

Medicine country was such swell fishing, while Pop did not want to face the real howls of the imbibing community when they found out who would be taking over the Medicine Lodge. As soon as Earl strutted out the door that day, Pop was in the back room instructing Zoe and me to keep our lips zipped about what we'd just heard. "It's not a secret, exactly, we just don't want anybody to know about it until we say so, got that?" At least in that he was talking our language, and it was nothing for us to stay mum to the whole world, except for each other and our supper plates, for the ten days until the sale of the saloon was to be made final. Coincidentally, that was also opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and Pop made what amends he could by promising to drive us to Valier to see the play. "Gives you a little something to look forward to, hey?" he tried, without much success, to lift our spirits.

The majority of those waiting days went somewhere while I still was in my fog of what-ifs, and when Saturday morning came again, I had to be forcefully reminded of my swamping duties.

With reluctance I took up the broom and mop and pail for what might be the last time and followed Pop into the silent barroom. To my further astonishment lately—what change would he think of next, plastic surgery?—he'd meant it about quitting smoking, and was down to half a pack a day. Every so often he would have a cigarette between his lips and be thumbing the lighter before he remembered, as he did now. With a quick, guilty glance in my direction, he snapped the lighter shut and tapped the cigarette back into the pack, knowing I was vengefully keeping count of his daily total. Weaning himself off nicotine left him cranky, which made two of us. Even the animal heads seemed gloomy, their eyes not yet brightened in the soft morning light.

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Neither of us said anything as we began our chores. As ever, he was behind the bar doing this and that in a rhythm all his own, although I noticed he went at things solemnly. With a lump in my throat, I was sweeping near the front door when the doorknob rattled.

"We're closed," I called out rather shrilly.

The doorknob rattled some more.

"Pop, somebody wants in. Real bad, it sounds like."

"That's their tough luck," he said, continuing to fuss behind the bar.

Now there was urgent knocking, so much so that I looked questioningly in Pop's direction.

"Can't they take a hint?" he grumbled. "Okay, if it'll stop the racket, see who it is."

I unlocked the door to someone no more than twice my age, but also twice my height and narrowly built, in sharply pressed tan slacks and a shirt with all kinds of pockets and flaps, as if he were on a safari. With the reddest red hair topping that slender build, he looked like a man-size matchstick. He gave me and my broom an uncertain smile, then a lit-up one to Pop.

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It took more than the latest odd variety of tourist to faze my father. "The joint's not open yet, chum," he called from behind the bar. "Come back in a couple of hours and I can take care of whatever ails you so bad."

"Actually, I'm not trying to buy a drink." The voice was as reedy as the rest of this apparition. He slipped past me and up to the bar in about four steps. "Are you Tom Harry? *The* Tom Harry?"

"The only one I know of. What makes you ask?"

The redheaded stranger smiled even more brightly. "Sir, it's such an honor, simply to be in your presence. And what a break for me. If I hadn't found you, I hate to think—" He clucked at what a tragedy that would have been. Gazing around the barroom as if it were an uncovered temple, he began in a spellbound tone: "I'm Del Robertson of the Missing Voices Oral History Project at the Library of Congress, and—"

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He broke off, peering past Pop's shoulder. "There it is!"

Pop whipped around as if some genie had escaped from one of the countless liquor bottles.

"The Roosevelt poster!" A long arm and finger extended past Pop, as if he couldn't see what was under his nose. "Right by the cash register, where I was told you always kept one. How perfect!"

"Glad you like the decor," Pop wearily started to come from behind the bar, not a good sign for

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the person on the other side—“and now that you’ve had a look, you might as well get on with your business somewhere else, okay? We don’t have any missing voices around here.”

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The young man shook his head, chuckling. “You certainly haven’t lost the gift of gab, Mr. Harry,” he said, practically bouncing with enthusiasm. “No wonder you and your saloon are legendary.”

If it was possible for my ears to perk up any more than they already had, they did so now. My own father and the Medicine Lodge, actual legends? Was that what a newspaper story could do?

“That’s pretty flattering to me and the old joint here,” Pop stopped short at the end of the bar, looking curiously at the interloper. “But that’s about to be over with, so I don’t think I’m worth your time, whatever it is you have in mind.”

“Hmm?” Still gazing reverently at Pop, our caller had that head-cocked attitude of hearing only what he wanted. “No, no, not this saloon, although don’t get me wrong, it looks like a perfectly nice place.”

Pop started to say something, but my blurt beat him, startling all three of us. “What saloon, then?”

“The Blue Eagle, of course,”—Del Robertson gave that out like a song known by heart—“when history was being made at Fort Peck.”

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History is always being made, let's face it, but Fort Peck did so on a scale all its own. The dam there was the biggest in the world when it was built, and the huge workforce brought in for what no less an authority than my fifth-grade history book called "the engineering miracle on the Missouri River" constituted a major New Deal effort to jack Montana up out of the Depression. All that was common knowledge. What was not, to the boggled twelve-year-old of the moment, was that the old saloon sign tucked away in the back room wasn't merely a collector's item from the mists of my father's early days of ~~being hired somewhere~~ ^{King} on as a bartender, it was a proclamation of proprietorship. Right there at the famous site of the Franklin D. Roosevelt speech and who knew what other exploits of the time.

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"Pop, you didn't ever tell me the Blue Eagle was your own—"

"Yeah, yeah, never mind, that's another story." He studied our visitor more closely, as did I. Crew-cut and lean, handsome enough in a college-boy kind of way, Del Robertson had the dashing look in vogue in the time of Kennedy, as if wishing for a torpedo boat under him. He stood there restlessly, all pockets and ambition. Even to me, newly hatched from childhood into adolescence, he seemed young in a way other than years—Pop would have said wet behind the ears—which made his appearance in the Medicine Lodge all the more odd.

"Look, fellow, you've caught me"—Pop glanced at me standing there with the broom forgotten in my hand—"us at kind of a busy time. And I don't really have anything colossal to tell you about bartending, it was all pretty much in there in the newspaper."

"It was? Which paper?" Out came a notebook and pen from one of the various pockets. "I'll have

to look that up.”

That stopped Pop. “If you didn’t see the newspaper story, how ~~the hell did~~ you find me?”

“Hmm? Oh, I took some rolls of quarters into a phone booth and started calling every newspaper editor in the state to ask if they knew of a bartender by your name in their town.” A modest shrug accompanied the telling of this. “Luckily, Gros Ventre isn’t far down the alphabet.”

Pop shut his eyes for a second, then opened them, blinking like an owl. “Bill Reinking is taking over from God.” Sighing mightily, he turned back to the matter of the perplexing visitor. “Okay, so you know about the Blue Eagle,” he granted, looking discomfited. He could see curiosity sticking out all over me. “Why’d you come hunting me up about something way back when?”

“Sir”—Del Robertson’s tongue practically tripped over itself in the rush to answer—“you’re the Leadbelly of Fort Peck.”

“I’m the *what?*”

“Don’t take it wrong, let me explain,” came stumbling out next. “You’ve heard of Alan Lomax, I hope?”

Pop squinted impatiently. “Didn’t he used to pitch for the Yankees?”

