Up close, it was apparent she had her dark eyebrows fixed the way women do, perfect as a picture. At the moment she was not exactly a composed portrait, again. “Listen, I’m still getting used to not having a dead Scotchman for a father. Makes me a little rattled.” She fiddled with the leather bracelet on her wrist. “I don’t even know what to call you—’Pop’?”

“‘Tom,’” he said firmly, which I was glad to hear.

“Oh-kay,” she responded, sounding like an echo of her mother. “So, anyway, Tom, I’ll give it my best,” she spoke in a rush now, “if you’ll show me how. Mom says you’re the greatest at tending bar. I’d be all kinds of a moron if I passed up this chance, don’t I know.”

Well, at least that showed some spirit. Pop continued to look Francine up and down. Having conscientiously told her the drawbacks of bartending, now he had to tell her yes or no about how she stacked up for the job. I still believe he had not made up his mind until that very moment. He looked like he’d had too little sleep the past forty-eight hours or so, if any at all. I sensed what was coming when he rubbed the top of my head again as he spoke.

“All right, we’ll give this a try.” He cut off Proxy’s flash of smile and Francine’s relieved expression. “On my terms. There’s not going to be any working partner, so don’t get big ideas, Proxy. The Medicine Lodge stays in my hands, I’m the boss, period and end of punctuation.” He looked hard at Francine to make sure this was sinking in. “I’ll hire you, which means I can fire you, got that?”

Her mouth twitched that quirky way again, but she sounded fairly reasonable in saying: “That’s jake with me.” I filed that away to share with Zoe.

“See?” Proxy began. “It all works out for the best, just like I--”

“One more thing.” Pop held up his hands as if stopping traffic. His gruff tone had Francine fooling nervously with the gizmo on her wrist again. “I’m not gonna spend my time explaining to anybody who comes in the joint that you’re some daughter of mine who just happened to show up like Jesus in the manger.”
His eyes bored into Proxy’s, although his words were still meant for Francine. “It’s not fair to you either. You shouldn’t have to feed people’s curiosity about something that goes back before you were born.”

In the pause while he drew a deep breath, a single thing was on everyone’s minds in more ways than one, and that was hair. “Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do when customers get nosy about any resemblance,” he acknowledged the problem. “We’ll say Francine is my niece,” he appeared uncomfortable with that white lie, if that’s what color it was, but I could tell he was set in rock about this. “My sister’s kid that I’m breaking in on the job out of the goodness of my heart. People can think what they want, but that’s gonna be our story. Everybody got that?”

Wow, I couldn’t help thinking, what a bit.

Francine and Proxy looked at each other. Whatever passed between them, it was Francine who turned to Pop with the hint of a sassy grin. “If that’s the best you can do, Unk.”

“‘Tom’, he warned her.

By now Proxy was eyeing me, and I was instantly on my guard. There always was a little something in the way she looked at me, as if I was a cause for concern. “Some little man will have to watch his mouth real careful, won’t he.”

“Rusty knows what’s involved,” Pop stoutly took up for me, squeezing my shoulder as he spoke. “He won’t give the act away. Right, kiddo?”

I swallowed. “I’ll, uh, watch my mouth.”

That satisfied Proxy only so far. Now she was frowning in the direction of Del’s van. “Then what about carrot top? Where is he, playing with his machine?”

Pop indicated to English Creek, which was making that pretty sound of water dancing over rocks just beyond the yard. “I told him to go fishing while we worked this out. Don’t worry, I’ll clue him in as soon as he gets back. Delano
won’t be a problem.” He had more to say, and for once seemed to relish it. “That leaves you, Proxy. You’ll need to make yourself scarce during this--no hanging around the joint. There are people here who were at Fort Peck and would recognize you at the drop of a hat. We don’t want questions following you around, do we.”

Obviously Proxy had not thought of this, but she recovered quick as a cat. “I can live with that, I’ve got business elsewhere anyway.” There was something a little cloudy in the way she looked, though, as she glanced at Francine before turning back to Pop. “How about if I just slip by here”--she nodded toward the house--“once in a while to kind of check on things?”

“That might not hurt,” Pop conceded, “if ‘once in a while’ means what it’s supposed to.” He too was looking speculatively at Francine, busy plucking cottonwood fluffs out of her hair and dispatching them into the breeze. “I suppose we better get at this,” he said as much to himself as to her. “Rusty can show you the house, how about. Give her the bedroom next to yours, okay?” It wasn’t, but I nodded.

Pop turned to Proxy. “Before you hit the road,” he muttered, checking his watch, “come over to the joint with me. I need you to help me with the guy thinks he’s got a deal to buy it or I’ll never hear the end of it from him. You’re going to have to be Aunt Marge, whose darling daughter has to learn bartending if she’s ever going to amount to anything.”

“That shouldn’t strain me too much,” Proxy said with a perfectly straight face. The two of them started toward the Medicine Lodge, and the realization hit me.

“Pop, wait! I have to tell you something.”

He swung around, Proxy halting as well. “What is it, kiddo?”
My big gulp did not constitute an answer, but it told him that what I wanted
to say was for his ears only. Frowning, he came back and bent down so I could
whisper it.

"Zoe has to be let in on it. She'll know something is fishy about Francine."

"Cripes. I didn't think about her." He pondered for several moments
before whispering back: "She's gonna have to be your department. Hogtie her into
not telling anybody else about this, not anybody, right?"

"R-right."

Off he went with Proxy, leaving me with Francine as she dragged out of the
Cadillac's trunk a hefty suitcase and a kit bag about the size of an extra-large purse
which must have had her toiletries in it. How do women find time for all the
beautification involved, I wondered, although I was about to find out.

"I can take the ditty bag," I offered, but she said never mind, she was used
to being a beast of burden. While I was trying to decide if that was a joke, she
tossed her head to clear the hair out of her vision and said impatiently, "Lead on,
Jungle Jim."

Ordinarily I did not have trouble making conversation, but I didn't know
how to commence in this situation and Francine was no help until I showed her to
the bedroom next to mine. Looking it over, she said, "I've seen worse." Noticing
me stiffen more than I already was, she amended: "It's nice enough. This takes
some getting used to, is all."

I was with her on that, definitely. Moving around the room restlessly, she
ended up at the window that looked down on the driveway which had turned into a
parking lot with the Packard, the Gab Lab van, our Buick, and the Cadillac. She
asked over her shoulder "Who's 'carrot top' that the old folks were talking about?"

I had to blink past that characterization of Pop and Proxy before delineating
Del for her. I must have done a decent job because she folded her arms on her
chest and listened civilly enough. "Fine. Another one with Fort Peck on the
She stashed the kit bag in the corner by the dresser and flopped her
suitcase onto the bed, flipping it open to establish residency, I suppose.
Female undergarments brimmed into sight before I could hastily look away."
brain," she said, not a bad summary really, when I’d finished about Del. “It must be contagious.” She appraised me more openly than before, testing the matter of the two of us in a roundabout way. “Russell’, huh? Pretty distinguished. Where’d that come from?”

“I like ‘Rusty’ better,” I dodged.

“I know what you mean. What were they thinking when they fastened fancy names on us, anyway? I always think ‘Francine’ sounds like some dumb perfume.” She bobbed agreement with herself. “The shorter the better, ain’t it.” Sometimes you know when to take a shot in the dark. “Are you from Canada?”

That caught her by surprise. “Sharp ears. Raised there in a little place across the line, is all. While mumsy was off here, there, and everywhere doing her thing.” I was about to ask more when she swung back to the window, craning to see what she could of town, which was mostly the alley and the backs of the buildings on Main Street. Off in the distance past Igdrasil’s snowing branches, though, the cemetery knoll—the marble farm, as Pop always called it—showed up greener and prettier than anything else in sight because of the carefully watered grass.

“This is one of those towns, huh?” she sounded as if she had been sentenced to Gros Ventre. “Dead people get the view.”

“Maybe they need it more.”

That drew me a keen look. “Pretty good, fella. I’m glad brains run in the family.”

