

The Bartender's Tale

my edited version as sent to Becky Saletan

My father was the best bartender who ever lived. No one really questioned that in a town like Gros Ventre, glad of any honor, or out in the lonely sheep camps and bunkhouses and other parched locations of the Two Medicine country where the Medicine Lodge saloon was viewed as a nearly holy oasis. There was a reliability rare in life for a customer to walk into the oldest enterprise for a hundred miles around and be met with just the right drink whisking along the polished wood of the prodigious bar, along with a greeting as dependable as the time of day. Not even heaven promised such service. Growing up in back of the joint, as my father always called it, I could practically hear in my sleep the toasts that celebrated the Medicine Lodge as an unbeatable place and Tom Harry as perfection of a certain kind behind the bar.

Which was not to say, even the adherents comfortably straddling their bar stools might have admitted, that he added up to the best human being there ever was. Or the absolute best father of all time, in ways I could list. Yet, as peculiar a pair as we made, the bachelor saloonkeeper with a streak of frost in his black pompadour and the inquisitive boy who had been an accident between the

sheets, in the end I would not have traded my involuntary parent for a more standard model. It is said it takes a good storyteller to turn ears into eyes, but luckily life itself sometimes performs that trick on us. In what became our story together, when life took me by the ears, what a fortunate gamble it was that my father included me in his calling. Otherwise, I'd have missed out on the best seat in the house--the joint, rather--when history came hunting for him.

I turned twelve that year of everything, 1960. But as my father would have said, it took some real getting there first.

My mother, who was my father's housekeeper when domestic matters underwent a surprising turn and I was the result, long since had washed her hands of the two of us and vanished from our part of Montana, and for all I could find out, from the face of the earth. "She up and left," was his total explanation. "Pulled out on us when you were a couple of months old, kiddo." Accordingly, he handed me off to his sister Marge and her family in Arizona, and I spent my early years in one of those sun-baked Phoenix neighborhoods where saguaro cactuses had not yet been crowded out entirely. It was not an easy existence. My cousins, Danny and Ronny, were four and six years older than I was, and infinitely more ornery. Aunt Marge was loyal to me--or at least to the checks my father sent for my support--but she took in laundry and ironing as well as running the household, and so her supervision of her unruly sons was sporadic at best. None of us saw much of the husband and father, Arvin, a fireman who usually was trying to catch some sleep in the back bedroom or on shift at the firehouse. My enduring memory of that period of my life is of the big Zenith console radio saving my skin the same time every afternoon, when the bigger boys took a break from tormenting me and we all slumped down on the living room floor to tune in to serial adventures far beyond what Phoenix had to offer. So, I survived, as

children somehow do, and occasionally I even was reprieved from Danny and Ronny. A time or two a year, my father would show up and take me off on what he declared was a vacation. We saw the Grand Canyon more than once.

As time went on, my situation started to slip drastically. Ronny was about to become a teenager, and turning meaner along with it. Among other stunts, he liked to grind his knuckles on the back of my head when Aunt Marge wasn't watching. All the while, copycat Danny was just waiting for his turn at me. The saying is that what does not kill you strengthens you, but sometimes you wonder which will happen first.

By the summer I turned six, I was desperately looking forward to the first grade when I would be out of Ronny's reach at least that much of the day. It all culminated one hot afternoon when we were sprawled on the rug in the living room listening as usual to "The Lone Ranger." Ronny was alternately mocking Tonto--"Why it never your turn to sweep the tepee, Kemo Sabe?"--and spitting sunflower seed husks at me, Danny was giggling at such good fun, and I was wincing at how cruddy a life it is when a person has to put up with relatives like the pair of them. Then, more dramatically than anything on the radio, there was a thundering knock on the front door, which brought Aunt Marge rushing to see what it was about.

She opened the door to my father, head and shoulders above her even though she was a large woman. "Hey, Marge. How's tricks?" I was too surprised to jump up and run to him as usual. Seeing him materialize in that doorway--he looked like he always did, his hair slicked back and his lively eyebrows cocked, although his usual blinding white shirt was unbuttoned at the neck in concession to the Arizona heat--challenged my imagination more mightily than the masked man and his faithful Indian companion ever could. What was wrong? Why was he here, suddenly and unannounced?

The perfectly bland answer confounded me as much as the question. "I came to get the kid."

Aunt Marge laughed in his face. "Tom, you can't drag Rusty off on some dumb vacation right now. He starts school pretty soon."

That did not seem to perturb him the least bit. "Last time I looked, Montana has schoolhouses."

She was speechless, although not for long. "You don't mean you're going to try to raise him! That's crazy!"

"That's one description of it." My father's wallet now entered the conversation, a riffle of bills as he counted out more money than I would have ever dreamed I was worth. Thrusting the wad of cash into her nearest hand and adding "Much obliged, Marge," he peered past her to our three gaping faces amid the unheard palaver of the radio.

In that moment, my life stopped being cruddy. Maybe I was imagining, but I thought I heard a scared gulp out of Ronny as my father sized up him and the sunflower seed shrapnel. Then he was looking at me as if we were the only two in the room. "Let's grab your things and hit the road, kiddo."

We swept out of Phoenix in one of those tubby Hudsons made after World War Two, which maybe accounted for its family resemblance to a tank. I could barely see over the dashboard of the thing. In contrast to my father, who only just did fit under the car roof, tall even sitting down. By then I was catching up with the full implications of what had happened and was thrilled through and through with my escape from those stinker cousins. But was he? Every time I stole a look at him, he was squinting at the highway ahead as though something more than driving was on his mind. Surely now he wouldn't turn the car around and deliver me back to Aunt Marge's madhouse, would he? Would he?

Squirring in the passenger seat as the desert whipped past--he drove the way Montana people did in those days, as though the speed limit was merely a suggestion--I risked a question about when our trip would be safely over but got no further than, "Daddy, how long--"

"Cripes, let's get rid of that word right now," he muttered, fishing out a cigarette and punching the lighter on the dash. "Makes both of us sound like we're still dealing with diapers."

Cautiously I tried again. "Father?"

"I'm no priest, am I," he said gruffly.

"Wh-what should I say?"

He lit his cigarette and waved the lighter as if extinguishing a match.

"Don't sweat it. We'll think of something."

There matters stood until we pulled in to a gas station in the first little town. As luck would have it, past the pumps I spotted a cheery enameled sign for Orange Crush soda, my favorite, and blurted: "Uh, Pop, can I please have some pop?"

He shot a look at me across the space of the front seat. His eyebrows went up in what seemed to be fresh consideration of his passenger. "Didn't I tell you we'd think of something?"

We had traveled together a little on those "vacations," but this journey was far, far different. Interstate freeways hadn't yet bisected the West, and the highway went through towns so that you felt you were visiting each one. There were advantages to that, as when Pop would slow whenever the road became a main street and ask, "Need to take a leak?" I almost always did, and he would aim for a sign that said Mint or Stockman or some other saloon name in plain tubular neon--this was 1954, take into account, before everything began flashing like Las Vegas--

and in we would go. "My kid's got a quick call of nature," he'd tell the bartender, and be sure to buy a couple packs of cigarettes or some gum or candy bars for me to give the bar a bit of business, while I went to the toilet. On our way out he would always say, "Nice joint you have here," even if the place was gloomy as a funeral parlor. I suppose I learned something about professional courtesy from those stops.

Although I was a daydreaming type of child, the trip was beyond anything I ever imagined. Half of a state might go by in an afternoon, with Pop giving the Hudson's gas pedal no mercy. To pass the time, he was trying to follow the fortunes of the Great Falls Selectrics baseball team. They played in a Class D league--about one step up from picnic softball--and we took turns twiddling the car radio dial to pull in their games. I practically squinted an ear at first, trying to figure out what I was hearing. "Why are they called the Slick Tricks?"

He told me that wasn't the case, fishing in his shirt pocket to toss me a matchbook "Here's where the name comes from, see?" Back there at six I already could read, and had not too much trouble with the fancy red script lettering that blazoned GREAT FALLS SELECT--MONTANA'S BEST BEER!

"I sell oceans of it," he spelled out further for me. "Seems only fair to root for the team." It sounded like they needed it, against the Pocatello Cowpokes. The broadcast signal faded in and out, as the Selectrics also seemed to do. *"There's a grounder through the infield, one runner is in to score, here comes another. Seven to two, 'Pokes. The ball has eluded the Great Falls centerfielder..."*

"Damn," said Pop with a frown as the Selectrics wavered off the dial to their fate. "It's real too bad they don't live up to the beer."

Nights were a time neither of us was quite prepared for. Auto courts still existed then, and after parking the Hudson in the garage stall as if putting the horse

in the barn, the two of us had a cabinlike room and all evening ahead. With that in mind, before pulling in for the first night Pop had let me buy my fill of comic books at a drugstore. His own reading preference turned out to be paperback mystery novels, usually with a cover showing a beautiful blonde woman in a bad situation. But we both read restlessly in the unaccustomed company of each other. My head was too full of what-ifs. What if I didn't like Montana, which I had not seen since I was an infant? What if they didn't have a desk for me, surprise newcomer that I was, when I started school? What if I didn't like living with Pop, or he with me? What if he didn't know how to cook? What if he didn't even have a house, just the saloon? What if he had met some woman and I was going to have a new mother; there must be some reason, mustn't there, why he had whisked me from Aunt Marge's after all this time?

Worst of all, what if he changed his mind at some point and delivered me back into the clutches of Ronny and Danny?

