

## ONE

This time of year, the report from the dust counties in the northeastern part of the state customarily has it that Lady Godiva could ride through the streets there without even the horse seeing her. But this spring's rains are said to have thinned the air sufficiently to give the steed a glimpse.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, June 1

That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country. In my life until then I had never seen the sidehills come so green, the coulees stay so spongy with run-off. A wet May evidently could sweeten the universe. Already my father on his first high patrols was encountering cow elk drifting up and across the Continental Divide to their calving grounds on the west side. They, and the grass and the wild-hay meadows and the benchland alfalfa, all were a good three weeks ahead of season. Which of course accounted for the fresh mood everywhere across the Two --as it's always said, spring rain in range country is as if halves of ten-dollar bills are being handed around, with the other halves promised at shipping time. And so in the sheepmen, the cowmen, the storekeepers of Gros Ventre, our Forest Service people, in just everyone that start of June, hope was up and would stay strong as long as the grass did.

Talk could even be heard that Montana maybe at last had seen the bottom of the Depression. After all, the practitioners of this bottomed-out notion went around pointing out, last year was a bit more prosperous, or anyway a bit less desperate, than the year before. A nice near point of measurement which managed to overlook that for the several years before last, the situation of people on the land out here had been godawful. I suppose I ought not to dwell on dollar matters when actually our family was scraping along better than a good many. Even though during the worst years the Forest Service did lay off some rangers--Hoovered them, the saying went--my father was never among them. True, his salary was jacked down three times, and Christ only knew if the same wasn't going to start happening again. But we were getting by. Nothing extra, just getting by.

It gravels me every time I read a version of those times that makes it sound as if the Depression set in on the day Wall Street tripped over itself in 1929. By then Montana already had been on rocky sledding for ten years. The winter of 1919--men my father's age and older still just called it that sonofabitch of a winter--was the one that delivered hard times. Wholesale. As Dode Withrow, who had the ranch farthest up the south fork of English Creek, used to tell: I went into that '19 winter with four thousand head of ewes and by spring they'd evaporated to five hundred. Trouble never travels lonesome, so about that same time livestock and crop prices nosedived because of the end of the war in Europe. And right along with that, drought and grasshoppers showed up to take over the dry-land farming. It began to be just a hell of a situation, my

father always summed up those years when he and my mother were trying to get a start in life. Anyplace you looked you saw people who had put twenty years into this country and all they had to show for it was a pile of old calendars. Then when drought circled back again at the start of the Thirties and joined forces with Herbert Hoover, had progressed to worse. That is within my own remembering. Rancher after rancher and farmer after farmer getting in deeper with the banks. Gang plow and ditcher, work horses and harness, haymow and cream separator: everything on those places was mortgaged except the air. And then foreclosure, and the auctioneer's sale. Nor, from what we heard, was the situation here in the Two as hard as what was going on elsewhere. Autumn upon autumn, to take just one further example from a possible many, the exodus stories kept coming out of the High Line grain country to the north and east of us, and right down here on the highway which runs through Gros Ventre anybody who looked could see for himself the truth of those tales, the furniture-loaded jitney trucks with farewells to Montana painted across their boxboards in big crooked letters: GOODBY OLD DRY and AS FOR HAVRE YOU CAN HAVE 'ER.

So it was time hope showed up.

Jick! Set your mouth for it!

Supper, and my mother. It is indelible in me that all this began there right at the very outset of June, because I was out working over my saddle and lengthening the stirrups to account for how much I had grown in the past year, for the ride up with my father on the counting trip

the next morning. I can even safely say what the weather was, one of those brockle late afternoons under the Rockies when tag-ends of storm cling in the mountains and sun is reaching through wherever it can between the cloud piles. Tell me why it is that details like that, saddle stirrups a notch longer than last year or sunshine dabbled around on the foothills some certain way, seem to be the allowance of memory while the bigger points of life hang back. At least I have found it so, particularly now that I am at the time where I try to think what my life might have been like had I not been born in the Two Medicine country and into the McCaskill family. Oh, I know what's said. How home ground and kin together lay their touch along us as unalterably as the banks of a stream direct its water. But that doesn't mean you can't wonder. Whether substantially the same person would meet you in the mirror if your birth certificate didn't read as it does. Or whether some other place of growing up might have turned you wiser or dumber, more contented or less. Here in my own instance, some mornings I will catch myself with a full cup of coffee yet in my hand, gone cold while I have sat here stewing about whether my years would be pretty much as they are by now had I happened into existence in, say, China or California instead of northern Montana.

Any of this of course goes against what my mother forever tried to tell the other three of us. That the past is a taker, not a giver. It was a warning she felt she had to put out, in that particular tone of voice with punctuation all through it, fairly often in our family. When we could start hearing her commas and capital letters we knew the topic had become Facing Facts, Not Going Around with our Heads

Stuck in Yesterday. Provocation for it, I will say, came from my father as reliably as a dusk wind out of a canyon. Half a night at a time he might spend listening to Toussaint Rennie tell of the roundup of 1882, when the cowmen fanned their crews north from the elbow of the Teton River to the Canadian line and brought in a hundred thousand head. Or the tale even bigger and earlier than that, the last great buffalo hunt, Toussaint having ridden up into the Sweetgrass Hills to see down onto a prairie that looked burnt, so dark with buffalo, the herd pinned into place by the plains tribes. Strange, but I can still recite the tribes and where they pitched their camps to surround those miles of buffalo, just as Toussaint passed the lore of it to my father: Crows on the southeast, Gros Ventres and Assiniboines on the northeast, Piegans on the west, Crees along the north, and Flatheads here to the south. Something to see, that must've been, my father would say in his recounting to the rest of us at supper. Varick, somebody already saw it, my mother would come right back at him. What you'd better Put Your Mind To is the Forest Supervisor's Visit Tomorrow. Of if she didn't have to work on my father for the moment, there was Alec when he began wearing a neck hanky and considering himself a cowboy. That my own particular knack for remembering, which could tuck away entire grocery lists or whatever someone had told me in innocence a couple of weeks before, made me seem likely to round out a houseful of men tilted to the past must have been the final stem on her load. Jick, I can hear her yet, there isn't any law that says a McCaskill can't be as forward-looking

as anybody else. Just because your father and your brother--

Yet I don't know. What we say isn't always what we can do. In the time after, it was her more than anyone who would return and return her thoughts here to where all four of our lives made their bend. The summer when--she would start in, and as if the three-note signal of a chickadee had been sung, it told me she was turning to some happening of that last English Creek summer. She and I were alike at least in that, the understanding that such a season of life provides more than enough to wonder back at, even for a McCaskill.

JICK! Are you coming, or do the chickens get your share? I know with all certainty too that that call to supper was double, because I was there at the age where I had to be called twice for anything. Anyway, that second summons of hers brought me out of the barn just as the pair of them, Alec and Leona, topped into view at the eastern rise of the county road. That is, I knew my brother as far as I could see him by that head-up way he rode, as if trying to see beyond a ridgeline in front of him. Leona would need to be somewhat nearer before I could verify her by her blouseful, but those days if you saw Alec you were pretty sure to be seeing Leona too.

Although there were few things more certain to hold my eyes than a rider cresting that rise of road, with all the level eastern horizon under him as if he was traveling out of the sky and then the outline of him and his horse in gait down and down and down the steady slow slant toward the forks of English Creek, almost a mile of their combined parading figure approaching, I did my watching of Alec and Leona as

I crossed the yard to the ranger station. I knew better than to have my mother call me time number three.

I went on in to wash up and I suppose was a little more deliberately offhand than I had to be by waiting until I'd dipped water into the basin and added hot from the kettle before announcing, Company.

The word always will draw an audience. My father looked up from where he was going over paperwork about the grazers' allotments, and my mother's eyebrows drew into that alignment that let you know you had all of her attention and had better be worth it.

Alec and Leona, I reported through a face rinse. Riding like the prettiest one of them gets to kiss the other one.

You seem to know a remarkable lot about it, my mother said. Actually, that sort of thing was starting to occur to me. I was fourteen. Fourteen, hard on to fifteen, as I once heard one of the beerhounds around the Medicine Lodge saloon in Gros Ventre describe that complicated age. But there wasn't any of this I was about to confide to my mother, who now instructed: When you're done there you'd better bring in that spare chair from your bedroom. She cast the pots and pans atop the stove a calculating look, then as if having reminded herself turned toward me and added: Please. When I left the room she already had rattled a fresh stick of wood into the kitchen range and was starting in on whatever it is cooks like her do to connive food for three into a supper for five.

Remind me in the morning, I could overhear my father say, to do the rest of this Uncle Sam paper.

I'll serve it to you with breakfast, promised my mother.

Fried, he said. Done to a cinder would suit me, particularly Van Bebber's allotment. It'd save me arguing the Section Twenty grass with him one more time.

You wouldn't know how to begin a summer without that argument with Ed, she answered. Are you washed?

By the time I came back into the kitchen with the spare chair which had been serving as my nightstand, Alec and Leona were arriving through the doorway, him inquiring Is this the McCaskill short-order house? and her beaming up at him as if he'd just recited all of Shakespeare. ¶ They were a pair to look on, Alec and Leona. By now Alec was even taller than my father, and had the same rich red head of hair; a blood-sorrel flame which several hundred years of kilts and skirts being flung off must have fanned into creation. Same thin thrifty McCaskill nose. Same tendency to freckle across it. Same deep upper lip, with the bottom of the face coming out to meet it in stubborn support; with mouth closed, both Alec and my father had that jaw-forward look which meets life like a plow. Resemblance isn't necessarily duplication, though, and I see in my mind's eye that there also was the message of that as promptly as my brother and my father were in the same room that evening. Where my father never seemed to take up as much space as his size might warrant, Alec somehow took up his share and then some. I noticed this now, how Alec had begun to stand in that shambly wishbone way a cowboy adopts, legs and knees spraddled farther apart than they need to be, as if hinting to the world that he's sure longing for a horse to trot in there between

them. Alec was riding for the Double W ranch, his second summer as a hand there, and it had caused some ~~reduction~~<sup>ruction</sup>--his going back to cowboying instead of taking a better-paying job, such as driving truck for Adam Kerz as my mother particularly suggested. But the past year or so he had had to shut off his ears to a lot of opinions my parents had about his cowboy phase. Last Fourth of July when Alec showed up in rodeo clothes which included a red bandanna around his neck, my father asked him: What, is your Adam's apple cold?

Not that you could ever dent Alec for long. I have told that he had a head-up, ~~nothing-in-life-has-ever-slowed-me-up-yet~~ way of riding. I maybe should amend that to say that on horseback Alec looked as if he was riding the world itself, and even afoot as he was here in the kitchen he seemed as if he was being carried to exactly where he wanted to go. Which, just then, I guess you would have to say he was. Everything was coming up aces for Alec that year. Beating Earl Zane's time with Leona. Riding for the Double W this green high-grass summer. And in the fall he would be headed for Bozeman, the first McCaskill to manage to go to college. Launching Alec to college from the canyon of the Depression was taking great exerting by the whole family, but his knack for numbers plainly justified it; we none of us held a doubt that four years from now he would step out of Bozeman with a degree in engineering. Yes, Alec was a doer, as people said of him. My own earliest memory of this brother of mine was the time--I must have been four and him eight--when he took me into the pasture where the ranger station's saddle horses were grazing and said Here's how you mooch them, Jick. He eased over to the nearest horse, waited until it put its head down to eat grass, then straddled its neck.

When the horse raised its head Alec was lifted, and slid down the neck into place on its back and simultaneously gripped the mane to hang on and steer by. Now you mooch that mare he called to me, and I went beside the big chomping animal and flung my right leg over as he had, and was elevated into a bareback rider just as he was.

'Lo, Jicker, Alec said across the kitchen to me now after his greeting to my mother and father. How's the world treating you?

Just right, I said back automatically. 'Lo, Leona.

