

"My seeing eye," she said fondly. I made a big show of helping her out of her seat and she made one of clinging to me to be guided. "Oh, Mr. Irv? Thanks for the hotdog," she called over her shoulder to him as he peered after us in concern, while I steered her urgently out of the press box and down the stairs.

"Is he still watching us?" Zoe moaned as we reached the grandstand aisle. "My eyes are getting really tired."

"Hang in there, we've almost got it made," I said out the side of my mouth. With everyone still standing around and stretching, we were able to slip into the crowd in the aisle and become our normal selves, more or less, as we neared the guest box.

"You were fantastic!"

"No, you were!"

"Actors get paid for this! Can you believe it?"

"Unreal!"

We were welcomed like the long-lost by the vice president and Pop as we clambered into seats on the far side of them, away from prying eyes in the press box. Feeling the effects of the bottles of Select, Pop sat back like king for the day, turned to Zoe and me, and grandly asked: "How was it up there? Could you see good?"

"The whole bit," we chorused.

The journey home, in my memory, capped the day perfectly, Pop driving and smoking in contentment, Zoe smiling as she dozed between us, while a sunset that would have made Charlie Russell reach for his paints drew down over the mountains and prairie. When the car cruised into Gros Ventre with the darkened trees over the town like a canopy of night and the lights softly on in the houses beneath, Pop roused Zoe with a gentle "Hey, princess" as we pulled up to the

cafe. Sleepily she got out and thanked him for the day and yawned us a good-night. But before I could close the car door, she whirled like a dancer and whispered as if giving me full credit, "Your dad is wild!"

The plaque proudly went into place in the barroom below the buffalo head, where no customer entering the Medicine Lodge could possibly miss it, and on the other side of the wall Zoe and I eagerly resumed our routines after the triumphant Great Falls trip. Rehearsing Cloyce Reinking into crosseyed high-toned perfection in her role, doing ballpark bits to each other like old vaudevillians reciting beloved punchlines, rooting around in the treasures of the back room, listening hungrily at the vent for fresh lingo from the loosened tongues of Pop's clientele, life at the moment was just right for the two of us, the midsummer air fairly bubbling with laughing gas, every minute together promising fresh intoxication of our imaginations. Could I have told even then that, like the thirty-year winter, this was a summer all others would have to be measured against? Everything in me says so.

A week spilled past, and in practically a blink, here was Sunday again and I was up so early and so full of life that I trotted across to fetch the Great Falls *Tribune* from the front doorway of the Medicine Lodge to read the comics and sports sections while waiting for Pop to get up and fix breakfast. Walking back, I idly thumbed the brown wrapper off the hefty Sunday paper. FARGONAUTS FLEECE SELECTRICS 11-3, not a surprise. But the photo near the top of the front page surely was.

"Pop!" I tore into the house and up the stairs to his bedroom. "You're in the paper!"

"Hmpf?" He struggled upright in bed, rubbing sleep from his eyes as I waved the newspaper at him. "Let me see that."

The newspaper picture did him justice, the merciless way a camera does, highlighting the lines in his face, the furrows of his forehead, the stripe in his hair that looked even more startling in black-and-white. He looked more than ever like the etched visage of the Depression generation, the survivor with those past hard times written in his face. The photographer at the Hotel Rainbow award luncheon had caught him cradling the plaque the awkward way a new father holds a baby. Squinting at his likeness as if it hurt his eyes, Pop tried to yawn himself more fully awake. "It took the Shellackers a week to get a mug shot like that in, huh?"

"No, there's more!" I flipped the newspaper for him to the story beneath the front page fold.

Still bleary and hunched in his undershirt, he spread the *Tribune* on the bedcovers, with me reading along with him over his shoulder.

THE MAN BEHIND THE BAR

Beneath that headline was Bill Reinking's account of the Medicine Lodge and its one-of-a-kind bartender.

If you bottled Tom Harry, bartender of possibly the oldest continuous pleasure dispensary in Montana and surely the most engaging, you would have the hundred-proof pure stuff of legend.

His Medicine Lodge saloon, the comfortable old gathering place on the main street of Gros Ventre, has been in operation since territorial days, and Tom Harry has been in business long enough to qualify as a historic landmark himself. Recently the brewers of Great Falls Select beer honored his beloved joint as the Select Pleasure Establishment of the Year, and all that needs to be said further about that is, what took so long?

His bar room has the look and feel of that vacation lodge you have always dreamed of finding, one small surviving corner of an earlier time but absolutely professionally up-to-the-minute in service. The man behind the bar looks almost too much like a bartender--bowtie, pompadour, lived-in face--to be real, but then he seemingly only glances in your direction and

here's that drink you had in mind. You'd like to talk? He'll listen hard enough to turn you inside out, if you want. You prefer to sip in silence? Not another word is heard.

Tom Harry makes it all look easy--and does so while finding time to be father to a bright twelve-year-old son, Rusty--but presiding over the clientele that unerringly finds its way into this western outpost of civility in a parched land is no small task. Behind the bar on a busy Saturday night, he is Clyde Beatty in the lion cage. Mandrake the Magician doing the pouring. Lamont Cranston using his wizardry judiciously.

"Who the hell is Lamont Cranston?"

