

Suddenly I wondered. That slight stiffnecked turn of Del's head, as if to let in what he deigned to hear. Taking advantage of that to shuffle sideways a few feet, just past the corner of his eye, I experimentally snapped my fingers.

Del showed no response, although Pop showed plenty. Eyes narrowed and voice low, he directed me:

"Do that again."

I instantaneously did, with the same result.

"Hmm? Do what?" Inquisitively Del looked around at Pop, then at me. There was no mistaking it, he had missed my finger snap both times.

"Delano," Pop was saying in the deadly tone he used on drunks who had to shape up or ship out, "am I right that you don't hear so good?"

Del drew himself up against that implication, or at least tried to. "What makes you think that?"

Hard stares from both of us were his answer.

I have to say, his confession was wrenching to watch as well as to listen to: you never saw a guy look so guilty of something not of his own doing.

"All right, now you know. I'm deaf in that left ear," he said miserably. He rubbed a hand tenderly across it as if trying to feel the lost sense of hearing. "A lacrosse accident, when I was about Rusty's age. It broke the eardrum."

"Then why in all hell are you in a line of work where you have to catch every word people say?"

"Tom, this may sound paradoxical," he launched into desperate explanation, "but--what I *can* hear, I *really* hear. When a person is sitting on the other side of the microphone from me, I don't miss a thing, I absolutely don't." From the look of him, everything in Delano Robertson, ostensible oral historian, strained to make this understood. "It goes deeper in me than just catching some nice turn of phrase, I can *feel* the language making itself. It's, it's the words,

yes, but the history they draw from takes me over in almost a kind of trance when people tell me their lives in their own way. An instinct kicks in, it seems like, and I know what to ask, how to keep them talking, what will draw them out.” He spun his hands in front of him as if trying to get traction on the notion. “It’s hard to describe, but when I’m collecting people’s stories, there’s always that feeling I’m capturing more than what’s being said. A kind of sixth sense of how much *else* there is, in back of the words.” Stopping to read our faces, he weakly imitated Canada Dan: “I hope that’s clear, ain’t it?”

Give Pop full credit; he did not tell Del a bartender hardly needed a disquisition on the art of listening. Nor did he suggest the equally obvious, that a person with a hearing loss might seek to compensate for it the same as someone with a voice like a bullfrog would take up blues singing. He stuck with the heart of the matter.

“Whatever you’re hearing in your head doesn’t change the fact you’re half deaf and going around trying to make talk with people.” He locked eyes with Del. “That’s why you want me to be your bird dog at the reunion, isn’t it.”

“No, honestly, Tom, that’s only the least part of it.” Del’s voice shook. “You and the Blue Eagle are absolutely up there at the front of people’s memories of Fort Peck, I wasn’t putting you on about what an institution you were. I mean, *are*. The reunion really needs you, it’s not just me.”

Pop squinted at him as if trying to believe what he saw. “Before you tie yourself in any more knots, let me ask you something. Why don’t you just settle for a nice office job back there at oral history headquarters, instead of beating your one good ear against the situation this way?”

“I wouldn’t last half an hour.”

“Why’s that?”

“The phone.” Del pantomimed the problem. A right-handed person like him, to dial and be free to write and so on, naturally held the receiver in the other hand, to the left ear; he couldn’t hear if he did it that way. “They’d spot that in an office right away.” He drew a finger across his throat in the slitting motion.

“That’s why I have to make it as a collector in the field.”

“You’re like one of those spy stories,” Pop said grimly. “Every time anything clears up and halfway makes sense, some other damn thing comes along.”

During this, Del sent him a silent look of appeal, and I admit I added an extra-strength one of my own. If rummy old shepherders couldn’t be left in that awful place of predicament, the lurch, how could he abandon poor one-eared Delano Robertson to it? He couldn’t let that be on his conscience, could he? Could he?

He withstood us in silence as long as he could. “Lay off while I consolidate my thinking, okay?” he snapped. “Rule number one is don’t rush into things.”

I wasn’t letting him get away with that. “Are you sure, Pop? I thought it was, you got to play the hand you been dealt.”

He gave me a darkly furrowed look. Followed by one at Del. “Cripes, why couldn’t you have two good ears instead of getting yourself hit in the head by some goofy kind of stick?”

“Actually, I’ve asked myself that,” Del said delicately.

“For starters,” Pop now reeled off as if in an argument with himself, “Fort Peck isn’t just a hop, skip, and jump from here, it’s way to hell and gone across the state. And there’s two half-pint actors with their hearts set on me taking them to a certain play in Valier at the same time, right, Rusty?”

I would like to say I instantaneously and bravely made my decision. In reality, for the longest few seconds I went back and forth like a swinging gate

before deciding. Lady Bracknell would have to prevail without me. "Zoe can ride with Bill Reinking. I want to go with you and Del to the mud thing reunion."

No sound followed that except for the rain drumming on the roof, accompaniment of the summer. Del tensely watched the two of us, his good ear slightly turned our way. Looking like he badly needed a cigarette, Pop lit one and proceeded to growl his way through any number of reasons not to go to Fort Peck--the howl Earl Zane would send up about postponing the sale of the saloon, the howl from Howie when he was tapped for bartending without any notice, the howl customers would put up when they came into the Medicine Lodge to lay eyes on its nationally famous bartender and he wasn't there, and so on.

Finally running out of growls, he took one last exasperated drag on his cigarette.

"The hell with it, let them howl. If it'll make the two of you quit looking like kicked puppies, we'll go gab with mudjacks."

As Pop would have put it, anyone with a brain in their cranium grasps what a lumberjack does. And it's no great mental feat to figure out a steeplejack even if you've never seen one climbing the peak of a church. But a mudjack? If Fort Peck was the damnedest dirt dam in all of Creation as he said, why weren't its builders called dirtjacks? Perched restlessly in back of the two very different heads in the front seat that midweek morning while Del drove the Gab Lab at no more than the speed limit even on long empty stretches of the highway--surely the only vehicle in Montana behaving so--I asked just that.

"Use your thinking part, kiddo." Still growly about the trip, Pop took the question as if he had been waiting for something to do besides watch grainfields go by too slowly. We'd had to pile ourselves and everything else into the van even earlier than on a fishing trip, and dawn found us heading east on the plains with the mountains of the Two Medicine country already slipping from sight behind us. The day came bright and washed after the latest deluge, but besides constant wheat and occasional farmhouses crouched behind scrubby trees planted as windbreaks--Igdrasil would have stood out like a redwood in this landscape--there was not much

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to look at. Boring as the geography was, I attached plenty of meaning to it. Somewhere not distant in the gray prairie to the north was the start of Canada, scene of those trips of his that had driven me wild. Were they really over, with the back room accumulation to be dealt with somehow? I would have to worry about that some other time, right now the lesson of the day was as basic as dirt, according to his tone of voice.

“Say you wanted to take one of those buttes,” he was squinting into the distance toward the only landmarks anywhere around, the Sweetgrass Hills rising like three Treasure Islands on the horizon, “and use it to dam up the Missouri River. What’s the slickest way to move that much fill?”

“Uhm, lots and lots of trucks?”

Wrong, his expression told me, not even close. “You’d be trucking for a hundred years. Naw, what you want to do is add water,” he said as though mixing the simplest drink. “Dredge up the soil, turn it into mud, a kind of slurry anyhow, and then pipe the stuff to wherever you want it. Dump enough of it and guess what, you’ve got a dam.”

Okay, that explained mudjacks enough for me. But he wasn’t through. Shifting around as though the passenger seat and for that matter the Volkswagen van was too small for him, he lit a cigarette, already his third of the day, and blew smoke as if letting off steam. “I bet you didn’t know Fort Peck had the biggest dredges ever built.” This tidbit of information was provided as if for my benefit, but doubtless for that of the straining listener in the driver’s seat as well.

“Every piece of machinery on those mudboats was the biggest of its kind,” we heard next. “Just the cutter heads alone stood higher than the feather on a tall Indian.” He smoked and spoke very quietly, apparently drawn back in spite of himself to that time of making a mountain of mud and moving it. Del, hands tight on the steering wheel, looked agonized at not being able to write this down.

“Those things took a real bite out of the riverbank at a time,” the dredge tale went on, “a whole hillside would be gone before you could give it a second look and you’d wonder where the hell it went to. Then way down at the end of the pipeline,” he flourished his cigarette toward the horizon until the ash was about to drop, “you’d see this brown geyser shooting out, and mudjack crews all over the dam like an anthill that had been stirred up.” He paused with timing any actor would have envied. “It was quite the sight.”

Was this great or what? Boats in the middle of Montana with teeth huge enough to eat hills. Geysers of muck adding up to the biggest dam on the planet. My very own father right there witnessing the mudjacks at their muddiest. I was back on top of the world. The magnitude of Fort Peck in <sup>his</sup> Pop’s telling of it gripped me the way the notion of a thirty-year winter had, and Zoe’s magical presence in the back room, and the selection of the <sup>Medicine Lodge</sup> joint as the most pleasurable of all the saloons in the state, and <sup>family</sup> Pop’s fame in newspapers far and wide, and Delano <sup>Robertson</sup> Curtis arriving in a cloud of sheep, the entire cascade of this one-of-a-kind year; the idea of outsize life, the feeling of being present as things happened way beyond ordinary in human experience. I suppose it was something like a mental fever, the headiest kind to have. Ever since Pop consolidated his thinking there in the hallway of the house where my finger snap still echoed, my imagination and I knew no limits, and there is no spell more dizzying at twelve or any other known age.

Besides, as Zoe would have said, the Zanes didn’t have their weenie hands on the Medicine Lodge yet. Temporary luck was better than none, right?

