

*a couple of times*

*# a couple of times*

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

That low old ranch house of Walter Kyle's was as private a place as could be asked for. To sit there at the table looking out the window to the south, down the slope of Breed Butte to the willow thickets of the North Fork and beyond to Grizzly Reef's crooked cliffs and the line of peaks into the Teton River country, was to see the earth empty of people. Just out of sight down the North Fork was our ranger station, and only over the brow of Breed Butte the other direction was the old McCaskill homestead, now Hebnerized. But all else of this <sup>long</sup> North Fork <sup>coulee</sup> valley was vacancy. Not wilderness, of course. Scotch Heaven left traces of itself, a few homestead houses still standing or at least not quite fallen down, fencelines whose prime use now was for hawks to perch on. But any other breathing soul than me, no. The sense of emptiness all around

*Roman Reef?*

*im*

made me ~~think about~~ <sup>ponder</sup> the isolation those early people <sup>, my father's parents among them,</sup> landed themselves

into here. Even when the car arrived into this corner of the Two

Medicine country, mud and rutted roads made going ~~some~~ <sup>anywhere</sup> no easy

task. To say nothing of what winter could do. Some years the snow here

drifted up and up until it covered the fenceposts and left you guessing

its depth beyond that. It went without saying that those homesteaders

of Scotch Heaven did not know what they were getting into. But once

in, how many cherished this land as their own, whatever its conditions?

It is one of those matters hard to balance out. Distance and isolation

create a freedom of sorts. The space to move in according to your

own whims and bents. Yet it was exactly this freedom, this fact that

a person was a speck on the earth sea, that must have been too much

for some of the settlers. From my father's stories and Toussaint

Rennie's, I knew of Scotch Heavens who retreated into the dimness

of their homestead cabins, and the worse darkness of their own minds.

Others who simply got out, walked away from the years of homestead

effort. Still others who carried it with them into successful ranching.

Then there were the least lucky who took their dilemma, a freedom

of space and a toll of mind and muscle, to the grave with them.

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

# ———  
That's next thing to hopeless, to spend your time wishing you weren't in the fix you are. And so I fished like an apostle, and read and read, and hung around the ranger station betweentimes, and eventually <sup>even</sup> came up with something else I wanted to do with myself.

—————→

mom

The ~~These~~ magazines must have ~~planted~~ <sup>seeded</sup> the notion in me. In any case, it was during those hot drifting ~~late~~ <sup>last of</sup> August days that I proposed to my mother that I paper my bedroom.

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

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

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

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

hall.

"All right," my mother surrendered. "It's too hot to argue.

The next time anybody makes a trip to town, we'll pick up your paste."

# —————

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

I'd ~~so~~ much like to have had ~~some~~ western scenes, but do you know, I could not find

any that were worth a damn. A story called Bitter Creek showed a guy riding with a rifle across ~~the pommel of~~ his saddle and some packhorses behind him. The packhorses were all over the scenery instead of strung together by rope, and there was every chance that the guy would ~~blow~~ <sup>blast</sup> his leg off by not carrying that rifle in a scabbard.

pommel

So much for Bitter Creek. Then there was a story which showed a couple on horseback, which ~~stopped~~ <sup>drew</sup> me because ~~they~~ <sup>the pair</sup> made me think of Alec and Leona. It turned out, though, that the setting was a dude ranch, and the line ~~in~~ under the illustration read: One Dude

drew  
the pair

REVISED

Ranch is a Good Deal Like Another. You Ride Horseback and You  
Overeat and You Lie in the Sun and You Fish and You Play Poker  
and You Have Picnics. All of which may ~~have been~~ true enough,  
 but I didn't think it interesting enough to deserve wall space.

No, the first piece of art I really liked was a color illustration  
 in Colliers of a <sup>tramp</sup> freighter at anchor. And then I found a Post piece  
 showing a guy leaning on ~~the railing of another~~ the railing of another merchant  
 vessel and looking across the water to a beautiful sailing ship.

REVISED

'As the 'Inchcliffe Castle' Crawled Along the Coast of Spain,  
Through the Strait of Gibraltar, the Engineer Was Prey to a  
Profound Preoccupation.

This was more like it. A nautical decor, just what the room could  
 use. I went ahead and snipped out whatever sea story illustrations  
 I could find in the stack of ~~Illustrated~~ magazines. I could see that  
 there wasn't going to be enough of a fleet to cover the whole wall,  
 but ~~there was~~ <sup>I came across</sup> a Mr. Moto detective series that went on practically  
 forever and so I filled in along the top of the wall with <sup>action scenes from</sup> that, as  
<sup>contrasting</sup> a kind of border.

