."

That seemed to be double Dutch to her. But she smiled on and commended: "That was good of you. I'm sure Wendell will be pleased."
I sought to correct her impression that a ~~deliver~~ ^{delivery} of Blanche and Fisheye was involved here. "Well, no, they'll only be there until it clears up. I mean, what it is, I was driving my scatter rake to town and the storm started coming and I had to head in here on account of lightning, so I unhitched my team and put them in the barn there, I hope that's all right?"

"I'm sure it must be," she acceded, pretty plainly because she had no idea what else to say. Meredice Williamson was a city woman--a lawyer's widow, it was said--whom Wendell met and married in

California a few winters before. The unkind view of her was that she'd had too much sun on the brain down there. But I believe the case honestly was that because Meredice Williamson only came north to spend summers at the Double W, she never got clued in to the Two country; never quite caught up with its rhythms of season and livelihood and lore. At least, standing there within the weathered doorway ~~marcelled~~ in her yellow sun frock and with her graying hair in perfect waves, she looked much like a visitor to her own ranch house.

Yet maybe Meredice Williamson was not as vague as the general estimate of her, for she now pondered my face a moment more and then asked: "Are you Beth McCaskill's other boy?"

Which wasn't exactly my most preferred phrasing of it. But she did have genealogical fact on her side. So I bobbed yes and contributed: "Jick. Alec's brother."

"Wendell thinks highly of Alec," she confided, as if I gave a hoot in hell about Mr. Double W's opinion. So far as I could see Wendell Williamson was a main contributor to Alec's mental delinquency, encouraging him in his damn cowboy notions. The summer's sunder of my family followed a faultline which led to this doorstep. Fair is fair, though, and I couldn't really blame Meredice Williamson for Wendell's doings. Innocent as a bluebird on a manure pile, this lady seemed to be. Thus I only said back:

"Yeah. So I savvy."

Just then the leading edge of rain hit, splatting drops the size of quarters on the flagstones of the walk. Meredice Williamson peered

past me in surprise at the blackening sky. "It looks like a shower," she mustered. "Wouldn't you like to step in?"

I was half-tempted. On the other hand, I figured she wouldn't have the foggiest notion of what to do with me once I was in there. Furnish me tea and ladyfingers? Ask me if I would care for a game of Chinese checkers?

"No, that's okay," I declined. "I'll wait in the bunkhouse. Alec likely will show up there pretty quick. I'll shoot the hooey with him until the rain's over and then head on to town." Here Meredice Williamson's expression showed that she was unsure what hooey was or why we would shoot it. In a hurry I concluded: "Anyway, thanks for the borrow of your barn."

"You're quite welcome, Jake," she was saying as I turned and sprinted across the yard. The rain was beginning to pelt in plentiful drops now, pocking the dust. Flashes of light at the south edge of the storm and the immediate rumbles made me thankful again that I was in off the rake, even if the haven was the Double W.

Strange, to be in a bunkhouse when its residents are out on the job. Like one of those sea tales of stepping aboard a ship where everything is intact, sails set and a meal waiting on the galley stove, but the crew has vanished.

Any bunkhouse exists only to shelter a crew. There is no feel of it as a home for anybody, although even as I say that

I realize many ranch hands spent their lives in a bunkhouse.

Alec himself was a full-timer here, and would be until he and Leona tied their knot. Even so, a bunkhouse to me seems a place you can put up with for a season but that would be enough.

If you are unaccustomed to a bunkhouse, the roomful of beds is a medley of odors. Of tobacco in three incarnations: hand-rolled cigarettes, snoose, and chewing tobacco. The last two, in fact, had a permanent existence in the spit cans beside about half the bunks. These I took special note of, not wanting to kick one of them over. Of too many bodies and not enough baths; yet I wonder why it is that we now think we have to deodorize the smell of humanness out of existence. Of ashes and creosote; the presence of an elderly stove and stovepipe. All in all, the scent of men and what it takes them to lead the ranch hands' life.

I gandered around to try and figure out which bunk was Alec's. An easy enough mystery. The corner bunk with the snapshot of Leona on the wall above the pillow.

Naturally the picture deserved a closer look.⁴⁷ It showed Leona on a horse in a show ring--that would be Tollie Zane's during one of his horse sales--and wearing a lady Stetson and leather chaps. And a smile that probably fused the camera. But I managed to get past the top of Leona, to where something else was tugging my eyes. Down the length of her chaps, something was spelled out in tooled letters with silver spangles between. I moved in for a closer look yet, my nose almost

onto the snapshot, and I was able to make out:

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Well, that wasn't the message that ordinarily would come to mind from looking along Leona's leg. But it was interesting.

I could hear voices, and men began trooping in. The hay crew.
and at the tail end of them Alec, who looked flabbergasted to see
m me sitting on his bunk.

"Jicker, what in blazes--" he started as he strode over to me. I related to him my scatter rake situation and he listened keenly, although he didn't look perceptibly happier with my presence. "As soon as the rain lets up, I'll head on to town," I assured him.

"Yeah, well. Make ~~yourself~~ at home, I guess." Now to my surprise, my brother seemed short of anything more to say. He was saved from having to, by the arrival of the Double W foreman Cal Petrie and the other two riders, older guys named Thurl Everson and Joe Henty. Both had leather gloves and fencing pliers, so I imagined they were glad to be in away from barbwire for a while, too.

Cal Petrie spotted me ~~sitting~~^{perched} on the bunk beside Alec, nodded hello, and steered over to ask: "Looking for a job?" He knew full

well I wasn't, but as foreman it was his responsibility to find out just what brought me here.

Again I explained the scatter rake-lightning situation, and Cal nodded once more. "A stroke of that could light you up like a Christmas tree, all right. Make yourself to home. Alec can introduce you around." Then Cal announced generally: "I got to go to town after supper for some sickle heads for the mowers, and I can take two of you jaspers in with me in the pickup. I'll only be in there an hour or so, and you got to be ready to come home when I say. No staying in there to drink the town dry, in other words. So cut cards or Indian rassle or compare dicks or however you want to choose, but only two of you are going." And he went off into the room he had to himself at the far end of the bunkhouse.

In a hay crew such as the Double W's there were ten or a dozen guys, putting up two stacks at once, and what struck me as Alec made me known to them was that three of the crew were named Mike. A gangly one called Long Mike, and a mower man naturally called Mike the Mower, and then one who lacked either of those distinctions and so was called Plain Mike. The riders who had come in with Cal Petrie I already knew, Thurl and Joe. Likewise the choreboy, old Dolph Kuhn, one of those codgers who get to be as much a part of a ranch as its ground and grass. So, I felt acquainted enough even before somebody chimed out:

"What, are you another one of the famous fist-fighting McCaskills?"

Alec's flooring of Earl Zane at the Fourth of July dance was of course the natural father of that remark.

"No, I'm the cut and shoot type," I cracked back. "When the trouble starts, I cut through the alley and shoot for home."

You just never know. That joke had gray whiskers and leaned on a cane, but it drew a big laugh from the Double W ~~yahoos~~ even so.

There followed some more comment, probably for the fortieth time, about how Alec had whopped Earl, and innumerable similar exploits performed in the past by various of this crew. You'd have thought the history of boxing had taken place in that bunkhouse. But I was careful not to contribute anything further. The main rule when you join a crew, even if it's only for the duration of ~~a~~ rainstorm, is to listen more than you talk.

Alec still didn't look overjoyed that I was on hand, but I couldn't help that. I didn't order up the damn electrical storm, which still was rumbling and crashing around out there.

"So," I offered as an opener, "what do you know for sure?"

"Enough to get by on," Alec allowed.

"Been doing any calf roping?"

"No."

That seemed to take care of the topic of calf roping. Some silence, then Alec hazarded: "How's the haying going at Pete's?"

"We've pretty close to got it. A few more days left. How're they doing here?"

"More like a couple of weeks left, I guess."

And there went the topic of haying. Alec and I just

sat back and listened for a little to where the discussion had now turned, the pair of slots for town. Some grumping was going on about Cal Petrie's edict that only two of ~~them~~^{crew} were going to get to see the glories of Gros Ventre on a Saturday night. This was standard bunkhouse grouse, though. If Cal had said the whole shebang of them could go to town with him, there'd have been grumbling that he hadn't offered to buy them the first round of drinks as well. No, the true issue was just beginning to come out: more than half the hay crew, six or so guys, considered themselves the logical town candidates. The variety of reasoning--the awful need for a haircut, a bet to be collected from a guy who was going to be in the Medicine Lodge only this very night, even a potential toothache that necessitated preventive remedies from the drugstore--was remarkably well-rehearsed. This Double W bunch was the kind of crew, as the saying went, who began on Thursday to get ready on Friday to go to town on Saturday to spend Sunday.

Long Mike and Plain Mike and a sort of a gorilla of a guy who I figured must be one of the two stackmen of this gang were among the yearners for town. Plain Mike surprised me by being the one to propose that a game of cards settle the matter. But then, you just never know who in a crew will turn out to be ~~the~~^{the} tiger rider.

The proposal itself eliminated the big stackman. "Hell with it, I ain't lost nothing in that burg anyway." At the time I thought his sporting blood was awfully anemic. It has since dawned on me that he could not read--could not tell the cards apart.

Inasmuch as Plain Mike had efficiently whittled off one contender, the other four felt more or less obliged to go along with a card game.

"We need an honest banker," Plain Mike solicited.

"You're talking contradictions," somebody called out.

"Damn, I am at that. Honest enough that we can't catch him, will do. Hey there, Alec's brother! How about you being the bank for us?"

"Well, I don't know. What are you going to play?"

"Pitch," said Plain Mike. "What else is there?"

That drew me. Pitch is the most perfect of card games. It excels poker in that there can be more than one winner during each hand, and cribbage in that it doesn't take an eternity to play, and rummy and hearts in that judgment is more important than the cards you are dealt, and stuff like canasta and pinochle can't even be mentioned in the same breath with pitch.

"I guess I could," I assented. "Until the rain lets up." It still was raining like bath time on Noah's ark.

"Pull up a stump," invited Plain Mike, nodding toward a spare chair beside the stove. "We'll show you pitch as she is meant to be played."

Uh huh, at least you will, I thought to myself as I added my presence to the circle of card players. But I will say this for ~~yahoos~~, the Double W ~~yahoos~~, they played pitch the classic way--high, low, game, jack, jick, joker. It would just surprise you, how many people go through life under the delusion that pitch ought to be played

without a joker in the deck, which is a skimpy damned way of doing it, and how many others are just as dim in wanting to play with two jokers, which is excessive and confusing.

My job of banker didn't amount to all that much. Just being in charge of the box of Diamond wooden matches and paying out to each player as many matches as he'd made points, or taking matches back if he went set. Truth be told, I could have kept score more efficiently with a pencil and sheet of paper, and Alec simply could have done it in his head. But these Double W highrollers wanted to be able to squint around the table and count for themselves how much score everybody else had.

From the very first hand, when the other players were tuning up with complaints like "Is this the best you can deal, a mess like this?" and Plain Mike simply bid three, "in them things called spades," and led with ~~a~~ ^{the} queen, it was worth a baccalaureate degree in the game of pitch to watch Plain Mike. He bid only when he had one sure point, ace for high or deuce for low, with some other point probable among his cards, so that when he did bid it was as good as made. But during a hand when anybody else had the bid, he managed to run with some point, jack or jick or joker, for himself, or at least--this, a real art of pitch--he managed to sluff the point to somebody besides the bidder. I banked and admired. While the other cardsters' scores gyrated up and down, with every hand Plain Mike added a wooden match or two to his total.

Around us, the rest of the crew was carrying on conversation. If you can call it that. There is no place like a bunkhouse for

random yatter. One guy will grouch about how the eggs were cooked for breakfast and another will be reminded of a plate of beans he ate in Pocatello in 1922. Harness the gab gas of the average bunkhouse and you'd have an inexhaustible fuel.

By now Alec, looking restless, had come over and joined me in watching the card game. This was certainly a more silent brother than I'd ever been around before. Maybe it had something to do with his surroundings, this hay crew he and the other riders now had to share the bunkhouse with. Between checking out the window on the progress of the rain and banking the pitch game, I started mulling what it would be like to work in this hay crew instead of Pete's. If, say, ranches were swapped under Alec and me, him up the creek at the Reese place as he'd been at my age and me here at the Gobble Gobble You. Some direct comparison of companions was possible. Wisdom Johnson was an obvious choice over the gorilla of a guy who was one of the Double W stackmen, and a rangy man called Swede who more than likely was the other one. A possible advantage I could see to the gorilla was what he might have inflicted on Good Help Hebner for trying to drown him in hay, but that was wishful thinking. Over on the conversation side of the room, Mike the Mower looked somewhat more interesting than Bud Dolson. He was paying just enough attention to the pair of storiers not to seem standoffish. His bunk was the most neatly made, likely showing he had been in the army. All in all, though, Mike the Mower showed more similarity to Bud than difference. Mower men were their own nationality.

From how they had been razzing one another about quantities of hay moved, three of the five pitch players--Plain Mike and Long Mike and a heavy-shouldered guy--were the horse buckrakers. I was pretty sure how they shaped up on the job. The heavy-shouldered guy, who looked like a horseman, was the best buckraker. Long Mike was the slowest. And Plain Mike did just enough more work than Long Mike to look better.

A couple of younger guys, around Alec's age but who looked about a fraction as bright, likely were the stacker team drivers in this outfit. Then a slouchy elderly guy in a khaki shirt, and a one-eyed one--I suppose it doesn't say much for my own haying status that I was working down through this Double W crew, getting to the bunch rakers and whoever the scatter raker was, when the phone jangled at the far end of the room.

The ring of that phone impressed me more than anything else about the Double W had yet. I mean, there was no stipulated reason why there couldn't be a telephone in a bunkhouse. But at the time it seemed a fairly swanky idea.

Cal Petrie stepped out of his room to answer it. When he had listened a bit and yuffed an answer, he hung up and looked over toward where Alec and I were on the rim of the card game.

"Come on up for supper with us," the foreman directed at me.
"Give the mud a little more chance to dry out, that way."

Cal declaimed this as if it was his own idea, but I would have bet any money as to who was on the other end of that phone line.
Meredice Williamson.

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Not long after, the supper bell sounded the end of the card game. The heavy-shouldered guy had the highest score, and yes, Plain Mike had the next. Now that they were the town-bound pair they received a number of imaginative suggestions of entertainment they might seek in there, as the crowd of us sloshed over to the kitchen door of the house. While everybody scraped mud off their feet and trooped on in I hung back with Alec, to see what the table lineup was going to be.

"Jick," he began, but didn't go on with whatever he had in mind. Instead, "See you after supper," he said and stepped into the house, with me following.

