Like a kid faced with a long-division problem, she nibbled her lip. “How much time is that supposed to take?”

“Hum ‘Home on the Range’ to yourself all the way through.”

Skeptically she tried all that, and a presentable glass of beer resulted. Pop nodded. “Okay, that’s half the battle. Go around to the other side,” he directed, “and be the customer for a minute,” flicking his towel to where he wanted her to sit up to the bar.

Francine came around past where I was sweeping for about the sixth time and snuggled onto the bar stool. “This seems more natural.”

“Don’t get ideas,” Pop growled. From a dozen feet away he slid the glass of beer to a perfect stop in front of her.

“I get it. It’s like shuffleboard.”

“I wouldn’t know. I call it a slick touch you only get by learning it. Now you come back here and try. Rusty?” Startled, I nearly dropped my idle broom. “Hop onto that stool like you’re the customer,” Pop directed, “so she can scoot the beer to you.”

This was different, sitting up to the bar as though I were supposed to belong there. Feeling important with the perch, I patty-caked the bar like Earl Zane until Pop gave me a look.

Meanwhile Francine, puckered with determination, was drawing a bead on the spot where the foam-topped glass in her grasp was supposed to glide to a graceful halt.

“Woops,” she said as I reared back out of the way of sloshing beer.

Pop made her try again and again. A lot of Great Falls Select ended up on the bar before she found the knack, more or less.

“Okay, that’s that,” Pop allowed, sopping up the beer spillage. “Now for the hard stuff.”

Hearing this, Francine rolled her eyes, as if anything harder would send her right back to Reno, newly discovered father or no newly discovered father, but I knew Pop only meant the liquor, all the
brands crowding the shelves of the breakfront. He reached under the bar. “I dug out a drink book for you. Study up from it when you get a chance and keep it handy here.” He saw she was taken aback by the sizable volume. “Hey, don’t let it throw you. We don’t get much call for fancy concoctions in here.”

“Glad of that.” Saying so, she tilted her head the way he always did, as if reminding herself to be daughterly. “There’s quite a bit to this job, ain’t it.”

“Bartending isn’t tea and crumpets,” Pop replied briskly. “While I think of it, let me show you a pouring secret.” He flourished his favorite shot glass. It had the New Deal blue eagle embossed on the side, no doubt the notion of some federal Roosevelter back in the time of Fort Peck. “Always use this as the house jigger. If anybody wants a shot and water on the side, give them one of those,” he indicated the stubby rank of shot glasses in the breakfront glassware—“but don’t let this one get away. Here, feel why.” He put the jigger in Francine’s uncertain hand. “Feel the eagle on there, the top of its head?” She rubbed the shot glass between her fingers and thumb and nodded. “That helps when you pour, pretty quick you’ll have a feel for when there’s enough in the jigger and you won’t hardly have to look.”

He stopped to take stock, of both Francine and the territory he’d covered behind the bar. “Oh, yeah. Next, the concert piano.”

“The huh?” She frowned around the barroom. “Maybe I’m blind in one eye and can’t see out of the other, but where’s there even a jukebox?”

“Don’t need one, here’s what makes music to our ears,” said Pop as he stepped to the cash register, hit the jangly key that opened the till, and began instructing. “Rule number one is, when you make change from paper money, a five or ten or whatever it is, put it over here in this part of the drawer first, instead of in with the rest of the cash. That way if any argument comes up, you can make sure the mistake isn’t yours. In other words, cover your behind.”

Francine smirked at that, but didn’t say anything. Pop moved on to showing her the quirks of the ice machine. While there, though, she spotted his reading material tucked beneath the bar at the amen
corner. "You dig Mickey Spillane?"

"Sure." Guardedly: "Why?"

"Me, too. *I, The Jury* is really something, huh?"

"Strong stuff." He regarded her afresh, as a hard-boiled master of fiction might have put it. "You read that kind of thing a lot?"

"Every chance I get. Done all the Mike Shayne books, waiting for more."

"Those’re good, too," he enthused, the lesson session temporarily forgotten. At the time, tales of tough-guy private eyes and endangered damsels were over my head, or at least at a level I wasn’t supposed to be perusing at my age, so I helped myself to an Orange Crush while the pair of them volleyed titles and characters. In his best humor for days, Pop commended her reading habit. "This’ll help. You’ll have a lot of time on your hands when business is slow."

"Don’t worry," Francine said breezily, "I’m good at killing time."

Deciding she’d had enough behind-the-bar tutelage for now, Pop tossed down his towel. "Couple more things, and we’ll call it good. The first one is what you might call the policy of the house." He looked at her in great seriousness. "No dating the customers. You get to going steady with some one__ ( Deleted: .

__guy, and the others aren’t gonna like it." He paused for emphasis. "So, no flirting, either direction across the bar, right?"

That seemed to make her bristle at the very idea, but she caught herself. "I get it, I guess. Playing favorites is bad for business, huh? Don’t worry on that score, Tom. Ain’t in this for romance, as my darling mother would say.” Fidgety to have this over with, she asked. "So, what’s the other thing that’s bugging you?"

Running a hand through his hair, Pop looked consciously paternal as he surveyed her from head to toe and back again as she twiddled the leather bracelet. "Your getup."

Francine all at once looked scared, and it made me think she had a lot to learn about having a
father.

He held up his large, capable hands to show her by example. "No fancy rings. Don't paint up with nail polish, either, now that I think of it. The customers shouldn't be looking at anything but that nice glass of whatever you're serving up, savvy?"

"Oh boy." She was fingering the fancy leather bracelet nervously now. "I don't want to break any rules, but I'm really attached to this."

Pop studied it and her for a moment. "Yeah, well, okay, I don't know why you want to wear half a handcuff like that, but I guess you can keep it on." He squinted critically. "Let's talk clothes. That outfit you've got on makes you look like something the cat dragged in." Before she could make so much as a peep of protest, he set her straight about proper apparel, Medicine Lodge style. "First thing, we'll get you some dark ones. The Toggery will have some. Nice white blouses to go with them." He looked at her moccasins. "Shoes, too. When you're bartending, you're on your feet all the time, squaw slippers won't do."

"Hey, wait," she protested, "didn't I see some bedroom slippers tucked away under the bar? What's the difference?"

"It's my old dogs that are tired," he meant his feet, "that's what. You want to keep yours from getting that way as long as you can. You need substantial shoes. Ask in the store for that grandma kind, I don't know what they're called."

Her dismayed expression said she knew what he meant. "Those black clodhoppers? Like nuns wear?"

"Those are the ones." He went to the cash register and counted out the wardrobe money for her. "Needless to say, this comes out of your first wages."

She tucked the money in her jeans, that hint of grin showing ever so slightly. "I haven't even
started and I’m already in the hole? Only kidding."

Pop stuck to business. “So now you know what’s involved with the joint. I’ll work behind the bar with you the first week or so while you’re breaking in. Get you through Saturday night. Then you’re gonna have to be on your own.”

With a swipe of her hand, Francine cleared the black mop of hair out of her vision. “It won’t be the first time.”

The next day came with Zoe and me hardly able to decide which subject to put our minds to first, Francine or Del. Since Pop was trooping her through the unglamorous side of bartending, such as slitting open whiskey cases when we poked our heads in the back room, we opted for Del.

“Must of been quite the sight, that there tick on the business end,” she did her John Wayne/Marion Morrison drawl as we approached the driveway where the Gab Lab was parked.

“Cecily, old thing, it would astound the birds out of the trees,” I replied in Wildean tones.

We sobered up and got our sympathy back in order as we reached the silent van with its curtains drawn. In his tick-bitten condition Del perhaps was sleeping in, although that did not seem like him. In any case, the morning was far enough along that we figured he ought to be up, so we knocked on the big side door.

Only silence answered.

Zoe and I were not prepared for this. We looked at each other in sudden fright. She was the one who said it out loud. “What if he’s dying in there and can’t open the door?”

Why this overcame me so, I still can’t explain, but it seemed a horrible fate to die in a VW van that Pop had likened to a sardine can. I panicked. If Del was breathing his last, there was no time to run for help. The side door was locked when I tried it, and so was the passenger one.

It was considerably belated, but one of us had the bright idea to go around and try the door on the
driver's side. That came right open, and we scrambled in to look into the back of the Gab Lab, expecting the worst, but not what we saw.

In wrinkled fancy pajamas, gray-faced as a ghost, Del was sitting hunched over his tape recorder at the worktable. He had headphones on, big as soup bowls, and as we gaped, he would peer closely down at the recorder, where there was a tiny counting instrument like the odometer on a car, jotting down what the number was at that stage of the tape, then hit the recorder's PLAY and REVERSE and FORWARD buttons like someone playing the piano one-handed. How someone with a crew cut managed to be tousled, I don't know, but he looked like he'd been worked over with an eggbeater. Thinking back, it strikes me as like something out of Beckett, Krapp's Last Tape, with the reel whirring methodically back and forth.

Zoe and I tumbled over the seat, startling Del out of his trance.

"Oh." Blinking at us, he lifted the headphones off. "Good morning, I guess it is."

"Does it hurt like crazy," Zoe asked straightforwardly, "where the tick got you?"

"Not quite that bad." He tried to seem sturdier than he looked.

I took a different medical tack. "Um, didn't the doctor tell you to take it easy?"

"I can't," he moaned, looking even more haggard. "I'll lose my grant! You have no idea how cutthroat the library world can be!" A wild look came into his eyes. "If I can't live up to what I promised in my proposal, the powers that be will take the Gab Lab away from me. There's a real push on to get Missing Voices into the library's holdings, and if I'm laid up..." He let that awful thought dangle. "I can at least transcribe. See?" He whipped the headphones back on, screwed up his face in listening concentration, then typed in blurs, a foot pedal stopping the tape recorder as he caught up with the last phrase. Off came the headphones, as if what we had just witnessed was proof of mental if not physical competence.