"He's the Shadow, on the radio," I was an authority on that, all those Phoenix afternoons of cringing on the carpet to listen to serials finally paying off. "He has the power to cloud men's minds."

There was more, much more, in the newspaper piece, but I had to force myself to concentrate, my head swelling fast. Bright! I'd been called that right there in the newspaper. Pop was wide awake now. He broke off reading long enough to snatch his cigarette pack off the nightstand and light up with a big puff. "Bill poured it on thick," he muttered, "whatever got into him."

"Yeah, wow, Pop, you're really famous!"

"Don't go overboard. Famous around here isn't so famous."

"No, see what it says?" Beneath Bill Reinking's byline, in smaller print was the wording North American Press Feature Syndicate. "North America is a lot to be famous in, right?"

"Cripes." I couldn't tell from Pop's exhalation whether he was pleased or not to be continentally famous.

We read to the bottom of the newspaper piece.

Tom Harry's decades as the ideal bartender have carried forward the historical standing of the Medicine Lodge as an institution in its special corner of the world. The cavalcade of customers has gone from homesteaders and

cowboys and sheepherders to tourists and businessmen and ~~radar~~^{missile} warriors, but the presence behind the bar has stayed steady as the mountains of the Two Medicine country.

On a recent Saturday night, with the joint full and rollicking, this bartender of the ages found time to listen to some fisherman's lie he had heard so many times before, his towel restless on the polished bar but the rest of him keen and still, until the punchline came and all that was left was for him to cock an eyebrow and chip in his own:

"Sure gonna miss you when I'm gone."

Customers of the Medicine Lodge hope that will not happen for a long, long time.

"Cripes" again, from Pop as we read that ending. I was openmouthed.

"Did you really say that to somebody?"

"I must have. Bill Reinking is an honest ess of a bee in what he writes."

"What did you mean about being gone?" The phrase brought a chill around my heart.

"Don't get in an uproar." He mashed out his cigarette in the ashtray next to the bed, trying to think. "It's a what do you call it," he mumbled, "figure of speech. Somebody I used to know said it all the time. She was always saying something." He caught himself. "I don't know why it popped into my head, and that's that."

She?

Pop returned to the newspaper photo, wishing he'd gotten a haircut before the awards luncheon so he didn't look like a beatnik. I scarcely heard, my mind so taken up with "miss you when I'm gone" and the phantom who said it all the time. Who else could she be but my mother? A dozen years ago when they were splitting the blanket--and me into half orphanhood--how had she ~~spiken~~^{missed} it then to him? With the snap of drama, fit for Shakespeare's ear if he were still around? Or did it come out plain and bitter, good riddance to him and his booze business

and everything that came with it, including an accidental kid? And *gone*, the question that hung off that. Did it admit a longing that she knew she could not entirely escape by pulling out on us, as Pop put it? Or did it mean the opposite, we'd never be missed as long as she lived? And if she saw the newspaper story, wherever she was, what would she think now? A Jones among the worldful of names, how must she have felt at seeing our distinctive ones reappear like ghosts from another life?

During my daze, Pop had absently lit another cigarette while he frowned down at the newsprint, the bartender for the ages smoking in bed. Still shaking his head a little, he sighed acceptance.

"What the hell, maybe it'll be good for business. How about we celebrate being famous by going fishing?"

In no time, the article was not just good for business, it was wildly so. There was such a flood of tourists stopping in to experience the historic saloon and its fabled bartender, besides the Two Medicine country proudly paying its respects by ordering up round after round, that Howie had to be summoned to help Pop behind the bar for hours on end. One particular brand of beer sold at a fantastic rate as customer after customer--"even the Schlitz yayhoos," Pop had marveled to me in one of our bedtime conversations--ordered up a Shellac in tribute to the towering bottle on the plaque. Earl Zane got so carried away he hocked his Calgary Stampede belt buckle for a week's worth of beer credit.

During all this, Zoe could not get enough of the vent's events, nor could I, once I somewhat got over the mystery of that utterance of Pop's that now existed in every newspaper under the sun--although "Sure gonna miss you when I'm gone" isn't the kind of thing easily put out of mind. It was as intoxicating a time for the pair of us as anyone bellied up to the bar, what with mornings of Cloyce

Reinking steadily perfecting Lady Bracknell bit by bit and then the dialogues of the Medicine Lodge awaiting us the minute we climbed to the familiar comforts of the landing. Grinning widely at each other, we silently cheered Bill Reinking to the skies the first time he came in after the momentous newspaper story, although Pop folded his arms instead of producing a shot of scotch, water on the side.

"How come you couldn't have warned me I was gonna to be plastered on front pages everydamnwhere?"

Old friend looked at old friend across the expanse of that question.

"Alas, Tom, I didn't find out in time the story for the *Trib* was being picked up by the syndicate. I haven't had that happen for a while. You make good copy, as we knights of the press say."

Through the vent slats, Zoe and I memorized their expressions, the hopeful smile lifting the gray mustache of the old customer and the deep frown creasing the face behind the bar, like the two masks of drama. We could hear the tick of the clock behind Pop. Then a shot glass and water on the side appeared like magic. "It's on the house today."

"Swift," Zoe breathed, and my heart danced in agreement.

That set of days passed like a parade, and before Pop's fame showed any sign of wearing off, Saturday dawned and it was time for me to swamp out the bar room as usual.