“Um, talking about family,” I must have thought nonstop gab constituted hospitality, “I bet you were plenty surprised to find out Pop is your father.”

“Better believe it, I was.” She gave her hair a flip and said carelessly: “Kind of a nice change, though. It beats having a Communist one.”
My jaw dropped. At the time, calling someone that was like saying the person was a mad-dog enemy of all things American. Scratch the surface of any decade and nostalgia flakes away in a hurry; the 1950s, which amounted to the full extent of my memory then, were a period when McCarthyism had people scared of Communists under their bed. More than once I had heard Pop and Bill Reinking when they were talking politics call the Red-hunting Wisconsin senator a blowhard and worse, but the duck-and-cover drill and a lot of other Cold War nervous twitches indicated the Communist threat was taken seriously by the higher-ups in government. Understandably, I blathered to make sure I heard right that Darius Duff, mudjack at Fort Peck, had been an actual living breathing Communist: "You mean like in Russia?"

“No, I guess not,” Francine treated that as though it did not make much difference one way or another. “From what I picked up from Mom and the relatives, Daddy Darius was his own kind.” For a moment, she looked more thoughtful than she had at any time yet. “As I get it, he figured the Russkies had it backwards. His big idea was that people on the bottom ought to run things. Didn’t impress wife Proxy any, she’d imitate him to me when she got wound up about him. ‘They couldn’t hardly do worse than the big bugs are doing at it, ay?’” she mimicked a Scotch accent as good as an actress, it sounded to me. “She’d always ask him how that was supposed to work,” Francine was going on in that same musing way. “He’d just tell her, ‘to be devised.'” Another flip of the hair, and that keen look at me. “Well, you know, not to stick up for the old devil or anything, but that’s pretty much life, ain’t it.”

Wait till Zoe heard all this.

Francine regarded me for a a moment as if making sure, and of course she was. “So he set out to remake the world and ended up in a truck in the river with the wrong woman. You heard all about that, I bet.”
“Uh-huh. Pop told me when you, um, came into the picture.”

“Fine. Takes care of that.” She stirred from where she’d been standing by window. “Know what, I better get unpacked.”

And I knew I had better depart before filmy undies and such came into further sight. But I was held by one matter yet. “Francine? Can I ask you something?”

“Try me.”

“We’re supposed to pretend to be--cousins, aren’t we?”

“How about that.” She glanced at me over the opened suitcase. “Nothing is ever simple, is it.”

“But we’re really--half-brother and half-sister?” I still was having trouble getting that relationship through my head. Maybe there was some other description of it that I was missing.

“Surprise, surprise, huh?” A sly little smile much like Proxy’s caught me off guard. “So, buddy, which half is your girl part?”

The only response I had to that was a flaming blush. Backing out of the room, I rattled out: “I’ll let you get moved in. Pop will be here when he gets done at the saloon.”

That’s when I raced to the Spot to fetch Zoe.

The discussion in the bar room, if voices raised to such a level can be called that, was reaching a climax when we slipped into the back and flung ourselves up the stairs to the landing. So much had been happening, I’d had time to tell Zoe only bits and pieces, particularly the juicy ones like the naked couple in the ill-fated truck, leading up to Proxy’s arrival in the Cadillac at Fort Peck.

Ears and eyes plastered to the vent, the two of us hungrily caught up with what was happening on the other side of the wall. Right away we could tell that
Earl Zane was not even touching the beer Pop had served up as a peace offering. Earl was having all he could handle in Proxy Duff.

"See, Tom got a little ahead of himself in putting the joint up for sale," she was explaining to him ever so nicely in a voice smooth as a purr. "This is what you might call a God clause, like in an insurance policy when an act of nature comes along and makes things go flooey. Tom just didn’t know how much the matter was going to change when my daughter and me expressed our interest in keeping the saloon in family hands." It really was quite an appealing story in her telling, that a young woman starting out on her own in life and who incidentally was Pop’s niece merely required a bit of experience in the art of bartending under the tutelage of the master himself, was that so much to ask? In conclusion, Proxy gave Earl a smile that I was learning to recognize as one with long practice behind it, probably all the way back to taxi dancing. "No reflection on you. These things happen."

Earl reacted as if the Medicine Lodge was being stolen right out of his pocket. His big red face looked like it would burst. "You can call it that claptrap if you want, lady," his protest would have reached the back room even if Zoe and I had not been glued to the vent, "but I say it’s backing out of a deal."

"Don’t get yourself on fire, Earl," Pop was heard from, sounding strained. Maybe on that dark drive home from Fort Peck with more history attached to him than even he had known, he was pulled in paradoxical directions the same as I was, and came out teetering away from giving up the Medicine Lodge quite yet. Maybe the stage was set by the sorcery of drama that enveloped two theater-struck twelve-year-olds that certain summer. In any case, Zoe and I were the breathless audience as my father spoke his lines like a man taking his medicine.

"What’s happened is, I need to hang onto the joint for a while and give the girl a chance. I’m sorry as hell you got your hopes up. My mistake, and I’ll make it up to you if you’re out any money on legal fees or whatever, okay?"
A cat will puff itself up when provoked. Earl did something like that now.

“What did they serve at that Fort Peck get-together, loco weed? Goddamn it, Tom, you already put off selling the place to me once, it’s getting to be a habit. A deal’s a deal, where I come from.”

“Del doesn’t know what he’s missing out on,” Zoe turned her head to whisper to me.

“Is there any ink on any sheet of paper”—this voice, calm and collected, level as a pistol, was Proxy’s—“that spells out what you’re calling a deal?”

“No,” Earl admitted, “but—”

“Have you put down any earnest money?”

“Well, no, Tom understands it’ll be along as soon as—”

“Then it hasn’t reached the deal stage, has it, it’s preliminary discussion, isn’t it. And we’ve just discussed the change of circumstances.”

“She’s got you there, Earl.”

“THAT’S ENOUGH OF THIS!” I might have considered that a cry from the heart if I wasn’t aware Earl, like his mouthy son, had a heart the size of a prune.

His eruption had Zoe and me bumping heads to watch this through the vent. The scene is indelible in me. Like always, Pop was behind the bar, but in the new order of things had not put his apron on. Across from him, Proxy leaned against the bar with veteran ease as she faced the wrath of Earl perfectly poker-faced. As for Earl, though, the slats of the vent sectioned him as if he might fly apart. His face had turned so furiously red it was a wonder his hat didn’t boil off. In the next slot down, his arms waved in the universal gesture of disgust. Below that, even his beer gut seemed agitated, barely contained by a rodeo belt buckle. “Tom,” he huffed, turning aside from Proxy as though that might make her vanish, “I’m gonna lay it to you, man to man.” Swelling up even more, he warned ominously: “I don’t like to have to do this, but you leave me no choice.”
"I couldn't begin to imagine the extent of the threat he was working himself up to—a lawsuit? a horsewhipping?—and an inch from me Zoe was equally frozen in apprehension.

"Until you come to your senses," we heard him tell Pop in the darkest of tones, "I'm going to take my patronage right down the street to the Pastime." Earl folded his arms magisterially. "See how you like that."

For the first time since the Mudjacks Reunion, Pop smiled, from ear to ear.

That was that, at least. With Earl Zane out of his hair as a Medicine Lodge customer, let alone as its imminent proprietor, Pop could turn to the Francine matter, and he and Proxy went out the front door of the saloon so she could see the Medicine Lodge in its full glory, with her doing all the talking as they headed around back to the house. Zoe and I stayed put, so I could catch her up, to the extent possible, on the situation that began with that Cadillac making its appearance. The tip of her tongue showed how hard she was concentrating to follow the twists and turns of my report, but in the end she grasped what counted.

"Rusty, you get to be an actor!" She meant, of course, maintaining the pretense to all and sundry that Francine was merely my cousin instead of my new sister. Not the hardest role ever, surely, yet it felt more than a little tricky.

"You're in on it, too. So do you."