Now Del in his bushy-tailed way began asking Pop about this, that, and the other at Fort Peck. Crouched there with the van’s cargo stacked almost against my hip pockets, I listened for all I was worth. It was up to me to tell Zoe everything that happened, just as she had vowed to give me the full report on *The Importance*

of *Being Earnest* and Mrs. Reinking's crosseyed bit, so I nearly stretched my neck into the front seat when Del all of a sudden popped out with:

"Is it true you built the Blue Eagle in one day?"

Pop snorted. "Where did you get that haywire idea?" He couldn't help looking rather pleased with himself, though. "I had the floor laid in one night, is all. There was a family of honkyocker farmers by the name of Duff, they were working fools. Three of them hammered all night until their arms about dropped off, and I was serving drinks by breakfast time."

"How enterprising of you," Del enthused.

Pop shrugged. "You got to take the chance when it comes. Hey, is this as fast as this crate will go?"

"Hmm?" Del speeded up the van fractionally. He himself kept going full-tilt at trying to find out about everything back there in the Depression years; even his crewcut seemed to be standing at sharper attention now that he had Pop talking even the slightest bit about the Blue Eagle. I was burning up to ask the question that I for so long had wanted to, but did not get the chance before Del switched to:

"Do you mind telling me, Tom, why you left Fort Peck before the dam was finished?"

Pop took so long to answer that I thought he wasn't going to. Finally he said, "It was time." He was back to being <sup>rough as a rasp</sup> growly. "Every winter was colder than an Eskimo's butt, for one thing. And in the summer, you'd fry." He shook his head. "Nature had it in for the place, bad."

"Yes, but you were right in the middle of so much that was happening," Del sounded wistful, "all that history being made."

"What the hell, aren't we always?"

And that was that, for anything worthwhile about my father's experience at the damnedest dirt dam of all time.

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We reached the dam before I fully realized it. I was expecting something as grand as the Egyptian pyramids, rising against the sky, as mighty as eternity. But Fort Peck stretched across what must have been a gentle valley between high bluffs, and all that caught the eye at first was an immense sheet of water that met a very broad grassy slope, like a glacier stopped by a rise of the land. As we drove down from the west bluff, though, I saw the fantastic gush of water way down at the foot of that rise, the entire Missouri River discharging out of a tunnel--I may have been imagining, but the air seemed to tremble from the force of that white torrent as we drew nearer--and there was no mistaking that the earthen bank of the dam simply was so huge it seemed a natural feature of the landscape.

Del drove onto the dam and a considerable distance across to a wayside overlook where we could get out and stretch and have a look around. There on the world's biggest dike, even Pop, I <sup>believe</sup> think, climbed out like a pilgrim at a fateful shrine.

It still was quite the sight, all these years after a much younger Tom Harry saw the mud start to fly. A mountain's worth of boulders lined the entire water side of the four-mile length of the dam, and the whole piece of engineering was staggering to think of, the heavy lid of rocks and gravel pressing down on what had started as the mud fill, to compress everything into place and hold back the biggest river of the West. The sparkling lake, picture-perfect with circling white pelicans gravely looking down their long beaks at the water below, was like Rainbow Reservoir magnified uncountable times. I could see now why the people who built this would proudly come back to it, even if my reluctant father had to be taken by an ear--Del's deaf one--to join in the mudjacks reunion.

"It's really <sup>is</sup> some rezavoy," Pop <sup>he</sup> sounded as if he wished he were here to go fishing, looking at the water stretching for miles before it disappeared beyond

more bluffs. He shifted his gaze to the extent of the dam and the huge spillway off in the distance, shaking his head as though the sight was hard to believe.

“Wasn’t any of this here when I came in ‘33.”

Del took the chance to ask: “How old were you then, Tom?”

I came alert, ready to do the arithmetic.

“Old enough to know better and too young to resist.” And we could tell that was all the answer there going to be.

As the three of us gazed around from the overlook, my curiosity about something else finally burst. “Where was it, Pop?”

“Where was what?”

“You know! The Blue Eagle!”

He gave me a dodgy look, which was not at all the answer I wanted, until Del jumped in to my support. “I was going to ask if Rusty didn’t.”

“If it isn’t one of you, it’s the other,” Pop grumbled. “I thought there was a law against double jeopardy.” However reluctantly, he squared around toward the high bluff we had driven down and pointed halfway up the slope. “Okay, see that wide spot in the road? You’re looking at the town of Wheeler. The highway was the main drag and there was a whole lineup of saloons, mine”--he stumbled slightly on the word--“right smack in the middle.”

Where there was nothing but bunchgrass and tumbleweeds? I let Del ask the next. “What happened to the buildings?”

“Torn down or moved,” came the curt response. “I bet we saw plenty of them on the way here--chicken coops and tool sheds.”

I couldn’t contain my dismay. “Even the Blue Eagle?”

“It was big enough to make a nice barn, kiddo.”

Wheeler’s fate of disappearance, Pop went on to tell us, was also that of the town of Idlewile. And of Parkdale, Park Grove, Midway, Valley, McCone City,

Lakeview, Willow Bend, Delano Heights, New Deal, Square Deal, and Free Deal, all of the workers' shantytowns that sprang up at the dam site in the 1930s like Hoovervilles with paydays. Del and I hung on his every word as he described how twenty thousand people lived any crazy way they could while the wages lasted, in tarpaper shacks and drafty government barracks and any other kind of shelter that could be slapped together and called housing. It made the life of Two Medicine shepherders seem luxurious.

~~"Enough of that," Pop broke off the story of the shantytowns all too soon.~~  
~~"We better get to getting, Delano."~~

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Carried away by a sense of the occasion, however, Del insisted on taking a picture before we budged from the dam and went scrambling into the Gab Lab to find his camera. He had to squirm in from the front seat through the space where I'd been sitting, because the back of the van was so loaded with our cargo, and we could hear him grunting as he shifted things around to reach the camera. "Do you think we brought too much?" I worried to Pop. "He doesn't have any room in there to get his recording stuff ready."

"Unless mudjacks have changed," he said without concern, "there's no such thing as too much. Delano will have to fend as best he can, it'll be good for him. This'd all be easier if he wasn't as green as goose crap." Edgily he walked to the railing of the wayside, peered over to the water, then grimaced toward the van. "I wish to hell he'd hurry up. This spot gives me the willies. It slid, you know."

I knew no such thing, which was becoming chronic where Fort Peck was concerned.

"This part of the dam gave way in '38," Pop impatiently enlightened me. "Killed eight mudjacks in the slide." He indicated the boulder-banked slope down to the lake. "It happened before they got the rocks onto it, this was all fresh fill, and a quarter of a mile of it along here slipped loose and slid into the rezavoy." He

“Help me with something Tom,” Del asked as if stumped on his homework. “From everything I’ve been able to find out, the town of Wheeler had no shortage of saloons. The Buckhorn Club, the Wheeler Inn--”

“Yeah, and Ed’s Place, and the Bar X,” the recital seemed to improve Pop’s mood. “The Dew Drop Inn, terrible name for a joint. The Mint and the Stockman, you can’t have a genuine drinking town without those.”

“--yet the one that sticks in people’s minds is the Blue Eagle. How in the world did you win over so many customers against so much competition?”

Pop actually smiled a little. “Easy as pie. I took the front door off its hinges, first thing.”

Del looked as if he hadn’t heard that quite right, but I knew I had and I still goggled.

“Word got around fast that the Blue Eagle never closed, day or night,” Pop spelled out. “*Couldn’t* close, no door, see? Three shifts were running on the dam, around the clock, so we had guys coming in from midnight to dawn as well as all day long.” From the glint in his eye, this was one satisfying memory of Fort Peck. “Eventually I put the door back on and closed the joint late at night like a sane person, but that didn’t matter by then.” He shrugged. “You get the right kind of reputation, Delano, and you’ve got it made.”

The other two of us could have heard more and more of his secrets of success, but he broke the discourse off all too soon. “Enough of that. We better get to getting, or we won’t be ready at the damn reunion.”

shook his head. "They were lucky the whole thing didn't go, or it'd have drowned out every place from here to St. Louie."

The vision of the biggest dirt dam of all time, which we happened to be standing on, turning into the biggest flood of all time definitely made an impression on me. Gulping, I asked:

"Wh-where were you when it happened?"

"Where would I be? Slinging drinks in the Blue Eagle."

"Found it!" Del sang out, brandishing the camera and motioning for us to stand together at the outer edge of the dam, which I would have been happier to do if Pop hadn't mentioned the big slide. He <sup>held still</sup> impatiently posed for the photograph--it shows one of us big-eyed as a puppy for whatever the day would bring and the other looking like he was about to have teeth pulled; you can guess which was which--but the instant the shutter was clicked, he had us into action. "Let's go to the government burg and look around," he directed Del, and we headed back to shore.

The little town carrying the Fort Peck name had outlasted all the others by housing the federal workers who tended the dam and its powerhouse, and it appeared determined to make up in neat identical streets of houses for the notorious messiness of the shantytowns. Lawns blazed green, like swatches of a golf course. Besides those spotless neighborhoods there was a tiny business section that Del cruised us into. Old hotel, post office, gas station, grocery store--the store had a big fresh sign saying ICE!

"Pull in here," Pop spoke up. "It's time to give your expense account some exercise."

Del parked and none too willingly pulled out his wallet.

“Give Rusty, oh, <sup>twenty</sup>~~fifty~~ bucks,” Pop instructed, “that ought to do it.” He turned to me and told me the plan. “Delano, better go in with him to help carry it.”

Del balked. “The Library of Congress <sup>powers that he don't</sup> ~~doesn't~~ like odd expendi--”

“What they don't know back there won't hurt them. Call it emergency rations.”

It was my turn to balk. “What if the store person doesn't want to sell that much?”

“No sweat,” Pop waved that off and instructed me on how to handle matters inside.

Repeating over and over to myself what I was supposed to say, I advanced toward the store with trepidation, <sup>==</sup> this was not like doing a bit when Zoe was the only audience. Beside me, Del looked as uncertain about this as I was.