He must have caught our glances at each other, and around the interior of the van, mused on
almost every surface with uneven piles of typed transcriptions and scattered reels of tapes. "Things are a trifle out of order because of gaps in the transcriptions," he was forced to confess. "Talk about lingua
america, the mudjacks practically speak a tongue of their own whenever they're describing something
done at the dam." He shook his head as if to clear it. Gnawing the corner of his mouth, he lifted the
nearest stack of typing as if weighing it, then let it drop. "Rusty? I hate to bother him, I know how busy
he is, but could you ask your father to help me straighten out some of what I'm hearing on the tapes
when he has time?"

I assured him I'd ask Pop right away, anything to make him feel better. "He said to tell you not to
work yourself to death, there are more interesting ways to go," I passed along.

"Don't I wish he was in charge of the Library of Congress as well as the Medicine Lodge," he
replied forlornly, grabbing for the next reel of tape.

Francine's debut at the Medicine Lodge was as carefully supervised by Pop as if she were about to
perform for royalty. "You aren't nervous or anything, are you?" he asked edgily before he opened the
place for business that first day. "I'll be right here, just give me the high sign if anything stumps you,
okay?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," she recited yet again, taking her post at the end of the bar nearest the street
door as I watched every move through the vent. Zoe would have given skin to be here for this, but she
could not talk her way out of chores at the café, and it was up to me to provide a full report at supper.
Whatever was going to happen, the stage was surely set, with the barroom practically gleaming after all
my sweeping and mopping and Pop's attention to everything Francine could conceivably need. Spiffed
up according to Pop's dictates, in dark slacks and a white blouse and a black bow tie that I had shown
her how to master after half a dozen tries and with her hair even fixed better, she looked like a
bartender. Some version of one, anyway,
As luck would have it, her first customers were a tourist couple on their way to Glacier National Park, and setting them up with a couple of beers was a cinch. They did appear puzzled as to why there was an equal number of bartenders to customers in this particular saloon on a quiet afternoon, but shortly they were on their way and Francine grinned down the bar to Pop. "I haven't disgraced the joint yet, huh?"

The first regular to come in was Bill Reinking, and I just knew he was going to be instinctively inquisitive at the sight of a young woman in back of the bar. So did Pop, even more so. Before Bill could get a word out, he hurriedly produced the explanation he was going to have to make dozens if not hundreds of times: "New blood. My sister's kid, gonna learn the ropes about bartending."

"I see," said Bill, whether or not he actually did. Tipped off ahead of time by Pop, Francine had a bottle of good scotch waiting, and poured generously, and Bill, too, went off satisfied if still more than a little mystified.

It was Velma Simms who provided Francine's first real challenge. Things started not too badly, with Pop making introductions and Velma only raising an eyebrow a fraction. When Francine brought the ginger-ale highball over to the booth where Velma was going through her mail, though, she lingered and said, "That's a wild blouse." It was made of a soft material that seemed to have been poured onto Velma. "You buy it around here?"

"London."

"No crap! I bet it costs something over there, huh?" During this, Pop had come into the back room for something and wasn't aware of the one-sided conversation out front until I caught his eye and urgently pointed in that direction. He emerged into the bar room as Velma, notoriously companionable only on her own terms, ran a look up and down the younger woman and said, "Like they say, if you have to ask, you can't afford it."

"Hey," Pop called to Francine too late to ward off the frost attack, "give me a hand with the beer
glasses here, would you?" I noticed as she retreated behind the bar, looking back at the booth where alimony envelopes were coolly being slit open, that the little dent between her eyes when irritated was a lot like Proxy's.

After Velma, things went more smoothly, enough customers to keep Francine on her toes but not an overwhelming crowd, and with Pop close at hand as guardian angel, she kept things flowing reasonably well. My thoughts raced back and forth as I watched the activity in the barroom. This crazy year, which a person nearly needed to be an acrobat to follow, in its latest stunt had given me a sister, even if we didn't seem to be much alike in anything except hair follicles. I knew from my schoolmates that kids were not always happy when a new child came into the family, but did it have to work that same way at the other end of things, when a new grown-up showed up out of the total blue? I didn't think I actually resented Francine's arrival into my life and Pop's. I wasn't that much of a daddy's boy, was I? Yet, how was a kid supposed to react to such an instantaneous change in the family, and for that matter, in the cherished routine of Medicine Lodge life? And Pop and Francine, this had to be real tricky for them to do, too. Down there at the bar, behind the big fib that they were uncle and niece, were they truly becoming like father and daughter? After all, she was a grown woman, and he admittedly was up there in years, and Pop by word and example had long told me that habit dies hard. It bore watching, this dance of the generations.

Such thinking was interrupted as I saw him glance toward the door and stiffen at the sight of the next customers coming in. J._L. and Nan Hill were longtime friends of his and of the joint, but also old Fort Peck hands familiar with the Blue Eagle and its staff, if taxi dancers could be called that. The Hills steered their way to a booth as they always did because of J._L.'s shaking disease, while Pop in low tones instructed Francine in making a pink lady and drawing a beer into a mug with a handle large enough so that J._L. could manage it without spilling.

Escorting Francine over with the drinks, Pop began a roundabout explanation of her presence. "I
don’t suppose you remember my having a sister, she wasn’t really around Fort Peck so’s you would notice.” Boy, was he stretching the facts to fit the situation. He of course did have a sister, Aunt Marge, who had never been within a thousand miles of Fort Peck. Now, though, the so-called white lie had to be applied. “Anyhow, this is my niece Francine—”

“Pleased to meetcha,” Francine all but curtsied, sensing something perilous from the way Pop was speaking.

“She’s here getting an education in bartending.”

“This is the place for it,” declared J. L., drawing the beer mug to himself with both trembling hands. “None better from here to China, unless it was the old Blue Eagle in Fort Peck days. I sure do wish we could have got to that reunion, seen all the faces again. I kind of miss the old days, Tom, how about you?”

“Sometimes,” Pop equivocated, while Francine tried not to display the jitters at Fort Peck and Proxy’s bailiwick surfacing in the conversation. And I knew what she did not, that the real threat of discovery was Nan Hill, who as washerwoman to establishments such as the Blue Eagle no doubt had knowledge of people’s dirty laundry in more ways than one. judiciously sipping her pink drink, she was searching Francine’s face, as if trying to place it.

After enough such scrutiny, she turned to Pop with the verdict three of us were breathlessly waiting for.

“I can see the family resemblance—there’s no mistaking that hair, surely.”

With that, Francine passed all the examination any one person should have to undergo the first day on the job, and life in the Medicine Lodge settled to its true business, bartending. She did not do badly, as Pop graded it, on through the rest of the afternoon and evening. The true test to come, of course, would be whether she could handle the saloon by herself. And life with Pop and me.
There is nothing like a new face behind the bar to either intrigue or alarm a saloon's patrons, and Francine's presence in the Medicine Lodge very quickly drew attention far and wide. Word spread like grass fire among the Air Force missile silo contingents and oil field roughnecks and the like, that there was someone young, female, and reasonably attractive now pouring drinks in the old joint, and they began to show up in droves. Saloons in the other towns must have dried up like puddles. And while her bartending skills were still very much in the development stage, right from the start she could hold her own with the flyboys, sassily kidding them as "junior birdmen," and laugh enough but not too much at the rough jokes of the oil rig hands, and meanwhile fend off flirting from just about every local male in her age range, including prominent bachelors like Turk Turco and Joe Quigg, by tossing off "Sorry, no free samples of the merchandise" along with a little mocking smile that seemed to let them in on the joke. As Pop admitted one night in a doorway conversation with me when she was finishing the bartending shift by herself, "She's got quite a mouth on her. But she maybe had to get one, to keep up with Proxy."

On the other hand, a number of the Medicine Lodge's longtime customers, such as Dode Withrow and other old-timers from the ranches, including the sheepherders, were less taken with her saucy manner and quick tongue, and missed having Pop stationed behind the bar, in his bedroom slippers, faithfully listening to their stories and letting out "No bee ess?" as appropriate. No matter how attentive to them Francine tried to be, it was nowhere near the same.

I suppose Pop would have said it all balanced out on the teeter-totter. In any case, Francine now
was there behind the bar of the Select Pleasure Establishment of the whole state, apparently as firmly installed as the beer spigot, and people were just going to have to get used to her. That included me.

“Bill tells me you have an addition to the family.”

Word surely was all over town if it tickled the ears of even Cloyce Reinking, I deduced when I met up with the former Lady Bracknell at the post office soon after Francine’s bartending debut. You might not think going for the mail constituted hazardous duty, but was I ever finding it so. Occupied as Pop was with nurturing the newcomer behind the bar, he delegated me for the daily post office trip, which I ordinarily would not have minded. Nothing was ordinary since his change of mind about selling the Medicine Lodge, as I found out the first afternoon I had to pass the Zanes’ gas station on my way and Duane popped out like the birdie in a cuckoo clock. “Your old man weaseled out of the deal,” he sneered as I came into range, “he don’t know how to keep his word.” That got to me, but a broad daylight fistfight with a hereditary fool would not help matters in any way I could see, and so I only told him to stuff his remarks where the sun doesn’t shine and from then on took to dodging around the block on my mail errand. Encountering Mrs. Reinking with the Saturday Evening Post* and Collier’s* and a catalog, or two cradled in her arms and lofty curiosity in her expression was no similarly possible mortal conflict, but something of a challenge nonetheless.

“Uh-huh,” I tried offhandedly handling her inquiry about Francine having joined our living arrangement. “She’s kind of a surprise.” A little late, I remembered about watching my mouth. “I mean, we were never real close to that side of the family up until now.”

