freeze parts right off you!”--when I was old and gray. True, there was the point that it had been only a dozen years since the last thirty-year winter; but looking at it a certain way, that might mean this one was so intense it overrode the usual weather arithmetic, mightn’t it?

Besides, if any further proof was needed of the nature of this winter, Velma Simms had pulled out for Mexico, saying she wasn’t coming back to this icebox of a town until June.

In short, a killer winter, and Pop somewhere out there in it in a twenty-five-year-old crate of a car. I tried my best not to think about him swallowed up in the polar wastes of Canada, although I could not get it off my mind for very long. If this was a fair sample of being fatherless, it stank.

My spirits did begin to lift--the only direction for them to go--the day he was due to come home. All I had to do was to get through the hours of school, I kept telling myself, and there he’d be behind the bar the same as ever, fresh white shirt putting the snow to shame, when I burst into the joint through the back door, and that would be that, no more of his trips until this killer winter was in the record books. You can talk yourself around to almost anything when you really try.

Accordingly, by noonhour the main thing on my mind was the game of Horse the usual fifth-grade bunch of us gathered for in the gymnasium. The junior high boys were hogging the basketball court as always, but in the alcove leading to the locker room there was a hoop mounted on the wall for practicing freethrows, and that served for us.

“Who’s first?”

“Jimmy’s turn. He was horse’s wazoo last time.”

“Ruhss-ull keeps track,” Duane Zane perpetually thought it was funny to mock my name in caveman syllables, “Ruhss-ull always keeps track.”

“Somebody has to or it’d be your turn all the time, brain pain.”
Jimmy Hahn and Hal Busby, my closest friends, laughed plenty at that, and even Duane’s buddies, Sid Musgreave and Ted Austin, had to snicker.

Trying again, Duane sneered, “DDT, simp,” short for Drop Dead Twice.

“And look like you? Huh-uh, nothing doing.”

Giving me a last dirty look, he flipped the basketball to Jimmy.

“Jump shot,” Jimmy decided, gave a little hop and with a grunt catapulted the ball toward the basket, hitting the rim. We were just at the age where the basketball no longer seemed as big as a pumpkin to us, but it didn’t yield easily to our shot-making efforts.

Catching the rebound, Sid crooned, “Nice try, guy,” the latest word fad--
guy this and guy that--we had picked up from somewhere. “Watch this.” With a grunt, he shot and hit the backboard but not the basket.

“Rusty’s up,” Hal said, bouncing the ball to me. “C’mon, guy, show them how.”

To my surprise if nobody else’s, I did, although my jump shot clattered around the rim for what seemed an interminable time before dropping through.

“Unreal! How’d you make that?”

“How’d you miss it? H,” I announced, because one of our countless rules was that you had to call out each letter of H-O-R-S-E as you earned it with a basket; if you forgot to do it before the next player shot, you lost that letter.

“How about that,” Duane still was on my case, “the guy thinks he can spell.“

“‘Duane’ starts with ‘Duh’, that’s easy enough,” I came right back at him. I long since had learned the one great lesson of early education: to fit in, stand your ground. Duane, my nemesis since that first fishing derby and always the loudest mouth at school, at first had been in the habit of coming out with something like “Show us your hairy part!” I noticed, however, he did not join in when someone
smarted off with "Hey, Rusty, had any of your old man’s medicine lately?" A few playground fistfights settled the worst of that, and by now I wasn’t picked on any more than anyone else. To keep it that way, I made sure to join in on things at the right volume, loudly playing work-up softball and touch football and Horse with the other boys and whispering answers in class to selected girls; you would have had to look hard to single me out from my couple of dozen classmates. It was each day after school that I turned into the loner an only child tends to be. My close buddies Jimmy and Hal rode the school bus to where their families ranched, and neither of them--nor anyone else from school--ever laid eyes on the back room of the Medicine Lodge. That was my special spot in life, mine alone, and I intended to keep it that way.

“You guys hear what happened to Elvis’s guitar?” Duane halted our game to clumsily imitate the Presley pelvic style of playing. “It got pregnant.”

“You’re so out of it, Zane. That joke’s o-o-old. C’mon, you gonna shoot the ball, or hatch it?”

“It’s not his turn anyway, it’s mine.”

“You’re crazy, it’s mine.”

“He’s right, it’s his.”

“Then let’s see him do something.”

“Here goes, losers.”

“You shoot like a girl, guy.”

“I do not, sparrowhead. That’s a two-handed set shot. Try it and die.”

Overflowing with energy and slander, the half-dozen of us kept on taking turns at trying to make the basketball go in the basket. In our rules of the game, as fixed as the laws of nature, every player not only had to attempt a shot from the same spot as the first shooter, it had to be the identical kind of shot. That first one, though, could be as creative as any eleven-year-old athlete could come up with.
Sometimes we were totally silly in shooting it, sometimes we were cutthroat serious.

With Duane Zane, you couldn’t always tell which was which. “Freethrow,” he declared when it came his turn to start the round. His version, however, proved to be an exaggerated underhand heave from down around his ankles. Wouldn’t you know, the damn ball went in.

Just then a blast of wind rattled the high windows at the end of the gym. Most of us let out brrs and yearnings for spring, but not Duane. “I hope it storms for a month, so my dad keeps on making money pulling people out of ditches with his wrecker,” he proclaimed, his voice strutting with the rest of him after that basket. Was obnoxiousness a natural Zane family trait, I had to wonder, like the color of eyes or hair, that passed from father to son?

Oh, how I wanted to bounce the ball off his fat head. Instead I managed to take revenge by swishing my shot through the net to match his dumb freethrow. “Way to go, guy!” cried my adherents, while Duane made a gagging sound.

Noonhour was nearly over after that round, but we always believed if we hurried we could squeeze in one more before the bell rang. I especially wanted to; with the lucky day I’d been having, all I needed for Horse was e. Even better, it was my turn to start, and my choice of shot was as unpopular as I’d hoped.

“Aw, not that!”

“Be a guy, give us a break!”

“You and your pukey hook shot.”

Even Jimmy and Hal moaned with the others. A hook shot may not have seemed a likely accomplishment for me--I wasn’t a bad athlete, though I definitely was not a really good one--but at the start of the school year Pop had put up a basketball hoop for me in a back room corner that must have been a horse stall originally, and I endlessly practiced over-the-head shots there, pretending I was
Wilt Chamberlin or some other elongated hook shooter twice my height. Those solo hours paid off now as I catapulted the ball one-handed over the top of my head and it ricocheted off the backboard hard enough to rattle the rim, then toppled through the hoop, to everyone else’s groans and my cry of joy.

The basketball hadn’t hit the floor yet when it was intercepted by the school principal, Mr. Naylor.

“Whoa, boys. We’re sending bus students home early,” he singled out Hal and Jimmy, “on account of the roads. Grab your coats and books and be ready to go.”

“Lucky guys,” said Duane, dumb as a popsicle without a stick, while they went off to be bussed home through treacherous weather.

I forged my way from school at the regular time, the slow afternoon hours like enormous shadows dragging behind me. What was the saying, something about the driven snow? This snow was doing its unerring best to drive down my neck, the wind flinging the fat flakes right at me no matter how I turned my head; if this wasn’t the recipe for a thirty-year winter, I didn’t know what was. Beneath the bare cottonwood trees, English Creek was frozen over, an icy pond that went on for miles. The entire town of Gros Ventre looked like something that had been left in the freezer too long collecting frost.

Anxious, I did not take time to go around to the back of the Medicine Lodge as usual but stumbled in, overshoes, mackinaw, cap, scarf, and mittens coated with snow, through the front entrance; I couldn’t wait to see Pop, safe, sound, big as life, bartending incomparably as usual.

Howie was behind the bar. The saloon’s only other sign of life was a pair of the red-eyed sheepherders who were fixtures in the Two Medicine country, Canada Dan in from the Withrow ranch on one of his frequent spells of unemployment, and Pete Peterson likewise in from any number of places he had
been hired and fired from down through the years, sitting out the winter in town and hoping for some charitable soul to attend to their thirst. They especially pinned their hopes on tursters, as they called tourists, who could be trapped into conversation and free drinks. Pop ritually grumbled about this scruffy pair but let them hang around in the bar room because, he said, you couldn't leave the damn old fools in the lurch; the lurch always sounded like the worst kind of place to be left in.

"Hi, Eskimo." Howie's croaky greeting did not tell me what I wanted to know.

"Isn't--isn't he back yet?"
A shake of the old bald head.

Despair gripped me to the bone. This was my worst fear coming true. What might have been a sympathetic guttural sound came from Canada Dan at the far end of the bar. "It's sure too bad Tom's not on hand, ain't it?" he observed as if to the world at large. "Depressing weather like this, he'd stand loyal customers a drink now and then to cheer things up."

"That's hunnerd percent gospel truth and then some," Pete Peterson backed that up with vigorous nods.

"You're so keen on the weather, just keep watching until it hits forty below in Hell," Howie advised them acidly. "That's about when you'll get a free drink from me in this joint." He turned his attention back to me. "You better scoot on over to my place again, you're still dressed for it. Lucille is gonna be looking for you."

All I felt like doing was collapsing in a heap, but I put it differently: "I could just stay on here until Pop gets home."

"No, you aren't. That father of yours would skin me alive if I let you do that. Besides, I'm pretty quick gonna kick these two out and close the joint early."
This weather's a bugger.” He made a sour face, more than usual. “I'm getting too old for this.”

“Why hasn't he called?”