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

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

# \_\_\_\_\_



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

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

Six were my father's. One near the head of the South Fork of English Creek. One at the base of Billygoat Peak. Two in the old Phantom Woman burn, probable <sup>3</sup>/~~4~~ snags alight. One in northwest behind Jericho Reef. And one up the North Fork at Flume Gulch.

The McCaskill household was in gear by daybreak.

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

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

to keep me out of the ~~the~~ station with all this going on.

As soon as I stepped in I saw that Chet and Paul looked braced. As if they were sinners and this was the morning after, when they had to stand accountable to a tall red-haired Scotch preacher. # My father on the other hand was less snorty than he'd been in weeks. Waiting for the bad to happen was <sup>always</sup> harder for him than trying to deal with it once it did.

~~was all my father said to the pair of them,~~  
 "All right," ~~said my father,~~ "let's get the guys to chasing these smokes." Chet started his switchboard work, ~~Paul began writing~~ <sup>and</sup> the log of who was sent where at what time.

Paul began assessing where he ought to pitch in person.

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

like Roman candles.

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

It was mostly good news I was able to repeat to my mother when I visited the house for gingersnaps just past mid-morning. Chet had reported to headquarters in Great Falls, "We've got 10 a.m. control on four of ours"--the South Fork, Billygoat and the two Phantom Woman situations. All four were snag strikes, lightning gashing into a dead tree trunk and leaving it slowly burning, and the nearest fire guards had been able to get to the South Fork and Billygoat ones, while the Phantom Woman pair turned out to be close enough together that the smoke chaser who's been sent up there managed to handle both. So those four now were history. Jericho Reef and Flume Gulch were actual blazes; small ones, but still alive and trying.

A fire guard named Andy Ames and a smokechaser named Emil Kratka ~~were~~ were on the Flume Gulch blaze. Both were new to that area of the Two, but my father thought well of them. "They'll stomp it if anybody can." Jericho Reef, so much farther back in the mountains, seemed more like trouble. Nobody wanted a backcountry fire getting underway in weather like this. Paul had nibbled on the inside of his lips for a while, then suggested that he ~~under~~ fetch the CCC crew that was ~~nibbling~~ <sup>repairing</sup> trail on the North Fork and go on up to the Jericho Reef situation. My father told him that sounded right, and Paul charged off up there.

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

# ~~was~~ <sup>is</sup> was the only comparatively good news in the Two Medicine National Forest that ~~Sunday~~ <sup>Saturday</sup>. On his Indian Head district <sup>south of us,</sup> Cliff Bowen had a fire away to hell and gone up in the mountains, under the Chinese

Wall. A bunch of EFFs--emergency fire fighters, those were; casual labor who were signed on in a real pinch--were being sent from Great Falls, but it would take Cliff most of the day just to hike them up to his fire.

*noq* there. "Gives me a nosebleed to think about fighting one up there,"

my father commiserated. And at Blacktail Gulch down by Sun River,

Murray Tomlin was still scooting his smokechasers here and there

to tackle <sup>a dozen</sup> snag strikes. The worst of the electrical storm must have

dragged through Murray's district on its way to Great Falls.

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

Had he known, he would have <sup>something</sup> muttered stronger. It turned out to be a snake of a day. By the middle of

the morning, Chet was ~~reporting~~ telling Great Falls about 10 a.m.

control on one ~~end~~ of our two blazes--but not the one he and my

father expected. Jericho Reef was whipped, Paul and his CCs found

only a <sup>quarter-acre</sup> ~~half-acre~~ ground fire there and promptly managed to mop it

up. "Paul should have taken marshmallows," my father was moved to joke

to Chet. Flume Gulch, though, had grown into something full-fledged.

All day ~~Sunday~~ <sup>Saturday</sup> Kratka and Ames had worked themselves blue against the patch of flame, and by nightfall they thought they had it contained.

But ~~Monday~~ <sup>Sunday</sup> morning the fire ran, took off ~~up~~ down a slant of the gulch into a thick stand of lodgepole. In a hurry my father

yanked Paul and his CCs back from Jericho Reef to Flume Gulch, and

I was ~~missing~~ <sup>killing</sup> time in the ranger station, late that morning, when

Chet passed along the report Paul was phoning in from the guard cabin

nearest to Flume Gulch. # Thus I was on hand for those words of Paul's

that became ~~legendary~~ <sup>fabled</sup> in our family. # "Mac," Chet recited them, "Paul

says the fire doesn't look that bad. It just keeps burning, is all."

"Is that a fact," said my father carefully, too carefully. Then it all came.

"Kindly tell Mr. goddamn Eliason ~~from~~ from me that it's his goddamn

job to see to it that the goddamn fire DOESN'T keep burning, and that

I--no, never mind." # My father got back his breath, and most of his

temper. "Just tell Paul to keep at it, keep trying to pinch it off

against a rock formation. Keep it corralled."