It was a boggling amount for a six-year-old to think about, all because the human mystery across the room, who happened to be my father, had appeared like a white-shirted genie in that Phoenix doorway. Somewhere in any of us is the memory of how it was at that age, elbow-high to the almost incomprehensible world of parents. In my case, one newly materialized parent, almost more incomprehensible yet.

After a long enough spell of trying to stick with his book, Pop got up and prowled the room. Television had not yet invaded everywhere, and the radio on the bedstand when he tried it seemed to carry only the fifty-thousand-watt station in Del Rio, Texas, broadcasting lovelorn country songs and constant commercials for quack cures. He clicked that off in no time and went over to his suitcase to see what it had to offer. It appeared he must have packed in a hurry, or maybe not unpacked from some other trip; what I mostly glimpsed were mussed white shirts.

However, he rummaged a bit and came up with more detective stories, and under those, a deck of cards. Arching his eyebrows, he looked over to where I was flipping the pages of a Plastic Man comic book and eating a candy bar.

“You know how to play cards?”

“Sure!”

“Gin rummy?”

“What’s that?”

“How about pinochle?”

“Huh-uh.”

“Okay, cardsharp, you tell me.”

“Old Maid.”

“I don’t have a deck like that.”

“I do! You sent it for my birthday. Along with *My Friend Flicka*, remember?”

“Oh yeah, sure. Aren’t we in luck.” He sighed. “I suppose it beats solitaire. Okay, one game.” He thought it over as I scabbled in my suitcase for the cards. “Hey, if anybody ever hears about this, we played cutthroat poker, got that?”

“Sure! I won’t forget! Cut-rate poker. Here’s my deck, Pop.”

He did the shuffling and dealing, since he was countless years better at it than I was. And here was another strange thing, engraved in memory: time suspended itself as we studied our cards, drew from each other’s hand, took turns discarding, over and over. I see us yet in the dresser mirror of that boxy room, civilly playing cards on the kind of nubbly bedspread used before artificial fabrics came along. My father was a figure to behold, by any standard. The long big-shouldered body, as if the whole world was meant to look up to him the way I did. The skunk streak in his black hair, expressive thick eyebrows just as dark with a

little silvering in them to match. A widow's peak started above the temples, pushed by the forehead's set of lively wrinkles. Deep-set eyes, of a surprising light blue. Eyes the color of sky and active eyebrows can do you a lot of good in dealing with people, and that fit him as if made to order. But it was the lines in his face that told the most about him. History sees to it that certain countenances become visages of an era. Lincoln and Grant and Lee of their time. Mark Twain and Teddy Roosevelt of theirs. The man on that unlikely magic carpet of bedspread with me that night was etched with the 1930s, with that deeply creased survivor's look so many times photographed as the image of the Depression generation. Hollywood further put that kind of face into our national memory by casting its most believably gaunt leading man, Henry Fonda, as Tom Joad in "The Grapes of Wrath." My time-scarred father was no movie star nor was he a Dust Bowl Okie, but his face was a badge of the decade as surely as if printed on a coin.

And the smaller figure in that mirror reflection? My mopheaded self, the early draft of some decade yet unwritten? Other than that shock of hair as stovepipe-black as his, I was not any miniature of my father. Complexionwise, Pop's was merely the washed-out sort that comes from years spent under fluorescent lights, while I had the hopelessly pearly pale skin that generally is found on someone blond, the kind that always sunburns, never tans. Beyond that, my features were more regulation boyish, and for lack of another word, cozy than his rugged ones; Lassie would have licked my face by the hour. Where resemblance was concerned, then, time had its work cut out for it on the boy and the man paired in that mirror.

"That's my last card, Pop! I win!"

"Cripes, just my luck you're such a cardslick." Stuck with the Old Maid, he tossed in his hand, frowned for a moment, then scooped the cards together for a shuffle. "Let's play another one."

Another led to another, and while I did not manage to skunk him entirely, he ended up the Old Maid several times more than I did. At last he let his wristwatch come to his rescue. "Hey, look at the time, we'd better turn in. Tomorrow's another real stretch of road."

He let me choose which side of the bed I wanted, and we undressed. Pajamas were in my suitcase, but Pop got under the covers in his shorts and undershirt, so I bravely did too.

I was too excited to go to sleep, my mind going every which way, the what-ifs still buzzing in me like bees. My father was no example of repose either. I could tell he was laying there awake with his hands under his head. Before very long he sat up in bed and I heard the scratch of a match, and the draw of breath as he lit a cigarette.

I turned on my side, toward him. "Uncle Arvin says people who smoke in bed are sticking their necks out."

"He's a fireman; it affects his judgment."

I stayed the way I was, watching the red end of his cigarette as he took slow drags and expelled the smoke into the dark. "Pop? Can I ask you something?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies." My heart stopped a little at that. The springs creaked as he leaned to tap an ash into the bedside ashtray.

"Only kidding. Ask away."

"Is it gonna be just us? At"--I didn't know what other word to use--  
"home?"

He did not say anything until he had finished his cigarette and ground it out in the ashtray. "We're enough, kiddo. Catch some shuteye."

Goodbye saguaros, hello sagebrush. After the days of our long drive north, the Two Medicine country and its anchoring town were all at once the

world around me, and I had some real adjusting to do. Phoenix had mountains of a kind around it, but nothing like the great high snowy ones of the Rockies that now stretched farther than I could see, to wherever Canada was. Hayfields green with alfalfa, also new to me, were tucked along a wooded creek that wound all the way from the mountains, and white igloo-like things that Pop identified as shepherders' wagons stood on distant ridgelines. And from the sign at the city limits as he slowed the Hudson to a more reasonable speed, I realized that the town I had always heard him speak of as Grow Von was spelled Gros Ventre. I asked why and drew the reply: "It's French, so it doesn't need to make any sense."

I craned my neck at the strange storefronts--a store that called itself a mercantile with rolls of barbwire stacked on a loading dock; another place of business that identified itself as The Top Spot and left it to the curious to figure out it was a cafe; next to that, Shorty's, the smallest barbershop I'd ever seen; what looked like a clothing store called The Toggery; and finally something I could recognize, a movie theater marquee, with ODEON spelled out in bright red letters --as Pop drove along the shady main street, in no hurry now. Halfway through town, he slowed down even more and pulled over. "Welcoming party for you," he said, cracking a grin. I peered over the hood of the car at sheep, sheep, and more sheep, filling the entire street and coming right at us like a woolly stampede.

"Wh-what do we do?"

"Sit tight and think of lamb chops." He explained that the flock of animals stamping their hooves at us was being trailed to the ranch from summer range and the town was used to this sort of thing. In back whooping the sheep along with the help of a busy dog were a stumpy herder who looked like he needed a bath and a longer-limbed man in clean clothes and a good Stetson hat. Under their

push, what must have been a thousand fleecy eye-rolling ewes, the lambs beside them nearly as large and agitated as they were, rapidly surrounded Pop and me where we sat; their stupendous blating sounded as if the sight of us was making them lose their minds. I wasn't really scared, but not very far from it either. As the sea of sheep parted around the car, Pop rolled down my window to call to the long-limbed man. "Hey, Dode! Got the kid, come meet him."

"Keep the sonofabitching old biddies moving, Dan, I'll catch up," the rangy figure yelled to the herder, then came and poked the brow of his hat in the car window. "Huh-uh," he declared after a close look at me. "Been a mistake. Better take him back."

Much alarmed, I shrank far down in the car seat. The frozen expression on Pop didn't help.

Our visitor broke out in a generous smile that had a tooth missing. "How can this one be yours, Tom? He's way better looking than you."

Relieved, Pop instructed me to shake hands with Dode Withrow, sheep rancher and prize customer. "Pleased to make your acquaintance," the ranchman went through with the ceremony as if we were equals. "Randall, do I remember your front name is?"

"Russell," I piped back. "Most everybody calls me Rusty."

"Then I guess I better, too. So, Rusty, are you all set for the derby?"

"He's gonna be," Pop answered stoutly for me while I blinked at this revelation. Thanks to the Wheaties box that Aunt Marge plunked down beside my cereal bowl practically every breakfast of my life, I knew there was such a thing as a soapbox derby, in which Wheaties-filled boys surely no braver than me were depicted scrambling into homemade miniature race cars and letting gravity guide them to glory on a downhill track. How lucky I was! Never mind the what-ifs! I had a father who fetched me all the way from Phoenix to put me in the cockpit, if

that's what it was, of my very own soapbox flyer. I couldn't wait to see the wheeled wonder.

"This old man of yours generally has something up his sleeve," Dode Withrow confided to me with a wink, turning to go. "See you on the big day."

"Why didn't you tell me about the derby, Pop?" I asked, bouncing with excitement.

"How the hell could I, when it's supposed to be a surprise?" he stated with irrefutable logic, putting the car in gear and nosing it through several last panicky sheep, up the street to the Medicine Lodge saloon and all that came with it.

The building we pulled up to was a lot like Pop, taller than ordinary, showing its years somewhat but not giving in to them, and impressively two-toned at the very top, where the biggest black letters I had ever seen were painted onto the whitewashed square front to spell out MEDICINE LODGE. Beneath that in lesser lettering but still about a foot high was: BEER--SOFT DRINKS--FULL BAR AND THEN SOME I was to learn that the triumphant previous owner added that line when Prohibition ended, and when Pop bought the place not many years later, he saw no reason to change the wording.

Wisely, the brass-trimmed doorway below the signs was inset against the weather, while on either side of it department store-size plate-glass windows provided anyone sitting at the bar with a full view of the activity on Gros Ventre's main street, such as a passing parade of sheep. This saloon was already more personable than the Mints and Stockmans of all our toilet stops since Phoenix, and I could hardly wait to go inside. But Pop made no move to get out of the car.

