“So?” Proxy arched an eyebrow. “How’s she shaping up behind the bar?”

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

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

“Let’s don’t get into that can of worms.” He turned away to where his apron was hanging on its usual hook by the landing. “I know you want to visit with Francine--I mean, France. Cripes, why couldn’t you give her a name that can’t be fiddled with?” Zoe’s eyes sparkled at that. “I’ll take over out front,” he tied the apron on, “and send her--”

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

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

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

“That happens some Why, you in the market for a saddle for the Caddie?” Proxy didn’t crack a smile. “I was just thinking of someplace where they buy all sorts of stuff, and there must be a junior fortune here if it was handled right.” Clearly she thought she was talking over the heads of Zoe and myself,
which showed she didn’t know our heads. We put on disinterested faces, idly spinning the rowels of the rank of spurs while listening with all our might.

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

“Canada, silly.”

My insides lurched.

“The railroad district in Medicine Hat,” she specified. “Come on, Tom, you know what I’m talking about. Remember what a handy place it was for us, back when?” The kind of slick knowing smile I didn’t want to see accompanied that. “Still could be, I bet,” she sailed right on. “I’ve been back to the district now and then since, doing business, and you’d be surprised at what they can come up with when they like what they see.” I suppose she did not actually bat her eyes, but she might as well have. Francine’s words from that first day thrummed in me: ‘While mumsy was off here, there, and everywhere doing her thing.’ Proxy’s general type of thing already had involved Pop with a surprise daughter; now it was threatening to set him off again on those trips I hated so much. Catching my distress, Zoe nibbled her lip anxiously.

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

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

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

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

“If that’s so, Marilyn Monroe had better watch out she doesn’t end up as a stand-in for Proxy,” he said with a laugh. Actually taking a break for a minute from the tape recorder and typewriter, he yawned and stretched in the Gab Lab chair. “By the way, how’s ‘Uncle Tom’s Niece’ playing to the audience at large?”

This was different; he hadn’t brought up Francine to us before, still embarrassed over the tick on the business end and the rest of that naked episode, we figured.

Zoe looked at me meaningfully, and I had to nod in surrender; I’d had the privilege of dropping the news on Proxy, this was purely her turn.

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

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

With no further prompting, Zoe delved into Francine becoming France, with me furnishing the crucial detail she’d always thought Proxy had burdened her with a name that sounded like a constipated saint.
“Yeah, but,” Zoe was struck with a thought that nobody else saw coming, "that was his middle name, though. President Roosevelt’s, I mean. So you got off pretty easy, people usually have dumb middle names. What’s yours?”

“Oh, nothing worth mentioning. Now, if you don’t mind--"

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

“Sure. You first.”

“‘Theodosia.’ It’s Greek.”

“‘Thomas,’” I owned up to. “Like Pop.”

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

“I bet it’s something like ‘Sylvester,’ isn’t it,” Zoe persisted. “Or ‘Algernon.’ Or--”

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

“It’s ‘Delano.’”

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

“For your edification,” he was admitting to none too willingly, “the whole thing is ‘Philip Delano Robertson’. My father thought if you speak it fast, it sounds kind of like--well, you know.”

I did not even have to say anything, just kept staring at him.

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

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

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

“What, call herself after a country?”

“No, change her name to the extent she is. Amending it, let’s say, the way I’m doing with ‘Delano.’ History is full of examples,” he said as if that was justification enough, “people did it all the time when they came to this part of the West, famously so. Alan Lomax even found a song about it.” Del cleared his throat, necessarily or not, and twanged out:

“Oh, what was your name in the States?
Was it Jackson or Johnson or Bates?
Maybe Gaitskill or Gaither or Gates?
Oh, what was your name in the States?”