The meal was in the summer room, a kind of windowed porch along the side of the house, long enough to hold a table for a crew this size. I of course did know that even at a place like the Double W, family and crew ate together. If the King of England had owned Noon Creek benchland instead of Scottish moors, probably even he would have had to go along with the ranch custom of everybody sitting down to refuel together. So I wasn't surprised to see Wendell Williamson sitting at the head of the table. Meredice sat at his right, and the old choreboy Dolph Kuhn next to her. At Wendell's left was a vacancy which I knew would be the cook's place, and next to that, Cal Petrie seated himself. All five of them had chairs, then backless benches filled the rest of both sides of the table, which was about twenty feet long.

I felt vaguely let down. It was a set-up about like any other ranch's, only bigger. I suppose I expected the Double W to have something special, like a throne for Wendell Williamson instead of a

straightback kitchen chair.

Alec and Joe and Thurl, as ranch regulars, took their places next to the head-of-the table elite, and the hay crew began filling in the rest of the table to the far end. In fact, at the far end there was a kitchen stool improvised as a seat, and Meredice Williamson's smile and nod told me it was my place.

This I had not dreamt of. Facing Wendell Williamson down the length of the Double W supper table. He now acknowledged me by saying: "Company. Nuhhuh. Quite a way to come for a free meal, young fellow."

Before thinking I said back: "Everybody says there's no cooking like the Double W's."

That caused a lot of facial expressions along the table, and I saw Alec peer at me rather firmly. But Wendell merely said "Nuhhuh" again--that "nuhhuh" of his was a habit I would think anybody with sufficient money would pay to have broken--and took a taste of his cup of coffee.

To me, Wendell Williamson always looked as if he'd been made by the sackful. Sacks of what, I won't go into. But just everything about him, girth, shoulders, arms, even his fingers, somehow seemed fuller than was natural; as if he always was slightly swollen. Wendell's head particularly stood out in this way, because his hair had retreated about halfway back and left all that face to loom out. And the other odd thing up there was, what remained of Wendell's hair was thick and curly and coal-black--a real stand of hair there at the rear of that big moonhead, like a sailor might wear a watchcap pushed way back.

The cook came in from the kitchen with a bowl of gray gravy and handed it to Wendell. She was a gaunt woman, sharp cheekbones, beak of a nose. Her physiognomy was a matter of interest and apprehension to me. The general theory is that a thin cook is a poor idea; why isn't she more enthusiastic about her own grub?

Plain Mike was sitting at my left, and at my right was a scowling guy who'd been one of the losers in the pitch game. As I have always liked to keep abreast of things culinary, I now asked Plain Mike in an undertone: "Is this the cook from Havre?"

"No, hell, she's long gone. This one's from up at Lethbridge."

What my mother would have commented danced to mind: "So Wendell Williamson has to import them from Canada now, does he? I'm Not Surprised."

I kept that to myself, but the scowler on my right had overheard my question and muttered: "She ain't Canadian though, kid. She's a Hungarian."

"She is?" To me, the cook didn't look conspicuously foreign.

"You bet. She leaves you hungrier than when you came to the table."

I made a polite "heh-heh-heh" to that, and decided I'd better focus on the meal.

The first bowl to reach me contained a concoction I've never known the actual name of, but in my own mind I always dub Tomato Smush. Canned tomatoes heated up, with little dices of bread dropped in. You sometimes get this as a side dish in cafes when the cook has run out of all other ideas about vegetables. Probably the Lunchery in Gros

Ventre served it four days a week. In any case, Tomato Smush is a remarkable recipe, in that it manages to wreck both the tomatoes and the bread.

Out of chivalry I spooned a dab onto my plate. And next loaded up with mashed potatoes. Hard for any cook to do something drastic to mashed potatoes. The gravy, though, lacked salt and soul.

Then along came a platter of fried liver. This suited me fine, as I can dine on liver even when it is overcooked and tough, as this was. But I have observed in life that there is no middle ground about liver. When I passed the platter to the guy on my right he mumbled something about "Lethbridge leather again," and his proved to be the majority view at the table.

There was some conversation at the head of the table, mostly between Wendell and the foreman Cal about the unfairness of being rained out at this stage of haying. In light of what followed, I see now that the rainstorm was largely responsible for Wendell's mood. Not that Wendell Williamson ever needed a specific excuse to be grumpy, so far as I could tell, but this suppertime he was smarting around his wallet. If the rain had started before noon and washed out the haying, he'd have had this to pay all ~~his~~ hay crew for only half a day. But since the rain came in the afternoon he was laying out a full day's wages for not a full day's work. I tell you, there can be no one more morose than a rancher having to pay a hay crew to watch rain come down.

Anyway, the bleak gaze of Wendell Williamson eventually found its way down the length of the table to me. To my surprise, since I didn't

think anybody's welfare mattered to him but his own, Wendell asked me:
"How's your folks?"

"Real good."

"Nuhhuh." Wendell took a mouthful of coffee, casting a look at the cook as he set down his cup. Then his attention was back on me:

"I hear your mother gave quite a talk, the day of the Fourth."

Well, what the hell. If Wendell goddamn Williamson wanted to tap his toe to that tune, I was game to partner him. The McCaskills of this world maybe don't own mills and mines and all the land in sight, as some Williamson back in history had managed to grab, but we were born with tongues.

"She's sure had a lot of good comments on it," I declared with enthusiasm. Alec was stirring in his seat, trying to follow all this, but he's missed Mom's speech by being busy with his roping horse. No, this field of engagement was mine alone. "People tell her it brought back the old days, when there were all those other ranches around here. The days of Ben English and those."

"Nuhhuh." What Wendell would have responded beyond that I will never know, for Meredice Williamson smiled down the table in my direction and then said to Wendell: "Ben English. What an interesting name, I have always thought." Mr. Double W didn't conspicuously seem to think so. But Meredice sallied right on: "Was he, do you think?"

"Was he what?" retorted Wendell.

"English. Do you suppose Mr. English was of English extraction?"

"Meredice, how in hell--" Wendell stopped himself and swigged

some more sour coffee. "He might've been Swedish, for all I know."

"It would be more fitting if he were English," she persisted.

"Fitting? Fit what?"

"It would be more fitting to the memory of the man and his times."

She smiled toward me again. "To those old days." Now she looked somewhere over my head, and Plain Mike's, and the heads of all of us at our end of the table, and she recited:

"Take of English earth as much
As either hand may rightly clutch.
In the taking of it breathe
Prayer for all who lie beneath."

Then Meredice Williamson dipped her fork and tried a dainty bite of Tomato Smush.

All around the table, though, every other fork had stopped. Even mine. I don't know, maybe Kipling out of the blue would have that effect on any group of diners, not just hay hands. But in any case, there was a mulling silence as Wendell contemplated Meredice and the rest of us contemplated the Double W boss and his wife. Not even a "nuhhuh" out of Wendell.

Finally Cal Petrie turned toward me and asked, "How's that power buckrake of Pete's working out?"

"Real good," I said. "Would somebody pass the liver, please?" And that pretty much was the story of supper at the great Double W.

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Alec walked with me to the barn to help harness Blanche and Fisheye. He still wasn't saying much. Nor for that matter was I. I'd had about enough Double W and brooding brother, and was looking forward to getting to town.

Something, though--something kept at me as we started harnessing. It had been circling in the back of my mind ever since the hay crew clomped into the bunkhouse that afternoon. Alec came in with them. Cal Petrie and the riders who had been fixing fence made their appearance a few minutes after that.

I may be slow, but I usually get there. "Alec?" I asked across the horses' backs. "Alec, what have they got you doing?"

On the far side of Blanche, the sound of harnessing stopped for an instant. Then resumed.

"I said, what have they--"

"I heard you," came my brother's voice. "I'm helping out with the haying."

"I figured that. Which job?"

Silence.

"I said, which--"

"Raking."

You cannot know with what struggle I resisted popping out the next logical question: "Dump or scatter?" Yet I already knew the answer. I did indeed. The old slouchy guy in the khaki shirt and the one-eyed one, they were plodding dump rakers if I had ever seen the species. And that left just one hayfield job unaccounted for. My brother the calf-roping caballero was doing the exact same thing

in life I was--riding a scatter rake.

I did some more buckling and adjusting on Fisheye. Debating with myself. After all, Alec was my brother. If I couldn't talk straight from the shoulder with him, who could I?

"Alec, this maybe isn't any of my business, but--"

"Jick, when did that detail ever stop you? What's on your mind, besides your hat?"

"Are you sure you want to stay on here? More than this summer, I mean? This place doesn't seem to me anything so special."

"So you're lining up with Mom and Dad, are you?" Alec didn't sound surprised, as if the rank of opinion against him was like one of the sides in choosing up to play softball. He also didn't sound as if any of us were going to alter his thinking. "What, is there a law that says somewhere that I've got to go to college?"

"No, it's just that you'd be good at it, and--"

"Everybody seems awful damn sure about that. Jick, I'm already doing something I'm good at, if I do say so my own self. I'm as good a hand with cattle as Thurl or Joe or anybody else they ever had here. So why doesn't that count for anything? Huh? Answer me that. Why can't I stay on here in the Two country and do a decent job of what I want to, instead of traipsing off to goddamn college?"

For the first time since he stepped into the bunkhouse and caught sight of me, Alec came alive. He stood now in front of Blanche, holding her haltered head. But looking squarely at me, as I stood in front of Fisheye. The tall and blue-eyed and flame-haired Alec

of our English Creek years, the Alec who faced life as if it was always going to deal him aces.

I tried again, maybe to see if I was understanding my brother's words. "Christamighty, though, Alec--they haven't even got you doing what you want to do here. You hired on as a rider. Why're you going to let goddamn Wendell do whatever he wants with you?"

Alec shook his head. "You do sound like the folks would."

"I'm trying to sound like myself, is all. What is it about the damn life here that you think is so great?"

My brother held his look on me. Not angry, not even stubborn. And none of that abstracted glaze of earlier in the summer, as though only half-seeing me. This was Alec to the full, the one who answered me now:

"That it's my own."

"Well, yeah, I guess it is," was all I could manage to respond. For it finally had struck me. This answer that had popped out of Alec as naturally as a multiplication sum, this was the future. So much did my brother want to be on his own in life, he would put up with a bad choice of his own making--endure whatever the Double W heaped on him, if it came to that--rather than give in to somebody else's better plan for him. Ever since the night of the supper argument our parents thought they were contending with Alec's cowboy phase or with Leona or the combination of the two. I now knew otherwise. What they were up against was the basic Alec.

"Jick," he was saying to me, "do me a favor about all this, okay?"

"What is it?"

"Don't say anything to the folks. About me not riding, just now."

He somewhere found a grin, although a puny one. "About me following in your footsteps as a scatter raker. They have a low enough opinion of me recently." He held the grin so determinedly it began to hurt me. "So will you do that for me?"

"Yeah. I will."

"Okay." Alec let out a lot of breath. "We better get you hooked up and on your way, or you'll have to roll Grady out of bed to do the welding."

One more thing I had to find out, though. As I got up on the seat of the scatter rake, the reins to Blanche and Fisheye ready in my hand, I asked as casually as I could:

"How's Leona?"

The Alec of the Fourth of July would have cracked "fine as frog hair" or "dandy as a field of dandelions" or some such. This Alec just said: "She's okay." Then goodbyed me with: "See you around, Jicker."

"Ray? Does it ever seem like you can just look at a person and know something that's going to happen to them?"

"No. Why?"

"I don't mean look at them and know everything. Just something. Some one thing."

"Like what?"

"Well, like--" I gazed across the lawn at the Heaney house, high and pale white in the dark. Ed and Genevieve and Mary Ellen had gone to bed, but Ray and I won permission to sprawl on the grass under the giant cottonwood until Ray's bedroom cooled down a bit from the sultry day. The thunderstorm had missed Gros Ventre, only left it its wake of heat and charged air. "Promise not to laugh at this?"

"You couldn't pay me to."

"All right. Like when I was talking to Alec out there at the Double W after supper. I don't know, I just felt like I could tell. By the look of him."

"Tell about what?"

"That he and Leona aren't going to get married."

Ray weighed this. "You said you could tell something that's going to happen. That's something that's not going to happen."

"Same thing."

"Going to happen and not going to happen are the same thing? Jick, sometimes--"

"Never mind." I stretched an arm in back of my head, to rub a knuckle against the cottonwood. So wrinkled and gullied was its trunk that it looked as if rivulets of rain had been running down it ever since the deluge floated Noah. I drifted in thought past the day's storm along Noon Creek, past the Double W and Alec, past the hayfields of the Ramsay place, past to where I had it tucked away to tell Ray:

"Saw Marcella a while back. From a distance."

"Yeah?" Ray responded, with what I believe is called elaborate

indifference.

The next morning I returned with the rake to the Reese place, confirmed with Pete that the hay was too wet for us to try, retrieved Pony, and by noon was home at English Creek in time for Sunday dinner. During which I related to my parents my visit to the Double W.

My father, the fire season always on his mind now, grimaced and said: "Lightning. You'd think the world could operate without the damn stuff." Then he asked: "Did you see your brother?" When I said I had, he only nodded.

Given how much my mother had been on her high horse against the Double W all summer, I was set to tell her of the latest cook and the Tomato Smush and the weakling gravy. But before I could get started she fixed me with a thoughtful look and asked: "Is there anything new with Alec?"

"No," came flying out of me from some nest of brotherly allegiance I hadn't been aware of. Lord, what a wilderness is the thicket of family. "No, he's just riding around."

This is what I meant, earlier, about the chain of events of those last week of haying. If Clayton Hebner had not grab-assed himself into a twisted ankle, I would not now have been the sole depository of the news of Alec's Double W situation.

The second Saturday in August, one exact month since we started

haying, we sited the stacker in the last meadow along Noon Creek.

Before climbing on the power buckrake Pete cast a long gaze over the windrows, estimating. Then said what didn't surprise anybody who'd ever been in a haying crew before: "Let's see if we can get it all up in one, instead of moving the stacker another damn time."

"If you can get it up here," vowed Wisdom, "we'll find someplace to put it."

So that final haystack began to climb. Bud Dolson, now that mowing was over, was on top helping Wisdom with the stacking. Perry too was done with his part of haying, no more windrows to be made. He tied his team in some shade by the creek and in his creaky way was dabbing around the stack with a pitchfork, carrying scraps of hay to the stacker fork. Clayton, I am happy to report, had mended enough to drive the stacker team again and I had regained my scatter rake.

Of course, it was too much hay for one stack. But on a last one, that never stops a hay crew. I raked and re-raked behind Pete's swoops with his buckrake. The stack towered. The final loads wouldn't come off the stacker fork by themselves, Wisdom and Bud pulled up the hay pitchforkful by pitchforkful to the round summit of the stack.

At last every stem of hay was in that stack.

"How the hell do we get off this thing?" called down Bud from the island in the air, only half-joking.

"Along about January I'll feed from this stack," Pete sent back up to him. "I'll bring out a ladder and get you then."