“Kiddo,” his brows drew down as he looked over at me, “there’s something we need to get straight. Did Aunt Marge ever say anything about me and”--he inclined his head toward the saloon--“this?”

I thought. “One time I heard her tell Uncle Arvin that a bartender wasn’t the absolute worst thing you could be.”

“That’s high praise from Marge.” He continued to look at me intently. “What about those cousins of yours?”

“They said stuff all the time. I didn’t listen, honest.”

“Smart use of your ears.” His creased face showed relief for a moment, then he turned serious again. “Okay, here’s the straight scoop. I’m in business here”--he nodded to the Medicine Lodge, and I wouldn’t have been too surprised if it had nodded back--“just like somebody who sells candy bars or jellybeans. Only what I sell has alcohol in it. You know what that is, do you?”

“Sure. It makes people drunk.”

“Too much of it can, just like you can get a bellyache from eating too much candy.” I could tell he was putting every effort into making me understand. “People are gonna drink and have a good time, that’s just the way it is. Even the Bible says so, Jesus doing that stunt with the water and the wine at the wedding, right? But customers who are feeling thirsty don’t need to get out of hand, and I see to it that they don’t. If they want to drink themselves blind, they can go down the street to the Pastime. If they want to have a few snorts in a decent joint, they can come in here.” He turned his eyes to the waiting saloon. “Cripes,” he said more less to himself, “churches are for sinners too. What’s the big difference?” His gaze shifted to me and he cleared his throat. “Follow what I’m saying?”

“I guess so.”

“That’s that, then. Let’s head on inside.”

The joint, as I right away learned to call it, was not yet open for the day, but behind the bar a scrawny man in an apron that fit him like a tent was setting things up for business.

“Hey,” Pop called out as we entered, which seemed to serve as *Hello* and much else in his vocabulary. “Didn’t manage to give the place away to some bigger fool than me, I guess?”

“That would take too much looking,” came the croaky reply. The sparely built part-time bartender gave me, or at least my existence, a bare nod of acknowledgment, then cocked an eye at my father. “Can I trade in this apron for my rocking chair, now that the prodigal has returned?”

This was Howie, bald and cranky and indispensable to Pop for filling in as needed. You can’t run a saloon like a country club, and Howie was an old hand at handling customers of all stripes, having owned a roadhouse and row of cabins during the war when the Great Falls airbase was going full blast. “Howie knows the tricks of the trade,” Pop would say in a certain kind of voice. That became clearer to me when I grew old enough to figure out what trade was plied in the row of cabins.

“Not so damn fast,” Pop told him now, “I haven’t even had a chance to change my shirt yet. Let’s take a look at how the cash register did in my absence.” Remembering me as he rounded the bar, he reached into the pop cooler. “Here,” he handed me an Orange Crush, “entertain yourself while I count the take, okay?”

So, wide-eyed at the new surroundings, I was temporarily left on my own in my father’s prized place of business. “Your old man makes his money off of a bunch of drunk shepherders,” knucklehead Ronny had told me plenty of times. Whatever the quantity of truth in that, at the moment there were none of those on

the premises and the venerable bar room was mine to explore. I still see the Medicine Lodge of that day as clearly as if it were a stage set.

The highly polished surface of the classic bar, as dark as wood can get.

In back of the bar the colossal oak breakfront, as ornate as it was high and long, displaying all known brands of liquor. According to what Pop had heard from the oldest of oldtimers, it had taken a freight wagon usually used for huge mining machinery, with ropes up, down, and sideways, to haul the tall teetery thing; coming across the prairie, it must have looked like a galleon sailing the sea of grass.

A lofty pressed-tin ceiling the color of risen cream. Walls of restful deep green. Original plankwide floorboards as substantial as a ship's decking.

Fake-leather maroon booths along the far wall where only strangers and loners ever sat, and a baize poker table looking a little lost at the absolute rear of the room.

Crowning it all, literally, my father's notion of decor, or as he pronounced it, *dee-cor*: his menagerie of stuffed animal heads protruding from the walls. The buck deer, mostly antlers. The mountain goat and the antelope facing one another glassily. Cougar, bobcat, even coyote, lopped and mounted. The one-eyed buffalo over the front door was particularly dramatic, dark and mangy, a ghostly relic of the great vanished herd of the plains. This wildlife motif achieved a last flourish in the gilt-framed painting dominating the wall across from the bar, a reproduction of a hunting scene by Charlie Russell, the cowboy artist who painted Montana in dreamy sunset colors no matter what time of day. Called "Meat's Not Meat Until It's In The Pan," it showed a hunter in the high country scratching his head in bafflement as he gazed down at the mountain sheep he had shot on a ledge impossible to reach. A good many of the Medicine Lodge patrons had hunted since they were big enough to hold a rifle, and they heaped scorn on the unfortunate in

the picture who had pulled the trigger inadvisedly, always referring to him as The Buck Fever Case. As far as I know, Pop never turned a hair when crude remarks were directed at his chosen masterpiece, evidently convinced the artwork was doing its job, giving the audience something to think about.

Such was the saloon of near-mythic status that stayed substantially the same in the span of time when I went from a half dozen years of age to a full dozen. I would like to say I felt its inimitable atmosphere from that first moment. Actually, all I could think about was a derby-winning soapbox race car waiting somewhere for me.

“Ready?” Pop called to me after he had counted out the take at the cash register. “Done all the damage we can here. Let’s head to the house.”

We were practically there by the time I settled onto the car seat and resumed gawking over the dashboard. The house stood across an alley from the back of the saloon; Pop could walk to work in about half a minute. I still had to get used to the fact that although we were in the middle of town, there were more trees than anything else. Nearby English Creek and its good steady water table accounted for that, cottonwoods growing to such terrific size that Gros Ventre was practically roofed over with leafy limbs. An old giant of the species loomed beside the lofty two-story structure we pulled up to now, the yard white where its seed fluff had drifted down. Pop stopped the car in the dappled shade of the big overhanging limbs. When we got out, he laughed comfortably at the fluff falling on us like confetti and said: “Say hello to Igdrasil.”

I looked all around the yard for a dog or a cat. Nothing barked and nothing meowed.

Then the horrible thought hit me. Maybe Pop had another kid, another version of me, waiting there in the house, that he had spared telling me about until

now. Which meant I would have a brother or a sister to compete with for his affection, to call it that. How was that in any way fair?

I asked fearfully: "Who's--who's Ig-somebody?"

"The tree, savvy?" I watched in relief but still some confusion as he stepped over and patted the enormous wrinkled trunk. "Had a customer in the old days," he shook his head, remembering, "Darius Duff, how's that for a name? He was kind of a political crackpot, but he knew things. He'd start feeling his oats after enough drinks, and one time he got going on Igdrasil, the tree of existence. It's an old Norskie legend, according to him. I can't do his Scotch brogue, but the words stuck with me. Igdrasil," he recited, squinting to get the words exactly right, "the tree of existence. Its roots watered by the fates of past, present and future. Its top reaching to heaven and stirring the colors of the rainbow. Its bower spreading over the whole universe." Looking up at the mighty expanse of green leaves and gray bark, he shook his head again. "When I bought the joint and the house, the biggest tree in town came along with. That's Igdrasil for you," he met my blinking look. "I know it's a headful, but you'll catch up with it someday. Come on, let's see if the house is still standing."

My new home looked as aged as Igdrasil, gray and knotty in its own way. The outside hadn't tasted paint for a good many years, while the interior was well-kept but as oldfashioned as the time it was built, with a dreary parlor and a milkmaid room off the kitchen and those high ceilings of the Victorian era that defied rationale and heating system alike. Perched as it was on a stone foundation of enough height to allow for a dirt cold-cellar where people used to store the canning and potatoes, the house had a cool earthy smell even on a summer day like this.

"So, kiddo, this is it," Pop said as he dumped our belongings at the stairway at the end of the hall and lit up a cigarette. He blew out a wreath of smoke and his brows went up an inch. "Got something for you. Let's go out back."

At last! My reward for waiting through a welcoming party of sheep, an excursion through the saloon, and meeting the king of all trees. Nearly skipping with excitement, I followed him through the dining room and the kitchen and into the backyard. At the end of the driveway sat an old car, long and black as a hearse, but no soapbox racer was parked anywhere that I could see. Well, of course, something that precious would be kept in the garage, wouldn't it. I looked around for the garage. There wasn't one.

"Here you go." Pop reached back inside the porch doorway and pulled out a junior-size fishing pole. "All yours. Now all you have to do is give the fish hell, day after tomorrow."

An awful truth descended on me as I unsurely held the awkward gift. "Is it going to be a, uh, fishing derby?"

He gave me a look. "What did you think it'd be, a Sunday school picnic?"

There is that memorably rueful line in Shakespeare, "*The soldier's pole is fall'n.*" Despite my effort to be stoic, my newfound one definitely drooped.

Somewhat belatedly, I remembered manners. "Gee, Pop. Thanks. Can I try it out?" English Creek chattered past only a strong cast away, if a person knew how to cast.

"Not here," he shook his head decisively, "the creek's too roily. I'll take you to the real place tomorrow. Come on back inside, we need to get you squared away."

I followed him in and upstairs, to a warren of bedrooms; the house went with the saloon, I learned, so the original Medicine Lodge owner must have sired a batch of children. Pop thought for a moment and assigned me a room at the back, farthest from his own at the head of the stairs, so I wouldn't be disturbed when he came in at all hours from bartending. A bedroom of my own eased the

disappointment about lack of a soapbox racer somewhat; at least for now I was under the same roof with my singular father rather than the world's worst cousins.