Leona too was a horseperson, I guess you'd call it these days. When Tollie Zane held his auction of fresh-broke saddle horses in Gros Ventre every year he always enlisted Leona to ride them into the auction ring because there is nothing that enhances a saddle pony more than a good-looking girl up there on his back. Right now, though, entering my mother's kitchen Leona's role was to be milk and honey. Which she also was first-rate at. A kind of pause stepped in with Leona whenever she arrived somewhere, a long breath or two or maybe even three during which everyone seemed to weigh whether her hair could really be so gold, whether her figure actually lived up to all it advertised on first glance. I managed to notice once that her chin was pointier than I like, but by the time any male looked Leona over enough to reach that site, he was prepared to discount that and a lot more.

Anyhow, there in the kitchen we went through that pause period of letting Leona's looks bask over us all, and on into some nickle-and-dime gab between Alec and my father--

Working hard?

Well, sure, Dad. Ever see me do anything different?

Just times I've seen you hardly working.

The Double W sees against that. Y'know what they say--nobody on the Double W ever gets a sunburn, they don't have time.

--and an old-as-womankind kitchen ritual between Leona and my mother--

Can I help with anything, Mrs. McCaskill?

No, probably it's beyond help.

--until shortly my mother was satisfied that she had multiplied the food on the stove sufficiently and said: I expect you brought your appetites with you? Let's sit up.

I suppose every household needs some habited way to begin a meal. I have heard the Lord thanked in some of the unlikeliest of homes, and for some of the unholyest of food. And seen whole families not lift a fork until the patriarch at the head of the table had his plate full and his bread buttered. Ours, though, said grace only once every three hundred sixty-five days, and that one a joke--my father's New Year's Day invocation in that Scotch-preacher burr he could put on: Hogmanay that's born today, gi' us a year o' white bread and nane o' your gray--and other than that, a McCaskill meal started at random, the only tradition to help yourself to what was closest and pass the food on clockwise.

How's cow chousing? My father was handing the mashed potatoes to Leona, but looking across at Alec.

It's all right, Alec meanwhile was presenting the gravy to Leona, before he realized she didn't yet have spuds on her plate. He colored a little, but notched out his jaw and then asked back:

How's rangering?

When my father was a boy a stick of kindling flew up from the axe and struck the corner of his left eye. The vision was saved but ever after, that eyelid would droop to about half-shut whenever amusement made him squint a little. It descended now as he studied the meal traffic piling up around Leona. Then he made his reply to Alec:

It's all right.

I had the bright idea this conversation could benefit from my help, so I chimed in: Counting starts tomorrow, Alec. Dode's sheep, and then Walter Kyle's, and then Fritz Hahn's. Dad and I'll be up there a couple three days. Remember that time you and I were along with him and Fritz's herder's dog Moxie got after a skunk and we both--

Alec gave me a grin that was tighter than it ought to have been from a brother. Don't let all those sheep put you to sleep, sprout.

Sprout? Evidently there was no telling what might issue from a person's mouth when he had a blond girl to show off in front of, and the look I sent Alec told him so.

Speaking of counting, Alec came up with next, you got your beavers counted yet? Here he was giving my father a little static. Every so often the Forest Service regional headquarters in Missoula--Mazoola,

all of us pronounced it my father's way, emphasis on the zoo--invented some new project for rangers to cope with, and the latest one we had been hearing about from my father was the inventory he was supposed to take of the beaver population of English Creek. Christamighty, he had grumped, this creek is the beaver version of New York City.

Now, though, with Leona on hand--this was the first time Alec had brought her out for a meal; the rest of us in the family recognized it as an early phase, a sort of curtain-raiser, in his style of courting--my father just passed off the beaver census with: No, I'm waiting for guidance ~~policy direction~~ from the Mazoola inmates. They might want me to count only the tails and then multiply by one, you never know.

Alec didn't let it go, though. Maybe if they like your beaver arithmetic, next summer they'll have you do fish.

Maybe. My father was giving Alec more prancing room than he deserved, but I guess Leona justified it.

Who's this week's cook at the Double W? My mother, here. Leona, take some more ham and pass it on to Jick. He goes through food like a one-man army these days. I might have protested that too if my plate hadn't been nearly empty, particularly of fried ham.

A Mrs. Pennyman, Alec reported. From over around Havre.

By now it's Havre, is it. Wendell Williamson will keep on, he'll have gone through every cook between here and Chicago. My mother paused for Alec's response to that, and got none. So? she prompted. How does she feed?

It's--filling. The question seemed to put Alec a little off balance, and I noticed Leona provide him a little extra wattage in her next gaze at him.

So is sawdust, said my mother, plainly awaiting considerably more report.

Yeah, well, Alec fumbled. I was beginning to wonder whether cowboying had dimmed his wits, maybe driven his backbone up through the judgment part of his brain. You know, it's usual ranch grub. He sought down into his plate for further description and finally proclaimed again: Filling, is what I'd call it.

How's the buttermilk business? my father asked Leona, I suppose to steer matters off Alec's circular track. Her parents, the Tracys, ran the creamery in Gros Ventre.

Just fine, Leona responded along with her flash of smile. She seemed to be on the brink of saying a lot more, but then just passed that smile around to the rest of us, a full share to my father and another to my mother and then one to me that made my throat tighten a little, then letting it rest last and coziest on Alec. She had a natural ability at that, producing some pleasantry then lighting up the room so you thought the remark amounted to a whole hell of a lot more than it did. I do envy that knack in a person, though likely wouldn't have the patience to use it myself even if I had it.

We still were getting used to the idea of Leona, the three of us in the family besides Alec. His girls before her were from the ranch families in here under the mountains or from the farm folks east of

Gros Ventre. Nor was Leona in circulation at all for the past few years, going with Tollie Zane's son Earl as she had been. But this past spring, Alec's last in high school and Leona's next-to-last, he somehow cut Earl Zane out of the picture. Swap one cowboy for another, she might as well have stayed put, my mother said at the time, a bit perturbed with Alec anyway about his intention for the Double W summer job again.

--All right, I guess, Alec was answering profoundly to some question of my father's about how successful the Double W's calving season had turned out.

How's this, how's that, fine, all right, you bet. If this was the level of sociability that was going to go on, I intended to damn promptly excuse myself to get back to working on my saddle, the scenic attractions of Leona notwithstanding. But then just as I was trying to estimate ahead to whether an early piece of rhubarb pie could be coaxed from my mother or I'd do better to wait till later, Alec all at once put down his fork and came right out with:

We got something to tell you. We're going to get married.

This kicked the conversation in the head entirely. My father seemed to have forgotten about the mouthful of coffee he'd just drunk, while my mother looked as if Alec had announced he intended to take a pee in the middle of the table. Alec was trying to watch both of them at once, and Leona was favoring us all with one of her searchlight smiles.

How come?

Even yet I don't know why I said that. I mean, I was plenty old enough to know why people got married. There were times recently, seeing

Alec and Leona mooning around together, when I seemed to savvy more than I actually had facts about, if that's possible.

Focused as he was on how our parents were going to respond, the philosophy question from my side of the table jangled Alec. Because, because we're--we love each other, why the hell do you think?

Kind of soon in life to be so certain on that, isn't it? suggested my father.

We're old enough, Alec shot back. And meanwhile gave me a snake-killing look as if I was going to ask old enough for what, but I honestly didn't intend to.

When's all this taking place? my father got out next.

This fall. Alec looked ready to say more, then held on to it, finally just delivered it in one dump: Wendell Williamson'll let us have the Foster place house to live in.

It was up to my mother to cleave matters entirely open. You're saying you'll stay on at the Double W this fall?

Yeah, Alec said as if taking a vow. It's what I want to do. The unsaid part of this was huge, huger than anything I had ever felt come into our kitchen before. The financing to send Alec to Bozeman, my parents had been gathering like quilt pieces: whatever savings the household managed to pinch aside, plus a loan from my mother's brother Pete Reese, plus a part-time job which my father had set up <sup>for</sup> Alec with a range management professor at the college who knew us from having spent time up here studying the Two, plus of course Alec's own wages from this

summer, which was another reason why his choice of the Double W riding job at \$30 a month again was less than popular--Christamighty, since my own haying wages, later this summer would go into the general household kitty, even I felt I had a major stake in the Bozeman enterprise. And now here was Alec choosing against college. Against all the expectation riding on him. Against--

Alec, you will End Up as Nothing More Than a Gimped-Up Saddle Stiff, and I for one Will Not--

More out of samaritan instinct than good sense my father headed my mother off with a next query to Alec: How you going to support yourselves on a cow chouser's wages?

You two did, at first.

We starved out at it, too.

We ain't going to starve out. Alec's grammar seemed to be cowboyifying too. Wendell'll let me draw ahead on my wages for a few heifers this fall, and winter them with the rest of the outfit's.  
It'll give us our start.

My father finally thought to set down his coffee cup. Alec, let's keep our shirts on here--language can be odd; I had the vision just then of us all sitting around the table with our shirts off, Leona across from me in full pure double-barreled display--and try see what's what.

I don't see there's any what's what about it, Alec declared.  
People get married every day.

So does the sun rise, my mother told him, without particular participation by you.

Mom, now damn it, listen--

We all better listen, my father tried again. Leona, we got nothing against you. You know that. Which was a bit short of true in both its parts, but Leona responded only with a lower beam of smile.

It's just that, Godamighty, Alec, cattle have gone bust time after time these last years. That way of life just has changed. Even the Double W would be on hard times if Wendell Williamson's daddy hadn't left him such deep pockets. Whether anybody'll ever be able to start off from scratch in the cow business and make a go of it, I don't see how--

Alec was like any of us, he resisted having an idea pulled from under him. Rather have me herding sheep up on one of your allotments, would you? There'd be something substantial to look forward to, I suppose you think, shepherding.

My father seemed to consider. No, most probably not, in your case. It takes a trace of common sense to herd sheep. He said it lightly enough that Alec would have to take it as a joke, but there was a poking edge to the lightness. Alec, I just think that whatever the hell you do, you need to bring an education to it these days. That old stuff of banging a living out of this country by sheer force of behavior doesn't work. Hasn't for almost twenty years. This country can outbang any man. Look at them along this creek. Hahn, Ed Van Bebber, Pres Rozier, the Busbys, Dode Withrow, Farrell, Hill. They've

all just managed to hang on, and they're as good a set of stockmen as you'll find in this whole goddamn state. You think any of them could have got underway, in years like there've been?

Last year was better than the one before, Alec defended with that litany of the local optimists. This one looks better yet.

I saw my father glance at my mother, to see if she wanted to swat down this part of Alec's argument or whether he should go ahead. Even I could tell from the held-in look of her that once she got started there'd be no stopping, so he soldiered on. And if about five more come good back-to-back, everybody'll be almost to where they were fifteen or twenty years ago. Alec, trying to build a living on a few head of stock is a dead end these days.

Dad--Dad, listen. We ain't starting from fifteen or twenty years ago. We're starting from now, and we got to go by that, not whatever the hell happened to--to anybody else.

You'll be starting in a hole, my father warned. And an everlasting climb out.

I say warned. What rang through to me was an alarm different from the one in my father's words--an iron tone of anger such as I had never heard out of him before.

That's as maybe. Alec's timbre was an echo of the anger, the iron. But we got to start. Now Alec was looking at Leona as if he was storing up for the next thousand years. And we're going to do it married. Not going to wait our life away.

# —

If I ever get old enough to have brains, I will work on the question of man and woman.

All those years ago, the topic rode with me into the next morning as my father and I set off from the ranger station toward the mountains. Cool but cloudless, the day was a decent enough one, except for wind. I ought to have been in <sup>a</sup>topnotch mood, elevated by the anticipation that always began with my father's annual words, Put on your mountain clothes in the morning. Going along on one of these start-of-June rides with my father as he took a count on the sheep summering on the various ranchers' range allotment <sup>s</sup> was one of the awaited episodes of life. Better country to look ahead to could not be asked for. Our ride led up the north fork of English Creek, which actually angles mostly west and northwest to thread in between Roman Reef and **Phantom** Woman Mountain to its source, and where the coulee of the North Fork opened ahead of us the backdrop of the mountains filled the vee like a towering ancient dam. Lift your eyes just atop that, and there the first summits of the Rockies sat on the horizon like stupendous sharp boulders. Only when our first hour or so of riding carried us above that west edge of the coulee would we see the mountains in total, their broad bases of timber and rockfall gripping into the foothills. But even here at the outset, the blue-gray hover of it all always caused my father to turn and appreciatively call over his shoulder to Alec and me something like: Nothing the matter with that. And Not one thing, Alec and I would agree, both because we were expected to and because we too savored those waiting mountains.