“Is that so?” A persimmon smile in character for the ladyships of the world. “I hope not for anything as serious as leaving a baby in a handbag.”

“Huh-uh. No. Nothing like that.”

When she put her mind to it, Mrs. Reinking could be surprisingly astute about things. “It must
make quite a change in the household for you and your father."

That was putting it mildly. "It takes some adjusting," I squeezed out enough truth without having to go into our domestic situation further, and hurriedly switched topics to her starring performance as Lady Bracknell, which I'd finally gotten to see when Bill Reinking kindly took me to the final night of the play. "You were outstanding! Zoe thinks so, too."

Her wintry features thawed into a genuine smile. "The two of you started something," she confided. "The Prairie Players are going to do Blithe Spirit this winter. I am cast—typecast, you might even say—as Madame Arcati."

"Neat! Do you get to—" I crossed my eyes to the best of my ability.

"I think not," she laughed lightly. "But I may resort to a turban. Madame Arcati, you see, is a medium and clairvoyant." Helpfully she explained that meant the character conducted séances with ghosts and could sense things that other people could not. A kind of fortune-teller of the past as well as the future, it sounded like.

We parted with her promise to enlist Zoe and me when she needed to learn her lines, and my silent wish for her clairvoyance to rub off on me.

The fact of the matter was that Francine was not like any relative—sister, cousin, something in between, as a half-sister seemed to be—I could ever have dreamed up. For sure, the presence of a woman in a house that had not known one since I was an infant meant detours in routines Pop and I had followed as habitually as monks. Particularly, she hogged the bathroom for so long each morning that I regularly had to go out behind Igdrasil to take a leak. "They're that way," Pop counseled me about that propensity of womankind. But such quirks were the least of learning to live with Francine. Not only did she and I not start off on the same page of the book of siblings, we were not even in the same edition yet. Throughout life you meet people from the past, as natural as anything, but meeting someone from
the future is far, far different. History only licenses us to drive in the past; the road ahead is always full of blind curves. Even I did not have nearly enough imagination to fantasize any of what the decade ahead would bring, with the flowering of a generation of Francines, restless and brainier than they knew what to do with and all too often as zany as they were brainy. The music coming that would leave Elvis Presley in the dust. The sprouting of communes and Haight-Ashbury and other such scenes. The whole youth revolt continually fueled by political assassinations, cities burning in racial rage, the despised Vietnam War, national traumas that seemed to come year by year after 1960. All I knew, those summer days and nights when history was forming up over the horizon, was that life had radically changed course with Francine's arrival, and I was scrambling to keep up.

Things might have gone on that way, she in her hemisphere and me in my own, and mostly thin air between despite our best efforts, if the night hadn't come when she joined Zoe and me for supper. Until then she had been eating early with Pop so they could work the shift in the joint together on through the evening, and also to the point, he could keep on introducing her to all and sundry as his niece. This time he was busy with a beer delivery and sent her on ahead to the Top Spot by herself, and the next thing we knew, here she came giving us a knowing grin about all being in the same boat, eating-wise.

"Room for one more casualty?" she asked, as if Zoe wasn't openly dying of curiosity about her, and scooted in with us at the back table, already wearing her bartending bow tie and crisp white blouse. She dubiously scanned my usual shake and cheeseburger and Zoe's barely touched plate of the day's special. "Liver and onions, ain't it. That'll put hair on your chest." She flapped open a menu for any alternative. "What do they serve here that doesn't come with ptomaine?" We giggled a little nervously at this frank approach to Top Spot cuisine.

I have wondered since if Francine's tongue was simply looser than usual without Pop there with her. His wing, when he took you under it, covered a lot of territory. Out on her own, without him or
Proxy to intervene, she must have felt—well, who knows what she was feeling, but she rambled on in a relaxed way as she went down the list of the café’s none too appetizing offerings. Zoe and I could just sit there and listen to this mercurial visitor from the grown-up world, obviously not thought up by Shakespeare or Oscar Wilde but theatrical enough in her own head-tossing way. I have to stop and remind myself that Francine was only twenty-one at the time. To us she seemed as worldly as Scheherazade.

Zoe’s eye was caught by the handiwork on Francine’s wrist. Wider than a watchband, the wristpiece was an intricate weave of different-colored leather strips like fine basketry, only soft. “Ooh, that’s some bracelet. Where did you get it?”

“Mmm? Made it myself? Francine still was absorbed in trying to find anything on the menu that appealed. ‘in leather class.’”

That roused my curiosity. “They have that in school where you were?”

“Nahh,” she said offhandedly, still intent on the menu, “but they’re big on it in juvie.”

Zoe and I just about fell into our food.

We looked at each other to make sure we had heard right, and we had. Juvie meant only one thing, any way it was said. A juvenile-offender correction facility. Alcatraz for teenagers.

“I give.” Francine surrendered the menu, flopping it closed. “Liver and onions it is, you only die once.” Our faces gave us away. “Woops. I see my mommy didn’t spread the word about that little episode in my youth.” Momentarily she frowned down at the wristband. “I sort of wondered how much my reputation had proceeded me. Not all that much, it looks like.” With the rare realization that she might have said too much, she winked at us in the manner of Proxy. “Tell you what, let’s keep it that way. What people don’t know won’t hurt them, huh?”

Depend on Zoe. She came right out with it. “How bad a crime was it?”

“I took a car, is all. People got excited. Jeez,” A note of annoyance crept into her voice, “I was
going to bring it back later that night. I just got a little delayed.”

“How old were—” Zoe and I blurted together.

“Old enough not to know better,” Francine breezed past that. “Fourteen.” In other words, no great amount of age beyond that of two thunderstruck twelve-year-olds.

If she was going to keep talking, we were going to keep asking. It was my turn. “So how long were you in juvie?”

Frowning, she toyed with a tendril of her hair. “Year and a half. That judge was really touchy about cars.”

“Have you decided, dear?” Mrs. Constantine hovered in briefly to take her order, alternating a warm smile at Francine as a new customer and a stern expression at her non-eating daughter. Zoe and I could hardly wait until she was out of earshot to resume our question barrage.

“What did Proxy say when you got caught?”

“She wasn’t around to say anything. Hardly ever was.” This was given out carelessly, as if a missing mother were of no concern. “My aunt and uncle weren’t any too happy with me”—she gave the offhand shrug that was becoming familiar—“but what did they expect? If there’d been anything to do besides watch wheat grow, maybe I wouldn’t have swiped that car.”

Zoe was torn, I could tell, between devouring every word of this and dying to fire off more questions, and for that matter, so was I. With extreme mutual willpower, we waited for Francine to go on.

“Anyhow,” she picked up her story as if she had nothing better to do—“me being in juvie got Proxy’s attention for sure. Came and got me when I was sprung. Decided to turn into a real mother and hauled me off to Nevada.” She shrugged again. “It’s been a roller coaster ride ever since.”

For someone who had been locked away for not inconsiderable theft, this new addition to the family sounded blindingly honest when she wanted to. But not, it was dawning on me, to the extent of
having volunteered her automotive indiscretion to Pop. Nor had Proxy seen fit to mention the matter, had she. If I was sure of anything, it was that Tom Harry would not put a car thief in charge of the saloon that was his lifeblood. So he didn't know, but now I did. Talk about the weight of knowledge; it all of a sudden felt like a ton.

Zoe, bless her up, down, and sideways, took up the questioning while I was sitting there, stunned with the burden of truth. "What did you do before coming here? I mean, what kind of work?"

Francine glanced around with an expression as if the hard-used cafe were all too familiar. When not showing a sidelong smile similar to her mother's, her mouth had a tendency to look like she was tasting something fishy. That dubious approach to life came out in her voice now. "Pearl-dived." Which meant she washed dishes. "Slung hash." Waited on tables. "Took rental cars down to Vegas when they ran short, go bring them back when Reno started to run out. Little of this, little of that, not a hell of a lot of anything." She picked up her spoon and drew idle circles on the tablecloth. "Just between you and me and Pat and Mike and Mustard, I think that's why that mother of mine came up with this brainstorm of getting me into a line of work that's got something going for it, like bartending. Don't you guess, Rusty?"

"Huh? Oh, sure." How the question popped out of me right then, I don't know, but when better?

"What does your... what does Proxy do for a living?"

"Her?" Some more tracing with the spoon in concentrated fashion. "She's a promoter." Zoe and I glanced at each other, trying to figure that out—the only promoting we knew anything about was advancing from one grade to the next in school—until Francine took mercy.

"Mom," she gave the word a sly little twist, as if all three of us knew the strange ways of parents—"is more or less in the divorce business, see. Nevada dude ranches have always been big on divorcees in for the quickie piece of paper. New crops of grass widows. So they send her around up here"—from the vague swing of her head that seemed to include everywhere north of Nevada—"to
travel agencies and private investigators and so on, anybody with a stake in marriages going on the rocks. Casinos use her, too, same kind of thing—spreading the word where people might be interested in coming on down to Reno.” She kept looking fixedly at the whorls the spoon was making on the tablecloth. “Those, and some other ways of earning a buck.” The slight lift of the shoulders that was casual, but also not. “She’s usually got something going.”

Her supper arrived, along with Mrs. Constantine’s beaming wish for good appetite, and she dug in, while mine now sat as untouched as Zoe’s.

“Hey, don’t let anything I said put you off your feed,” Francine favored us with as she chewed a piece of liver. “You can’t let other people’s behavior drive you crazy. Learned that in juvie.”