But I could see his mood change markedly while we were putting away my things. He had a habit of squinting while thinking, his eyebrows drawing together until they nearly met. The deeper the squint, the deeper the thought. Whatever was on his mind now appeared to be bottomless. After kicking my suitcase under the bed--not far enough under to suit me--he stood there facing me, running a hand through the gray streak in the middle of his hair.

"Listen, Rusty," he said, as if I hadn't been all ears since the instant he showed up in the Phoenix doorway. "The joint takes damn near every hour I have, day and night, so I can't be playing nursemaid to you all the time, right? You can stand your own company, can't you?"

"Sure, I guess."

"You don't miss Danny and Ronny?"

"Huh-uh. I hate their guts."

"That's pretty much what I figured." He muttered, "Too bad they didn't run down Arvin's leg."

"Too bad they didn't what, Pop?"

"Never mind. You're here now, that's what counts." He started to say something more, then gruffly broke off to: "Dress warm tomorrow for fishing."

Tomorrow came all too soon. Pop must have believed fish got up before dawn. Cats were just then scooting home from their nightly prowls, eyes glittering at us in the Hudson's headlights, as he drove out of town and onto a gravel road that seemed to go on and on. I was more asleep than awake when eventually he stopped the car. "Here it is. Set your mouth for catching fish."

Groggily I climbed out after him, and Montana opened my eyes for good.

The Rocky Mountains practically came down from the roof of the continent to meet us. The highest parts lived up to their name in solid rock, bluish gray cliffs like the mightiest castle walls imaginable, with timber thick and dark beneath and the morning sky boundless beyond. Canyons, mysterious by nature, led off between the awesome rims of stone. I know now that the clear air and time of day made it all seem so wonderfully near and distinct; in the first morning of the world the light must have been like that.

Such was my introduction to the Two Medicine country, larger than some eastern states and fully as complicated. The Two, taking its name from the Two Medicine River in ancestral Blackfeet land some thirty miles north of town, was an extravagant piece of geography in all directions. The sizable canyon of the river cutting through the eastward plains was joined by a succession of fast-running creeks with generous valleys nicely spaced along the base of the mountains. Benchlands flat as anvils and dramatically tan as buckskin separated these green creek valleys, while to the west, the peaks and crags of the Rockies went up like the farthest rough edge of everything. The Two Medicine National Forest began in the foothills and stretched up and over the Continental Divide, and that forest grazing land and the wild hay in the creek bottomlands had made the Two country a historical stronghold of sheep ranching, with one huge cattle ranch, the Double W, thrown in for contrast. That restless landscape working its way up to the summit of the continent seemed to me then an amazing part of the earth, and still does.

Taking in the view between assembling our fishing poles, having a cigarette, and drinking coffee from a thermos, my father summed up the surroundings his own way. "Nature. Damn hard to beat."

What he was viewing most appreciatively, I suspected, was the body of blue water in the foreground, so big that it stretched around the nearest mountain and out of sight. RAINBOW RESERVOIR, according to the sign at the edge of the

lake. I was to learn that the dirt dam of the reservoir--rezavoy, Pop pronounced it--impounded the South Fork of English Creek, there at the canyon that rounded the towering rimrock called Roman Reef. At the time, it was simply an oversize fishing hole I had been dragged to.

Rocks large enough to stand on lined the inner curve of the dam, and Pop scrambled down to the water's edge, with me following uncertainly. Perching us on a boulder that seemed to suit him, he blew into his hands to warm them and began fiddling with our fishing poles and a bait can. "This is just our secret, got that?" He glanced around even though there wasn't a sign of anyone for miles, then carefully shook out a few of the grayish slimy contents onto the rock and started cutting small strips with his jackknife. "Fish knock each other's brains out trying to get to these."

"What are they?" In what I hoped was the spirit of fishermanliness, I picked one up to examine it, drippy and sort of oozing though it was.

"Chicken guts."

I determinedly did not puke. Close, though. Pop busied himself showing me how to hold the fishhook steady by its shank and work the hunk of icky bait past the barb so that it covered the shine of the hook.

Trying it, I was nervous and stuck myself. I yelped, and tears started.

"Cripes, don't cry," he soothed, getting me to wash the spot of blood off my finger in the frigid lake. "Stick it in your mouth and it'll stop bleeding. Here, I'll bait up for you, this once."

I sucked on the finger and sniffled myself dry, watching as he took up his pole, fussed with the line and reel, drew back and sent the hook and sinker sailing to where the fish were dreaming of chicken guts. "Now you try."

Awkwardly I whipped my pole and the line plooped into the water about six feet from the bank. "That's a start," he commended my effort to the extent he

could. "You want to go a little more easy when you cast, okay? It's not like you're chopping wood."

Another swish, another ploop, maybe seven feet out from the bank this time. And again, no interested response from any fish. I was beginning to get the feeling that progress came slowly in fishing. Not only that, but my hands and feet were cold and the rest of me in between was not much better. Beautiful as the crisp scenic morning was, it would have been even more attractive from inside the car with the heater on.

"Don't sweat it," Pop at least was undiscouraged, "you'll get the hang of it."

Not, as it proved out, before losing my bait every few casts and having to deal with the hook and chicken guts a number of times more.

Something else troubled me: I could accept that the sign was right about this being a reservoir, but the other part I had my doubts about. Any rainbow I had ever seen--Arizona at least had those--needed its distance, an expanse of sky to stretch its band of colors from end to end. Here, though, the way the lake was pressed against the mountains, you would sprain your neck looking overhead for any sign of one. I asked Pop about it, and he just laughed. "It's on the fish, silly. Rainbow trout. The rezavoy is stocked with them."

"Really?" I was more interested now, if chicken guts were going to lead to amphibians with red, yellow, green, blue, and purple stripes. Time passed, however, and cast after cast, with me growing more and more numb and no tug at my line--or for that matter, at Pop's--from any trout, rainbow or otherwise.

Ultimately I was saved by the wind, which kicked up a strong ruffle on the water and made his casts hard to control and mine hopeless. "Well, hell, they aren't biting anyway," he conceded at last, securing his hook into the cork handle

of his pole and doing mine for me. "It just leaves that many more for you to catch in the derby." I shivered from more than the cold as we climbed back to the car.

Back in town, it began to dawn on both of us that my father didn't quite know what to do with me once the fishing poles were put away. So, there I was again, tagging after him as he had to tend to business at the saloon. Howie was doing the same things behind the bar he'd been doing twenty-four hours before, but with a fresh gripe.

"Tom, you're gonna have to do something about Earl Zane. Teach him to read, if nothing else." He jerked his head toward the sign prominent above the cash register: MOSES FORGOT THE ONE ABOUT CREDIT: THOU SHALT NOT ASK. "The no-good son of a bitch wanted to keep on drinking after his money ran out, but I told the prick to--"

"Hey, not in front of the kid," Pop cut him off, just when I was getting interested. At least in my vicinity, my father brought his own rules to the etiquette of bad language. *Damn* and *hell* salted and peppered his remarks to me as well as to everyone else, but he made an effort to swear off, so to speak, the worse words when I was around. *Cripes* stood in for what Bill Reinking, the newspaper editor and the town's acknowledged wise man on matters of language, would have called invoking the Nazarene. And *ess of a bee* I soon figured out was his abbreviated version of *son of a bitch* rather than anything to do with collecting honey. *Bee ess*, on the other hand, baffled me until some overheard conversation enlightened me with the key word *bull*.

Now Howie tucked his tongue in his cheek to keep from saying anything, which nevertheless made all the statement needed about protecting my tender ears, and resumed his bar chores. Pop meanwhile was scooping unpaid bills from a drawer by the cash register. "Come on in the back while I'm busy being busy with

these damn things," he told me as if he saw no other choice. "You can help me count the booze."

I had never been in a museum, but the colossal back room of the Medicine Lodge immediately fixed that. The two-story space was like some enormous attic that had settled to the ground floor under the weight of its treasures. Ranch things were everywhere, most with the dust of time on them. Saddles, bridles, pairs of chaps, sets of harness--one entire wall was leather items of that sort, as if the horses had just left. Automobile jacks and tires neighbored with the equine gear. Elsewhere, axes and shovels and even a sledgehammer shared space with softer goods such as bedrolls and bright yellow rainslickers and hats of the Stetson sort. A guitar leaned against a pile of well-traveled suitcases. I couldn't help but notice a clutch of fishing poles poking up in one corner, in with some longhandled crookheaded things that proved to be sheephooks. As though one floor wasn't enough for it all, the room had a loft--doubtless the haymow in the early days when this extensive space had been the stable behind the saloon--and lighter items such as lariats and hay hooks, like the kind stevedores used, hung from the rafters there.

"Wow," I let out, open-mouthed, "where did you get all this?"

"All what?" Pop asked absently, shedding his suitcoat but not his bowtie as he prepared to deal with the month's bills. He followed my gaze around the menagerie of items. "The loot?" he half laughed. "It accumulates. See, customers don't always have the ready cash when they want a couple of drinks. Or maybe need bus fare to somewhere, or are in the mood for a better pair of boots or a new hat. So," he shrugged and lit up a cigarette, "I'll take whatever they bring in, if it's any use. Maybe they get it out of hock eventually and maybe they don't. After long enough, I sell it off, a bunch at a time." He contemplated the motley collection again. "Some of the stuff goes way back, long before me. An old Scotchman

owned the joint for a lot of years, in the early days. They say he knew every nickel about life, and he's the one who started taking things in when cash was short. Kind of comes in handy eventually, doing it that way." Tobacco smoke wisped over him as he stood there thinking out loud. "Gonna have to lay down the law to Earl Zane, though. He's dumber than a frozen lizard. You got to watch out for people like that, kiddo," he philosophized to me. "Hell, if the ass of a bee is short of money, he's got those belt buckles he won riding at rodeos when he was a bronc punk. Hold up his pants with one hand and drink with the other--it'd be good for him." Laughing the way he ordinarily did, quick and sharp like exclamations, he climbed the stairs to his checkwriting chore.