Monday made Sunday look good. Paul and his CC crew still could not find the handle on the Flume Gulch fire. They would get a fireline built around most of it, then a burning lodgepole pine would crash over and come sledding down the gulch, igniting the next stand of tinder-dry timber. Ten a.m. came and went, ~~with~~ with Paul's report substantially the same as his ones from the day before: not that much fire, but no sight of control.

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

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

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

"The same way you do every summer," <sup>suggested</sup> ~~said~~ my mother.

~~Paul's report~~

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

"No, only about every other summer. As soon as you get them trained, Sipe or the Major move<sup>S</sup> them on and hand<sup>S</sup> you the next fresh ones."

"Yeah, well. At least these two aren't as green as they were a month ago. For whatever that's worth." He was drinking that coffee as if it was going to get away from him. It seemed to be priming him to think out loud. "I don't ~~like~~ like it that the fire ~~got away~~ <sup>outjumped</sup> ~~from~~ Kratka and Ames. They're a real pair of smokehounds, those guys. It ~~is~~ take<sup>S</sup> something nasty to be too much for them. And I don't like it that Paul's CCs haven't got matters in hand up there yet either."

My father looked at my mother as if she had the answer to what he was saying. "I don't like any of what I'm hearing ~~about~~ from Flume Gulch."

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

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

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

"Am I." He carried his empty coffee cup to the sink and put it in the dishpan. "Well, Lisabeth McCaskill, you are famous the world over for your lunches."

I'd be crazy to pass one up, wouldn't I."

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

"Bet, there's nothing I'd like more. But I don't get the feeling it's being handled. Paul's been lucky on his other two fires this summer, they both turned out to be weinie roasts. But this one isn't giving up."

~~He~~ prowled over to the window where Roman Reef and Phantom Woman Peak could be seen. "No, I'd better get up there and have a look."

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

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

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

"Her and Alec, I mean."

"All right. What about them?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," she said ~~with firmness~~ firmly. "I know that story."

"Well, Alec doesn't look that way. He did earlier in the summer.

But when I saw him at the Double W that time, he looked like somebody had knocked the blossom off him. Like Leona had."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then what--what do you think will happen after that? With Alec, I mean. Alec and you and Dad."

"We'll just have to see in September. Your father still has his mad on about Alec throwing away college. For that matter, I'm not over mine either. To think, a mind like Alec's and all he wants to do is Prance Around Like--" she caught herself. Then got back to her tone of thinking out loud: "And knowing Alec, I imagine he's still just as huffy as we are."

"Maybe"-- I had some more <sup>careful</sup> ~~deciding to do here,~~ <sup>than ever,</sup> how ~~much~~ to say this so as not to <sup>bring about</sup> ~~cause~~ something which would rile Alec even more--

"maybe if you and Dad sort of stopped by to see Alec. Just dropped <sup>the Double W,</sup> by sort of."

"I don't see how it would help." Not until Leona and the college question are out of the way. Another family free-for-all won't

24A

improve matters. Your father and your brother. They'll have to

get their minds off their argument, before anything can be done.

So." # The "so" <sup>which</sup> ~~that~~ meant, we have now put a lid on this topic.

But she added, as if it would reassure me: # "We wait and see."

# —



Say this for the Forest Service life, it enlarges your days.  
after my mother and I were done with breakfast  
Not long ~~after~~ the next morning, the telephone rang. Everybody  
in a ranger's family knows the rings of all the lookout sites and  
guard cabins on the line. This signal was from the fire guard Ames's  
cabin, the one nearest to Flume Gulch.

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

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

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

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

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

, in edited form,  
 I relayed this to my mother. She didn't say anything. But with  
 her, <sup>often</sup> silence conveyed <sup>enough</sup> a lot.

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

This voice was my father himself.

"It is an ornery sonofabitch," he was informing Chet. "Every  
 time a person looks at it, it looks a little bigger. We better  
 hit it hard. Get hold of Isidor and have him bring in a <sup>camp setup.</sup>  
~~fireman~~  
 bars and flophouses and <sup>fifty</sup> ~~50~~ EFFs." EFFs were emergency fire  
 fighters, guys ~~recommended~~ scraped together and signed up from the  
 bars and flophouses of Galena Street in Butte and Trent Avenue in  
 Spokane and First Avenue South in Great Falls.

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

"Five-oh, Chet."

Pause.

Chet was swallowing on the figure. With crews of EFFs already  
 on the Chinese Wall fire and the fires down in the Lewis and Clark

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

"Grub," my father was going on. "Get double lunches in here for us today, and a cook for the camp by tonight. The CC guy we been using could burn water. I'm going to get some use out of him by putting him on the fire line."