My stomach kept turning inside out during the rest of that meal. Francine’s offhand gossiping about herself had left me in what Pop would have called a “picklish dilemma.” Was it up to me to tell him his long-lost daughter had a criminal past, at least of the juvenile sort? Would that make me a squealer against my own flesh and blood? What if I did tell him and he took it wrong, thinking I was doing it because I resented her arrival into the family? Would I only be making trouble, and be blamed for bringing up something bothersome from the past? When you go through a gate, close it behind you, remember.

For once, even Zoe was less than certain when we put our heads together at the table after Francine finally went off to tend bar.

“You want him to keep her on so he doesn’t sell the joint—”

“Yeah.”

“—but you don’t want him out of it about what she did to land herself in juvie.”

“No.”

We deliberated silently on the matter.
“Maybe” inspiration surfaced in Zoe as it so often did—“she’ll take care of it.”

“Who, Proxy? Fat chance. She hasn’t said boo about it so far, so why would she—”

“No, no, not her. Francine, I mean. She about talks her face off, doesn’t she? So she might blab it herself to your dad, like she did with us, sooner or later.”

I seized on that, particularly the “later” part.

“Good thinking, Muscles. Maybe I’ll wait and see what happens.”
“Guess what Bill Reinking had on his mind today.”

Looking deeply thoughtful, Pop was at his desk on the landing, a typical rainy afternoon, when I came back from the post office.

“Don’t keep me in suspenders, Pop,” I joked as I trotted up the stairs, still clutching the mail under my slicker to keep it dry until I handed it to him—bills, mostly—and went to hang up the dripping coat.

At least I hoped I was joking, for the most average thing seemed suspenseful since Francine came onto the scene. I was pretty sure she hadn’t told him about her juvenile detention past yet, if she was ever going to, and the Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner generally had more serious matters on its mind than who had stolen a car way back then, so there was a pretty good chance this wasn’t that.

What was it, though, that had him sitting there, as if waiting to explore the human condition with me? I could tell simply by listening that the vent was safely closed. He had not said anything about keeping it a secret from the new presence in the barroom, but I had the impression he didn’t at all mind it happening that way for the time being. Right now he looked more than ever like the master of all he surveyed, having a cigarette in a relaxed manner that suggested this one didn’t count toward quitting smoking, gazing around the back room, as if collecting his thoughts from the loot assortment. Now that Francine was catching on as bartender enough not to disgrace the joint, he even had the leisure to help Del with mudjacks lingo, the Fort Peck reunion evidently a rosier experience to look back on than when he’d had to face it. So I was not able to pick out any imminent disturbance of the peace in my father’s universe at the moment, and had to let him take his sweet time in telling me what was on the mind of
the Gleaner editor.

"Okay, picture this," he said at last when I was more than ready to. "Bill comes in a little while ago and is sitting there having his scotch and I'm just hanging around, visiting with him. Francine minds her manners, goes off to the amen corner to leave us alone, and we're shooting the bull like always, when guess what he brought up?"

He seemed to be enjoying the story so much I almost hated to parrot back, "Gee, what?"

"He's president of the chamber of commerce, you know." News to me. Pop paused for effect, but couldn't hold it in for long. "He asked me to honcho the derby this year."

This was quite something, all right. While other towns marked the close of summer with harvest festivals and homesteader days and rodeos and such, Gros Ventre had decided the proper way to celebrate was to catch every fish humanly possible. The derby had grown much larger and more popular across the half dozen years since my ill-fated introduction to it. Which was why the best I could come up with at the idea of Pop, chicken-gut fisherman that he was, in charge of the annual rod-and-reel extravaganza at Rainbow Reservoir was "No bee ess?"

He started to correct my language, but then laughed a little sheepishly. "I must be getting a reputation for having time on my hands, you suppose? I don't know, though." He looked almost embarrassed. "Being in charge of something like that is awfully damn civic. I'm not sure I have it in me."

Now, it would have been perfectly fine with me if he had decided not to have anything to do with the exalted fishing derby in any way, shape, or form, which would mean I didn't have to, either. However, if it would give him something to do after Francine could handle the Medicine Lodge by herself and Del departed to wherever Missing Voices led him to next, what could be wrong with that?

Quickly I worked up enthusiasm. "Sure you have. He's just asking you to boss a bunch of people for their own good, isn't that what 'civic' means?"
"I told Bill I'd think it over." He glanced at me, as if making sure. "You really figure I could do okay at it?"

"Hunnerd percent cinch, Pop," I vouched.

"Okay, we'll see," he said, and for once it did not sound as if it meant maybe.

Next came the morning, not long after, when Francine startled me by showing up in the kitchen as I was heating my breakfast. Ordinarily she slept late and I would only eventually know she was out of bed by those constant bathroom sounds of faucets being turned on and off and lids clattering on the sink counter and other toiletry noises that always left males in the dark. In this new order of things, Pop was sleeping in as well, claiming to be catching up on years of late nights, and usually he and she would grab a bite at the Top Spot before setting up the saloon for the day. So I wasn't prepared when she wandered in this early, her hair not even fixed, more like the black mop back to the day she had arrived, and she had on the same pinkish shirt and over-the-hill blue jeans from then. "What's buzzin', cousin?"

Thrown as I was by her appearance, I mechanically did the polite thing. "Morning. Want some tomato soup?"

"Not hardly." Instead, she prowled around, opening cabinets, making a face at what she didn't find.

"Don't you have anything edible in the place, like cornflakes? Oatmeal? Raisins, even?"

"Huh-uh. There's some old bread we haven't thrown to the magpies yet. You could maybe make toast."

"I'll settle for some joe, thanks just the same." She prepared the coffeepot and stuck it on the stove while I poured my breakfast into a soup bowl and sat down to it. Joining me at the table while waiting for the coffee to perk, she seemed to have something on her mind. Whatever that was, it didn't seem right to me for the only sound in the room to be my slurping up soup.
I asked, "Sleep well?"

"Fine." This was said, though, with another yawn stifled with her sleeve, the leather bracelet sliding a little on her wrist. By now Pop was letting her close up the saloon by herself most nights—"She needs the practice, shutting up of any kind," he said humorously enough about Francine's shotgun style of conversation; little did he know—so she was keeping late hours. Rare sunshine was flooding in through the kitchen window on us, not a cloud anywhere beyond Igdrasil's leafy outline, the old Packard, and Del's van, sparkling with dewdrops in the morning light. Squinting against the brightness, she asked, as if just reminded, "How's College Boy doing?"

"No tick fever yet," I reported. "He's still awful busy typing up the mudjacks so he doesn't get canned from his job."

She smiled with one side of her mouth. "He better not work himself too hard. He gets any skinnier, ticks wouldn't have anything to climb on, huh?"

I didn't care to join in on this reminiscence of Del in the flesh, and, coffee now ready, she went and poured a cup and took quick sips before rejoining me at the table.

Francine sat there for a little while, not saying anything, which was unlike her. After enough gabby suppers in the café, Zoe and I had become used to her going on at length to the effect that it didn't matter whether Kennedy or Nixon won the forthcoming presidential election because we were all going to get blown up anyway when Russia and the flyboys cut loose with the missiles out in those siloes, and other extended observations that did not help one's appetite. Yet you couldn't really write her off, we kept finding, to our fascination, even when she was telling us we'd all end up in incinerated fallout shelters with nothing to eat but tubes of toothpaste. Even at her worst she made you think, and that's worth something in a person.

As now, when she sat there tracing a roundabout pattern on the oilcloth with her thumbnail before giving me a sudden, keen look. "Want to know something?" I kept at my soup. In my experience, when
someone said that, they were going to provide the something, whether or not that’s what you wanted.

“You’re the first to find out, bud.” She leaned across the table in confidential fashion. “Decided I’m gonna change my name.”

Just like that? Was she kidding? Could a person do that?

“Oh?” I stammered in surprise, wondering if I ought to get Pop up to hear this. “You mean, from Duff to—ours?”

“Nahh, it’s too late on that,” She tossed the Harry family name exclusively back to Pop and me, to my considerable relief. “I mean the other one. I’m sick of being Francine. It sounds like some constipated saint.”

Now I was fascinated. “What are you going to change it to?”

“France.”

The kitchen went so silent, my eye blinks probably could have been heard, until I managed “Like the country?”

“Mm hmm. Got kind of a romantic touch to it, ain’t it. How’s it grab you?”

“It’s, um, real different.”

“That’s what I thought. Sounds kind of hip, don’t it. ‘France,’” she said in cool-customer fashion, “yeah.” She grinned at me over her coffee cup. “The boys in the joint are gonna have something to get used to, huh?”

So were the rest of us, starting with Pop. When he arrived on the scene somewhat later for a wake-up jolt of coffee, his initial reaction was predictable—“Like the country? Not even ‘Frances,’ like the saint sounds like?”—but shortly he threw up his hands and said she was a grown-up and her name was her own damn business.

As it proved out, France, as she was now, guessed right about the flyboys and roughnecks having a good time adjusting to the new her when they came in the joint, with the playful ones teasing her as
'Frenchy' at first. But that wore off soon enough, and her adopted name or nickname or whatever it was ceased to be anything I paid particular attention to on life's list of surprises.

Proxy was another matter. Put it simply, she spooked the daylights out of me whenever she showed up.

Not far into the evolution of Francine into France and the reaction in the saloon, Zoe and I were on our way back from supper, chattering a mile a minute as usual, when we saw the red Cadillac parked in the alley behind the saloon. Leaning against a fender, taking long, thoughtful drags on a cigarette was the unmistakable blond, shapely figure, and we needed to do some quick thinking.

"Just remember," I whispered urgently, "you've seen her—"

"—through the vent, right," Zoe tallied in a similar rushed whisper.

"—but she's never seen you—"

"—but she knows I'm in on it about Francine, I mean France—"

"—so you better look surprised or something at meeting her so she doesn't get suspicious about how you recognize her. Ready?"