The storekeeper glanced up as the pair of us shuffled in. “How do, fellows. What can I get for you?”

“Hi.” Nervously I spread the money on the counter, my voice squeaking as I ordered up:

“All the ice you've got, please.”

Startled, the man behind the counter asked, “What are you going to do with it all?”

“I'm, we're from the Boy Scouts. This is our troop leader.” Del did vaguely look like that in his semi-safari shirt and tan pants. “We're selling pop to raise money for the big Scout Jamboree that's going to be at the dam, and our cooler tipped over on the way here and everything melted, and now we need all the ice you've got. Please.”

“Funny I hadn't heard about any big jamboree,” the storekeeper pondered that. “When's this?”

“Labor Day weekend?”

The thought of a horde of hungry thirsty boys as customers across a three-day weekend made him sit up and take notice. Still, he questioned our purpose a bit further. “What’ll this pop money you raise be spent on, exactly?”

“We need tents. Lots of tents.”

“Dozens,” Del unexpectedly put in.

“Hundreds,” I adjusted his nice try.

The storekeeper rubbed his jaw. “Gee whiz, I sure hate to run out of ice this early in the day, so many people coming to the dam get-together and all. But if it’s for a good cause--”

Del and I stacked bags of ice in every available nook and cranny of the van, with Pop supervising. “Drive down to the boat ramp,” he directed next. There, he opened up the first of the cases of Great Falls Select stacked solid in the back of the van and dragged out the washtub brought along for this purpose. Professionally he iced the tub of beer with a number of bags of our monumental and stowed some in reserve. purchase. The rest of the ice, he had us dump in the lake. Looking satisfied for the first time all day, he told Delano: “Get your apparatus ready. People are going to want a tall cool one, and when they do, we nab them.”

In the next little while, mudjacks began arriving to Fort Peck as if they had come up the river to spawn. The reunion site was a riverbank park with picnic tables and scrubby windbent trees that provided mere spots of shade, and that, too, proved to be part of Pop’s plan. He’d had Del unfurl the camper van’s awning that was supported by a couple of aluminum poles and set up his table and tape recorder squarely beneath it, then supplemented that with a big tarp fastened onto the awning and stretched to the nearest couple of trees. The result was a nice sizable patch of shade, and the three of us hung back there in the cool shadow,

watching cars pour off the approach road and park in the bunchgrass in a mass of glittering windshields and hoods and fenders polished for the occasion, and people in their good clothes climbing out and greeting one another like long-lost relatives. We viewed the handshaking and backslapping and general camaraderie of the reunion until Del grew antsy.

“Ah, Tom, I do want to get as many interviews as I possibly can, so hadn’t I better begin??”

“Not until the hats start to come off.”

“The--?”

Very shortly it became evident what Pop meant. Those in the crowd who remembered what Fort Peck was like on a summer day wore straw cowboy hats or other ventilated headgear. (The three of us had on the best loose-weave Panamas from the back room.) Those who had been less mindful sweated in Stetsons and fedoras, and they were the first to start lifting their lids and wiping their brows.

“Okay, let’s get at it,” Pop granted, and we sprang into action. He and Del lugged the loaded beer tub from the rear of the van to a prominent spot in the shade of the tarp while I started setting up some folding chairs that had been gathering dust in the Medicine Lodge back room. When those were in place, Pop briskly brushed his hands and turned to the waiting two of us.

“Remind me, Delano--which one is your lame ear?”

“Hmm? The left, why?”

“Keep the good one closest to me so you can hear and try to act like a normal human being, is all. Rusty, just come on along and don’t say anything, got that?” He squared his bowtie and set his jaw. “Come on, let’s go highjack mudjacks.”



I wish I had adequate words for the performance that followed. He sifted into that Fort Peck crowd, meeting and greeting old customers not seen for more than twenty years, swapping remarks about how time flew, and in that gathering on that day my father was treated as if he was parting the waters of the Missouri River. "Tom, how you doing?" man after man greeted him joyously and he would smile a little and respond with something like, "Still teetering and tottering." No question, the practically Shakespearean newspaper story accounted for some of the regard that enveloped him, fame finding its mark for all to see, but what Pop was experiencing went much deeper than that, I am still convinced. As we trailed in his wake like pageboys behind royalty, Del kept slipping me a grin that said *Didn't I tell you he's a living legend?* And that was openly true, for the people assembled here no longer were fledgling dambuilders escaping the Depression for a night out in a boomtown saloon, but middle-aging husbands and fathers who saw in a familiar white-shirted bowtied figure with eyebrows knowledgably cocked a vision from when they were young and unmarred by what lay ahead of them in life. Memory does that, unerring as a spotlight. I noticed Pop didn't seem all that displeased with the attention that followed him through the crowd, either, but he dispensed with it as if he were on business in back of the bar, staying on the move until, over at the edge of the throng, he spotted a lanky man in bib overalls and an old gray fedora.

"There's your first victim," he murmured as Del strained to hear. "Hey, Musically Challenged," he called out, "how's the world been treating you?"

"Tom Harry, or I'm seeing things!" The bibbed man and Pop swatted each other on the shoulders until Pop managed to step back out of range and bring us in for introduction. "Delano, Rusty, meet Curly Atkins."

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“Used to be, anyhow,” Curly told us with a forlorn grin, lifting his hat to display a bald head. Providing Del a handshake that seemed to startle him, our new acquaintance began talking a blue streak. “Son, you’re packing around the best name this side of the Bible. If it wasn’t for old Roosevelt, I’d still be living out in the tumbleweeds and eating gophers.” Then it was my turn for a startling handshake while Curly expanded the conversation to Pop. “Tom, you old son of a gun, you sure bring back the memories. Remember the time that drunk Swede grabbed that milk-blond taxi dancer, what was her name anyhow, and tried to drag her up onto the bandstand to sing with him? You threw him out halfway across the street, dang if you didn’t. Came back in with most of your shirt tore off and told us, ‘Play ‘Roses of Picardy,’ get people to dancin’ again.’”

I gaped at my father. Bouncing an objectionable customer halfway across the street was not news. But people danced in the Blue Eagle? Whose very same owner would not permit so much as a jukebox tune in the Medicine Lodge?

“That’s another story, Curly,” Pop <sup>coagled that away</sup> cleared his throat, “but what Delano here would rather hear about is something like when the dam slid. You were mudjacking that day, <sup>don't I remember</sup> were you?”

“Whoo, you know I was. Right there on the top of the dam when the ~~god~~damn railroad tracks started to bow and the ~~god~~damn ground turned to jelly right under my--”

“Hold it,” Pop suspended the narrative. “See, Delano has come out here all the way from Washington, D.C., to collect stories like that from the old days” --Del was almost nodding his head off ratifying that--“and so you’d be doing the world a favor by telling this into his tape recorder.”

Instantly Curly dried up like a prune. “Aw, I’d be kind of bashful about doing something like that.” He looked around as if for rescue. “Besides, the

fellows and me are gonna see if we remember how to play music at all. I better be getting at that. Been nice visiting with you.”

Looking stricken as Curly made his escape, Del started to call after him but Pop beat him to it.

“You know what, though, it’s gonna be kind of hot playing music out in this sun. If it was me, Curly, I’d get myself ready with a nice cold Shellac over there in the shade while Delano asks you a few things about the big slide.”

Curly halted practically in mid-step. “Now you’re talking.” He turned around to Del. “Where’s this little piece of heaven?”

We watched Del eagerly usher him to the Gab Lab, with Curly already talking a mile a minute again. I asked Pop, “Does he really play music?”

“Yeah, with the Melody Mechanics. He’s guitar.”

My hand still was feeling that handshake. “He’s only got three fingers.”

“Sure,” he shrugged, “that’s how he made his musical reputation--Three Fingered Curly.”

Obviously there was a lot to learn about what went on in the Blue Eagle. But I didn’t have time to pursue that because Pop kept on the move picking out people to steer to Del, murmuring the names to me as faces fit his memory. “Cece Medwick from the boatyard, yeah, he’d be good....Taine, he was the diving-barge boss, he’d have a lot to tell about the slide...Chick Siderius, naw, he was always a management stooge...Hey, there’s Ron and Dola, they’d be just what Delano wants. They ran a cafe, more like a hash joint.”

“What was it called?”

“What do you think, the Rondola.”

All too soon, he sent me scooting off to keep the beer tub filled while he sorted through the crowd for further mudjacks to send over. Before long, quite a gang of them was bunched around that tub and the only ice anywhere to be found,

and if these had been Missing Voices, they weren't by the time they had a couple of Shellacs and sat down under the Gab Lab awning one after another to be interviewed by Del. I have to say, I was amazed at him. He was working at high speed, yet somehow managing to draw the best out of each Fort Peck veteran. As ~~Del~~ had tried to make us understand, his bad ear didn't matter when the person was seated across the microphone from him because he listened with all of himself, from intent brow down his whole body which at times would be practically doubled up with anticipation and other times would be thrust back in his chair at the wonder of what was being said. Throughout it all he made nearly silent clucks of encouragement between dealing out questions <sup>cannily</sup> perfectly attuned to whatever was being said, the five W's and an H taken care of in the most natural kind of way. Maybe he was doing a bit each time or maybe it was just Del, but whatever the topic, he radiated such keen interest in the person in the interview chair that I almost wanted to jump in and start talking into his microphone myself. Besides that, he <sup>turned out to be</sup> ~~was~~ a whiz with the tape reels; when the little counter on the recorder, like the odometer on a car, hit a certain number, he was there in a flash with a fresh reel, threading it on so quickly I would have bet he had practiced blindfolded. Even the safari shirt proved itself, pockets producing batteries to keep the recorder rolling and old clippings about Fort Peck to help jog memories and labels to slap names onto the reels and other supplies that kept things rolling smoothly. If only Zoe had been there to applaud his performance properly with, "Swift!"