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

Right then we should have seen what was coming, shouldn’t we.
The very next day, another rainy one keeping us inside at the back-room
desk, Zoe and I were settling in over the Flying Fortress that still lacked a tail, what
with all else that had been taking up our time. Out front, the saloon had just opened
and was still empty, with only the distant clink of glassware as France--it took
some getting used to, but we were regularly calling her that now--fussed with
chores behind the bar. Zoe was ritually checking the vent, which we were about to
close so we could jabber all we wanted while we worked on the tail.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mm hmm. Well, that’s always good.”
Tailfin abandoned one more time, the two of us at the vent watched in suspense while she rubbed the bar with her towel and he stood there like a telephone pole.

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

“Fine. What’ll it be?”

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

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

Matters now had reached a pivotal point of bartending ethic, whether to withdraw to a respectful distance and let the drink be imbibed in solitary pleasure, or to stay in the immediate vicinity doing some little thing and provide small talk and a listening ear if wanted. Pop always knew in a flash which to do. Looking less than certain, France glanced to the amen corner and the crossword puzzle waiting there in the day’s Tribune, but then began drying the same beer glasses she’d dried five minutes before. “You’ve really been holed up working, huh?” she made conversation. “How’s it going?”

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

“Then what? You moving on?”

“I’m afraid so.” He did the bit with his chin jacked down on his voicebox again. “Back on the trail of the Missing Voices.”

Zoe and I heard this with a pang, while France reacted decisively.
“So I better ask now, it sounds like.” She swabbed along the bar toward him, trying to sound casual. “You come across Tom and my mom much? In what people were saying?”

Del took his time about answering.

“If you mean the two of them together, no, not at all. The, ah, taxi dancers are talked about some, but not especially by name. But Tom,” he shook his head in gratitude. “Tom shows up all the time in what people remember. He’s absolutely one of those people history can’t get enough of.” Chuckling in tribute, he finished: “To hear the mudjacks tell it, you’d think the Blue Eagle was everyone’s second home.”

“I know, I know, kind of like this joint. Proxy’s practically brained me about that.” France creased her brow as if something more had just now occurred to her, although we all knew better. “What do people say about the other person? You know who I mean.”

“Darius Duff?” Del handled the name with care. “If you’re wondering whether he’s remembered as a far-out radical--Tom’s told me he could sound like one with a few drinks in him--I didn’t pick up the least mention of that. He must have kept his politics well hidden on the job. The mudjacks only recall him as a terrific boatwright, on the bargework and so on. It seems he helped build the Queen Mary, back on the River Clyde.” His beer glass received thoughtful attention while he phrased the next. “As to the truck in the river and the circumstances, yes, that’s told over and over in the interviews. People can’t get away from the mystery. That’s human nature, don’t you think?”

“I suppose.” France had been listening so keenly the pair of us at the vent weren’t moving a muscle lest she hear some twitch out of us, and we gratefully relaxed as she came out of the trance to ring up Del’s drink and make change, saying over her shoulder: “He must have been some character.”
“Evidently.”

“Yeah, well. It takes all kinds, huh?” She delivered the change and began to move off down the bar. Del wrenched around on his stool in that direction.

“Ah, France--I was wondering, I mean I wanted to ask, have you had a chance to see any of the country around here? Glacier Park, for instance?”

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

Del managed to sound bashful and eager at the same time. “What would you think about driving up with me on Sunday? It’s only a few hours from here.”

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

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

Even from the length of the bar room away, we could see Del’s ears redden.

“No buggy stuff, scout’s honor.”

“Oh okay. Sunday’s it.”

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

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

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

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

Wait till I told Zoe about this development.

By now Charlie Hooper at the Odeon ticket window must have thought Zoe was tubercular, but in any case, with a few of her tragic coughs the crying room was ours at the show the next night and we could spend some time resting our brains from trying to keep up with the grownup world. Certainly the movie would have been worth seeing. We were in one of those jaundiced moods that kids catch from each other. The summer was passing almost faster than we could keep up with, and we had the haunting sense that our shared education would end when school started.
not wear us out with thinking. *G.I. Blues* starring Elvis Presley, with the rest of a cast that no one had ever heard of, deservedly. Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde had nothing to fear from the plot—tanks roared across the screen crushing small trees and blowing things up in the opening scene, but this merely served to establish that Elvis was one of a happy-go-lucky bunch of peacetime American soldiers stationed someplace in sunny West Germany where there didn’t seem to have been a lick of damage done by World War Two.