“Ah, no. Lomax is a musicologist, the best there is.” The word was new to both Pop and me, someone who cured people of music?

Evidently not, according to the copious explanation that ensued—I took a seat on a bar stool during it, and Pop leaned back against the cash register with his arms folded—to the effect that this Lomax person collected folk songs, in the old days lugging a recording machine like a big suitcase through the hollows and swamps of the South until, to cut the story short, he heard about a colored man in a Louisiana prison who played a guitar and wrote songs like nobody else’s.

“Leadbelly,” our young informant concluded, as if saying the name in church. “Huddie Ledbetter. Possibly the greatest blues performer ever. The songs poured out of him like, like down-and-out poetry.

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The essence of the blues." In illustration, he cleared his throat and tried to make his voice deep and growly. *"I's got to bobbasheely through life alone, 'cause I got no constant home. Classics like that."*

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Boy oh boy, did I ever wish Zoe was here for this.

It intrigued me that something of the sort qualified as music, but Pop was unmoved. "Don't turn into a damn jukebox, okay? What's Leadbottom got to do with me?"

Another explanation poured out, the point being that after the song catcher Lomax convinced Huddie Ledbetter to sing into the machine, other blues singers let him record them at it, too. "Muddy Waters, Jelly Roll Morton, the greats. It grew into one of the greatest collections ever done, all because Leadbelly led the way with that first session, if you see what I mean." Just in case, our overeager visitor spelled it out. "When potential interviewees are a trifle, ah, shy, an oral historian needs someone known and trusted to sort of"—he spun his hands as if churning up the proper words—"break the ice, let's say. With your reputation, Mr. Harry, along with the Blue Eagle's, you are the absolutely natural one for the Fort Peck project. You're the perfect"—at least he didn't say Leadbelly this time—"icebreaker."

stet songcatcher, it's a bit confusing otherwise

"You want me to get Fort Peckers to spill their guts for you?" Pop wasted no time cutting through that. "What kind of an ess of a bee do you think I am? Not a snowball's chance. Stick to blue music."

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The collector of **Missing Voices** looked hurt.

Comment [CE47]: Stet caps

"Sir, you misunderstand. Gathering people's own stories is crucial to preserving that chapter of history. It's a"—hands spun again—"a crime against civilization to let those voices be lost." I, at least, was impressed.

He paused to muster a new thought. "Let me put it this way. Fort Peck had so many workers—~~thousands, really—~~that I can't possibly know which ones would be the best to interview. But from what I've been told over and over, practically everyone there sooner or later was funneled through a certain institution"—he bunched his hands narrowly—"as historians call a social fixture in a community. No, please, don't try to be modest, Mr. Harry, it's true—^{every} by reputation, the Blue Eagle saloon was a Fort

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Peck institution without equal." He had that spellbound look again as he gazed at Pop. "And naturally that makes you the institutional memory."

Pop groaned. "How the hell did I get to be the institutional anything all of a sudden?"

"The place in history finds the man," Del Robertson said sagely.

"Maybe you mean well" Pop plucked up a fresh towel for bar polishing, "but I've got a business to tend to. Even if I wanted to, I can't go trotting off across the countryside with you trying to find yayhoos who worked at the dam."

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"That's the lucky part," the response came as if it couldn't wait. "They'll be at Fort Peck, in droves. At the Mudjacks Reunion."

"That bunch? Getting together like high schoolers? When's this?"

Wouldn't you know. The eager-beaver historian named the exact day the papers were to be signed and the sale of the Medicine Lodge would be final. Not to mention the opening-night performance of Mrs. Reinking, carefully coached eyes and all, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. There seemed to be only that single red-letter date on the otherwise numberless calendar. Pop could not hide his relief. "Naw, I couldn't go with you then even if I wanted to. I've got something important to do, it's all set up. Besides," he concluded righteously, "I promised the kiddo and his friend I'd take them to the play over in Valier that night. Busy as a one-handed juggler, see?"

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"But" Del Robertson couldn't believe his day of days wasn't more sacred than ours, "it's a historic occasion, you have to be there! It's a monumental celebration! Twenty-five years almost to the minute" the earnest explanation of the Mudjacks Reunion was not about to let up, "since the dam fill was begun."

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Something thrummed in me at hearing that. First the thirty-year winter. Now this. The way 1960 kept bringing historic numbers had to add up to something a person would remember into eternity, didn't it?

"That can't be ri—" Pop did the Fort Peck arithmetic in his head and frowned. "Okay, so Fort Peckers will be there thick as weeds. There's your setup. All you need to do is wade in with your recording machine and find the ones who'll gab to you, no sweat."

"That's just it," ~~The lanky figure shifted uncomfortably,~~ "I've been trying for weeks, out on the coast and other places." The strain in his voice showed the effort. "It's no use. Every time I track down someone who was at Fort Peck and they start in on their stories, inevitably it leads to something that happened in the Blue Eagle, and when they realize I haven't talked to you first, they absolutely clam up. The last one told me, 'You better go see Tom Harry, he knows A to why about any of that.'" He paused, as if tasting such sweet words. "Isn't that such a great way to describe an institutional memory?" After that wistful moment, he went back to looking doleful but determined. "That's what I mean about needing you to break the ice, sir."

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"No, you don't," Pop said, showing every sign of losing his patience. ~~There were loads of other bartenders at Fort Peck.~~

~~Cripes,~~

"None like you, everyone says. Mr. Harry, I absolutely cannot get the interviews I need at the Mudjacks Reunion without you." Pop's shake of the head hastened the next plea. "Please, sir? It would only take a couple of days."

~~Hey,~~ ~~or something~~

"Are you hard of hearing? I told you no already."

"One day."

"Ever been thrown out of a joint before, Delbert? Because you're about to—"

"That's not my name."

"Then what the hell is?"

"Delano."

You could have heard a fishhook drop after he said that. Pop jerked a thumb at the poster picture of Roosevelt. "Same as him? How come?"

Delano Robertson, as we now knew him, blushed. "My father lived and breathed the New Deal and President Roosevelt. He was administrative assistant to one of the main members of FDR's 'Brain Trust,' Rexford Tugwell."

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"Lucky you didn't get named after him," Pop observed. "Delano, ^{huh}hey? That's halfway interesting."

He squinted in fresh appraisal of the visitor. "You're from back there?"

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"Washington, D.C., you hit it on the nose," A boyish smile accompanied the admission. "Born and bred, strict in the District, as the saying is."

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"How about that. You keep up with politics any?"

"Somewhat," came the cautious answer.

"What do you think of this guy Kennedy's chances?"

FDR's namesake was no dummy. With the Kennedy poster looming over Pop's shoulder, he said in that tone of voice a person uses in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance: "He's the better man. If sanity prevails, he'll win."

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"Nixon's a rat," Pop growled in confirmation, "you can tell by looking at the ass of a bee." He was scrubbing back and forth over the same already gleaming spot on the bar wood with his towel, a sign he was thinking hard. "So you get paid for going around and listening to people, if you can manage to get them to talking in the first place? Not a bad racket." And not too unlike what went on in a certain barroom. "Where'd you learn this oral history stuff? Harvard?" he asked hopefully, knowing Roosevelt and Kennedy had gone there.