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

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

I jumped, but managed: "Yeah?"



minds, my father's and my mother's and mine, we had known that unless the ~~August~~ weather let up it would be a miracle not to have a fire somewhere on the Two. Montana weather, and a miracle, neither one is anything to rest your hopes on. But why, out of all the ~~Two~~ English Creek district of the Two Medicine National Forest, did the fire have to be there, in that extreme and beautiful country of Flume Gulch.

I heard the pickup door  
~~My mother was called~~ open, and my mother call: "Jick! Let's go."

I opened the screen door and stepped from the kitchen. Then  
 called back: "No, I ~~don't think I will~~ think I'll just stay here."

From behind the steering wheel she sent me a look of surprise.  
 "Do you ~~not~~ feel all right?" That I would turn down a trip to town must be a malady of some sort, she figured.

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

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

"Yeah, well, I can ~~do~~ <sup>manage to</sup> do that."

cut

As I was counting on, she didn't have time to debate with me.

"All right then. I'll be back as soon as I can." And the pickup was gone.

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

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

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





~~I looked at the clock. Coming up on the noon hour. The time~~  
to do it.

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

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

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

"I came to see if it's okay if I use the town line. I forgot  
to tell Mom something and I want to ~~say~~ leave word for her at ~~Helwig's~~  
<sup>Lunchery</sup> ~~store~~."

"Sure thing. Nothing's going on ~~with the lookouts~~ right now,  
you can help yourself. You should've just rung me, Jick. I'd have gone

they can  
not  
listen

Uh-huh, and  
in and switched it for you." ~~And~~ more than likely have stayed on

and listened, ~~and~~ as was a dispatcher's habit. Rubbering was something  
that worked both directions.

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

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

"Right. Thanks, Chet. Like I say, I won't be long."

I moseyed around the corner of the station out of Chet's sight, then ~~ran~~<sup>sped</sup> like hell <sup>back</sup> to ~~the~~ our house.

Facing the phone, I sucked in all the breath I could, to crowd out my puffing and my nervousness about all that was riding on this idea of mine. Then I lifted the receiver,



*Perfect  
Chet  
OCT 1951  
stay  
shaded  
up  
put some  
done  
accompl*

→ rang central in Gros Ventre, and asked to be put through to the Double W.

Onto the line came a woman's voice:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, that'd be too late. I need to talk to him now, it's just

that it's, like I said, private. Family. A family situation has come up. Arisen."

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

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

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

Now a dead stretch of time.)

But my mind was going like a million. All of the summer to this minute was crowded into me. From that suppertime when Alec stomped out with Leona in tow, through all the days of my brother going his stubborn way and my parents going their stubborn one, through my times of wondering how this had come to be, how we McCaskills <sup>had</sup> so tangled our family situation; to ~~right~~ now, when I saw just how to unknot it all. ~~Turning and turning in my thoughts,~~ at last it was coming up right, <sup>III</sup> the answer was about to dance within this telephone line--

change

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

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

"You're right about that."

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

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

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

*more?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

More of the seashell sound, the void. Then:

"Jick, no. I can't."

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

"I'm not going to ask him."

"You mean you won't ask him."

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

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

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

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

"Jick, listen. No, I can't or won't, ~~and~~ however you want to say it. But it's not ~~to get back at Dad~~ <sup>because of Dad, it's</sup> not to get back at him or anything.

It's--it's all complicated. But I got to go on with what I'm doing.

I can't--" All these years later, I realize that here he very nearly

said: "I can't give in." But ~~that~~ <sup>the way</sup> Alec actually finished that sentence

was: "I can't go galloping home any time there's a ~~spot~~ <sup>speech</sup> of trouble.

If somebody was sick or hurt, it'd be different. But--"

"Then don't do it for Dad," I broke in on him, and I may have

built up to a shout

for this: "Do it because the goddamn country's burning up!"

"Jick, the fire is Dad's job, it's the Forest Service's job,

it's the job of the whole crew they'll bring in there to Flume

Gulch. It is not mine."

"But Alec, you can't just--" Here I ran out of argument. The

dead space on the telephone line was from my direction now.

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

"I guess we're not."

"Things will turn out,"

~~"See you, Jick,"~~ said my brother. "See you, Jick." And the phone

connection ended.

# —

It was too much for me. I stood there <sup>gulping</sup> ~~trying to~~ gulp back tears. <sup>9</sup> The house was empty, yet they were everywhere around me. The feel of them, I mean; the accumulation, the remembering, of how life had been ~~was~~ when the other three <sup>of my family</sup> were three, instead of two against one. <sup>Or</sup> ~~that~~ one against two, as it looked now. Alec. My mother. My father.

People. A pain you can't do without.

Eventually I remembered to ding the phone, signaling Chet that I was done with the town line. Done in, was more like it. <sup>#</sup> For the sake of something, anything, to do, I wandered to my bedroom and listlessly thumbed through magazines for any more sea scenes to put on the wall. Prey to a Profound Preoccupation, that was me.