I listened all I could between making runs of Select to the slushy tub; listened entranced to the mythic Thirties coming to life, little knowing that the Sixties would echo the same way someday. The interviews as conducted by Del were like jazz, or, yes, the blues; riffs of memory in a language all their own. So I learned that Fort Peck's populace had been such working fools that even the barbers wore bib overalls, and shantytown living conditions were so barny you'd

half expect to wake up in the morning next to a horse, but that never stopped married couples from pouring foundations in the dark--I figured out this meant making babies happen--and a job at the dam was as welcome as Christmas because when the eagle laid--payday--a person so broke he was dragging the ground would at last have some cartwheels--silver dollars--to rub together. And over and over, it was said that the day of the big slide, you'd have thought Hell was afloat and the river rising.

What is it about human nature that dwells on close calls? As Del and I hung on their tales, the mudjacks almost to a man had stories of terror when the face of the dam slid, of riding the pipeline down the avalanche of mud as if on the back of a dragon, of being pulled from the island of mud and debris, of narrowly escaping drowning before the rescuers could get there. I listened with shivers, especially as they all said in one way or another that if the dam had broken, it would have been the damnedest flood ever.

But that was what this day was for, those memories, those stories. Del was in his element and the mudjacks were in theirs and the reels of tape ran and ran, the voices becoming permanent echoes of a certain time, a certain place, a rediscovered *lingua americana*.

Eventually Pop showed up with another fresh supply of mudjacks, listened for a few minutes, then signaled me with a jerk of his head. "That ought to hold Delano for a while," he said with satisfaction. "Let's grab some grub."

Generally a reunion is an occasion with the worst of the past rinsed away by the passage of time, and this one now was determinedly lighthearted. On the flatbed of a truck the Melody Mechanics were playing vigorously--sure enough, Curly was strumming a guitar as if three fingers were plenty--and between numbers an announcer with the sound of a livestock auctioneer worked the crowd to find out who had come the longest distance, who had produced the most children, and so

on. The air had turned heavy--big prairie thunderheads were building up in the distance; I could tell what Pop meant about nature having it in for Fort Peck--but no one seemed to mind the weather this day. Skirting the throng, he and I stayed on course down to the riverbank where the food tables were, then found a spot to sit under a scrawny shade tree with our paper plates of macaroni salad and hot dogs. We barely were settled before I could not contain the question one moment longer.

“What’s a taxi dancer?”

“You would ask.” He chewed on a bite of hot dog as well as my question. “Let me put it this way, it’s a dance partner you pay for her time, just like cab fare to go someplace.”

“You mean, guys would rent these, uh, partners right there in the Blue Eagle?”

“Yeah, in the joint. It brought in herds of customers, savvy?”

I was starting to, putting two and two together and it was adding up rapidly. “All those renters and taxi dancers ever did,” I could hear how dubious I sounded, “was just dance?”

He hesitated. “With some of the taxi dancers, that was kind of open for negotiation if the customer wanted to go farther than that, I guess you could say.”

“So,” I pressed on dangerously, “really it was like on First Avenue South in Great Falls?”

The sigh of ages, as the topic of prostitution no doubt has produced down through history. With his forehead scrunched, the famous owner of the Blue Eagle set to the task of explaining matters for me.

“Not every taxi dancer was a whore, if that’s what you’re thinking. Most weren’t. Plenty of them ended up married to those dance partners, I could point out some of them here today.” He saw me trying to keep up with this and finding it hard. “Rusty, here’s the how of it. Things were different in the Thirties, and

Fort Peck was even different, if that's a word. The Depression, when it hit"--he looked off across the still water of the manmade lake as though searching back into that time--"it did things to people it's hard to believe now. If you were on a farm out here, chances were your crops dried up and blew away year after year until all you were left with was tumbleweeds and a foreclosure notice, and you lost everything. If you were just a working <sup>at all</sup> joe, you got laid off because Wall Street crashed, and next thing you knew, the bank down the street went under and took your life's savings with it."

I had read all this in school, but hearing it from him sank in vastly deeper. He was grimacing painfully as he spoke.

"It changed people, they had to do whatever they could to get by. Curly wasn't only kidding about eating gophers--some families in this part of the state were that desperate." He lowered his voice, as grave as I had ever heard him. "I still don't know why there wasn't a revolution. But people toughed it out until Roosevelt came into office and projects like this dam got underway. Then before long there's these thousands of mudjacks drawing wages, and others who showed up here because the mudjacks had money in their pockets." His voice gathered itself and he mustered a kind of smile. "Cripes, that was me, too, if you can imagine."

He drew a breath. "Okay, that's the long way around the barn to taxi dancing, but it's all connected, see. There were women who had to make a living, too, and getting out on the floor with a guy for two bits a dance was a way to do it. ~~Anything~~ talk of business beyond that, let's say, was up to them, not me."

By this point I was practically memorizing his each word. Zoe was going to want every tiniest detail of this.

“The dance partner more than likely would buy the woman a drink or two and a few for himself,” he went on doggedly, “so there’s where it paid off for me. It was what you might call a sideline. Like letting the Medicine Lodge customers hock stuff. Same kind of thing.”

Renting out women didn’t sound to me like the same kind of thing. Was there even any way it sounded legal? The past casts a tricky shadow, I was discovering.

Pop read my face, then gazed off toward the truck bandstand where the Melody Mechanics were producing another spirited tune and the crowd around them was clapping and whooping.

“Kiddo,” he said softly, “you have to understand, every night in Wheeler was Saturday night. The town was wide-open. Some joints never closed at all, ~~They took the door off the hinges, if you can imagine. twenty-four hours around the clock.~~ He listened to the raucous music for a few moments. “It was a different time, back then. Everybody was young and hot to trot, excuse my Latin. Sure, people liked to drink in the Blue Eagle, the way I ran the joint, but what they really liked was to drink and dance and kind of get to know each other, the way men and women do. If I was going to be in business in ~~Wheeler,~~ <sup>here</sup> that’s what had to happen.” He tipped his hat back with a forefinger to look at me more openly. “Got all that?”

“I--I guess so.”

“That takes care of that, then,” he said, sounding like he was trying to convince himself as well as me.

“Can I ask you something else?”

“Nothing known to man has stopped you yet. What is it now?”

“Were you a bootlegger, too?”

He winced at ‘too’. “What makes you think I was?”

“The Packard. Somebody said it’s a bootlegger special.”



“Somebody did, did they?” He frowned in the general direction of Del. “That’s bee ess, kiddo. I just liked the looks of the old buggy. Seemed like a lot of car for the money. Anyway, bootlegging,” he took a couple of hungry bites of hot dog before I could come up with any more pesky questions. “Naw, I never did any of that, not the kind you’re thinking of anyway.” This was not the definitive answer I was looking for, he could tell from my expression. “Here’s how it was, see. Fort Peckers were a pretty thirsty bunch, so the joint would run low on booze sometimes ahead of a Saturday night. It’s a hell of a ways to Great Falls or anywhere else out here, so the easiest thing was to run up to Medicine Hat and load up the car with Canadian booze.”

“Why there?”

He shifted uneasily. “The Hat is kind of a crossroads, on the Canadian railroad and the highway to Calgary and like that. You can get a lot of business done there if you hold your mouth right. Anyway,” he plowed on again, “that’s all it was, some cases of rye and other Canuck hooch packed home in the Packard. This was after Prohibition, no law broken, but”--he underscored that last word with a careful look at me--“if the state liquor board didn’t have somebody at the border to collect tax at two or three in the morning, that was their tough luck. Get the picture?”

It could not have been clearer if painted by Charlie Russell, so I nodded. My father the living legend maybe had not crossed the line of the law in the Blue Eagle years, but he had danced and driven right up to it, from all it sounded like. Yet as he said it was a different time, back then. He couldn’t change the past, I couldn’t change it, we had to go on, and together, as he’d said more than once, we weren’t doing too bad ~~at it~~ <sup>with what we had to work, work with</sup> and we didn’t give a flying fig for other ways of being father and son. I couldn’t really argue with that.

Gazing off again into the gathering, he asked reflectively: "Now do you get why I wasn't red-hot to come to this? Things happen sometimes that can be misunderstood."

"But everybody here seems to think you're"--I stumbled for the words--  
"something great."

"Yeah, well, that's what time can do to you, once in a while. Among other things." He turned my way, watching me anxiously. "That enough answers for you for one day? Rusty? Things still more or less okay between us after all that, I hope?"

Slowly I nodded again. "Still are, Pop."

"Right. Come on, eat up and let's go see how Delano is doing."

It was slow going through the crowd, with him being greeted like strolling royalty by anyone who hadn't done so before, and as hard as I tried to envision these paunchy men and their broadbeamed wives as lean young hot-to-trot drinkers and dancers, twenty-five years stood in the way. That was not the case with Pop, who accepted slaps on the back and outpourings about the old days in an easy fashion, now that we could see Del still busily interviewing mudjacks and beer still serving its purpose among those waiting under the shade of the tarp. "He's got it made," Pop said with satisfaction as we were closing the distance to the Gab Lab, "so all we need to do is keep everybody happy with enough more Shellac and--"

He stopped in his tracks so suddenly I bumped into him. "Damn," he let out under his breath. "Why doesn't he have anything better to do than prowl around here?"

"Who, Pop?"

"You'll see."

"I might have known who I'd find if I followed the trail of beer bottles," a voice with a scary amount of authority in it made itself known. A small man in a cowboy hat strutted over to us, looking annoyed. His meager face seemed set in that one expression, like a doll's head carved out of a dried apple. Everything about him was half-pint in size, except for the star-shaped badge on his shirt pocket. "Tom Harry is still among the living, huh? Imagine that."