“Who the hell knows? He's Tom Harry, is why.” Apology was not in Howie's vocabulary, but his tone softened a trifle as he said: “He'll show up. Now scoot.”

Head down, I traipsed the length of the bar room to go out the back of the saloon. “Your old man's away for quite a while, eh?” Canada Dan remarked as I glumly went past. “He's sure missed around here.”

“Hunnerd percent and then some,” Pete Peterson wagged his head sadly.

Like Nanook returning to the ice floe, I trudged through snowdrifts to the bungalow across town, where Lucille greeted me in her nice quiet way. She was as aged and sparrowlike as Howie, and while they both treated me like a best guest, theirs was a house that had not known a child for many years. Prominent on the living room wall was the photograph of their Marine son who had been killed in the invasion of Tarawa in 1943.

This night was the darkest of my life in every way. I lay under strange old heavy blankets in that musty bedroom listening to the wind, knowing it was whipping up the snow into a ground blizzard, the absolute worst thing for Pop if he was out there somewhere trying to drive home. My thoughts swirled and whirled, too. I blamed him for going by himself in this awful weather, I blamed myself for not throwing such a fit he'd have taken me with him, for if I had gone along he would not have have dared to let anything disastrous happen, right? In theory, anyway. This night I resented the existence of thirty-year winters, this night I could not get rid of the fear under the covers with me, fear that this time Pop's trip was going to lead to unimaginable disaster, except I was imagining it.
The truth was, something about these trips of his frightened me even without the weather. The idea had been growing in me, maybe as my capacity for imagination expanded, that something really bad was going to happen to him on one of these trips. I had no reason for this I could put my finger on. But he looked worse for wear every time he came back. He didn’t drink in the joint—he was notorious for saying “I’ll take mine in the till” and ringing it up whenever someone tried to buy him a round—and he didn’t noticeably chase women, so I doubted he went off on those kind of binges. If not, though, what went on during his trips to make him look like he’d been pulled through a knothole? It made me uneasy every time, and this time it bone-chilled me, despite the load of blankets. If the worst happened, if he were to perish in a snowdrift out there—I huddled miserably under the covers, ashamed that I was near tears not only for him but for myself. But what would happen to me without him? In my years with him, Phoenix had gradually diminished to Christmas cards and birthday cards to me curtly signed, “Ever, Aunt Marge.” It still was very much on the map, though, down there with the sand and sidewinders and cactuses. Ending up back in Aunt Marge’s household seemed to me a one-way ticket to Hell; my cousin Ronny was no doubt Phoenix’s leading juvenile delinquent by now. No, my life wouldn’t be worth spit without Pop, my provider and protector, my one and only parent.

That was true and not true, at the same time. There wasn’t anything immaculate about my conception, remember. A woman I knew virtually nothing about had borne me. My vanished mother existed only in my father’s extremely few remarks about her, mainly this one: “We split the blanket”—which was to say, divorced—“when she pulled out on you and me, and that’s that.” It wasn’t, as far as I was concerned. I had learned her maiden name the hard way, by innocently asking Pop after I understood enough about marriage to be curious about that. “Joanie Jones if there ever was one,” he let out in one long exasperated breath.
"Why?" My stammered answer must have amounted to, Because. He reminded me she had pulled out on us when I was still in the cradle and it was best for all concerned to have her out of our life, and while that was that one more time, I came out of it finally able to fit ‘Joanie Jones’ onto the hazy outline of the woman who gave me birth. I went to school with a Janie and a Susie, so the girlish first name did not trouble me, although if you had a choice you want your mother to be named something nice like Gwendolyn, don’t you. ‘Jones’ I found harder to deal with; how anything about her could be figured out from that I hadn’t arrived at. In any case, her name could not tell me why she up and left a husband a baby, and I harbored my own version of what must have divorced her from Pop, and for that matter, me. The Medicine Lodge, what else? It made sense. If, say, she disapproved of liquor, as there were people in the world who did, would she stay married to a bartender? Plainly not. Admittedly, leaving me--by way of Pop--to the clutches of Aunt Marge’s clan did not win her any high marks as a mother, but parents do whatever suits them, for good reason or not, every kid learns that.

Yet, gone from almost my entire life though my mother was, what if she showed up out of nowhere to claim me if the worst happened? Would she even want me, reared in saloon circumstances as I was and by a man she couldn’t stand? Would I want to be with her, total strangers to each other, a dozen years of separation the only thing we had in common?

There in the howling dark, my thoughts kept jittering back and forth: better the demon I knew--Ronny--or the phantom I didn’t--her--if Pop didn’t come back alive from this trip? Everything churned in my mind, except anything resembling a right answer.

I heard Howie get up in the night. The toilet flushed, the slap-slap of slippers stopped at my bedroom doorway.
“You’re awake, ain’t you.” I could see his bald head in the light from all the snow.

“Uh-huh.”

“How about some warm milk to help you sleep?”

“No thanks. It would just make me have to get up and take a leak.”

“There’s a path wore in the floor about that,” Howie readily granted. He shuffled off back to bed, but not before saying: “Your dad generally knows what he’s doing. He’ll make it back tomorrow, you’ll see.”

Grownups are full of painless predictions like that. I was in no mood to have reassurance spooned into me. My worries were altogether too big, nobody else could understand the fix I was in with Pop lost and gone, as I was more and more sure he must be, the inside of my head would give me no rest for as long as I lived, I just knew, and more to the immediate point, I wasn’t going to be able to go to sleep ever again.


It was either bright daylight or a dazzling dream. Pop was shaking me awake, peeling away my cocoon of blankets.

“Wh--what time is it?”

“Saturday. Come on, upsy daisy, let’s get over to our place.”

Groggy, so surprised to see him back in existence that I couldn’t put words to it, I fumbled into my clothes while he tidied my bed in the manner expected of a guest. The silence of the house said Howie and Lucille were not up yet.

The two of us floundered out to the Packard, purring like a limousine, through fresh snow up to the top buckles of our overshoes. Driving home, he took advantage of the deep set of wheel tracks someone earlier had left, then, at the untouched snow of the alley and our driveway, he floored the gas pedal and
fishtailed the old car to its natural parking spot beneath the barebone branches of Igdrasil. The gunboat Buick in its spot was under so much snow it resembled an igloo, and I wished for the same to happen to the Packard if that’s what it took to keep Tom Harry home.

“Here we are,” he said, calm as cream, and I gave him a look he pretended not to notice.

The house was chilly enough that we kept our coats on at first. Pop had me turn up the furnace and set the table and things like that while he made coffee. He crucially needed some, I saw. He looked tired and drawn, the lines in his face deeper than ever, his pompadour flopping to the sides. Worst of all, his pouring hand shook a little in filling the coffee cup. You would not know any of this from the way he acted, however. Shedding his coat for action the minute the house warmed up and whisking mine from me to hang up, he took over the kitchen as though he were back in the barroom, getting out the soup bowls and big spoons.

“So, kiddo. What’ll it be this morning?”

“Oyster.”

We never fussed any with breakfast, merely heated a can of soup, almost always tomato or chicken noodle, so my choice was enough out of the ordinary that he scrutinized me before going to the cupboard.

“Oh, let’s splurge. Get out the milk and butter.”

When it was ready, we each crumbled crackers into oyster stew until it was nearly solid and commenced to eat. He wasn’t saying anything, so I did.

“How were the roads?”

“So-so.”

I could have told him the roads were as atrocious as that before he made the first wheeltrack in the treacherous snow, couldn’t I. "Pop? I was worried sick about you.”

"The sheepherders missed you in the joint, they said so.”

"That’s real flattering, but I had to be someplace else, didn’t I. Rule number one is you got to play the hand you been dealt.”

"I thought it was don’t wait until you hear from--“

"Cripes, don’t split hairs at this time of day, okay?”
"I said I'd be back in--" he skipped past that 'couple of days' prediction he'd made--"hardly any time at all, and here I am, trying to eat my oysters when I'm not answering questions."

I had been of two minds from the instant he woke me up, wildly relieved to see him alive and intact, and mad as blazes at him for putting us through all this. The mad portion burst from me now. "I don't want you to go on these trips like you do."

"I wouldn't need three guesses on that."
"They scare me worse than anything."
"Hey, don't exaggerate," he gruffly instructed.

I didn't think I was. The look on my face told him as much.

With an exasperated sigh he quit on his stew and sat back, frowning at me. "Damn it, kiddo, you want to save being scared for something really worth it."

"I can't help it." I was determined not to blubber, but my eyes were getting moist and my voice had started to quiver. "You go away like that, and I don't even know where for sure, and then there's a blizzard and if you're out in it froze stiff and I don't have you any more--how am I supposed to not be scared?"

"Rusty, I don't like doing it," his voice was as strained as mine, "any more that you like me doing it."

"Then why do you have to?"
"There are things that just won't wait."
"What things?"

"Things," he despaired as if those were too numerous to face over breakfast. "You see me fighting the bills like I do, sometimes it's just worse, is all." He started to say something more, but stopped and ran a hand through his hair, smoothing the black in with the silver. "The back-room loot helps out with things, that's all there is to it."
"But why do you need to go all the way to Canada? Why can’t you just make a trip to someplace close, like Great Falls? When it’s not snowing like crazy?"

"It pays off better up there," he said in frustration. "Cripes, I’d have thought you figured that out a long time ago."

I must have looked immovably skeptical.

"All right then, Mister Dubious." He rose and went to where his coat was hung. Reaching into a pocket I didn’t even know was there, he pulled out an envelope and dropped it on the table next to my soup bowl. "Take a look."