# —

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

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

Civility was nowhere among all that crowded my brain just then.

I simply blurted:

"Are you going up to the fire?"

"Thought I would, yeah. A man's got to do something to ~~fight~~<sup>ward off</sup>  
frostbite."  
~~chillblains, in this kind of weather."~~

My mother was giving Stanley her look that could peel a rock.

But in an appraising way. I suppose she was having second thoughts

about what she had set in motion here, by fetching Stanley from the

~~any possible help for my father~~  
Busbys' ranch, and then third thoughts that ~~something had to be tried,~~  
~~was better than no~~  
~~and on and on.~~ help, then fourth thoughts about Stanley's capacity  
to be any help, and on and on.

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

"I better not take time, Bet. I can get by without it." The  
fact was, it would take more than coffee to make a difference on him.

"Who's this dispatcher we got to deal with?"

My mother told him about Chet, Stanley nodded, and she and he headed

for the ranger station. Me right ~~after~~<sup>behind</sup> them.

"Getting those lunches up there'd be  
~~"That'd be a real help, all right,"~~ a real help, all right,"

Chet agreed when my mother presented Stanley. But all the while he

had been giving Stanley a going-over with his eyes, and it must be  
looked as old and bunged-up  
said, Stanley ~~did~~<sup>did</sup> look the worse for wear; ~~Not somebody you would~~

and afflicted as the night in the cabin when I <sup>was</sup> ~~rewrapped~~ <sup>ing</sup> his massacred hand. In this instance, though, the affliction was not Stanley's hand but what he had been pouring into himself with it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and afflicted as the night in the cabin when I reversed his massaged

hand. In this instance, though, the affliction was not Stanley's hand

but what he had been pouring into himself with it.

Not somebody you would put on a fire crew, at least if your name

was Chief Barrow and the responsibility was directly traceable to you.

This time, though, Stanley wasn't singing. To my surprise I

missed it quite a lot.

# —

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

"He's A-number-one at it," I chirped in commemoration of Stanley's

breakfast the morning of my barrow.

Chief needed more vouching than my notorious appetite. He turned to my

mother. If ever there was a grand high authority on food, it was her. She

his throat. "Well, let's get you signed up here."

Stanley stepped over to the desk with him and did so. Chief

looked down at the signature with interest.

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

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

All politeness, Stanley inquired: "The who?"

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

"None that I know of."

# —————  
Chet went back in his belfry, and Stanley headed to the barn to rig up a saddle horse and Brownie as a pack horse. Ordinarily I would <sup>have</sup> gone along to help him. But I was shadowing my mother, all the way back to the house.

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

"Mom? <sup>I've</sup> ~~it~~ got to go with Stanley."

The same surprise as when I'd ~~asked~~ stepped up and asked ~~her~~ to dance the Dude and Belle with her, that distant night of the Fourth. But this request of mine was ~~not~~ a caper in a more serious direction. "I thought you'd had enough of Stanley," she reminded me, "on that camptending episode."

"I did. But that was then." I tried, for the second time this

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

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

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

Serious as all this was, my mother couldn't stop her quick sideways grin at the notion of me around food full-time. But then she sobered. With everything in me, I yearned that she would see things my way. That she would not automatically tell me I was too young, that she ~~at last~~ <sup>at last,</sup> would let me play a part, even just as a chaperone, in this summer's stream of events.

4 Rare for Beth McCaskill, not to have an answer ready by now. By

now she must have been on tenth and eleventh thoughts about the wisdom of having asked Stanley <sup>Maxwell</sup> to go to Flume Gulch.

My mother faced me, and decided.

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

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

~~7~~ Stanley was my next obstacle.

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

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

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

Canada Dan and Bubbles and Dr. Al <sup>9</sup> K. Hall in a tin cup had come into my ~~own~~ life at the elbow of this man and he could stand there and ask me that?

I shot back, "Does anybody ever?"

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

# —

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

man  
out

# —

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

No, I concentrated on keeping us moving at a fast walk, at least as fast as I could ~~get~~<sup>urge</sup> Pony's short legs to go.

Something was different, though. This time, Stanley wasn't singing.

To my surprise I missed it quite a lot.

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

A quantity of smoke is an unsettling commodity. The human being does not like to think its environs are flammable. My mother had the memory that when she was a girl at Noon Creek, the smoke from the 1910 fires brought a Bible-toting neighbor, a homesteader, to the Reese )

doorstep to announce: "This is the wrath of God. The end of the world is ~~now~~<sup>come</sup>." Daylight dimming out to a sickly green color and no distinct difference between night and day, I suppose it would make you wonder.

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

Stanley too had undergone the 1910 smoke. In the cabin, he had told me of being on that fire crew on the Two fire west of Swift Dam.