I followed him, because this was the next sideshow attraction of the back room. The stairs to the loft were interrupted halfway up by a long wide landing, and there Pop had his desk and a table and other office requirements, as if staying above the tide of stuff below. I thought it was a sensational perch, and I didn't yet know the best thing about it as I gawked around from up there: a sizable air vent was cut through the wall at one end of the desk, and all of a sudden, the sound of Howie smashing ice behind the bar came through clear as anything. It took me hardly any time to figure out that when the vent's louvered slats were open like that, a person could hear everything--and see everything, by peeking--that was happening out front in the bar room. No wonder my father had the reputation of being the lord of all he surveyed, if he could do it secretly whenever he wanted.

He dropped the stack of bills to pay and his checkbook on the desk and turned around to me. "The deal is, you're gonna count up the booze for me, right?" His forehead furrowed. "You do know how to count, don't you?"

Anything above ten was a challenge, but I didn't want to appear as shaky at arithmetic as I was at fishing. "Sure! I do it all the time."

“Okay, then, see those cases down there?” They were hard to miss, stacked halfway to the ceiling along the side wall. “Count each kind and call it out to me. Start with the beer.”

That was the next scene for awhile, me scrambling around the boxes of alcoholic beverages and out of his way while he sat there at his lofty desk tackling the financial chores. That image of him with his clattery adding machine and fountain pen and checkbook I suppose sounds as quaintly manual now as a monk with an abacus and quill and scroll, but calculators then were still the human sort cranking out sums up there on the landing and, to a lesser degree, the six-year-old one laboriously enumerating the pyramid of booze down below. Starting with the beer--the vast majority of it Great Falls Select; the beverage of the Selectrics!--I would count the cases twice to make sure I had the number right, call out the total to Pop, he would say “Got it” and write it down somewhere and go back to his calculating, and I would move on to the next brand of intoxicant. It was educational. Booze was a new word to me, and toward the back of the pile, I was thrilled to find included with the bourbon and scotch and all the rest a case of Orange Crush, proof of my father’s discriminating taste. The thrill diminished somewhat when I counted the Coca Cola, six cases, but I still ended up happy to have been entrusted with the inventory.

“All done, Pop.”

“Okay, swell job,” he responded without looking up. “Keep yourself amused a while, I’m not done writing these damn checks yet.”

“Can I have some booze?”

“What? Hell no!” He scowled down from the landing, until he saw me disconsolately tracing a finger along the carton of orange pop. “Oh. Sure, help yourself to a crushed orangutang.” He tossed me an opener.

Bottle of sweet sticky soda in hand, I circulated through the maze of things, eager for discoveries. One that puzzled me was tucked behind a stack of spare tires and covered with a tarpaulin, several tool boxes identically new and shiny. Still in my counting mode, I asked: "Why are there so many of these?"

Fanning a check in the air to dry the ink, Pop glanced over at what I'd found. "Never mind. Pull that tarp over those like it was."

"But there's"--I had to think hard to remember what the number is when you have ten and two more--"twelve?"

"The customer was a dozen times thirstier than usual," he said blandly and went back to what he was doing.

I kept on prowling the wonders of the back room. Propped against the wall where the rainslickers were hanging was a sizable wooden sign standing on end. Pushing aside the curtain of coats and turning my head sideways, I managed to read the big lettering: BLUE EAGLE. Between the words, in fading paint, a fierce-looking sky-colored bird swooped as though it meant business.

"Pop, how come the eagle is blue instead of eagle color?"

"Hmnh?" The adding machine was coughing out a long result, which he waited for before answering me. "That's the name of the joint, is all."

"I thought it was the, uh, Medical Lounge."

"Not this one," he replied crossly, setting me straight about the Medicine Lodge and that the other joint was somewhere he'd been way back when, long before I entered the world. "That's another story," he said, which told me he didn't want to be pestered further about it. Getting up from his desk, he straightened his bowtie and shrugged into his suitcoat. "Come on, let's mail these damn bills and grab some lunch."

# →

Derby Day was a repeat of the circumstances Pop had introduced me to at Rainbow Reservoir twenty-four hours before: brilliant weather, matchless scenery, and chicken guts.

What was decidedly different, though, was his method of getting us there. This time when he gathered fishing poles and bait can and thermos and so on, he headed not toward the Hudson but to the old car parked at the far end of the driveway. Trying to get my bearings on a day that was strange enough already, I asked: "Does it run okay?"

"Hell yes," his reply sounded a little hurt as he tumbled our gear into the back seat. "It's in topnotch shape."

That may not have been too far from the truth, I saw when I drew closer to the lengthy black vehicle. I learned it was a 1932 Packard, its characteristic hood nearly as long as the four-door passenger compartment, which looked like it could hold a baseball team. Up close, there was a certain old-fashioned elegance to the car, from its gleaming grill and white sidewall tires to its outsize headlights mounted on fenders that swooped all the way back to the running board at the doorframe. "How come you"--I corrected that as I circled the automotive behemoth--"we have two cars?"

"The Packard still has its uses," he was busy unfurling something, "you'll see. You don't get rid of a good thing just because it's got a little age on it, right? I've had it since Blue Eagle days, up at Fort Peck." I took in this news with some confusion. My father had been at a fort? But didn't he tell me the Blue Eagle was his joint back when, like the Medicine Lodge? That did not seem to go with being a soldier, especially if another possession in those days was the biggest, fanciest car I'd ever seen. He was not about explain anything further, though, cheerfully going at the task at hand. "Here, help me with this banner."

Accordingly, I held one end of a large oiled-cloth banner while he tied it across the car's extensive trunk. Twice a year, it developed, the Packard attained this kind of starring role, this time with the banner reading: THE MEDICINE LODGE SUPPORTS THE GROS VENTRE FISHING DERBY. CATCH 'EM TO THE LIMIT! The other occasion was rodeo time, when it was prominently parked in front of the saloon bannering the message: THE MEDICINE LODGE SUPPORTS THE GROS VENTRE RODEO. RIDE 'EM TO THE WHISTLE!

"There," he said in satisfaction, standing back with his hands on his hips. "Ready to go. People get a kick out of seeing the old heap. Besides, it never hurts to advertise."

So we went to the rezavoy in what Pop regarded as style, and joined what appeared to be the entire populace of the Two Medicine country at the water's edge. Setting off toward what he assured me was the best spot on the lake, he was right at home in the festive throng, meeting and greeting people in wholesale numbers, looking like a million dollars in his dress hat, a pearl-gray stockman Stetson, while I felt out of place in my dumb cloth sunhat from Phoenix. Headgear was really the least of what was on my mind, though, in this looming situation of me versus what appeared to be every kid in Montana ready to compete for mysterious rainbow fish.

Churning with apprehension as he assembled my pole for me, I listened distractedly to his recital of the fishing contest rules. He could bait my hook for me in preparation for the initial cast, but after that, "It's up to you, kiddo. Remember how I showed you to bury the hook in the bait so it looks good to the fish." Then when I caught a trout--a prospect I wasn't at all sure I looked forward to--I would have to land it myself, but he could help me take the hook out of its mouth because "sometimes it gets snagged so hard you need to tear it out with pliers." There were prizes in each age category for catching the biggest fish and the most fish. "Two

shots at packing home the money, you can't beat that. Ready? Let's go give the fish hell."

First we had to sign up, atop the approach to the dam where a truck was parked with a loudspeaker crowning its cab. White water was gushing picturesquely through the floodgate just beyond, and the sky could not have been more blue. As Pop and I approached the registration table, the announcer on the flatbed of the truck boomed out, "WELCOME TO THE ROD AND REEL EXTRAVAGANZA YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR, THE SECOND ANNUAL RAINBOW FISHING DERBY!" as if just for us. The woman who took the entry money and pinned a number on my back seemed considerably less hospitable for some reason, eyeing me and then Pop as if to make sure we matched. He didn't seem to pay that any mind, kidding with the announcer and the Chamber of Commerce organizers of the festivity who were standing around looking important. The civic side of my father was complicated, as it can be in a town where everyone knows everyone else's business. For example, he would not have anything to do with the Rotary Club. "Not until the asses of bees quit stealing money out of my pocket with that beer booth of theirs." The Kiwanis and Toastmasters, younger strivers hoping for a station in life higher than a saloon, were not sure they wanted anything to do with him. Leave it to Pop, he sorted it all out without blinking: he had no argument with commerce, nor it with him, so the local Chamber received his wholehearted backing.

As now, when he steered me past the army of adults attacking rainbow trout with rod and reel to the stretch of lakeshore reserved, according to the banner flapping in the breeze, for JUNIOR ANGLERS. Boys my age or a year or so younger, and a sprinkling of girls, were being stationed far enough apart that we wouldn't spear one another with our fishpoles during energetic casts. Pop got me settled in my spot, slipped me the bait can of chicken guts cut into gooey strips, told

me again to give the fish hell, and retreated up the bank a safe distance where other parents were clustered. My mind was a whirl. *Second* annual extravaganza; why wasn't I plucked from Phoenix for this a year ago? Another nettlesome thought: if it wasn't for the fishing derby, would I still be--

I did not have time to dwell on that, because the announcer's voice was booming again. "AND NOW WE COME TO THE SPECIAL FEATURE OF THE DERBY, THE CONTEST WHERE THE KIDDIES SHOW US HOW IT'S DONE. READY, JUNIOR ANGLERS? GET SET...START FISHING!"