It was bulging with money. Nothing smaller than tens and twenties, either. More money than I had ever seen, even when the bar’s cash register was full after a Saturday night.

"Really? That much? For those old things?"

"Miracles happen, if you give them enough help." He sat back down heavily, retrieving the money as if to make sure it didn’t get away. "There’s your answer on these trips, okay?"

"Now you don’t have to do it again," I pressed on hopefully, "until winter is over, I bet."

"We’ll see. Pass the crackers."

A Saturday, even in the heart of winter, meant getting ready for Saturday night, and so he pretty soon directed himself to the saloon, and I stuck right with him, making up for lost time if I could. Howie wisely had left the heat up overnight and the place was livable when we stepped in and started doing things. Pop took a look in the bar room, where the floor showed all the evidence of snowy feet tracking in while he was away, but he only muttered "First mess first" and climbed the stairs to the landing to contend with the stack of bills that had
come in at the end of the year. I kept busy down below at my small hours of sorting empty bottles and seeing to the supply of towels and aprons while he sat at his desk writing checks. I noticed him looking at his watch a number of times, and when the phone rang, he already was frowning as he answered it.

“Damn,” he muttered after hanging up. “The Finletter kid didn’t make it home last night--the basketball team’s snowed in up at Cut Bank. Not the first time he’s stood me up that way.” A high school boy always was hired--they came cheap in those days--to clean up the bar room on Saturday morning for that night, the peak of the week’s business. “I’m gonna have to can him and find a new swamper, that’s all there is to it.”

I would like to say I had been waiting for this chance. The truth is, I spoke up before really thinking about it.

“Can’t you just hire me? I can do all that stuff.”

He looked at me in surprise. “You aren’t even--”

“Yes I am! Almost.”

“--twelve.” He eyed me the way he did a customer asking to be put on the tab. “You really think you can do everything that needs doing?”

“Sure!”

“Sweep and mop and dust the whole joint?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Clean the spittoons?”

I hesitated, then nodded.

“The toilets?”

I had to gulp hard on that, but managed to nod again.

He still did not look entirely convinced. “Okay, I’ll give you a try. But you better be up to the mark. I’d hate to fire my own kid.”
That was my introduction to broom and mop and toilet brush. And in one of those tricks life likes to play on us, that first Saturday forenoon and the ones to follow I came to truly know my father as a bartender.

Spending the time there in the front of the joint with him as he puttered behind the long dark bar getting everything ready for opening time, his reflection playing hide-and-seek behind him in the breakfront’s angles of mirror as he arranged glasses and bottles, was altogether different from the constrained view through the . The tall man with shoulders that stretched his white shirt roved from one housekeeping chore to the next in the room-long aisle in back of the bar as if primping delicate blossoms. *Loving* may not be the most apt word for the kind of care he gave to his bartending domain, but it’s close. With him, finesse equaled preparation; his just-so way of doing things gave me plenty to live up to in my new role as swamper. Seeing out of the corner of one’s eye is not an entirely unusual ability, but I swear, he seemed to have such second sight all the way back to his ears, as I found if I failed to clean out the dried-up spider parts in some tucked-away corner and would immediately hear, “Missed a spot. Get with it, kiddo.”

In spite of such scrutiny, I was proud and pleased to have the job and particularly the pay, not that it was much. My favorite part of swampin out the saloon was mopping behind the bar, where I got to see what all Pop kept out of sight under the bar top. A sock filled with metal washers to bust apart ice cubes. Bottle openers of every design. Countless swizzle sticks. A hotplate with a coffee pot to keep him going through the long shifts. A stash of fresh towels, the secret behind his always having a clean white one in hand. The Medicine Lodge clientele preponderately took its drinks straight, but just in case someone came in wanting something more fancy he had a storehouse of makings ready under there, maraschino cherries and a few limes and lemons and bottled olives and even
cinnamon sticks, a regular little grocery shelf it seemed to me. And down at the far end of the bar, the amen corner as he called it, was tucked away a small radio for listening to Selectrics games when business was dead, and a pair of bedroom slippers to give his feet some relief in the long hours behind the bar. All this was like seeing a secret side of him, and as Saturdays went by, I never was back there in his working domain with the winter light casting a kind of hush over everything without feeling I was someplace special to him and therefore to me.

The one thing he did keep out in the open, prominent and practically as big as life, was that FDR campaign poster, always in place on the breakfront mirror right next to the cash register. And before 1960 was very far along, it was joined by another. Looking over my shoulder then as I swabbed the floor was not only Franklin D. Roosevelt, eternally jaunty in his fourth successful run for President, sixteen years before, but also the current Democratic hope making his way through the primaries, John F. Kennedy, combed and groomed until he shone. Pop was more than ready for a new political champion, having suffered through two Republican terms of Eisenhower, whom he always called Eisenhoover. I was dutifully sweeping the floor one of these mornings not far along in my career as swamper when he let out a “Cripes!” that made me look up. He had noticed that the campaign posters were peeling away from the glass, a state of affairs that could not be tolerated. “Get me the Scotchman tape, why don’t you.”

When I fetched it from the back room, he ever so carefully Scotch-taped the corners of the campaign posters that restored Democrats to their rightful eminence, and stood back.

“This Kennedy maybe has what it takes,” he said with satisfaction. “FDR, though, he topped them all. A giant among men. We maybe wouldn’t be up against so much of it,” he ruminated as if to a listening customer, although I was the only one around, “the Russians acting up the way they do and this Castro
in Cuba and the country going to the dogs, if FDR was still the man in charge.”
He gazed at the large face of Roosevelt some moments more. “I heard him give a
speech once, you know.”

“Really? Here?”

“Not by a long shot,” he dismissed Gros Ventre’s eligibility for a
presidential visit. “Up at the dam.” I could tell he spoke the next two words
simply for the sound of them. “Fort Peck.”

This was new of him. I knew vaguely that he had tended bar there during
the construction of the big dam, sometime before working his way up to buy the
Medicine Lodge. Occasionally someone he had known in those years, such as
J.L. and Nan Hill who now ranched on upper English Creek, would drop in for a
drink on their way home and they would get going on something that had
happened in the old dam days, as they liked to call that Depression period. From
school I knew a little about the Fort Peck dam, built by the government in the
1930s when projects of the New Deal were being set up as fast as the alphabet
could be divvied out. According to the schoolbook, the enormous dirtfill dam on
the Missouri River had given ten thousand people jobs and wages and hope.
Doubtless they were ready for a drink, too, after all that shoveling or whatever
other manual labor damworkers worked at, and from the sound of it when the
Hills and Pop got to laughing about some saloon episode back then, tending bar
there must have been a good job for someone starting out in life. I had never paid
any great attention to such reminiscing as it drifted through the vent, the way we
can’t quite credit parents with real existences before we came along in their lives.
But this time, perhaps it was the look on Pop’s face as he stood there studying his
political hero that made me prompt him: “You never told me about that.”

“Didn’t I?” He came to life. “It was a doozy of a speech, all about the
Missouri River and how when the water was put to work, so were people who
hadn’t had a job in years.” He tapped the Scotch tape in the palm of his hand in some odd rhythm of memory to envision the scene for himself as well as me.

“His train came right to the dam, and they had loudspeakers rigged up so when the man himself came out on the rear platform, you could hear that voice of his for a mile. I tell you, kiddo, it was like hearing from heaven, him that day.”

Stretching to the FDR poster one more time, he pressed a thumb on a top corner as if to make sure the tape would hold a good long time. “If Frank Roosevelt walked in here right now,” he was saying pensively, “I’d stand him a drink on the house, you better bet I would.” His brow knotted in brief contemplation. “Cutty Sark and soda, is my guess. He was always classy.”

“Pop, wasn’t he in a wheelchair?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff, okay?” His gaze still lingered on the posters, the foxy old campaigner side by side with the youthful President-to-be. “Damn it, some people just shouldn’t have to die. They’re too good to put in the ground.”

He shook his head. “Life cheats on us sometimes.”

Handing me the tape to put away, he noticed the way I was looking at him. “The toilet needs another scrubbing,” he said gruffly. “Better get at it.”

The big round number of a new decade on the calendar always brings anticipation with it. After the Depression years of the Thirties, the World War Two years of the Forties, the Cold War years of the Fifties, people of my father’s generation were more than ready for the world to behave itself better in the Sixties. All I knew was that 1960 was bringing surprise after surprise, some bad, some good.

“Guess what, Pop!”

The winter was still at it, new snow on top of leftover snow, some weeks later when I hurried home from school, as determined as I was excited. I had
shed my coat, cap, and overshoes in the back room and rushed through to the quiet bar room where he was drying beer glasses. “We have a class assignment about Family History and What It Means to Us.” I wasn’t going to pass this up. “Things like--”

“History, hey? That’s a deep subject, as the welldigger said.” He tossed me his towel. “Snow on your eyebrows.”

I mopped that off. “Things like, how come--”

“Better have a sunshine juice while we think about this.” He uncapped an Orange Crush for me and lit a leisurely cigarette for himself. It was not the first time personal matters of this sort stalled with him. While this father of mine seemed to know everything worth knowing about anyone who ever stepped into the saloon, he never talked about himself. Not for lack of trying, I didn’t know his precise age, and he wouldn’t even let on to me when his birthday was. “Same as last year,” he’d say, and that was that. He had always been equally vague on the subject of genealogy; to judge by him, we might be the only living people without ancestors. Perhaps this murky lineage should not have bothered me as much as it did--a Harry family tree, after all, might be full of rotten apples, if those Phoenix cousins were any example--but I had developed a burning reason for wanting to know more. As I persevered with now before he could sidle away from the topic behind a cloud of cigarette smoke.