"If it isn't my favorite sheriff." I could tell from Pop's voice that the lack of warmth was mutual. "Been a while, hasn't it, Carl, since you would drop by the Blue Eagle for some recreation of a certain kind."

"That's past history." The Fort Peck lawman, as much of him as there was, took me in at a glance. "Who's this? Got yourself a grandkid, you of all people?"

"My son," Pop said stiffly. "Rusty, meet Carl Kinnick. He's been sheriff in this county since the grass first grew."

"Hi."

Kinnick didn't answer me, merely nodded as if his neck hurt. "Tom Harry a family man? I'll be a son of a bitch." He smirked at Pop. "Will miracles never quit?"

Pop said levelly, "I hope not."

I started to worry, not even knowing why. At my age I didn't have Pop's long experience in reading people's character, but this person had *mean* written all over him.

Now the sheriff was back to giving Pop a gimlet gaze. "I wouldn't have thought you was the sentimental type, showing up at a shindig like this."

"Life's full of surprises," Pop offered what seemed to be an innocent observation, but turned out not to be. "Didn't I read somewhere that you've switched to Republican? After all those times of riding Roosevelt's coattails here?"

This evidently hit a touchy spot on Sheriff Kinnick. "The Democrats weren't worth it any more," he huffed. "Adlai Stevenson was a loser if there ever was any invented."

"Kennedy maybe won't be," Pop laughed, "if the other choice is Dickybird Nixon."

"I'll take my chances," the sheriff said as if it was costing him teeth. He went up on his toes to peek past us to the Gab Lab where Del was poising the microphone like a magic wand while a lean gray veteran of dam work regaled him between swigs of beer. "Who's the jaybird over there people are yakking to?"

"Delmer <sup>Robertson</sup> Curtis," Pop improvised politically. "Highpowered historian from back east. Talking to folks about working on the dam. Rusty and me are helping him with his on-the-ground research."

"They start them awful young in on-the-ground research, don't they," the sheriff said with a suspicious look at Del and then at me. "Present company excepted, huh, barkeep?" he shifted his beady attention to Pop. "Just to keep things on the legal up-and-up, let's see your event permit for selling beer."

I knew it. We were going to be thrown in the clink because this badge-wearing retreaded Republican son of a bitch--he used the word on himself--didn't like the looks of us.

"No need," Pop saved us, "I'm giving the hooch away."

Surprised, the sheriff laughed unpleasantly. "That isn't like you."

"Good works sneak up on a person, haven't you ever noticed?"

"Not hardly--I didn't get where I am by believing in fairy tales." Peering from under his cowboy hat, the little lawman watched one person after another fish out a bottle of beer from the icy tub and walk away without any show of money. He took another long look at Del and the recording apparatus, then sourly moved off, saying over his shoulder to my father: "Better be careful spreading

those good works in my jurisdiction, hear? Every twenty-five years is about right.”

I began to breathe again. My feeling of relief lasted only as long as it took Pop to get a gleam in his eye and call after the retreating figure:

“Hey, sheriff? Speaking of past history. Anything ever come of that case of the truck in the river?”

Kinnick halted and turned around, scowling. “Don’t be funny. I’m still working on it--you’d have heard it all over the state if I got that solved.”

“Just wondering. You know I always had an interest in law enforcement.”  
That unpleasant laugh again. ~~“As long as you didn’t get any on you, yeah.”~~ <sup>From a healthy distance,</sup>

Pop persisted: “Any of the Duffs here?”

“That tribe? Hah. They wouldn’t show their faces after that.”

“People surprise you sometimes, though, don’t you find?”

Before turning to go, the sheriff preened up on his toes again, shaking his head. “You’re getting soft, Tom. That’s bad for your health.”

I held in what I was dying to ask until the badge-wearing runt was out of earshot.

“What truck in the river?”

“Can’t you take lessons from Delano in being hard of hearing?” Pop sounded on edge, although my question seemed to me perfectly natural. He still was watching the sheriff recede. Aware that I was not going to let the question rest, he lowered his voice and began: “If you really have to know, it was something that happened in ‘38, not long after the slide. A couple were parked in a truck on the dam one night. The thing somehow rolled into the water and drowned them both.”

Put that way, it sounded like a pure accident. But if so--

“Why is the sheriff still working on it?”

“Kiddo”--Pop wrinkled his brow at me --“I don’t know where you get it from, but sometimes you know more than the situation calls for.” He pulled out his day’s half-pack of cigarettes and found it was empty. “Damn,” he said through his teeth, and opened a fresh pack. I didn’t say anything. The commotion of the reunion picked up as the Melody Mechanics swung into “Pennies from Heaven” and much of the crowd sang along. Over at the van, Del could be seen absorbed as ever in mudjack gab. The sun shone, the famous dam stood strong as eternity, the Blue Eagle was worshipped in memory, the sheriff was taken care of, everything was clicking just right for Pop on this day of days except for the questioning kid waiting relentlessly at his side.

“Okay, if it’ll get it out of your system,” he said as if it had better, “I’ll tell you.” He lit the sinful cigarette, blew a wreath of smoke, and began. “Like I said, the two of them were in the truck in the middle of the night when it rolled. But that was only the half of it. They were--”

I couldn’t wait to tell Zoe about it.

“Bare naked? Both of them?”

“That’s what Pop said.”

“Watching the submarine races,” Zoe whispered in her knowledgable way. Practically breathless, we were camped beneath the vent trying to sort through the happenings at Fort Peck and those since, and at the same time follow along with the voices rising and falling in the bar room, neither one a simple task. For the moment, the tip of her tongue showed her concentration on the mystery couple. “But if they were married, why weren’t they home in their own bedroom instead of making out in a truck?”

“That’s just it, see. Married, but not to each other.”

“Ooh. That’s different.”

So different that it kept me busy filling her in on the story as I had it from Pop. The pair in the truck both belonged to a large family working on the dam, which caused the scandal, but it was the man’s name that meant something. ‘Had a customer in the old days,’ my father introducing me to a summer snow of seedfall from a giant cottonwood the day of my arrival in Gros Ventre, ‘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.’ I skipped the Igdrasil part to catch Zoe up on the mean little sheriff and how touchy he still was about the unsolved crime, if that’s what the drownings amounted to. “Pop thinks it was an accident. The truck getting knocked out of gear when they were, um--”

“Screwing,” Zoe helped out.

“--uh huh, and it rolled down the dam into the lake, just like that.”

“Wild!”

We paused to listen tensely to the voices out front, the familiar and the new. Nothing was changing there, although at the same time everything was, and I was impelled back to the rest of the story of the mudjacks reunion. How Del, exhausted but triumphant, finished the last interview as people were heading for their cars, calling out goodbyes and vows to do this again in five years. Meanwhile Pop and I filled trash cans with empty beer bottles--“The Shellackers in Great Falls ought to put up a plaque here, too,” he observed--and carefully stacked the empty beer cases so they wouldn’t blow away. Now that the reunion was all but over, he acted more like his usual self, going about business as if nothing else on the face of the earth mattered, but a couple of times I caught him watching me anxiously to gauge my reaction to the day and its revelations. I hardly knew how to measure it myself. This father of mine had proved to be everything Del credited him with, legend and

institutional memory and icebreaker; why not say it all the way, Leadbelly of the mudjacks. Yet he also was shown to have been something like a landlord of women who went with men for money--I may have been only twelve, but I could figure out that taxi dancing might have further implications after the music stopped--and he and the sheriff poked at each other in a kind of scary way. What was I supposed to think?

When Pop wasn't busy glancing at me as we loaded up to leave, I eyed him, trying to decide. "Tom, you were fantastic! You too, Rusty." Del by now was practically floating against the ceiling of the Gab Lab as he stowed the precious reels of tape, recounting to us one mudjack's tale or another in <sup>giddy</sup> ~~dizzying~~ fashion.

4 Gradually I made up my mind. When Del at last showed signs of running down, I butted in sharply.

"I have a question."

I looked right at Pop as I said it, and my tone sent Del silent. I could see Pop, his expression frozen, bracing himself against five W's and an H and whatever else of the alphabet of inquiry possible about his doings in his Fort Peck years. I let that hang in the air just long enough before I asked:

"Why was the eagle blue?"

I realize it was an imaginary whoosh of relief from him, and for that matter from Del, who sensed that this was one of those family matters where the stakes were dangerously high, but it cleared the air nonetheless. With a look of relief, Pop <sup>replenished confidence</sup> told me <sup>enlightened that</sup> the blue eagle was something from the New Deal, a symbol businesses showed off to say they were complying with wage standards and other codes of the National Recovery Administration, and he'd figured it made a good name to slap onto a saloon at the grandest New Deal construction project of all. "Anything to do with Roosevelt, Fort Peckers were hogwild about," he was talkative now that my



question had proved easy as a breeze, “so they thought it was patriotic to drink in the joint. Not bad, hey?”

Head cocked, Del had been crouched in the Gab Lab happily listening. “Great story! History making itself felt in the thirst glands,” he enthused, joking or not, I couldn’t tell. “Tom, you absolutely must let me capture that on tape when we get back.”

“We’ll see” sounded more positive than it usually did from him.

Hesitantly, Del put forth: “I, ah, hope you’re glad you came?”

Pop paused. He gave that a rueful smile, sharing some of it to me, before <sup>winked</sup> saying: <sup>real best</sup> “Glad’ maybe isn’t quite the right word. But it’s been interesting.”

His gaze went distant as he cast a look at the dam and then at the vacant hillside where the Blue Eagle once stood and around at the reunion site where he had walked like a king. I silently watched while he unloosed his bowtie and folded it away, the same as I had seen him do so many times after his nights of bartending. Standing there as if catching his breath, he looked like he did after bouncing someone from the saloon, shirt crumpled and the gray in his pompadour mussed in with the black hair, brow furrowed but no wounds showing. I was the one hurting, with our life scheduled to change unimaginably as soon as we got home and the Medicine Lodge passed from our hands, and this father whom I loved, in spite of <sup>anything</sup> whatever today’s evidence said about him, would turn into an old man waiting for the marble farm. It didn’t seem right.