Always was not in operation this year, however. My father did not pause to pronounce on the scenery, I had no chance to echo him, and Alec-- Alec this year was on our minds instead of riding between us.

So our first stint on the road up the North Fork was broken only by the sound of our horses' hooves or one or the other of us muttering a horse name and urging a little more step-along in the pace. Even those blurts of sound were pretty pallid, because where horse nomenclature was concerned, my father's imagination took a vacation. A black horse he invariably named Coaly, a blaze-face was always Star. Currently he was riding a big mouse-colored gelding who, depend on it, bore the name of Mouse. I was on a short-legged mare called Pony. Frankly, high among my hopes about the business of growing up was that I would get a considerably more substantial horse out of it. If and when I did, I vowed to give the creature as much name as it could carry, such as Rimfire or Chief Joseph or Calabash.

Ransack my memory as I will, I honestly can find nothing that colored the outset of this counting trip, not one thing that cast so much as a spot of shadow of portent, except once when the wind disgusted me by snatching my hat off, and in the Two country that can't be called out of the ordinary. I hopped off Pony and just managed to retrieve **the hat** before it skittered into the creek and set sail for St. Louis. Of all of the number of matters about the Two country that I never have nor will be able to savvy--one life is not nearly enough to do so--a main one is why in a landscape with hills and buttes and benchlands everywhere a

person is so seldom sheltered from the everlasting damn wind. I mean, having the wind **forever** trying to blow harmonica tunes through your rib cage just naturally wears on the nerves. Someone like Ed Van Beber, whose ranch lay next up the south fork of English Creek from the ranger station, couldn't even be said hello to until he positioned himself with a building between him and the wind, and then he would cuss about how much of it was following him around the corner. Of course not everybody was that highstrung. I like to think that I'm not, quite. But I do believe it is incontestable that if that wind off the Rockies could be done away with, the Two would be a hundred percent more comfortable place of the world.

This hat chase comes to mind because as I was swinging back onto Pony I glanced ahead and saw that Mouse and my father were halted, and my father was gandering back to see what had become of me. # I rode on up and found that we had arrived to where a set of rutted tracks--in flattery, it could have been called almost a road--left the North Fork roadbed and crossed the coulee and creek and traced on up the side of Breed Butte to where a few log buildings could be seen.

Normally I would have been met with some joke from my father about keeping my hat on my head lest the wind blow my hair off instead. But this day he was looking businesslike, which was the way he looked only when he couldn't find any better mood. How about you taking a look at Walter's place? he proposed. You can cut around the butte and meet me at the road into the Hebner tribe.

All right, I of course agreed. And turned Pony to follow the ruts down and across the North Fork swale. Walter Kyle always summered in the mountains as herder of his own sheep, and so my father whenever he rode past veered in to see that everything was okay at the empty ranch. This was the first time he had delegated me, which verified just how much his mind was burdened — also with that question of man and woman? at least as it pertained to Alec McCaskill and Leona Tracy?—and that he wanted to saunter alone a while as he sorted through it all.

I suppose one school of thought is that I have an overdrawn imagination. Yet answer me this: how can the farthest reaches of life be gotten to except by way of the mind? I stop to say this because otherwise what I did next might sound odd. For as soon as my father had gone his way and I was starting up Breed Butte, I turned myself west in my saddle to face Roman Reef, tapped the brim of my hat in greeting, and spoke in the slow and distinct way you talk to a deaf person, 'Lo, Walter. How's everything up on the Reef?

What was involved here was that from Walter Kyle's summer range up there in the mountains, on top of Roman Reef a good five miles from where I was, his actual house and outbuildings here on Breed Butte could be seen through fieldglasses. Tiny, but seen. Walter had shown Alec and me this stunt of vision when we took some mail up to him during last year's counting trip. There ye go, he congratulated as each of us in turn managed to sight the building specks. You can see for as long as your eye holds out in this country. Walter's enthusiasm for the Two was that of a person newly smitten, for although he was the most

elderly of all the English Creek ranchers--at the time he seemed to me downright ancient, I suppose partly because he was one of those dried-up little guys who look eternal--he also was much the most recent to the area. Only three or four years ago <sup>Walter</sup>~~he~~ had moved here from down in the Ingomar country in the southeastern part of the state, where he had run several bands of sheep. I have never heard of a setup like it before or since, but Walter and a number of other Scotch sheepmen, dedicated bachelors all, lived there in the Ingomar Hotel and operated their sheep outfits out of their back pocket and hat, you might say. Not a one of them possessed a real ranch, just grazing land they'd finagled one way or another, plus wagons for their herders, and of course sheep and more sheep. Away each of those old Scotchies would go once a week, out from that hotel with boxes of groceries in the back of a Model T to tend camp. For whatever reason, Walter pulled out of hotel sheep tycoon--my father speculated that one morning he turned to the Scotchman next to him at the table and burred, Jock, for thirrrty yearrs ye've been eating yourr oatmeal aye too loud, got up and left for good--and bought the old Lewis place here on Breed Butte for next to nothing.

Pony was trudging up the butte in her steady uninspired way, and I had nothing to do but continue my long-distance conversation with Walter. Not that I figured there was any real chance that Walter would be studying down here exactly then, and even if he was I would be only a gnat in the fieldglass lenses and certainly not a conversationalist on whom he could perform any lip-reading. But for whatever reason, I

queried in the direction of the distant reef: Walter, how the hell do people get so crosswise with one another?

For last night's rumpus continued to bedevil me from whatever angle I could find to view it. The slant at which Alec and my parents suddenly were diverging from each other, first of all. In hindsight it may not seem such an earthquake of an issue, whether Alec was going to choose college or the wedding band/riding job combination. But hindsight is always through bifocals, it peers specifically instead of seeing whole. And the entirety here was that my father and my mother rested great hopes on my brother, especially given all that they and others of their generation had endured in the years past, years they had gotten through by constantly saying within themselves Our children will know better times. They're got to. That Alec seemed not to want to step up in life, now that the chance at last was here, went against my parents' thinking as much as if he'd declared he was going to go out on the prairie and dig a hole and live a gopher's existence.

Walter Kyle had seen a lot of life, his mustache which must have been sandy in his youth now was as yellow-white as if he'd been drinking cream from a jar. What about that, Walter? From your experience, has Alec gone as goofy as my folks think? And got back instead of Walter's long Scotch view of life my father's briefer Scotch one, his last night's reasoning to Alec: Why not give college a year and then see? You got the ability, it's a crime not to use it. And Bozeman isn't the moon. You'll be back and forth some times during the year. The two of you can see how the marriage notion holds up after that. But Alec wasn't about to have

time bought from him. We're not waiting our life away, ran his constant response. And there, our life: that convergence of Alec and Leona and the headlong enthusiasm which none of the rest of us had quite realized they were bringing to their romance. Well, it will happen: two people who have been around each other for years and all of a sudden finding that nobody else in history has ever been in love before, they're inventing it all themselves. Yet apply my mind to it in all the ways I could, my actual grasp of their mood wasn't at all firm, for to me then marriage seemed about as distant as death. Nor did I understand much more about the angle of Leona and--I was going to say, of Leona and my parents, but actually of Leona and the other three of us, for I somehow did feel included into the bask she aimed around our kitchen. I will admit, it was an interesting sensation, collecting an occasional gleam off Leona as if I'd abruptly been promoted beyond fourteen-year-oldhood. A battlefield commission, so to speak. Leona, Leona. Now there is a topic I could really stand to talk to you about, Walter. Yet maybe old Walter Kyle a bachelor was not the soundest source either. Perhaps ~~he~~ knew only enough about women, as the saying goes, to stay immune. Well, anyhow; with all care and good will I was trying to think through our family situation in a straight line, but Leona brought me to a blind curve. Not nearly the least of last evening's marvels was how much ground Leona had been able to hold with only a couple of honest-to-goodness sentences. When my father and mother were trying to argue delay into Alec and turned

to her to test the result, she said just We think we're ready enough. And then at the end of the fracas, going out the door Leona turned to bestow my mother one of her ~~million-watt~~ <sup>sunburst</sup> smiles and say, Thank you for supper, Beth. And my mother saying back, just as literally, Don't mention it.

The final line of thought from last night was the most disturbing of all. The breakage between my father and Alec. This one bothered me so much I couldn't even pretend to be confiding it to Walter up there on Roman Reef; stony silence from that source was more than I could stand on this one. For if I'd had to forecast, say at about the point Alec was announcing marriage intentions, my mother was the natural choice to bring the house down on him. That would have been expected, it was her way. And she of course did make herself more than amply known on the college/marriage score. But the finale of that suppertime was all-male McCaskill: You're done running my life, flung by Alec as he stomped out with Leona in tow, and Nobody's running it, including you, from my father to Alec's departing back.

Done running my life. Nobody's running it, including you. Put that way, the words without the emotion, it may sound like something concluding itself; the moment of an argument breaking off into silence, a point at which contention has been expended. But I know now, and I somehow knew even then, that the fracture of a family is not a thing that happens clean and sharp, so that you at least can calculate that from here on it will begin to be over with. No, it is like one of those

worst bone breaks, a shatter. You can mend the place, peg it and splint it and work to strengthen it, and while the surface maybe can be brought to look much as it did before, the deeper vicinity of shatter always remains a spot that has to be favored. So if I didn't grasp much of what abruptly was happening within our family, I at least held the realization that last night's rift was nowhere near over.

Thinking heavily that way somehow speeds up time, and before I quite knew it Pony was stopping at the barb-wire gate into Walter Kyle's yard. I tied her to the fence on a long rein so she could graze a little and slid myself between the top and second strands.

Walter's place looked hunky-dory. But I did a circle of the tool shed and low log barn and the three-quarter shed sheltering Walter's old Reo, just to be sure, and then went to the front of the house and took out the key from behind the loose piece of chinking which hid it.

The house too was undisturbed. Not that there was all that much in it to invite disturbance. The sparse habits of hotel living apparently still were in Walter. Besides the furniture--damn little of that beyond the kitchen table and its chairs of several stiff-back varieties--and the open shelves of provisions and cookery, the only touches of habitation were a drugstore calendar, and a series of coats hung on nails, and one framed studio photograph of a young, young Walter in a tunic and a fur cap: after Scotland and before Montana, he had been a Mountie for a few years up in Alberta.

All in all, except for that stale feel that unlived-in rooms give off, Walter might just have stepped out to go down there on the North Fork and fish a beaver dam. A good glance around was all the place required. Yet I stood and inventoried for some minutes. I don't know why, but an empty house holds me. As if it was an opened book about the person living there. Peruse this log-and-chinking room and Walter Kyle could be read as thrifty, tidy to the verge of fussy, and alone.

At last, just to stir the air in the place with some words, I said aloud the conclusion of my one-way conversation with the mustached little man up on the Reef: Walter, you'd have made somebody a good wife.

Pony and I now cut west along the flank of Breed Butte, which would angle us through Walter's field and one of Merle Torrance's to where we would rejoin the North Fork road and my father. Up here above the North Fork coulee the outlook roughened, the mountains now in full ruffled view and the foothills bumping up below them. On this part of the route the land steadily grew more beautiful, which in Montana also meant more hostile to settlement. The English Creek valley was considered to be the western edge of the Two's habitable country, and that being so, the people of the North Fork had sited themselves up on the lip of the edge. Merle Torrance, who had the place farthest in under the mountains, original homestead land which butted right against the national forest line, faced almost combat conditions. In winter the wind slammed through there and snow drifted up and up and up until it covered Merle's fence-posts and left him guessing its depth beyond that. About this time of

year, though, came Merle's turn to retaliate against nature, on three fronts. His summer days he spent ransacking the ranch for hay, mowing every coulee that showed enough grass to fill a sheep's belly. Then each dusk he went over to the North Fork with his shotgun and sat sentry for beaver. His contention with beaver about the North Fork--Merle of course wanting water for his hay coulees, the beaver insisting they deserved it for their dams and lodges--was never-ending. Mink have got all the reputation, but these buggers outbred them all to hell, Merle claimed in half-admiration. His third chosen foe made the beaver battle look like a washcloth fight. Bears. Merle was a burly man with a big low jaw which his neck sort of bagged up into, in a way that always reminded me of a pelican. The notion of him out after a bear was strange enough to be entertaining; that pelican jaw in pursuit of, say, a half-ton grizzly. I suppose the bears never saw any amusement in the situation, though, for Merle trapped them with no remorse. More than once my father veered off from some little stand of timber where Merle had laid poles to keep livestock out and nailed up a sign saying WATCH OUT BEAR TRAP to warn humans. In there would be a can of bacon grease dangling over a huge steel trap, or if the pole pen showed disturbance, in there would be the bacon grease bait and the trap and a damned perturbed bear. No man's land, my father called Merle's neighborhood of the Two, and gave it the widest berth he could.