“Things like, how come I’m named Russell?”

It bothered me every time I had to write my full name on a school assignment such as this one, or when the teacher called on me, or when some grownup who didn’t know any better would simper, “My, my, Russell, you’re growing like a weed.” Worst of all, of course, was when Duane Zane would drag it out so it sounded like it was in some idiot language. Thank heaven for “Rusty,” which bought me survival in the schoolyard, but my given name did not seem to
fit with anything I could figure out. Half the males in the Two Medicine country were called Bill or Bob or Jim or Joe or, for that matter, Tom, so why had I been tagged with something that seemed more than a bit out of place? Now I looked the question to the person responsible, determined get an answer out of him.

He barely paused in his toweling of an invisible spot on a glass. “Old family name. Didn’t Marge tell you all that stuff, way back?” I shook my head. “Doesn’t matter,” he breezed past that, “nobody amounted to a hill of beans before us anyway. Write about you and me and Igdrasil and going fishing and junk like that, why not.”

I wasn’t satisfied, and immediately wrote to Aunt Marge, air-mail, in my careful fifth-grade fashion asking about my namesake back there in family history. She wrote back saying she had no idea what my father was talking about. Confronted with this, Pop swabbed the wood of the bar this way and that, studying me out of the corner of his eye. “Okay, if it’ll make you quit asking.” He pointed his chin to where “Meat’s Not Meat Until It’s In The Pan” hung slightly askew on the far wall. “You’re named after him.”

I gawked at the scene of the hapless hunter. “That guy? The Buck Fever Case?”

“Hell no, use your thinking part,” came the impatient answer. “The painter.”

Now I gaped at the father who had plucked a name for me off the nearest Charlie Russell purplish rendering. My dismay surely showed, as he said defensively: “You had to be called something.”

“I guess so, but I can’t just hand in that I’m named after somebody I’m not even related to, can I. That’s not family history, Pop.” Suddenly something cunning came to me. Now was the time, now if ever. “Hey, I know what! I bet
I'd get an A on stuff you can tell me about"--how to put it?--“the other side of my family.”

He winced the way he always did when things led in this direction.

“Rusty, you’re better off if I don’t say anything about your mother.” Rubbing the side of his head as if it ached, he continued: “When you go through a gate, close it behind you, right? That’s how it is with me and her.” A shrug. “I’ve told you she was nothing but a Jones, anyway.”

I was disappointed but not surprised, so much for anything maternal, one more time. Pop was determinedly steering matters back toward the namesake who had done the Buck Fever masterpiece on the wall. “If I was you, I’d stick with good old Charlie Russell and--”

When I wailed that I’d flunk the assignment if I didn’t have anything better than that to turn in, he held up his hands like a traffic cop. “Don’t get hydrophobia about this. Make something up.”

“I can’t, Pop. It’s school.”

“What,” his eyebrows climbed, “getting yourself out of something that has you stuck doesn’t count? You’ve got to learn that, too.” My dubious expression made him sigh hard. “Well, hell,” he said to himself, “there’s always the proxy method,” whatever that was supposed to mean. Then to me: “All right, we’ll find some kind of pedigree and you can put your name onto it like you’re trying it out for a little while, okay? It’s sort of like renting a house.” It did not sound exactly okay to me, but I was past the point of arguing. He checked the clock. “Your whole class have the same assignment to dig up family stuff?”

“Huh-uh,” I said, although I couldn’t see why it mattered, “just us in the first half of the alphabet. The others are doing town history and what it means to them.”
"You've got it made, kiddo. Grab your tablet and get up there in the back room where you can hear."

I did so, my ears practically into the air vent. Very nearly to the minute, in came Earl Zane, practically licking his chops for the beer my father was already drawing from the tap. Large-headed and bigheaded both, he was one of those characters who had to be put up with in a town as small as Gros Ventre, where not only people but businesses needed to get along with one another. Pop normally gassed up at Earl’s service station, and unfortunately Earl returned that kind of patronage, strutting in as he did now with his belly lopping over his belt buckle, a moon-faced grin breaking out on him as usual; he was the kind who winked with half his face. I could tell from the set of Pop’s shoulders he was braced to be civil even though this customer was the town’s leading windbag.

What passed for conversation with Earl Zane ensued. “Ever hear the one about Pat and Mike and Mustard and the toilet brush, Tom?”

I never would understand why two Irishmen and someone named Mustard figured in half the jokes told by Earl and for that matter the entire male clientele of the Medicine Lodge, but they seemed indispensable. Biting my pencil to keep from groaning out loud as the joke played out, I sneaked a peek through the vent slats at Earl toasting himself with his beer. “Know where I first heard that? Around the bucking chutes, at the Calgary Stampede in the old days. Laugh, I thought I’d cry.”

“Nobody remembers them like you, Earl, that’s for sure.” Pop manfully chatted for a couple of minutes while the beer went down in swigs. “Ready for some more holy water?”

“I meant to talk to you about that. This month’s caught me a little short of—”

“Don’t sweat it, catch up next time.” As he slid the foam-topped glass to a surprised Earl, Pop said casually: “Hey, speaking of the old days, somebody was
in here the other day saying he knew some Zanes in North Dakota, back when he was yay-high. Relatives of yours?"

"In North Dakota? I’d rather have relatives from South Hell than that," Earl got his mouth in gear. "Didn’t I ever tell you we’re Minnesota people, as far back it goes?" Getting the idea, I made that Wisconsin in the Harry family version. "We’d still be there, breeding with Swedes, if it wasn’t for my granddad Herman." Scribbling away, I drew a decisive breath and changed that to Russell. I suppose I should have been remorseful about pirating Duane Zane’s forebears, but because he was Duane, I wasn’t. "The old boy hopped on a train back there in St. Paul in nineteen-ought-three," Earl rolled on, "he’d heard there was all this free land in Montana being thrown open to homestead--" I wrote as fast as it spilled out of him, more than enough history for any family to rent. And it got an A.

That big winter of ’60 kept up its weather tricks, storming as if it would never quit and then abruptly thawing everything with a chinook wind warm as an opened oven. This happened time and again, until the calendar finally said it was spring whether or not the weather agreed. In between snow squalls, the Two Medicine country waded in mud up to its shoetops, which gave me plenty to do in my job as swamper. One of those Saturday mornings of what was supposed to be spring, Pop considered the tracks on the bar room floor and joked, "Maybe we just ought to hose out the joint." At least I thought he was joking. But he wasn’t when he contemplated the white slushy street. "So much for the opening day of fishing at the rezavoy."

Secretly I didn’t mind if fishing season was delayed. As far as I was concerned, the rainbow trout could swim in peace indefinitely. I was content to be in the company of my busy father and the zoo of animal heads and the other
comfortable surroundings of the bar room—even the dumb hunting painting by my namesake painter—on mornings like this, with Pop more like his old self now that we both had settled down some after that Canada trip of his. Money makes a difference in life, I had to admit, and since that trip he showed no sign that we were running out any time soon, paying bills with only the usual muttering to himself. Things were back on track enough that I was daydreaming a little as I started my chores with the pushbroom to get up the worst of the mud before mopping, still in the thrall of living through a historic time, although even for me the winter had proved its point by now. This latest surprise storm had dumped several inches of heavy wet snowfall not twenty-four hours before, and now the day was innocently bright and clear. The bar room was washed in light from sunshine reflecting off the snow, although washed may not be the appropriate word, given the dusty places atop the booths and other surfaces showing up in the unaccustomed brightness. Pop had not pointed out my housekeeping lapses yet, but I knew I was in for a session with the dustcloth after I finished sweeping and mopping, and I felt put out at the weather. I wasn't the only one. “This isn't exactly great for business,” Pop muttered, irritably flicking his towel at an imaginary mote on the bar.

He scarcely had the words out of his mouth when to our surprise Canada Dan slogged in, stomping snow onto the mat by the door and grumbling to himself while he kicked his overshoes off, even though we weren't open for business yet.

“Hey,” Pop met him with, “I thought you went bunch herding for Dode.” Curious myself, I perked my ears while I swept mud into the dustpan. Lambing time had started weeks ago, the season when shepherders migrated back to work on ranches all across the Two.

“I did,” came the sour reply. “He canned me. Ran me off the place. I caught a ride in with the county plow.”
Pop and I almost had to laugh at this latest in the longstanding story of cantankerous herders and fed-up ranchers. But the look on Dan’s face stopped us. We watched silently as he hoisted onto a bar stool with a grunt and grimaced toward Pop. “Something wrong with your pouring hand?”

“It hasn’t woke up yet,” Pop said mildly, taking his time about reaching for a shot glass and bottle.

“I ain’t mooching, Tom, if that’s what’s bothering you.” Canada Dan pulled out some crumpled bills and loose change in a spill onto the bar. “Gimme some bar grub while you’re at it.” This was another bad sign; only someone too drunk to leave a bar stool ever ate the pickled pigs’ knuckles and preserved boiled eggs swimming in big jars of bluish brine at the very back of the breakfront. Canada Dan plainly wanted to get that way fast. Reaching for his drink almost before Pop finished pouring it, he said in a deadened voice: “Here’s to them things called lambs. What’s left of them.”

Pop stood motionless and my broom and dustpan halted.