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"Come again?" The redhead tilted a little to one side, as if catching up with what had been said.

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"Oh. Actually, no. William and Mary."

"I guess you get a longer diploma that way." Pop tossed down his towel. "Hey, Delano," he seemed to enjoy trying out the name, "I can see why you'd like to have me glued to your side at the Fort Peck doings. But even if I wanted to, I've got a business deal that same day I positively have to be here for."

Right, kiddo?" If he thought I was going to confirm the need to sell the Medicine Lodge, he was going to have a long, long wait; what he said may have been accurate, but that did not make it right. I sullenly kicked the leg of my bar stool until he took the hint and turned back to the other person whose hopes he was dashing. "Anyhow, before you go on your way, better have something to help you pack that name around. On the house. What do they drink at Willy and Mary?"

Delano Robertson smiled bashfully. "The same as ~~at~~ any college, I suppose. Kegs of beer."

"On the house' runs out after one glass," Pop made clear. While the beer brimmed to a perfect head, he included me in the proceedings by scooting an Orange Crush down the bar to where I was still perched. "This character with his ears hanging out is my son and swamper, Rusty."

Delano came at me on scissor legs for a handshake, as if we were long-lost brothers. "Twenty-five years," Pop was muttering to himself and perhaps the Roosevelt poster as he fussed the glass of beer to perfection, "where the hell does the time go?" This prompted me to give Delano a secret look of encouragement, not that he needed much of that. By now he was taking in the barroom, from the stuffed menagerie protruding from the forest-green walls, to the pressed-tin ceiling that looked as old as heaven, to the ornately carved breakfront, with its cargo of bottles and glasses and mirrors, as though he couldn't get enough of it.

"This is priceless"—he plopped down on the bar stool next to mine and twirled as if on a merry-go-round—"the way you've kept this a classic saloon, Mr. Harry."

"Yeah, well, it takes some real hard running to stay in the same place these days," Pop agreed with that. I watched him think hard ~~for a moment~~, his forehead furrowed the way that usually meant a wrestle with his conscience. "Here's the honest truth, Delano. Keep it under your hat, but I've about got a deal to sell the joint and—"

"No!" Delano cried out, whirling on his stool to face Pop. "I mean, that's totally surprising. The saloon and you, both the best of the kind, and for you to give it up now, at the height of—"

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“Would it be too ~~damn~~ much trouble to let me finish what I’m saying, do you suppose?” Pop’s glower sent Delano into retreat behind his beer glass. “That’s one of the reasons I can’t go gallivanting off to Fort Peck with you. There’s a last few things to be worked out on the deal that day, and then we’re going to sign the papers, so I need to be here instead of there, see?”

“The time is out of joint,” ~~Delano brooded as if he were about to cry in his beer,~~ “and the joint is out of time.”

“Run that by me again?”

“Shakespeare, at least the first part.” A tingle went through me, and I waited breathlessly for what Delano would cause next. “It’s just too ironic,” he went on in the same voice of gloom and doom, “that the very day you would be the center of celebration at Fort Peck will be your last as bartender here, Mr. Harry.”

That gave Pop pause, but not for long. “I didn’t bargain for everything piling up on the ~~damn~~ calendar, did I? It’s your tough luck it happens that way.” All too plainly he was ready to drop the topic and the erstwhile young collector of Missing Voices, both. “Anyhow, drink up. You’ll need the nourishment to tackle those mudjacks.”

“Sir,” Delano ~~turned to him in~~ ~~fashioned a~~ fresh inspiration, helped by some fast gulps of beer. “I heard everything you said against coming along to the reunion, and I respect every word. But at least let me show you the Gab Lab. I have it all ready to go to Fort Peck, you’ll see. It’s parked right across the street. Please? It’ll only take a minute.”

Of course I was off my stool and halfway to the front door by the time he finished saying that, but Pop hesitated before taking his apron off and following him out.

I’ve always thought what awaited Delano Robertson in the main street of Gros Ventre was so unfair. Even yet, I can see it and hear it and almost catch a whiff of it ~~as~~ as he stepped from the sidewalk to eagerly lead us across to a ~~green-and-white~~ Volkswagen van, bearing down on him no more than half

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a block away was a panicky mob of freshly shorn sheep, peeing and pooping and announcing in other ways how upset they were at being stripped of their fleeces, while in back of them, also supremely agitated, was Canada Dan, cussing the life out of the surprised pedestrian in the path of the flock. Pop and I looked on unsuspectingly at this inhospitable reception for the person who would change our life like night to day.

Our visitor froze in astonishment at the spectacle of a thousand undressed sheep ~~rapidly~~ ^{madly} advancing on him, which was a mistake on his part. Out front of the others, one ewe that must have lost her lamb as well as her wool and maybe her mind was frantically chasing back and forth, bleating blame at the world and stamping her hooves at anything in the way. She made a maddened run in Delano's direction. Can a person be buffaloed by a sheep? Whatever the fitting description, he bolted for safety as fast as his legs could carry him.

"They're just out of the shearing pen across the creek," Pop informed him as he scrambled ungracefully back to join us in the doorway of the Medicine Lodge. "Makes them a little excited." We watched the fleeceless animals, their bewildered lambs trailing them, jostle past by the hundreds. Sheep look so naked without their wool, like peeled eggs with legs. Besides that indignity, some of the ewes carried cuts where they had been nicked by the shearers' power clippers. You see pictures, all the way back to Bethlehem, of peaceful grazing flocks, but this scarred-up, loose-boweled parade would not make anyone envy a sheep's life. Delano Robertson remained wide-eyed and more than a little nervous about his van with the unsanitary swarm ~~around~~ ^{engulfing} it. "Does this happen much?"

"Oh, hell yeah," Pop said, as if this were only ordinary traffic. "The Two Medicine country is deep in sheep. Wool and lambs are its bread and butter."

Eventually the last echelon of skittery ewes passed us by, along with Canada Dan, who spat a brown stream of tobacco juice toward us and grouched, "It's getting so a man can't even herd sheep through town without a turster in the way, ain't it?"

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Delano's face lit up. "The negative interrogative! It's a linguistic pattern that's dying out in most places." His hands flew to one of many shirt pockets again for the notebook and pen as he craned a look at the departing figure, still bristling like a porcupine and spitting in our general direction. "Where's he from?"

"All over," said Pop, alluding to the job history of the Two Medicine country's most hired and fired shepherd.

"Canada," I said, giving Pop a look.

"I thought so," Delano nodded wisely, jotting in the notebook. "Linguistic patterns tend to mix along borders, likely French affecting English in him. The Gallic *n'est-ce pas* must have become *ain't it* in his cultural subgroup, don't you think?"

"Something must have affected the ess of a bee," Pop said, as if his eye still smarted. "That's Canada Dan for you."

Delano paused in his scribbling, puzzled now. "What's a 'turster'?"

"Tell you later," said Pop. "Show us this traveling contraption of yours. Watch where you step."

The street was even more of a mess than usual after sheep had gone through, and Delano pretty much tiptoed as he escorted us to the van. Reaching it, he let out a relieved "Whew!" and flung open the double doors in the middle of the beetle-nosed vehicle. "Here it is, the Gab Lab!"