"Such as we were, for a crew. Everybody and his cousin was already fighting some other sonuvabitch of a fire, Bitterroot or somewhere else. We dabbled at it <sup>here</sup> as best we could, a couple of weeks. Yeah, and we managed to lose our fire camp. The wind come up <sup>and</sup> turned a flank of that fire around and brought it <sup>right</sup> into the camp. A thing I never will forget, Jick, all the canned goods blew up. That was about all that was left when the fire got ~~done~~ done with that camp, a bunch of exploded goddamn tin cans."

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

# —————  
Now that my father had stepped in as fire boss at Flume Gulch, Paul Eliason was the camp boss. I will say, Paul was getting things in good order as we arrived. We rode in past a couple of CCs digging a toilet trench, <sup>while</sup> ~~and~~ Paul himself and ~~also~~ another CC were setting up a council tent, ~~and~~ the feed ground--the kitchen area--already was built.

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

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

"Paul, this is Stanley, uh--"

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

"--and, and he's here to--" I finally found the inspiration I

needed: "Chet signed him on as your cook." Well, as far as it went, that was true, wasn't it?

Paul studied this news. "I thought <sup>Chet told me</sup> he was going to have to

get one out of Great Falls, and the chances didn't look real good even there."

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

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

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

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

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

"Uh huh," <sup>emitted</sup> ~~came~~ from Paul, more as a sigh than an acknowledgment.

Stanley swung his gaze around the camp in interest. "Have ~~Did~~ you got ~~have~~ some other candidate in mind for cook?"

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

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

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

Possibly this was the first time a member of a fire crew ever arrived with an excuse from his mother, and it sure as hell was Particularly from a mother such as mine. nothing Paul Eliason had ever dealt with before. You could all ~~see~~ *squatting there on* but see the thought ~~take over~~ his mind: what next from these damn McCaskills? ~~But he~~ *Paul* only said: "You sort that out with your father."

*sailed* And ~~went~~ off to finish worrying the camp into being.

Fire Camp  
ca. 1944  
P.S. ↓

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

"So," Stanley announced. "I guess--"  
This I could have completed in my sleep ~~we~~ "we got it to do."

The Forest Service being the Forest Service and Paul being Paul, there hung a FIRE CAMP COOK BOOK on a nail at the serving table. Stanley peered over my shoulder as I thumbed to the page title ~~the~~ FIRST SUPPER, then ran my finger down that page to where it was

another  
dicky

decreed: Menu--beef stew.

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

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

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

Over beside the ~~boxes~~<sup>packs</sup> of groceries, Stanley was leaning over his saddlebags. Oh, Jesus. I could forecast the rest of that movement before it happened, his arm going in and bringing forth the whiskey bottle.

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

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

"No, damn it. We got ~~fifty~~<sup>seventy-five</sup> men to feed. One of us has got to have enough damn brains to stay sober."

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

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

"Just taste it, Jick." Stanley was ~~patiently~~ holding the bottle out to me, patient as paint.

All right, all goddamn right; I had run out of thinking

~~don't they~~

patiently

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

Water.

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

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

# —————

#  
FC  
CMA, P10

# ———  
"The Forest Service must of decided everything tastes better  
with tin around it," observed Stanley as he dumped ~~in~~ <sup>into the boiler</sup> eight cans  
each of tomatoes and peas.

"Sounds good to me, <sup>right now,</sup> I said from where I was slicing up ~~a~~  
~~couple~~ <sup>several</sup> of dozen carrots.

# ———

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

"Yeah." I was tending a round boiler in which twelve pounds  
of prunes were being simmered for dessert, but figured I could  
~~go~~ <sup>drive</sup> back and forth between tasks. "How much?"

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

I went and looked again at the FIRST SUPPER page.

"  
7.10

# { Twenty loaves.

# ———

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

"It doesn't."

"It which?"

*IC  
Coke,  
P. 11*

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

"Aw,  
~~oh,~~ goddamn."

# —

My right arm and hand felt as if they'd been slicing for years.

I remembered I was supposed to set out five pounds of butter to go

with the bread. Stanley now was <sup>the one</sup> at the cook book, <sup>swearing steadily</sup> ~~pulling at his~~

~~was~~ <sup>for the third time</sup> as he tried to divine the proportions of salt and pepper for

<sup>a wash boiler of</sup> ~~all that~~ stew.

"What's it say to put this butter ~~in~~?"

*P. 11*

{

His finger explored along the page. "Pudding dishes. You got

time to start the coffee after that?"

"I guess. What do I do?"

*P. 11*

{

"Fill two of those halfbreed boilers with <sup>in the creek —</sup> ~~water.~~"

# —

When Paul at last popped over to tell us the fire crew was on its way in for supper, he couldn't help ~~looking us over~~ <sup>eying us</sup> dubiously.