"Piece of cake. I'll just say, 'I've heard your name mentioned, Mrs. Duffy.'"

"No, no, Duff, get that straight or she'll bite your head off. Come on, she's looking at us."

You really knew you had been looked at when Proxy gave you the once-over, with that suggestive gaze and tuck of a smile at a corner of her mouth. She studied Zoe to the maximum as we came up, Zoe giving back as good as she got.

"Remind me here," Proxy saw in a hurry that Zoe was thoroughly attached to me, "you're exactly who?"

Dramatically Zoe began regaling her with Butte and the Top Spot and suppers together, until I finished off the introduction with what really counted. "She's in on it."

"Right," Proxy said, as if sucking a tooth. Me, she gave a little shake of her head. "You're starting
early, Russ,” whatever that was supposed to mean. Her attention shifted from us, thank goodness, as she
restlessly looked up and down the alley. “Is Tom around? He’s not at the house, and I didn’t want to
barge into the joint and upset things.”

“He’s gassing up the car”—with Earl Zane still spitting mad over losing out on the saloon, this
now had to be done at the truck stop at the other end of town—“he should be back pretty quick.”

“Oh-kay,” Proxy said, grinding out her cigarette with a practiced foot, “we can inspect the scenery
until he gets here. So, sonny. How’s that daughter of mine doing at slinging drinks, does he say?”

I was not going to be drawn into any discussion of that. “Pop will want to tell you himself, I don’t
want to spoil it.”

She studied me in the intent way that made me uncomfortable. “You getting along okay with
Francine, I hope?” She included Zoe with a half-wink that said any of this was just between us.

“Sure,” we chorused. Then, though, some urge sneaked up on me and I turned this conversation on
its head. “She’s changed her name, that’s a little hard to keep up with, but we’re getting pretty much
used to it.”

“She’s what?”

“Didn’t you know?” I couldn’t resist, and Zoe beside me was trying to keep an equally straight
face. “She goes by ‘France’ now.”

“Like the—?”

“Sure thing.”

“Is that all.” Proxy nonetheless looked a bit bothered by the news, resorting to another cigarette.
She smoked the same unregenerate brand of coffin nails my father did, no Kools or Salems for her.

“She goes by ‘France’, huh? Isn’t that something. Shows she has a mind of her own,” she said as though that were a
novelty.

Zoe’s attention was caught by the strange license plate on the Cadillac and used it as an excuse to
ask with a wonderful air of innocence, "Do you have a job in Nevada?"

Proxy seemed amused by the question. "More than one, angel eyes. Force of habit." Well, that tallied with her daughter’s version that she always had something going. Now she slanted a look at Zoe, although I again had the feeling she was speaking mostly to me. "I don’t suppose you know what a stand-in is."

But we did! We had learned all manner of things theatrical from Cloyce Reinking. Bursting with curiosity, we demanded to know what classic of drama Proxy was attached to.

"Naw, not a play," she brushed aside a mere stage role. "A movie they’re shooting in Reno and the desert there."

Suspiciously I asked, "So who are you the stand-in for?"

"Marilyn Monroe, natch."

Zoe and I fell silent. This couldn’t possibly be true. Could it?

Meanwhile she was telling us she didn’t know why anybody would think it would make a good movie because all it was about was catching wild horses, but Clark Gable was in it, too, "and a bunch of others." It sounded very much like what a person might pick up from reading a Reno newspaper.

"Then what’s Marilyn—" I began trying to pin her down.

"—really like?" Zoe finished.

"Don’t get me wrong," Proxy’s voice dipped to a more modest tone, "we’re not buddy-buddy, her and me. I’m part of the furniture, as far as she’s concerned. See, I stand in for her when they’re setting up the shots, is all. The hair and skin and so forth, we register about the same with the cameras."

Zoe barely beat me to the next question. "How’d you get a neat job like that?"

Proxy shrugged, as if there were nothing to it. "I’m in Harrah’s one night, just seeing what’s going on, and I reach out and give one of the slot machines a yank as I go by. ‘Why’d you do that, doll?’ a guy behind me asks. ‘This machine loves me,’ I tell him. He laughs and says, ‘Wait a minute, stand over
here in the light, would you?' He turns out to be the movie director on his way to the blackjack table.”

She shrugged again. “Long and short of it is, he tells me they need somebody awfully blond for a stand-in, and how about me, so I said why not?” She laughed in a dry way. “You watch, I bet they swipe my line about the slot machine. Thosemovie people.”

Whether or not there was a lick of truth in any of that, she could weave a story, for sure. Skeptical as we were, Zoe and I had listened as if hypnotized. “But if they need you to be the stand-in,” I finally challenged insofar as I could, “how come you aren’t there instead of here?”

“Oh, that. The shooting’s shut down a while. See, they have to dry Marilyn out. Booze and pills together.” She twirled a finger at her temple. “Real bad idea.”

That still was the kind of gossip that probably could be picked up at any Reno slot machine. Like me, Zoe didn’t know how much to believe, but it sounded so good in the telling, it seemed a shame to write it off entirely. “Maybe she’ll go on the wagon and you’ll have to turn right around and go back to Nevada,” she tested out, knowing I would feel a lot better about matters if that happened.

“I’m not holding my breath. Things happen when they happen, buttercup.” Proxy was growing restless about waiting around in the open and glanced at me. “What do you suppose is keeping that father of yours?”

I shrugged and should have quit with that, but instead did something I could have kicked myself for afterward.

“We could wait for him in the back room, I guess,” I more or less invited before Zoe’s expression told me that was not the best idea.

In a blink Proxy dispatched her latest cigarette. “Lead on, I’m housebroken.”

The back-room assortment caught her interest the moment we stepped in. “Well, looky here. Tom didn’t tell me he was running a pawnshop as well as the joint.” Damn, she was swift at sizing things up.
I had to hope she wasn't swift as well.

"This is some bunch of stuff," she marveled, looking every which way. "Kind of like money in the bank, huh?"

I mumbled an explanation about drinkers sometimes running short of money, avoiding any mention of Pop selling off the loot, as I wished he hadn't called it, on those trips of his.

A reminiscent gleam came into her eye. "Yeah, that had a habit of happening at the Blue Eagle, too." She gave a throaty laugh. "You wouldn't believe what some of those characters wanted to trade."

Zoe had been darting fearful glances at the slicker covering the vent, but when Proxy's back was turned I silently mouthed, "It's okay, it's closed," and she relaxed into the natural role of tour guide. With Zoe showing off the variety of items from cowboy hats to crowbars, Proxy was unexpectedly interested in it all, like a shopper turned loose in a shut department store. I hung back a little, staying out of the way, brooding over the way this milk-blond force of nature kept showing up out of nowhere and disrupting things.

"What the devil is this, a gospel meeting?"

So taken up with Proxy's visitation, I hadn't heard Pop's car, and I came to with a start as he stepped in from the alley. He did not sound all that pleased at finding the three of us in the back room, and I edged in behind Proxy to let her handle it. Zoe wisely had shut up, too.

"How's every little thing, Tom? I figured I'd stop by and find out how our girl is doing, besides lopping her name in half," Proxy said casually. "I see you're letting her run the joint by herself."

"Some of the time," Pop allowed, coming over to where we were clustered by the saddles and spurs. "She's got to learn to be on her own."

"So?" Proxy's eyebrows alone pretty much asked the question. "How's she shaping up behind the bar?"

"Not bad." He paused, glancing at Zoe and me and then giving up on keeping us away from grown.
up talk. "The flyboys and roughnecks are like bees to honey around her, but she knows I mean it about no dating the inmates, and she hasn’t been."

"I’ll lay down the law to her about strictly sticking to the job, too," Proxy said, looking relieved. "Men, they are such a nuisance. Present company excepted, natch." She generously included me in the grinning glance she gave Pop.

"Let’s don’t get into that can of worms." I noticed he was giving her the same funny look he had when she pulled in after the Fort Peck reunion, guarded yet attracted. Shaking that off, he turned away to where his apron was hanging on its usual hook by the landing. "I know you’ll want to visit with Francine—I mean, France. Cripes, why couldn’t you give her a name that can’t be fiddled with?" Zoe’s eyes sparkled at that. "I’ll take over out front”—he tied the apron on—"and send her—"

"Before you do that," Proxy interjected. Zoe and I took note of the actressy way she looked around the room, as if only then discovering its treasures. "Quite the collection you have here."

Pop paused, looking unsure whether he wanted to hear this. "It adds up, if you stay in business long enough."

"If I know my history from the old days in the Eagle, customers don’t always make good on paying up later." She patted the weathered stirrup of a saddle that obviously dated back to roundups long ago. "I bet a bunch of this is never gonna be got out of hock and it’s yours to do with, am I right?"

"That happens some. Why, you in the market for a saddle for the Caddie?"

Proxy didn’t crack a smile. "I was just thinking of someplace where they buy all sorts of stuff, and there must be a junior fortune here if it was handled right." Clearly she thought she was talking over the heads of Zoe and myself, which showed she didn’t know our heads. We put on bored faces, idly spinning the rowels of the rank of spurs while listening with all our might.

"You were, were you," Pop was saying gingerly. "And where is it you think something like that takes place?"
“Canada, slowpoke.”

My insides lurched.

“The railyard district in Medicine Hat,” she specified. “Come on, Tom, you know what I’m talking about. No place like it when we used to know it, was there.” The kind of slick, knowing smile I didn’t want to see accompanied that. “Still that kind of place, if I know anything about it,” she sailed right on. “I’ve been back to the district now and then since, doing business, and you’d be surprised at what they can come up with when they like what they see.” I suppose she did not actually bat her eyes, but she might as well have. Proxy’s general type of business already had involved Pop with a surprise daughter. Now it was threatening to set him off again on those trips I hated so much. As far as I could see, she was a specimen of catamount that made the wildcat mounted on the wall seem like a kitten. Catching my distress, Zoe nibbled her lip anxiously.