The grizzled sheepherder clutched the shot glass so tightly he seemed to be drinking out of his fist. “I lost a couple hunnerd in this storm,” he said hollowly, “never had it happen before in all the years. Had them out in bunches like I was supposed to, so the ewes could eat a little new grass to help their milk. It started blizzarding so goddamn fast I only got about half the bunches into the shed. The others, they’re froze under snowdrifts.” Shoulders hunched miserably, he looked like he was about to cry. “It wasn’t only my fault. Dode listens to them radio forecasts like they was religion. And he never did drive down to the lower shed and tell me a foot of snow was gonna hit, whatever the hell got into him.” He tossed down the rest of his drink as if the whiskey was water. “Then this morning first thing, here he comes and blows up at me something fierce. Tells me to get out of his sight. What kind of a way is that to treat a man, I ask you.”
Choking up, Canada Dan twirled the shot glass on the bar wood. “C’mon, Tom. I know you got more where that came from.”

“Hold onto yourself a minute, okay? I need to get a bottle from in back.” Pop signaled me with the slightest jerk of his head and I followed him to the back room.

The instant we were there, he said low enough for only me to hear: “He’s gonna drink himself blotto. Call Dode.”

I dialed the ranch number, letting it ring about twenty times as you have to when a rancher is in the lambing shed. Finally the familiar voice answered, sounding testy, and I hurriedly said who I was and why I was calling: “My father thought you’d better know Canada Dan is in here.”

“He’s what? the phone line practically sizzled. “We’re still in the middle of lambing! What’s he doing in town?”

“Getting drunk as fast as he can.”

There was a silence and then a burst of swearing that swelled to the question, “What in hell brought this on?”

“Dan says you, uhm, ran him off the place.”

“Silly son of a bitch.” Shocked, I nearly dropped the phone before realizing that meant Canada Dan, not me. “I only told him to get out of my sight when I found out about those lambs. I figured he’d stew in his wagon until I cooled down. Tell your dad not to let the idiot get too boozed up before I get there.”

For the next while, Pop kept up a conversation with an increasingly slurred Canada Dan. The sheepherders of the Two Medicine country were a familyless tribe, single men with kinks in their lives that sent them into the hills like hermits for months on end and then deposited them in town to drink up their wages as fast as possible. Canada Dan was only one of the more habitual of the many who passed through the Medicine Lodge in the course of a year, the saloon
and the Top Spot cafe and cheap rooms at the back of the hotel their way stations before the last stop of all, the cemetery on the hill overlooking Gros Ventre.

"They’re just waiting for the marble farm," Pop set me straight when I once said something about always having smelly old shepherders around the joint, “and they’ll get there soon enough.” Canada Dan looked halfway there now as he hoisted his shot glass to his lips with a trembling hand. I slowly wiped down booths and fiddled with other chores so I could watch what would happen when Dode Withrow got hold of him.

Something of the sort must have been in the back of Canada Dan’s mind, too. “Here’s what I owe, ain’t it,” he shoved some money along the bar toward Pop and jammed the rest of it in his nearest pocket. “I’m going down to the Falls,” he declared, as if Great Falls was on the next block instead of ninety miles away. “See what’s happening on First Avenue South.” Even I knew that was the wino district where whores hung out.

“Are you,” Pop said as if he had heard this too many times. “How you gonna get there?”

“Thumb.”

“Don’t be a horse’s ass,” Pop’s language was unusually strong. “You’ll freeze to death on the road before anybody comes along to give you a lift.” Squinting toward the street in vain for any sign of Dode, he resorted to direct diplomacy. “Just go over there in a booth and simmer down, why don’t you, and I’ll bring you some more bar grub and another drink.”

“Nope. I’m going, you watch and see,” the herder lurched off his bar stool and unsteadily pointed himself in the direction of the door. “Had enough of old Dode and his dead lambs.”

“Damn it, you’re not going anywhere in this weather.” Pop came around the end of the bar to head him off. Canada Dan was toddling off toward the door,
his gait as rolling as a sailor's, when he hit the glare from the snowfield outside and with a grunt flung up an arm just as Pop reached him. To my horror, his elbow clouted Pop smack in the eye, knocking him off balance and sending him to his knees with a sickening “Uhh.”

“Pop!” I squealed in fright, throwing my dust rag away and tripping over myself in my rush to him. “Are you okay?”

That was the dumbest of questions, with him down on all fours and groaning in pain; but the sight of my father so vulnerable in the bar room that was his kingdom shook me to my roots. My imagination had never even come close to this. I was afraid to touch him for fear of what I'd find when that eye was revealed.

Blinking in confusion, Canada Dan swayed over him. “You hurt yourself, Tom?” he asked considerately.

“What in blazes is going on in here?”

Dode Withrow just now had come in, stopping short at the sight of tottering sheepherder and paralyzed boy, both useless as bumps on a log, hovering over the figure of Pop struggling up onto one knee. “Get out of the way,” the rancher was a portrait of temper in a plaid mackinaw as he roughly pushed the two of us aside and grappled Pop onto his feet. “What did the son of a bitch do to you, Tom?”

Both hands covering his eye, Pop gasped to steady his breath. “Dan's crazybone got in my way, is all,” he managed. “These things happen.” Musterling himself as only he could in these circumstances, he directed me: “Get me some ice in a towel, kiddo.” And Canada Dan: “How about planting your stupid butt over there in a booth like I told you?”

“Hunky-dory,” the herder said as if he was the soul of cooperation, and staggered over and sat down.
With Dode and me helping to steer him, Pop made it to the amen corner and dropped onto the highbacked stool there, clasping the ice pack to his eye.

“Don’t take a fit,” he told us, mostly me, “see, it’s only a shiner.” It was going to be spectacularly that, all right, a real raccoon job of a black eye. I was relieved, but still shaken, too, aghast over that image of him collapsed on the floor until Dode helped him up. As a unit the three of us looked across the room to the booth where Canada Dan was mumbling his trials to the Buck Fever Case in the picture on the wall. “I hung onto the ess of a bee until you could get here,” Pop told Dode in a resigned exhalation, “he’s yours to deal with now.”

Dode studied the hunched-up herder a trifle longer, then offered: “What do you say I just take him outside and beat the living daylights out of him?”

“You know better than that.”

“Yeah, I’m afraid I do.” The weary sheep raiser grimaced and headed over to the booth, shaking his head. “This is the damnedest year.”

Canada Dan addressed him indignantly as he approached. “Couldn’t wait to track me down and hand me my pay, huh? Write ’er out.”

“I will like hell,” Dode said back to him angrily as he slid into the opposite side of the booth. “I need a herder with those sheep. Even if it’s you.”

Canada Dan sniffed. “I ain’t said I’ll work for you ever again, have I.” He sat in woozy dignity before demanding: “How come you didn’t tell me it was gonna snow so goddamn much?”

“I didn’t catch up with the forecast,” Dode said in a dead voice. “Midge and me were in Great Falls at a woolgrowers’ meeting and didn’t get back until late. Never gave it a thought we’d get dumped on this time of year.”

“That wasn’t any too bright of you.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

Long silence.
“You still sore at me for losing them lambs?”
“No more than I was.”
Longer silence.
“That’s sore enough, ain’t it.”
“Yeah, it’ll do. You ready to quit tearing the town up and go back to the ranch?”

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place?” Wobbling to his feet, Canada Dan called over to where we were watching: “Sorry if I inconvenienced you any, Tom.”

“It could happen to a nun,” Pop said past his ice pack.

The two of us watched through the plateglass window as the unsteady herder put his arm over his eyes against the glare of the snow and let Dode lead him to the car. Then Pop winced and took a look at his mostly shut discolored eye in the breakfront mirror, and said to my distressed reflection: “Better get at the mopping, so we can open the joint on time.”

This goes to show you how much I knew about handling the embarrassment of a black eye. I’d have been sick with mortification until the telltale mark of a losing battle was fully gone. Not Pop. He practically turned that record shiner into a public attraction, imperturbably tending bar in the same style as ever and answering the obvious question by saying no more than, “Hey, you should have seen the other guy.” And guess what, in the course of all the razzing he took about learning when to duck, customers often had a second drink or a third. “Business has picked up, kiddo,” he reported in my bedroom doorway, untlying his bowtie with a flourish, a week or so after the incident in the bar room. “I probably should cut Canada Dan in on the proceeds, but I’m not gonna.”
Relieved as I was at that outcome, it still bothered me to see him going around with that doozy of a shiner, which turned various sickening colors on its gradual route to fading. On the other hand, he hadn’t vanished on a trip since that nightmare one at the start of the year, so if I didn’t have an unblemished father, I at least had one steadily on the premises. Even the weather improved now that the winter that threatened never to leave finally went away for the next thirty years or so, and spring, what little was left of it, settled in. True, it rained notably more than usual as June approached, but that merely revived the old saying among the customers in the bar room that in Montana too much rain is just about enough, and beside our house English Creek ran high and lively and Igdrasil greened up in cottonwood glory. I sprouted, too. Almost before I knew it, I awoke one morning a year older than when I had gone to bed: twelve at last, which immediately felt tremendously better than being merely eleven. In my newfound maturity, I managed to sound enthusiastic—if not totally sincere—about the new fishing pole Pop gave me for my birthday.

The better present was school letting out for the summer. A kid’s dream, always, an entire untouched season of liberated days ahead. By habit and inclination I right away all but moved in to the back room of the Medicine Lodge, spending as much of my time as I wanted casually listening in at the vent or practicing basketball shots or building model planes or entertaining myself any of the other ways an only child so well knows how, while Pop’s performance of his bar duties went on as clocklike reliable as ever on the other side of the wall. This was how I always wanted things to be, and at last in this peculiar year, here they were along with summertime and every new day of nature’s making.