After his breather, if that’s what it was, Pop snapped to. “Delano, you don’t have to kiss every tape,” he called into the van where Del could be heard still squirreling away things, “we need to get a move on or we’ll be at the tail end of the traffic out of here.” Already, departing cars were jammed at the approach to the road up the bluff, except for one coming off the dam and heading our direction at a surprising speed, from the looks of it someone who couldn’t wait to use the boat

ramp now that the crowd was clearing away. Del hopped out, and while I made myself useful folding up chairs, he and Pop began taking down the van awning. Busy with that, they weren't paying any attention to the rapid arrival, but, naturally curious, I watched the car zoom right past the boat ramp and keep coming in a storm of dust.

Zoe had been following my whispered telling of this as if she didn't dare miss a word. I stopped, seeing it all again.

"Then what?" she breathed.

"This big red Cadillac pulled up." The voices coming through the vent rose at this point, the woman's above the others. "And she got out."

“Back in business in the old neighborhood, Tom?” The voice was husky, the smile a bit tilted, the appearance startling, to say the least. “Mudjacks haven’t forgotten how to drink, I betcha. How was the take?”

Pop watched wide-eyed--Del and I <sup>did</sup> were, too--as this late-arriving surprise left the car to join us. She was, in the saying I had never fully appreciated until then, an eyeful. In lavender slacks that had no slack between the fabric and her, and a creamy blouse also snugly filled, the woman providing us that slinky smile was not what is usually thought of as beautiful, yet here were three males of various ages who could not stop staring at her.

As she came up to us it became more evident she was middle-aged, but unlike Pop’s version, in the middle of resisting the years. Her complexion was that mother-of-pearl kind in ads in magazines, and whatever maintenance it took to discourage wrinkles had been done. Even more striking than any of the rest of her, though, was the mane of hair so blonde it approached white; ‘milk-blonde’ said it about right. She resembled someone well-known, although in the surprise of the moment I couldn’t quite think who, nor could Del, according to his quizzical expression.

To Pop, she seemed to look all too familiar. "It's nothing like the old days, Proxy," he said, not sounding like himself. "We were giving it away."

"For free?" She laughed. "You know what I think about that."

"Let's not go into it." I noticed he was awfully edgy all of a sudden, glancing back and forth from her to the others of us, his brow knotted. "So, what brings you to a reunion you've managed to miss entirely?"

More of that skewed smile. "You're here, I'm here. Nicer without all those people around, don't you think?"

Del and I standing there gawping drew her attention, especially me. Kids can sense calculation, and I sensed something like that now. "Hey there, sunshine. Do I see a family resemblance?" she asked without missing a beat.

Gruffly Pop identified us to her, and her to us. "Meet Proxy Shannon. She used to"--he put it carefully--"work in the Blue Eagle."

She shook her head as if to say, *Men*. "The old marriage certificate reads 'Duff', Tom."

"I know that. I just never liked it on you."

That exchange electrified me. Now I knew, absolutely knew, who she was, the wife, widow, survivor, whatever the unfortunate mate should be called, of the male half of that naked couple in that truck in the river. Talk about history, here was some a good deal juicier than Del's tape recordings. The sheriff had made it sound as if those with the cursed name of Duff would be ashamed to show their faces around Fort Peck, yet she was certainly showing hers. Hungry as I always was for a story, I could hardly wait for hers to emerge.

Of course, Del knew none of that and regarded the dazzling newcomer as a surprise pearl in the day's treasure chest of mudjacks. "Shall we get out of the sun?" he brightly took the role of host, since the tarp tent still was stretched between the van and the nearest trees. "Here, I'll set up the chairs." I scrambled to

help. Pop seem<sup>ed</sup> none too pleased with Del's burst of good manners, but in a matter of moments the four of us were seated in the shade with the water of the captured river lapping in the background, almost like all this was intended.

"I could have sworn I heard you say you were giving away throat medicine around here," our unexpected guest kidded Pop, if it was kidding.

Del vaulted up to fish out a beer for her from the last remnants in the tub. "It's been such a phenomenal day, I believe I'll have one with you, Mrs. Duff."

"I could use one, too," said Pop, making me wonder what gets into grown men at a time like this.

"A phenomenal day at Fort Peck, huh?" the glamorous betrayed widow, as she now starred in my imagination, investigated Del as he returned with the clutch of Shellacs. "That's one for the books." She peered around him to the equipment cubbyholed in the van. "What are you, some kind of gypsy reporter?"

"Hmm? Not quite." He happily expounded to her about the Gab Lab and the mudjack interviews and how he couldn't have done them without Pop as the institutional memory and what a historic day this had been for the retrieval of Missing Voices, while Pop looked more and more as if he wished Del would lose his.

During this, she ~~arched an eyebrow~~<sup>raised one</sup> ~~which I noticed~~<sup>and then the other</sup> was not exactly blonde. Finally Del slowed down enough to ask:

"Is your husband, ah, available for me to interview sometime?"

"He's out of reach," she said without the least crack in her expression. It was driven home to me how much Zoe and I had to learn about facial control if we were going to be actors. Next came a teasing little grin at Del as if catching him at something. "Del-a-no. Is that your honest handle?"

He reddened, back to college boy. "As I've told Tom and Rusty, my father worshipped Roosevelt." It was his turn now, though. "If you don't mind my asking, Mrs. Duff--"

"Proxy' will do, thanks. 'Mrs.' is for grandmas and I'm not there yet."

"--that's positively what I was curious about, the derivation of 'Proxy', I mean. A great historian once said names are the signposts of the soul."

"The hair, honey." She tossed her head as if he might not have noticed the bleach job that stood out like a full moon. "I had to use peroxide, in the old days. They've got better drugstore stuff now."

*# Until now* Pop had been <sup>not saying anything,</sup> just sitting there nursing his beer ~~until now~~. "If we're through with hairdressing and the history of names, maybe you could tell us why you're here. There's Nevada plates on that Caddy." He couldn't help looking appreciatively at the big car with tailfins like a rocket ship. "That's a long way to come, Proxy, just to wait until everybody packs up and leaves and then here you are like the return of the wild goose."

"Jeez, Tom, is that the best you can do for a welcome? Been a little while since we saw each other, I thought absence is supposed to make the heart grow fonder."

"How'd you know I'd even be here?"

"Just a hunch. An old-timey Fort Peck get-together wouldn't amount to anything without Tom Harry, would it." That came from her with an admiring grin, genuine or not I couldn't tell. "Institutional memory, huh? Boy, I wish I had one of those."

"I seem to have enough for everybody," he said with a pointed look at Del, before giving her an equally edged one. "Okay, out with it. You aren't here to stroll down Memory Lane."

Proxy studied her red fingernails. "I need to talk to you about a job."

"A job?" Relief was written all over Pop. "Proxy, you're slipping. I'm not running that kind of joint any more, haven't been for more than twenty years. And besides, I'm about to--

"Don't get excited. Not that sort of job." That crooked smile. "I'm danced out anyway, Tom. Reno has plenty else to offer." My mind was practically flooded with all this. Nevada was where people went to get divorced quick, and Reno its center of that activity; Velma Simms had shed any number of spouses there. But this Cadillac-driving mystery woman from there: what possible job could she want from Pop? Proxy Shannon in his telling, Proxy Duff in her own, this latest exchange told me she was no stranger to taxi-dancing and the wilder doings in the Blue Eagle, besides being the victim of a husband who strayed to his death at the bottom of the Missouri River right out from where we were sitting. She'd had a busier existence than we were used to in the Medicine Lodge.

Naturally Del had his head cocked to hear every word she said--<sup>had that</sup> he looked on him as if like he wished he had his tape recorder going--and she glanced at him and then at me. "I didn't expect to have to do this in front of an audience." Again, I had the feeling that for some reason I was a particular concern to her. Del, though, gave a start as if he'd been poked in the ribs. "Ah, maybe Rusty and I should go look at the scenery."

"Sit tight," Pop ordered. "You too, Rusty. I'm not going to have two cases of itching curiosity to ride home with."

"Oh-kay," Proxy said in throaty singsong. "Then here goes." A tiny indent of concentration--or was it calculation?--appeared in the place between her eyebrows as she peeled at the label of her Select bottle with her thumbnail before saying anything more. "I saw that newspaper piece about you and your famous joint, Tom. It set me to thinking."

"You can give your brain a rest," Pop gladly headed her off. "I'm about to sell the Medicine Lodge. Gonna quit the business."

"I sort of wondered if that wasn't in the wind. 'Sure gonna miss you when I'm gone' is something I used to tell customers when their time was up. Always good for a laugh and they'd go away feeling better, the dumb joes." Her slanted smile seemed to excuse the three of us from that category, whether or not we deserved it. "But from the story in the paper it sounded like you <sup>might</sup> maybe mean it."

<sup>in so many words</sup> "Didn't I just say I'm selling the--"

<sup>if you don't watch out.</sup>

"It sounds like a real nice joint," she didn't miss a beat. "Right up there with the old Eagle, I bet. You always were the best at running a bar room. Jeez, Tom, you don't want to give up something like that. Sure, you maybe could use some time off, not work yourself half to death any more--I feel that way myself sometimes. But you don't have to throw the whole business away to get to that." She paused. "I can see the fix you're in. Rusty here"--either I was imagining or she said my name as if trying to get used to it--"has some years to go before he can help out behind the bar, doesn't he."