Pop squinted as if trying to draw a bead on what to say next. I couldn’t tell if he really was tempted or simply thrown by Proxy’s latest big notion. In any case, hesitation was not a good sign in him around her.

“I’m kind of busy with something else,” he put her off. Who knew I would ever be thankful for the fishing derby? “For now,” he went back to safer ground, “let’s just concentrate on the bartending daughter.”

Agreeably enough, Proxy said that was fine and dandy with her, and as he went in to mind the bar, she left Zoe and me with a grinning adios and went out to the Cadillac to wait for France. It is strange what you have to pin your hopes on in this life. I now had to wish for Marilyn Monroe to be dried out enough to need a stand-in, if she really did, because when Proxy was here instead of there, I could feel my father being lured away from me a little at a time.

By now Del was showing signs of emerging from his camper cocoon. Much to his relief, Pop’s
sessions of helping with the mudjack lingo had enabled him to send off a first batch of Fort Peck tapes and transcriptions to the powers that be at the Library of Congress, and with every new day bringing no sign of Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Zoe and I no longer had to dole out sympathy when we dropped by the van to see how he was doing. Our report of Proxy’s visit elicited his old bushy-tailed interest, right down to that deathless detail, that she claimed she was a stand-in for Marilyn Monroe.

“If that’s so, Marilyn Monroe had better watch out she doesn’t end up as a stand-in for Proxy,” he said with a chuckle. Actually taking a break for a minute from the tape recorder and typewriter, he yawned and stretched in the Gab Lab chair. “By the way, how’s ‘Uncle Tom’s Niece’ playing to the audience at large?” This was different. He hadn’t brought up Francine to us before, still embarrassed over the tick on his business end, we figured.

Zoe looked at me meaningfully, and I had to nod in surrender. After all, I’d had the privilege of dropping the news on Proxy.

“Not bad,” she took over with that arch hint of more to come that we had picked up from The Importance of Being Earnest. “People are going have to get used to the fact she’s changed her name, though.”

“Say again?” Del tilted his head to employ his good ear.

No further prompting needed, Zoe delved into Francine becoming France, with me furnishing the crucial detail she’d always thought Proxy had burdened her with a name that sounded like a constipated saint.

“She thinks she got a bum deal on her birth certificate,” Del did a wickedly effective Groucho Marx bit with his eyebrows—“she should try being named after a president.”

“Yeah, but”—Zoe was struck with a thought that nobody else saw coming—“that was his middle name, sitting there waiting. President Roosevelt’s, I mean. So you got off pretty easy, people usually have dumb middle names. What’s yours?”
“Oh, nothing worth mentioning. Now, if you don’t mind—”

“That’s not fair. We’ll tell you ours, won’t we, Rusty.”

“Sure. You first.”

“Theodosia. It’s Greek.”

“Thomas,” I owned up to. “Like Pop.”

Still nothing from Del. “Listen, I have work to do and—”

“I bet it’s something like Sylvester, isn’t it,” Zoe persisted as devilishly as only she could. “Or Algernon, or—”

“All right, all right.” He picked up a pencil and threw it down. We kept waiting.

“It’s Delano,”

As soon as the word was out of his mouth, Zoe knew something was up. I was already staring bullets at him.

“For your edification,” he was admitting to none too willingly, “my full name is Philip Delano Robertson. My father thought if you speak it fast, it sounds kind of like, well, you know.”

I did not even have to say anything, merely kept staring at him. Was any grown-up trustworthy at all?

“I know what you’re thinking, Rusty”—and he was all too right—“but it wasn’t like that, honestly. I didn’t turn Phil into Del to win over your father, I decided to make the change when I left Washington to come out here.”

“Cross your heart and swear to go to heaven in a flash of—”

“Absolutely. Look, I’m using it on the Missing Voices tapes”—he grabbed the nearest one to show us the grease-penciled label on the reel—“and the transcriptions and all else. Professionally and”—he spun his hands as making the one catch up with the other—“personally as well, I go by Delano now. It’s a better name, it has more to it,” he said with conviction. “I don’t know why it’s taken me this long to
do it. Slow learner.”

He must have seen we needed more convincing. “Honestly, it’s an old, old tradition of new arrivals to this part of the country,” he resorted to saying, “and I can absolutely see why Francine, I mean France, would do it.”

“What, call herself after someplace in Europe?”

“No, change her name to the extent she is. Amending it, let’s say, the way I’m doing with Delano. History is full of examples,” he said, as if that were justification enough, “people did it all the time when they came west.” He hit on an inspiration. “Alan Lomax even discovered a song about it.”

Clearing his throat, necessarily or not, he proceeded to twang out:

Oh, what wuz yer name in the States?
Wuz it Jackson or Johnson or Bates?
Mebbe Gaitskill or Gaither or Gates?
Oh, what wuz yer name in the States?

We clamored for more, but he declined. “I really shouldn’t have got going on this matter of France, as she now is,” he reproved himself. “Terrible manners. I don’t know what’s happening to me. I’ve never even thanked her for pitching in at picking deadly insects off me.” Serious to the roots of his crew cut now, he looked out the van window toward the Medicine Lodge, as if setting his sights on it. “I suppose I really ought to take care of that when I get a chance.”

Right then we should have seen what was coming, shouldn’t we.

The very next day, another wet one keeping us inside at the back-room desk, Zoe and I were settling in over the Flying Fortress that still lacked a tail, what with all else that had been taking up our time. Out front, the saloon had just opened and was still empty, with only the distant clink of glassware
as France—we were calling her that with hardly a second thought now—fussed with chores behind the bar. Zoe was ritually checking the vent, which we were about to shut so we could jabber all we wanted while we worked on the bomber tail.

“Ooh,” she whispered as I was starting to cut out the balsa wood tailfin with the X-Acto knife. “Rusty, guess who.”

Looking much as he did when he appeared in the Medicine Lodge that first day, all legs and pockets and red head, Del was stepping up to the bar, shaking off the worst of the rain as he came.

“Top of the afternoon,” he said lightly. “Good weather for amphibians.”

“Yeah, ain’t it.” France came partway down the bar, wiping her hands on a fresh towel. “Two Medicine country liquid sunshine, everyone tells me this is.” She glanced up at the clock. “Looking for Tom? He’s at the Spot having lunch with his fish derby committee, so he’ll maybe be a while.”

“No, no, I only came by to say thanks for helping out there when I had to be, ah, searched.” He twitched his shoulders self-consciously. “I hope it wasn’t too embarrassing.”

France responded with that cunning little turn of mouth she had inherited from Proxy; it could serve as a smile or not, depending. “Angel of mercy, that’s me.” Turning serious, she asked: “You over your bug bite?”

“Pretty much. Still an itchy spot.” Del tried for the bright side: “At least it didn’t result in sudden death.”

“Mm hmm. Well, that’s always good.”

Abandoning the bomber tailfin one more time, the two of us at the vent watched in suspense while she rubbed the bar with her towel and he stood there, gangling like a hollyhock.

“Actually,” he came around to as if it was a big decision, “while I’m here, I think I’ll have a drink.”

“Fine. What’ll it be?”

“Hmm? Beer, please. Sorry, let me do it right.” Slapping a dollar on the bar, Del pulled in his chin
to make his voice deeper. “Herd me up a Shellac, s’il vous plaît.” Not a bad bit, Zoe and I silently agreed.

France snickered and stepped to the Select spigot. When the glass was brimming to a nice head, she slid it to him. “Here you go, straight from the horse.”

Matters now had reached a pivotal point of bartending ethic, whether to withdraw to a respectful distance and let the drink be imbibed in solitary pleasure, or to stay in the immediate vicinity, doing some little thing and provide small talk and a listening ear if wanted. Pop always knew in a flash which to do. Looking less than certain, France glanced to the amen corner, where one of those mystery novels with the perpetually endangered blonde on the cover waited as usual, but then began drying the same beer glasses she’d dried five minutes before. “You’ve really been holed up working, huh? How’s it going?”

“Phenomenal,” Del responded, dabbing away a little beer mustache. “Another week or so and I’ll have all the interview tapes transcribed and sent off. I couldn’t have done it without Tom. Fort Peck was a world all its own.”

“I bet. I’ve heard a ton of that from Proxy.” Another dry glass received a thorough wiping. “Then what? You moving on, I guess?”

“I’m afraid so.” He did the bit with his chin jacked down on his voice box again. “Back on the trail of the Missing Voices.” Zoe and I heard this with a pang we could feel in each other.

“Oh boy, this place could use some noise around this time of day,” France skipped past his imminent departure. “Tried to talk Tom into putting in a jukebox, but he says if people want music, they can go sing in church.” She wrinkled her nose at the Buck Fever Case painting across the room. “If I owned the joint, I’d put in a juke right smack over there.”

Del ventured, “And have to listen to fifty versions of ‘she done me wrong’ songs?”

“Nahh, not just yokel vocals. I’d make sure to sneak in some Mose Allison. ‘One Room Country
Shack' and so on. You dig that kind of thing?"

"Do I! Absolutely!" Del nearly ascended off his bar stool. "Mose Allison is a Mississippi Delta bluesman of the first order. A direct descendant of Leadbelly and Muddy Waters and Blind Lemon Jefferson and—" He rattled off names until building up to an encore of the growly blues he had performed at the reservoir the fishing day with Pop and me. "Everythin' nailed down 's comin' loose. Seems like livin' ain't no use. Sensational stuff, isn't it? Pure jingua america." Finally he caught himself. "Sorry. I tend to get carried away about musicology."