Plainly the prospect did not displease her. "I suppose. How long will this Francine take to learn bartending?"

"That's just it, see." I voiced the uncertainty foremost on my mind.

"Maybe she's here for forever, if she's good at it."

A look came into Zoe's eyes I had not seen before. Careful to make the query sound careless, she asked: "Do you like her?"

"I can't tell yet. She's kind of different."
We fell silent. Empty but for us, the Medicine Lodge for once was quiet in both its halves, the back room that had costumed our imaginations so many times that summer and the bar room out front where the grownup world did its own performing. One and then the other, we gazed longingly at the vent that was our keyhole to that world, knowing our times of listening in secrecy had depended on Pop’s indulgence of us. Whatever else she proved to be, Francine did not seem to me the indulging type. What a rotten shame to lose our listening post just because she had arrived out of nowhere, I thought to myself, my mind stumbling this way and that until it hit on the obvious.

“Tell you what I’m gonna do, Muscles,” I resorted to my best gangster growl.

“What would that be, Ace?”

“This.” I reached over to where Pop’s spare apron was hanging and moved it to a peg where it concealed the vent.

“Real smart thinking, Ace,” Zoe ratified with a growl of her own.

By then it was time for Zoe to go to her cafe chores and I needed to catch up on developments at the house. Just as I got there, Proxy was making her farewells. Before getting into the big red car, she drilled Francine on the shoulder with a finger. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Lots of leeway there,” Francine joked, or maybe not.

“I’ll be back before you know it,” Proxy was saying as if anyone had asked, “to see how things are going. Have fun showing her the tricks of the trade, Tom.”

Pop responded with a sort of grunt amid tensely lighting a cigarette. Opening the door of the Cadillac, Proxy paused to consider me, as if deciding on
the right goodbye, and gave me a wicked wink that I would rather not have had. I
didn’t know why any attention from her got to me so much, but it made me feel like
I was a target in her sights. Then in a crush of gravel she was gone.

There was an awkward gap now as Francine and Pop considered each
other, as I supposed they were entitled to after twenty-one years of ignorance of
one another’s existence.

As that started to stretch too long, he roused himself and her and me as
well.

"Hey, no sense standing around like lawn ornaments, is there. Come on, I
better show you the joint. Not you, kiddo," he evidently decided Francine was
enough to deal with at the moment. "Hang on here and when Delano shows up, tell
him I want to see him right away, savvy?"

Of course I didn’t like being left out of things, but I thoroughly savvied that
Del had to be clued in quick on the niece make-believe. Pop, Francine, myself,
Zoe, Del; this was becoming a bit with quite a cast. I drifted to the house in a mood
new to me. Aware that so much was going to be different from here on, but not
knowing--not even knowing how to guess--what those changes would amount to.
It crossed my mind that tremendous unknowns of this nature must be why, when
people got married, the ceremony had to include those heart-grabbing words, for
better and for worse. The house at least was undisturbed, on the surface, when I
wandered in. The old place had not known a woman’s touch, except for Nola’s
feathery occasional housekeeping, since the year of my birth. Still, as if drawn to
the source as distinct as perfume in the air, I went upstairs again and gazed into the
bedroom that was now Francine’s. Her suitcase was open on the bed, with female
undies spilling out. A jacket with a beaded yoke had been tossed over the back of a
chair. From what I could see, the only thing that had been put away somewhere
was the whopping kit bag, but I figured she had to start somewhere. Housekeeping
did not seem to be her strong point any more than it was ours, so maybe that much of our habit pattern was safe. Yet disturbance of some sort was on its way, I couldn’t help but feel it coming almost like a change in the weather. It already felt strange to have someone else in the gallery of bedrooms that Pop and I had shared for the past half dozen years. There are some days in a person’s life, definitely not many, that mark themselves into memory almost from first minute to last. The one thing I knew for sure was that this Sunday was never going to leave me.

“Anyone home?” Del’s cheery hello downstairs snapped me to. “The angler returns in triumph!”

I was down there in a flash, bursting into the kitchen where he was emptying his creel of fish into the sink. “She’s here, over at the joint with Pop,” I reported all in one breath, “he wants to see you. Right away, he said.”

Still full of pride at his catch, Del grinned over his shoulder at me. “I don’t suppose you’d care to tell me what the hurry is?”

“Huh-uh, it’d take too long. I’ll start cleaning the fish.”

As he went out, I began gutting the batch of trout, nice rainbows of a good eating size and a goodly number of them. Fifteen was the legal limit. I counted twice, and Del’s catch was fourteen. That was odd, for someone fishing up a storm as he obviously had been, to be skunked on the last fish.

Del was back before I was half through dealing with fish guts. His cheerful look was gone. “Quite a change of script by your father, isn’t it. I guess he knows what he’s doing.” He scratched behind an ear. “Francine didn’t seem exactly friendly.”

“Maybe she just has to get used to us,” I tried to put the best face on things as he came over to the sink to pitch in on cleaning the rest of the fish. “How come you didn’t limit?” I was curious as he was finding a jackknife in the maze of pockets of his shirt.
“Hmm? Oh, the angels’ share.”

Of course my impulse was to launch into a bit by asking, “What the devil is that?” but he was already busy explaining as he slit a fish belly.

“My father heard it from FDR”—you never knew what dose of history you were in for, around Del—“when the brains trust and their top aides were called in to celebrate some part of the New Deal that had passed Congress. Eleanor happened to be on hand and she ran the White House staff by her own lights, so the drinks were poured pretty weak.” He slipped me a grin in acknowledgment of what Pop would have thought of that. “Anyway, Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” he of course made the middle name resound as if it was the main one, “takes a sip of his and holds the glass up to the light and says,” here came a good imitation of that famous Fireside Chat voice, “‘Gentlemen, we seem to be experiencing that phenomenon of evaporation called the angels’ share.’”

I laughed, but still didn’t see what that had to do with fish. Rubbing the side of his head with a sleeve to satisfy an itch mental or otherwise, Del went on: “It’s silly, I suppose, but that saying caught on in our family.” From being around Pop, I knew sayings were almost a second language, so I listened hard to add this one to the collection.

“Any time a sock went missing or we ran short of milk at breakfast,” Del recounted, “we’d say it was the angels getting theirs. My father and I turned it into a joke when we fished together. We’d never catch the absolute last fish to fill out our limit. Leave that one for you know who. I won’t say we were superstitious, but close enough.” A bit of a grin came back to him. “Families aren’t easy to figure out, maybe you’ve noticed.”

Was that ever the truth. Each lost in thought, we companionably thumbed guts out of split-open trout until Del rinsed a hand so he could scratch at a rib.

“Phew. That is one brushy creek,” he said in tribute to the hard-won trout. “There
were places I had to get down on my hands and knees to crawl in to where I could cast.”

“What’s all the scratching about?”

“Oh, nothing. I just keep finding some kind of ladybugs on me. There must have been quite a hatch.” He pulled up his trouser leg and rubbed his shin. He paused and peered at the back of his hand. “There’s another one.”

I looked with horror at the tiny dot crawling across his skin. “Don’t go anywhere. Let me get Pop.”

I raced across the alley and burst into the bar room. To my shock, there was Francine behind the bar by herself, already looking things over as if she owned the place, and Pop nowhere around. When I stammered out the question, she jerked her head toward the back of the bar room. “Said he needed to take a leak. What’s up?”

This was no time for good manners. I went and pounded on the toilet door and hollered:

“Del’s got ticks!”

“Damn, what next?” came the muffled reply, along with the sound of flushing. Pop was out of there in record speed and headed out the back of the saloon for the house, with me chasing after and Francine belatedly following us.

We got there as Del was finishing with the fish, in between scratching. He looked up in surprise at all of us piling into the kitchen. “Are ladybugs this much of an attraction?”

“Ladybugs, nothing,” Pop informed him grimly, “those are sage ticks. Quick, get upstairs to the bathroom. Stand in the bathtub and take all your clothes off.”