I just now was passing in view of the one other ranch on this Breed Butte side of the North Fork. Up a draw a little north and west of where I was riding, George and Aggie Emrich ran a shirt-tail

outfit, a few cattle and a little hay and a broken-backed barn for the benefit of both. I can't tell you a whole lot about the Emrichs because they lived on terms no one else could penetrate, let alone savvy. About 99 99/100ths of the talking for the two of them was done by Aggie, and none of that could really be called definitive. Anything that might have been going on in George's head got translated by her. They could be standing side by side in front of you and Aggie would declare in her near-baritone George figured this time we'd ought to try two-inch lumber on that shed roof that keeps blowing off as if George was years dead and his wisdom was being recalled. Which may, in fact, just have been habit with Aggie, for she'd been a widow when she married George, and her first husband, Tom Felton, she always referred to as the other one.

The general opinion was that the isolation up here under the mountains had bent the North Fork people, as a prevailing wind will hunch a tree. Rumor liked to carry around the news, for instance, that Walter Kyle would have nothing to do with banks. The theory ran that whatever money he had was planted around his place in Mason jars. (Although, as my father pointed out, who's to say Walt's not just a helluva lot smarter about banks than the rest of us.) And Merle's beaver and bear fixations, George and Aggie's one-tongued conversation: they too could be spoofed at, and were. But generally by persons who had no idea what it took to survive in the very shadow of the Two's mountains. Why wouldn't anybody's mind need to put up a few shields between it and the power of that horizon of the summits of the continent?

As is evident, the topic of family was foremost on my own mind this day, and it occurred to me that none of the three ranches within view of this route Pony and I were following held an actual family. Walter, Merle, Aggie and George: two bachelors, a widow and her long-in-the-tooth bridegroom. That thought was just a thought, though, not a conclusion. For I was in no mood to vouch that a family was a guaranteed shield against warped behavior.

# ————— My father was waiting at another ratty offshoot from the North Fork road. This one had so many cuts of track, some of them dating from the era of wagon wheels, that it looked like a kind of huge braid across the grassland. My father turned his gaze from the twined ruts to me and asked: Everything under control at Walter's?

Uh huh, I affirmed.

All right. <sup>His</sup> ~~My father's~~ businesslike expression had declined into what I think is called dolor. Let's go do it. And we set off into the weave of tracks toward the Hebner place.

No matter what time of day you approached it, the Hebner place looked as if demolition was being done and the demolishers were just now taking a smoke break. An armada of abandoned wagons and car chassis and decrepit farm equipment--even though Good Help Hebner farmed not so much as a vegetable garden--lay around and between the brown old buildings. A root cellar was caved in, a tool shop **had** only half a roof left, the barn looked distinctly teetery. In short, not much ever functioned on the Hebner place except gravity.

Out front of the barn now as we rode in stood a resigned-looking bay mare with two of the littler Hebner boys astraddle her swayed back. The pair on the horse must have been Roy and Will, or possibly Will and Enoch, or maybe even Enoch and Curtis. The way they were so frequent through life, there was no keeping track of which size Hebner boy was who unless you were around them every day.

I take that back. Even seeing them on a constant basis wouldn't necessarily have been a foolproof guide to who was who, because all the faces in that Hebner family rhymed. I don't know how else to put it. Every Hebner forehead was a copy of Good Help's wide crimped-in-the-middle version, a pale bony expanse centered with a kind of tiny gully which widened as it went down, as if the nose had avalanched out of there. Across most of the left side of this divided forehead a cowlick flopped at a crooked angle. The effect was as if every male Hebner wore one of those eyepatches shown in pictures of pirates, only pushed up higher. Then from all that forehead any Hebner face simply sort of dwindled down, a quick skid of nose and a tight mouth and a small ball of chin.

The tandem horsebackers stared us the length of the yard. It was another Hebner quality to gawp at you as if you were some new species on earth. My father had a not entirely ironic theory to explain that: They've all eaten so goddamn much venison their eyes have grown big as deers'. For it was a fact of life that somewhere up there in the jackpines beyond the Hebner buildings would be a woolsack hanging

from a top limb. The bottom of the sack would rest in a washtub of water, and within the sack, being cooled nicely by the moisture as it went wicking up through the burlap, would be <sup>a</sup> behind quarter or two of venison. Good Help Hebner liked his deer the same way he preferred his eggs--poached.

On the face of the law, one good search through those jackpines should have clapped Good Help behind bars. Yet that search never was made, either by my father or by the game warden, Joe Rellis. For if Good Help's use of the Two forest as a larder was a known outcome, the question part of the equation was where the next square meal for the Hebner kids would come from if Good Help was shut away for his deer proclivities.

Actually, I don't mind Good Help snitching a deer every so often, my father put it, or even that he's so damn lazy he can barely breathe. But when he starts in on that goddamn oughtobiography of his--how he ought to have been this, ought to have done that--

Morning, Ranger! Hello there, Jick!

I don't know about my father, but that out-of-nowhere gust of words startled me just a little. The greeting hadn't issued from the staring boys on the mare but from behind the screen door of the log house. Ought to have been paying attention to the world so I'd seen you coming and got some coffee going.

Thanks anyway, Garland, said my father who had heard years of Good Help Hebner protocol and never yet seen a cup of coffee out of any of it. We're just dropping off some baking Beth came out long on.

We'll do what we can to put it to good-- Commotion in front of the barn interrupted the voice of Good Help. The front boy atop the old horse was whacking her alongside the neck with the reins, while the boy behind him was kicking the mount heartily in the ribs and piping, Giddyup, goddamn you horse, giddyup!

Giddyup, hell! Good Help's yell exploded across the yard. It was always said of him that Good Help could talk at a volume which would blow a crowbar out of your hand. The pair of you giddy off and giddy over to that goshdamn woodpile!

We all watched for the effect of this on the two would-be jockeys, and when there was none except increased exertion on the dilapidated mare, Good Help addressed my father through the screen door again: Ought to have taken that pair out and drowned them with the last batch of kittens, way they behave. I don't know what's got into kids any more.

With <sup>the</sup> profundity of that, Good Help materialized from behind the screening and out onto the decaying railroad tie which served as the front step to the Hebner house. Like his place, Good Help Hebner himself was more than a little ramshackle. A tall yet potbellied man with one bib of his overalls usually frayed loose and dangling, his sloping face made even more pale by a gray-white chevron of grizzle which mysteriously never matured into a real mustache. Garland Hebner: nicknamed Good Help ever since the time, years back, when he volunteered to join the Noon Creek cattlemen when they branded their calves and thereby get in on a free supper afterward. In Dill Egan's corral, the branding crew at one

point looked up to see Hebner, for no reason that ever became clear, hoisting himself onto Dill's skittish iron-gray stud. Almost before Hebner was truly aboard, the gray slung him off and then tried to pound him apart while everybody else bailed out of the corral. Hebner proved to be a moving target; time and again the hooves of the outraged horse missed the rolling ball of man, until finally Dill managed to reach in, grab hold of a Hebner ankle, and snake him out under the corral poles. Hebner wobbled up, blinked around at the crowd, then sent his gaze on to the sky and declared as if piety was natural to him: Well, I had some Good Help getting out of that, didn't I?

Some extra stickum was added to the nickname, of course, by the fact that Good Help had never been found to be of any use whatsoever on any task anybody had been able to think up for him. He has a pernicious case of the slows, Dode Withrow reported after he ~~after he~~ once made the error of hiring Good Help for a few days of fencing haystacks.

Ranger, I been meaning to ask if it mightn't be possible to cut a few poles to fix that corral up with, Good Help was blaring now. The Hebner corral looked as if a buffalo stampede had passed through it, and translated out of Hebnerese, Good Help's question was whether he could help himself to some National Forest pine without paying for it. Ought to have got at it before now, but my back--

That allergy to work, however, was the one characteristic in which the rest of the family did not emulate Good Help. They didn't dare. Survival depended on whatever wages the squadron of Hebner kids could earn

by hiring out at lambing time or through haying season. Up and down English Creek at those times of year, on almost any ranch you would find a Hebner boy bucketing water in the lambing shed or driving a stacker team in the hayfield, a Hebner girl kitchen-choring for the ranch wife. Then at some point in their late teens each Hebner youngster somehow would come up with a more serious job and use it as an escape ladder out of that family. The oldest boys, Harvey and Sanford, and the daughter just younger than them, Norena, already were out in the world one place or another.

I have told that among my thinking routes now is that question of whether I'd be much the same person if my lineage and birthsite had been altered a bit. Whenever I was around the Hebners a variation of that always shot to mind, as it did now while Good Help nattered to my father about his intentions of repair: Christamighty, what if I had tumbled into life as a member of this family instead of my own? For Alec and I had accidentally been on hand for one of the Hebner chapters of life, the launching of Sanford, and if I wished to mull matters of chance and circumstance, that instance stood as a considerable education. It occurred a couple of springs before when Ed Van Bebber came by the ranger station one Friday night and asked if Alec and I could help out with lambing chores that weekend. Neither of us much wanted to do it, because Ed Van Bebber is nobody's favorite person except Ed Van Bebber's. But you can't turn down a person who's in a pinch, either. When the pair

of us rode into Ed's place early the next morning we saw that Sanford Hebner was driving the gutwagon, even though he was only seventeen or so, not all that much older than Alec at the time. And that **particular** ~~rugged~~ had been a rugged one, lambing season at Van Bebber's the hay was used up getting through the winter and the ewes now thin as shadows and not particularly ready to become mothers. Ed had thrown the drop band clear up onto the south side of Wolf Butte to provide any grass for them at all, which meant a mile and a half drive for Sanford to the lambing shed with each gutwagonload of ewes and their fresh lambs. With the ewes dropping eighty and ninety lambs a day out there Sanford was working every horse on the ranch, saddle horses and everything, to pull that heavy wagon on that slope and make those long shed trips--walking in to the ranch as many as three times a day to trade a played-out team ~~for different~~ **fresher** horses. All in all, Sanford was performing about two men's work and doing it damn well. The day this happened, dark had almost fallen, Alec and I were up on the hillside above the lambing shed helping Ed Van Bebber corral a bunch of mother ewes and their week-old lambs, and we meanwhile could see Sanford driving in with his last load of lambs of the day. We actually had our bunch under control just fine, the three of us and a dog or two. But Ed always had to have a tendency toward hurry. So he cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled down the hill to Sanford:

HEY-THERE-YOU-HEBNER! COME-UP-HERE-AND-HELP-US-CORRAL-THESE-EWES-AND-LAMBS!

I still think if Ed had asked properly, Sanford probably would have been fool enough to have climbed up and joined us, even though he already

had put in his workday and then some. But after the season of man's labor he had done, to be yelled at to come up and help a couple of milk-tooth kids like us chase lambs; worse than that, to not be awarded even his first name, just be shouted to the world as a Hebner--I still can see Sanford perched on the seat of that gutwagon, looking up the slope to us, and then cupping his hands to his mouth the same way Ed had, and hear yet his words carry up the hill:

YOU-GO-PLUMB-TO-HELL-YOU-OLD-SON-OF-A-BITCH!

And he slapped his reins on the rumps of the gutwagon team and drove on to the lambing shed. At the supper table that night, Sanford's check was in his plate.