Pop and I stared into what looked like a camper combined with the guts of a recording studio. The camper part was straightforward enough: a gateleg table, seats and cushions that converted into a bunk, a white gas stove cleverly hooked onto one of the double doors, and a small sink with a hand pump for water. Curtains on all the windows, a homey touch. But the rest of the interior held racks and racks of tape reels, as recorders used in those days, and two or three of the bulky machines were tucked away wherever they could fit, and headphones dangled from cabinet knobs. A typewriter was lashed to a little shelf all its own.

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Pop could not help but observe, "Kind of tight quarters unless you're a sardine, isn't it?"

"Everything is within reach," Delano defended, sounding a trifle crestfallen.

"So how does this Missing Voices deal work?" Pop wondered. "You corner people and get them to gabbing about themselves and then—"

"—after the interview has been conducted, according to professional standards," Delano said patiently, "I review it and transcribe it onto paper, right here. It's fresh in my mind that way, and there aren't those questions later as to what this word or that was." He leaned toward us confidentially. "Alan Lomax's transcription typist thought Leadbelly had written an entire song about 'swimming' instead of 'wimmin' and it took the Library of Congress folklorists days and days to figure that out and fix it." That same shy smile. "That's why I came up with the idea for the Gab Lab and was able to convince the powers that be to let me outfit it like this." He beamed proudly at the chockful camper van. "It's the only one of its kind."

Shaking his head, Pop backed away from the van. "Okay, it's been seen. Good luck."

Immediately Delano had that pleading expression again, and began, "Mr. Harry, the Mudjacks Reunion is the chance of a lifetime to—"

It only brought him more head shaking from Pop. "Listen, I can tell you think you can't do this by yourself, but you'd better make up your mind to. I'm still not gonna be Leadbutt for you and lead you around by the hand to every Fort Pecker who's got some kind of a story. I gave you my reason, and that settles it, right?"

~~Wrong, if I had anything to do with it. whatever~~
~~No, he hadn't. Not to my satisfaction. I was trying to come up with anything that would impel him~~
to the reunion instead of signing the death warrant of the Medicine Lodge, when Delano slammed one of the van's double doors hard enough to show he did have a temper.

"If you're determined to turn your back on history," ~~he slammed the other one harder yet~~ "that's that."

Thrusting his hands into side pockets of his bush-jacket shirt and hunching up mournfully, he

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looked around at the town, mostly at the street with its sheep leavings, some of which he had stepped in.

Without much hope, he inquired, "Is there a campground somewhere along the creek?" He was asking me because Pop, still shaking his head, was making a beeline back to the saloon. "Maybe I'd have better luck at fishing," Delano muttered, scraping his shoe on the curb.

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Inspiration sometimes comes from the least likely source. "Fishing?" I repeated loudly. "Gee, I don't just know where you'd go, the creek has been too roily practically forever."

Pop stopped short in the middle of the street. He turned his head enough to ask, "You fished much back east?"

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"Hmm? Oh, a tad."

Whatever a tad was, it did it. "Tomorrow's Sunday," Pop mused, as if it were his own sudden discovery. "We could show you the best fishing spot on the face of the earth, couldn't we, Rusty?"

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Delegating me to escort him to the house, where he could park his traveling home and office in the driveway overnight for a nice, early start on catching fish, Pop headed back to the Medicine Lodge in lifted spirits, calling over his shoulder: "You'll have rainbow trout running out your ears before we're done with you."

Delano had brightened measurably by the time he and I climbed into the van, probably at the prospect of a safe haven where marauding sheep could not get at him. Riding in the Gab Lab was an adventure in itself—wait till I told Zoe!—what with the recording gear and highway maps and other clutter its usual occupant had to scoop out of the passenger seat to make room for me. He apologized for his housekeeping and I told him not to worry, it matched ours. "There's only your father and you?" he asked, and I started in ~~full-bore about Pop and my mother splitting the blanket~~ about my mother leaving when I was real little, but before I could say more, he sympathized by telling me his parents ~~had divorced~~ ^{too,} when he was a child and now were both dead, which effectively put him way beyond me in orphanhood, so I quit babbling.

As he drove, he evidently ~~was still~~ bothered by the events competing with the Mudjacks Reunion.

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“What is this play that’s so vitally important?” he asked peevishly. “Something by someone local?”

“Oscar Wilde.”

“Oh.”

I figured it was my turn. “What’s ‘bobbasheely’ mean?”

“Mmm, something like moseying along.”

“Then why not just say ‘moseying along’?”

“You wouldn’t want vanilla to be the only flavor of ice cream, would you?” He had me there.

By then we were pulling in to the house, met by a stiff breeze along the creek, which was ruffling the front-yard trees. Igdrasil appeared to be doing a rain dance, its boughs swaying rhythmically and its leaves shimmering in countless motions. Fantastic clouds, fat and billowy, hovered beyond the giant tree, as if waiting their turn with the wind. “I hope your father is a good judge of the weather,” Delano glanced up dubiously. “It looks stormy.”

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“That’s nothing. We had a thirty-year winter, you know. It never let up from Thanksgiving until—”

“A Packard straight-eight! What a piece of history!”

Unquestionably he had spotted the dark hulk at the end of the driveway. The surprise was mine, next, when he enthused, “Those old babies were absolute wonders—horsepower to burn. Bootlegger specials.” He imitated the rat-a-tat-tat of a tommy gun so effectively, I gave a start. “Did your father pick it up in a government seizure sale, do you know?” I didn’t, but I was sure going to ask now.

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“Ah, well,” he pined with a mysterious grin, “if only the godly carriage could talk.”

Grown-ups are like that, I had to accept one more time, evidently even ones barely old enough to shave. Yet somehow Delano was hard not to get attached to—maybe it was the name—and I was prepared to keep him company for the afternoon, but he had work to do. “The Gab Lab is a trusty servant, but a hard master,” he said, if I heard him right. Before I could traipse off and leave him to his

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undersize laboratory, though, he made the mistake of asking, "Where's a place in town that serves a good dinner?"

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"You get paid money to listen in on people, Mr. Delano? Like a spy?"

"Hmm? To listen to what they have to say, yes, but it's actually not like spying because—"

"Oh. You don't get to sneak up on them without their knowing it?"

"Not at all. Oral history is strictly face-to-face. Interviewer, interviewee, and the mike."

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"But then if you can't listen to them without their knowing it, how can you tell they're not lying when they say things right to you? Isn't that what 'bare-faced liar' means?"

To say Delano had his hands full at the corner table in the Top Spot only begins to describe the situation, because along with attempting to eat a chicken-fried steak and contend with Zoe's barrage of questions, there was the surplus of conversation in the crowded café constantly at the edge of one's hearing. Pop's maxim that Saturday night buys the rest of the week held as true here as in the Medicine Lodge, as Zoe's mother bustled along the counter from customer to customer and to the other few tables, apologetically pouring coffee, while Pete Constantine, in his slipping cook's hat, manhandled matters in the kitchen. Trying to take it all in, our dining partner was having to stretch his attention in a number of directions at once.

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"He's been to college for that, Zoe," I stuck up for his presumed ability to recognize truth or falsehood when it looked him in the face. "Isn't that so, Mr. Delano?"