Therefore I was unprepared, soon into those first days of freedom, when Pop came back from a meal at the Top Spot, the cafe down the street which was best described as reliably mediocre, with news of a major change. We invariably
ate supper at the Spot, although usually separately because he needed to grab an early bite before his evening of tending bar.

“New couple bought the place,” he reported while slitting open a whiskey case in the back of the saloon. They were Butte people, and his guess was that Pete Constantine, the husband and cook, had been in some kind of scrape--a lot of things could happen in Butte--and the wife Melina was determined that the cafe would keep his nose clean, as Pop put it. “I hope to hell they make a go of it. The food’s not any better, but at least it’s no worse.”

Straightening up, he flicked his lighter and lit a cigarette, cocking a look at me in my favorite perch up there on the landing where I was gluing a challenging twin-tail assembly onto my latest model aircraft, a P-38 Lightning fighter plane. His black eye was down to a greenish purple now that I had almost grown used to. “Guess what. They got a kid about your age.”

Aw, crud, was my first thought. Every youngster knows the complication of such a situation, the burden of being expected to make friends with a new kid just because he was new. Why weren’t twelve-year-olds entitled to the same system as adults, to merely grunt to any newcomer, “How you doing?” and go on about your own business?

“What’s his name?” I asked unenthusiastically.

“Go get yourself some supper,” Pop blew a stream of smoke that significantly clouded the matter, “and find out.”

The Spot showed it had indeed changed as soon as I walked in, because Melina Constantine herself was behind the counter in the cleanest waitress apron the cafe had seen in ages. Mrs. Constantine was squat, built along the lines of a fireplug, but with large warm eyes and a welcoming manner. She greeted me as if I was an old customer--actually, I was--and plucked out the meal ticket Pop had just inaugurated. Activity in the kitchen sounded hectic, and her husband the cook
hurried past the serving window, giving me a dodgy nod. No kid my age was in sight, which was a relief.

"Now then, Russell," Mrs. Constantine smiled in motherly fashion as I hoisted onto my accustomed stool at the end of the counter, "what would you like for supper? The special is pot roast, nice and done."

Her smile dimmed a bit when I ordered my usual maple nut milkshake and cheeseburger, but she punched the meal ticket without saying anything.

Wouldn’t you know, though, muffled conversation was taking place in the kitchen, and from where I sat, I could just see the top of a dark mop of hair as someone about my height stood waiting while Pete, cook and father rolled into one, dished up a plate of food and instructed that it all be consumed. I heard the new kid groan at the plateload.

Listening in, Mrs. Constantine beamed in my direction again and provided, "You’re about to have company." I waited tensely as you do when someone from a different page enters the script of your life. Would he be hard to get along with? Would I?

The kitchen’s swinging door was kicked open—it took a couple of thundrous kicks—and, meal in hand as if it weighed a tragic amount, out came a girl.

"Hi," she said faintly.

"Hi," I said identically.

Zoe was her name, and she seemed to come from that foreign end of the alphabet, a gypsylike wisp who slipped past me to a table in the back corner before I finished blinking. Her mother corrected that in nothing flat. "Russell, I’ll bring yours over to the table too, if you don’t mind."

You bet I minded. All my years in Gros Ventre, I had been contentedly eating supper at the counter. In the manner of old customers, I felt I owned that
spot at the Spot. But tugboat that she was, Mrs. Constantine had me maneuvered into changing seats before I could think of a way out of it. “Sure, I guess,” I muttered and reluctantly slid off my prized stool to go over to make friends, as grownups always saw it, or to meet the opposition, as kids generally saw it.

At the table, the two of us sat across from each other as trapped as strangers in a dining car. Given my first full look at Zoe, the wide mouth, the pert nose, the inquisitive gaze right back at me, I must have just stared. My education until then had not included time with a girl. Male and female relationships in school were literally a joke. ‘Your eyes are like pools. Cesspools. Your skin is like milk. Milk of magnesia.’ But the incontrovertible fact facing me was that Zoe Constantine possessed deep brown eyes that were hard to look away from and she had an olive-skinned complexion that no doubt suntanned nice as toast, unlike mine. Her hair was not quite as richly black as my own, but at the time I thought no one in the world had hair as dark as mine and Pop’s. For all of these arresting features, she was so skinny—call it thin to be polite—that she reminded me of those famished waifs in news photos of DP refugee camps. But that was misleading, according to the indifferent way she toyed with her food while I waited edgily for mine. I was close to panic, thinking of endless suppertimes ahead with the two of us about as conversational as the salt and pepper shakers; how was this going to work?

She spoke first:

“I bet your dad was in a knockdown dragout fight, wasn’t he. That’s some black eye.”

“Oh, yeah. You should have seen the other guy.”

“People get in fights all the time in Butte,” she said in worldly fashion. “It gives them something to do.” Idly mashing potatoes that were already mashed, she caught me even more by surprise as she conspiratorially lowered her voice
enough that neither her mother behind the counter nor her father in the kitchen could hear:

“How come he and you eat here? Where’s your mother? Can’t she cook better grub than this?”

“She’s, she’s not around any more.”

Her voice dropped to an eager whisper. “Did they split the blanket?”

“Uh-huh,” I whispered back, although I wasn’t sure why divorce was a whispering matter. “When I was real little. I wouldn’t know her if I saw her.”

“Far out! Are you making that up?”

“You can’t make something like that up, nobody would believe it.”

“Ooh, you’re a half orphan, then.” That jolted me. Even during my time in Phoenix trying to dodge Ronny’s knuckles I had not thought of myself that way. That was nothing to what she said next. “You’re so lucky.”

I was so stunned I could hardly squeak out: “Because I don’t have a mother I’ve ever seen?”

“No, silly, I mean because you’ve got only one parent to boss you around,” she whispered with either world-weary assurance or perfectly done mischief, it was impossible to tell which. “That’s plenty, isn’t it?” She peered critically toward the kitchen. “I’d give up my dad, I think, if it came to that.”

“Wh-why?” I sneaked a look at her father in his undersized cook’s hat, flipping a slice of Velveeta onto my cheeseburger as if he’d just remembered that ingredient. “What’s the matter with him?”

Zoe waved that away with her fork. “Nothing much. He’s just not swuft about a lot of things.”

This was another stunner from her. Swuft did not merely mean quick at handling things, it meant swift-minded, brainy, sensible, and quite a number of other sterling qualities she evidently found lacking in her own father.
“He couldn’t beat up anybody in a fight, like I bet your dad can,” she was saying as if she would trade with me on the spot. “Besides, my mom could have made your burger while he’s standing around looking at it.” In fact, Mrs. Constantine kept revving the milkshake machine as she waited for the cheeseburger to find its way out of the kitchen; my ’shake was going to be thin as water.

All kinds of doubts about the Top Spot under its new management must have begun showing on me, as Zoe now amended her view of fathers for my benefit in another fervent whisper.

“I bet your dad is plenty swuft, you can tell that just by looking at him, can’t you. Besides, I heard the old owners tell my folks”—her whisper became even more whispery; what a talent she had—“this cafe gets a lot of its business because the Medicine Lodge brings customers to town from everywhere. I guess it’s real famous around here?”

I nodded nonchalantly. Fame was right up there with swuftness in her estimation, I could tell.

“Do you get to be in your dad’s saloon,” she wrinkled her nose at the less than impressive confines of the cafe, “ever?”

It was my turn to astonish. “Sure! All the time.”

She gave me the kind of look you give a bare-faced liar.

I began at convincing her by recounting my job as swamper every Saturday morning. Disdainfully she let me know this did not win me any bragging rights, her parentally ordained job was to fill the sugar dispensers, salt and pepper shakers, ketchup bottles, and napkin holders and things like that every single day, from her tone a life sentence of cafe chores.
No way was I going to be trumped about the joint, though. “Yeah, well,” I responded, elaborately casual, “I just about live in the saloon, I’m there so much. In the back room, I mean.”

Her ears perked up. I expounded about the privileged position provided by the stair landing and went on at some length about the trove of hocked items housed from floor to ceiling.

Zoe listened as if she had never heard of such a thing, as I suppose she hadn’t.

“All kinds of stuff?” she whispered eagerly. “Years’ and years’ worth? And people are still doing that?”

“You bet. Sometimes the same people, over and over.”

“How do you know that?”

“I hear them at it, don’t I, out front with my dad.”

“What,” she scoffed, mischief in her gaze, “is there some rule they have to talk at the top of their voice to get a drink in this town?”

“Don’t be silly,” I got back at her for that word, “it’s not that. All it takes is--”

Carried away with myself, I told her about the vent.

“Really?” Her voice dropped again to the lowest whisper humanly possible. “You can see and hear them but they can’t see you? They’re down there drinking and carrying on and everything, and you’re up there invisible?”

“Uhm, yeah.”

Her eyes shone. “That sounds neat! Can I come hear them, too?”

Before I had to commit to that, my milkshake and cheeseburger were delivered, along with Mrs. Constantine’s smiling wish for me to have a good appetite and her instructive frown at Zoe’s barely touched victuals. “Eat, missy, or you’ll blow away,” she recited and left us to it. I attacked my meal. Zoe
sighed and speared a single stringbean off her plate. It dawned on me I had better make sure just how much we were destined to be around each other, apart from what looked like disconcerting suppertimes ahead. Between milkshake slurps, I inquired:

“What grade will you be in?”