This particular morning, I didn't mind even the snottiest of chores quite as much with the plaque right there on the wall proclaiming this was what a select establishment was like, spittoons and all, and with none other than Tom Harry its duly celebrated impresario. While I ^{contentedly} swept and mopped and all else, Pop seemed wrapped up in his own thoughts, doing little things behind the bar. A couple of times I noticed him checking the cash register, as though making sure the money piling up in there ^{until} wasn't a mirage.

"Yeah, well, maybe. But did you have to make that last line sound like something at a funeral?"

"A story can have more than one ending, you hear enough of them in here to know that," the newspaperman said mildly. "It's a question of what fits best with the rest of the tale, isn't it."

Busy dreaming up the next bit to do with Zoe, I wasn't paying any special attention when he picked up a towel and began polishing the bar as always, but this time in a single long slow lick from one end to the other. When he reached the end nearest to where I was doing swift justice to the floor with my mop, he called over to me.

"Got something to tell you."

He took a longer look around the saloon than usual, from corner to corner, and I expected to be told I'd missed a spot in my mopping. Instead, he said:

"I've made up my mind I might as well sell the joint."

The bar room floor seemed to give way under me. I stared at him as if he had declared he might as well drown himself in the creek.

In those instants, my imaginings of my mother's principled objection to the occupation of selling alcohol, my frets about him as bouncer when customers got out of hand, everything of that sort went out the window. The Medicine Lodge and my father had been indivisible all these years. Had he really said what I thought I'd heard come from his mouth? Like wrong pieces of a puzzle, the words refused to fit together sensibly in my mind. Sell? The joint? *You can't!* Out loud, the best I could do amounted to:

"But, but--why?"

"All kinds of reasons." He had that shrugging look, and I was afraid he was going to be as impenetrable on this as about those trips of his. I was wrong.

He started to say something, then didn't. The lines in his face deepened as he searched for where to start.

"Seeing you in here like this set me to thinking," he began in a strained voice.

Me? Now I was horrified as well as shocked. By taking on the job of swamper, I caused us to lose the Medicine Lodge? I was the pebble that started this avalanche?

He was fumbling out something about how damn hard a decision like this was, which barely registered through my daze. Finally he simply shook his head. "Rusty, I don't want you to end up running the joint."

"I'm ~~going to~~ ^{gonna} be an actor, remember?"

"Kiddo, listen." His blue eyes softened as he looked into mine. "Things don't always work out the way they're supposed to."

He saw that didn't help at all, and tried again.

"I mean, sure, let's say you're gonna be an actor and set the world on fire. But first you've got to grow up, right? And that's years down the line from now, isn't it. I--I don't want it on my conscience that you might have to shoulder more than you already do around here." He employed the towel on an already spotless corner of the bar so as not to look at me. "You know as well as I do what it takes to operate the joint. You have to be a working fool, your time is never your own, it adds up on a person after a while."

Now he did shrug, as if what he was going to say next was merely the tag end of that, although it was anything but. "I'm getting middle-aged, you know. In the middle of getting too damn aged."

He saw my doubting expression, and sighed. "Hey, maybe you don't notice it, but I do. The body doesn't lie." He patted his stomach regretfully. "My belly's coming over my belt more all the time. When you can't see down to your business end, you know you're starting to hit trouble."

Ordinarily I would have appreciated such man-to-man talk. This was no ordinary time. I absolutely did not want to have to think of him as too damn aged. So what if his middle was sagging, and his widow's peak was more pronounced

than it used to be, and his forehead had a ladder of wrinkles now when he lifted his eyebrows? The sky color of his eyes hadn't dimmed any and his pouring hand was as steady as ever and his hearing was still keen as could be. Yes, he worked himself practically to the bone in the saloon and there were always so many bills to be paid and there had been those spooky Canada trips to help out on the money end, but none of that counted as much as my alarm at the thought of him as old, too old to be the best bartender who ever lived, too old to possess the Medicine Lodge and its back room, too old to be the father who was half my life.

Nor was he letting the matter rest. "When you can't even get out of the way of somebody's elbow," he wadded up the towel and tossed it away under the bar, "it makes you stop and think."

"That was an accident, you said so your--"

"I know what I said, and it's entirely true. That might not happen again in a hundred years, but some other damn thing will, that's the story of life." He leaned back against the breakfront, his arms firmly crossed, Franklin Delano Roosevelt at his shoulder as if backing him up about the vicissitudes of life. "Listen, Rusty, it's not just about getting smacked in the eye that way. The hours, day and night in here"--he glanced almost apologetically to the gleaming bar as he spoke of this -- "are starting to get to me. Been that way since the start of the year."

I argued with all my might that he could hire help behind the bar. Good help was devilishly hard to find, he argued back. Besides, he threw at me, what better time to sell than when the Medicine Lodge had been chosen the select joint in all of Montana? The Medicine Lodge, I came right back at him, was always that anyway whether or not there was a plaque on the wall, so why be in a rush to sell it? We went around and around like that, getting nowhere, until another awful disturbance caught up with me.

"The house, too?"