"Just Del, all right? No need to be fancy among friends, hmm?" He took a couple of sips of the Spot's watery coffee to escape dealing with Zoe's philosophical inquiry into bare-faced liars, meanwhile trying to listen in on two oilfield roughnecks at the counter mystifyingly talking about Christmas tree valves on a mud rig.

"Del" Zoe dropped her voice to first-name confidentiality, "do they teach acting where you

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went to college?"

"Come again?" He tipped his head slightly in that habit of his, until she repeated, "Acting."

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"Ah, a drama department, do you mean?" He grinned down at her. "Are you sure you need one?"

He worked on his chicken-fried steak, the night's special, seeming puzzled to find not a recognizable steak under the gluey-looking brown gravy and breading, but merely pulverized meat.

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"Rusty, what do you know for sure?"

The voice so close behind my chair it made me jump was the nosiest in town, and quick as I was to be on my guard, Zoe's eyes already were flashing me a warning. Chick Jennings had been the postmaster before buying the Pastime saloon a few years back, and as Pop put it, he liked to know everybody's business but his own. "He runs that joint like he's still doing government work," the best bartender who ever lived ~~had said dismissively~~ ^{scorned} of this most amateur one. "Doesn't put in the hours a real saloon needs. And he talks customers into the ground, which is why that joint is so dead."

Chick Jennings's jowly face now hung over me like the man in the moon as he lowered his voice confidentially. "Your daddy found a taker for the famous Medicine Lodge yet?"

"Not that he's told me about." Which was narrowly true; it had been overheard fair and square through the vent. Zoe radiated approval.

The Pastime owner looked deeply disappointed at the lack of gossip to take away. "Tell your daddy for me he beat me to the punch, putting the thing up for sale. The saloon business does wear a man down." He wagged his head in sympathy I didn't believe. "I never figured I'd outlast Tom Harry."

"I'll be sure to tell my father that."

Delano was following this, wisely silent. I knew Chick Jennings would not leave until his curiosity was satisfied, so I said: "This is, uh, Mr. Robertson. He's here to go fishing."

"That so? Where do you come from, Mr.—"

"Oh, look, your supper sack is ready," Zoe piped up as Pete Constantine's hand plopped the brown

bag on the serving window.

Actually, it was understandable if Chick Jennings would rather talk than eat the Top Spot's version of food, but he wagged his head again about the call of duty at the Pastime and went off looking unsatisfied.

"I take it Gros Ventre is a two-saloon town," said Del, amused.

"His is a dump," Zoe dismissed the Medicine Lodge's competition so scornfully it did my heart good. "In Butte," she confided in the voice she used for secrets, "we call a saloon like that a deaf and dumb institute."

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Professional listener or not, Del looked as if he had not heard that quite right. "Say again?"

Patently she did, complete with explanation: "A bartender like him will talk you deaf and you're dumb to drink there in the first place."

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My turn to issue a warning as her mother sidled along the counter toward us, coffee pot in action. "Here she comes, Zoe, you better get busy eating."

With a world-class sigh, she fiddled a fork onto her otherwise untouched plate, then eyed Del's. "I bet you aren't getting enough supper," she expressed sudden concern. "Here, you can have some of mine." Before he could turn down the offer, she was dumping a major chicken-fried helping onto his. When he protested that he could not possibly eat all that, she assured him, "That's okay, you can just leave it."

Her mother arrived, clucking approval as she inspected the progress of Zoe's meal. "That's what I like to see, honeybunch, good appetite." Patting Zoe and giving me and my milk shake and cheeseburger her usual doubtful glance, she turned to Del with her most motherly smile. "I hope my little good-for-nothing isn't being too much of a nuisance."

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"Not at all," he maintained with a straight face, "she's no trouble." That was an underestimation of Zoe if I ever heard one, but as soon as her mother left us, he took care of it. "I have sisters like you. Holy terrors."

Glowing at the compliment, she went back to peppering him with questions. I concentrated on my burger and shake until, ~~eyes a little flirtatious in~~ ^{movie style}, she reached: "So, Del, are you married?"

"No," he reported, shy again. I could see something change in his eyes. "I came close right after college, but she chose a finance major from Richmond instead." He pulled his chin in, almost to his collar button, and intoned in that voice-of-doom style of old newsreels, "This is the way the world ends, not with a whim but a banker."

Zoe and I looked at each other in the same instant. There was no mistaking it. Shtick doesn't happen by accident. He had just done a bit.

After that, how could we resist showing him the keenest costume shop this side of Shakespeare's closet?

"How incredible!"

Del turned in circles in the middle of the back room of the Medicine Lodge, gaping at ~~everything~~ ^{it all}, the hocked haberdashery ~~on~~ ^{filling} the walls, and the tools and such piled in corners, and the lariat coils gracing the rafters. "There are museums that don't have this much!" He looked as excited as if he were the third kid in the room. "Where did ~~it~~ ^{this} all come from?"

I explained Pop's policy of drinks for loot, as he called it. While I was doing so, Zoe skipped up to us with a set of Stetsons she'd swooped off the wall.

"Here, have a hat."

"No, really, I—" Del watched each of us clap one on like veteran riders of the plains and stand there looking at him expectantly. He gulped and glanced around, but the back room was an empty stage except for us, so he gingerly took the kangaroo-brown cowboy hat Zoe was thrusting at him—"This one goes nice with your shirt"—and put it on. It was not a bad fit, and feeling braver, he experimentally tugged it lower on one side of his forehead like every movie cowboy. "Git along, little doggies," he

drawled, winning our instant approval.

Zoe and I trailed him as he toured the room. "That's a Texican saddle," he exclaimed, rushing over to the biggest and oldest of the horse gear. "It had to have come north on a cattle drive. That dates it to the eighteen seventies or early eighties, before the winter of '86." The first thirty-year winter! Just when you figured he was green as a pea, he would come up with something like that. "I like old things," he was saying, happy as pie, "You know they've lasted for a reason." Gazing around, he shook his head in awe. "Imagine, ~~eighty or so years of~~ ^{nearly} ~~the past are~~ ^{century} stored away in this room. It's like a King Tut's tomb of the prairie." Suddenly he lifted his Stetson as high in the air as his long arm would reach. "Hats off!"

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Quick as a heartbeat, Zoe and I were lofting ours, too, even if we didn't yet know what the bit was that we were doing.

"To Tom Harry!" Del resoundingly completed the tribute, clapping his Stetson back on in emphasis. "Rusty, your father is a gatekeeper of history. A living legend in the Two Medicine country, that's obvious from all this." He shook his head in wonder. "The same as he was at Fort Peck."

Yes, but ~~is~~ now teetered on becoming ~~was~~ again. As Del sailed off around the room in search of further wonders and Zoe tagged after him, leaving me with a dark-eyed look of understanding, I stayed rooted in the spot where I had taken my hat off to my father. My mind kept spinning back and forth over the fact that these old, familiar surroundings would no longer be ours, very soon. The Select Pleasure Establishment of the Year, the oasis of the Two Medicine country, the back room that was my second home, this would all vanish from my life and his the minute he signed over the Medicine Lodge to a bee esser who could hardly even run a gas station. It didn't seem fair. Swallowing hard, I gazed up to the stairway landing and could just see that stupid weenie Duane Zane plastering himself to the vent. It pained me even more that this was the last Saturday night, the final time Zoe and I could have huddled there, gleefully listening in on the extravaganza of voices while Pop bartended to perfection, but instead we were stuck with being polite tour guides for this enthusiast of collections of all kinds.