In actuality, the descent of Wisdom and Bud was provided by

Clayton running the stacker fork up to them, so they could grab hold of the fork teeth while they climbed down onto the frame.

Marie had driven up from the main ranch to see this topping-off of the summer's haying, and brought with her cold tea and fresh-baked oatmeal cookies. A crew about to scatter, we stood and looked and sipped and chewed. Perry to head back into Gros Ventre and a winter of leather work at the saddle shop. Bud tonight onto a bus to Anaconda and his smelter job. Wisdom proclaimed he was heading straight for the redwood logging country down in California, and Pete and Bud had worked on him until they got Wisdom to agree that he would ride the bus with Bud as far as Great,

Falls, at least getting him and his wages past the Medicine Lodge saloon. Clayton, over the English Creek-Noon Creek divide to the North Fork and Hebner life again. Pete and Marie, to fencing the haystacks and then shipping the lambs and then trailing the Reese sheep home from the Reservation, and all too soon feeding out the hay we had put up. Me, to again become a daytime dweller at English Creek instead of a nightly visitor. And the tall, tall last haystack, standing over us as if it was a holy mound we had come to, to hear where each of us was to go next in life.

—

"Either this weather is Out Of Control," declared my mother,
"or I'm Getting Old."

It can be guessed which of those she thought was the case. This summer did not seem to be aware that, with haying done, it was supposed to be thinking about departure. The wickedest weather yet settled in, a real siege of swelter. The first three days I was home at English Creek after finishing at Pete's the temperature hit the 90s and the rest of the next couple of weeks wasn't a whole lot better. Too hot. Putting up with heat while you drive a scatter rake or work some other job is one thing. But having the temperature try to toast you while you're just hanging around and existing, that somehow seems a personal insult.

Nor, for all her lament about August's runaway warmth, was my mother helping the situation any. The contrary. She was canning. And canning and canning. It started each June with rhubarb, and then would come a spurt of cooking homemade sausage and layering it in crocks with the fat over it, and next would be the first of the garden vegetables, peas, and after them beets to pickle, and then the various pickings of beans, all the while interspersed with making berry jams, and at last in late August the arrival to Helwig's merc in Gros Ventre of the flat boxes of canning peaches and pears. We ate all winter on what my mother put up, but the price of it was that during a lot of the hottest days of summer the kitchen range also was blazing away. So whenever canning was

the agenda I steered clear of the house as much as I could. It was that or melt.

In the ranger station as well, life sometimes got too warm for comfort, although not just because of the temperature reading.

"How's it look?" my father asked his dispatcher Chet Barnouw first thing each morning. This time of year, this sizzling August, Chet's reports were never good. Extreme danger was the fire rating on the Two Medicine National Forest now, day after day. There already were fires, big ones, on forests west of the Continental Divide; the Bad Rock Canyon fire in the Flathead National Forest was just across the mountains from us.

Poor Chet. His reward for reporting all this was to have my father say, "Is that the best news you can come up with?" My father put it lightly, or tried to, but both Chet and the assistant ranger Paul Eliason knew it was the start of another touchy day. Chet and Paul were young and in their first summer on the Two, and I know my father suffered inwardly about their lack of local knowledge. Except for being wet behind the ears, they weren't a bad pair. But in a fire summer like this, that was a big except. As dispatcher Chet was in charge of the telephone setup that linked the lookout towers and the fire guard cabins to the ranger station, and he kept in touch with headquarters in Great Falls by the regular phone system. His main site of operation, thus, was the switchboard behind a partition at one side of my father's office. I think my mother was the one who gave that cubbyhole the name of "the belfry,"

from all the phone signals that chimed in there. The belfry took some getting used to, for anybody, but Chet was an unhurryable type best fitted for the job of dispatcher.

Of the two, Paul Eliason gave my father more grief than Chet did. Paul did a lot of moping. You'd have thought he was born looking glum about it. Actually the case was that the previous winter, just before he was transferred to the English Creek district as my father's assistant ranger, Paul and his wife had gotten a divorce and she'd gone home to her mother in Seattle. According to what my father heard from Paul it was one of those things. She tried for a year to put up with being a Forest Service wife, but Paul at the time was bossing CCC crews who were building trail on the Olympic National Forest out in the state of Washington, and the living quarters for the Eliasons was a backcountry one-room cabin which featured pack rats and a cookstove as temperamental as it was ancient. Perfect circumstances to make an assistant ranger-city wife marriage go flooey if it ever ~~was~~ going to.

"He's starting to heal up," my father assessed Paul at this point of the summer. "Lord knows, I've tried to keep him busy enough he doesn't have time to feel sorry for himself."

If I rationed myself and didn't get in the way of business, my father didn't mind that I hung around in the ranger station. But there was a limit on how much I wanted to do that, too. Whenever something was happening--the lookouts up there along the skyline of

the Two calling in their reports to Chet in the belfry; my father tracing his finger over and over the map showing the pocket fires his smokecashers and fire guards already had dealt with--the station was a lively enough place to be. But in between those times, rangering was not much of a spectator sport.

Each day is a room of time, it is said. In that long hot remainder of August I knew nothing to do but go from one span of sun to the next with as little of rubbing against my parents as possible. My summer's work was done, they were at the zenith of theirs.

Consequently a good deal of my leisure or at least time-killing was spent along the creek. I called it fishing, although it didn't really amount to that. Fish are not dumb, they don't exert themselves to swallow a hook during the hot part of the day. So until the trout showed any signs of biting I would shade up under a cottonwood, pull an old magazine from my hip pocket and read.

A couple of times each week, I would saddle Pony and ride up to Breed Butte to check on Walter Kyle's place, then fish the North Fork beaver dams on my way home. Walter's place was a brief hermitage for me on those visits. The way it worked was this. We and Walter were in the habit of swapping magazines, and after I had chosen several to take from the pile on his shelf, I would sit at his kitchen table for a while before heading down to the beaver dams.

The low old ranch house of Walter Kyle's was as private a place

as could be asked for. To sit there at the table looking out the window to the south, down the slope of Breed Butte to the willow thickets of the North Fork and beyond to Grizzly Reef's crooked cliffs and the line of peaks into the Teton River country, was to see the earth empty of people. Just out of sight down the North Fork was our ranger station and only over the brow of Breed Butte the other direction was the old McCaskill homestead, now Hebnerized. But all else of this long North Fork coulee was vacancy. Not wilderness, of course. Scotch Heaven left traces of itself, a few homestead houses still standing or at least not quite fallen down, fencelines whose prime use now was for hawks to perch on. But any other breathing soul than me, no. The sense of emptiness all around made me ponder the isolation those early people, my father's parents among them, landed themselves into here. Even when the car arrived into this corner of the Two Medicine country, mud and rutted roads made going anywhere no easy task. To say nothing of what winter could do. Some years the snow here drifted up and up until it covered the fenceposts and left you guessing its depth beyond that. It went without saying that those homesteaders of Scotch Heaven did not know what they were getting into. But once in, how many cherished this land as their own, whatever its conditions? It is one of those matters hard to balance out. Distance and isolation create a freedom of sorts. The space to move in according to your own whims and bents. Yet it was exactly this freedom, this fact that a person was a speck on the

earth sea, that must have been too much for some of the settlers. From my father's stories and Toussaint Rennie's, I knew of Scotch Heavener who retreated into the dimness of their homestead cabins, and the worse darkness of their own minds. Others who simply got out, walked away from the years of homestead effort. Still others who carried it with them into successful ranching. Then there were the least lucky who took their dilemma, a freedom of space and a toll of mind and muscle, to the grave with them.

It was Alec who had me thinking along these heavy lines. Alec and his insistence on an independent life. Was it worth the toll he was paying? I could not give an absolute affidavit either way. What I did know for sure was that Alec's situation now had me in my own kind of bind. For if my parents could learn what a fizzle Alec's Double W job was, it might give them fresh determination to persuade him out of it. At very least, it might soften the frozen mood, put them and him on speaking terms again. But I had told Alec I'd say nothing to them about his situation. And his asking of that was the one true brother-to-brother moment between us since he left English Creek.

That's next thing to hopeless, to spend your time wishing you weren't in the fix you are. And so I fished like an apostle, and read and read, and hung around the ranger station betweentimes, and eventually even came up with something else I wanted to do with myself. The magazines must have seeded the notion in me. In any

case, it was during those hot drifting last of August days that I proposed to my mother that I paper my bedroom.

She still was canning. Pole beans by now, I think. She tucked a wisp of hair back from where it had stuck to her damp forehead and informed me: "Wallpaper costs money." I never did understand why parents seem to think this is such startling news, that something a kid wants costs money. Based on my own experience as a youngster, the real news would have been if the object of desire was for free.

But this once, I was primed for that response from my mother. "I'll use magazine pages," I suggested. "Out of those old Posts and Collier's. There's a ton of pictures in them, Mom."

That I had thought the matter through to this extent told her this meant something to me. She quit canning and faced me. "Even so, it would mean buying the paste. But I suppose--"

I still had my ducks in a row. "No, it won't. The Heaneys have got some left over. I heard Genevieve say." Ray's mother had climaxed her spring cleaning that year by redoing the Heany front hall.

"All right," my mother surrendered. "It's too hot to argue. The next time anybody makes a trip to town, we'll pick up your paste."

I can be fastidious when it's worth being so. The magazine accumulation began to get a real going-over from me, for illustrations worthy of gracing my sleep parlor.

I'd much like to have had western scenes, but do you know, I could not find any that were worth a damn. A story called Bitter Creek showed a guy riding with a rifle across the pommel of his saddle and some packhorses behind him. The packhorses were all over the scenery instead of strung together by rope, and there was every chance that the guy would blast his leg off by not carrying that rifle in a scabbard. So much for Bitter Creek. Then there was a story which showed a couple on horseback, which drew me because the pair made me think of Alec and Leona. It turned out, though, that the setting was a dude ranch, and the line under the illustration read: One Dude Ranch is a Good Deal Like Another. You Ride Horseback and You Overeat and You Lie in the Sun and You Fish and You Play Poker and You Have Picnics. All of which may be true enough, but I didn't think it interesting enough to deserve wall space.

No, the first piece of art I really liked was a color illustration in Collier's of a tramp freighter at anchor. And then I found a Post ^{on} piece showing a guy leaning ~~on~~ the railing of another merchant vessel and looking across the water to a beautiful sailing ship. As the 'Inchcliffe Castle' Crawled Along the Coast of Spain, Through the Strait of Gibraltar, the Engineer Was Prey to a Profound Pre-occupation. This was more like it. A nautical decor, just what the room could use. I went ahead and snipped out whatever sea story illustrations I could find in the stack of magazines. I could see that there wasn't going to be enough of a fleet to cover the whole wall, but I ~~came~~ across a Mr. Moto detective series that went on

practically forever and so I filled in along the top of the wall with action scenes from that, as a kind of contrasting border.

When I was well launched into my paperhanging, Mr. Moto and various villans up top there and the sea theme beginning to fill in under, I called in my mother to see my progress.

"It does change the look of the place," she granted.

The evening of the 25th of August, a Friday, an electrical storm struck across western Montana and then moved to our side of the Continental Divide. It threw firebolts beyond number. At Great Falls, radio station KFBB was knocked off the air and power lines blew out. I would like to be able to say that I awoke in the big storm, so keen a weather wizard that I sat up in bed sniffing the ozone or harking to the first distant avalanche of thunder. The fact is, I snoozed through that electrical night like Sleeping Beauty.

The next morning, more than 200 new lightning fires were reported in the national forests of Region One.

Six were my father's. One near the head of the South Fork of English Creek. One at the base of Billygoat Peak. Two in the old Phantom Woman burn, probably snags alight. One in northwest behind Jericho Reef. And one up the North Fork at Flume Gulch.

The McCaskill household was in gear by daybreak.

"Fire school never told us they come half a dozen at a time," muttered my father and went out to establish himself in the ranger station.

I stoked away the rest of my breakfast and got up to follow him. My mother half-advised and half-instructed, "Don't wear out your welcome." But she knew as well as anything that it would take logchains and padlocks to keep me out of the station with all this going on.

As soon as I stepped in I saw that Chet and Paul looked braced. As if they were sinners and this was the morning after, when they had to stand accountable to a tall red-haired Scotch preacher.

My father on the other hand was less snorty than he'd been in weeks. Waiting for the bad to happen was always harder for him than trying to deal with it once it did.

"All right," was all my father said to the pair of them, "let's get the guys to chasing these smokes." Chet started his switchboard work and the log of who was sent where at what time, Paul began assessing where he ought to pitch ⁱⁿ person.

The day was not August's hottest, but hot enough. It was vital that all six plumes of smoke be gotten to as quickly as possible, before mid-day heat encouraged these smudges to become genuine fires. The job of smokechaser always seemed to me a hellish one, shuffling along a mountainside with a big pack on your back and then when you finally sighted or sniffed out the pocket of fire, using a shovel or a pulaski to smother it to death. All the while, dry trees

standing around waiting to catch any embers and go off like Roman candles.

No, where fire fighting of any sort was concerned I considered myself strictly a distant witness. Alec had done some, a couple of Augusts ago on the fireline against the Biscuit Creek blaze down on Murray Tomlin's ranger district at the south end of the Two, and as with everything else he showed a knack for it. But I did not take after my brother in that flame-eating regard.

It was mostly good news I was able to repeat to my mother when I visited the house for gingersnaps just past mid-morning. Chet had reported to headquarters in Great Falls, "We've got 10 a.m. control on four of ours"--the South Fork, Billygoat and the two Phantom Woman situations. All four were snag strikes, lightning gashing into a dead tree trunk and leaving it slowly burning, and the nearest fire guard had been able put out the South Fork smolder, the lookout man and the smokechaser stationed on Billygoat Peak combined to whip theirs, while the Phantom Woman pair of smokes were close enough together that the smokechaser who'd been dispatched up there managed to handle both. So those four now were history. Jericho Reef and Flume Gulch were actual blazes; small ones, but still alive and trying. A fire guard named Andy Ames and a smokechaser named Emil Kratka were on the Flume Gulch blaze. Both were new to that area of the Two, but my father thought well of them. "They'll stomp it if anybody can." Jericho Reef, so much farther back in the mountains, seemed more like trouble. Nobody wanted a backcountry fire getting underway in weather like this. Paul had nibbled on

the inside of his lips for a while, then suggested that he collect the CCC crew that was repairing trail on the North Fork and go on up to the Jericho Reef situation. My father told him that sounded right, and Paul charged off up there.

"Fire season in the Forest Service," said my mother. "There is nothing like it, except maybe St. Vitus' dance."

Ours was the only comparatively good news in the Two Medicine National Forest that Saturday. On his Indian Head district south of us, Cliff Bowen had a fire away to hell and gone up in the mountains, under the Chinese Wall. A bunch of EFFS--emergency fire fighters, those were; casual labor who were signed on in a real pinch--were being sent from Great Falls, but it would take Cliff most of the day just to hike them up to his fire. "Gives me a nosebleed to think about fighting one up there," my father commiserated. And at Blacktail Gulch down by Sun River, Murray Tomlin was still scooting his smokechasers here and there to tackle a dozen snag strikes. The worst of the electrical storm must have dragged through Murray's district on its way to Great Falls.