That brought him up short. The mate to the Medicine Lodge, the way we had lived these whole six years, back and forth across the alley with the spreading bower of Igdrasil sheltering our universe. "It's always gone with the joint," he said gingerly, "that was the deal when I bought the business." He must have seen me sag toward my shoetops. "Don't get in a sweat. We'll see, we could maybe hang on to the house. For now, anyhow."

"For now?" I stared the question at him: what did that mean?

"Let't don't worry about the house for now, is all I meant." That seemed to me awfully thin reassurance. "We've got the joint to deal with, that's why I had to lay it on you like this."

The idea of life without the Medicine Lodge still stunned me, but there was something even more daunting to imagine beyond that. Pop without the Medicine Lodge in his daily life. The human race's preeminent bartender without a bar to tend. Past the lump in my throat, I asked:

"Wh-what will you do?"

"Oh, take life easy, I guess." Which did not sound convincing even to him. He rubbed the sleek wood of the breakfront a moment. "Who knows, whoever buys the joint might need somebody to fill in now and then."

This nightmare kept getting worse. My father's plan for the rest of his life was to turn into Howie?

"Pop, that's crazy," I all but bawled, "you say you're gonna sell the joint so you don't have to bartend any more and then you turn right around and--"

"Hey, excuse me all to hell for thinking out loud," he held up his hands to stop my torrent. "We'll think of something." He attempted a smile that didn't quite take. "Maybe I'll quit smoking--that'd keep me occupied, right?" Seeing that didn't convince me of his sanity, he tried again. "Go fishing whenever we want. Maybe we'll take up fly-fishing."

By now I was looking at him totally slack-jawed.

"Okay, okay, I don't just know yet what we'll do. One headache at a time." He ran a hand through his hair, as if he could feel the streak of silver against the black. "Rusty, what I do know is time catches up with a person, and I'm trying to stay ahead of it a little." Gazing around one more time from the long dark bar to the bright-eyed creatures on the wall to the dazzling bottles of the breakfront, he shook his head again. "Nothing lasts forever."

The news that Tom Harry was putting the Medicine lodge up for sale brought on lamentations of practically biblical dimensions.

"Aw, hell, Tom, what do you want to do a terrible thing like that for?" ran the general howl of complaint, usually expressed much more profanely than that, as customers from one end of the Two Medicine country to the other dropped in to pay tribute to the saloon they had always known. Bill Reinking smiled sadly and called it the end of an era. Velma Simms asked Pop if he had lost his mind. The sheepherders were stricken, faced with a future where they might have to hang out in a merciless dump like the Pastime. Even the flyboys were disturbed, grouching that the only good thing about their hole-in-the-ground duty was being upended.

And Cloyce Reinking, in one of our last script runthroughs before she went on to dress rehearsals with the Prairie Players, departed from Lady Bracknell enough to let me know: "This town will be a poorer place without your father there in his spot."

Listening at the vent after the news got around, I could tell the remarks were getting on Pop's nerves. The first few days, he would make some vague reply whenever someone asked what he was going to do with the rest of his life, but after that, his standard answer was, "Retire from the human race."

Zoe was as downcast as I was. She understood all too well what a change in the Medicine Lodge meant for us.

"It's funny," she said with a long lip, "your dad doesn't want you in his business and mine can't wait to put me to waitressing in the dumb cafe."

"Yeah. That's grownups for you. By the time we ever figure them out," I despaired, "we'll be them."

"Won't either," she said crossly. "We've got our heads screwed on different than that."

I had to hope so, did I ever. For there was one implication in Pop's decision that possibly was worst of all, that I couldn't bring myself to tell even Zoe about. That "for now" of his about at least keeping the house held a tremor I could feel in the distance, however near or far. It didn't take any too much imagination to conjure Pop one day saying, as people in our part of the country did when their bones starting aching some particular way, 'You know what, we maybe ought to consider someplace warm. These winters are getting to be too much.' Someplace warm spelled only one thing to me, Arizona. Worse, Phoenix. The vicinity of Aunt Marge, our only known relative, in case something really bad happened to him in the onset of age and he could no longer bring me up by himself. Treacherous cousins and all else loomed in that, and if my mood could be depressed any farther, that was guaranteed to do it.

We were on the landing, slumped at the desk, listless as puddles. Out front, the barroom had no customers yet at this early point of the afternoon, but we could hear the small sounds of Pop puttering with things behind the bar, which he was doing a lot more of these days. The idle back room seemed to have caught a mood from the pair of us, ~~the rainslickers hanging slack,~~ ^{X-acto knife looking} ~~the dress shoes~~ dull and uninviting, ~~my~~ model planes barely stirring in their suspended state. Attic of our imaginations, the big old expanse and its holdings had provided us

treasures beyond measure--costumery, an expanded vocabulary, a hundred bits we did, and of course, the listening post into the adult world. All of that, we knew disconsolately, was about to go. So were times together like this. My throat had been tight for days with that thought, and Zoe looked tragic most of the time now.

She sighed dismally. "What's going to happen to all the stuff?"

"I wish I knew." Even Pop didn't seem to. 'Maybe it ought to go with the joint,' he wavered, 'although it's worth something if we hang onto it somehow. We'll have to see how the cards fall.'