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I couldn't stand it.

In the infinitesimal time it took for the snap of my fingers to travel the length of the room to where he was perusing a wall practically curtained in reins and bridles and quirts and other leather accessories while she chattered at him, Zoe must have read my mind. Del paid no attention whatsoever to my finger snap, but she glided purposefully back to me, already radiating intrigue. We consulted in whispers.

"Should we let him in on it?"

"I dunno. We don't want him blabbing to people about it."

"Maybe he's smart enough not to."

"Maybe."

Together we contemplated the redheaded stick figure over there, engrossed in a workhorse harness. One of us shrugged, one of us nodded, and it somehow constituted agreement.

"Del? Can you keep a secret?"

"Hmm? I suppose." He turned around to us, blinking his way back to the land of the living. "I mean, absolutely."

Zoe specified: "Swear on the tailbone of a black cat killed in a graveyard at midnight?"

Interested now, he bobbed his head.

"You have to say it," she directed severely.

Concentrating hard, he recited it to Zoe's satisfaction. With that settled, we led him up the stairs to the landing and, fingers to our lips, sat him down next to the vent grille. Zoe allowed me to do the honors of silently levering it open and letting in the sounds of Saturday night getting under way in the barroom.

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"Dode, I haven't seen you in hell's own while. How'd you winter?"

"Oh, I made it through to grass. Jesus H. Christ, though, did you ever see snow like that? I had to put stilts on my snowshoes to get to the barn."

The voices—mostly male, but with a wife's or a girlfriend's occasionally pealing in—came chorusing clearly as ever through the vent, joking and complaining—

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“That honyocker was supposed to help out on this fencing deal, but he called up sick. Allergic to postholes, probably. So I guess I got to go at it bald-headed.”

—arguing politics—

“I'm telling you, if the Democrats get back in, this country's done for.”

“Are you kidding? What the Republicans already did to the country would gag a maggot off a gut wagon.”

—gossiping tooth and nail—

“Didn't you hear? She left him, for some scissorbill at their high school reunion.”

—toasting to faith in the future—

“Here's to eighty-pound lambs in the shipping pen and a new checkbook!”

—and ordering another drink just in case—

“Tom, when you get a chance, how about a couple more glasses of vitamin B for us down at this end?”

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“You got it, two Shellacs coming right up.”

—all of it as though the Two Medicine country possessed a communal throat that Leadbelly himself might have envied for its lifetimes of verses, all of it fairly singing into the ear Del Robertson was pressing to the vent slats.

“How amaz—” he started to say out loud, before two sets of small hands covered his mouth.

“Sorry,” he whispered as Zoe and I withdrew our hands. “But it is amazing! Voices like these are usually so scattered, you can never collect this many in one place.” He took on a tone of awe. “This is like discovering the Mississippi Delta of gab. Now I know how Alan Lomax felt.” We smiled smugly. “I have to get some of this down,” he muttered while urgently searching into the flap pockets of his shirt

for the notebook and pen that held Canada Dan's contribution to the language. "It's pure *lingua america*."

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"It's what?" Zoe or I or more likely both of us ~~whispered immediately.~~

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"I'll explain later. Let's listen."

As often as not, though, the lingo coming into his ear was also over his head. "I'm calling it a night," said someone, who indeed sounded as though he had spent a liquid evening, "I got to go out in the morning and do the round dance."

Hesitating in his scribbling, Del looked at us as if he ~~were~~n't sure he had heard right.

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"Plow a field," my ~~whisper~~ ^{murmur} enlightened him, "around and around."

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"Mm-hmm, how apt." He scrawled away madly until another in the chorus of lubricated voices proclaimed that if things didn't pick up in the sheep business pretty soon, his herder was going to have to live on side hill pork.

sidehill, per Dictionary of American Regional English

Zoe took that one. "Poached deer." From Del's expression, you could tell he was thinking along the line of Top Spot specialties such as chicken-fried steak, until she rolled her eyes. "You know," she practically hissed in his ear, "shot out of season."

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It went on that way, with him industriously listening and jotting until one of us asked, "Why don't you just set up your recorder?"

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"I'd love to, but I can't. It's not ethical."

"Then why are you writing stuff down?"

"That's different," he maintained, not totally convincingly, "it's only random collecting."

"Like spying, you mean."

"No," he whispered insistently, "I don't mean that. All this is"—he sounded like he was coming up with it from some rule book—"is a set of unstructured linguistic encounters."

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Whatever it was, the three of us took in everything the vent had to offer until at last Zoe sighed

fatalistically. "It's nine, I have to go. Bedtime," she pronounced, as if it were a jail sentence.

"Me, too." I looked at Del, but still wrapped up in the language of Saturday night in the Medicine Lodge, he had not taken the point. "You'd better, too, if you're going fishing with Pop."

Rainbow Reservoir looked much murkier than I remembered—even though my memory of it was perpetually colored by being skunked in the derby every year and not catching much on these spontaneous outings of Pop's—and considerably deeper, given the runoff from the winter of big snows and then the spring blizzard and the unseasonal rains ever since. The water was lapping right up to the rocks we usually stood on to fish. Pop seemed unbothered by that fact. Lots of water meant lots of fish, he assured us, an equation Del lifted sleepy eyebrows at but didn't question.

"Pop?" Recent circumstances made me curious about the reservoir dam, an earthen slope between the piney bluff where the parking lot was located and the similar shoulder of land across the way. "How does dirt hold back the water?"

He followed my gaze to the dam and the concrete spillway in its middle, with white water rushing down to where the South Fork of English Creek resumed, then shrugged. "Pile enough dirt together and it just does, that's all."

"I bet that took a lot of dirt at Fort Peck, huh?" I asked cagily.

"The dammedest dirt dam in all of Creation, as it used to be called?" He frowned at me and the topic. "Yeah, I'd say it took plenty."

"More earth than was moved in the digging of the Panama Canal," Del provided between yawns.

"There, see?" Pop told me. "All you have to do is ask something and a monkey comes out of a tree with the answer." He said it jokingly enough, however, finishing off the coffee in his thermos cup and taking last drags on a precious cigarette of his daily ration as he gazed up at the ~~skyline~~ ^{mountain}, which still held the pink of dawn. "Can't beat this if you want nature," he provided his customary tribute to the

mountain scenery practically in our faces, then got busy digging out fishing gear from the car trunk. Assembling his rod and reel with alacrity while the other two of us ~~did our own~~ ^{a lot more slowly} ~~more slowly~~, it occurred to him to make sure Del was not incurably addicted to fancy fishing.

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“Ever use bait instead of flies made out of feathers, did you, back east?”

“All the time.”

“That’s good, it ought to be in the Constitution that people have to fish with real bait. Here’s how we do it, but don’t tell nobody, got that?”