Sanford and that money, though, did not travel back up the North Fork to this Hebner household. When Alec and I headed home that night Sanford rode double behind me--I didn't think of it at the time, but I have seen ever since that that must have been one more mortification, straddling a saddle behind a shavetail kid like me after he'd been a full-fledged gutwagon driver all spring--and when we dismounted at the ranger station, Sanford trudged into the dark straight down the English Creek road, asking at every ranch on the way whether a job of any sort could be had. Anything. I'll clean the chicken house. The Busby brothers happened to need a bunch herder, and Sanford had been with them ever since; this very moment, was herding one of their bands of sheep up in the mountains of the Two. To me, the realization of Sanford's situation that evening when Ed Van Bebber canned him, knocking at any door rather than return home, having

a family, a father, that he would even clean chicken houses to be free of; to me, the news that life could deal such a hell of a situation to someone about the age of Alec and me came as a sobering gospel.

--Missus! Having failed to cajole my father out of free timber, Good Help evidently had decided to settle for the manna we'd come to deliver. Got something out here.

The screen door opened and closed again, producing Florene Hebner and leaving a couple of the very littlest Hebners--Garlena and Jonas? Joanas and Maybella?--gawping behind the mesh. Since the baked goods were tied in a dish towel on my saddle, I did the courteous thing and got off and took the bundle up to Florene. Florene was, or had been, a fairly good-looking woman, particularly among a family population minted with the face of Good Help. But what was most immediately noticeable about her was how worn she looked. As if she'd been sanded down repeatedly. You'd never have guessed the fact by comparing the two, but Florene and my mother went through grade school at Noon Creek together. Florene, though, never made it beyond the second year of high school in Gros Ventre because she already had met Garland Hebner and promptly was pregnant by him and, a little less promptly on Garland's part, was married to him. <sup>#</sup> She gave a small downcast smile as I handed her the bundle, said to me Thank your ma again, Jick, and retreated back inside.

Funny to see Alec not with you, Good Help was declaiming to my father as I returned from the doorway to Pony. But they do grow and go.

So they do, my father agreed without enthusiasm. Garland, we  
got sheep waiting for us up the mountain. You ready, Jick? My father  
touched Mouse into motion, then uttered to Good Help in parting,  
purely poker-faced: Take it easy.



The route <sup>we</sup> rode out of the Hebner place was a sort of upside-down L, the long climbing stem of ruts and then the brief northwestward leg of the North Fork trail where it tops onto the English Creek-  
Noon Creek divide. Coming onto that crest, we now would be in view of the landmarks that are the familiar sentries of the Two country. Chief Mountain--even though it is a full seventy miles to the north and almost into Canada, standing distinct as a mooring peg at the end of the long chain of mountains. Also north but nearer, Heart Butte--no great piece of geography, yet it too poses separate enough from the mountain horizon that its dark pyramid form can be constantly seen and identified. And just to our east the full timber-topped profile of Breed Butte, a junior landmark but plainly enough the summit of our English Creek area.

With all this offered into sight, I nonetheless kept my eyes on my father, watching for what I knew would happen, what always happened after he paid a visit to the Hebner place. There at the top of the rise he halted his horse, and instead of giving his regard to the distant wonders of Chief Mountain and Heart Butte, he turned for a last slow look at the Hebner hodgepodge. Then shook his head, said Jesus H. Christ, and reined away. For in that woebegone log house down there, and amid those buildings before neglect had done its handiwork on them, my father was born and brought up.

Of course then the place was the McCaskill homestead. And the North Fork known by the nickname of Scotch Heaven on account of the several burr-on-the-tongue-and-thistle-up-the-kilt families who had come over and settled. Moirs, Adamsons, Frews, McHarolds, Lewises, and my

McCaskill grandparents, they lit in here sometime in the 1880s and all were dead or defeated or departed by the time the flu epidemic of 1918 and the winter of '19 got done with them. I possessed no first-hand information on my father's parents. Both of them were long since under the North Fork soil by the time I was born. And despite my father's ear to the past, there did not seem to be anything known or at least fit to report about what the McCaskills came from in Scotland. Except for a single scrap of lore: the story that a McCaskill had been one of the stone masons of Arbroath who worked for the Stevensons--as I savvy it, the Stevensons must have been a family of engineers before Robert Louis cropped into the lineage and picked up a pen--when they were putting up the lighthouses all around the coast of Scotland. The thought that an ancestor of ours helped fight the sea with stone meant more to my father than he liked to let on. As far as I know, the only halfway sizable body of water my father himself had ever seen was Flathead Lake right here in Montana, let alone an ocean and its beacons. Yet when the fire lookout towers he had fought for were finally being built on the Two Medicine forest during these years it was noticeable that he called them Franklin Delano's lighthouses.

Looking back from now at that matter of my McCaskill grandparents, I question, frankly, whether my mother and father would or could have kept close with that side of the family even if it had still been extant. No marriage is strong enough to bear two loads of in-laws. Early on the choice might as well be made, that one family will be seen as much as can be stood and the other, probably the husband's, shunted off to rare

visits. That's theory, of course. But theory and my mother together-- in any case, all I grew up knowing of the McCaskills of Scotch Heaven was that thirty years of homestead effort proved to be the extent of their lifetimes and that my father emerged from the homestead, for good, in the war year of 1917.

Yeah, I went off to Wilson's war. Fought in blood up to my knees.

As I have told, the one crack in how solemn my father could be in ~~announcing~~ announcing something like this was that lowered left eyelid of his, and I liked to watch for it to dip down and introduce this next part. Fact is, you could get yourself a fight just about any time of day or night in those saloons outside Fort Leonard Wood. That my father's combat had been limited to fists against Missouri chins seemed not to bother him a whit, although I myself wished he had some tales of the actual war. Rather, I wished his knack with a story could have illuminated that war experience of his generation, as an alternative to so many guys' plain refrain that I-served-my-time-over-in-Frogland-and-you-by-God-can-have-the-whole-bedamned-place. But you settle for what family lore you can.

My father's history resumes that when he came back from conducting the war against the Missourian saloonhounds, he was hired on by the Noon Creek cattle ranchers as their association rider. Generally some older hand got the job, but I was single and broke, just the kind ranchers love to whittle their wages down to fit--by then too, the wartime live-stock prices were on their toboggan ride down--and they took me on.

That association job of course was only a summer one, the combined Noon Creek cattle--except those of the Double W, which had its own huge swath of range--trailing up onto the national forest grass in June and down out again in September, and so in winters my father fed hay at one cow ranch or another and then when spring came and brought lambing time with it he would hire on with one of the English Creek sheepmen. I suppose that runs against the usual notion of the West, of cow chousers and mutton conductors forever at odds with each other. But anybody who grew up around stock in our part of Montana knew no qualm about working with both cattle and sheep. Range wars simply never were much the Montana style, and most particularly not the Two Medicine fashion. Oh, somewhere in history there had been an early ruckus south toward the Sun River, some cowman kiying over to try kill off a neighboring band of sheep. And probably in any town along these mountains, Browning or Gros Ventre or Choteau or Augusta, you could go into a bar and still find an occasional old hammerhead who proclaimed himself nothing but a cowboy and never capable of drawing breath as anything else, especially not as a mutton puncher. (Which isn't to say that most sheepherders weren't euqally irreversibly sheepherders, but somehow that point never seemed to need constant general announcement as it did with cowboys.) By and large, though, the Montana philosophy of make-do, as practiced by our sizable ranching proportion of Scotchmen, Germans, Norwegians, and Missourians, meant that ranch people simply tried to figure out which species did best at the moment, sheep or cows, and chose accordingly. It all came down, so far as I could see, to the philosophy my father expressed whenever someone

asked him how he was doing: Just trying to stay level.

In that time when young Varick McCaskill became their association rider there still would have been several Noon Creek ranchers, guys getting along nicely on a hundred or so head of cattle apiece. Now nearly all of those places either were bought up by Wendell Williamson's Double W or under lease to it. The Williamsons of life always do try to latch onto all the land that touches theirs, was my father's view on that. What I am aiming at, though, is that among those Noon Creek stockmen when my father was hired on was Isaac Reese, mostly a horse raiser but under the inspiration of wartime prices also running cattle just then. It was when my father rode in to pick up those Reese cattle for the drive into the mountains that he first saw my mother. Saw her as a woman, that is. Oh, I had known she had some promise. Lisabeth Reese. The name alone made you keep her somewhere in mind.

Long-range opportunities seemed to elude my father, but he could be nimble enough in the short run. I wasn't without some practice at girling. And Beth was worth extra effort.

The McCaskill-Reese matrimony ensued, and a year or so after that, Alec ensued. Which then meant that my father and mother were supporting themselves and a youngster by a job that my father had been given because he was single and didn't need much wage. This is the brand of situation you can find yourself in without much effort in Montana, but that it is common does not make it one damn bit more acceptable. I am sure as anything that the memory of that predicament at the start of my parents'

married life lay large behind their qualms about what Alec now was intending. My father especially wanted no repeat, in any son of his, of that season-by-season scrabble for livelihood. I know our family ruckus was more complicated than just that. Anything ever is. But if amid the previous evening's contention my father and Alec could have been put under oath, each Bibles to the deepest of the truths in him, my father would have had to say something like: I don't want you making my mistakes over again. And Alec to him: Your mistakes were yours, they've got nothing to do with me.

--gander. My father had halted Mouse, and was swiveled around looking at me in curiosity. Sometimes I think if I endure in life long enough to get senile nobody will be able to tell the difference, given how my mind has always drifted anyway.

Uh, come again? I mustered. I didn't quite catch that.

Anybody home there, under your hat? I was saying, it's about time you checked on your packslinging. Better hop off and take a gander.

Back there on the subject of our horses, I should have told too that we were leading one pack horse with us. Tomorrow, after we finished the counting of the Kyle and **Hahn** bands of sheep, we were going on up to Billygoat Peak, where Paul Eliason, the junior forester who was my father's assistant ranger, and a couple of fireguards were building a fire lookout. They had gone in the previous week with the pre-cut framework and by now likely had the lookout erected and shingled, but the guywire had been late in coming from Missoula. That was our

packload now, the roll of  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch galvanized cable and some bolts and flanges to tie down the new lookout cabin; you may think the wind blows in the lower areas of the Two, but up there on top it really huffs.

This third horse, bearer of the load whose ropes and hitch knots I now was testing for tautness, was an elderly solemn sorrel whom my father addressed as Brownie but the rest of us called by the name he'd been given before the Forest Service deposited him at the English Creek station: Homer. Having Brownie <sup>nee</sup> Homer along was cause for mixed emotions. One more horse is always a nuisance to contend with, yet the presence of a pack horse also made a journey seem more substantial; testified that you weren't just jaunting off to somewhere, you were transporting. Packstrings had been the lifeblood of the Forest Service ever since its birth, the hooped carriers of supply into the mountains of all the west. I know for a fact that my father considered that the person most important at his job as English Creek district ranger was not Paul Eliason, although Paul was a good enough assistant, nor anyone up the hierarchy, the superintendent of the Two Medicine National Forest or the regional forester of Region One or any of those, but his packer, Isidor Pronovost. One of the stories my father told oftenest was of being with Isidor on one of the really high trails farthest back in the mountains of the Two, where a misstep by one pack horse might pull all the rest into a tumble a few thousand feet down the slope, when Isidor turned in his saddle and conversationally said: Mac, if we was to roll this packstring right about here, the buggers'd bounce till they stunk.

Since the lookout gear and our food only amounted to a load for one horse it hadn't been necessary to call on Isidor for this counting trip of ours. But even absent he had his influence that morning as I arranged the packs on Brownie/Homer under my father's scrutiny, both of us total converts to Isidor's perpetual preachment that in packing a horse, balance is everything. It took some contriving, say to make a roll of heavy guywire on one side of the pack saddle equivalent to some canned goods on the other side of it, but finally my father had proclaimed: There, looks to me like you got it Isidored.

Evidently I had indeed, for I didn't find that the packs or ropes had shifted appreciably on our ride thus far. But I went ahead and snugged a rope or two to justify the report to my father: All tight as fiddlestrings.