Hooks and lines swished through the air at all different altitudes, and the tips of more than a few fishing poles dunked in the lake, mine included.

A pause ensued, as those of us who had thrashed bait into the water wondered what to do next, beyond hanging on to the fishing rod with both hands, while the grownups shouted conflicting advice--"Try a longer cast!" "Keep your hook in the water, not in the air!" Stealing a peek over my shoulder, I saw Pop standing with his arms folded, the picture of patience, confident that the secret bait would lure fish in my direction in a frenzy. Even though my line sagged out into the lake only a little way, I decided to let it sit there. The breeze had picked up--it would have been news when the wind wasn't blowing at Rainbow Reservoir--so I didn't want to risk another cast; the fish could jump ashore if they wanted chicken guts badly enough, as far as I was concerned.

To my surprise, suddenly there was a sharp tug on my line. I yanked my pole up and back as hard as I could, the hook and line sailing over my head in a mighty arc. But no fish. Worse than that, I realized, no bait.

"Hot damn, they're biting!" Pop yelled encouragement. "Don't horse it like that, though, just pull the next one in real easy. Bait up and go get him."

During this, the boy nearest me had actually landed a fish. "Way to go, buckshot!" His father, a chesty man with a red face broad as a fire bucket, came

charging down the bank to unhook the catch and gill it onto a stringer. The trout was a good size, but I was disappointed to see it was not striped like a rainbow, merely brightly speckled on the sides. As both of us faced the challenge of baiting our hooks, I said to the chunky kid in sportsmanlike fashion, "Nice fish."

"If you like something slimy as snot." He made a face. "I hate fishing, I wish it had never been invented." Narrowing his critical view of things to me, he demanded: "Who're you anyway?"

I told him, which drew me a beady look and the remark, "Huh, you're that one. My daddy gets a snootful in your daddy's saloon when Mom isn't looking."

"Uhm, what's your name?"

"Duane Zane." He smirked. "I don't take up much alphabet that way, my folks tell everybody." By now he had shaken little doughy pellets of some kind out of a bait can and was jabbing his hook through one.

"What're those?"

Duane smirked again. "Pink marshmallows. My daddy says they're our secret weapon." Before I could even blink, he picked up his pole and whipped the line, *whizzzz*, over my head and into the lake.

Gulping, I managed to bait my hook with a sloppy bit of chicken gut and get everything into the water again. As if I didn't have enough on my mind before, now the holy terror next to me already had another bite and was sidestepping in my direction as he tried to haul the fish to shore. It was then that the wind strengthened, and somewhere down the rank of junior anglers from Duane, a gust caught a line being weakly flung out and blew the hook back onto the boy making the cast. He screeched and threw his pole aside, unfortunately toward the kid next to him. That one panicked too, and I gaped at fishpoles toppling like dominoes toward Duane and myself, with lines and hooks flying crazily. Busy trying to land his catch, he glanced down in irritation when a hook caught in his sleeve, yelped

when he saw what it was, and yanked his pole so hard the fish flew off and his hook flew at me. I yowled as it caught my ear.

Pop was right there in the stampede of parents to tend to aggrieved children. "Don't get in an uproar," he told me, cutting the fishline with his jackknife and tilting my head so he could see how the hook was embedded. I had quit yowling, but the tears of fright and pain would not stop.

During this, Duane Zane seemed mostly put out that I was in possession of his fishhook, but his father hovered in, full of advice. "Push it on through and snip the barb off, why don't you, Tom?"

Pop shook his head grimly. "It's caught too hard." Now I was so scared I couldn't even whimper, thinking of pliers tearing the hook out of my ear the way it would from a fish's mouth. At least, it turned out, Pop was not going to do it himself, saying he had to get me to town to the doctor.

He drove the gravel road at high speed, the banner flapping madly behind us, while I hunched down, a picture of misery at least to myself, against the passenger door. Neither of us had anything to say until he asked:

"Doesn't hurt, does it?"

"Yes."

"Okay, okay, we'll get you to the doc in no time." And the Packard somehow picked up even more speed.

His day off interrupted, the doctor was gruff, as if someone else's fishhook sticking in my ear was my fault. Sighing at what people get themselves into, he sat me on the examining table, numbed my ear with something, used a needle-nosed instrument to maneuver the hook out, dabbed some Mercurochrome on my wound, and told me I was as good as new. There wasn't even any blood in sight, which I have to admit disappointed me.

As we went home, Pop tried to make me feel better by telling me about worse things that had happened to people in his experience. Unloading our fishing gear in the driveway beneath the bower of Igdrasil, he paused when I still hadn't said anything.

"The ear still bothering?"

"Huh-uh."

"What's the matter then?"

"Are you going to send me back?"

"Where? To Phoenix?"

"Uh-huh."

"What for?"

"The derby's over. And I didn't catch anything, I got caught."

We looked at each other for a long moment, pretty much a life's worth as it turned out, before he muttered: "What kind of an ass of a bee do you think I am?" The fishing poles clattered in his grasp as he headed for the house, motioning me on in. "School starts Monday, we need to get you some pencils and tablets and junk like that." At the back door, he stopped and looked at me again, his eyebrows cocked.

"Kiddo? About today--the fishing and all. Don't sweat it. You'll show them how, next year."

So, my suitcase stayed under the bed and I stayed on as half-pint participant in the world of my bartending father. He and I occupied the house behind the saloon like a pair of confirmed bachelors, rattling around in the big old place by ourselves except when the cleaning woman came and moved the dust a little. Having learned his lesson about housekeepers, Pop employed Nola Atkins for this, who was seventy-five if she was a day. Otherwise, the two of us were free to go about domestic matters in our unrestricted male way. Actually, the house was where we slept and kept our clothes. We lived at the Medicine Lodge.

“--the guy looks over at her in bed when they hear her husband come in downstairs and says, ‘Can you cache a small Czech?’ Get it, Tom? The c-a-c-h-e kind of ‘cash’, see, and he’s--”

“Can’t help but get it, Earl. You rich enough for another Shellac or do I have to cut you off?”

“How would you feel about a silver inlaid belt buckle, on account?”

“On account of you’re broke again, you mean? Let’s see the damn thing.”

The Medicine Lodge did not have a monopoly on the drinking trade in Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country, but close enough. The main competition, the Pastime Bar at the other end of town, was, well, past its time; rundown, erratic in its hours, gloomy, smelling a little funny. And the lounge bar across at the hotel had the hereditary failing of its kind, lack of pep. This meant that besides the jackpot of Saturday night crowds-- "Saturday night buys the rest of the week, kiddo" was one of Pop's favorite pronouncements--the singular saloon with FULL BAR AND THEN SOME added beneath its name drew a day-in day-out traffic of steady customers. This imbibing community, to call it that, which showed up in my father's venerable place of business was mainly wetting its collective whistle now and then as people have done since time immemorial, exchanging gossip or talking just to be talking. The back-and-forth that whiled away time and its concerns, of which those last years of the 1950's held their dire share, as usual in human history. The familiar voices would start up in the late afternoon when Earl Zane slipped in to swap a joke barely worth telling and whatever was loose on his person for a series of beers before his wife appeared to drag him back to their gas station. To be followed, more often than not, by gray-mustached Bill Reinking on the way home to supper after putting in his day as editor, star reporter, and linotype operator of the Gros Ventre *Weekly Gleaner*.

"What you have in your hand looks like just what the doctor ordered, Tom, bless you."

"It's the best scotch in the joint, comes in a bottle and everything. The world going to hell enough to suit you?"

"It keeps me in business, alas. Any juicy news in here I can hold up to the light of day?"

And in the clockwork of human habit, no sooner would Bill Reinking be out the door after his single drink than Velma Simms would sail in for hers. By the

nature of things, the Medicine Lodge was a watering hole for men, just as the beauty parlor down the street served as a social oasis for women. This particular customer did not treat that as a fact of life; quite the contrary. Her husky voice never varied as she headed for her usual booth. "It's that time of day, Tom."

"Funny how that happens about now, Velma." Pop did not quite treat this patron as if she was radioactive, but it approached that category. She'd had four or five husbands, and her history of divorce settlements and alimony scared the daylights out of every man in town. Velma was around Pop's age, so the chestnut hair surely had help from the drugstore, but in tailored slacks and a silky blouse she still drew second looks. Her custom was to nestle into the booth, instantaneously get a cigarette going with a flash of her silver lighter, and begin riffling through her mail, in all probability on the lookout for alimony checks. Pop meanwhile mixed a G-ball, conscientiously using a decent bourbon and opening a fresh ginger ale so the drink wouldn't taste flat. After delivering it to the booth, he would retreat all the way behind the bar before initiating conversation.

"Been anywhere?"

"Hawaii. Waikiki Beach isn't what it used to be."

Those regulars and others, early birds before the saloon became fully populated for the evening with ranchers on their way back from tending sheep camp, tourists on their way north to Glacier National Park, fishermen who had tried their luck at the reservoir, seasonal hunters hoping to do better than the Buck Fever Case on the wall, state highway crews on perpetual maintenance jobs, construction workers passing through at the end of their workweek on the Minuteman missile silo sites starting to dot the northern plains of Montana, roughnecks who maintained the donkey pumps and storage tanks of the minor oil field south of town, hayhands from the big Double W cattle ranch, local couples treating themselves to a night out, sheepherders in for a spree; if the ocean ever

comes back to the Rockies, archaeologists of that time can dive to the site of the Medicine Lodge and determine how a segment of mid-twentieth-century America assuaged its social thirst.