So saying, he shook out a prime chicken gut from the bait can and cut it into strips. Del cautiously watched us bait up before touching his share of the gooey stuff.

“Come on, you two.” Pop lost no time picking his way down to the waterline, calling over his shoulder. “You can’t catch fish if you don’t have your hook in the water.”

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That may have been so, but a pesky breeze was ruffling the lake as usual, and I was determined not to have my hook blown back in the direction of my ears. Using pliers, I put an extra sinker, like an enlarged lead BB, on my line, close to the hook and spinner. After watching me at it, Del took the pliers and, to my astonishment, crimped several sinkers onto his line. Busily casting, Pop was not paying attention to anything beyond persuading trout to take a bite of chicken guts.

I don’t know that this is in the Bible, but there is a time to participate and a time to spectate. Something told me to hang back on the reservoir bank and see what Del was about to do.

First of all, he advanced to the lake by degrees, tinkering with his reel, plucking at his line, making twitchy little back-and-forth tries with his pole. Finally he reached the water, but as if sneaking up on it sideways, I had seen many, many peculiar stances in the fishing derbies, but never this. Gripping the pole in both hands like a baseball bat, he swung it all the way back until the tip nearly reached the ground behind him, then whipped it forward in a tremendous arc. Carried by the weight of the sinkers, the hook and line sailed and sailed, until dimpling into the lake three or four times farther out than

Pop's cast.

"Where the hell did you learn that?" asked Pop, staring at the extent of fish_line beyond his.

"Surf casting. In the Atlantic. Oops, got a bite."

It was the first of a good many. I was kept busy stringing Del's catch of rainbow trout onto a forked willow stick and cutting up bait for him, which I volunteered for to evade thrashing the water with my own pole, as usually happened. Pop was not ready to change a lifelong style of casting and take up catapulting, but I noticed his casts were more muscular than usual, and fish out toward the middle began finding his bait, too. The two men struck up the kind of conversation that catching fish on a scenic lake under a blue sky can lead to, Del asking this and that about the Two Medicine country and Pop inquiring in turn about life on the road in the Gab Lab.

"It still seems to me you're a glutton for punishment, Delano," he shook his head but in a humorous way—"traveling around in a glorified tin can. It can't be any too much fun, either, when someone sees that microphone of yours and comes down with mental laryngitis. ^{So} What keeps you doing it?"

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That question seemed to flip a switch in Del. "Sir," he began in a serious voice—

"Hey, I'm not your commanding officer, am I."

"Sorry, Mr. Harry. The interviews—"

"Cripes, are you allergic to first names?"

Somewhat bashfully, Del managed to come out with "Tom" and get back onto his train of thought.

"The interviews fill a historical need. If we don't capture people's own stories, history is told from the top down. Rome fell, and that's that, period. But the Roman Empire was so much more than the Caesars and gladiators and such," he went on like a classroom instructor, "it was a way of life and language that lasted on and on in ordinary people. That's where a hybrid language such as *lingua franca* spoken around the Mediterranean came from, people of all walks of life spreading the words, sorry

about the pun." By now he was really getting wound up, a lot busier with this than with fishing. "And here in our own time, we have the technical means to actually document it when people put history into their own words and vice versa." He looked momentarily pleased with himself. "Actually, I put some of this in my grant proposal for the Missing Voices project. It seems to have worked." He sobered again. "But traveling around in the Gab Lab is going to produce oral history of a particularly valuable kind, I'm absolutely sure of it. Wherever I can manage to point that microphone, it's waiting to be found, *lingua americana*."

He paused, suddenly embarrassed about sounding ~~as if he were~~ reading all this off a card he carried in his wallet. "Alan Lomax has it easier in a way," he admitted with the shy grin that made him likable, "he only has to say he's crazy about the blues. *'Everythin' nailed down, 's comin' loose.'*" he growled illustratively. *"Seems like livin' ain't no use."* That kind of thing, you know."

Pop was listening as only he could, taking in every word while still tending to the business of baiting up and casting. "So why be crazy about history," he prodded, "when you can't even sing it?"

Del laughed slightly, then turned serious.

"I suppose this will sound idealistic, but why not? To try to understand human nature a little better, according to every history professor I ever had. They could all quote George Santayana in their sleep." His voice went so deep it seemed to come from his shoe tops: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

His fish ^{pole} ~~line~~ swished as he made another two-fisted cast toward the middle of the reservoir. "Besides, I just somehow find it the most interesting thing in the world, listening to people tell about their lives. Maybe it started all the way back in nursery rhymes, but I can't get enough of stories."

Watching Pop, I could see that registered on him, but maybe not the way I hoped. "I don't know about you and Santa Ana," he said skeptically as he cast for more ^{trout} ~~fish~~, "but I hear all kinds of bee ess when people start telling me their life stories. So, how do you know you're getting anything halfway

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fishpole

true when they rattle off to you?" There: Zoe's question exactly.

"Tom, you might be surprised at the sobering effect of a microphone and a tape recorder," Del replied mildly. "When they know that their words will be preserved in an archive, most people stay quite honest. Careful in how much they say, maybe, but on the up and up with what memories they are willing to share." He was back to reciting, as if it were a creed. "Oral historians have to count on what's called the moral edifice embodied in remembrance."

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"What's morals got to do with it?" Pop squinted across the boulders in Del's direction, twitting him a little or maybe not. "If you think you're gonna get anywhere at Fort Peck, you'd better not be picky about what some of those folks were up to, back then." My ears pricked up, but he stopped at that.

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"That's no problem," Del was grinning. "You know how it is, all sorts of things end up in a collection, mine as well as yours."

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His ~~line~~^{pole} swished in a fresh cast. Pop's did not.

"I'll go clean the fish," I said, grabbing up the whole catch and scrambling off along the bank toward the spillway to escape Pop's look. But I couldn't get away from what he was saying, loud and clear: "You know what, it sounds like somebody just might have let you snoop around the back room of the joint."

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"Rusty was kind enough to let me poke my head in," Del's voice faltered a bit, then rallied. "It's a marvel, Tom, to see what you've gathered. How you've done it all—" He shook his head in tribute.

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"The Rockefellers spent millions on collecting for Williamsburg."

"It's a lot of years' worth of taking stuff in when cash isn't there, for sure," I could barely hear the gruff response over the rushing sound of the spillway. "That's over, a couple days from now."

The rest of that Sunday has blurred in me, the way a long stay in a hospital waiting room dulls away into a memory of dread at what was waiting ahead. I'm confident in saying fried ~~fruit~~^{rainbow} was the

special at the Top Spot that suppertime, but beyond that, all I am sure of is that Pop was busy at being busy going over the saloon's accounts one last time, Del was holed up in the Gab Lab doing whatever he could to get ready for the multitude at Fort Peck, and Zoe and I spent a pitiful afternoon in the deathly quiet Medicine Lodge, with not even the farewell whisper of a voice sifting from the barroom to the back room. It was like an all-day funeral.

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Which changed like a thunderclap around bedtime that night.

Or rather, like the surprise barrage of thunder that could be felt in the floorboards of the house as lightning made the lights flicker, causing Pop to jump up from the kitchen table and his spread of paperwork while I scrambled to turn off the Selectrics game I was halfheartedly listening to, lest the radio tubes be blown out.