The familiar swish of the saloon's front door roused us just enough to peek through the vent slats, more out of habit than interest, to see who had come in. Zoe and I made a face at each other. Mr. Snake Boots himself, Earl Zane, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hullo, tarbender." We watched him approach the bar, swaggering like a crow. As usual, he was full of himself and there was a lot of him to be full of. "How's business at the old watering hole?"

"Drying up fast," said Pop as if present company accounted for that.

"Don't worry your scalp, that'll change real soon." Earl straddled a bar stool, beaming into the breakfront mirror as usual. "I'll buy it."

"Buy what?" Pop glanced around the bar room for anything Earl could possibly afford.

"Your hearing going, Tom? The whole place. The Medicine Lodge."

Pop snorted an explosive laugh, the first gust in a storm of mirth that left him clutching the bar for support. I thought he never was going to stop with it. His laughing fit was so infectious Zoe and I had to stifle our own with hands over mouths.

"Damn, Earl," he gasped and wiped his eyes with a towel as he made his way to the beer tap, "that's the best one you ever told."

"I'm not joking," Earl protested in a hurt tone. "You ^{can't understand plain} ~~gone hard of hearing~~ ^{English all of a sudden?} ~~or something?~~ I guess I got to say it again, huh? I'll buy you out, lock, stock, and barrel."

Shaking his head, Pop drew a glass of Shellac by feel. "Sure you will. There's only that one pesky little detail. What do you intend to use for money?"

"I'll sell the gas station, natch." He rolled his shoulders as if luxuriating in newfound wealth. "Got it all penciled out. That and a mortgage will do the trick." He confided triumphantly: "I already been by the bank."

The three of us listening knew, in a single heartbeat, this was dire.

"I'll be an ess of a bee," Pop uttered in amazement. "You're serious." In the same tone of voice he used to tell me not to put beans up my nose, he told Earl: "You know, pouring drinks isn't like pumping gas."

The prospective buyer was offended. "I can pick that up along the way. You had to, sometime or other. C'mon, Tom, is the damn place for sale or isn't it?"

I did not imagine this, and Zoe would back me up in saying so: Pop looked up at the vent and the invisible two of us, with apology in his eyes. Then he moved slowly toward Earl, pushing the glass of beer along the bar.

"I said it's for sale, so it is. Set things up with the bank, and we'll get going on the deal."

How many ways could life turn inside out in the same year?

Now the Medicine Lodge not only was going out of our existence, Pop's and mine and Zoe's, but it was passing into the hands of the person who, if there were such an election, would be the strongest candidate for town fool. On top of

that, Earl Zane insisted the trove of hocked items be included in the deal--"It gets me my belt buckles back, don't it?"--which meant our beloved back room and its treasures would fall prey to that weenie Duane, while I would be across the alley eating my heart out.

I was haunted by what-ifs. What if I hadn't had the bright idea of filling the swamper job myself, which somehow made my father envision me chained to the joint forever? What if the Great Falls beermakers hadn't boosted our perfectly nice saloon into the select Shellac shrine of the whole damn state and prompted Bill Reinking's newspaper story? What if Zoe and I had been caught at that blind bit in the ballpark and spoiled Pop's big day--wouldn't that have been better, in the end? It wore me out, thinking about everything. Oh sure, you can't undo what's done, but that doesn't necessarily get it off your mind. Past actions, guileless at the time, seemed to have a habit of ambushing later on, and that was greatly unnerving to a twelve-year-old consciousness. Suppers with Zoe turned into one long glum wish list, each of us coming up with muttered hankerings for this or that to happen and miraculously set matters right again. Eyeing us mumbling into our meals that way, her parents plainly wondered what had gotten into us now.

Even Earl Zane had enough sense to agree with Pop that the sale of the saloon ought to be kept quiet until the absolute last minute. He admitted he had a few details to corral yet, such as working out final terms with the Californian who wanted to buy the gas station because he'd heard the Two Medicine country was such swell fishing, while Pop did not want to face the real howls of the imbibing community when they found out who would be taking over the Medicine Lodge. As soon as Earl strutted out the door that day, Pop was in the back room instructing Zoe and me to keep our lips zipped about what we'd just heard. "It's not a secret exactly, we just don't want anybody to know about it until we say so,

got that?" At least in that he was talking our language, and it was nothing for us to stay mum to the whole world, except for each other and our supper plates, for the ten days until the sale of the saloon was to be made final. Weirdly, that was the same date as opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. and Mrs. Reinking's emergence as Lady Bracknell, and Pop made what amends he could by promising to drive us to Valier to see the play. "Gives you a little something to look forward to, hey?" he tried without much success to lift our spirits.

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

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

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

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

The doorknob rattled some more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Glad you like the deecor," Pop wearily started to come from behind the bar, not a good sign for the person on the other side, "and now that you've had a look, you might as well get on with your business somewhere else, okay? We don't have any missing voices around here."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Pop, you didn't ever tell me the Blue Eagle was your^{own}--"

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

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

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

That stopped Pop. "If you didn't see the newspaper story, how'd you find me?"

"Hmm? Oh, I took some rolls of quarters into a phone booth and started calling every newspaper editor in the state to ask if they knew of a bartender by your name in their town." A modest shrug accompanied the telling of this.

"Luckily, Gros Ventre isn't far down the alphabet."

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

"Sir," Del Robertson's tongue practically tripped over itself in the rush to answer, "you're the Leadbelly of Fort Peck."