I absorbed every bit of this, because thanks to the father I happened to have, the joint became something like my second parent.

“Got an idea, kiddo. Let’s cross our fingers and toes it’s a good one.”

Things happened fast around Pop. After my rescue from Phoenix and induction into fishing and all else, I had been in school barely a week before he concluded that our household, such as it amounted to, needed serious adjustment. He had been smart to start me in Gros Ventre when he did; in the first grade everyone is a new kid, the ABCs see to that. Thus school itself was no big problem, if I didn’t count Duane Zane snickering at my wounded ear until he grew tired of it, but after school was another matter. That time of day and on through the evening was when the Medicine Lodge did most of its business and Pop had to be there to maintain the level of bartending that made the saloon’s reputation, leaving me to the sparse company of the empty house and Igdrasil the tree. Even as inexperienced as he was at raising a kid, it evidently didn’t feel quite right to him for us to see each other only at breakfast, supper, and after closing time at the joint. Which is why he reached the decision that needed fingers and toes crossed. He announced it as usual, with a puff of smoke.

He stood there outlined in the doorway of my darkened bedroom, bowtie loosened against white shirt, the next-to-last cigarette of the day--one of my worries was that he continued to smoke in bed just as if Uncle Arvin the fireman never existed--aglow between his fingers. Already it was a ritual between us that I would snap awake when I heard him come in late at night and as soon as he finished in the bathroom I would call out, “Is that you, Pop?” and he would answer something

like, "No, it's the Galloping Swede." The notion of Montana's immigrant Governor, Hugo Aronson, galumphing in on Scandinavian size-fourteens to use our bathroom would set me off into a fit of giggles, and Pop would lean against the doorframe a minute and ask me what I'd been up to since supper, which was seldom much beyond listening to the radio and reading comic books until my eyelids drooped. After a little of that exchange, he would say, "Let's catch some shuteye--don't let the ladybugs bite" and tread down the hall to his own bedroom.

So I grew even wider awake than usual this night as he hung on there in the doorway, squinting and smoking, and started talking at length.

"It gets kind of lonesome over here by yourself so much, I bet."

"Maybe just a little."

"Not that you aren't doing real good at getting along on your own, don't get me wrong."

"Mmm hmm."

"If I could be two places at once, we could do some things together. Go fishing after supper and stuff like that."

"That'd be, uh, nice."

"But I can't, can I. Be two places at once. It wouldn't work even if I was Siamese twins."

"Uh-huh."

"So here's my thinking," his forehead furrowed with it. "I don't dare let you be in the bar room when the joint is open, the state liquor board would nail my hide to the wall if they caught us at it," he spelled out his decision probably as much for his own benefit as mine. "But I see no reason why you can't be in the back room some when I'm busy out front. After school and maybe until your bedtime. How's that grab you?"

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My face must have lit up the dim bedroom, because he added in a hurry: "That don't mean you can run wild back there. You have to behave yourself around the hocked stuff, it's like money in the bank for us."

"I won't hurt any of it, I promise."

"There's something else. The air vent." His eyes locked onto mine. "You know what I'm talking about, right?"

"Uh-huh." Who could forget, how sound from the bar room came right in through it, clear as a whistle, when he was at the desk busy being busy with bills and checkbook.

He took a drag on his cigarette, still looking hard at me. "I know you're gonna listen in to the bar talk, there's no getting around that. You're liable to hear some rough language--"

"That's nothing, Ronny cussed all the time."

"--and that's my point, I don't want you picking up the bad habit." I shook my head vigorously against the possibility of that ever happening. He had a further thought. "If you're playing around up there at the desk and the vent's open, just don't make any racket and disturb the inmates," meaning the customers out front. "Savvy that?"

"Sure!"

Hesitating a moment, he drew a deep breath that had nothing to do with smoking. "I've got to trust you back there, Russell." It was the first time within memory that he had used my given name.

"I'll be good, Pop. Honest!"

"Okay, kiddo, we'll give it a try." He turned to go. "Don't let the ladybugs bite."

#

I still marvel at the sheer guts, blind faith, thick skull, whatever it took to install an impressionable kid in the back room of a saloon that way. What dramatist could come up with a more predictable setting for trouble? A father, distant in age and much else, married only to his bar room. A son, by some design of fate he is too young to understand, left on his own just the other side of the perforated wall from that enterprise of peddling drinks to all comers. You can see it happening, a version of "Our Town" with a buzz on, Pop as the Stage Manager stationed at the beer spigot while I brooded on the behavior of humanity drinking its sorrows away. By all the rules, this situation promised deeper, darker consequences for both of us than if my father had been selling, say, life insurance instead of liquor.

There was one problem with the predictability of that scenario. I fell in love with the back room of the joint from the first possible moment.

I could scarcely believe my good fortune—<sup>cruddy</sup> Phoenix was ~~never~~ <sup>the farthest thing from</sup> like this!—in being allowed to spend hours on end at that comfortable desk perch on the stair landing, reading comic books or building model airplanes or following the misfortunes of the Selectrics in the Great Falls *Tribune* or letting my imagination wander through the ever-growing collection of hocked treasures piled below. And of course, most of all, listening at the vent, silent as a ghost. Any kid is a master spy until that talent meets itself in the mirror during the teen years and turns hopelessly inward, but life could not have arranged my surveillance of the grownup world more perfectly. From the bar room side, the air vent high on the rear wall wasn't even noticeable amid the stuffed animal heads, but there in the back room that same slatted metalwork grill close by the desk was almost like a <sup>absolute</sup> radio I could take a look into and have each scene come to life. I needed only to stretch my neck a little to peek through the vent slats when the street door whished open and a customer appeared, and see and hear everything as my father lived up to his reputation as the best bartender imaginable, his shirt and apron crisp as table

linen, his black bowtie lending an air of dignity, his magical hands producing a drink almost before it was thought of, his head tilted just so to take in whatever topic was being introduced on the other side of the bar. The reliably contrary weather of the Two Medicine country? "Sure enough, it's all gonna dry up and blow away if we don't get some rain." The storms of the human heart? "She did that to you? No bee ess?" Philosophy needed after some grievance against fate? ~~"All you can count on in life is your fingers and toes."~~ ~~"You got to play the hand you been dealt in this life."~~ And if a known face came in not saying much of anything, I could count on hearing "Hey, you look like you need a Shellac," and then the <sup>whish</sup> ~~snick~~ of a bottle cap coming off a Great Falls Select, <sup>being drawn from the beer tap</sup> and the sounds of Pop puttering patiently until this set of vocal cords, too, was oiled enough to reward the waiting ears, his and mine.

I know, I know; the listening bartender is a standard character, probably ever since Chaucer. But Pop filled the role so completely, those years when I was the eager but secret audience behind the vent, that the Medicine Lodge became the repository of lore in much the same way as material items piled up in the back room collection. Sooner or later, everyone has a story to tell, and <sup>his</sup> ~~Pop's~~ tireless towel rubbing up a special sheen in front of a customer seemed to polish the opportunity. If it wasn't Dode Withrow in from the ranch with yet another tale about one sheepherder or another quitting for the twentieth or thirtieth time, it was one sheepherder or another there on a barstool drinking up his wages and recounting like the other half of an old married couple Dode's shortcomings as an employer down through the years. If it wasn't absolute strangers <sup>relating</sup> ~~telling~~ Pop's things which sent <sup>Pop's</sup> ~~his~~ eyebrows climbing, and mine, it was the afternoon regulars contributing their share of episodes as well. Earl Zane's <sup>sagas</sup> ~~stories~~ of himself tended to be blowhard accounts of rodeo bronc riding during which he seemed never to have been bucked off. If the mail happened to be short of alimony checks, Velma Simms might have a second drink and begin dreaming aloud about her latest

cruise of Greek islands, through seas if not wine-dark at least ginger ale highball-tinted in recollection. Bill Reinking with his newspaperman's memory often harkened back to the 1930's, the testing time of his and Pop's younger years; Pop kept an old election poster of Franklin D. Roosevelt taped to the mirror beside the cash register in tribute to the President who pulled the nation out of the Depression. And even I, underage occupant of the 1950's, could feel the close breath of history when Turk Turco, the state highway maintenance man, would relate something hair-raising from his time as an infantryman in Korea at Pork Chop Hill, and his buddy and arguing partner, the Montana Power lineman Joe Quigg, would match that with the sobering memory of the mushroom cloud shrouding the Pacific sky when he served in the Navy during the hydrogen bomb tests in the Marshall Islands. The voices of the vent still seem to me so vivid, so distinct. It is a sensation I even yet find hard to describe, how those overheard stories kept me occupied, in the truest sense of that word, taking up residence within me like talkative lodgers in the various corners of my mind. As ~~Pop would~~ <sup>bachelor</sup> ~~the father who was doing his crossed-fingers best~~ <sup>to raise me</sup> have said, I didn't lack imagination in the first place, and I certainly had no shortage of it as the clandestine eyewitness--or earwitness--to the variety of life as it passed through the Medicine Lodge.

"Pop? Did you have to bounce anybody?"

~~the big question as regular as~~ <sup>(the minute)</sup> ~~the Saturday night question, as soon as~~ I heard him in the hallway. Weeknights, regular as clockwork he would break off anything he was doing in the bar room, serving drinks or negotiating with a customer wanting to hock something, to step into the back room when it was my bedtime and if I was still there, ritually shoo me home. Saturdays, though, his busiest night, I had to evacuate to the house right after supper--"Just to keep the decks clear, kiddo"--and spend those evenings wondering what I was missing at the saloon.

"Relax and get your beauty sleep," he usually answered, tired after his long night behind the bar, "nobody got out of hand." Usually.