“All my--? Why--?”
"You don’t want them biting you, that’s why. Hurry up, so we can look you over.” Pop was already at the doorway and motioning urgently, standing flat against the wall so Del would not brush against him.

Francine hadn’t said a thing during any of this, simply backing away to the safety of the living room, but from the crimp in her brow she must have wondered if this was what life in our household was going to be like.

“Come on,” Pop surprised her as the others of us hustled up the stairs, “we need all the eyes we can get.”

That may have been so, but with Francine crowded into the bathroom with us, Del hesitated at jumping in the tub and stripping, until Pop said impatiently: “She’s not gonna see anything new in the human experience, get going.” I was directed to cram his clothes in the wastebasket as he shed them, for soaking. “It’s this tan getup of yours,” Pop shook his head as Del peeled off the shirt of many pockets. “Makes you the color of a deer. Ticks see that and think you’re their favorite food, venison.”

I watched and certainly Francine did while the naked Del, who had more to him than expected, stood shivering in the clammy tub as Pop started to examine him all over for unwelcome visitors.

“Francine, quit window shopping and go through his hair,” Pop snapped her out of her attention to the other part of his anatomy.

I will say, she was equal to the task, telling Del, “Close your eyes, chum, here I come,” as she straddled up to the bathtub.

Helplessly he ducked his head as she ran her fingers over his scalp. You would think a person with a crewcut did not offer much in the way of hiding places up there. Not so. “Ick, here’s one,” Francine exclaimed when she felt into the hair at the back of his neck. Pop told her to pick it off if it wasn’t dug in, and she gamely did so, squeezing past me to drop it in the toilet bowl. That was the
fate it deserved, as far as I was concerned. I hated ticks. That awful little goosy feeling on a section of skin as all those tiny legs kept the thing crawling slowly as if exploring every pore; a tick wasn’t like a mosquito, zeroing in and then gone, it kept on creeping for a prime spot to suck blood. What was worse, the things were dangerous even if you didn’t get Rocky Mountain spotted fever, which could kill you, a tick bite could hurt and itch for a long time. I silently cheered as Pop picked each one off Del’s body and flicked it in the toilet bowl. By now there were three or four dark little bodies floating there. Then I saw the worst thing possible.

“There’s one on his business end!”

Both men looked down as if afraid to, and Francine’s eyes widened. The tick was at the start of things there, having crept from the red pubic hair as if coming out of the brush to find a picnic spot on a knoll.

Pop backed away a step, grimacing. “They head for the softest parts of the body, the damn things like to bite there. Is it moving any?”

“I—I can’t tell,” Del said shakily, staring at his threatened part.

“Real careful now,” Pop advised in a hushed voice, “see if you scooch it off with your fingernail. If it’s bit into you, we’ll have to try something a whole lot worse.”

The other three of us held our breath as Del attempted to prod the insect just enough. Under his poking finger it seemed to move almost infinitesimally, and he took that as a sign to wildly bat it off at the cost of some pain to himself. Wincing, he studied the area with all due care. “I don’t see any bite.”

“Good,” Pop let out in an extended breath. “The rest of the family jewels okay?”

Gingerly Del felt around between his legs and reported, “Nothing there that doesn’t belong there. Whew.” We shared in his relief as he put his hands
under his arms, hugging himself against the chill of standing naked in the bathtub this long. Abruptly the relief left him. “Oops.”

“Let me see,” Pop groaned.

When Del lifted an arm for him to look, an ugly dark dot was there squarely in the middle of the armpit. I immediately felt queasy, and the tick wasn’t even on me. “This one bit you, sure enough,” Pop said, swearing suitably. “Full of blood.” Rapidly he told Del, “Sit on the edge of the tub,” and me, “Go get a coat hanger. Francine, there’s some kitchen matches in the medicine cabinet, hand me some.”

When I hustled back with the wire hanger, Pop mashed and twisted it, straightening the hook, until he had something holdable with a prong sticking out. He lit a match with his thumbnail, the sulphur smell curling Del’s nostrils and mine and Francine’s, and heated the end of the prong in the flame. “Lift your arm,” he told Del and directed Francine to get a good grip on it and hold it steady in case he flinched. “This is gonna be a little warm. I have to make the tick back itself out, so the head doesn’t break off in you.” It took exceedingly careful application of the hot wire onto the rump, if that’s what insects have, and a bunch more matches, but at last the gorged tick gave up and dropped into the bathtub. I didn’t have to be told to turn on both faucets full blast to swash the thing down the drain.

“How you feeling?” Pop checked with Del apprehensively.

“Not so good. It kind of burns.”

“Right. We need to get you to the doc. Where can Rusty find you some clothes in the van?”

Duly instructed, I thundered down the stairs while behind me Francine said she’d clear out too, not to be in the way in the way of medical progress.
Mere minutes later, as the two of us stood beneath the leafy sweep of Igdrasil watching Pop and Del speed away in the Buick, she had to admit: “This burg isn’t as dull as it looks.”

As Pop told it when they returned from the doctor’s office and a very pale Del had excused himself to take refuge in the Gab Lab, the tick-bite victim had been given some pills and a strong talking-to about the idiocy of crawling around on the ground during tick season and the prognosis that Rocky Mountain spotted fever could take as much as a couple of weeks to develop and there was nothing to do until then except to watch himself for strange rashes and fevers. “So he’s not going anywhere for a while,” Pop concluded, trying to settle himself down with a cigarette despite my frown at how many he’d already had since Francine stepped out of that Cadillac of Proxy’s into our existence.

“I hope that’s the excitement for the day,” he let out along with a blue zephyr of smoke. Squinting as if trying to make up his mind about something, he checked with Francine as she stood there with her hands parked in her ratty jeans and her bust testing the threadbare shirt. “Think you’re ready to learn some bartending?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she responded, probably truthfully enough.

When they made their entrance into the closed and deathly still Medicine Lodge--somehow there is an added dimension of silence in a saloon on a Sunday -- I trailed them into the bar room. Pop glanced over his shoulder at me, and before he could ask what I was hanging around for, I alibied: “I thought I’d, you know, sweep and mop and like that.”

Since I had done those swamping chores only the day before, after our return from Fort Peck, I could tell he was about to ask if I had left my mind out to
dry. Luckily for me, he caught on just in time that I was pining to be in on the session of educating Francine.

“Okay, maybe not too bad an idea,” he granted. “Just stay out of our way where we’re holding school.” In pretty much one motion he donned his apron and plucked up a fresh towel and gestured for her to come on behind the bar, and she did so, pushing her hair away from her eyes as if readying for business.

“You know anything about this at all?” Pop began as he swished the towel tenderly on the bar wood.

“Sure, I’ve been in joints before.”

“There’s a world of difference being on the other side there with your fanny on a stool,” he said evenly. “I should have asked before we started. Do you drink, yourself?”

“If you mean will I get tanked to the gills on the job,” she laughed that off, “no, I won’t. Give me credit for that many smarts”—that tiny pause—“Tom.”

“That’s only half the story. How about after work?”

She grinned saucily. “Maybe a little something before bedtime to settle down from this exciting town might be what the doctor ordered, huh?”

Uh oh. I knew she was awfully close to putting beans up her nose with that answer.

Pop scowled. “Francine, you can’t party and run a saloon. It’s like any other business. You’ve got to be real serious about it or you might as well pick out your room at the poorhouse before you even start.”

Sobered in more ways than one by his stern sermon, she bobbed her head.

“All right, I hear what you’re saying. I won’t drink the place dry either before or after, honest.”

“That’s better.” Pop led her down half the length of the bar to the beer spigot. “Here’s where we start.” He patted the draft handle. “The Shellac pump.”
"The which? Wait, I bet I know. The Select whizzy that made this joint famous."

"See, this isn’t so hard if you have half a brain. First thing is," he reached to the breakfront without looking and plucked a beer schooner, "you need to know how to fill a glass."

Francine didn’t say anything, not knowing whether that was a joke. Pop drew maybe the millionth beer of his career from the Shellac tap, and it sat there brimming to a head pretty as a picture. He conjured another shiny empty glass from the breakfront. "Give it a try."