“Sixth. Same as you.”

“How’d you know?”

A quick devilish look. “Your father bragged you up.”

“Uh-huh.” I swirled my milkshake in man-of-the-world fashion. “We’ll have old lady Spencer for a teacher.”

“Is she hard?”

“Terrible. She catches you whispering, you have to stay an hour after.”

The mischievous look again. “In Butte, they cut your tongue out.”

By the time I was done snorting milkshake out of my nose, I was in love with Zoe. I have been ever since.

“Pop, is that you?”

“No, it’s Nikita Khrushchev.“

I had not yet gone to sleep by the time I heard the nightly sounds in the bathroom and then the hallway, my mind turning over and over on the heresies that a half orphan was supremely lucky and that a kid could unerringly judge whether a parent was swuft or not, and much else that still was to be digested from my first meal with Zoe. It should have been exhausting, but it was the opposite.

Pop came and leaned against the doorjamb, smoothing the cloth of his undone bowtie between his hands as he peered at me in the dim bedroom.

“How’d you do with your supper partner?”
“She’s”—I cast around for the right way to put it—"different."

That immediately turned him into the listening bartender.

“Not bad different,” I spelled out. “She’s real smart, for a girl.”

“They can be like that,” he said dryly. “Try to get along with her, okay?

It puts us in a bind if we can’t grab a meal at the Spot. We’d have to live on pig
knuckles and embalmed eggs.” That was meant to be a joke, I understood, but it
was not that far from the dietary probability if we had to fend for ourselves every
suppertime.

“Sure thing, Pop,” I said as if there really was such a thing.

People come and go in our lives; that is as old a story as there is. But
some of them the heart cries out to keep forever, and that is a fresh saga every
time. So it was with me and the unlooked-for supper partner who quickly became
so much more than that. Zoe proved to be something like a pint-size force of
nature. Her face was always a show, her generous mouth sometimes sly,
sometimes pursed, the tip of her tongue indicating when she was really thinking,
her eyes going big beyond belief when something pleased her, and when
something didn’t, she could curl her lip practically to the tip of her nose. To say
that she was not the kind of company I could ever have expected in that summer
of my life is a drastic understatement.

Whether or not we were made for each other, the two of us were definitely
made for the back room of the Medicine Lodge. From the very start of our
exploring of its wonders together, she couldn’t get enough of the assortment of
stray and odd items that had been traded in down through time, and I couldn’t get
enough of her prodigious imagination. Prowling in some cluttered quarter, she
would stumble onto a stray article such as a suitcase made of that old pebbled
phony black leather and away she would go. “Ooh, I bet this has been lots of
places. Let’s look in it.” We would. Empty, every time. No matter, the lack of belongings only spurred her speculation. “Just think, all he has is the clothes on his back. I bet there was a fire. In the bunkhouse. He was all played out from punching cows all day and was laying there smoking in bed and went to sleep and the old army blanket caught fire”—for a twelve-year-old, Zoe had a remarkably graphic view of life—“and everything burned up, and he had to run for his life, and the only thing he had time to grab was his suitcase. Everything else, ka-whooosh!”

You always hate to disrupt an artist, so I did not tell her the inspirational piece of luggage actually was owned by some snooze-chewing herder whose belongings were securely in his sheepwagon out in the foothills while he hocked the suitcase when his money ran out before finishing off a big drunk. Besides, Pop’s habit of that last cigarette at bedtime made ka-whooosh! something I didn’t like thinking about.

I had to ask, though. “Does your dad smoke in bed?”

“All the time,” she said, rolling her eyes to fullest effect. “I bet your dad knows better.”

“Oh, sure.”

That was cast into doubt, however, by her next find. The shoebox half full of metal cigarette lighters. Zoe’s eyes went big in amazement. “Who smokes this much?”

“No one guy,” I responded like the back room veteran I was. “See? They’re engraved. Soldiers trade them in.” And had been doing so for a long time. Rummaging, we found a tarnished lighter with the engraving MONTANEER JUNGLE FIGHTERS which dated back to the Montana National Guardsmen who served in the tropical hell of New Guinea in World War Two. Another one read INCHON SEPT. 1950 THE MARINES HAVE LANDED from the Korean war.
Newest and shiniest were some engraved with MINUTEMAN MISSILEMEN AMERICA’S ACE IN THE HOLE from Air Force troops, flyboys as we somewhat inaccurately called them, stationed in missile silos out there under the prairie.

“Pop takes one out and uses it until the flint wears out,” I explained the plenitude of lighters. “He says he got tired of digging through his pockets for a matchbook all the time.”

“Smart,” Zoe commended, but by now her attention had been caught by a collection of shoes ranged along the bottom of one wall, cowboy boots and workshoes but also well-shined oxfords. “That’s wild!” she gasped. “People even trade in their dress shoes?”

“You bet. Like Pop says, they can’t drink with their feet.”

She giggled and went over to the footwear assortment, drawn by one particularly extravagant-looking pair of items. They resembled cowboy boots, but were higher topped and the leather was an odd texture and funny greenish shade.

“What are these fancy things?” she wondered, fingering one.

“Snake boots.”

“Rusty, you’re making that up.” Nonetheless she jerked her hand away.

“Huh-uh, cross my heart up, down, and sideways. It’s snakeskin of some kind, they’re made in Texas,” I held forth knowledgably because I had asked Pop the identical question a few days before when Earl Zane traded them in to drink on. I started to fill her in on the Zane family propensities, but she was so canny she had already caught on to those, including Duane’s. “That kid at the gas station?” She curled her lip dismissively. “What a weenie.”

Snooping past the boots and shoes, she next found the hiding place of the Blue Eagle sign under the rainslickers, just as I had when the back room was a new world to me. Watching a dark-eyed imp of a girl repeat my discovery so
exactly was remarkable and somewhat spooky; I’ve said this was starting off as not a usual summer.

Unlike me, however, Zoe saw nothing odd about the eagle being blue. “I bet it’s the only paint they had that day,” she resolved the question and moved on.

As inevitably as B follows A, she next stumbled onto the latest quantity of items tucked away even farther with the tarp over them. “What are all these tools for?”

My guess was that they were implements used in oilfield work, but I only repeated what Pop told me whenever I happened to ask about the stuff that every so often multiplied under the tarpaulin as if it was a magician’s cloth: “It’s just surplus somebody didn’t know what else to do with.”

“This place is really something, Rusty,” she marveled.

And that was before I even introduced her to the vent.

“It’s that time of day, Tom,” the alimony purr in that voice drifted up to us when we hunched in at the desk on the landing and I grandly levered the vent slats open.

“You’re living proof of that, Velma.” Pop’s reply was punctuated with the sounds of a ginger ale highball being mixed. “I can quit winding my watch now that you’re back.”

Zoe pressed so close to the metal grill her ear practically kissed the slats. “Ooh,” she turned to me, instinctively whispering, “it’s just like you said, we can hear every word! This is wild!”

Veteran eavesdropper that I was, I welcomed her to the club with a smug smile.

“How was Mexico?” Pop’s voice kept its distance from Velma’s.

“Same as ever. Fiestas and tortillas.”
Craning her neck, Zoe took a good look at Velma’s tailored outfit and eternally chestnut hair. “She looks pretty swuf,” she murmured over her shoulder to me. “How come your dad doesn’t fall for her?”

“She’s too”—I almost said old before realizing Velma Simms most likely was close to my father’s age, whatever that was—“divorced.” I noiselessly closed the vent so I didn’t have to whisper my way through the long history of the town’s record-holder for broken marriages.

“That’s a lot of split blankets,” Zoe said sagely when I was done. “I bet that’s why your dad is such a bachelor. He doesn’t want something like that happening to him again, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Zoe looked at me keenly. “You don’t ever hear from your mom at all?”

“Not really,” I was surprised into dumb honesty. I was not yet used to the fact that the mind of Zoe was like a pinball machine; the flips and bounces came so suddenly you were left blinking trying to know the score. “Christmas or any time?” she pressed the point.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Not even,” she wondered in a hushed voice, “on your birthday?”

I might have answered, Especially on my birthday, since my arrival in the world seemed to have so colossally done in the marriage of my mother and my father. “She, ah, doesn’t believe in that sort of thing. I don’t blame her,” I tried to sound worldly, “when you go through a gate, close it behind you.”

Zoe blinked in thinking that over, and the vent came to my rescue. “Oh, hey, listen,” I whispered, opening it again to the clocklike happenings of the bar room.

“Ring me up one, Tom,” Bill Reinking had walked in on schedule. “Something to get my mind off the state of the world again this week.”
“Shot of scotch, water on the side,” I stated without looking.

Peeking to check on that, Zoe bobbed her head in fascination. She listened avidly to the trials and tribulations of the Gleaner editor as told to Pop, then when Bill Reinking left, dropped back into her chair with a gleam in her eye. “Know what?” Her whisper turned even more confidential. “Priests do this all the time.”

Pop and I weren’t even remotely Catholic or anything else, but I was pretty sure the confessional booth had something more to it than a vent in a saloon wall did.

“How’s it any different?” Zoe insisted. “People come and tell their troubles, and they get to feeling better because somebody is listening to them.”

“Yeah, but it’s my dad they know is listening, not us up--”

“Same thing, him or us,” she breezed past that. “People just want somebody to spill to.” Her eyes sparkling, she provided final proof of her expertise. “In Butte, they have a confessional on every corner, like a phone booth.”