The price of my cherished private spot in the back room was a pair of nagging thoughts that would not go away, no matter how I tried to put them out of mind. I will come to the other one soon enough, but my first concern was that Pop served not only as bartender and proprietor and all the other lofty jobs of the saloon, but bouncer as well. This was tricky, since it almost always involved someone who'd had a drink too many. If asked, Pop would have pointed out that people have been getting intoxicated since the first ripe grape dropped on Adam and Eve. To him, Prohibition was the dumbest thing ever tried, resulting only in bad bootleg booze. But the Medicine Lodge had a reputation to maintain as a respectable joint, and he did not tolerate what he called squirrely behavior. "Hey, this isn't the Copabanana," he would directly warn anyone growing too loud or just plain sloppy drunk. Persist, though, and the offender would be told in no uncertain terms to tone things down right then or <sup>clear</sup> get out. Every once in a while this ultimatum would put the balky customer in a fighting mood, and if he could not be talked into taking it outside, Pop would have to throw him out. The first time I happened to witness this through the vent, scared to watch but too thrilled to look away, I held my breath as he came out from behind the bar, his apron still on and not a hair out of place in his silver-striped pompadour, and got hold of a drunken and combative oilfield roughneck. In nothing flat, the guy was in the street; you did not argue the point with Tom Harry.

As soon as I saw him bounce that unwelcome customer, though, the what-ifs swarmed. Suppose the guy had been carrying a knife? A gun? What if he had been an ex-prizefighter mad at the world who could have beaten Pop's brains out? What if things really got out of hand some Saturday night, always the drinkingest night of the week?

When I confessed that I worried about his role as bouncer, Pop seemed surprised. "I'm not selling milk to kittens, am I. Don't bother your head with it."

Mostly, I did not have to, the majority of the evenings of the week when I was across the alley there seated at what I regarded as my rightful place, with the familiar sounds from the bar room sifting in through the vent. The click of washed glasses lining up on a shelf. The release of metal and air when a fresh beer keg was tapped. The *ching* of the cash register. Much like being backstage while the theater came to life out front. But all you can count on in life is your fingers and toes, right? The script changed mightily for both of us when the page was turned from one decade to the next and the curtain went up on 1960.

"Can't I go with you this once, Pop?"

"You sure as hell can't." Bent over like a bear in a berry patch, he was rummaging through the hocked items piled along the walls of the back room, selecting things, rejecting things. "Get that idea out of your head before it leaves a puddle, okay? Cripes, you'd have to miss some school."

Which was one reason why I wanted to go, of course. I knew it wouldn't do any good to argue the point. This was the other worry I carried through those years, these periodic trips of his to sell off some of the back room loot, as he jokingly called it, when he would park me with Howie and his wife Lucille while he was "away on business" days at a time. He always went alone, so that part did not surprise me now. This abrupt journey, though, was right after New Year's, a time of year when I thought we were safely settled in for the season, maybe for many frigid months. Out the top of the frosted back window, I could see Igdrasil's spreading branches humped with snow from the unusually hard winter we were having.

"You didn't tell me you were gonna do this again."

"Yeah, well, things come up and need something done. Rule number one is ~~never~~ wait until you hear from heaven."

*don't*

I didn't <sup>not</sup> like being caught by surprise this way. Except for times like this, Pop and I by now knew each other's habits blindfolded. Our nearly six years together had taught me that when he said "Maybe" it meant "No," and when he said "We'll see" it meant "Maybe." When I asked him in those nighttime conversations in my doorway how the day's take was, if he said "Not bad" that meant good, but if he said "So-so" that meant bad. He could sound gruff--no, wrong, he could be gruff--but I had grown used to that, just as he'd had to become accustomed to my tendency to get carried away by matters. He generally coped with any of my thorny questions about life by giving some vague answer that ended with "That's the how of it," while I always wanted the five W's and an H--Who, What, When, Where, Why, and then the H. <sup>How</sup> If I persisted, he might say "Don't be a plague of locusts" or he might sigh and provide some actual W's. It depended.

At various levels, then, there was give and take between us, maybe more so than in some supposedly normal households. When it occurred to him, he taught me things for their own sake--I was probably the only kid who could tie a bowtie at the age of six--and I figured out for myself certain habits that made our life easier, such as fixing my own lunch for school, generally jam sandwiches. I suppose with only each other to count on, reciprocity was a necessity. Whenever I had a school project I needed help with, he leapt to it as if I were an Einstein in the making, and whenever he took a notion to go fishing at Rainbow Reservoir on a summer Sunday, I fished loyally alongside him for as long as the chicken guts held out. True, we occasionally could get on each other's nerves--those ironclad habits of his did not always coincide with my own--but off again just about as fast, luckily. In short, we probably were as used to each other as two people can get. We ate, slept, and went about life as suited us; one of Pop's middle of the

night hallway pronouncements was, "I don't give a flying fig what anyone says, ~~with what we got to work with, myx~~ we're not doing too bad at this, kiddo." We weren't, until right now.

If I couldn't go on this alarming trip of his, my brand of logic told me, then he shouldn't either. "Pop, it gives me the creeps. What if the car runs off the road and you freeze to death? The radio says there's another big snowstorm coming."

"Let 'er come, I was here first," he said stoically.

"Aw, crud, though," I switched complaints trying to find one that would work, "can't you at least take the other car?" The successor to the Hudson was a Buick we called "the gunboat" for its series of stylized chrome insets in the lengthy hood like portholes. ~~he~~ he liked substantial cars--but parked in the alley waiting to be loaded was the old Packard.

"Naw," he wrestled down a saddle from the wall collection and added it to the growing pile of stuff. "Like I told you before, the old buggy holds more." That was unarguable; the Packard's roomy back seat and big trunk had probably the capacity of a small truck. Pausing to catch his breath, he checked on me where I was slumped at the desk on the landing to see how genuinely worried I was. Reading me like an open book, he sighed. Pop could really sigh, what I came to think of as the sigh of ages; like the expelled breath of time itself. If that isn't in Shakespeare, it ought to be. "Don't get all worked up," he followed that with. "Canada is real good about keeping the roads open." The fact that many miles of blizzardy prairie lay between Gros Ventre and the Canadian border did not enter into the matter, apparently. "I'll be back before you know it."

Fat chance of that, my long face said. Why did he always have to go to Canada for this anyway? Why not simply sell the stuff off in Great Falls, a safe few hours away? Every time I pointed this out, I was told I didn't understand back-room commerce.

“Come on, cheer up.” He cocked an eyebrow at me. “Tell you what, I’ll bring you a plane kit. What was that you wanted?”

“A Spitfire.”

“Easy done. Figure out where you’re gonna hang it.” Suspended by fishing line from the rafters above the stair landing and the loft was the swarm of other plane models I had assembled, from his other trips. With the least stirring of air in the back room, the P-39 Airacobra fighter plane and Grumman Avenger torpedo bomber and others danced in little aerial duels with the hanging lariats and hay hooks, an effect I liked. Pop was standing under the swaying aircraft, mentally calculating his load for the car in a way that told me he was mostly done. Mostly.

“Okay, I’m about ready to hit the road.” Looking up, he saw me still morosely watching. He frowned the way a person does when trying to be super patient. “Don’t you have schoolwork to do?”

“Arithmetic, is all. My book’s at the house.”

“Just make sure to get at it. Numbers aren’t as easy as pie.” I have since wondered whether he actually meant pi or not; it was never easy to know how much to read into him. <sup>9</sup> He gave me another serious look and made a shooing motion. “Go get yourself some supper at the Spot.”

“Can’t I help you load?”

“Go get yourself some supper,” he repeated as if I hadn’t heard him the first time. “Howie and his missus are ready for you, these next couple of nights.” One last look of that kind and he said, as I expected him to, “Don’t put beans up your nose.”

I smile now at his usual proscription against doing anything foolish. At the time, though, I was too busy nursing my grievance to appreciate it. By then I was very nearly twelve, as I liked to think of it even though my birthday was months

off, an age when notions can come into a person's head as fast as chain lightning and it's hard to tell which of them are crazy or not. This particular conviction had been growing in me since the first big snowstorm, on Thanksgiving day: I was convinced we were in a thirty-year winter.

That was not to say that I expected the deep snowdrifts and below-zero temperatures gripping the Two Medicine country to last for the next three decades, like a meteorological version of some medieval war that hopelessly went on and on. No, when Pop and the Medicine Lodge denizens spoke of a thirty-year winter they meant such a hard one that came once in a generation, seasonlong weather disasters that stood out in history. The cattlemen's winter of 1886, when the open range was dotted with cow carcasses by the tens of thousands when spring finally came. The sheepmen's winter of 1919, when ranchers' haysleds had nothing to offer starving animals but measly slewgrass. The snowbound winter of 1948, when airplanes dropped medical supplies to communities cut off from the world by impassable roads. <sup>Tales</sup> Stories of those last two still were told and retold in the Medicine Lodge every time a siege of freezing weather set in. Not only did I hang on those sagas at my listening post at the vent, but there was always something like the <sup>twangy</sup> daily exchange between Turk Turco and Joe Quigg, as to which of them had it worse in this kind of winter.

"You in here warming your insides already, Turco? It must be nice to be on a state pension."

"Try running a snowplow for twelve goddamned hours when you can't even see the goddamned side of the road and then tell me if it's the soft life, Jojo."

"Hah. Try hanging forty feet off the ground in the goddamned wind with the goddamned snow in your face."

Every such morsel fed my imagination, my conviction that this was a monster winter which still would be exclaimed about--"Back there in '60, it'd

single photo