With a little lift of her shoulders, Francine stepped up to the beer spigot as casually as if it was a kitchen sink faucet.

I dawdled as close as I dared to this, slowly sweeping nonexistent dirt, because what she was about to try amounted to nothing less than the bartending skill of hand that had made the Medicine Lodge the cherished oasis it was. For without a basic good glass of beer, properly drawn and presented, a saloon was merely a booze trough. And while I knew it was an illusion, all the eyes seemed to be watching her at this, every critter on the walls, for they were all of the male species, or at least had been. The horned ones, the deer and the antelope and the elk, with that antlered astonishment they carried into eternity. The lynx with the blaze in its eyes. The buffalo with its one-sided gaze like an old pirate. Even the Buck Fever Case in the Charlie Russell painting appeared to be scratching his head at the sight of a female behind the bar.

Francine gushed the glass full. It was all foam.

Swearing silently, she tried with another glass. This one overflowed, a lot of good Shellac flooding into the sink under the tap.

"Fine, I give," she muttered to Pop. "What’s the holy secret?"
“Draw it slow and easy with the glass tilted a little. Then let it sit until the head forms just right.”

She asked peevishly, “How long is that?”

“Hum Hmmm On The Range to yourself twice.”

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

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

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

“I get it. It’s like shuffleboard.”

“I wouldn’t know. I call it a slick touch you only get by learning it. Now you come back here and try. Rusty?”

Startled, I nearly dropped my idle broom. “Hop onto that stool like you’re the customer,” Pop directed, “so she can scoot the beer to you.”

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

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

“Whups,” she said as I rared back out of the way of sloshing beer.

Pop made her try again and again. A lot of Great Falls Select ended up on the bar until she found the knack, more or less.
“Okay, that’s that,” Pop allowed, sopping up the beer spillage. “Now for the hard stuff.”

Hearing this, Francine rolled her eyes as if anything harder would send her right back to Reno, newly discovered father or no newly discovered father, but I knew Pop only meant the liquor, all the brands crowding the shelves of the breakfront.

Running his eyes over the familiar bottles rank on rank, he thought about how to begin. “You know what a ditch is, don’t you?”

Francine appeared wary of a trick question. “I don’t suppose you mean like by the side of the road?”

“Around here, it’s a whiskey and water,” Pop said definitively. “So, first thing, you have to know what kind of ditch. If the customer just says, ‘Gimme a ditch,’ that’s plain bourbon and water, and you use the cheap stuff down here in the well,” he pointed out a bottle to her beneath the bar. “If it’s a lord ditch, that’s Lord Calvert,” he turned and put a hand to the higher quality whiskey on a shelf. “A rosy ditch, Four Roses,” he went on down the line, “a square bottle ditch, that’s Crown Royal. If it’s a scotch ditch”—he shook his head at the thought of this—“I don’t know why anybody would cut good stuff like that with water, but some guys do, so give them the Cutty.” He reeled off more lore of this sort until finally stopping to gauge Francine, who was looking a little dizzy. “You keeping all this straight?”

“Working on it like a ditchdigger,” she at least showed spunk.

“Good, because then there’s the mixed drinks.” He reached under the bar. “I dug out a drink book for you. Study up from it when you get a chance and keep it handy here.” He saw she was taken aback by the sizable volume. “Hey, don’t let it throw you. We don’t get much call for fancy concoctions in here.”
"Yeah, all right, good," she was drawing a deep breath. "You know what, though, there's something I've watched bartenders at and never understood how they do it."

"What's that?" Pop said easy as a wizard.

"Keeping track of who's had what kind of drink, in a whole bar full of people. If they want another, I mean. You probably don't want me asking customers every time, 'What's yours again?', huh?"

"I sure as hell don't." With a jerk of his head, he referred her to the breakfront. "Here where the glassware comes in. If it's a fruit drink, a Tom Collins or a gin and tonic, something with a cherry or slice of lime in it, you serve it in one of these tall skinny glasses. Any kind of highball, use these big tumblers. That kind of drinker wants something substantial in the hand. You can pretty much remember from the kind of glass sitting in front of the customer, see?"

"Fine," she looked somewhat relieved, although not a lot, "but what about a schooner's a schooner, beer? Those glasses are all the same, and not everybody drinks out of the same spigot, do they?"

"Easy. Watch the coasters." He produced a stack of them like a square deck of cards, each blazoned in red with WHEN YOU SELECT, IT'S A PLEASURE! "Hardly anybody ever uses them, but the brewery gives these out free for the advertising, so set one down with the first beer every time. If it's a Shellac, put the coaster face up. If it's one of the Milwaukees"--his term for Hamm's and Schlitz and Pabst and others wherever they were brewed--"turn up the blank side. That'll help you keep the beer straight, okay?" Boy, the things I had been seeing him do for years and never knew the secret of.

Francine was nodding her head, but confessing: "There's quite a bit to this job, ain't it."

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

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

She looked around the bar room for anything remotely resembling that. “The which? I don’t even see a jukebox in the place.”

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

Francine smirked at that, but didn’t say anything. Pop moved on to showing her the quirks of the ice machine. So it went, with him leading her through the entire bar room and its routines, dropping little secrets here and there. I was fascinated. It was like being backstage watching a great actor showing a novice how to perform. Eventually the lesson session veered into the back room to show her where the booze supplies were kept. I could not fully have said why, but I was
glad that the vent was hidden from sight, that it remained a secret Zoe and I, and of course Pop, shared. The hocked items along the walls intrigued Francine. She walked around the room a couple of times ogling it all. At last she turned to Pop and asked guardedly, “What if some guy wants to trade me something for, um, drinks?”

This he perhaps had not thought out ahead of time. The best he could come up with was to light a cigarette and wave the matter away with the smoke. “Leave that to me, for now.”

I trailed them back into the bar room as Pop was declaring that ought to be enough tutelage to start with. “Couple more things, though. The first one is what you might call the policy of the house.” He looked squarely at her. “No dating the customers. You get to going steady with some one guy and the others aren’t gonna like it.” He paused for emphasis. “So, no flirting, either direction across the bar, right?”

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

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

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

He held up his large capable hands to show her by example. “No fancy rings. Don’t paint up with nail polish either, now that I think of it. The customers shouldn’t be looking at anything but that nice glass of whatever you’re serving up, savvy?”
She was nervously fingering the fancy leather bracelet with the gem insets. “I don’t want to break any rules, but I’m really attached to this.”

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

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

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

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

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

She tucked the money in her jeans, that hint of a smile showing ever so slightly. “I haven’t even started and I’m already in the hole? Just kidding.”

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

With a swipe of her hand, Francine cleared the black mop of hair out of her vision. “It won’t be the first time.”
The next day came with Zoe and me hardly able to decide which subject to put our minds to first, Francine or Del. Since Pop was trooping her through the unglamorous side of bartending such as slitting open whiskey cases when we poked our heads in the back room, we opted for Del.

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

"It would astound the birds out of the trees," I replied in the stuffy Wildean tone of Travis of the Alamo.

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

Only silence answered.

Zoe and I were not prepared for this. We looked at each other in sudden fright. She was the one who said it out loud:

"What if he’s dying in there and can’t open the door?"

Why this overcame me so, I still can’t explain, but it seemed an awful fate to die in a VW van that Pop had likened to a sardine can. I panicked. If Del was breathing his last, there wasn’t time to run for help. The side door was locked when I tried it, and so was the passenger one.

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

In wrinkled fancy pajamas, grayfaced as a ghost, Del was sitting hunched over his tape recorder at the work table. He had headphones on, big as soup
bowls, and as we gaped, he would peer closely down at the recorder where there was a little counting instrument like the odometer on a car, jot down what the number was at that stage of the tape, then hit the recorder’s play and reverse and forward buttons like someone playing the piano one-handed. How someone with a crewcut managed to be tousled, I don’t know, but he looked like he’d been worked over with an eggbeater. Thinking back, it strikes me as like something out of Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape* with the reel whirring back and forth.