"I'm the *what*?"

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

Pop squinted impatiently. "Didn't he used to pitch for the Yankees?"

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

Evidently not, according to the copious explanation that ensued--I took a seat on a bar stool during it and Pop leaned back against the cash register with his

arms folded--to the effect that this Lomax person collected folk songs, in the old days lugging a recording machine like a big suitcase through the hollows and swamps of the South until, to cut the story short, he heard about a colored man in a Louisiana prison who played a guitar and wrote songs like nobody else's.

"Leadbelly," our young informant concluded as if saying the name in church. "Huddie Ledbetter. Possibly the greatest blues performer ever. The songs poured out of him like, like down-and-out poetry. The essence of the blues." In illustration, he cleared his throat and tried to make his voice deep and growly. *"I's got to bobbasheely through life alone, 'cause I got no constant home.* Classics like that."

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

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

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

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

The collector of Missing Voices looked hurt.

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

He paused to muster a new thought. "Let me put it this way. Fort Peck had so many workers, thousands really, that I can't possibly know which ones would be the best to interview. But from what I've been told over and over, practically everyone there sooner or later was funneled through a certain institution"--he bunched his hands narrowly--"as historians call a social fixture in a community. No, please, don't try to be modest, Mr. Harry, it's true--by reputation, the Blue Eagle saloon was a Fort Peck institution without equal." He had that spellbound look again as he gazed at Pop. "And naturally that makes you the institutional memory."

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

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

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

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

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

Wouldn't you know. The eager beaver historian named the exact day the papers were to be signed and the sale of the Medicine Lodge would be final. Not to mention the opening night performance of Mrs. Reinking, carefully coached eyes and all, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. There seemed to be only that single otherwise numberless one red-letter date on the calendar. Pop could not hide his relief. "Naw, I couldn't

something important to do, it's all set up.

go with you then even if I wanted to. I've got ~~a piece of business to tend to then.~~

Besides," he concluded righteously, "I promised the kiddo and his friend I'd take them to the play over in Valier that night." *Busy as a one-handed juggler, see?"*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"One day."

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

"That's not my name."

"Then what the hell is?"

"Delano."

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

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

"Lucky you didn't get named after him," Pop observed. "Delano, hey? That's halfway interesting." He squinted in fresh appraisal of the visitor. "You're from back there?"

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

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

"Somewhat," came the cautious answer.

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

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

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

"Come again?" The red head tilted a little to one side, as if catching up with what had been said. "Oh. Actually, no. William and Mary."

"I guess you get a longer diploma that way." Pop tossed down his towel. "Hey, Delano," he seemed to like trying out the name, "I can see why you'd like to have me glued to your side at the Fort Peck doings. But even if I wanted to, I've got a business deal that same day I positively have to be here for. Right, kiddo?" If he thought I was going to confirm the need to sell the Medicine Lodge, he was going to have a long, long wait; what he said may have been accurate, but that did not make it right. I sullenly kicked the leg of my bar stool until he took the hint and turned back to the other person whose hopes he was dashing. "Anyhow, before you go on your way, better have something to help you pack that name around. On the house. What do they drink at Willy and Mary?"

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

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

Delano came at me on scissor legs for a handshake as if we were lost brothers. "Twenty-five years," Pop was muttering to himself and perhaps the

Roosevelt poster as he fussed the glass of beer to perfection, "where the hell does the time go?" This prompted me to give Delano a secret look of encouragement, not that he needed much of that. By now he was taking in the bar room, from the stuffed menagerie protruding from the forest-green walls, to the pressed-tin ceiling that looked as old as heaven, to the ornately carved breakfront with its cargo of bottles and glasses and mirrors, as though he couldn't get enough of it.

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

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

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

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

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

"Run that by me again?"

"Shakespeare, at least the first part." A tingle went through me, and I waited breathlessly for what Delano would cause next. "It's just too ironic," he

went on in the same voice of gloom and doom, "that the very day you would be the center of celebration at Fort Peck will be your last as bartender here, Mr. Harry."

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

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

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

I've always thought what awaited Delano Robertson in the main street of Gros Ventre was so unfair. Even yet, I can see it and hear it and almost catch a whiff of it: as he stepped from the sidewalk to eagerly lead us across to a green and white Volkswagen van, bearing down on him no more than half a block away was a panicky mob of freshly shorn sheep, peeing and pooping and announcing in other ways how upset they were at being stripped of their fleeces, while in back of them, also supremely agitated, was Canada Dan cussing the life out of the surprised pedestrian in the path of the flock. Pop and I looked on unsuspectingly at this inhospitable reception for the person who would change our life like night to day.

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

"They're just out of the shearing pen across the creek," Pop informed him as he scrambled ~~back~~^{ungracefully} to join us in the doorway of the Medicine Lodge out of the way of the rampant ewe and the rest of the flood of wildly blating creatures.

"Makes them a little excited." We watched the fleecelless animals, their bewildered lambs trailing them, jostle past by the hundreds. Sheep look so naked without their wool, like peeled eggs with legs. Besides that indignity, some of the ewes carried cuts where they had been nicked by the shearers' power clippers. You see pictures, all the way back to Bethlehem, of peaceful grazing flocks, but this scarred-up loose-boweled parade would not make anyone envy a sheep's life. Delano Robertson remained wide-eyed and more than a little nervous about his van with the unsanitary swarm around it. "Does this happen much?"