"He isn't ever--"

"See, that's why I came all this way to make you a proposition." The other two of us were following this as if it were a volleyball match. Proxy gave us another sidelong look, then leaned sharply in on Pop. "What you need is a working partner." ~~An A-1 bartender to take some of the load off.~~

"Now there's a pregnant idea if there ever was one," he met that with something between a laugh and a scoff. <sup>You're slipping, Proxy.</sup> "Have you forgot what a grind it is behind a bar? Slinging drinks to a full house isn't like cozying up to some guy who's feeling frisky, you ought to know that from those years of watching me at it." He shook his head definitively. "You wouldn't last one night tending bar."

<sup>with a guy</sup> "Not me, slowpoke. Her."



Pop wrinkled his brow. "Who's 'her'?"

"Francine."

"Proxy, have you slipped a cog? I don't know any--"

"My daughter." The smile sloped more than ever this time. "Yours, too."

Dumbstruck is a word you use when you're out of others, but it fit then.

Pop stared slackly at the tinsel-haired bearer of this news. Del rubbed his good ear as if to make sure it was working right. My head swam. What was it about Fort Peck that kept a person gasping to keep up?

More to the immediate point, how could this woman have a daughter by my father if she had been married to the man in the truck in the lake--I mean, it was conceivable, so to speak, but all kinds of questions followed that one. Starting with, why had he never known about this Francine person until this very day, as I only had look at him to know this was total news to him. With my head swirling I tried to think straight, arithmetic first. Anyone dating back to the Blue Eagle in the 1930's would be a grownup by now, would need to be if she was a candidate to tend bar. The revelation, if true, that I had some sort of adult sister boggled me as much as if I'd been told Igdrasil the ancient tree was a relative.

Professional listener or not, Del was sitting there with his mouth pooched in a silent whistle of amazement. Pop was recovering enough to speak.

"This is wacky. If you've got a kid going back that far, sure as hell it came from Darius. He could barely keep his pants on, thinking about you, even after you were married. You and I only ever--"

"Nice try, Tom, but Francine doesn't take after him in any way," Proxy brushed that aside. "Besides, him and me weren't that friendly there towards the end, if you take my meaning. I've always kept it a secret from the other Duffs about her being from some other pasture, but no question, Tom, she's yours." She

locked eyes with him. "Women know these things." Then a different smile from her, that found time for me before returning to Pop. "Excuse me for saying she's a chip off the old bar, but you'll see. Wait till you meet her."

# ~~9~~ The long, long drive back to Gros Ventre that night was like being in a darkened tunnel that stretched on and on. Instead of cruising home wrapped in the memory of our phenomenal day at Fort Peck, the three of us were under a far different spell, Del rabbit-eyed behind the wheel, me in some state of emotional commotion in back, Pop dourly smoking his way through one cigarette after another.

An uncertainty named Francine rode with us. When Pop demanded to see this supposed offspring with his own eyes, Proxy promised to produce her just as soon as she could catch a plane from Reno. "I figured we ought to do this sort of gradual," she'd generously left us with, "so everybody could get used to the idea of her." That didn't show any sign of taking hold as the van monotonously traced the highway out of the deeper black with its headlights.

Ultimately Del cleared his throat a little. "Ah, Tom, and Rusty, I feel like an intruder. This actually is none of my business. I mean, I can't help but think about it, but--"

"Delano, don't get started," Pop begged. "You wanted to hear about life at Fort Peck, you got one more earful than you bargained for, let's leave it at that." I watched him hesitate a couple of times before he half turned to where I was perched behind the seats. "How you doing, kiddo? Kind of a surprise, isn't it." The match lighting his next cigarette showed his face, so serious and seamed. Strange how a moment's glimpse like that can last a lifetime. "It sure as hell was to me." He shook his head, blowing a soft stream of smoke. "Shouldn't have happened."

I had no way of knowing if he meant Proxy materializing like a ghost risen from the reunion as she did, or whatever transpired some unbridled night in the

Blue Eagle twenty-some years ago, or what. The best I could muster was a shaky “Yeah?”

“You’ve got every right to be upset,” he granted. “But this isn’t what it’s stacked up to be, as heaven is my witness.” That was maybe not the best choice of words from a man never known to go near a church.

Trying to look like he was concentrating only on the road, Del was listening as strenuously as I was. “The odds are still sky-high any kid of hers is not mine,” Pop spoke as it was flat fact. “Proxy and I didn’t fool around in the Eagle. Strictly business, me in back of the bar and her on the dancefloor side. All those years we kept our paws off each other.”

“Then why is she--”

“Except that one damn time.”

The hum of the tires on the road surface was the only sound for several seconds. Finally Pop hitched around in his seat toward Del. “How about you, Delano? You ever been in a squeeze like that? Where the brain shuts off and the other body part doesn’t?” I sensed this man-to-man talk was for my benefit, somehow.

“Not to that extent,” Del confessed.

“You’re lucky, then.” Pop shifted in his seat again, for once not lighting up a cigarette, simply gazing out at the night. “What happened between me and her came smack out of nowhere. Like I said, we’d behaved ourselves for, what, five years working together since the damwork started up. And it wasn’t many days before I was done with Fort Peck, I’d already put money down on the Medicine Lodge. But there was one last big Saturday night in the Eagle, and after we closed the joint, Proxy wanted me to have a drink with her to celebrate what the Eagle had been for us. One led to a couple or three.” This still sounded like man talk directed at Del, but I had the very real impression of being the listener in the dark as the only

parent I had ever known leaned against the bedroom doorway and told me what was most on his mind. <sup>4</sup>“We got sloppy,” he was continuing that same way. “She was drunk, she was having trouble with that husband of hers, and I guess I didn’t resist all that much. It was kind of a goodbye.” He gave that the sigh it deserved. “Some goodbye.”

Del judiciously left the question to me. “Then--then what?”

“We both came to our senses in a hurry, right after. Darius Duff wasn’t someone to have mad at you, if he’d ever caught on. Proxy and I didn’t go near each other again, and pretty quick the slide happened and that was the only thing on anybody’s mind. Then I pulled out for Gros Ventre, and the rest is another story, isn’t it.” Saying that, he turned his head toward me, our eyes meeting. “What can I say? Life throws you for a loop sometimes, Rusty. Try not to come unglued about this, okay?”

Did he think I wasn’t trying, ever since the fateful words “*She’s yours*”?

He went on: “Hell, maybe Proxy just has a wild hair and nothing will come of this.” I didn’t believe that the least little bit, and I doubted that he did either.

“What if”--my voice was so hushed Del was leaning practically out of his seat to hear--“it doesn’t turn out that way?”

“Don’t get ahead of the stampede,” Pop warned crossly. His gaze moved off into the dark again. “We’ll sort this out when they show up at the joint.”

“But what about the deal with Earl?”

“Didn’t I just tell you not to--” It took some doing, but he reined himself in. “First things first, right? Earl will just have to wait his turn in the complaint line a little longer. He’s used to it.”

So many conflicting thoughts contended in me that my brain felt knotted up. As much as ever, I didn’t want him to give up the Medicine Lodge, and if this Francine could turn out to be really a working partner and take the strain off the

bartending, wouldn't that be the best possible thing? How much would she take over things, though? Everything? Would she live with us? Would she boss me around? What if she turned out to have a disposition like that other relative, Ronny the Phoenix menace? The doubts began to win in me. Come right down to it, I didn't want to be related to anyone in the world except Pop, did I. Call me spoiled, if that's what being an only kid with free run of the back of a saloon amounted to, but I was extremely leery of my life changing that way. If I was to have a sudden sister, I wanted her to be a duplicate of Zoe, smart and funny and ready to do bits and sharp of eye and keen of ear where the mystifying beings that were grownups were involved, and what were the chances of that?

In other words, I was irrevocably finding out for myself the drawback of the age of twelve, the awkward stage of not yet old enough to master such things but past the simple arithmetic of being just a kid. The one certainty was that those two trains of thought, for and against a total newcomer in the family, put me in a real fix. Pop's familiar commandment not to get myself in an uproar or hydrophobic or some other upset state of mind wasn't helping at all. Opposite as were the outcomes I could imagine ahead, either one scared me to my eyeteeth to think about, and I never did know any way to shut off thinking.

The silence that had settled on the van lasted only as long as Del judged was respectful. "Ah, excuse my asking, but why is the husband missing in this?"

"He met with an accident," Pop replied reluctantly, "right after I left Fort Peck. Drowned in the river."

"Maybe she did it," Zoe had a ready theory when I told her about the naked couple found in the truck. "Sneaked up on them and let them have it somehow."

“That’s what I thought, too. But when I tried Pop on that, he said there was no way she could have, she was in the Eagle with him and about a hundred other people when it happened.”

“That lets her off the hook then,” Zoe couldn’t help sounding disappointed.

“Yeah. That one, anyway.”

Glancing at Pop as much as at the road, Del waited for more, although I could tell it would have to come from me later on. Unfazed, he pursued in another direction: “That’s an odd name, if I heard it right. Darius was a Persian king.”

Pop laughed, the reflex kind when something is more bizarre than funny. “He was a strange bird in a lot of ways. Bony kind of guy who always looked like he could use a good meal--the Duffs all were built like hungry cats.” That description cleared my mind a little. I would have been told I was jumping the gun again, but a family characteristic like that ought to settle the whose-daughter-is-she issue in a hurry, hadn’t it? Look at the Zanes, senior and junior, you could tell at first glance they were the same make of fool. And while Pop and I didn’t take after each other all that much except for build and our hair black as shoe polish, the likeness was unmistakable. Even Zoe had her mother’s eyes. Resemblance didn’t lie, right?

“Sometimes I thought Proxy married the ass of a bee”--Pop still was on Darius--“just to have somebody to fight with. He was a bright guy, knew his stuff about history and so on, but he’d argue politics until your ears would fall off.”

Del was quick to pick up on the implication of that. “Against Roosevelt?”

“Can you imagine?” Pop sounded as indignant as if this had all happened yesterday. “FDR was way too tame for him. ‘Capitalism and soda water,’ he called the New Deal. All the while he’s drawing good wages on the dam like ten thousand other guys who would have been bums on the street without the

government doing something." With a shake of his head, he delivered the final verdict: "Not the best customer there ever was."