"Sunday, the day of rest," was the mutter from my father as he headed to the ranger station the next morning.

Had he known, he would have uttered something stronger. It turned out to be a snake of a day. By the middle of the morning, Chet was telling Great Falls about 10 a.m. control on one of our

two blazes--but not the one he and my father expected. Jericho Reef was whipped, Paul and his CCs found only a quarter-acre ground fire there and promptly managed to mop it up. "Paul should have taken marshmallows," my father was moved to joke to Chet. Flume Gulch, though, had grown into something full-fledged. All day Saturday Kratka and Ames had worked themselves blue against the patch of flame, and by nightfall they thought they had it contained. But during the night a remnant of flame crawled along an area of rock coated with pine needles. Sunday morning it surfaced, touched off a tree opposite from where Kratka and Ames were keeping an eye on matters, and the fire then took off down a slant of the gulch into a thick stand of lodgepole. In a hurry my father yanked Paul and his CCs back from Jericho Reef to Flume Gulch, and I was killing time in the ranger station, late that morning, when Chet passed along the report Paul was phoning in from the guard cabin nearest Flume Gulch.

Thus I was on hand for those words of Paul's that became fabled in our family.

"Mac," Chet recited them, "Paul says the fire doesn't look that bad. It just keeps burning, is all."

"Is that a fact," said my father carefully, too carefully. Then it all came. "Kindly tell Mr. goddamn Eliason from me that it's his goddamn job to see to it that the goddamn fire DOESN'T keep burning, and that I--no, never mind."

My father got back his breath, and most of his temper. "Just tell Paul to keep at it, keep trying to pinch it off against a rock formation. Keep it corraled."

—

Monday made Sunday look good. Paul and his CC crew still could not find the handle on the Flume Gulch fire. They would get a fire-line built around most of it, then a burning lodgepole pine would crash over and come sledding down the gulch, igniting the ~~rest~~ next stand of tinder-dry timber. Or sparks would shoot up from one slope, find enough air ~~in~~ current to waft to the other side of the gulch and set off a spot fire. Ten a.m. came and went, with Paul's report substantially the same as his ones from the day before: not that much fire, but no sight of control.

My father prowled the ranger station until he about had the floor worn out. When he said something unpolite to Chet for the third time and started casting around for a fresh target, I cleared out of there.

The day was another scorcher. I went to the spring house for some cold milk, then in to the kitchen for a doughnut to accompany the milk down. And here my father was again, being poured a cup of coffee by my mother. As if he needed any more prowl fuel today.

My father mimicked Paul's voice: "'Mac, the fire doesn't look that bad. It just keeps burning, is all.' Jesus. How am I supposed to get through a fire season with help like that, I ask you."

"The same way you do every summer," suggested my mother.

"I don't have a pair of green peas as assistant and dispatcher, every summer."

"No, only about every other summer. As soon as you get them trained, Sipe or the Major moves them on and hands you the next fresh ones."

"Yeah, well. At least these two aren't as green as they were

a month ago. For whatever that's worth." He was drinking that coffee as if it was going to get away from him. It seemed to be priming him to think out loud. "I don't like it that the fire outjumped Kratka and Ames. They're a real pair of smokehounds, those guys. It takes something nasty to be too much for them. And I don't like it that Paul's CCs haven't got matters in hand up there yet either." My father looked at my mother as if she had the answer to what he was saying. "I don't like any of what I'm hearing from Flume Gulch."

"I gathered that," she said. "Do you want me to put you up a lunch?"

"I haven't said yet I'm going up there."

"You're giving a good imitation of it."

"Am I." He carried his empty coffee cup to the sink and put it in the dishpan. "Well, Lisabeth McCaskill, you are famous the world over for your lunches. I'd be crazy to pass one up, wouldn't I."

"All right then." But before starting to make his sandwiches, my mother turned to him one more time. "Mac, are you sure Paul can't handle this?" Which meant: are you sure you shouldn't let Paul handle this fire?

"Bet, there's nothing I'd like more. But I don't get the feeling it's being handled. Paul's been lucky on his other fires this summer, they both turned out to be weenie roasts. But this one isn't giving up." He prowled over to the window where Roman Reef and Phantom Woman ~~and Rooster Mountain~~

Peak could be seen. "No, I'd better get up there and have a look."

I didn't even bother to ask to go along. A counting trip or something else routine, that was one thing. But the Forest Service didn't want anybody out of the ordinary around a fire. Particularly if their sum of life hadn't yet quite made it to 15 years.

"Mom? I was wondering--" Supper was in the two of us, she had washed the dishes and I had dried, I could just as well have abandoned the heat of the house for an evening of fishing. But I had to rid myself of at least part of what had been on my mind the past weeks.

"I was wondering--well, about Leona."

Here was an attention-getter. My mother lofted a look and held it on me. "And what is it you've been wondering about Leona?"

"Her and Alec, I mean."

"All right. What about them?"

I decided to go for broke. "I don't think they're going to get married. What do you think?"

"I think I have a son in this kitchen who's hard to keep up with. Why are Alec and Leona tonight's topic?"

"It's not just tonight's," I defended. "This whole summer has been different. Ever since the pair of them walked out of here, that supertime."

"I can't argue with you on that. But where do you get the idea the marriage is off?"

I thought about how to put it. "You remember that story Dode tells about Dad? About the very first time you and Dad started, uh, going together? Dad was riding over to call on you, and Dode met up with him on the road and saw Dad's clean shirt and shined boots and the big grin on him, and instead of 'Hello' Dode just asked him, 'Who is she?'"

"Yes," she said firmly. "I know that story."

"Well, Alec doesn't look that way. He did earlier in the summer. But when I saw him at the Double W that time, he looked like somebody had knocked the blossom off him. Like Leona had."

My mother was unduly slow in responding. I had been so busy deciding how much I could say, without going against my promise to Alec not to tell what a botch his Double W job was, that I hadn't realized she too was doing some deciding. Eventually her thoughts came aloud:

"You may have it right. About Leona. We're waiting to see."

She saw that I damn well wanted a definition of "we."

"Leona's parents and I. I saw Thelma Tracy the last time I was in town. She said Leona's mind still isn't made up, which way to choose."

"Choose?" I took umbrage on Alec's behalf. "What, has she been seeing some other guy, too?"

"No. To choose between marrying Alec and going on with her last year of high school, is what she's deciding. Thelma thinks school is gaining fast." She reminded me, as if I needed any: "It starts in a little over a week."

to Flume Gulch.

"Rubber that, will you, Jick," called my mother from whatever chore she was on elsewhere in the house. "Please."

I went to the wall phone and put the receiver to my ear. Rubbering, which is to say listening in, was our way of keeping track of matters without perpetually traipsing back and forth between the house and the ranger station.

"Mac says to tell Great Falls there's no chance of controlling the fire by 10 today," Paul was reporting to Chet. "If you want his exact words, he says there isn't a diddling deacon's prayer of whipping it today." Even on the phone Paul's voice sounded pouty. My bet was, when my father arrived and took over as fire boss, Paul had reacted like a kicked pup.

"Approximate words will do, given the mood Mac's been in," Chet told Paul. "Anything else new, up there?"

"No" from Paul and his click of hanging up.

I relayed this, in edited form, to my mother. She didn't say anything. but with her, silence often conveyed enough.

When the same phone ring happened in late morning, I called out "I'll rubber."

This voice was my father himself.

~~orner~~
"It is an ~~empty~~ sonofabitch," he was informing Chet. "Every time a person looks at it, it looks a little bigger. We better hit it hard. Get hold of Isidor and have him bring in a camp setup. , I think I have said, And tell Great Falls we need fifty EFFs." EFFs were emergency fire

fighters, guys scraped together and signed up from the bars and flophouses of Galena Street in Butte and Trent Avenue in Spokane and First Avenue South in Great Falls.

"Say again on that EFF request, Mac," queried Chet. "Fifteen or fifty? One-five or five-oh?"

"Five-oh, Chet."

Pause.

Chet was swallowing on the figure. With crews of EFFs already on the Chinese Wall fire and the fires down in the Lewis and Clark forest, Two headquarters in Great Falls was going to greet this like the miser meeting the tax man.

"Okay, Mac," Chet mustered. "I'll ask for them. What else can I get you?" Chet could not have realized it, but this was his introduction to the Golden Rule of a veteran ranger such as my father when confronted with a chancy fire: always ask for more help than you think you'll need. Or as my father said he'd once heard it from a ranger of the generation before him: "While you're getting, get plenty."

"Grub," my father was going on. "Get double lunches in here for us today." Double lunches were pretty much what they sound like: about twice the quantity of sandwiches and canned fruit and so on that a working man could ordinarily consume. Fire fighters needed legendary amounts of food. "And get us a real cook for the camp by tonight. The CC guy we been using could burn water. I'm going to get some use out of him by putting him on the fireline."

"Okay," said Chet again. "The double lunches I'll get out of Gros Ventre, and I'll start working on Great Falls for the fifty men and a cook. Anything else?"

"Not for now," allowed my father. Then: "Jick. You there?"

I jumped, but managed: "Yeah?"

"I figured you were. How's your fishing career? Owe me a milkshake yet?"

"No, I didn't go last night."

"All right. I was just checking." A moment, then: "Is your mother around there?"

"She's out in the root cellar, putting away canning."

"Is she. Okay, then."

"Anything you want me to tell her?"

"Uh huh, for all the good it'll do. Tell her not to worry."

"I will if I want to," she responded to that. "Any time your father asks Great Falls for help, it's worth worrying about." She set off toward the ranger station. "At least I can go into town for the double lunches. That'll keep Chet free here. You can ride in with me."

While she was gone to apprise Chet, the Flume Creek fire and my father filled my mind. Trying to imagine what the scene must be. That campsite where my father and I, and Alec in the other summers, caught our fill of brookies and then lazed around the campfire, flames now multiplied by maybe a million. In the back of all our minds, my father's and my mother's and mine, we had known that unless the weather let up it would be a miracle not to have a fire somewhere on the Two. Montana weather, and a miracle. Neither one is anything to rest your hopes on. But why, out of all the English Creek district

of the Two Medicine National Forest, did the fire have to be there, in that extreme and beautiful country of Flume Gulch.

I heard the pickup door open and my mother call: "Jick! Let's go."

I opened the screen door and stepped from the kitchen. Then called back: "No, I think I'll just stay here."

From behind the steering wheel she sent me a look of surprise. "Do you feel all right?" That I would turn down a trip to town must be a malady of some sort, she figured.

"Yeah. But I just want to stay, and do some more papering on my room."

She hesitated. Dinnertime was not far off, her cookly conscience now was siding with her motherly one. "I thought we'd grab a bite at the Lunchery. If you stay, you'll have to fix your own."

"Yeah, well, I can manage to do that."

As I was counting on, she didn't have time to debate with me. "All right then. I'll be back as soon as I can." And the pickup was gone.

I made myself a headcheese sandwich, then had a couple of cinnamon rolls and cold milk. All the while, my mind on what I had decided, my eyes on the clock atop the sideboard.

Each day a room of time. Now each minute as slow as the finding and pasting of another page onto my bedroom wall in there.

I waited out the clock because I had to. It at last came up on the noon hour. The time to do it.

Out the kitchen door I went, sprinting to the ranger station. Just before coming around to its front, I geared myself down to what I hoped was my usual walking pace.

Chet was tipped back in a chair in the shade of the porch while he ate his lunch, as I'd counted on. Dispatchers are somewhat like gophers, they're holed up indoors so much they pop out into the air at any least chance.

"Hey there, Jick," I was greeted by Chet ~~and~~ ^{as} I sauntered onto the porch. "What's up? It's too blasted hot to move if you don't have to."

"I came to see if it's okay if I use the town line. I forgot to tell Mom something and I want to leave word for her at the Lunchery."

"Sure thing. Nothing's going on right now, you can help yourself. You should've just rung me, Jick. I'd have gone in and switched it for you." Uh-huh, and more than likely have stayed on and listened, as was a dispatcher's habit. Rubbering was something that worked both directions.

"No, that's okay, I didn't want to bother you. I won't need the line long." In I went to the switchboard and moved the toggle switch that connected the ranger station to the community line.

"When you're done," Chet said as I headed off the porch past him, "just ding the dealybob and I'll switch things back to our line."

"Right. Thanks, Chet. Like I say, I won't be long." I moseyed around the corner of the station out of Chet's sight, then

sped like hell back to our house.

Facing the phone, I sucked in all the breath I could, to crowd out my puffing and my nervousness about all that was riding on this idea of mine. Then I lifted the receiver, rang central in Gros Ventre, and asked to be put through to the Double W.

Onto the line came a woman's voice: "Hello?"

Perfect again: Meredice Williamson. I hadn't been sure what I was going to resort to if Wendell answered.

"'Lo, Mrs. Williamson. Can I--may I speak to Alec McCaskill in the bunkhouse, please? That is, would you ask him to go to the phone out at the bunkhouse? This is, uh, personal."

Down the line came the silence of Meredice Williamson pondering her way through the etiquette of yet another Two country situation. Maybe I would have been better off with Wendell's straight forward bluster. At last she queried: "Who is this, please?"

"This is Alec's brother Jick, I put Blanche and Fisheye in your barn that time, remember? And I'm sorry to call but I just really need to talk to--"

"Oh yes. Jack. I remember you well. But you see, Alec and the other men are at lunch--"

"Yeah, I figured that, that's why I'm calling right now."

--could I have him return your call afterward?"

"No, that'd be too late. I need to talk to him now, it's just that it's, like I said, private. Family. A family situation has come up. Arisen."

"I see. I do hope it's nothing serious?"

"It could get that way if I don't talk to Alec. Mrs. Williamson, look, I can't explain all this. But I've got to talk to Alec, while he's alone. Without the whole damn--without everybody listening in."

"I see. Yes. I think I see. Will you hold on, Jack?" As if from a great distance, I heard her say: "Alec, you're wanted on the phone. I wonder if it might be more convenient for you to answer it in the bunkhouse?"

Now a dead stretch of time. But my mind was going like a million. All of the summer to this minute was crowded into me. From that supper-time when Alec stomped out with Leona in tow, through all the days of my brother going his stubborn way and my parents going their stubborn one, through my times of wondering how this had come to be, how we McCaskills had so tangled our family situation; ~~now~~^{to}, when I saw just how to unknot it all. At last it was coming up right, the answer was about to dance within this telephone line--

Finally a voice from across the miles. "Jick? Is that you? What in the holy hell--"

"Alec, listen, I know this is kind of out of the ordinary."

"You're right about that."