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As the next terrific rumble arrived, we rushed to a side window, the same thing on both our minds. There, squarely beneath Igdrasil's biggest limbs, perfectly targeted if lightning struck the old tree, sat the VW van, just as Del had parked it.

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Had it been either of us out there, the erstwhile Gab Lab already would be roaring to life and hightailing out from under that threat. The undisturbed faint light behind its drawn curtains indicated no such thing had occurred to its oblivious occupant.

By now the wind was picking up and rain had cut loose with the other elements, drumming down so hard we couldn't be heard if we yelled out to him. "Damn," said Pop, and some more than that. The situation was as plain as the repeated lightning flashes and rolls of thunder. One of us would have to go out in the storm, and I hoped it didn't have to be me.

I underestimated. Pop was putting on his slicker, but handing me mine, too. "I'm gonna have to move the Packard some so he can pull in behind it at the end of the driveway. Quick, go tell him to hurry up about it."

As the two of us slogged into the dark back yard like sailors in rough weather, I barely heard his

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shout to me over the rain: "And tell the clueless ess of a bee to come sleep in the house out of this racket."

I splashed out to the van with the merciful message. Give Del some credit, he had that van going almost before I could scramble into the passenger seat out of the downpour. After parking out from under Igdrasil, he speedily threw pajamas and such in a bag and made a dash for the house with me.

Pop was there ahead of us, mopping his face and hair with a kitchen towel. I shucked off my dripping slicker in the hallway, while Del just dripped. "Whew. There's a lot of weather in this part of the country."

"You haven't seen any weather until you get to Fort Peck," Pop informed him. "Let's get you a bedroom. That one next to yours, Rusty."

However, Del seemed in no hurry to retire for the night now that he was under secure shelter, gazing around the house in that deer-eyed way of his and asking about this and that and the other. I kept hovering at the bottom of the stairway to show him to his bedroom, more than ready for my own after a day that had begun with fishing and gone downhill from there. I suppose I was out of sorts. All right, I was definitely out of sorts, yawning impatiently as Del toured the downstairs rooms as if this were Williamsburg West.

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"Is this the original wainscoting?" he was asking as he trailed through the hallway a second time, running his fingers along the nicely carved panel wood. "How interesting. I haven't seen this kind since my grandfather's country place."

"I don't know whether it's original," Pop muttered carelessly, plainly thinking about bed himself, "but it's old as hell."

"Come again?" Del already was looking off to one side, maybe interested in the ceiling plaster now. That irritating haughty little habit of asking for something to be repeated got to me. Couldn't he for crying out loud pay attention to what was being said, the first time around? Couldn't he—

Suddenly I wondered. That slight stiff-necked 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."

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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

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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 ~~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.

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“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, 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, Tom, 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. “The powers that be would 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 half way makes sense, some other damn thing comes along."

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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 sheepherders 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."

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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

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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 his 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 damndest 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.

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“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 grain fields go by too slowly. We'd had to pile ourselves and everything else into the van even earlier than for 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~~ ^{nothing} much 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.

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“Say you wanted to take one of those buttes”—he was squinting into the distance toward the only

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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?”

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“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, were 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.

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“Every piece of machinery on those mud boats 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.

mudboats, like mudjacks

“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.”

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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

famous

the mudjacks at their muddiest. I was back on top of the world. The magnitude of Fort Peck in his 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 Medicine Lodge as the most pleasurable of all the saloons in the state, and family fame in newspapers far and wide, and Delano Robertson 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 ~~at twelve or at any other known age~~, there is no spell more dizzying.

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 ~~eager-beaver~~ 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 cross-eyed 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 honyocker 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, that's rule number—" He caught my look and broke off. "Hey, is this as fast as this crate will go?"

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"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 crew cut 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?"

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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 rough as a rasp. "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."

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

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

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

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 tremendously tall and long dike, even Pop, I



believe, climbed out like a pilgrim at a fateful shrine.

It still was quite the sight, all these years after a much younger Tom Harry ~~had seen~~ ^{marveled at} the mud start ^{ing} 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 mud fill, to compress everything in 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 ~~one of the wonders of the modern world here would proudly hold a Mudjack Reunion,~~ 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 Mudjack Reunion.

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~~"It really is some rezavoy," He 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 were hard to believe. "Wasn't any of this here when I came in '33."~~

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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.”

~~Nonetheless~~

~~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 question~~ ^{obvious}. “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 toolsheds.”

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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 Hooverilles with paydayes. 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 tar paper 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 sheepherders seem luxurious.

“Help me with something, please,” 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—”

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“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 laughed 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 off the discourse all too soon. “Enough of that. We better get to getting, or we won’t be ready at the damn reunion.”

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

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My toes curling, I glanced down at the dam fill under us. "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 held still 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 ^{see} look ~~what's what~~ 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 ~~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!

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"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, twenty 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 powers that be don'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. This was not like doing a bit when Zoe was the only audience. Beside me, Del looked as uncertain 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."

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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."

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"Funny I hadn't heard about any big jamboree." The storekeeper pondered that. "When's this?"

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"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 purchase and stowed some in reserve. The rest of the ice, he had us get rid of 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 at Fort Peck as if they had come up the river to spawn. The reunion site was a riverbank park with picnic tables and scrubby wind-bent 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, which 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."

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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 sweltered 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 borrowed from the Gros Ventre Chamber of Commerce’s fishing derby resources. 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 spectate nice and quiet, got that?” He squared his bow tie and set his jaw.

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“Come on, let’s go hijack mudjacks.”

I wish I had adequate words for the performance that followed. Pop sifted into that Fort Peck crowd, meeting and greeting old customers he had 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 were 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 page boys 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 were no longer fledgling dam builders escaping the Depression for a night out in a boomtown saloon,

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but middle-aging husbands and fathers who saw in this familiar white-shirted bow-tied figure, with eyebrows knowledgeably 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, either, with the attention that followed him through the crowd, but he dispensed with it as if he were on the job 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.

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

change
Comment [CES4]: Ed/au: This seems like an anachronism: if this is set in 1960, would he be using terms such as "musically challenged," which sounds like a parody of the politically correct language that grew popular only in the mid- to late eighties?

"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 Martin."

"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.'"

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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 coughed that away, "but what Delano here would rather hear

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about is something like when the dam slid. You were mudjacking that day, don't I remember?"

"Whoa, you know I was. Right there on the top of the dam when the goshdamn railroad tracks started to bow and the goshdamn 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."

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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."

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Curly halted practically in midstep. "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 Finger Curly."

But, but a couple of missing, doesn't he?
Short-handed

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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 café, more like a hash joint."

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"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 other 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, one after another, sat down under the Gab Lab awning 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 he 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 his intent brow down his whole body, which at times would be practically doubled up with anticipation and at 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 cannily attuned to whatever was being said, the five Ws and an H taken care of in the most natural kind of way.

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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 turned out to be 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 it blindfolded. Even the safari shirt proved itself, its pockets producing batteries to keep the recorder rolling, old clippings about Fort Peck to help jog memories, 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!"

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I listened all I could between making runs to the slushy tub for Select; listened, entranced, to the