While I was cross-examining the pack ropes my father had been looking back out over the country behind us. Since we're this far along, he decided, maybe we might as well eat some lunch.

The view rather than his stomach guided him in that choice, I believe.

By now, late morning, we were well started into the mountains above the English Creek-Noon Creek divide, and so could see down onto both drainages and their various ranches, and on out to where the farm patterns began, east of the town of Gros Ventre. To be precise, on a map our lunch spot was about where the east-pointing panhandle of the Two Medicine National Forest joins onto the pan--the pan being the seventy-five mile extent of the forest along the front of the Rockies, from East Glacier at the north to Sun River at the south. Somehow when the forest boundary

was drawn the English Creek corridor, the panhandle route we had just ridden, got included and that is why our English Creek ranger station was situated out there with ranches on three sides of it. That location, like a nest at the end of a limb, bothered some of the map gazers at Regional Headquarters. ~~who~~ They'd have denied it, but they seemed to hold the theory that the deeper a ranger station was buried into preposterous terrain, the better. Another strike was that English Creek sat almost at the southern end of my father's district, nothing central or tidy about the location either. But the Mazoola inmates had never figured out anything to do about English Creek, and while the valley-bottom site added some riding miles to my father's job, the convenience of being amid the English Creek ranch families--his constituents, so to speak--was more than worth it.

Eating the sandwiches my mother had put up for us--slices of fried ham between slabs of homemade bread daubed with fresh yellow butter; you can't beat that combination--and gazing out over the Two country mended our dispositions a lot.

If a person can take time to reflect on such a reach of land, other matters will dim out. An area the size of the Two is like a small nation. Big enough to have several geographies and a gamut of climates and a considerable population, yet compact enough that people know each other from one end of the Two to the other.

The Two, I have been saying. I ought to clarify that to us the term meant both the landscape to all the horizons around us--that is pretty much what a Montanan means by a "country"--and the national forest that

my father's district was part of. (In those days, the six hundred square miles of the Two Medicine National Forest were divided into only three ranger districts--English Creek; Old Agency, west of Choteau; and Hannan Gulch, down by the Sun River.) Actually, only my father's northmost portion of the Two Medicine National Forest had anything at all to do with the Two Medicine River or Two Medicine Lake: the vicinity where the forest joins onto the south boundary of Glacier National Park and fits in there, again as a map shows it, like a long straight-sided peninsula between the park and the Continental Divide and the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. So the Two Medicine itself, the river that is, honestly is in sight to hardly any of the Two country. Like all the major flows of this region the river has its source up in the Rockies, but then promptly cuts a sizable canyon east through the plains as it pushes to meet the Marias River and eventually the Missouri. Burrows its way through the prairie, you might almost say. It is just the ring of the words, Two Medicine, that has carried the name all the way south along the mountains some thirty miles to our English Creek area. The derivation as I've heard it is that in distant times the Blackfeet made their medicine lodge two years in a row near the high lake that is one of the river's sources, and the name lasted from that. By whatever way Two Medicine came to be, it is an interesting piece of language, I have always thought.

A hawk went by below us, sailing on an air current. A mark of progress into the mountains I always watched for, hawks and even eagles now on routes lower than our own.

Mostly, however, as my father and I worked our way through sandwiches and a shared can of plums, I simply tried to store away the look of the land this lush June. Who knew if it would ever be this green again. The experience of recent years sure as hell didn't suggest so. For right out there in that green of farmland and prairie where my father and I were gazing, a part of the history of the Depression began to brew on a day of early May in 1934. Nobody here in the Two could have identified it as more than an ordinary wind. Stiff, but that is never news in the Two country. As that wind continued east, however, it met a weather front angling down out of Canada, and the combined velocity set to work on the plowed fields along the High Line. An open winter and a spring of almost no rain had left those fields dry; brown talcum waiting to be puffed. And so a cloud of wind and topsoil was born and grew. By the time the dirt storm reached Plentywood in the northeastern corner of the state, the grit of it was scouring paint off farmhouses. All across the Dakotas, further dry fields were waiting to become dust. The brown storm rolled into the Twin Cities, and on to Chicago, where it shut down plane flights and caused streetlights to be turned on in the middle of the day. I don't understand the science of it, but that storm continued to grow and widen and darken the more it traveled, Montana dirt and Dakota dirt and Minnesota dirt in the skies and eyes of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio. And on and on the storm swept, into New York City and Washington, D.C., the dust of the west fogging out the pinnacle of the Empire State building and powdering the shiny table tops within the White House. At last the dirt cloud expended itself into the Atlantic.

Of course thereafter came years of dust, particularly in the Great Plains and the Southwest. But that Montana-born blow was the Depression's first nightmare storm, the one that told the nation that matters were worse than anyone knew, the soil itself was fraying loose and flying away.

In a way, wherever I scrutinized from the lunch perch of that day I was peering down into some local neighborhood of the Depression. As if, say, binoculars such as Walter Kyle's could be adapted to pick out items through time instead of distance. The farmers of all those fields hemming the eastern horizon--they were veterans of years of scrabbling. Prices and crops both had been so weak for so long, many a farm family got by only on egg money or cream checks. Or any damn thing they could come up with. Time upon time we were called upon at the ranger station by one overalled farmer or another from near Gros Ventre or Valier or even Conrad, traveling from house to house offering a dressed hog he had in the trunk of his jalopy for three cents a pound. Incredibly, though, the farmers that neighbored the Two country were better off than those that neighbored them on the east. That great dust storm followed a path across northern Montana already blazed by drought, grasshoppers, army worms, you name it. Around the time the Civilian Conservation Corps was being set up, my father and other rangers and county agents and maybe government men of other kinds were called to a session over at Plentywood. It was the idea of some government thinker--the hunch was that it came down all the way from Tugwell or one of those--that everybody working

along any lines of conservation ought to see Montana's worst-hit area of drought. My father grumbled about it costing him three or four days of work from the Two, but he had no choice but to go. I especially remember this because when he got back he said scarcely anything for about a day and a half, and that was not at all like him. Then at supper the second night he suddenly looked across at my mother and said, Bet, there're people over who're trying to live on just potatoes. They feed Russian thistles to their stock. Call it Hoover hay. It--I just never saw such things. Fencelines pulled loose by the wind piling tumbleweeds against them. When a guy goes to drive a fencepost, he first has to punch holes in the ground with a spudbar, pour in water to soften the soil. And out in the fields, what the dust doesn't cover, the grasshoppers get. I tell you, Bet, it's a crime against life, what's happening.

So that was what came to mind from the horizon of green farms, and closer below us, along the willowed path of Noon Creek, the Depression history of the cattlemen was no happier memory. Noon Creek was original cattle country, the best grazing land of the kind anywhere in the Two. But now what had been a series of about ten good ranches spaced along Noon Creek was dwindled to three--the Reese family place now run by my mother's brother Pete, who long ago converted to sheep; just east from there Dill Egan's cow outfit, with its historic round corral; and everywhere east of Dill the miles of Double W swales and benchland and the eventual cluster of buildings that was the Double W home ranch. Dill Egan was one of those

leery types who steered clear of banks, and so had managed to hold his land. The Williamsons of the Double W owned a bank and property in San Francisco or Los Angeles, one of those places, and as my father put it, When the end of the world comes, the last sound will be a nickel falling from someplace a Williamson had it hid. Every Noon Creek cowman between the extremes of Dill Egan and Wendell Williamson, though, got wiped out when the nation's plunge flattened the cattle market. Places were foreclosed on, families shattered. The worst happened at a piece of Noon Creek I could not help but look down onto from our lunch site: the double bend of the stream, an S of water and willows like a giant brand onto the Noon Creek valley. The place there had belonged to a rancher named Carl Nansen. He went out to his barn the day before foreclosure. Where he tacked up in plain sight on one of the stalls an envelope on which he had written: I cant take any more. I wont have my ears knocked down any more. And then hung himself with a halter rope.

That Nansen land passed to the Double W. Alec perhaps even now was hazing Double W cows and their calves to a Nansen pasture. And the thought of this and the sight of that creek S were as if wires had connected in me, for suddenly I wanted to turn to my father and ask him everything about Alec. What my brother was getting himself into, sashaying off into the Depression with a saddle and a bridle and a bride. Whether there was any least chance Alec could be headed off from cowboying, or maybe from Leona, since the two somehow seemed to go together. How my father and my mother were going to be able to reason in any way

with him, given last night's family explosion. Where we stood as a family. Divided for all time or yet the unit of four we had always been? Ask and ask and ask; the impulse rose in me as if coming to percolation.

My father was onto his feet, had pulled out his pocket watch and was kidding me that my stomach was about half an hour fast as usual, it was only now noon, and I got up too and went with him to our horses. But still felt the asking everywhere in me.

No, I put that wrong. About the ask, ask, ask. I did not want to put to my father those infinite questions about my brother. What I wanted, in the way that a person sometimes feels hungry, half-starved, but doesn't know exactly what it is that he'd like to eat, was for my father to be answering them. Volunteering, saying I see how to bring Alec out of it, or It'll pass, give him a couple of weeks and he'll cool off about Leona and then...

But Varick McCaskill wasn't being voluntary, he was climbing onto his horse and readying to go be a ranger. Why I kept my silence is a puzzle I have thought about a lot. In a sense, I have thought about it all the years since that June lunchtime above the Noon Creek-English Creek divide. My conclusion, such as it is, is that asking would have been the necessary cost for any illumination from my father right then; and right then I could not exact such a cost from either of us. Another necessity had to be paid attention to, first. We needed that trail day, the rhythm or ritual or whatever it was, of beginning a counting trip, of again fitting ourselves to the groove of the task

and the travel and the mountains. Of entering another Two summer together, I may as well say. All of that, questions the size of mine would unbalance.

Not for the first time in my life nor the last, delay stood in for decision. Tonight in camp, I told myself: there, that would have to be early enough. Or at least was as early as I was going to be able to muster any asking.

Dode Withrow's sheep were nowhere in evidence when we arrived at the counting vee an hour or so after our lunch stop. A late start by the herder might account for their absence, or maybe it just was one of those mornings when sheep are pokey. In either case, I had learned from my father to expect delay, because if you try to follow some exact time when you work with sheep you will rapidly drive yourself loony.

I might as well go up over here and have a look at that winter-kill, my father decided. A stand of pine about a mile to the north was showing the rusty color of death. How about you hanging on here in case the sheep show up. I won't be more than an hour or so. He forced a grin. Think about how to grow up saner than that brother of yours.

This whole family's sanity could stand some thinking about, crossed my mind in reply but didn't come out. My father climbed on Mouse and went to worry over winter-kill on his forest.

I took out my jackknife and started putting my initials into the bare fallen log I was sitting on. This I did whenever I had time to

pass in the forest of the Two, and I suppose even yet up there some logs and stumps announce J McC to the silent universe.

Carving initials as elaborate as mine takes some attention. The J never was too bad to make and the M big and easy, but the curves of the c's needed to be carefully cut. Thanks to the tardy Withrow sheep, I had ample leisure to do so. I suppose sheep have caused more time to be whiled away than any other creatures in the world. Even yet on any number of Montana ridgelines there can be seen stone cairns about the height of a man. "Shepherders' monuments" they are called, and what they are monuments to is monotony. Just to be doing something a herder would start piling stones, but because he hated to admit he was out there hefting rocks for no real reason, he's stack up a shape that he could tell himself would serve as a landmark. Fighting back somehow against loneliness--that was a perpetual part of being a sheep herder. In the wagons of a lot of them you would find a stack of old magazines, creased and crumpled from being carried in a hip pocket. An occasional prosperous herder would have a battery radio to keep him company in the evenings.

no #

Once in a while you came across a carver or a braider. Quite a few though, the ones who give the herding profession a reputation for skewed behavior, figured they couldn't be bothered with pasttimes. They just lived in their heads, and that can get to be cramped quarters. Those religions which feature years of solitude and silence, I have grave doubts about. I believe you are better off doing anything rather than nothing. Even if it is only piling stones or fashioning initials.

In any event, that jackknife work absorbed me for I don't know how long, but to the point where I was startled by the first blats of the Withrow sheep.