"But just let me tell you all this, okay? There's a fire. Dad's gone up to it, at Flume Gulch--"

"The hell. None of that country's ever burned before."

"Well, it is now. And that's why I got hold of you, see. Alec, Dad's only help up there is Paul Eliason, and Paul doesn't know zero

about that part of the Two."

A void at the Double W bunkhouse. The receiver offered only the sounds within my own ear, the way a seashell does. At last Alec's voice, stronger than before, demanding: "Jick, did Dad ask you to call me? If so, why in all hell couldn't he do it him--"

"No, he didn't ask me. He's up on the fire, I just told you."

"Then who--is this Mom's idea?"

"Alec, it's nobody's damn idea. I mean, it's none of theirs, you can call it mine if it's anybody's. All that's involved, Dad needs somebody up there who knows that Flume Gulch country. Somebody to help him line out the fire crew."

"That's all, huh. And you figure it ought to be me."

I wanted to shout, why the hell else would I be on this telephone line with you? But instead carefully stayed to: "Yeah, I do. Dad needs your help." And kept unsaid too: this family needs its logjam of quarrel broken. Needs you and our father on speaking terms again. Needs this summer of separation to be over.

More of the seashell sound, the void. Then:

"Jick, no. I can't."

"Can't? Why not? Even goddamn Wendell Williamson'd let you off to fight a forest fire."

"I'm not going to ask him."

"You mean you won't ask him."

"It comes to the same. Jick, I just--"

"But why? Why won't you do this?"

"Because I can't just drop my life and come trotting home. Dad's got the whole damn Forest Service for help."

"But--then you won't do it for him."

"Jick, listen. No, I can't or won't, however you want to say it. But it's not because of Dad, it's not to get back at him or anything. It's--it's all complicated. But I got to go on with what I'm doing. I can't--" All these years later, I realize that here he very nearly said: "I can't give in." But the way Alec actually finished that sentence was: "I can't go galloping home any time there's a speck of trouble. If somebody was sick or hurt, it'd be different. But--"

"Then don't do it for Dad," I broke in on him, and I may have built up to a shout for this: "Do it because the goddamn country's burning up!"

"Jick, the fire is Dad's job, it's the Forest Service's job, it's the job of the whole crew they'll bring in there to Flume Gulch. It is not mine."

"But Alec, you can't just--" Here I ran out of argument. The dead space on the telephone line was from my direction now.

"Jick," Alec's voice finally came, "I guess we're not getting anywhere with this."

"I guess we're not."

"Things will turn out," said my brother. "See you, Jick." And

the phone connection ended.

It was too much for me. I stood there gulping back tears.

The house was empty, yet they were everywhere around me. The feel of them, I mean; the accumulation, the remembering, of how life had been when the other three of my family were three, instead of two against one. Or one against two, as it looked now. Alec. My mother. My father.

People. A pain you can't do without.

Eventually I remembered to ding the phone, signaling Chet that I was done with the town line. Done in, was more like it.

For the sake of something, anything, to do, I wandered to my bedroom and listlessly thumbed through magazines for any more sea scenes to put on the wall. Prey to a Profound Preoccupation, that was me.

I heard the pickup arrive. Nothing else I did seemed to be any use in the world, maybe I at least had better see if my mother needed any help with the fire lunches she was bringing.

I stepped out the kitchen door to find that help already was on hand, beside her at the tailgate of the pickup. A brown Stetson nodded to me, and under it Stanley Meixell said: "Hullo again, Jick."

Civility was nowhere among all that crowded my brain just then. I simply blurted:

"Are you going up to the fire?"

"Thought I would, yeah. A man's got to do something to ward off frostbite."

My mother was giving Stanley her look that could peel a rock. But in an appraising way. I suppose she was having second thoughts about what she had set in motion here, by fetching Stanley from the Busbys' ranch, and then third thoughts that any possible help for my father was better than no help, then fourth thoughts about Stanley's capacity to be any help, and on and on.

"Do you want some coffee?" she suggested to Stanley.

"I better not take time, Bet. I can get by without it." The fact was, it would take more than coffee to make a difference on him. "Who's this dispatcher we got to deal with?"

My mother told him about Chet, Stanley nodded, and she and he headed for the ranger station. Me right behind them.

"Getting those lunches up there'd be a real help, all right," Chet agreed when my mother presented Stanley. But all the while he had been giving Stanley a going-over with his eyes, and it must be said, Stanley did look the worse for wear; looked as old and bunged-up and afflicted as the night in the cabin when I was rewrapping his massacred hand. In this instance, though, the affliction was not Stanley's hand but what he had been pouring into himself with it.

Not somebody you would put on a fire crew, at least if your name was Chet Barnouw and the responsibility was directly traceable to you. So Chet now went on, "But beyond you taking those up for us, I don't see how we can use--"

"How're you fixed for a hash slinger?" Stanley asked conversationally.

Chet's eyebrows climbed. "You mean it? You can cook?"

"He's A-number-one at it," I chirped in commemoration of Stanley's breakfast the morning of my hangover.

Chet needed ~~more~~^{better} vouching than my notorious appetite. He turned to my mother. If ever there was a grand high authority on food, it was her. She informed Chet: "When Stanley says he can do a thing, he can."

"All right then," said Chet. "Great Falls more than likely would just dig out some wino fryhouse guy for me anyway." The dispatcher caught himself and cleared his throat. "Well, let's get you signed up here."

Stanley stepped over to the desk with him and did so. Chet looked down at the signature with interest.

"Stanley Kelley, huh? You spell it the same way the Major does."

My mouth flapped open. The look I received from my mother snapped it shut again.

All politeness, Stanley inquired: "The who?"

"Major Evan Kelley, the Regional Forester. The big sugar, over in Missoula. Kind of unusual, two e's in Kelley. You any relation?"

"None that I know of."

Chet went back in his belfry, and Stanley headed to the barn to rig up a saddle horse and Brownie as a pack horse. Ordinarily

I would have gone along to help him. But I was shadowing my mother, all the way back to the house.

As soon as we were in the kitchen I said it.

"Mom? I've got to go with Stanley."

The same surprise as when I'd stepped up and asked to dance the Dude and Belle with her, that distant night of the Fourth. But this request of mine was a caper in a more serious direction. "I thought you'd had enough of Stanley," she reminded me, "on that camp-tending episode."

"I did. But that was then." I tried, for the second time this day, to put into words more than I ever had before. "If Stanley's going to be any help to Dad, I'm going to have to be the help to Stanley. You heard him, after the camp-tending. He said he couldn't have got along up there without me. There at the fire camp Paul's going to be looking down his neck all the time. The first time he catches Stanley with a bottle, he'll send him down the road." Plead is not a word I am ashamed of, in the circumstances. "Let me go with him, Mom."

She shook her head. "A fire camp is a crazyhouse, Jick. It wouldn't be just you and Stanley this time. They won't let you hang around--"

Here was my ace. "I can be Stanley's flunky. Help him with the cooking. That way, I'd be right there with him all the time."

Serious as all this was, my mother couldn't stop her quick sideways grin at the notion of me around food full-time. But then she

sobered. With everything in me, I yearned that she would see things my way. That she would not automatically tell me I was too young, that she would let me play a part at last, even just as chaperone, in this summer's stream of events.

Rare for Beth McCaskill, not to have an answer ready by now. By now she must have been on tenth and eleventh thoughts about the wisdom of having asked Stanley Meixell to go to Flume Gulch.

My mother faced me, and decided.

"All right. Go. But stay with Stanley or your father at all times. Do you Understand That? At All Times."

"Yes," I answered her. Any term of life as clear as that, even I could understand.

Stanley was my next obstacle.

"She said you can?" C-A-N, can?"

"Yeah, she did. You can go on in and ask her." I kept on with my saddling of Pony.

"No, I'll take your word." He rubbed the back of his right hand with his left, still studying me. "Going to a fire, though--you sure you know what you're getting into?"

Canada Dan and Bubbles and Dr. Al K. Hall in a tin cup had come into my life at the elbow of this man and he could stand there and ask me that?

I shot back, "Does anybody ever?

The squinch around Stanley's eyes let up a little. "There you got a point. Okey-doke, Jick. Let's get to getting."

Up the North Fork road the summer's second Meixell-McCaskill expedition set out, Stanley on a buckskin Forest Service gelding ~~the packhorse Homer with the load~~ named Buck, leading ~~Brownie with the packs~~ of lunches, and me behind on Pony.

I still don't know how Stanley managed the maneuver, but by the time we were past the Hebner place and topping the English Creek-Noon Creek divide, the smoke rising out of the canyon of the North Fork ahead of us, I was riding in the lead just as on our campending expedition. That the reason was the same, I had no doubt. I didn't bother to look back and try to catch Stanley bugling a bottle, as that was a sight I did not want to have to think about. No, I concentrated on keeping us moving at a fast walk, at least as fast as I could urge Pony's short legs to go.

Something was different, though. This time, Stanley wasn't singing. To my surprise I missed it quite a lot.

Smoke in a straight column. Then an oblong haze of it drifting south along the top of Roman Reef. The day's lone cloud, like a roll of sooty canvas on a high shelf.

A quantity of smoke is an unsettling commodity. The human being does not like to think its environs are flammable. My mother had the memory that when she was a girl at Noon Creek the smoke from the 1910 fires brought a Bible-toting neighbor, a homesteader, to the Reese doorstep to announce: "This is the wrath of God. The end of the world is come." Daylight dimming out to a sickly green color and no distinct difference between night and day, I suppose it would make you wonder.

That same 1910 smoke never really left my father. He must have been about twelve or thirteen then, and his memory of that summer when the millions of acres burned in the Bitterroot while the Two had its own long stubborn fire was the behavior of the chickens there at the family homestead on the North Fork. "Christamighty, Jick, by about noon they'd go in to roost for the night, it got so dark." The 1910 smoke darkness, and then the scarred mountainside of Phantom Woman as a reminder; they stayed and stayed in my father, smears of dread.

Stanley too had undergone the 1910 smoke. In the cabin, he had told me of being on that fire crew on the Two fire west of Swift Dam. "Such as we were, for a crew. Everybody and his cousin was already fighting some other sonuvabitch of a fire, Bitterroot or somewhere else. We dabbed at it here as best we could, a couple of weeks. Yeah, and we managed to lose our fire camp. The wind come up and turned a flank of that fire around and brought it right into our camp. A thing I never will forget, Jick, all the canned goods blew up. That

was about all that was left when the fire got done with that camp,
a bunch of exploded goddamn tin cans."

All three of them, each with a piece of memory of that awful
fire summer. Of how smoke could multiply itself until it seemed
to claim the world.

Now that my father had stepped in as fire boss at Flume Gulch,
Paul Eliason was the camp boss. I will say, Paul was marshaling things
into good order. We rode in past a couple of CCs digging a toilet trench.
A couple of others were setting up the council tent, each of them
pounding in ~~the~~ tent pegs with the flat of an axe. The feed ground--
the kitchen area--already was built, and there we encountered Paul.

Paul still had an expression as if somebody big was standing on
his foot and he was trying to figure out what to say about it, but
~~Homer~~
he lost no time in sending one of the CCs off with ~~Brownie~~ and the
lunches to the fire crew. "Late is better than never," he rattled
off, as if he invented that. "Thanks for delivering, Jick," he next
recited, awarded Stanley a nod too, and started back to his ~~tent~~
~~target of inspection.~~
~~construction.~~

"Paul," I managed to slow and turn him, "somebody here you got
to meet. This is Stanley, uh--"

"--Kelley. Pleased to know you, ranger."

--and, and he's here to--" I finally found the inspiration I
needed: "Chet signed him on as your cook." Well, as far as it went,
that was true, wasn't it?

Paul studied this news. "I thought Chet told me he was going to have to get one out of Great Falls, and the chances didn't look real good even there."

"He must have had his mind changed," I speculated.

"Must have," Paul conceded. He looked Stanley over. "Have you ever cooked for a fire camp before?"

"No," responded Stanley. "But I been in a fire camp before, and I cookied before. So it adds up to the same."

"For crike's sake,
Paul stared. "Jesus, mister. Have you got any idea what it takes to cook for a bunch of fire fighters? They eat like--"

"Oh yeah," Stanley inserted, "and I almost forgot to tell you, I also've ate fire camp grub. So I been through the whole job, a little at a time."

"Uh huh," emitted from Paul, more as a sigh than an acknowledgment. Stanley swung his gaze around the camp in interest. "Have you got some other candidate in mind for cook?"

as the devil
"No, no, I sure to Christ don't. I guess you're it. So the feed ground is yours, mister." Paul waved to the area where the cookstove and a work table and the big T table to serve from had been set up. "You better get at it. You're going to have CCs coming at you from down that mountain and EFFs coming up from Great Falls.

Figure supper for about 75." Paul turned to me. "Jick, I appreciate you getting those lunches up here. If you start back now, you'll be home well before dark."

"Well, actually, I'm staying," I informed Paul. "I can be Stanley's flunky. My mom said it's okay."

Possibly this was the first time a member of a fire crew ever arrived with an excuse from his mother, and it sure as hell was nothing Paul Eliason had ever dealt with before. Particularly from a mother such as mine. You could all but see the thought squatting there on his mind: what next from these damn McCaskills?

But Paul only said: "You sort that out with your father." And sailed off to finish worrying the camp into being.

Stanley and I began to tour our feed ground. An open fire pit and not far from it the stove. Both were lit and waiting, as if hinting that they ought to be in use. A long work table built of stakes and poles. And about twenty feet beyond it, the much bigger T-shaped serving table. I could see the principle: tin plates and utensils and bread and butter and so forth were to be stacked along the stem of the T, so the fire crew could file through in a double line--one along each side of the stem--to the waiting food at both arms of the T. The food, though. That I could not envision: how Stanley and I were going to manage, in the next few hours, to prepare a meal for 75 guys.

"So," Stanley announced. "I guess--"

This I could have completed in my sleep--"we got it to do."

The Forest Service being the Forest Service and Paul being Paul, there hung a FIRE CAMP COOK BOOK on a nail at the serving table. Stanley peered over my shoulder as I thumbed to the page titled

FIRST SUPPER, then ran my finger down that page to where it was
decreed: Menu--beef stew.

"Slumgullion," Stanley interpreted. "At least it ain't mutton."

Below the menu selection, instructing began in earnest: Place large wash boiler, half full of water, on fire.

"Christamighty, Stanley, we better get to--" I began, before noticing the absence at my shoulder.

Over beside the packs of groceries, Stanley was leaning down to his saddlebags. Oh, Jesus. I could forecast the rest of that movement before it happened, his arm going in and bringing forth the whiskey bottle.

I don't know which got control of my voice, dismay or anger. But the message was coming out clear: "Goddamn it all to hell, Stanley, if you start in on that stuff--"

"Jick, you are going to worry yourself down to the bone if you keep on. Here, take yourself a swig of this."