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

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

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

bristling like a porcupine and spitting in our general direction. "Where's he from?"

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

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

"I thought so," Delano nodded wisely, jotting in the notebook.

"Linguistic patterns tend to mix along borders, likely French affecting English in him. The Gallic 'n'est pas?' must have become 'ain't it?' in his cultural subgroup, don't you think?"

the ess of a bee said as if his eye still smarted.
 "Something must have affected him," Pop had no trouble agreeing to.
 "That's Canada Dan for you."

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

"Tell you later," said Pop. "Show us this traveling contraption of yours. Watch where you step." The street was even more of a mess than usual after sheep had gone through, and Delano pretty much tiptoed as he escorted us to the van. Reaching it, he let out a relieved "Whew!" and flung open the double doors in the middle of the beetle-nosed vehicle. "Here it is, the Gab Lab!"

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

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

"Everything is within reach," Delano defended, sounding a little hurt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thrusting his hands into side pockets of his bush-jacket shirt, he hunched up as if cold water had been poured down the back of his neck. Unhappily he

~~and the Library powers that be~~

and was able to convince the powers that be to let me outfit it like this. He beamed proudly at the chockful camper van.

looked around at the town, mostly at the street with its leavings from the sheep, some of which he had stepped in. With a resigned sigh, he inquired:

“Is there a campground somewhere along the creek?” He was asking me because Pop, still shaking his head, was making a beeline back to the saloon. “Maybe I’d have better luck at fishing,” Delano muttered, scraping his shoe on the curb.

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

Pop stopped short in the middle of the street. He turned his head enough to ask:

“You fished much, back east?”

“Hmm? Oh, a tad.”

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

“Oh, sure.”

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

Delano had brightened measurably by the time he and I climbed into the van, probably at the prospect of a safe haven where marauding sheep could not get at him. Myself, I had that tingle that starts when almost too much is happening to keep track of. Riding in the Gab Lab was an adventure in itself--wait till I told Zoe!--what with the recording gear and highway maps and other

^{usual}
clutter its occupant had to scoop out of the passenger seat to make room for me. He apologized for his housekeeping and I told him not to worry, it matched ours. "There's only your father and you?" he asked, and I started in about my mother leaving when I was real little but before I could say more, he sympathized by telling me his parents had divorced when he was a child and now were both dead, which effectively put him way beyond me in orphanhood, so I shut up.

As he drove, he evidently still was bothered by the events competing with the Mudjacks Reunion. "What is this play that's so vitally important?" he asked peevishly. "Something by someone local?"

"Oscar Wilde."

"Oh."

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

"That's nothing. We had a thirty-year winter, you know. It never let up from Thanksgiving until--"

"A Packard straight-eight! What a piece of history!"

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

I figured it was my turn. "What's 'bobbasheely' mean?"

"Mmm, something like moseying along."

"Then why not just say 'moseying along'?"

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

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

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

"Where's a place in town that serves a good dinner?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

our dining partner
to take it all in, ~~Delano~~ was having to stretch his attention a number of directions at once.

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

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

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

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

"Ah, a drama department, do you mean?" He grinned down at her. "Are you sure you need one?" During this he was working on his chicken-fried steak, the night's special, a little at a time. The brownish gravy smothering it looked kind of gluey, and he seemed puzzled there was not a recognizable steak under the breading, merely pulverized meat.

"Rusty, what do you know for sure?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," he reported, shy again. I could see something change in his eyes. "I came close right after college, but she chose a finance major from Richmond instead." Hearing that, brought up as I was on how much could go wrong between a man and a woman, I started to feel sorry for him. Unexpectedly, he pulled his chin in almost to his collar button and intoned in that voice-of-doom style of old newsreels, "This is the way the world ends, not with a whim but a banker."

Zoe and I looked at each other in the same instant. There was no mistaking it. ^{Shit, it doesn't} ~~These things don't~~ happen by accident. He had just done a bit.

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

"How incredible!"

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

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

"Here, have a hat."

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

Zoe and I trailed him as he toured the room. "That's a Texican saddle," he exclaimed, rushing over to the biggest and oldest of the horse gear. "It had to have come north on a cattle drive. That dates it to the eighteen-seventies or early eighties, before the winter of '86." The first thirty-year winter! Just when you figured he was green as a pea, he would come up with something like that. "I like old things," he was saying, happy as pie, "you know they've lasted for a reason."

Gazing around, he shook his head in awe. "Imagine, eighty or so years of the past are stored away in this room. It's like a King Tut's tomb of the prairie." Suddenly he lifted his Stetson as high in the air as his long arm would reach. "Hats off!"

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

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

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

I couldn't stand it.

In the infinitesimal time it took for the snap of my fingers to travel the length of the room to where ~~Del~~ ^{he} was perusing a wall practically curtained in reins

and bridles and quirts and other leather accessories while she chattered at him, Zoe must have read my mind. ^{Del}He paid no attention whatsoever to my fingersnap, but she glided purposefully back to me, already radiating intrigue. We consulted in whispers.

"Should we let him in on it?"

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

"Maybe he's smart enough not to."