I gave my new best friend a look and a knowing laugh. “I bet they need to.”

That was the start. Zoe quickly became as regular in the back room as some of Pop’s customers out front. In no time, we were thicker than thieves, as that accurate enough saying goes. When we were together, almost anything tickled our funnybones, particularly overheard snatches from the bar room that arrived to us through the vent. In no time we adopted old sheepherders’ “Hunnerd percent and then some” and “Wouldn’t that fry your gizzard” equally with young flyboys’ “Listen up, troop” and “Outstanding!” and any number of other gleeful bits we made our own, lingo overlapping in us as though we were time travelers. Inevitably added to that was every particle of radio serial and
comic strip and movie dialogue we’d ever encountered that was silly enough to remember, piled up and waiting in two active twelve-year-old brains like ingredients filling a flour sifter. All it took for that powder of imagination to sieve through in good measure was for one or the other of us to turn the crank.

“Ace, what do you think this dohickey is?” Zoe might take on a persuasive growl--she could be a deadly mimic and I wasn’t bad myself--as we prowled the holdings of the back room.

“Get a brain in your head, Muscles.” Gangsters who talked sideways out of their mouths were one of our favorites. “Any dumb cluck can plainly see it's a whatchamacallit, a bootjack.”

“Now that you give me the skinny, boss, I can see you hit the nail on the noggin.”

Zoe had yet another surprising side to her. With boyish trepidation--she was first and foremost a girl, after all--I had given her a hasty tour of my aspiring air force of Hellcats and Spitfires and Airacobras and the like hovering on their fishlines from the rafters, figuring she would have about as much interest in model-plane building as I would in learning to sew. How wrong I was, luckily. Whether it was the pugnacious aircraft names or what, she took to my balsawood kits as though they were magic sets. “Neat! Show me how it all fits together.” I did more than that, finding the courage from somewhere to show her my most precious possession, the X-Acto knife Pop had given me for Christmas. “Ooh,” she breathed, just that, exactly the right response to the beautiful little instrument that was a cross between a pen and a scalpel. “You suppose,” she for once was almost shy in asking, “I could try it out sometime?” I didn’t have to think twice. “Right now, if you want,” I said with my heart thumping as I pulled out the model kit I had been saving for the summer. “I’m going to build my biggest one yet. A Flying Fortress.” There were more Oohs from her as I laid out the balsawood
sheets of the framework of the B-17 bomber. With the care of a surgeon I cut out
the first wing to show her how it was done, and then handed her the X-Acto knife
to do the other one herself. She handled it like a treasure, I was gratified to see,
tracing the wing outline with the sharp point as slowly and precisely as I could do
it myself.

That settled it. From then on, so many of those summer afternoons and
early evenings, Zoe and I were to be found together at the desk on the stair
landing, alternately tuning in on the bar room doings and giggling at each other’s
tomfoolery and holding our breath as surgical cuts on balsawood were made.
Somewhere in the back of our minds lurked the disturbing knowledge that when
school started in the fall, I would have to turn into a boy among other boys again
and she would have to find a best friend among girls. But that fact of life lay
whole months away yet, and in the meantime, all we had to live up to was for
each of us to do half the laughing.

Early in all this, Pop came in from the bar side to wrestle a keg of beer out
to the taps and looked up at us, innocent as angels there on the stair landing. He
paused for a long moment, his eyebrows working on the matter. “Your folks
know you’re in here as much as you are, princess?”

Zoe swore, cross her heart and hope to go to heaven in a flash of fire, that
they did.

He went back to grappling the keg, but not before giving us a more
significant look. “Just don’t disturb the peace, okay? That goes for both of you.”
Of course he was saying more than those words contained. He and Zoe’s parents,
while keeping an eye on the situation, must have judged we still were too young
to mess around with each other in the overwhelming matter of the flesh. They
were right, providentially; that particular temptation had not yet visited our young
bodies. In every other way, though, we were sinfully close, and I don’t know
what I would have done without Zoe that season when I had never laughed so much nor had so much to try to endure.

It was raining cats and dogs again, another weather parade the Two Medicine country wasn't used to, the day not much farther into summer when she came in the back door shaking her wet hair and caroling up to me on the landing, “What’s the story, morning glory?”

“Hi.”

She gave me a little look, but then bounded up the stairs as usual and started to settle in next to where I was dithering over our half-built Flying Fortress. I had the louver slats of the vent open to try to improve my mood, and right away we heard the bar phone being answered. Nothing got past Zoe in the sieving of voices from the bar room—at times like this, I wished it would—and at the first guttural word, she went alert as a sentry.

“That’s not your dad,” she whispered.

Trying to sound offhand—it’s hard when you’re whispering—I told her it was only Howie, filling in.

“Is he sick?”

“Who, Howie? He always talks that way.”

“No, silly, your dad.”

I was badly out of sorts, even with her. “No, nosey, he’s not sick.”

“Then why isn’t he tending bar like always?”

“He’s—he’s away on a trip.”

“He is? For how long?”

“Couple of days.”

“Oh good, that’s not much.” She read my face. “Although it’s kind of a lot, too. Why didn’t he take you along?”
“I didn’t want to go,” I said, hoping the opposite of the truth would end this. “All he’s doing is selling some of this old stuff.”

“Really? Ooh, I see what you mean, the snake boots are gone. Too bad.”

Those and much other stuff, I crossly had watched Pop pile up for loading early that morning, before he shooed me to the house and told me not to put any beans up my nose while he was gone. By now Zoe knew the holdings of the back room as well as I did, and she could tell from the crumpled look of the tarpaulin back by the Blue Eagle sign that the tool collection had vanished along with a lot else. Her curiosity wasn’t quenched about the comings and goings of the hocked merchandise. “Where does your dad go to sell all these kinds of things?”

When I told her, her eyes reflected dark mystery. “Canada! Why there?”

“Uhm, he makes more money.”

“Just by crossing the border? How does that work?”

“They’re short of American stuff up there, I guess.”

Zoe gazed around at the motley accumulation that was left. “They won’t be, if he makes enough trips.”

Same pickled bedroom. Same slap of Howie’s slippers on the way to the toilet. Same sleepless mood, that first night, fretting myself to a frazzle about my father. I couldn’t get over it. One minute we were in our usual comfortable routines in the house and the joint, and the next thing I knew, he was gone in another puff of smoke. True, this time he had not driven off into the jaws of a thirty-year winter, but it had been the rainiest spring and start of summer anyone could remember and there was flooding up north on the Milk River. I had really a bad feeling about this sudden trip of his, even more so than that New Year’s excursion into the blizzard, maybe because Zoe had taken my mind off such things and I was caught totally unprepared when he told me he was about to load
up and go. I wasn’t even sure why, weather aside, this time scared me so. What was it about life that kept tiptoeing back and forth so unpredictably across the back of the mind this odd year? Or was it just the age I was at, still a kid with a kid’s nightmares (Phoenix!) but growing older if not wiser at what seemed an accelerating rate? In any case, here the situation was again, him gone and me stewing in the dark.

Yet when I look back, this is possibly what it took to encourage me into what I did that next day. Desperation can serve as a kind of encouragement, after all.

We were back at the B-17, the X-Acto knife doing most of the talking as we traded back and forth at cutting out delicate small parts and gluing them into the complicated bomber fuselage. Worried sick and not able in the least to keep it from showing, I knew Zoe deserved better company than I was managing to be. She was all sympathy, I could tell, but she had that carefully pursed expression a person has around someone something is wrong with. Mustering myself, I cast around for some way to make up for my mood. Fortunately I was not without resources, Pop having given me a couple of dollars of conscience money before he left.

“Hey, want to go to the show?” Our evenings were pretty much second helpings of afternoons, inasmuch as television literally wasn’t in the picture before relay stations began beaming the signal to western small towns like ours; it is strange to think how much distraction the curvature of the earth spared us, back then. The new movie at the Odeon once a week was exactly what it sounded like, the only show in town.

“You bet,” said she, ready for anything. Until she thought it over for a second or two. “You think we both should? Together, I mean.” She picked at her elbow uneasily. “That’s kind of--you know.”
Yes, it was awfully public. Gros Ventre was a small town where people knew one another’s business almost before it happened. We could be teased to death if the wrong party—Duane Zane came to mind—spotted us sitting together in the movie theater. That was a chance we would have to take, and I had an inkling of how.

“Leave it to me, Bucky,” I did my best radio serial voice. “We’ll foil those devils yet.”

With enough pleading to her parents and my dogged negotiation with Howie, we managed to get permission to go to the late show rather than the early one on the unique premise that it was a shame to waste a nice summer evening inside. It still was only dusk when we slipped out the back door of the Medicine Lodge and down the alley until we were across the street from the Odeon. The first show had just let out, and as the crowd dispersed to cars and pickups, we waited until the traffic died down and then hurried across to where the marquee read:

THE ALAMO

STARRING JOHN WAYNE

DIRECTED BY JOHN WAYNE

Charlie Hooper, the Odeon’s owner, was at the ticket window counting his take and was surprised to see customers already for the next showing. He was even more surprised when I pushed our price of admission through the little wicket and requested urgently: “Could we be in the crying room? She has a real bad cough.”

I swear, Zoe immediately took on the look of a consumptive who would cough her head off throughout the show. As Charlie Hooper peered through the ticket window glass at her, she ducked her head and gave a piteous hacking sound. Figuring I was the emissary from her folks or my father, Charlie surmised: “Bashful, is she?”