I headed on down through the timber on foot to help bring them to the counting vee. A sheepman could have the whole Seventh Cavalry pushing his band along and he'd still seem glad of further help. Dode Withrow spotted me and called, Afternoon, Jick. That father of yours come to his senses and turn his job over to you?

He's patrolling to a winter kill. Said he'd be back by the time we get up to the vee.

At the rate these sonsabitches want to move along today he's got time to patrol the whole Rocky Mountains.

This was remarked loud enough by Dode that I figured it was not for my benefit alone. Sure enough, an answer shot out of the timber to our left.

You might just remember the sonsabitches ARE sheep instead of racehorses. Into view over there between some trees came Dode's herder, Pat Hoy. For as long as I had been accompanying my father on counting trips and I imagine for years before, Dode and Pat Hoy had been wrangling with each other as much as they wrangled their sheep. Hello there, Jick. Don't get too close to Dode, he's on the prod this morning. Wants the job done before it gets started.

I'm told you can tell the liveliness of a herder by how his sheep move, Dode suggested. Maybe you better lay down, Pat, while we send for the undertaker.

If I'm slow it's because I'm starved down, trying to live on the grub you furnish. Jick, Dode is finally gonna get out of the sheep business. He's gonna set up a stinginess school for you Scotchmen.

That set all three of us laughing as we pushed the band along, for an anthem of the Two was Dode Withrow's lament of staying on and on in the sheep business. In that '19 winter, I remember coming in to the house and standing over the stove, I'd been out all day skinning froze-to-death sheep. Standing there trying to thaw the goosebumps off myself and saying, "This is it. This does it. I am going to get out of the sonofabitching sheep business." Then in '32 when the price of lambs went down to four cents a pound and might just as well have gone all the way to nothing, I told myself, "This is really it. No more of the sonofabitching sheep business for me. I've had it." And yet here I am, still in the sonofabitching sheep business. God, what a man puts himself through.

That was Dode for you. Poet laureate of the woes of sheep, and a sheepman to the pith of his soul. On up the mountainslope he and Pat Hoy and I now shoved the band. It took a while, because up is not a direction sheep particularly care to go, at least at someone else's suggestion. Sheep seem perpetually leery of what's over a hill, which I suppose makes them either notably dumb or notably smart.

Myself, I liked sheep. Or rather, I didn't mind sheep as such, which is the best a person can do towards creatures whose wool begins in their brain, and I liked the idea of sheep. True, sheep had to be troubled with more than cattle did, but the troubling was on a smaller

scale. Pulling a lamb from a ewe's womb is nothing to untangling a leggy calf from the inside of a heifer. And a sheep you can brand by dabbing a spot of paint on her back, not needing to invite half the county in to maul your livestock around in the dust of a branding corral. Twelve times out of a dozen, in the debate of cow and ewe I will choose sheep as a matter of proportion. There on those slopes of the Two, for instance, to me sheep somehow simply looked proper, blending with the country as sage or heather or some other normal coloration would, while to my notion cattle on the same pasture stuck out like pepper on meringue. A kind of instant crop, sheep were. Under a strong-eyed herder who had them in easy graze across a half-mile of wildflower slope, sheep seemed as if generations of them always had been right there, cloudlike yet perpetual, and the grass and the flowers just now had been put in under them fresh for the year.

Nor do I hold with the argument that sheep inevitably destroyed such pasture. Put enough white mice or ostriches or anything else on a piece of land and you can overgraze it. No, if sense was used, if the sheep were moved around adequately on the range and there weren't more of them than the grass could stand--both of those conditions were enforced like the law of gravity in my father's bailiwick--pasturing sheep on a portion of a forest was a reasonable enough proposition. Anybody who slanders them as "hoofed locusts" or "bleaters and eaters" can also explain to me a better way to transform grass into food and fiber.

Anyway, for a person partial to the idea of sheep, I was in the right time and place. With the encouragement of what the Depression had done

to cattle prices the Two Medicine country then was a kind of ~~vast~~ garden of wool and lambs. Beginning in late May, for a month solid a band of sheep a day passed through the town of Gros Ventre on the way north to the Blackfeet Reservation, Tom Larson and Guy Miller each trailing several bands from all the way down by Choteau, and the Bartley brothers and Broadhurst Smith and Ira Perkins and the others bringing theirs from around Bynum and Pendroy. This was a time on the Reservation when you could see a herder's wagon on top of practically every rise: a fleet of white wagons anchored across the land. And off to the east, just out of view beyond the bench ridges, the big sheep outfits from over in Washington were running their tens of thousands, too. And of course in here to the west where we working Dode Withrow's sheep to the counting vee, my father's forest pastured the English Creek bands. Sheep and their owners were the chorus in our lives at the English Creek ranger station, the theme of every season and almost all conversation.

Blindfold and tickle me, and through it all I still could have identified each English Creek sheepman by voice and tale. Preston Rozier, who had the ranch just down the creek from the ranger station: originally his parents had homesteaded not far south of Pendroy, next to the Sheble place, and as in a lot of cases, growing up on a homestead sharpened his eyes for any other way of life. The summer when a four-man surveyor crew arrived to run the route for the railroad to push north from Bynum to Pendroy, two of them boarded with the Shebles

and the other pair with the Roziers; probably the best crop either family ever did get off those homesteads was those surveyors. When the railroad arrived in a few years it brought with it Pres's vision of his future. I'd see those cowmen come into Pendroy when they shipped their stock, they'd be pretty sorry lookers, cook over a campfire and sleep under their wagons and kind of slink off home the next day. But sheepmen, hell, they'd arrive and ship their wool and then hang around and drink and whoop and raise general hell, maybe party for three or four days before they'd drive off in a fancy car of some kind. And five months later they'd be back to ship their lambs and do it all again. Right then, I figured the money was in sheep. Ed Van Bebber, with the first place up the South Fork: Ed had a harum-scarum way of going about things, but nobody ever questioned his knack with sheep. During lambing, for example, Ed never even hired a night man, just got up from the supper table and went out to take the shift himself; there in the shed he'd nap in his sheepskin coat until the cold woke him up, then go around and collect the fresh drop of lambs. Being his own night man gave him a lower payroll than anyone else on the creek--although nobody else figured the self-punishment was worth it--but I believe Ed did his double duty for more than love of dollars. It's just got to be done, is all. In lambing it's the ewes and me against all the odds. Coyotes and scours and spring blizzards, they're a pack against us. Why give in to the son-of-a-bitch side of nature, I ask you? The Busby brothers, Bob and Ken: they grew up in Helena, and when

they were big enough to be of any help their uncle, Guy Busby, imported them out here as summer hands. No small portion of their work was the chore of mending the ranch's bobwire gates every time old Guy drove through them on the way home from a spree. We were misfortunate enough to come out here to work for old Unk just after he bought his first car. A Model T. He figured it was a wonderful advance, you know. Any time he wanted now he could scoot in to Gros Ventre and get lit up. Old Guy gave out before the world's whiskey did--some say the notion of Prohibition sent his blood pressure soaring behind what the human body can stand--and ever since, Bob and Ken had been trying to rebuild the Busby ranch. Thank the Lord that Unk was into sheep instead of anything else. Not even he could entirely drink up the wool money before the lamb money came. Don Frew: possessed of a college degree in agriculture and thus guilty until he could ever manage to prove himself innocent of a ranching community's automatic indictment--an educated fool. Don knew his stuff when it came to running a sheep ranch, but behind his back everyone imitated his perpetual response whenever he was asked when he was going to start lambing or haying or whatever: That will take some thinking about. Charlie Farrell; a close manager, as was said both in admiration and not, who never left a herder more than three cans of vegetables a week for fear somebody would rob the sheepwagon. But then, having to live in the time of the New Deal was an extenuating circumstance for anybody with Charlie's view of finances. News of the WPA wages being paid during the building of Fort Peck dam over in the eastern part of the

state convinced Charlie that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was making the world wobble on its axis: I wouldn't pay any man fifty cents an hour. No man is worth that much. J.L. Hill: lank and pale and palsied, but still a man of high insisrences, such as immediately firing any herder suspected of siccing his dog on the sheep too freely. Sheep don't eat with their feet, so running ain't going to fatten them. And of course Dode Withrow, of the moment, and Walter Kyle and Fritz Hahn, to be met up with on tomorrow's stage of this counting trip. Different as clouds, these English Creek ranchers in a lot of their ways. Yet they all were genuine sheepmen, all survivors of the annual war waged on them by Montana weather and the Depression, and from the flanks of the Rockies out onto the plains where the farming began, they and other men like them had made the Two country a land of sheep.

At the counting vee my father was waiting for us, and after greetings had been said all around among him and Dode and Pat, Dode handed my father a gunny sack with a couple of handfuls of cottoncake in it, said Start 'em, Mac, and stepped around to his side of the counting gate.

Up at Palookaville, where the dozen bands that summered on the north end of the Two entered the mountains all at the same place, there was an actual counting corral. But here on the spread-out English Creek range the count was done on each allotment through a vee made of poles spiked onto trees, the sheep funneling through while my father and the rancher stood beside the opening at the narrow end and counted.

Now my father went through the narrow gate into the vee, to the front of the sheep. He shook the sack in front of him where the sheep could see it, and let a few cottonseed pellets trickle to the ground.

Then it came, that sound not even close to any other in this world, my father's coax to the sheep: the tongue-made prrrrr prrrrr prrrrr, remotely a cross between an enormous cat's purr and the cooing of a dove. Maybe it was all the rs built into a Scotch tongue, but for whatever reason my father could croon that luring call better than any sheepman on the two.

Dode and Pat and I watched now as a first cluster of ewes, attentive to the source of the prrrrs, caught the smell of the cottoncake. They scuffled, did some ewely butting of each other, as usual to no conclusion, then forgot rivalry and swarmed after the cottoncake. As they snooped forward on the trail of more, they led other sheep out the gate and started the count. You could put sheep through the eye of a needle if you once got the first ones going so that the others could turn off their brains and follow.

My job was at the rear of the sheep with the herder, to keep the band pushing through the counting hole and to see that none circled around after they'd been through the vee and got tallied twice--or, had this been Ed Van Bebber's band, I would have been back there to see that his herder, on instructions from Ed, didn't spill some sheep around the wing of the corral while the count was going on, so that they missed being tallied into the allotment.

But since these were Dode's sheep with Pat Hoy on hand at the back of them, I had little to add to the enterprise of the moment and was there mostly for show. I always watched Pat all I could without seeming to stare, to try learn how he mastered these woolies as he did. Someway, he was able just to look ewes into behaving better than they had in mind. One old independent biddy or another would step out, size up her chance of breaking past Pat, figure out who she was facing and then shy off back into the rest of the bunch. This of course didn't work with lambs--who have no more predictability to them than hens in a hurricane--but in their case, all Pat had to do was say Round 'em, Taffy, and his carmel-colored shepherd dog would be sluicing them back to where they belonged. A sheepdog as good as Taffy was was worth his weight in shoe leather. And a herder as savvy as Pat knew how to be a diplomat toward his dog, rewarding him every now and then with praise and ear rubbing but not babying him so much that the dog hung around waiting to be complimented rather than performing his work. That was one of my father's basic instructions when I first began going into the mountains with him on counting trips, not to get too affectionate with any herder's dog, simply stroke them a time or two if they nuzzled me and let it go at that.

Taffy came over now to see if I had any stray praise to offer, and I just said You're a dog and half, Taffy.

Grass gets much higher up here, Jick, I'm liable to lose Taffy in it, Pat called over to me. You ever see such a jungle of a year?