I was sweaty and bedraggled, Stanley was parched and bedraggled.

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

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

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

Shortly the CCs <sup>streamed</sup> ~~came~~ into camp, and Stanley and I were dishing food onto their plates at a furious rate. A day on a fire line is ash and sweat, so ~~the~~ <sup>these</sup> CCs ~~would~~ were not exactly fit for a beauty contest. But they were at that brink of manhood--all of them about Alec's age--where energy <sup>recovers</sup> ~~comes~~ back in a hurry. <sup>In fact,</sup> Their appetites recuperated instantly. Some CCs were back on line for seconds

before we'd finished serving everybody a first helping.

Paul saw how swamped Stanley and I were with the serving, and sent two of his CC camp flunkies to take over from us while we fussed with reheating and replenishment. The fifty emergency fire fighters from Great Falls were yet to come.

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

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

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

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

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

"You're--" That stopped not only my father's tongue but all other parts of him. He stood rooted, ~~trying to register my presence.~~

And when I sunk in, so to speak, he of course had ~~nothing~~ to get his mind to decide who to skin alive for this, Paul or Chet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're kind of on the prod, Mac," observed Stanley. "You don't

care that much for slumgullion, huh?"

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

Stanley was opening his mouth, and I knew that out of it was going to ~~come~~ <sup>drop</sup> the reply, "Cooking." To head that off, I piped:

"Mom figured you could use our help."

"She figured what?"

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

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

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

the run on us anytime you want. But ~~until~~ <sup>until</sup> you do, we can handle this cooking for you."

My father at last said: "I'm not putting the run on anybody.

Dish me up some of your goddamn slumgullion."

#

It was getting dusk when the EFFs arrived into camp like a raggletaggle army. These men were drift, straight from the saloons and flophouses of First Avenue South in Great Falls, and they more

One guy even had a beard.

than looked it. Supposedly a person couldn't be hired for emergency fire fighting unless he ~~had~~ <sup>owned</sup> a stout pair of shoes, but of course the same passable shoes showed up on guy after guy in the signup line,

~~and~~ Most of these ~~EFFs~~ <sup>now</sup> were shod in weary leather, and hard-worn blue jeans if they were ranch hands, and bib pants if they were

gandy dancers or out-of-work smeltermen from Black Eagle. Motley as they looked from the neck down, ~~though, I was more interested in~~ <sup>paid keener attention to</sup>

copy  
my  
have  
looked  
last

their headgear. There was a legend in the Forest Service that a fire boss once told his signup man in Spokane: "Send me thirty men

if they're wearing ~~hats~~ <sup>Stetsons</sup>, or fifty if they're wearing caps." Most

of these EFFs at least were ~~hatted~~ <sup>they were</sup> used to ~~the~~ <sup>work,</sup> outdoors, were not

city guys except for recreational purposes.

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

"Hey, Jick!"

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

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

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

# —————

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

# —————

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

Fire Camp  
 chks, 12-13-  
 recipes multiplied 2 1/2  
 for 75 men

Whack off <sup>150</sup>~~200~~ slices of ham for frying. Oatmeal, <sup>4</sup>~~3~~ pounds into  
<sup>(each)</sup> ~~2~~<sup>2</sup> ~~16~~<sup>16</sup> quart boilers Milk for the mush, 15 tall cans of Segoe mixed  
 with the same of water. Potatoes to make fried spuds--thank the  
 Lord, we had just enough of the canned variety so ~~that~~ I didn't  
 have to start peeling. Fill two more halfbreed <sup>3</sup> boilers for coffee,  
 slice another oodle of bread, open <sup>7</sup> cans of jam.

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

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

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

#

That morning, my father put his fire fighters to doing everything that the Forest Service said should be done to ~~fight~~<sup>in</sup> such a battle.

Fire lines were being dug, snags were being felled, wherever possible

the flames were pinched against Flume Gulch's rocky outcroppings. ~~rocky patches.~~

It truly was a bastardly site to have to tackle ~~a fire.~~ The fire

had started at the uppermost end of the gulch, amid a dry tangle

of windfall, and was licking its way down through ~~the~~<sup>jingly</sup> stands of

lodgepole pine on the gulch's steep sides. Burning back and forth

as a falling flaming tree or a shower of sparks would ignite the

opposite wall of forest. So in a sense, in a kind of sloshing pattern

the fire was coming right down the trough of nature's version of a

flume, aiming itself into the creekside trees along the North Fork

and the high grassy slope opposite the gulch. And all the forested

country waiting beyond that slope.

To even get to the fire my father's men had to climb up the

face of the creek gorge into the gulch, and once there they had

to labor on ground which ~~always~~<sup>sharply</sup> sometimes tilted ~~up~~ ahead of them

and sometimes tilted sideways but always tilted. At breakfast I

had heard <sup>one of the</sup> CCs telling the EFFs that Flume Gulch was a spraddledy-ass <sup>damn</sup> place. Besides being high and topsy-turvy the fire battleground was hot and dry, and my father designated Wisdom Johnson to be the Flume Gulch water cow.