Zoe and I watched in silence except for the sound of Neccos in mouths as the soldiers made a bet that their leading seducer could not conquer the town’s standoffish nightclub dancer into a one-night stand. Presto, and the seducer was transferred to Alaska and Elvis had to fill in for him, as well as sing every five minutes, and it took no great guessing where this was headed. Elvis, slender in those days and with a flattop haircut so unmilitarily high that from a distance it looked like the eraser on a pencil, had just wiggled through the title song when Zoe murmured:

“You’re real worried, aren’t you.”

“About what?”

“Francine. France. Whoever she is today.”

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

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

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

“Right. I forgot her.”
I wished I could. Why did she call me ‘Russ’ and ‘sonny’ all the time, with that disturbing smile of hers, as if only the two of us were in on some kind of secret?

Zoe must have thought now was the time I could use some cheering up. “Got a present for you,” she said, the dark of the confined room adding to the mischief in her voice. “Cross your eyes and hold out your hand.”

We always obeyed each other on something like this, so I laughed and did. To be surprised at holding something heavy and cold and familiar. The moose tooth watch, I could tell without looking. “Hey, good. Where’d you find it?”

“It was back on the knickknack shelf. I saw it there this afternoon and borrowed it for this. Your dad must have put it back.”

“Huh.” I pocketed the hefty old showpiece watch. “Either that or it’s sprouted legs.”

“Wings, Algernon. Time flies, you must know.”

“That is too funny for human consumption, Cecily.”

Laughing ourselves out, we went back to watching the movie, actually finding a bit of wit in it when Elvis told someone, “Don’t get shook up.” But then it was time for him to sing again, this time in a rathskeller, and some bored soul among the troops and frauleins restlessly approached the jukebox.

“Guess what, the guy is punching an Elvis Presley song.”

“That’s downright strange,” Zoe did a deep voice.

“Funny as a crutch,” I did another.

On the screen, the jukebox blaring “Blue Suede Shoes” broke up Elvis’s onstage singing, so soldiers started slugging one another. Seasoned critics of this sort of thing by now, we agreed the fight scene in the rathskeller did not stack up well against the one in *The Alamo* cantina; not enough bodies were flying through
the air and breaking up furniture. Peace was quickly restored and the storyline went back to the bet about a one-night stand.

“How could they ever get married, anyway?” I thought out loud during this break in the action. “France and Del, I mean. She calls him ‘College Boy’ behind his back all the time.”

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

“Oh, sure, can’t you just hear her? ‘My little chicken dumpling, please pass the butter.’”

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

“Far out. What does he call her?”

“Nothing.”

By now Juliet Prowse was fully in the story, as the nightclub dancer whose routine was mostly twirling in circles when she wasn’t doing the splits. She was leggy and toothy, and didn’t sound German or even French to our discerning ears.

“What kind of accent do you call that?” one of us wondered.

“Goulash,” the other readily volunteered.

“Oh, from der old country?”

“Yah. Where der woods are full of woofs.”

“Woofs like dog bow-wows?”

“Don’t be a silly. Woofs like eat grandmas.”

“Hoo, _those_ woofs. She maybe wants Elvis to go woof-hunting with his tank, you t’ink?”

“He better learn to talk goulash if he wants to make woo-woo with her, is what I t’ink.”
Things worked out, as they do in movies. Elvis was pressed into babysitting for a G.I. buddy, the baby began squalling—"Just think, if they had crying rooms in Germany, the movie would have to end right there," I pointed out—and in a panic he called Juliet, who being a woman knew to coo over the baby and give it a bottle and these ministrations somehow took all night, so Elvis won the bet. Sure, after that there was a misunderstanding and a spat, but reconciliation in time for Elvis to sing the last song with Juliet practically turning to butter as she listened. "Uff courze I marry you," she said before he even asked.