No, I confessed, and we made conversation for a bit about the summer's prospects. Pat Hoy looked like any of a thousand geezers you could find in the hiring bars of Great Falls, but he was a true grassaroo--knew how to graze sheep as if the grass was his own sustenance as well as theirs. No herder in all of the Two country was more highly prized than Pat the ten months of the year when he stayed sober and behind the sheep, and because this was so, Dode put up with what was necessary to hang onto him. That is, put up with the fact that some random number of times a year Pat proclaimed to him: I quit, by damn, you can herd these old nellies your own self. Take me to town. Dode knew that only two of those quitting proclamations ever meant anything: The sonofagun has to have a binge after the lambs are shipped and then another one just before lambing time, go down to Great Falls and get all bent out of shape. He's got his pattern down like linoleum, Pat has. The Quality Stogie Store, Freda's place, he makes his headquarters, and for the first week he drinks whiskey and his women are pretty good lookers. The next week or so he's mostly on beer and his women are getting a little shabby. Then for about two weeks after that he's on straight wine and squaws. Generally it took Dode three or four trips to Great Falls to fish Pat out of a spree. I'll get there to the Quality and track him down and sober him up a little and have him all lined out to bring home, and he'll say, "Oh hell, I about forgot, I gotta have ten dollars to go pay a fellow." Then he takes off with that ten and that's the last I see of him. I wish to hell I had a nickel for every hour I've spent leaning up against the cigar counter in that joint, trying

to wait that bugger out. Jesus, one time I never will forget, I drove down there just bound and determined to get him back on the job, and I went into the Quality, and no Pat. Freda told me, "He's around here somewhere, Withrow, you just wait, he'll blow in here." So I waited. And waited. Leaning a hole into that goddamn counter. The bar was full of guys, it'd been railroad payday, and Freda's whores were working the crowd, Big Tit Lou and Bouncing Betty and Nora Buffalo and some others. Bouncing Betty had the first table, right in front of me, and she'd smile like a million dollars at everybody who came in. And all the time those gandy dancers were getting more and more boozed up. The place sounded like Hell changing shifts. So I stood there and stood there and stood there. Taking it all in, passing the time by thinking to myself what a sap I was. Finally Bouncing Betty got up and came over to me and said, "Withrow, I think you need some fun. On the house. We'll make it up out of Pat's next wages." I thought about how I'd been leaning there two-thirds of the night watching all this disgusting stuff, and I thought to myself, "By God, she is about a hundred percent right. I think Withrow DOES need some fun." Right then, wouldn't you just know, in the door comes goddamn Pat. "You looking for me?" he says. "I'm ready, let's head on home."

You can see how being around Dode and Pat lifted our dispositions. When the count was done and we had helped Pat start the sheep on up toward the range he would summer them on--the ewes and lambs already

browsing, taking their first of however many million nibbles of grass would ensue on the Two between then and September--Dode stayed on with us a while to swap talk. What's new with Uncle Sam? he inquired.

Roosevelt doesn't tell me quite everything, understand, my father responded. We are going modern, though. It has only taken half of my goddamn life, but the Billy Peak lookout is about built. Paul will have her done in the next couple days. This forest will finally have a goddamn fire tower everyplace it ought to have one. Naturally it's happening during a summer when the forest is more apt to float away than burn down, but anyway — Dode was a compact rugged-face guy, whose listening grin featured a gap where the sharp tooth just to the left of his front teeth was missing, knocked out in some adventure or another. A Dode tale was that when he and Midge were about to be married he told her that he intended to really dude up for the wedding, even planned to stick a navy bean in the tooth gap. But if Dode looked and acted as if he always was ready to take on life headfirst, he also was one of those rare ones who could listen as earnestly as he could talk.

How's Paul doing, Dode was asking next, is he healed up yet? Paul Eliason and his wife Catherine had gotten a divorce the past winter, and she had gone home to her mother in Minneapolis. It was one of those things. Catherine tried for a year to put up with being a Forest Service wife, but Paul at the time was bossing CCC crews who were building trail along the South Fork, and the living quarters for the Eliasons was a remote one-room cabin which featured pack rats and a cookstove as temperamental as it was ancient. Perfect circumstances to make an assistant ranger-

city wife marriage go flooey if it ever was going to.

He's getting over it, my father assessed. I'm trying to keep him busy enough he doesn't have time to feel sorry for himself.

Well, one thing, Dode observed, life is wide, there's room to take a new run at it.

Now it was Dode's turn to report, and my father just as keenly welcomed in his information that down on the Musselshell a wool consignment of thirty thousand fleeces had gone for 22 cents a pound, highest in years, encouragement that could goddamn near make a man think about staying in the sheep business, and that Dode himself didn't intend to shear until around the end of the month unless the weather turns christly hot, and that--

I put myself against a tree and enjoyed the sight and sound of the two of them. All the English Creek sheepmen and my father generally got along like hand and glove, but Dode was special beyond that. I suppose it could be said that he and my father were out of the same bin. At least it doesn't stretch my imagination much to think that if circumstances had changed sides when the pair of them were young, it now could have been Dode standing there in the employ of the U.S. Forest Service and my father in possession of a sheep ranch. Their friendship actually went back to before either of them had what could be called a career, to when they both were bronc punks, youngsters riding in Dill Egan's father's big round corral at Noon Creek every summer Sunday. My father loved to tell that Dode earned a lasting reputation the Sunday he showed up wearing a new pair of corduroy pants with leather trim--Dode could be

a dressy guy whenever there was any occasion--and found everybody gathered around a stranger from Fort Benton. The stranger possessed a bucking steer, and the standing wager that nobody could stay aboard him for a total of five minutes within a half-hour span. Dode snapped up the offer and then, getting a closer look at the animal, began to realize what he was in for. He strapped and tied on his saddle in every direction he could think of, got into the stirrups, and had the handlers turn the pair of them loose. When the half hour was up the steer had scraped and split Dode's fancy corduroy pants to tatters, and he would need to borrow something to go home in. But Dode also had totaled, between spills and remounts, five minutes and twenty seconds on the steer's back. Anybody can be a bareback rider, my father always concluded in telling the corduroy pants story, but it took Dode to ride barebutt.

By this time of afternoon a few clouds had concocted themselves above the crest of the mountains and were drifting one after another out over the foothills. Small fleecy puffs, the kind which during the dry years made people disgustedly joke that Those are empties from Seattle going over. This year it did not matter that they weren't rainbringers, and with the backdrop of my father and Dode's conversation I lost myself in watching each cloud shadow cover a hill or a portion of a ridgeline and then flow down across the coulee toward the next, as if the shadow was a slow mock flood sent by the cloud.

I hear nature calling, Dode now was excusing himself. He headed off not toward the timber, though, but to a rock outcropping about forty

yards away roughly as big and high as a one-story house. When Dode climbed up onto that I figured I had misunderstood his mission, he evidently was clambering up there to look along the mountain and check on Pat's progress with the sheep. <sup>4</sup> But no, he proceeded to do that and the other too, gazing off up the mountain slope as he unbuttoned and peed.

Do you know, even as I say this I again see him in every particular. His left hand resting on his hip and the arm and elbow kinked out like the handle on a coffee cup. His hat tilted back at an inquiring angle. He looked composed as a statue up there, if you can imagine stone spraddled out in commemoration of that particular human function.

My father and I grinned until our faces almost split. There is only one Dode, he said. Then he cupped his hands and called out in a concerned tone: Dode, I hope you've got a good foothold up there. Because you sure don't have all that much of a handhold.

By the time Dode declared he had to head down the mountain toward home, I actually was almost in the mood that a counting trip deserved. For I knew that traveling to tomorrow's sheep, those of Walter Kyle and Fritz Hahn, would take us up onto Roman Reef--always topnotch country--and after that would come the interesting prospect of the new Billy Peak lookout tower. It had not escaped me, either, that on our way to that pair of attractions we would spend tonight at a camping spot along the North Fork which my father and I--and yes, Alec in years past--considered

our favorite in the entire Two.

By just before dusk the two of us were there, and Mouse and Pony and Homer were unsaddled and tethered on good grass, and camp was established.

You know where supper is, my father advised. By which he meant that it was in the creek, waiting to be caught.

This far up the North Fork, English Creek didn't amount to much. Most places you could cross it in a running jump. But the stream was headed down out of the mountains in a hurry and so had some pretty riffles and every now and again a pool like a big wide stairstep of glass. If fish weren't in one of those waters, they were in the other.

Each of us took our hat off and unwound the fishline and hook wrapped around the hatband. On our way up, before the willows gave out we'd cut a pair of decent length, and now notched them about an inch from the small end, tied each fishline snug into each notch so it couldn't pull off, and were ready to talk business with those fish.

Hide behind a tree to bait your hook, my father warned with an almost straight face, or they'll swarm right out of the water after you.

My father still had a reputation in the Forest Service from the time some regional headquarters muckymuck who was quite a dry-fly fisherman asked him what these English Creek trout took best. Those guys of course have a whole catechism of hackles and muddlers and goofus bugs and stone flies and nymphs and midges. Chicken guts, my father informed him.

We didn't happen to have any of those along with us, but just before leaving home we'd gone to the old haystack bottom near the barn and dug ourselves each a tobacco can of angleworms. Why in holy hell anyone thinks a fish would prefer a dab of hair to something as plump as a stack-bottom worm, I never have understood the reasoning of.

The fish in fact began to prove that, right then. I do make the concession to sportsmanship that I'll fish a riffle once in a while, even though it demands some attention to casting instead of just plunking into the stream, and so it pleased me a little that in the next half hour or so I pulled my ten fish out of bumpy water, while at the pool he'd chosen to work over my father took some minutes longer to complete his catch.

Those little brookies, Eastern brook trout about eight inches long, are among the best eating there can be. You begin to taste them as quick as they hit the frying pan and go into their curl. Brown them up and take them in your fingers and eat them like corn on the cob, and you wish you had capacity for a hundred of them.

When we'd devoured five or so brookies apiece, we slowed down enough to share out a can of pork and beans, then resumed on the last half of our fish fry.

That hold you? my father asked when we were out of trout. I bobbed that I guessed it would, and while he went to the creek to scour the frying pan with gravel, and rinse off our plates, I set to work composing his day's diary entry.

That the U.S. Forest Service wanted to know, in writing, what he'd done with his day constituted my father's most chronic bother about being a ranger. Early on, someone told him the story of another rider-turned-ranger down on the Shoshone forest. Cut short my horses tail and the wind blew all day, read the fellow's first diary try. Then with further thought, he managed to conclude: From the northeast. My father could swallow advice if he had to, and so he did what he could with the perpetual nag of having to jot his activities into the diary. When he did it was entirely another matter. Two or three weeks he would stay dutiful, then came a Saturday morning when he had seven little yellow blank pages to show for his week, and the filling in had to start.

Bet, what'd I do on Tuesday? That the day it rained and I worked over the horse stalls?

That was Wednesday. Tuesday you rode up to look over the range above Noon Creek.

I thought that was Thursday.

You can think so if you like, but you'd be wrong. My mother was careful to seem half-exasperated about these scriiving sessions, but I think she looked forward to the chance to set my father straight on history, even if it was only the past week's. Thursday I baked, and you took a rhubarb pie for the Bowens when you went to the Old Agency station. Not that Louise Bowen is capable of recognizing a pie.

Well, then, when I rode to the Guthrie Peak lookout, that was-- only yesterday? Friday?

Today is Saturday, yesterday most likely was Friday, my mother was glad to confirm for him.

When I became old enough to go into the mountains with him on counting trips, my father perceived relief for his diary situation. (Previously he had tried Alec, but Alec had the same catch-up-on-it-later proclivity as his.) I think we had not gone a mile along the trail above the South Fork that very first morning when he reined up, said as if it had just occurred to him out of nowhere, Jick, whyn't you kind of keep track of today for me? and presented me a fresh-sharpened stub pencil and a pocket notebook.

It did take a little doing to catch onto my father's style. But after those first days of my reporting into my notebook in the manner of We met up with Dill Egan on the south side of Noon Creek and talked with him about whether he can get a bigger allotment to run ten more steers on and my father squashing it down in his diary to Saw D. Egan about steer proposition, I adjusted.

By now I was veteran enough that the day came readily to the tip of my pencil. Patroled--another principle some early ranger had imparted to my father was that if you so much as left the station to go to the outhouse, you had patroled--Patroled the n. fork of English Creek. Counted D. Withrow's sheep onto allotment. Commenced packing bolts and flanges and cable to Billy Peak lookout site.

My father read it over and nodded. Change that "bolts and flanges and cable" just to "gear." You don't want to be any more definite than necessary in any love note to Uncle Sam. But otherwise it reads like the very Bible.