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

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

“Does it hurt like crazy,” Zoe asked in a hushed tone, “where the tick got you?”

“Not quite that bad,” he tried to seem sturdier than he looked.

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

“I can’t,” he moaned, looking even more haggard. “I’ll lose my grant! The powers that be will take the Gab Lab away from me. There’s a real push on to get the Missing Voices into the Library’s holdings, and if I’m laid up—” He let that awful thought dangle. “I can at least transcribe. See?” He whipped the headphones back on, screwed up his face in listening concentration, then typed in blurts, a foot pedal stopping the tape recorder as he caught up with the last phrase. Off came the headphones, as if what we had just witnessed was proof of mental if not physical competence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“London.”

“Jeez. I bet it costs something over there, huh?” During this Pop had come into the back room for something and wasn’t aware of the conversation out front, until I caught his eye and urgently pointed that direction. He emerged into the bar room as Velma ran a look up and down the younger woman and said, “Like they say, if you have to ask, you can’t afford it.”
"Hey," Pop called to Francine too late to ward off the frost attack, "give me a hand with the beer glasses here, would you?" I noticed as she retreated behind the bar, looking back at the booth where alimony envelopes were coolly being slit open, that the little dent between her eyes when irritated was a lot like Proxy’s.

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

Such thinking was interrupted as I saw him glance toward the door and stiffen at the sight of the next customers coming in. J.L. and Nan Hill were longtime friends of his and of the joint, but also old Fort Peck hands familiar with the Blue Eagle and its staff, if taxi dancers could be called that. The Hills steered their way to a booth as they always did because of J.L.’s shaking disease, while Pop in low tones instructed Francine in making a Pink Lady and drawing a beer into a mug with a handle large enough that J.L. could manage it without spilling.
Escorting Francine over with the drinks, Pop began a roundabout explanation of her presence. "I don't suppose you remember my having a sister, she wasn't really around Fort Peck so's you would notice." Boy, was he stretching the facts to fit the situation. He of course did have a sister, Aunt Marge, who had never been anywhere near Fort Peck. Now, though, the so-called white lie had to be applied. "Anyhow, this is my niece Francine--"

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

"--she's here getting an education in bartending."

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

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

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

"I can see the family resemblance--there's no mistaking that hair, surely."

With that, Francine passed all the examination any one person should have to undergo the first day on the job, and life in the Medicine Lodge settled to its true business, bartending. She did not badly, as Pop graded it, on through the rest of the afternoon and evening. The true test to come, of course, would be whether she could handle the saloon by herself. And life with Pop and me.
There is nothing like a new face behind the bar to either intrigue or shock a saloon’s patrons, and Francine’s presence in the Medicine Lodge very quickly drew attention far and wide. Word spread like grassfire among the Air Force missile-silo contingents and oilfield roughnecks and the like, that there was someone female, reasonably attractive, and lively now pouring drinks in the old joint, and they began to show up in droves. Saloons in the other towns must have dried up like puddles. And while her other bartending skills still were in the development stage, right from the start she could hold her own with the flyboys, sassily kidding them as ‘junior birdmen,’ and laugh enough but not too much at the rough jokes of the oilhands, and meanwhile fend off flirting from just about every local male in her age range, including prominent bachelors like Turk Turco and Joe Quigg, by tossing off “Sorry, no free samples of the merchandise” along with a little mocking smile that seemed to let them in on the joke. As Pop admitted one night soon in a doorway conversation with me when she was finishing the bartending shift by herself, “She’s got quite a mouth on her. But she maybe had to get one, to keep up with Proxy.”
On the other hand, a number of the Medicine Lodge’s longtime customers, such as Dode Withrow and other oldtimers from the ranches, including the shepherders, were less taken with her quick tongue and missed having Pop stationed behind the bar in his bedroom slippers listening manfully there swabbing the bar while he listened to their stories and let out “No bee ess?” as appropriate. No matter how attentive to them Francine tried to be, it wasn’t the same. And, more was the pity, Velma Simms no longer came in.

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

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

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

"Uh-huh," Doffhandedly handled her inquiry about Francine joining our
living arrangement. "She's kind of a surprise." A little late, I remembered about
watching my mouth. "I mean, we were never real close to that side of the family up
until now."

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

"Huh-uh. No. Nothing like that."

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

That was putting it mildly. "It takes some adjusting," I squeezed out
enough truth not have to go into our domestic situation further, and hurriedly
switched topics to how sorry I was to have missed her starring performance as
Lady Bracknell. "Zoe told me you were outstanding."

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

"Far out! Do you get to--" I crossed my eyes to the best of my ability.

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

We parted with her promise to enlist Zoe and myself when she needed to
learn her lines and my silent wish for clairvoyance to rub off on me.
The fact of the matter was that Francine was not like any relative--sister, cousin, something in between as a half-sister seemed to be--I could ever have thought up. Inevitably the presence of a woman in a house that had not known one since I was an infant meant some sharp detours in routines Pop and I had followed as habitually as monks. Particularly, she hogged the bathroom for so long each morning that I regularly had to go out behind Igdrasil to take a leak. "They're that way," Pop counseled me about that propensity of womankind. But he in turn could not conceal surprise at the habit of listening to wild music turned low on the radio in her room whenever she wasn't in the bathroom or downstairs with us or deep into her other passion, which I will come to directly.

Those quirks were the least of learning to live with Francine, however. She and Pop naturally had a ways to go in savvying each other's personality, given the peculiar circumstances of their kinship. The family situation aside, though, what lay between them, harder to cross, was the great generational equator dividing their worlds. Francine's lips started to twitch, I noticed, any time he got going on something from the old days of the Depression and the Blue Eagle era he and her mother had shared. Similarly, when she tendered the suggestion that the Medicine Lodge would be more up to date if it had a jukebox, he kissed it off by saying if people wanted music they could sing in church. At least in that respect, they were father and daughter as if handed scripts in pink covers, with me doing my best to ad-lib between the pair of them.

For more than one reason, then, what everyone had to concentrate on--myself included--was how she was doing in back of the bar, starting with the Two Medicine country's adventurous clientele to be dealt with and ending with the long, long hours a bartender must put in. Pop anxiously warned her about all the time she would have on her hands when business was quiet in the afternoons or spells of the evening, but here is where the unexpected passion kicked in. "Nothing to it,"
she said carelessly, “I’ll do crosswords.” For someone as rough around the edges as she sometimes could be, this seemed about as likely as if she had declared a hobby of crocheting doilies, but people are full of surprises. Sure enough, first thing every day she would glom onto the crossword in the Great Falls Tribune, and when that was not enough, she would pick up a monthly puzzle pulp that the drugstore stocked along with Ranch Romances and Amazing Detective Stories and the like. So, when customers were on hand, she was conscientiously on the job, trying to remember to do the little things Pop always did, wiping the bar when it didn’t really need it and washing glasses that were already washed while making conversation about the weather if need be, but the moment the place was empty, she was right back at her spot in the amen corner puzzling over six across and five down and so on.

This complicated matters in regards to the vent, because I’d be there at the desk on the landing idly waiting for Zoe to put in her appearance and all of a sudden would glance through the slats and have to scramble to cover it with the rainslicker when Francine frowned a certain way and started toward the back room with folded newspaper and pencil in hand.

“Hey, Rusty, help me out here,” she would poke her head through the doorway and call. “What’s a six-letter word for a doctored sheep?”

“Wether.”

“Thanks, pal, you’re golden.”

Things might have gone on that way, she in her hemisphere and me in my own and mostly thin air between, if the night hadn’t come when she joined Zoe and me for supper. Until then she had been eating early with Pop so they could work the shift in the joint on through the evening together, and also to the point, he could keep on introducing her to all and sundry as his niece. This time he was busy with a beer delivery and sent her on ahead to the Top Spot. Almost as a
person can sense a change in the weather, I sensed something in the air when she came in alone and Zoe lit up at the sight of her passing up the counter to come in our direction.