"That's okay," she said, giving him a strange look. "Passes the time anyway."

That caused him to check the clock over by the Select Pleasure Establishment plaque and conscientiously down some more of his beer. "I really should get out of your ha—your way so you can go about your business."

"Aw, feel free to stick around and flirt with me," she gave him a grin so fresh it was comical—"I need the flattery and you need the practice." Her face sobered as she saw him redden all the way to his ears. "That's what's called a joke, you know."

"Right, right. Good one."

France fiddled with something under the bar while Del kept rolling the beer back and forth between his palms. "Actually, I need to drink up and go back to transcribing." As if it had just occurred to him—which may well have been the case—he dug deep to pay. She came, took the money, delivered the change, and began to move off down the bar. Del wrenched around on his stool in that direction.

"Ah, France... I was wondering, I mean I wanted to ask. Have you had a chance to see any of the countryside around here? Glacier Park, for instance?"

"Not hardly," she laughed unhumorously. "Been too busy with—" She rolled her eyes to indicate the totality of the bar room.

He managed to sound bashful and eager at the same time. "What would you think about driving up
with me on Sunday? The park is only a couple of hours from here.”

I instantly knew what was going through her mind: the house policy, no dating a customer. Yet, and I was entirely with her on this, too, Del didn’t really qualify as a customer, did he? He was, well, Del, practically an attachment to the household; friend of the family, inadvertently; soon to head down the road in pursuit of other Missing Voices. Obviously an exception to any rule, and in my pulling for her to say yes to him, I was not at all alone. I speak for both of us, Zoe was as eager as me to see Rosalind and Orlando, Algernon and Cecily and Jack and Gwendolen, duplicated in front of our eyes.

France did it her own way, grinning a little slantwise as she answered: “Promise we won’t end up picking ticks off each other?”

Even from the length of the barroom away, we could see Del’s ears redden again. “No buggy stuff, scout’s honor.”

“Okay. Sunday’s it.”

All that could be gotten out of them afterward about the Glacier Park trip was “It went fine” from her, and “It was quite the day” from him, not exactly the dramatic dialogue Zoe and I were hungry for. Pop added a few furrows to his brow when he learned of their date, but he only said, “Opposites attract, but usually not for long.”

And in fact, Del did not show his face in the saloon in subsequent days but hunkered in to the Gab Lab again, and France seemed the same as ever, matching wisecracks with customers when she had to and minding her own business in the form of bar chores and hard-boiled novels otherwise. Still waters run deep, though, notoriously so. It was only a few nights into that week when I stirred from sleep with the sense that something was wrong.

Groggily I sat up and sniffed hard; one more time the house was not on fire from Pop smoking in bed, so that wasn’t it. No, what woke me, I realized, was that France had not come in yet, even though
the radium green of the alarm clock showed it was considerably past closing time at the saloon. I strained to hear if she might be in the bathroom, but faucets weren’t running, the toilet wasn’t flushing, none of that.

Now I started to be really alarmed. Had something happened to her? Just as I was about jump out of bed and wake up Pop, I heard small noises outside. For the next minute or so I listened almost hard enough to get ear strain, but it did not really take that much. No matter how careful a person is, the side doors of a VW van opening and closing make some sound. So did creeping up the creaky back steps and easing open the kitchen door and trying to tiptoe through the house in the dark, as she more or less successfully was.

Wait till I tell Zoe about this development, I thought excitedly as I rolled over and pretended to be asleep.
“How much did you say them jellied eggs is, girlie? Price gone up again, ain’t it.”

There was only one voice like that in the Two Medicine country, rough as barbwire and about as welcome, and I had heard its grumbles so many times, it simply made me groan to myself as I checked on the bar room out of habit, a few afternoons after Del’s excursion into the joint. Like many another of the shepherders, Canada Dan drank for a week or so when he got started, and plainly he was launching the kind of drunken spree that Pop dealt with all the time but France had not encountered until now.

She had been in a chipper mood since taking up with Del, but any midnight rendezvous in the van was hours and hours away yet, and in the meantime, here sat this ornery customer as if he were taking up residence in the otherwise empty saloon. It would be a while yet before any of the regulars were due in, so I entirely sympathized that she had his unwelcome company to fend with by herself. Even through the vent, I could tell that when she wasn’t having to get up and draw him another beer, she just wanted to left alone in the amen corner to keep on reading the latest from her and Pop’s shared stash of tough-guy books, *Say It with Bullets.*

“Just like I already told you, twenty-five cents, cheap at half the price,” she joked, although she sounded a little strained and sulky. “Girlie” surely was nowhere on her list of preferred names, but then Canada Dan was never going to be a candidate for the diplomatic corps.

“Two bits a cackleberry, Jesus H. Christ, what’s this world coming to?” The grizzled herder pawed around in the wages he’d spilled out onto the bar, another of his less than endearing habits when he was on a bender like this, evidently trying to decide whether he could afford to eat as well as drink.
"What the hell," he made up his mind, "bring on the hen fruit, one for the gullet 'n' one for luck." I had my back-room chores yet to do—Zoe was at hers at the café, before she could join me for another session on the perpetually unfinished B-17—but for whatever reason, I couldn't tear myself away from the duo in the bar room.

What a contrast they made, the unshaven and unsteady gray-headed customer in shabby herding clothes and the feminine young bartender in a sharp white blouse and her raven hair by some bathroom miracle attractively done in ringlets. Appearances aside, France seemed capable of holding her own with the hunched, muttering figure at the end of the bar, gamely bringing the glass crock and serving up a couple of its distasteful contents to him with plate and fork.

With a shaky finger he pushed a bill to her out of his mess of money and ate an egg in about two bites, chasing it with beer, while she went and made change. "There you go. Have a good time," she left him with, and moved off to the other end of the bar to dive into her reading again.

Canada Dan wiped his mouth with his sleeve, staring down at the bar, his second egg untouched. He called out, "When's Tom coming in?"

"He's not. I'm the regular bartender now," France informed him coolly. "Lucky you."

"Huh, yeah." He was staring down at the bar again. "Girlie? Didn't I give you a ten-spot?"

France never even glanced up from the page. "Not unless it had Abe Lincoln on it."

I was dumbfounded. She stubbornly wasn't making a move toward the cash register, where in accordance with Pop's rule the greenback in question should have been set aside as proof against any doubt.

Canada Dan swayed on the bar stool but was firm on the money matter. "I'm sure as anything I had a ten, right here"—he jabbed a finger on the cash on the bar—"and now look, I got this chicken feed back from a five. That ain't right."

Irritably she called to him, "It was a five. If you'd keep your dough in your pocket, where it
The herder argued on, his voice growing louder. "It ain't fair. Treating a man like a turster. Swipe his money right out from under his nose. What's this place coming to?"

"Have another beer and forget it," came her flat reply from down the bar.

"Uh-uh, nothing doing." With that flair a drunk can sometimes have, all at once he was on his feet, staggering but determined. "Going down to the Pastime," he declared with injured dignity. "See if they can treat a man honest there."

"Fine," France said sweetly. "I'll miss you with all my heart."

As he made his unsteady way out without so much as looking at her, alarm grew in me at the prospect this presented. Canada Dan on a weeklong bender, telling his troubles at the rival saloon, run by that gossip Chick Jennings and now frequented by Earl Zane to boot. As surely as night follows day, they'd spread word around town that Tom Harry's barmaid would swipe money from you right under your nose. And while I wildly hoped not, there was the awful thought that they might be right. But Canada Dan might have been mistaken about a ten-dollar bill, too; I couldn't let the reputation of Pop and the Medicine Lodge depend on that.

Closing the vent decisively, I slipped down the stairs and out the back door and dashed for the house. Pop was in another session with Del in the Gab Lab, straightening out Fort Peck lingo, and I didn't dare burst in on them anyway with something like, "France is being called a thief and maybe she is, if she didn't learn her lesson in juvie." No, instead I rushed up to my bedroom and the dresser-drawer stash of money from my swamping chores. Pop always paid me off in silver dollars and I let them accumulate until there was a model-plane kit or something else I wanted to buy. To my dismay, I didn't have as many as I'd thought, and had to scratch together quarters and dimes and nickels to make the final dollar, panicked that I was losing too much time. Jamming the handful of coins large and small in my pocket, I raced down the alley to head off Canada Dan.
I rounded the corner of the block where the Pastime was situated just as he approached the entrance, muttering angrily to himself.

"Dan! Wait!"

"Uh?" He jerked around as I panted up to him.

"Francine"—I wasn’t going to confuse him with her latest name—"sent me. She looked in the cash register again. Said you were right, she shortchanged you, she’s real sorry. Here.”

“Well, ain’t that something.” Drunk as a skunk or not, he closely counted the loose change and four silver dollars I handed him. His sour old face leered down at mine as if we shared some dirty secret.

“Tell her I knowed she was wrong and I’m just glad she caught up with herself,” Canada Dan rasped. “It wouldn’t do to be cheating good customers.”

This wasn’t like me, but I didn’t even tell Zoe about the incident, let alone Pop. It was just too murky or too open to question, too something. Canada Dan’s word against France’s? I didn’t want to be responsible for bringing that kind of thing to anyone’s attention. After all, maybe she had made an honest mistake, or not made one at all. I kept telling myself I’d settled the matter—_with my own money, even_ and that ought to be that.

The next few days passed without disturbance, and the welcome lull brought the end of the week and a new movie at the Odeon for Zoe and me to capitalize on as usual. By now Charlie Hooper at the ticket window must have thought she was tubercular, but in any case, with a few of her tragic coughs, the crying room was once again ours.