"No, damn it. We got seventy-five men to feed. One of us has got to have enough damn brains to stay sober."

"I know how many we got to feed. Take a little of this in your mouth, just enough to wet your whistle."

When things start to skid they really do go, don't they. It wasn't enough that Stanley was about to begin a bender, he was insisting on me as company. My father would skin us both. My mother would skin whatever was left of me after my father's skinning.

"Just taste it, Jick." Stanley was holding the bottle out to

me, patient as paint.

All right, all goddamn right; I had run out of thinking space, all the foreboding in the world was in me instead; I would buy time by faking a little swig of Stanley's joy juice, maybe after putting the bottle to my lips like this I could accidentally on purpose drop the--

Water.

Yet not quite only water. I swigged a second time to be sure of the taste. Just enough whiskey to flavor it faintly. If I'd had to estimate, perhaps a finger's worth of whiskey had been left in the bottle before Stanley filled it with water.

"It'll get me by," Stanley asserted. He looked bleak about the prospect, and said as much. "It's worse than being weaned a second time. But I done it before, a time or two when I really had to. Now we better get down to cooking, don't you figure?"

"The Forest Service must of decided everything tastes better with tin around it," observed Stanley as he dumped into the boiler eight cans each of tomatoes and peas.

"Sounds good to me right now," I said from where I was slicing up several dozen carrots.

"You got time to slice some bread?" Stanley inquired from where he was stirring stew.

"Yeah." I was tending a round boiler in which twelve pounds

of prunes were being simmered for dessert, but figured I could dive back and forth between tasks. "How much?"

"This is the Yew Ess Forest Service, remember. How ever much it says in the book."

I went and looked again at the FIRST SUPPER page.

(BF)

Twenty loaves.

"Jick, see what it says about how much of this sand and snoose to put in the stew," Stanley requested from beside the wash boiler, a big box of salt in one hand and a fairly sizable one of pepper in the other.

"It doesn't."

"It which?"

"All the cook book says is: Season to taste."

"Aw, goddamn."

My right arm and hand felt as if they'd been slicing for years. I remembered I was supposed to set out five pounds of butter to go with the bread. Stanley now was the one at the cook book, swearing steadily as he tried for ~~the~~^a third time to divine the proportions of salt and pepper for a wash boiler of stew.

"What's it say to put this butter on?"

His finger explored along the page. "Pudding dishes. You got time to start the coffee after that?"

"I guess. What do I do?"

"Fill two of ~~these~~^{them} halfbreed boilers in the creek--"

All afternoon Paul had been going through the camp at such a pace that drinks could have been served on his shirrtail. But he gave Stanley and me wide berth until he at last had to pop over to tell us the fire crew was on its way in for supper.

He couldn't help eyeing us dubiously. I was sweaty and bedraggled, Stanley was parched and bedraggled.

"Mind if I try your stew?" Paul proposed. I say proposed, because even though Paul was camp boss it was notorious that a cook coming up on mealtime had to be handled with kid gloves.

This advantage must have occurred to Stanley, because he gave Paul a flat gaze, stated "If you're starving to death, go ahead--I got things to do" and royally strode over to the work table where I was.

We both watched over our shoulders like owls, though. Paul grabbed a spoon, advanced on the stew tub, dipped out a dab, blew on it, tasted. Then repeated. Then swung around toward us. "Mister, you weren't just woofing. You can cook."

Shortly the CCs streamed into camp, and Stanley and I were dishing food onto their plates at a furious rate. A day on a fire line is ash and sweat, so these CCs were not exactly fit for a beauty contest. But they were at that brink of manhood--all of them about Alec's age--where energy recovers in a hurry. In fact, their appetites recuperated instantly. Some CCs were back on line for seconds before we'd finished serving everybody a first helping.

Paul saw how swamped Stanley and I were with the serving, and sent two of his CC camp flunkies to take over from us while we

fussed with reheating and replenishment. The fifty emergency fire fighters from Great Falls were yet to come.

So was my father. I had seen him appear into the far end of camp, conferring with Kratka and Ames, now his fireline foremen, and head with them to the council tent. He wore his businesslike look. Not a good sign.

I was lugging a resupply of prunes to the T table when I glanced into the grub line and met the recognition of my father, his hand in mid-reach for a tin plate.

For a moment he simply tried to register that it was me standing before him in a flour sack apron.

"Jick! What in the name of hell are you doing here?"

"'Lo, Dad. Uh, I'm being the flunkie."

"You're--" That stopped not only my father's tongue but all other parts of him. He stood rooted. And when I sunk in, so to speak, he of course had to get his mind to decide who to skin alive for this, Paul or Chet.

"Mom said I could," I put in helpfully.

This announcement plainly was beyond mortal belief, so now my father had definite words to express to me. "You're going to stand there with your face hanging out and tell me your mother--" Then the figure at the stove turned around to him and ^{he} saw that behind this second flour sack apron was Stanley.

"Hullo, Mac," Stanley called out. "I hope you like slumgullion. 'Cause that's what it is."

"Jesus H.---" My father became aware of the audience of CCs piling up behind him in the grub line. "I'm coming around there, you two. You better have a story ready when I arrive."

Stanley and I retreated to the far end of the kitchen area while my father marched around the T table to join us. He arrived aiming huffy looks first to one of us and then the other, back and forth as if trying to choose between targets.

"Now," he stated. "Let's hear it."

"You're kind of on the prod, Mac," observed Stanley. "You don't care that much for ~~slumgullion~~, huh?"

"Stanley, goddamn you and your slumgullion. What in the hell are the pair of you doing in this fire camp?"

Stanley was opening his mouth, and I knew that out of it was going to drop the reply, "Cooking." To head that off, I piped: "Mom figured you could use our help."

"She figured what?"

"She wouldn't have sent us"--adjusting the history of my inception into the trip with Stanley and the lunches--"if she hadn't figured that, would she? And what's the matter with our cooking?" Some CCs were back in line for third helpings, they didn't seem to lack appreciation of our cuisine.

I noticed something else. My father no longer was dividing huffy looks between Stanley and me. He was locked onto Stanley. My presence in this fire camp was not getting my father's main attention.

As steadily as he could, after his afternoon of drought and wholesale cookery, Stanley returned the scrutiny. "Mac," he said, in that rasped-over voice from when my father and I first met him on the trail that day of June, "you're the fire boss. You can put the run on us anytime you want. But until you do, we can handle this cooking for you."

My father at last said: "I'm not putting the run on anybody. Dish me up some of your goddamn slumgullion."

It was getting dusk when the EFFs arrived into camp like a raggletaggle army. These men were drift, straight from the saloons and flophouses of First Avenue South in Great Falls, and they more than looked it. One guy even had a beard. Supposedly a person couldn't be hired for emergency fire fighting unless he owned a stout pair of shoes, but of course the same passable shoes showed up ~~on~~ ^{on} guy after guy in the signup line. Most of these EFFs now were shod in weary leather, and hard-worn blue jeans if they were ranch hands, and bib pants if they were gandy dancers or out-of-work smeltermen from Black Eagle. Motley as they looked from the neck down, I paid keener attention to their headgear. There was a legend in the Forest Service that a fire boss once told his signup man in Spokane: "Send me thirty men if they're wearing Stetsons, or fifty if they're wearing caps." Most of these EFFs at least were hatted--they were used to outdoor work, were not city guys except for recreational purposes.

I remember that this time, Stanley and I were lugging another boiler of coffee to the T table. For I damn near dropped my end when a big guy leaned out of the back of the grub line, peered woozily toward me, then yelled in greeting:

"Hey, Jick!"

Wisdom Johnson had not advanced conspicuously far on his plan to head for the redwood country for the winter. As soon as Stanley and I got the boiler situated on the table, I hustled to the back of the grub line to shake hands with Wisdom.

"That First Avenue South," he marveled. "That's just quite a place."

Uh huh, I thought. And Bouncing Betty is quite a guide to it.

What my first night in a fire camp was like, I can't really tell you. For when Stanley and I at last were done washing dishes, I entered my sleeping bag and that is the last I know.

Breakfast, though. If you have not seen what six dozen fire fighters will consume for breakfast, the devastation may shock you. It did me, after I awoke to the light of a gas lantern and Stanley above it half-croaking, "Picnic time again, Jick."

Whack off 150 slices of ham for frying. Mush, two 16-quart round boilers of water and 4 pounds of oatmeal into each. Milk for the mush, 15 tall cans of Sego mixed with the same of water. Potatoes to make fried spuds--thank the Lord, we had just enough of the canned variety so that I didn't



have to start peeling. Fill two more halfbreed boilers for coffee, slice another oodle of bread, open 7 cans of jam.

Enough grub to feed China, it looked to me like. But Stanley viewed matters and shook his head.

"Better dig out a half dozen of those fruitcakes, Jick, and slice them up."

I still blink to think about it, but only crumbs of those fruitcakes were left when that crew was done.

————— That morning, my father put his fire fighters to doing everything that the Forest Service said should be done in such a battle. Fire lines were being dug, snags were being felled, wherever possible the flames were pinched against Flume Gulch's rocky outcroppings. It truly was a bastardly site to have to tackle. The fire had started at the uppermost end of the gulch, amid a dry tangle of windfall, and was licking its way down through jungly stands of lodgepole pine on the gulch's steep sides. Burning back and forth as a falling flaming tree or a shower of sparks would ignite the opposite wall of forest. So in a sense, in a kind of sloshing pattern the fire was coming right down the trough of nature's version of a flume, aiming itself into the creekside trees along the North Fork and the high grassy slope opposite the gulch. And all the forested country waiting beyond that slope.

To even get to the fire my father's men had to climb up the face of the creek gorge into the gulch, and once there they had to labor on ground which sometimes tilted sharply ahead of them

and sometimes tilted sideways but always tilted. At breakfast I had heard one of the CCs telling the EFFs that Flume Gulch was a spraddledy-ass damn place.^H Besides being high and topsy-turvy the fire battle^C ground was hot and dry, and my father designated Wisdom Johnson to be the Flume Gulch water cow. What this involved was making trips along the fire^C line with a 5-gallon water pack on his back, so that the thirsty men could imbibe a drink from the pack's nozzle--the tit. "I thought I had done every job there was," claimed Wisdom, "but I never hit this one."

About mid-morning when he came down from the gulch to refill, Wisdom brought into camp my father's message for Paul. Paul read it, shook his head, and hustled down the trail to phone it on to Chet at the ranger station.

"What'd it say?" I pumped Wisdom before he could start back up with his sloshing water pack.

"'No chance 10 a.m. control today,'" Wisdom quoted. Then added his own view of the situation in Flume Gulch: "Suffering Jesus, they're a thirsty bunch up there."

"A lot of Great Fall nights coming out through the pores," Stanley put in piously from the work table where he and I next were going to have make double lunches for the 75 fire fighters. Which, the cook book enlightened us, amounted to 150 ham sandwiches, 150 jam sandwiches, and 75 cheese sandwiches.

" Slice the meat about four slices to the inch," I read in

a prissy voice. " Slice the bread about two slices to the inch.

Christamighty, they want us to do everything by the measurement
and then don't provide us any damn thing to measure with."

"Your thumb," said Stanley.

"My thumb what?"

"Your thumb's a inch wide. Close enough to it, anyhow. Go by
that. The forest Service has got a regulation for everything up to
and including how to swat a mosquito with your hat. Sometimes,
though, it don't hurt to swat first and read up on it later."

My thumb and I set to slicing.

At noon, Paul and his pair of camp flunkies and Stanley and
Wisdom and I lugged the sandwiches and canned fruit and pork and
beans up to the fireline.

I had grown up hearing of forest fires. The storied fire
summers, Bitterroot, Phantom Woman, Selway, this one, they amounted
to a Forest Service catechism. Yet here, now, was my first close
view.

Except for the smoke boiling in ugly fashion into the sky, the
scene was not as awful as you might expect. Orange flames were
a dancing tribe amid the trees, and the fire fighters were a rippling
line of shovelers and axmen and sawyers as they tried to clear any-
thing flammable from in front of the fire. But then when you got
over being transfixed by the motions of flame and men, the sense of
char hit you. A smell like charcoal, the black smudge of the burned

forest behind where the flames were crackling.

What told me most about the nature of a forest fire, however, was a single tree, a low scrawny jackpine at that. It had managed to root high up within a crack in one of the gulch's rock formations, and as I was gawking around trying to register everything, I saw that tree explode. Spontaneously burst into flames, there on its stone perch so far from any other foliage or the orange feather-edge of the fire itself.

I found my father and read his face. Serious but not grim. He came over to my pack of sandwiches and plowed into one. I glanced around to be sure Paul wasn't within hearing, then said: "'It doesn't look that bad. It just keeps burning, is all.'"

He had to grin at that. "That's about the case. But I think there's a chance we can kick it in the pants this afternoon. Those First Avenuers are starting to get their legs under them. They'll get better at fireline work as the day goes on." He studied the sky above Roman Reef as if it would answer what he said next. "What we don't need is any wind."

To shift himself from that topic, my father turned to me.

"How about you? How you getting along?"

"Okay. I never knew people could eat so much, though."

"Uh huh. Speaking of which, pass me another sandwich, would you." Even my father, conscientiously stoking food into himself. It was as if the fire's hunger for the forest had spread an epidemic of appetite among us as well.

My father watched Stanley divvy sandwiches out to a nearby bunch of EFFs. "How about your sidekick there?"

"Stanley's doing real good." Then the further answer I knew my father was inviting: "He's staying dry."

"Uh huh. Well, that's news. When he does get his nose in the bottle, you let me know. Or let Paul know if I'm not around. We got to have a cook. One'll have to be fetched in here from somewhere when Stanley starts a bender."

"If he does," I agreed because of all that was involved, "I'll say so."

Through the afternoon I flunkied for Stanley. Hot in that base camp, I hope never to suffer a more stifling day. It was all I could do not to wish for a breath of breeze.

Stanley too was sweating, his shirt dark with it. This would teach him to joke about other drinkers' pores.

And he looked in semi-awful shape. Agonized around the eyes, the way he had been when Bubbles butchered his hand. What bothered me more than his appearance, though, he was swigging oftener and oftener at the bottle.

As soon as Stanley went off to visit nature I got over there to his saddle pack, yanked the bottle out, and sipped. It still was water with a whiskey trace. Stanley's craving thirst was for the trace rather than the water, but so far he hadn't given in.

This lifted my mood. As did the continuing absence of wind. I was predicting to Stanley, "I'll bet they get the fire whipped."

"Maybe so, maybe no," he responded. "Where a forest fire is concerned, I'm no betting man. How about peeling me a tub of spuds when you get the chance."

"Stanley, I guess this isn't exactly any of my business, but-- have you seen Velma? Since the Fourth?"

"Now and then."

"Yeah, well. She's quite--quite a lady, isn't she?"

"Quite a one."

"Uh huh. Well. So, how are you two getting along?"