“Room for one more?” she asked as if Zoe wasn’t openly dying of curiosity about her, and sat down with us at the back table already wearing her bartending bowtie and crisp white blouse. She dubiously scanned my usual ‘shake and cheeseburger and then Zoe’s barely touched plate of the day’s special.

“Liver and onions, ain’t it. That’ll put hair on your chest.” She flapped open a menu for any alternative. “What do they serve here that doesn’t come with ptomaine?” We giggled a little nervously at this frank approach to Top Spot cuisine.

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

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

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

That roused my curiosity. “They have that in school in Canada?”
“I don’t know about all of Canada,” she qualified that, still intent on the menu, “but they’re big on it in juvie.”

Zoe and I about fell into our food.

We looked at each other to make sure we had heard right, and we had. Juvie meant only one thing, in Canadian or American or any other language. A juvenile offender correction facility. Alcatraz for teenagers.

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

Depend on Zoe, she came right out with it. “How big a crime was it?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What did Proxy say when you got caught?”

“She wasn’t around to say anything. Hardly ever was.” This was given out carelessly, as if a missing mother was of no concern. “See, my father’s”—she checked herself and flashed me a quick look—“my previous father’s relatives were raising me. Uncle Hugh and Aunt Meg. They’d been at Fort Peck, along with all the other Duffs. It must have been some crowd, four or five couples of them, Darius as Red as a Scotch rainbow, and you don’t even want to guess what any of the rest of them were up to.” She brushed a hand through her hair as though that family line was making it stand on end. Just from Proxy, I could sympathize that far. “Why they went across the border,” she was back to the aunt and uncle who raised her, “and found a farm just outside the deadest little burg in all of Canada, who knows. If there’d been anything to do besides watch wheat grow, maybe I wouldn’t have swiped that car.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Huh? Oh, sure.” How the question popped out of me right then, I don’t know, but when better? “What does your--what does Proxy do for a living?”

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

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

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

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

My stomach kept turning inside out during the rest of that meal. Even yet it
stupefies me, how someone who was a plausible stand-in for nice Natalie Wood
could have a mouth on her like an open fire hydrant, but that was Francine for you.
Her offhand gossiping about herself had left me in what Pop would have called a
picklish dilemma. Was it up to me to tell him his long-lost daughter had a criminal
past, at least of the juvenile sort? Would that make me a snitch against my own
flesh and blood? What if I did tell him and he took it wrong, thinking I was doing
it because I resented her arrival into the family? Would I only be making trouble,
and be blamed for bringing up something bothersome from the past? When you go
through a gate, close it behind you, remember.

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

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

“Yeah.”
"--but you don't want him out of it about what she did to land herself in juvie."

"No."
We deliberated silently on the matter.

"Maybe she'll take care of it," Zoe came up with at last.

"Who, Proxy? Fat chance. She hasn't said boo about it so far, so why would she--"

"No, no, not her. Francine, I mean. She about talks her face off, doesn't she? So she might blab it herself to your dad, like she did with us, sooner or later."
I seized on that, particularly the 'later' part.

"Good thinking, Muscles. Maybe I'll wait and see what happens."

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

“Yeah.”
"Guess what Bill Reinking had on his mind today."

Looking deeply thoughtful, Pop was at his desk on the landing, a rainy afternoon when I came back from going to the post office.
“Don’t keep me in suspenders, Pop,” I joked as I trotted up the stairs, still clutching the mail under my slicker to keep it dry until I handed it to him, bills mostly, and went to hang up the dripping coat. At least I hoped I was joking, for the most average thing seemed suspenseful since Francine came onto the scene. I was pretty sure she hadn’t told him about her juvenile detention past yet, if she was ever going to, and the Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner generally had more serious matters on its mind than who had stolen a car in Canada way back then, so there was a good chance this wasn’t that.

What was it, though, that had him sitting there as if waiting to explore the human condition with me? I could tell just from listening that the vent was safely closed, he had not said anything about keeping it a secret from our newcomer in the bar room, but I had the impression he didn’t at all mind it happening that way for the time being. Right now he looked more than ever like the master of all he surveyed, having a cigarette in the casual manner that suggested this one didn’t count toward quitting smoking, gazing around the back room as if collecting his thoughts from the loot assortment. If he didn’t have the world by the tail, he was giving a good imitation of it lately. Francine was catching on as bartender well enough to be off his conscience, at least mostly, and business was up with all those flyboys and roughnecks piling in. Across at the house--surprisingly, given his record with my mother--he was proving capable of superhuman patience toward female habits, even the bathroom sieges. He had spare time now to help Del with mudjacks lingo, the Fort Peck reunion evidently a rosier experience to look back on than when he’d had to face it. ‘You want to know the truth, kiddo, I kind of get a kick out of listening to the old bee essers,’ he’d confided after one such Gab Lab session. ‘You put on those headphones of his and it shuts out the world, you’re right there practically touching the person who’s talking. I can see why Delano is so crazy about what he’s doing.’ So, I was not able to pick out any imminent
disturbance of the peace in my father's universe at the moment, and had to let him take his sweet time in telling me what was on the mind of the *Gleaner* editor.

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

He seemed to be enjoying the story of this, so maybe it wasn’t anything dire, for a change. I shook my head vigorously to encourage him past this guesswork part.

“His president of the Chamber of Commerce, you know,” news to me. Pop paused for effect, but couldn’t hold it in for long. “He asked me to honcho the derby this year.”

This was quite something, all right. While other towns marked the close of summer with harvest festivals and homesteader days and rodeos and such, Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country had simply decided: let’s catch all the fish we can. The derby had grown much bigger and more famous across the half dozen years since my ill-fated introduction to it. Which was why the best I could come up with at the idea of Pop, chicken-gut fisherman that he was, in charge of the annual rod-and-reel extravaganza at Rainbow Reservoir was: “No bee ess?”

He started to correct my language, but then laughed a little sheepishly. “I must be getting a reputation as a gentleman of leisure now, you suppose?” His expression sobered. “I don’t know, though. Being in charge of something like that is awfully damn civic. I’m not sure I have it in me.”

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

Quickly I worked up enthusiasm. “Sure you have. He’s just asking you to boss a bunch of people for their own good, isn’t that what ‘civic’ means?”

“I told Bill I’d think it over.” He glanced at me as if making sure. “You really figure I could do okay at it, kiddo?”

“Right up your alley,” I vouched.

“Okay, we’ll see,” he said, and for once it did not sound as if it meant maybe.

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

Thrown as I was by her appearance, I mechanically did the polite thing.

“Morning. Want some tomato soup?”

“Not hardly.” Instead, she prowled around opening cabinets and drawers, making a face at what she didn’t find. “Don’t you have anything edible in the place, like corn flakes? Oatmeal? Raisins, even?”

“Huh uh. There’s some old bread we haven’t thrown to the magpies yet. You could maybe make toast.”
“I’ll settle for some joe, thanks just the same.” She prepared the coffee pot and stuck it on the stove while I poured my breakfast into a soup bowl and sat down to it, still uncertain how to treat this change in routine. Joining me at the table while waiting for the coffee to perk, she seemed to have something on her mind. Whatever that was, it didn’t seem right to me for the only sound in the room to be my slurping up soup. I asked:

“Sleep well?”

“Fine.” This was said, though, with a yawn she stifled with her sleeve, the leather bracelet sliding a little on her wrist. Rare sunshine was flooding in through the kitchen window, not a cloud anywhere beyond Igdrasil’s leafy outline, the old Packard and Del’s van sparkling with dewdrops in the morning light. Francine asked as if just reminded:

“How’s College Boy doing?”

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

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

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

Back in her thinking mode, she traced a roundabout pattern on the oilcloth with her thumbnail. “Rusty? Want to know something?”

I kept at my soup. In my experience, when someone said that, they were going to provide the something, whether or not that’s what you wanted.