As soon as we were settled in the dark, waiting for the show to start, we prattled about assignations in the Gab Lab and wondered what Del and Francine would do without each other when he left, and otherwise plumbed the mysteries of adult behavior, to call it that. Ourselves, we were joyously
splurging, Almond Joy candy bars added to the usual Neccos—thanks to a found dollar I must have missed, back under my socks, in that frantic scramble to ante up to Canada Dan; everything nailed down did seem to have a habit of coming loose lately—and if luxurious entertainment of this sort wouldn't get my mind off life with a startling sister, what would?

The movie was not likely to wear anyone out with thinking, for sure: *G.I. Blues*, starring Elvis Presley, with the rest of a cast that no one had ever heard of, deservedly. Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde had nothing to fear from the plot. Tanks roared across the screen, crushing small trees and blowing things up in the opening scene, but this merely served to establish that Elvis was one of a happy-go-lucky bunch of peacetime American soldiers stationed someplace in sunny West Germany, where there didn't seem to have been a lick of damage done by World War II.

Zoe and I watched in silence except for the sound of Neccos in our mouths as the soldiers made a bet that their leading seducer could not maneuver the town's standoffish nightclub dancer into a one-night stand. Presto, and the seducer was transferred to Alaska and Elvis had to fill in for him, as well as sing every five minutes, and it took no great guessing where this was headed. Elvis, slender in those days and with a flattop haircut so unmilitarily high that from a distance it looked like the eraser on a pencil, had just wiggled through the title song when a rattle of candy wrapper told me Zoe was putting her attention to an Almond Joy. Even through a mouthful of chocolate and almond she could sound more dramatic than anything happening on the screen: "You're real worried, aren't you."

"About what?"

"Francine. France. Whoever she is right now."

"Wouldn't you be if some car snatcher who's been in juvie showed up out of nowhere and said, 'Guess what, I'm your sister'?"

Her imagination refused to give in. "What about this: her and Del fall in love and get married, and they run the saloon, and your dad can quit bartending and go fishing all he wants and take you to ball
games and everything. What would be the matter with that?"

"Proxy would have her nose in everything even deeper, that’s what."

"Right. I forgot her."

I wished I could. Why did she call me Russ and Sonny, all the time, with that disturbing smile of hers, as if only the two of us were in on some kind of secret?

By this time Elvis was singing on a stage in a rathskeller, when someone punched a selection on the jukebox and it blared “Blue Suede Shoes” loud enough to drown him out. This somehow led to soldiers starting to slug one another. Seasoned critics of this sort of thing by now, we agreed the fight scene did not stack up well against the one in The Alamo cantina; not enough bodies were flying through the air and breaking up furniture. Peace was quickly restored and the storyline went back to the bet about a one-night stand.

"How could they ever get married, anyway?" I thought out loud during this break in the action, unwrapping an Almond Joy; it was such great candy, two goodly pieces when you opened it, so that you always felt there was reward ahead. “France and Del, I mean. She calls him College Boy, behind his back all the time.”

"She’d have to get over that," Zoe deliberated. “Learn to call him honeypie or something instead.”

"Oh, sure, can’t you just hear her?" I said, munching. ‘My little chicken dumpling, please pass the salt.”

"You never know what they’re going to do. Sometimes my mom calls my dad Peterkin.”

"Whoa. What does he call her?"

"Nothing.”

By now Juliet Prowse was fully in the story, as the nightclub dancer whose routine was mostly twirling in circles when she wasn’t doing the splits. She was leggy and toothy, and to our discerning ears didn’t sound German or even French.
“What kind of accent do you call that?” one of us wondered.

“Goulash,” the other readily volunteered.

Things worked out, as they do in movies. Elvis was pressed into babysitting for a G.I. buddy, the baby began squalling—“Just think, if they had crying rooms in Germany, the movie would have to end right there,” I pointed out—and in a panic he called Juliet, who, being a woman, knew to coo over the baby and give it a bottle, and these ministrations somehow took all night, so Elvis won the bet. Sure, after that there was a misunderstanding and a spat, but reconciliation in time for Elvis to sing the last song with Juliet practically turning to butter as she listened. “Uff courze I marry you,” she said before he even asked.

Elvis sang a final song to the assembled troops and frauleins, and then we were back in the dark for real, the Odeon’s marquee shutting off behind us as the audience dispersed to cars and pickups while the two of us headed home, quiet the way we sometimes were when one of us had grown-ups on the mind.

“Don’t get all shook up,” Zoe said sympathetically in parting.

“Uff courze not,” I said, as if I believed it.

France and Pop were both behind the bar the next morning, Saturday, when I showed up for my swamping duties.

He was breaking in France on this aspect of bartending, too, so she was washing and shining up an army of glasses while he checked the beverage supply, going over things with her as he did so. “Just remember, if a guy says, ‘Gimme a ditch,’ that’s plain bourbon and water, and you use the cheap stuff down here in the well. He replenished the supply of run-of-the mill bottles beneath the bar. “If he wants to drink fancy, he has to ask for a Lord ditch,” he turned and put a hand to the higher-quality Lord Calvert whiskey kept for show in the breakfront. France dabbed in “Fine” and “Got it” at intervals.
as instruction of that sort went on. They seemed to be becoming more comfortable with each other, despite the generational equator dividing their worlds that would make Francine's lips start to twitch whenever he got going on something from the old days of the Depression and the Blue Eagle era that he and her mother had shared, and that drew a gruff "Don't get big ideas" from him if she suggested something like the Medicine Lodge serving edible snack food instead of pickled eggs and pig knuckles. At least in that respect, then, they were father and daughter as if handed scripts in pink covers, with me doing my best to ad-lib between the pair of them. It was a role much on my mind again that quiet morning while they went about their chores behind the bar and I did mine in the rest of the barroom, spitoon and toilet duty first, to get the worst out of the way. I had just grabbed my broom and come back in to start sweeping when I heard Pop exclaim, "When did this show up? Been missing since last Saturday night, hasn't it? I thought you said somebody must have walked off with it."

I snapped my head around, to see him holding up the Eagle shot glass.

"Oh, yeah, meant to tell you," France said as if the jigger's reappearance didn't amount to much. "I came across it behind some stuff under the bar." She shrugged. "Don't know how it got away from me."

"That'll happen," Pop said good-naturedly. "Sometimes I'd lose my head if it wasn't tied on, hey, Rusty?"

"Uh, you said it."

"But you need to keep track of something like this," he sermoned for France's benefit, twirling the shot glass so that the blue eagle caught the light. "Don't let it be wandering off and get lost for good."

"Oh-kay," she said with a slanty smile, "I'll remember that."

I was in a trance as I slowly pushed the broom. Was I jumping to the conclusion? Or was the conclusion jumping out at me? My top-drawer dollar had mysteriously disappeared and reappeared exactly the same way, hadn't it. Put that together with juvie and Canada Dan's ten-spot, and now I knew I had to tell Zoe.
"You got something on your mind besides your hat, Ace," she sensed right away.

"Funny you bring that up, Muscles. I'm in a sort of a fix."

"Bad one?"

"Not yet, but it could get there." If I was learning anything this adolescent year, it was that pretense can be one hundred percent serious underneath. "So here's the setup," I stayed in character in more hardy fashion than I felt. "There's this person, see, who maybe keeps doing something not too legal but doesn't get caught at it, and then turns around and undoes it on account of guilty conscience or something, if you get what I mean. Pretty risky way to behave, you think?"

Zoe gasped. "Doesn't France have any more smarts than that? She's not back to taking cars, is she?"

"No, that's the weird part, it's dumb little things." I ticked off my missing dollar that came back and the shot glass story and I went on to what had happened with Canada Dan. Zoe listened as only she could, her dark eyes never leaving mine, her generous mouth pursed in contemplation.

The instant I was done, she said, "And you're in a fix about whether to tell your dad or not?"

"You got it."

The tip of her tongue indicated deep thinking about my dilemma while I waited in agony. "Maybe," she said at last, "maybe she's a kleptomaniac."

"Wh-what kind of maniac is that?"

"It means somebody who steals, they can't help it. It's in their blood or something," she said knowledgeably. "There was a rich lady in Butte, when she went in Hennessy's department store, a clerk would follow her around and write down what she tucked in her dress. At the end of the month they'd send her a bill."

"That wouldn't work on France," I despaired. "Zoe, what am I gonna do? What if she gets to be more and more of a stealing maniac? Takes a car"—the Buick; the Packard, even; once I started
imagining, there seemed no limit to where her acquisitive habit might lead, this was no mere matter of the angels' share—or all the money she can lay her hands on, or something?" I concluded helplessly, "But if I squeal on her to Pop, that's that for her bartending."

"Del."

Zoe left it at that until I gasped, "You think he's one, too?"

"That's not what I meant," she said impatiently. "Del must know her pretty well by now, don't you think?"

"Sure. Right down to the skin."

"So maybe he could"—she spun her hands that way he did when trying to come up with the right phrase—"sort of give her the word. Tell her somehow that she's got to quit taking things that don't belong to her. Some nice roundabout way, he's good at that. He's about to leave anyway, isn't he?"

"Any day now, he says, as soon as he hears from the powers that be."

"There you go, then. Piece of cake, Ace."

"Yeah, well, maybe." I drew a deep, deep breath of resolve. "Let's go ask him."

"Ah. The fearsome twosome."

Del was not doing a bit, though, when he admitted us into the van and sank back into his Gab Lab seat, only acknowledging us in a distracted way. He had a peculiar glazed expression, while he kept gazing around the Gab Lab as if enumerating every item in it. I fidgeted, waiting for him to show attention in our direction, but there was no sign of it. Zoe urged me on with a little snap of her fingers that he didn't hear.

I mustered, "Del, I was sort of wondering if you could help me out—us out, I mean—by... what's wrong?"

He sat up so abruptly it made me step back. "Where's your father?"