What this involved was making trips along the fire line with a 5-gallon water pack on his back, so that the thirsty men could imbibe a drink from the pack's nozzle--the tit. ~~What~~ "I thought I had done every job there was," claimed Wisdom, "but <sup>I never hit this one.</sup> ~~this is new.~~"

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

"What'd it say?" I pumped Wisdom before he could start back up with his <sup>stoking</sup> water pack, ~~refilled~~.

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

"A lot of Great Falls nights coming out through the pores,"

Stanley put in piously from the work table where he and I next were going to have make double lunches for the 75 fire fighters.

FC club  
p. 9

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}

which, the cook book enlightened us, amounted to 150 ham sandwiches, 150 jam sandwiches, and 75 cheese sandwiches.

# —

FC  
club p. 9

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"Slice the meat about four slices to the inch," I read, <sup>in a prissy voice.</sup> "Slice the bread about two slices to the inch." Christamighty, they want us to do everything by the measurement and then don't provide us any damn thing to measure with."

"Your thumb," said Stanley.

"My thumb what?"

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

# My thumb and I  
set to slicing.

# —

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

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

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

What told me most about the nature of a forest fire, however, was a single tree, a low scrawny jackpine at that. It had managed to root high up ~~in~~ within a crack in one of the gulch's ~~rock~~ rock formations, and as I was gawking around trying to register everything, I saw that tree explode. Spontaneously burst into flames, there on

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its stone perch so far from any other foliage or the orange featheredge of the fire itself.

I found my father and read his face. Serious but not grim. He came over to my pack of sandwiches and plowed into one. I glanced around to be sure Paul wasn't within hearing, then said: "It doesn't look that bad. It just keeps burning, is all."

He had to grin at that. "That's about the case. But I think there's a chance we can kick it in the pants this afternoon. Those First Avenuers



are starting to get their legs under them. They'll get better at  
 fire line work as the day goes on." He ~~dumped the last of his~~ <sup>studied the sky above Roman</sup>  
 Reef as if it would answer what he said next. "What we don't need  
 is any wind."

To shift himself from that topic, my father turned to me.

"How about you? How you getting along?"

"Okay. I never knew people could eat so much, though."

"Uh huh. Speaking of which, pass me another sandwich, would  
 you." Even my father, conscientiously stoking food into himself.

It was as if the fire's hunger for the forest had spread an epidemic  
 of appetite among us as well.

My father watched Stanley divvy sandwiches out to ~~the next crew.~~ <sup>a nearby bunch of EFPs.</sup>

"How about your sidekick there?"

"Stanley's doing real good." Then ~~I gave~~ <sup>was inviting</sup> the further answer I  
 knew my father ~~wanted~~: "He's staying dry."

"Uh huh. Well, that's news. When he does get his nose in  
 the bottle, you let me know. Or let Paul know if I'm not around.  
 We got to have a cook. One'll have to be fetched <sup>in here from somewhere</sup> when Stanley  
 starts a bender."

"If he does," I agreed because of all that was involved, "I'll

~~say so~~  
 tell you."

~~in here~~  
~~from~~  
~~somewhere~~

~~say so.~~

# \_\_\_\_\_

66

REVISED

OK

Through the afternoon I flunkied for Stanley. Hot in that base  
 camp, I hope never to suffer a ~~hotter~~ <sup>more stifling</sup> day. It was all I could do  
 not to wish for a breath of breeze.

Stanley too was sweating, his shirt dark with it. This would  
 teach him to joke about other ~~drinkers'~~ drinkers' pores.

And he looked in ~~semi-bad~~ <sup>semi-awful</sup> shape. Agonized around the eyes, the  
 way he had been when Bubbles butchered his hand. What bother~~ed~~ <sup>ed</sup> me  
 more than his appearance, though, he was swigging oftener <sup>and oftener</sup> at the  
 bottle.

*Thirst  
for  
alcohol  
or  
oftener*

As soon as Stanley went off to visit nature, I got over there to  
 his saddle pack, yanked the bottle~~d~~ out, and sipped. It still was  
 water with a whiskey trace. Stanley's craving thirst was for the  
 trace rather than the water, but so far he hadn't given in.

This lifted my mind. As did the continuing absence of wind.  
 By ~~late afternoon~~ I was predicting to Stanley, "I'll bet they get  
 the fire whipped."

"Maybe so, maybe no," he responded. "Where a forest fire is  
 concerned, I'm no betting man. How about peeling me a ~~bucket~~ <sup>teb</sup> of  
 spuds when you get the chance."

# \_\_\_\_\_