Stanley flexed his hand a time or two, then went back to cutting bacon. Tonight's main course was a casserole--if you can do that by the tubful--of macaroni and canned corn and bacon slices. "We've had some times," he allowed.

Times with Velma Simms. Plural. The gray eyes, the pearl-buttoned ears, those famous rodeo slacks, in multiple. Sweat was already rolling off me that morning, but this really opened the spigots. I went over to the water bucket and splashed a handful on my face and another on the back of my neck.

Even so, I couldn't help resuming the topic. "Think anything will come of it?"

"If you mean permanent, nope. Velma's gave up marrying and I never got started. We both know there's a season on our kind of

entertainment." Stanley slabbed off another half dozen slices of bacon, I peeled away at a spud. "But a season's better than no calendar at all, is what I've come to think." He squinted at the stacked results of his bacon slicing. "How many more hogs does that recipe call for?"

I was still peeling when the casualty came down from the gulch. He was one of the CCs, half-carried and half-supported by two others. Paul hurried across the camp toward them, calling: "How bad did he get it?"

"His cawlehbone and awm," one of the helping CCs answered. New York? Philadelphia? Lord only knew what accent any of the CC guys spoke, or at least I sure didn't.

Paul sent the bearers and their casualty on down to the trail-head where his pickup was parked, for them to drive in to Gros Ventre and Doc Spence.

A falling snag had sideswiped the injured CC. This was sobering. I knew enough fire lore to realize that if the snag had found the CC's head instead of his collarbone and arm, he might have been on his way to the undertaker rather than the doctor.

As yet, no wind. Calm as the inside of an oven, and as hot. I wiped my brow and resumed peeling.

"What would you think about going for a stroll?"

This proposal from Stanley startled me. By now, late afternoon, he looked as if it took 99% of his effort to stay on his feet, let alone put them into motion.

"Huh? To where?"

His head and Stetson indicated the grassy slope of Rooster Mountain above us, opposite the fire. "Just up there. Give us a peek at how things are going."

I hesitated. We did have our supper fixings pretty well in hand. But to simply wander off up the mountainside--

"Aw, we got time," Stanley told me as if he'd invented the commodity. "Our stepdaddy"--he meant Paul, who was down phoning Chet the report of the injured CC--"won't be back for a while."

"Okay, then," I assented a little nervously. "As long as we're back here in plenty of time to serve supper."

I swear he said it seriously: "Jick, you know I'd never be the one to make you miss a meal."

I thought it was hot in camp. The slope was twice so. Facing south as it did, the grassy incline had been drinking in sun all day, not to mention the heat the forest fire was putting into the air of this whole area.

"Yeah, it's a warm one," Stanley agreed. I was watching him with ~~concern~~. The climb in the heat had tuckered me considerably. How Stanley could navigate this mountainside in his bent-knee fashion--more than ever he looked like a born horseman, grudging the fact of

ground--was beyond me.

Except for a few scrubby jackpine^s peppered here and there, the slope was shadeless until just below its summit where the lodgepole forest overflowed from this mountain's north side. Really there weren't many trees even up there because of the rocky crest, the rooster comb. And Stanley and I sure as hell weren't going that high anyway, given the heat and steepness. So it was a matter of grit and bear it.

Stanley did lean down and put a hand flat against the soil of the slope as if he intended to sit. I was not surprised when he didn't plop himself down, for this sidehill's surface was so tropical I could feel its warmth through the soles of my boots.

"Looks to me like they're holding it," I evaluated the fire scene opposite us. Inasmuch as we were about halfway up our slope, we were gazing slightly downward on Flume Gulch and the fire crew. Startling how close that scene seemed; these two sides of the North Fork vee truly were sharp. Across there in the gulch we could see the men strung out along the fireline, could even see the strip of turned earth and cleared-away debris, like a stripe of garden dirt, that they were penning the fire with. In a provident moment I had snagged a pair of binoculars from the council tent before Stanley and I set off on our climb. With them I could even pick out individuals, found my father and Kratka in conference near the center of the fireline. Both of them stood in that peering way men do up a side-hill, one foot advanced and the opposite arm crooking onto a hip.

They looked like they could outwait any fire.

The dry grass creaked and crackled under my feet as I stepped to hand the binoculars to Stanley. He had been gandering here, there and elsewhere around our slope, so I figured he was waiting to use the glasses on the actual fire.

"Naw, that's okay, Jick. I seen enough. Kind of looks like a forest fire, don't it?" And he was turning away, starting to shuffle back down to the fire camp.

When the first fire fighters slogged in for supper, my father was with them. My immediate thought was that the fire was whipped: my father's job as fire boss was done.

As soon as I could see their faces, I knew otherwise. The fire fighters looked done in. My father looked pained.

I told Stanley I'd be right back, and went over to my father.

"It jumped our fireline," he told me. "Three places."

"But how? There wasn't any wind."

"Like hell. What do you call that whiff about 4 o'clock?"

"Not down here," I maintained. "We haven't had a breath all afternoon. Ask Stanley. Ask Paul." ~~and the rest~~

My father studied me. "All right. Maybe down here, there wasn't any. But up there, some sure as hell came from somewhere. Not much. Just enough." He told me the story. Around 4 o'clock, which must have been not long after Stanley and I took our look at things from the slope, the east flank of the fire made a run. "Jumped the fire-

line, but we got there and swatted it out. While we were doing that, it jumped again. Got to that one, got it out. But while we were doing that, it jumped one more goddamn time." That one flared, and a lower-down stand of lodgepole became orange flame. "I had to pull the men away from that flank. Too damn dangerous. So we've got a whole new fire, coming right down the mountain. Tomorrow we're going to have to hold it here at the creek. Damn it all to hell anyway."

My father did fast damage to his plateful of supper and went back up to the fire. He was keeping Kratka's crew on watch at what was left of fire~~line~~ until the cool of the evening would damper the flames.

Ames's gang of CCs and EFFs meanwhile were ready to dine. Ready and then some. "Hey, Cookie!" one among them yelled out to Stanley. "What're you going to founder us on tonight?"

"Soupa de bool-yon," Stanley enlightened him in a chefly accent of some nature. "Three buckets of water and one on-yon." Actually the lead course was vegetable soup, followed by the baconized macaroni and corn, and mashed potatoes with canned milk gravy, and rice pudding, and all of it tasted just heavenly if I do say so myself.

Dark was coming on by the time Stanley and I went to the creek to fill a boiler with water as a headstart toward breakfast.

figure out how we're going to handle this fire tomorrow."

My father and Paul and the pair of crew foremen took lanterns and headed up the creek to look over the situation of tomorrow morning's fireline. My father of course knew the site backwards and forwards but the hell of it was, to try to educate the others in a hurry and in the dark. I could not help but think it: if Alec--

At their bed ground some of the fire crew already were oblivious in their sleeping bags, but a surprising many were around campfires, sprawled and gabbing. The climate of the Two. Roast you all day in front of a forest inferno, then at dark chill you enough to make you seek out fire.

While waiting for my father, I did some wandering and exercising of my ears. I would like to say here and now that these fire fighters, elderly from 18-year-old CCs to the most ~~elderly~~ denizen among the First Avenue South EFFs, were earnestly discussing how to handle the Flume Gulch fire. I would like to say that, but nothing would be farther from the truth. Back at the English Creek ranger station, on the wall behind my father's desk was tacked one of those carbon copy gags that circulate among rangers:



Subjects under discussion during one summer (timed by stopwatch) by U.S. Forest Service crews, trail, fire, maintenance and otherwise.

	<u>Percent of Time</u>
Sexual stories, experiences and theories.....	37%
Personal adventures in which narrator is hero.....	23%
Memorable drinking jags.....	8%
Outrages of capitalism.....	8%
Acrimonious remarks about bosses, foremen and cooks..	5%
Personal adventures in which someone not present is the goat.....	5%
Automobiles, particularly Fords.....	3%
Sarcastic evaluations of Wilson's war to end war.....	2%
Sarcastic evaluations of ex-President Coolidge.....	2%
Sarcastic evaluations of ex-President Hoover.....	2%
Sears Roebuck catalogue versus Montgomery Ward catalogue.....	2%
The meteorological outlook.....	2%
The job at hand.....	1%

From what I could hear, that list was just about right.

—

Stanley I had not seen for a while, and it crossed my mind that he may have had enough of the thirsty life. That he'd gone off someplace to jug up from an undiluted bottle.

But no, when I at last spied my father and his fire foremen and Paul returning to camp and then heading for the tent to continue their war council, I found Stanley in that same vicinity. Looking neither worse nor better than he had during our day of cooking.

Just to be sure, I asked him: "How you doing?"

"Feeling dusty," he admitted. "Awful dusty."

My father spotted the pair of us and called over: "Jick, you hang on out here. We got to go over the map, but it won't take too long." Into the tent he ducked with Paul, Kratka and Ames following.

"You want me to go get your sipping bottle?" I offered to Stanley, referring to the one of whiskey-tinged water in his saddlebag.

"Mighty kind," replied Stanley. "But it better wait." And before I could blink, he was gone from beside me and was approaching the tent where my father's war council was going on.

Stanley stuck his head in past the flap door of the tent. I heard:

"Can I see you for part of a minute, Mac?"

"Stanley, it's going to have to wait. We're still trying to ~~dope~~ out our fire~~line~~ line for the morning."

"That fire~~line~~ line is what it's about."

There was a moment of silence in the tent. Then Paul's voice:

"For crying out loud! Who ever heard of a fire camp where the cook gets to put in his two bits' worth? Mister, I don't know who the devil you think you are, but--"

"All right, Paul," my father umpired. "Hold on." There was a moment of silence, which could only have been a scrutinizing one. My father began to say: "Stanley, once we get this--"

"Mac, you know how much it takes for me to ask."

A moment again. Then my father: "All right. There's plenty of night ahead. We can stand a couple of minutes for me to hear what Stanley has to say. Paul, you guys go ahead and map out how we can space the crews along the creek bottom. I won't be long." And bringing one of the gas lanterns out he came, giving Stanley a solid looking-over in the white light.

Side by side the two of them headed out of earshot of the tent. Not out of mine, though, for this I was never going to miss. They had gone maybe a dozen strides when I caught up with them.

The three of us stopped at the west end of the camp. Above us the fire had on its night face yet, bright, pretty. No hint whatsoever of the grim smoke and char it showed by day.

"Mac, I'm sorry as all hell to butt into your war council, there. I hate to say anything about procedure. Particularly to you. But--"

"But you're determined to Stanley, what's on your mind?"

"The idea of tackling the fire down here on the creek, first thing in the morning." Stanley paused. Then: "Mac, my belief is that's not the way to go about it."

"So where would you tackle it?"

Stanley's Stetson jerked upward, indicating the slope of grass across the North Fork from us. "Up there."

Now in the lantern light it was my father's eyes that showed ~~squint~~ the hurtful ~~quinch~~ Stanley's so often did.

The thought repelled him. The fire doubling its area of burn: ~~blackened~~ both sides of the North Fork gorge blacked instead of one. More than that--

"Stanley, if this fire gets loose on the slope and up into that next timber, it can take the whole goddamn country. It can burn for miles." My father stared up at the dim angle of slope, but what was in his mind was 1910, Bitterroot, Selway, Phantom Woman, all the smoke ghosts that haunt a fire boss. "Christamighty;" he said softly, "it could burn until snowfall."

Jerking his head around from that thought, my father said: "Stanley, don't get radical on me here. What in the hell makes you say the fireline ought to be put up there on the mountain?"

"Mac, I know you hate like poison to see any inch of the Two go up in smoke. I hated it, too. But if you can't hold the fire at the base of the gulch, it's gonna break out onto the slope anyway."

"The answer there is, I'm supposed to hold it."

"Supposed to is one thing. Doing it's another."

"Stanley, these days we've got what's called the 10 a.m. policy. ~~The Forest Service~~ Mazoola got religion about all this a few years ago. The Major told us, 'This approach to fire suppression will be a dividend-payer.'

So the rule is, try to control any fire by 10 the next morning."

"Yeah, rules are rules," agreed Stanley. Or seemed to agree, for I had heard my father any number of times invoke the second part of this ranger station catechism: "And fools are fools."

My father pulled out a much-employed handkerchief, wiped his eyes, and blew his nose. Among the aggravations of his day was smoke irritation.

"All right, Stanley," he said at last. "Run this by me again. You're saying, give the fire the whole ~~damn~~ slope of Rooster Mountain?"

"Yeah, more or less. Use the morning and as much else of the day as you can get to build a wide fireline along that rocky top. It's not as nasty a place as this gorge."

"Christamighty, I can't pick places to fight a fire by whether they're nasty or not."

"Mac, you know what I mean." Stanley spelled it out for my father anyway. "That slope is dry as a torch. If you put men down in this gorge and the fire sets off that slope behind them too, you're going to be sifting piles of ashes to find their buttons."

"I can't see how the fire could set off the slope across this much distance," my father answered slowly.

"I can," Stanley said back.

Still stubborn as a government mule against the notion of voluntarily doubling the size of the Flume Gulch burn, my father eyed back up at the slope of Rooster Mountain. "Hell, if we just let the flame get out in that grass, then's when we'll have a bigger fire."

"You'll have a bigger fireline. And rocks instead of men to help stop it."

My father considered. Then said: "Stanley, I'd rather take a beating than ask you this. But I got to. Are you entirely sober?"

"Sorry to say," responded Stanley, "I sure as hell am."

"He is," I chimed in.

My father continued to confront Stanley. I could see that he had more to say, more to ask.

But there I was wrong. My father only uttered, "The slope is something I'll think about," and set off back to the tent.

Stanley told me he was going to turn in--"This cooking is kind of a strenuous pastime"--and ordinarily I would have embraced bed myself. But none of this was ordinary. I trailed my father to the war council once more, and heard him say as soon as he was inside the tent:

"Ideas don't care who their daddies are. What would you guys say about this?" And he outlined the notion of the fireline atop the slope.

They didn't say much at all about it. Kratka and Ames already had been foxed once by the Flume Gulch fire, no need for them to stick their necks out again. After a bit my father said: "Well, I'll use it all as a pillow tonight. Let's meet here before breakfast. Meantime, everybody take a look at that slope on the map."

Paul's voice finally came. "Mac, can I see you outside?"

"Excuse us again, gents."

Out came my father and Paul, again I made sure to catch up before the walking could turn into talking.

At the west edge of the camp Paul confronted my father. "Mac, whichever way you decide on tackling this fire, I'll never say a word against you. But the fire record will. You can't get around that. If you don't have the crew down here to take the fire by its face in the morning, Sipe is going to want to know why. And the Major--if this fire gets away over that slope, they'll sic a board of review on you. Mac, they'll have your hide."

My father weighed all this. And at last said: "Paul, there's another if. If we can kill this fire, Sipe and the Major aren't going to give one good goddamn how we did it."