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

Just like that? Was she kidding? Could a person do that?
She sat there for a little while not saying anything, which was unlike her. After enough gabby suppers in the cafe Zoe and I were used to her going on at length to the effect that it didn’t matter who won the forthcoming presidential election because we were all going to get blown up anyway when Russia and the flyboys cut loose with the missiles out in those siloes, and other extended observations that did not help one’s appetite. Yet you couldn’t really write her off, we kept finding to our fascination, even when she was telling us we’d all end up in incinerated fallout shelters and eating tubes of toothpaste to live on. Even at her worst Francine made you think, and that’s worth something in a person. I had made up my mind to like this surprise member of the family if I possibly could, and in a number of ways already did—her sassy view of the grownup world, and that breathtaking habit she had of confiding startling things about herself—but there still was some distance to be covered. While I was being as brotherly as I knew how, it did not always work out as I thought it should. For one thing, Pop in recent nights was letting his bartending protege close up the saloon—“she needs the practice, shutting up of any kind,” he said humorously enough about Francine’s shotgun style of conversation; little did he know—while he turned in not long after I did, still reading those mystery novels with the perpetually endangered blonde on the cover, and I conscientiously tried to adjust to the new nightly routine. He had sworn to me that in cutting down on cigarettes he had given up smoking in bed, but I doubted it. I would go to the bathroom early and often and sniff at his door to make sure nothing was burning, then listen for the heavy breathing that meant he was safely asleep. After that I would doze off, but I always heard Francine come in. The first few nights, as she passed the open door of my bedroom, I sat up and called out, friendly as could be, the way I always did with Pop:

“How’d it go tonight?”
“Fine,” she tossed behind her as she whizzed by, and that was that.

I realize now that not only did Francine and I not start off on the same page of the book of siblings, we were not even in the same edition. Throughout life you meet people from the past, as natural as anything; but meeting someone from the future is far, far different. Even I did not have nearly enough imagination to fantasize any of what the decade ahead would bring, the Vietnam war and its protests, the sprouting of communes, the shifts in music that left Elvis in the dust, the whole youth revolt fueled by political assassinations, cities burning in racial rage, the close brush with annihilation in the Cuban missile crisis, and the other national traumas that seemed to come year by year in the 1960’s. A time with that much to rebel against perhaps was bound to produce the flowering of a generation of Francines, restless and brainier than they knew what to do with and all too often as zany as they were brainy. Perspective is always hard, and a stretch in juvie colored the matter of my problematic half-sister even more; Francine and her troubled mouth and defiant hair may have been a hint accidentally provided by history, but that larger picture was not easy to read past commotions of the moment. All I knew, those summer days and nights of that first year of the decade to come, was that life had sharply changed course with her arrival, and I was scrambling to keep up.

As now, when she sat there tracing a roundabout pattern on the oilcloth with her thumbnail before giving me a sudden grin. “Rusty? Want to know something?
“Oh?” I stammered in surprise, wondering if I ought to get Pop up to hear this. “You mean, from Duff to--ours?”

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

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

“France.”

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

“Sure. Sound good to you?”

“It’s, um, real pretty.”

“Short, neat,” she said in satisfaction. “‘France.’ That’ll do it.” She grinned at me over her coffee cup. “The boys in the joint are gonna have something to get used to, huh?”

So were the rest of us, starting with Pop. When he arrived on the scene somewhat later for a wake-up jolt of coffee, his initial reaction was predictable--“Like the country?”--but shortly he sighed and said he supposed her name was her own business.

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

Proxy was another matter. Put it simply, she spooked me whenever she showed up.
Not far into the evolution of Francine into France and the reaction in the saloon, Zoe and I were on our way back from supper, chattering a mile a minute as usual, when we saw the red Cadillac parked in the alley behind the saloon. Leaning against a fender while contemplatively smoking a cigarette was the unmistakable blonde shapely figure that was Proxy, and we needed to do some quick thinking.

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

"--through the vent, right," she tallied in a similar rushed whisper.

"--but she's never seen you--"

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

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

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

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

You really knew you had been looked at when Proxy gave you the once-over, with that suggestive gaze and tuck of a smile at a corner of her mouth. She studied Zoe as I made the introduction, Zoe giving back as good as she got, then her attention was all on me.

"Is Tom around, sonny? He's not at the house, and I didn't want to barge into the joint and upset things."

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

"Oh-kay," Proxy said, grinding out her cigarette with a practiced foot, "we can inspect the scenery until he gets here. So, Russ. How's that daughter of mine doing at slinging drinks, does he say?"
I was not going to be drawn into any discussion of that. “Pop will want to
tell you himself, I don’t want to spoil it.”

“I’ll just have to wait for the report from headquarters then, won’t I,” she
sounded mildly amused. She studied me the intent way that made me
uncomfortable. “You getting along okay with Francine, I hope?” She included Zoe
with a half-wink that said any of this was just between us.

“Sure,” we chorused. It was Zoe who turned this conversation on its head.
“She’s changed her name, that’s a little hard to keep up with, but we’re getting
pretty much used to it.”

“She’s done what?”

“Didn’t you know?” I couldn’t resist. “She goes by ‘France’ now.”

“Is that all.” Proxy nonetheless looked a bit bothered by the news,
resorting to another cigarette. She smoked the same unregenerate brand of coffin
nails as my father did, no Kools or Salems for her. “‘France’, huh? Isn’t that
something. Shows she has a mind of her own,” she said as though that was a
novelty.

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

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

But we did! We had learned all manner of things theatrical from Cloyce
Reinking. Bursting with curiosity, we demanded to know what classic of drama
Proxy was attached to.
“Naw, not a play,” she brushed aside a mere stage role. “A movie they’re shooting in Reno and the desert there.”

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

“Marilyn Monroe, natch.”

Zoe and I fell silent. This couldn’t possibly be true. Could it? Meanwhile she was telling us she didn’t know why anybody would think it would make a good movie because it was about catching wild horses, but Clark Gable was in it too, “and a bunch of others.” It sounded very much like what a person might pick up from reading a Reno newspaper.

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

“--really like?” Zoe finished.

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

Zoe barely beat me to the next question, “How’d you get a job like that?”

Proxy shrugged as if there was nothing to it. “I’m in Harrah’s one night, just seeing what’s going on, and I reach out and give one of the slot machines a yank as I go by. ‘Why’d you do that, doll?’ a guy behind me asks. ‘This machine loves me,’ I tell him. He laughs and says, ‘Wait a minute, stand over here in the light, would you?’ He turns out to be the movie director on his way to the blackjack table.” She shrugged again. “Long and short of it is, he tells me they need somebody awfully blonde for a stand-in and how about me, so I said why not?” She laughed in a dry way. “You watch, I bet they swipe my line about the slot machine. Those movie people.”

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

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

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

“I’m not holding my breath. Things happen when they happen, buttercup.” Proxy was growing restless about waiting around in the open and glanced at me. “What do you suppose is keeping your dad?” I shrugged and should have quit with that, but instead did something I could have kicked myself for, afterward.

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

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

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

“This is some bunch of stuff,” she marveled, looking every which way. “Kind of like money in the bank, huh?”
I mumbled an explanation about drinkers sometimes running short of money, avoiding any mention of Pop selling off the loot, as I wished he wouldn't call it, on those trips of his.

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

Zoe had been darting fearful glances at the slicker covering the vent, but when Proxy's back was turned I silently mouthed "It's okay, it's closed," and she relaxed into the natural role of tour guide. With her showing off the variety of items from hats to crowbars, Proxy was unexpectedly interested in it all, like a shopper turned loose in a shut department store. I hung back a little, staying out of the way, until they came to the knickknack shelf where the moose tooth watch, treasured for our forays to Cloyce Reinking's theatrical world, should have been. "Rusty, where'd you put it?" Zoe asked, dismayed at not being able to show off.

"I haven't had it. Pop must have moved it." I doubted that the timepiece and fob a Benevolent and Protective Moose wore on his belly counted for much with Proxy anyway, taking inventory of whole walls at a time as she was.

"What's this, a gospel meeting?"

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

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

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