Del absorbed all that for a few moments, then wondered: "Was Mrs. Duff--"

"Do me a real big favor and use her other name, okay?"

"Sorry. Was Proxy politically inclined then, too?"

Pop snorted. <sup>Hardly.</sup> "Her inclinations ran other directions." He dug for a cigarette, but halted before striking a match and turned to me. "How many is this today?"

"Four, on your second pack," I said crossly.

"I'm surprised it's not more." He lit up and took a lungfilling drag.

<sup>Cripes</sup> "Damn, what a day," came the exhalation. He glanced over and studied Del in the dim glow of the dashboard for a moment. "So, Delano. At least you got your Missing Voices. You'll be pulling out now, I expect?"

"Hmm? Oh, I was going to bring that up. Actually, I'd like to stay on while I transcribe the interviews, if that would be all right. Put the Gab Lab to use."

"Help yourself," I was secretly glad to hear Pop say, "there's plenty of room to park in the driveway behind the Packard." He let out the same kind of big sigh as he'd done earlier. "Cripes, the Packard."

"What about the Packard?" I probably beat Del to it by a half a second.

Pop didn't say anything for about a minute. Then <sup>4.</sup> "That's where it happened." His tone left no mistake what 'it' was.

"In the car?"

"Kiddo," he said tiredly, "you have to realize, a sizable number of the population gets its start in a back seat, that's just life." Compelled to honesty, he told his silent listeners that on the fateful night in the Blue Eagle when he and Proxy celebrated a little too much, the swamper still was at work in the joint, so they

resorted to the Packard. It somehow sounded like that was nothing new for Proxy, but Pop concluded with another deeply disgruntled mutter of "One damn time."

He turned around in his seat to me and I waited apprehensively for what else this day would bring. But he only said, "Better grab some shuteye. We got a lot ahead of us when we get home."

*new chapter?*

We thought she looked like a beatnik, when the Cadillac pulled up to the house that Sunday and ready or not, here they were, Proxy and her. That's because we didn't know yet what a hippie was.

There in the driveway beside her mother--at least there didn't seem to be any outstanding question about that--the young woman appeared frayed and tousled, maybe from the plane flight from Nevada, maybe habitually. She was in blue jeans on their last legs, so to speak, and in a threadbare pinkish shirt, not a blouse, and beaded mocassins, and some other kind of decorated leather thing on one wrist. Peer at her as hard as I could through the kitchen window, I did not see any boniness that matched Pop's description of Darius Duff; the 'hungry cat' part, if any, was more a matter of what she was wearing and how she wore it. On the other side of the resemblance question, certainly she was better looking than either of us, in a sulky kind of way. Mainly, if this newcomer resembled anyone within a hundred miles, dressed the way she was, it had to be Proxy, similar very womanly figure but not nearly so round, so firm, so fully packed, as the male clientele of the Medicine Lodge would have said. I still was unsure what to think. Because plain as day, any other comparison literally paled beside the matter of hair. Hers, in a kind of shaggy cut that did not come from any beauty shop, was the identical ~~darkest~~ <sup>indelible</sup> hue as mine and Pop's where his hadn't silvered, as if the three of us had been dipped in black ink together.



Watching over my shoulder, Pop scrutinized the new arrival as intently as I was. "Damn," he said mechanically about that family hair. He surprised me by rubbing his hand on the crown of my head as if for luck. "Here we go, kiddo. Let's see how this pans out."

Out we went, to where Proxy was fixing her face in the side mirror of the Cadillac and Francine was eyeing the old Packard and Del's VW van with curiosity. The usual breeze along English Creek rustled through Igdrasil's leafy branches overhead, sprinkling cottonwood fluff ahead of us as we approached. The four of us variously uttered "Hey" and "Hi" and "Hello," and then it was up to Pop.

"I don't know any rulebook for this kind of situation," he addressed Francine straight off, his voice tight. I had the impression he and I were being studied as fully by her as she was by us. "Proxy kept me in the dark about you."

"Same here," came the surprising reply. "She's so good at it, she ought to start a mushroom farm." Francine swept her hair away from a hazel eye, the color of her mother's, further proof if wanted that these sudden arrivals into our life were two of a kind. Up close, she looked a lot like the movie actress Natalie Wood, but after a hard night. The line of her mouth was set in a quirkish way that seemed to say, the rebellious streak starts here. I began to wonder what I was in for with her for a sister.

"Don't pour it on, you two," Proxy protested lightly. "I had my reasons. There wasn't any sense in upsetting things when there was nothing to be gained by it, and now there is, all around." She smiled sharply at Pop as though he needed reminding why we were all standing across the alley from the Select Pleasure Establishment of the Year. "What could be better? You get a working partner, missy here learns the tricks of the trade from you, the joint gets a new lease on life-- give me credit, Tom, I couldn't deliver more if I was Santa Claus."

Francine gave her the kind of look that came from long habit. "Mom, don't break your arm patting yourself on the back." Depending on how you wanted to hear it, that was either teasing or sarcastic.

"Kids these days," Proxy said imperturbably, with a glance that included me. "Right, Russ?"

Sticking close to Pop against the onset of these women, I was not actually tottering from one foot to the other, but the inside of me felt that way. Perhaps it came up through the shoe soles from the giant roots of Igdrasil, watered by the fates of past, present, and future. Which one would prevail was the decision Pop was struggling mightily with, as I could tell by the record number of wrinkles in his forehead. If he nixed this Francine--twenty-one or not, she did look a lot like a kid in those beat-up clothes and with that barely tamed hair--and turned her and Proxy away, then that was that, the Medicine Lodge was a thing of the past for us. If he gave her a chance behind the bar, he could look ahead to endless explaining to the Two Medicine country who she was and why she was there.

"Let's sort this out a little more," he backed off the tightrope of fates for the moment. "I'm not doubting you might have what it takes, understand," he said to Francine none too convincingly, "but are you sure you savvy what jumping into something like this would be like? You'd have a hell of a lot to learn. And bartending is long hours and short tips."

Francine's mouth quirked in a funny way. "Sounds a lot like life generally."

"Smile, chile," Proxy prompted with a terse laugh. "The man needs a working partner, not a wet blanket."

Her daughter did not actually smile, but she stopped looking like a raincloud. "Sorry," she mustered, facing Pop. "Only trying to be honest." She looked up at him, a head taller than she was, and wiped the hair away from her eyes

Up close, it was apparent she had her dark eyebrows fixed the way women do, perfect as a picture. At the moment she was not exactly a composed portrait, again. "Listen, I'm still getting used to not having a dead Scotchman for a father. however.

Makes me a little rattled." She fiddled with the leather bracelet on her wrist. "I don't even know what to call you--'Pop'?"

"Tom'," he said firmly, which I was glad to hear.

"Oh-kay," she responded, sounding like an echo of her mother. "So, anyway, Tom, I'll give it my best," she spoke in a rush now, "if you'll show me how. Mom says you're the greatest at tending bar. I'd be all kinds of a moron if I passed up this chance, don't I know."

Well, at least that showed some spirit. Pop continued to look Francine up and down. Having conscientiously told her the drawbacks of bartending, now he had to tell her yes or no about how she stacked up for the job. I still believe he had not made up his mind until that very moment. He looked like he'd had too little sleep the past forty-eight hours or so, if any at all. I sensed what was coming when he rubbed the top of my head again as he spoke.

"All right, we'll give this a try." He cut off Proxy's flash of smile and Francine's relieved expression. "On my terms. There's not going to be any working partner, so don't get big ideas, Proxy. The Medicine Lodge stays in my hands, I'm the boss, period and end of punctuation." He looked hard at Francine to make sure this was sinking in. "I'll hire you, which means I can fire you, got that?"

Her mouth twitched that quirky way again, but she sounded fairly reasonable in saying: "That's jake with me." I filed that away to share with Zoe.

"See?" Proxy began. "It all works out for the best, just like I--"

"One more thing." Pop held up his hands as if stopping traffic. His gruff tone had Francine fooling nervously with the gizmo on her wrist again. "I'm not gonna spend my time explaining to anybody who comes in the joint that you're some daughter of mine who just happened to show up like Jesus in the manger."

His eyes bored into Proxy's, although his words were still meant for Francine. "It's not fair to you either. You shouldn't have to feed people's curiosity about something that goes back before you were born."

In the pause while he drew a deep breath, a single thing was on everyone's minds in more ways than one, and that was hair. "Okay, here's what we're gonna do when customers get nosy about any resemblance," he acknowledged the problem. "We'll say Francine is my niece," he appeared uncomfortable with that white lie, if that's what color it was, but I could tell he was set in rock about this. "My sister's kid that I'm breaking in on the job out of the goodness of my heart. People can think what they want, but that's gonna be our story. Everybody got that?"

Wow, I couldn't help thinking, what a bit.

Francine and Proxy looked at each other. Whatever passed between them, it was Francine who turned to Pop with the hint of a sassy grin. "If that's the best you can do, Unk."

"Tom'," he warned her.

By now Proxy was eyeing me, and I was instantly on my guard. There always was a little something in the way she looked at me, as if I was a cause for concern. "Some little man will have to watch his mouth real careful, won't he."

"Rusty knows what's involved," Pop stoutly took up for me, squeezing my shoulder as he spoke. "He won't give the act away. Right, kiddo?"

I swallowed. "I'll, uh, watch my mouth."

That satisfied Proxy only so far. Now she was frowning in the direction of Del's van. "Then what about carrot top? Where is he, playing with his machine?"

Pop indicated to English Creek, which was making that pretty sound of water dancing over rocks just beyond the yard. "I told him to go fishing while we worked this out. Don't worry, I'll clue him in as soon as he gets back. Delano