Paul peered unhappily from the flickering cracks in the night on the Flume Gulch side of us, to the dark bulk of the slope on our other. "You're the fire boss," he said.

I am not sure I slept at all that night. Waiting, breath held, any time I imagined I heard a rustle of wind. Waiting for the morning, for my father's fireline decision. Waiting.

— "Christamighty, Stanley. Twenty loaves again?"

"Milk toast instead of mush to start with this morning, Jick," confirmed Stanley from the circle of lantern light where he was peering down into the cook book. "Then after the bread, it's Place

20-quart half-oval

20 cans of milk and the same of water in a 13-quart boiler--"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let me get the damn slicing done first."

My father and Ames were the first ones through the breakfast line. Ames's men had come off the fireline earliest last night, so they were to be the early ones onto it this morning. Wherever that fireline was going to be.

I was so busy flunking that it wasn't until a little break after Ames's men and before Krataka's came that I could zero in on my father. He and Ames brought their empty plates and dropped them in the dishwash tub. My father scrutinized Stanley, who was lugging a fresh heap of fried ham to the T table. Stanley set down the ham and met my father's regard with a straight gaze of his own. "Morning, Mac. Great day for the race, ain't it?"

My father nodded to Stanley, although whether in hello or agreement it couldn't be told. Then he turned to Ames. "Okay, Andy. Take your bunch up there. All the way to the top." And next my father was coming around the serving table to where Stanley and I were, saying: "Step over here, you two. I've got something special in mind for the pair of you."

Shortly, Wisdom Johnson came yawning into the grub line. He woke up considerably when my father instructed him that the tall, tall slope of Rooster Mountain, just now looming up in the approach of dawn, was where his water duty would be today.

"But Mac, the fire's over here, it ain't up there!"

"It's a new theory of fire fighting," my father told him.

"We're going to do it by mail order."

Kratka's men were soon fed. It transpired that my father himself was going to lead this group onto the slope and show them where he wanted backfires lit.

First, though, he called Paul Eliason over. I heard him instruct: "Have Chet tell Great Falls the same thing as yesterday--'No chance 10 a.m. control today.'"

"Mac," Paul began. "Mac, how about if I at least wait until toward that time of morning to call it in? I don't see any sense in advertising what--what's going on up here."

My father leveled him a stare that made Paul sway back a little. "Assistant ranger Eliason, do you mean to say you'd delay information to headquarters."

Paul gulped but stood his ground. "Yeah. In this case, I would."

"Now you're talking," congratulated my father. "Send it in at 5 minutes to 10." My father turned and called to the crew waiting to go up the mountain with him. "Let's go see a fire."

"Stanley, this makes me feel like a coward."

"You heard the man."

It was almost mid-afternoon, the sweltering heart of so hot a day. The rock formation we were perched on might as well have been a stoked stove. Pony and the buckskin saddlehorse were tethered

in the shade of the trees below and behind us, but they stood there drooping even so.

Stanley and I were chefs in exile. This rock observation point of ours was the crown-shaped formation ~~on~~ above the line cabin where the two of us sheltered during our camp tending shenanigan. How long ago it seemed since I was within those log walls, bandaging Stanley's hand and wishing I was anywhere else.

I had heard the man. My father, when he herded the pair of us aside there at breakfast and decreed: "I want you two out of here this afternoon. You understand?" If we did, Stanley and I weren't about to admit it. My father the fire boss spelled matters out for us: "If the wind makes up its mind to blow or that fire takes a turn for some other reason, it could come all the way down the gorge into this camp. So when you get the lunches made, clear out of here."

"Naw, Mac," Stanley dissented. "It's a good enough idea for Jick to clear out, but I--"

"Both of you," stated my father.

"Yeah, well," I started to put in, "Stanley's done his part, but I could just as well--"

"Both of you," my father reiterated. "Out of here, by noon."

The long faces on us told him he still didn't have Stanley and me convinced. "Listen, damn it. Stanley, you know what happened the last argument you and I had. This time, let's just don't argue." Then, more mild: "I need you to be with Jick, Stanley."

My father tried to head me off. "Old history now, Jick."

"If it's that old, then why can't I hear it? You two--I need to know. I've been in the dark all damn summer, not knowing who did what to who, when, where, any of it. One time you send me off with Stanley, but then we show up here and you look at him like he's got you spooked. Damn it all to hell anyway"--I tell you, when I do get worked up there is not much limit. "What's it all about?"

Stanley over his dishwater asked my father: "You never told him, huh?" My father shrugged and didn't answer. Stanley gazed toward me. "You folks never enlightened you on the topic of me?"

"I just told--No. No, they sure as hell haven't."

"McCaskills," Stanley said with a shake of his head, as if the name was a medical diagnosis. "I might of known you and Bet'd have padlocks on your tongues, Mac."

"Stanley," my father tried, "there's no need for you to go into all that."

"Yeah, I think there is." I was in Stanley's gaze again. "Phantom Woman," he began. "I let that fire get away from me. Or at least it got away. Comes to the same--a fire is the fire boss's responsibility, and I was him." Stanley turned his head to my father. Then to me again. "Your dad had come up from his Indian Head district to be a fireline foreman for me. So he was on hand when it happened. When Phantom Woman blew up across that mountain-side." Stanley saw my question. "Naw, I can't really say it was the

same as happened on that slope today. Timber instead of grass, different this and that--every goddamn fire I ever been around is different from every other goddamn fire. But anyhow, up it blew, Phantom Woman. Flames everywhere, all the crew at my flank of the fireline had to run out of there like singed cats. Run for their lives. It was just a mess. And then that fire went and went and went." Stanley's throat made a dry swallow. "Burned for three weeks. So that's the history of it, Jick. The blowup happened at my flank of the fireline. It was over that that your dad and I had our"--Stanley faced my father--"disagreement."

My father looked back at Stanley until it began to be a stare. Then asked: "That's it? That's what you call the history of it?"

Stanley's turn to shrug.

My father shook his head. Then uttered:

"Jick, I turned Stanley in. For the Phantom Woman fire."

"Turned him in? How? To who?"

"To headquarters in Great Falls. Missoula. The Major. Anybody I could think of, wouldn't you say, Stanley?"

Stanley considered. "Just about. But Mac, you don't--"

"What," I persisted, "just for the fire getting away from him?"

"For that and--" My father stopped.

"The booze," Stanley completed. "As long as we're telling, tell him the whole of it, Mac."

"Jick," my father set out, "this goes back a long way. Longer than you know about. I've been around Stanley since I was what,

sixteen, seventeen?

"Somewhere there," Stanley confirmed.

"There were a couple of years in there," my father was going on, "when I--well, when I wasn't around home much. I just up and pulled out for a while, and Stanley--"

"Why was that?" This seemed to be my main chance to see into the McCaskill past, and I wanted all the view I could get. "How come you pulled out?"

My father paused. "It's a hell of a thing to have to say, after all this with Alec. But my father and I, your grandfather--we were on the outs. Not for anything like the same reason. He did something I couldn't agree with, and it was just easier all around, for me to stay clear of the homestead and Scotch Heaven for a while. Eventually he got over it and I got over it, and that's all that needs to said about that episode." A pause. This one, I knew, sealed whatever that distant McCaskill father-son ruckus had been. "Anyway, Stanley took me on. Started me here on the Two, giving me any seasonal job he could come up with. I spent a couple of years that way, until we went into the war. And then after, when I was the association rider and your mother and I had Alec, and then you came along--Stanley suggested I take the ranger test."

I wanted to hear history, did I. A headful was now available. Stanley had been the forest arranger, the one who set up the Two Medicine National Forest. Stanley had stood in when my father was on the outs with his father. Stanley it had been who urged this

father of mine into the Forest Service. And it was Stanley whom my father had--

"It never was any secret Stanley liked to take a drink," I was hearing the elaboration now. "But when I started as ranger at Indian Head and he still was the ranger at English Creek, I started to realize the situation was getting beyond that. There were more and more days when Stanley couldn't operate without a bottle at his side. He still knew more about the Two than anybody, and in the normal course of events I could kind of keep a watch on things up here and catch any problem that got past Stanley. We went along that way for a few years. Nobody higher up noticed, or at least minded. But it's one thing to function day by day, and another to have to do it during a big fire."

"And Phantom Woman was big enough," Stanley quietly dropped into telling my father's ~~tell~~ of it all.

Something was adding up in a way I didn't want it to. "After Phantom Woman. What happened after Phantom Woman?"

Stanley took his turn first. "Major Kelley tied a can to me. 'Your employment with the U.S. Forest Service is severed,' I believe is how it was put. And I been rattling around ever since, I guess." He glanced at my father as if he had just thought of something further to tell him. "You remember the couple times I tried the cure, Mac. I tried it a couple more, since. It never took."

"But you got by okay here," I protested. "You haven't had a real drink all the time we've been cooking."

"But I'll have one the first minute I get back to the Busbys'," Stanley forecast. "And then a couple to wash that one down. Naw, Jick. I know myself. I ought to, I been around myself long enough." As if to be sure I accepted the sum of him, Stanley gave it flatly: "In a pinch, I can go dry for as long as I did here. But ordinarily, no. I got a built-in thirst."

Now my father. "I never expected they'd come down on Stanley that hard. A transfer, some rocking chair job where the drinking wouldn't matter that much--something to get him off the English Creek district. I couldn't just stand by and see both him and the Two country go to hell." The expression on my father: I suppose here was my first inkling that a person could do what he thought was right and yet be never comfortable about it. He shook his head over what had to be said next, erasing the inquiry that had been building in me. "You know how the Major is. Put up or shut up. When he bounced Stanley, he handed me English Creek. I wanted it run right, did I? Up to me to do it." My father cast a look around the fire camp, into the night where no brightness marked either Flume Gulch or the slope. "And here I still am, trying to."

Again that night, I was too stirred up for sleep. Turning and turning in the sleeping bag; the question beyond reach of questioner; the two similar figures crowding my mind, they and my new knowledge of them as awake as the night.

Up against a decision, my father had chosen the Two country over his friend, his mentor, Stanley.

~~against~~
Up ~~again~~ a decision, my brother had chosen independence over my father.

Rewrite my life into one of those other McCaskill versions and what would I have done in my father's place, or my brother's? Even yet I don't know. I do not know. It may be that there is no knowing until a person is in so hard a place.

All that next morning my father had Kratka's crew felling suspicious snags in the burnt-over gulch and creek bottom, and Ames's men on the slope to patrol for any sign of spark or smudge amid that char ~~that~~ which had been grass. After lunch my father let half the EFFs go back to Great Falls. He predicted, "The thanks I'll get is that headquarters will want to know why in holy hell I didn't get them off the payroll last night." But the rest of the EFFs and the CCs, he put back to watching the burn area.

Stanley and I recuperated from the lunch preparation and gradually started on supper, neither of us saying anything worthwhile.

When the hot part of the afternoon had passed without trouble, even my father was satisfied that the Flume Gulch fire was not going to rise from its black grave.

He came into camp with the rest of the EFFs. "Paul, the show is all yours," he delegated. "After supper you can have the CCs break the camp. I'm going to head into Gros Ventre now with the

rest of these EFFs. Chet can tell Great Falls to get them from there. And Paul," my father checked his assistant as Paul started off to pass orders to the CCs. "Paul, it was a good camp."

I was next on my father's mental list. "Jick, you might as well come in with me. Stanley can leave Pony off on his ride home."

Plainly my father wanted my company, or at least my presence.

"Okay," I said. "Let me tell Stanley."

My father nodded. "I'll go round up Wisdom. He's somewhere over there bragging up Bouncing Betty to the CCs. Meet us down at the truck."

The ride to town, my father driving and Wisdom and I beside him in the cab of the truck, was mostly nickel and dime gab. Our route was the Noon Creek one, a handier drive from the fire camp than backtracking over to English Creek. Reminiscent exclamations from Wisdom when we passed the haystacks of the Reese place. Already the stacks were turning from green to tan. Then my father eyeing around the horizon and thinking out loud that August sure as hell ought to be done with heat and lightning by now. More than that, I have no memory of. The fact may even be that I lulled off a little, in the motion of that truck cab.

When we had goodbyed Wisdom and the other EFFs, my father and I grabbed a quick supper in the Lunchery. Oyster stew never tasted better, which is saying a lot. Before we could head home, though, my father said he had to ^{stop} ~~go~~ by the Gleaner office. "Bill is going to want all the dope about the fire. It may take a little while. You want me to pick you up at Ray's after I'm done?" I did.

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St. Ignatius St. was quiet, in the calm of suppertime and just after, except for one series of periodic whirrs. Which proved to be Ray pushing the lawn mower around and around the Heaney front yard. Behind him, Mary Ellen was collecting the cut grass with a lawn rake bigger than she was.

I stepped into the yard and propped myself against the giant cottonwood, in its shadowed side. Busy as Ray and Mary Ellen were, neither saw me. Myself, I was as tired as I have ever been, yet my mind was going like a million.

After a minute I called across the law to Ray: "A little faster if you can stand it."

His grin broke out, and from the far corner of the yard he came pushing the lawn mower diagonally across to me, somehow making in the back of his throat the clackaclackaclackaclacka sound of a horse-drawn hay mower.

"Ray-ay!" protested Mary Ellen at his untidy shortcut across the lawn. But then here she came, raking up after him.

"What do you think?" Ray asked when he reached the tree and me. "Had I better bring this out to Pete's next summer and make hay with you?"

"Sounds good to me," I said. "But that's next summer. I want to know where this one went to." The light in the Heaney kitchen dimmed out, another one came on in the living room, then the murmur of Ed's radio. 7 p.m., you could bank on it. I thought back to my last visit to this household you could set your clock by, when I

pulled in from the Double W and the session with Alec, that first Saturday night of the month. "It's been a real quick August."

"Quicker than you know," advised Ray. "Today is September. School's almost here."

"The hell. I guess I lost some days somewhere." Three more days and I would be 15 years old. Four more days and Ray and Mary Ellen and I would be back in school. It didn't seem possible. Time is the trickiest damn commodity. The sound of Ed Heaney's radio in there should have been what I was hearing the night of the Fourth of July, not almost to Labor Day. Haying and supper at the Double W and the phone call to Alec and the forest fire and the revelations from Stanley and my father, all seemed as if they should be yet to happen. But they were the past now, in my mind like all that history in Toussaint's and Stanley's.

"Can we feed you something, Jick?" Ray asked in concern. "You look kind of hard used."

"Dad and I ate uptown," I said. "And he'll be here any minute. But I suppose I could manage to--"

Just then the front porch screen door opened and Ed Heaney was standing there. We all three looked at him in curiosity because with the screen door open that way he was letting in moths, which was major disorderly conduct for him. I will always see Ed Heaney in that doorway of light, motionless there as if he had been pushed out in front of a crowd and was trying to think of what to say. At last he did manage to bring out words, and they were these:

"Ray, Mary Ellen, you better come in the house now. They've started another war in Europe."