"Maybe."

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

"Del? Can you keep a secret?"

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

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

Interested now, he bobbed his head.

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

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

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

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

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

"That honyocker was supposed to help out on this fencing deal, but he called up sick--allergic to postholes, probably. So I guess I got to go at it baldheaded."

--arguing politics--

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

"Are you kidding? What the Republicans already did to the country would gag a maggot off a gutwagon."

--gossiping tooth and nail--

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

--toasting to faith in the future--

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

--and ordering another drink just in case--

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

"You got it, two Shellacs coming right up."

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

"How amaz--" he started to say out loud, before two sets of small hands covered his mouth.

"Sorry," he whispered as Zoe and I withdrew our hands. "But it is amazing! Voices like these are usually so scattered, you can never collect this many in one place." We smiled smugly. "I have to get some of this down," he

murmured while urgently searching into the flap pockets of his shirt for the notebook and pen that held Canada Dan's contribution to the language, "it's pure lingua america."

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

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

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

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

"Plow a field," my whisper enlightened him, "around and around."

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

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

It went on that way with him industriously listening and jotting until one of us asked:

"Why don't you just set up your recorder?"

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

"Then why are you writing stuff down?"

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

"Like spying, you mean."

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

Whatever it was, the three of us took in everything the vent had to offer until at last Zoe sighed fatalistically. "It's nine, I have to go. Bedtime," she pronounced as if it were a jail sentence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There, see?" Pop told me. "All you have to do is ask something and a monkey comes out of a tree with the answer." He said it jokingly enough, however, finishing off the coffee in his thermos cup and taking last drags on a precious cigarette of his daily ration as he gazed up at the skyline which still held the pink of dawn. "Can't beat this if you want nature," he provided his customary tribute to the mountain scenery practically in our faces, then got busy digging out fishing gear from the car trunk. Assembling his rod and reel with alacrity while the other two of us more slowly did our own, it occurred to him to make sure Del was not incurably addicted to fancy fishing. "Ever use bait instead of flies made out of feathers, did you, back east?"

"All the time."

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

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

Baited up and raring to go, Pop picked his way down to the waterline, calling over his shoulder: "Come on, you two. You can't catch fish if you don't have your hook in the water."

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

paying attention to anything beyond persuading trout to take a bite of chicken guts.

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

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

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

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

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

"It still seems to me you're a glutton for punishment, Delano," he shook his head but in a humorous way, "traveling around in a glorified tin can. It can't

be any too much fun, either, when someone sees that microphone of yours and comes down with mental laryngitis. What keeps you doing it?"

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

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

"Sorry, Mr. Harry. The interviews--"

"Cripes, are you allergic to first names?"

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

"The interviews fill a historical need. If we don't capture people's own stories, history is told from the top down. Rome fell, and that's that, period. But the Roman Empire was so much more than the Caesars and gladiators and such," he went on like a classroom instructor, "it was a way of life and language that lasted on and on in ordinary people. That's where a hybrid language such as *lingua franca* spoken around the Mediterranean came from, people of all walks of life spreading the words, sorry about the pun." By now he was really getting wound up, a lot busier with this than with fishing. "And here in our own time, we have the technical means to actually document it when people put history into their own words and vice versa." He looked momentarily pleased with himself. "Actually, I put some of this in my grant proposal for the Missing Voices project. It seems to have worked." He sobered again. "But traveling around in the Gab Lab is going to produce oral history of a particularly valuable kind, I'm absolutely sure of it. Wherever I can manage to point that microphone, it's waiting to be found, *lingua americana*."

He paused, suddenly embarrassed about sounding like he was reading all this off a card he carried in his wallet. "Alan Lomax has it easier in a way," he

admitted with the shy grin that made him likable, "he only has to say he's crazy about the blues."

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

Del laughed slightly, then turned serious.

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

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

Watching Pop, I could see that registered on him, but maybe not the way I hoped. "I don't know about you and Santa Ana," he said skeptically as he cast for more fish, "but I hear all kinds of bee ess when people start telling me their life stories. So, how do you know you're getting anything halfway true when they rattle off to you?" There: Zoe's question exactly.

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

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

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

His line swished in a fresh cast. Pop's did not.

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

"Rusty was kind enough to let me poke my head in," Del's voice faltered a bit, then rallied. "It's a marvel, Tom, to see what you've gathered. How you've done it all--" he shook his head in tribute. "The Rockefellers spent millions on collecting for Williamsburg."

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

The rest of that Sunday has blurred in me, the way a long stay in a hospital waiting room dulls away into a memory of dread at what was waiting ahead. I'm confident in saying fried trout was the special at the Top Spot that suppertime, but beyond that all I am sure of is that Pop was busy at being busy going over the saloon's accounts one last time, Del was holed up in the Gab Lab doing whatever he could to get ready for the multitude at Fort Peck, and Zoe and I spent a pitiful afternoon in the deathly quiet Medicine Lodge, with not even the

farewell whisper of a voice sifting from the bar room to the back room. It was like an all-day funeral.

Which changed like a thunderclap around bedtime that night.

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

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

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

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

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

As the two of us slogged into the dark back yard like sailors in rough weather, I barely heard his shout to me over the rain: "And tell the clueless ess of a bee to come sleep in the house out of this racket."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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