We tried out "uff courze" nonsensically a few times to satisfy ourselves it was fit for future bits, while Elvis sang a last song to the assembled troops and frauleins. Then we were back in the dark, the Odeon’s marquee shutting off behind us as the audience dispersed to cars and pickups while the two of us headed home, quiet the way we sometimes were when one of us had grownups on the mind.

"Don't get shook up," Zoe said sympathetically.

"Uff courze not," I replied, more staunchly than I had any hope of achieving in the days to come.

"How much did you say them jellied eggs is, girlie? Price gone up again, ain't it."

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

She had been in a remarkably better mood since taking up with Del, but any midnight rendezvous in the van was hours and hours away yet, and in the meantime
here sat this ornery customer as if he was taking up residence at the bar. As Pop had warned her, bartending isn’t hopscotch. “Just like I already told you, twenty-five cents, cheap at half the price,” she joked, although she sounded a little strained and sulky. ‘Girlie’ surely was nowhere on her list of preferred names, but then Canada Dan was never going to be a candidate for the diplomatic corps.

“Two bits a cackleberry, Jesus H. Christ, what’s this world comin’ to?”

The grizzled herder pawed around in the wages he’d spilled out onto the bar, another of his less than endearing habits when he was on a bender like this, evidently trying to decide whether he could afford to eat as well as drink.

“What the hell,” he made up his mind, “bring on the hen fruit, one for the gullet ‘n one for luck.” I had my back room chores yet to do--Zoe was at hers at the cafe, before she could join me for whatever crazily accented theatrics we could think up after Elvis and Juliet--but what was developing in the bar room could turn out to be interesting, I sensed, and kept on watching.

What a contrast they made, the unshaven and unsteady grayheaded customer in shabby herding clothes and the feminine young bartender in a sharp white blouse and with her raven hair fixed attractively. Since that first night, France’s nocturnal visits to the VW van had continued steadily if secretively, and it crossed my mind that whatever Del’s problems with tick bite and mudjack lingo, at least he had no worries whatsoever about competition from a dried-up old sheepherder.

Through the slats, it appeared France was managing to hold her own with the hunched muttering figure at the end of the bar, gamely bringing the glass crock and serving up a couple of its unappetizing contents to him with a plate and fork, even though she had warned Pop when he was first showing her around behind the bar that the pig’s knuckles and pickled eggs swimming in preservative turned her stomach. ‘It looks embalmed,’ she’d complained of the bar grub. ‘Who’d ever eat
that stuff, anyway?’ Shepherders when they’re blowing the rest of their wages on
booze, he patiently explained. ‘Tom, I have to tell you,’ she warned, ‘I’m not sure
I can serve any of that without throwing up.’ Pop was adamant. ‘It’s not going in
your belly, it’s going in theirs. The old fools have got to eat something,’ and there
followed the sermon about not leaving people in the lurch etcetera. In the end she’d
promised, ‘I’ll give it a whirl,’ and now she was, more or less conscientiously
completing the distasteful transaction with Canada Dan as I looked on.

With a shaky finger he pushed a bill to her out of his mess of money and ate
an egg in about two bites, chasing it with beer, while she went and made change.
“There you go. Have a good time,” she left him with and moved off to the other
end of the bar and the Tribune crossword puzzle she must have been trying to get
done when not tending to him.

Canada Dan wiped his mouth with his sleeve, staring down at the bar, his
second egg untouched. Possibly morose about being alone with himself, he called
out: “When’s Tom comin’ in?” By now I was following this only because I had
nothing better to do. The old ess of a bee who had pasted that shiner on Pop with
his elbow could choke on his bar grub for all I cared. But something in his voice
held me there at the vent.

“He’s not. I’m the regular bartender now,” France informed him coolly.
“Lucky you.”

“Huh, yeah.” He was staring down at the bar again. “Money don’t last no
time any more,” he mourned. “Harder’n the dickens to keep track where it goes.”

“Know what? If you’d keep your dough in your pocket where it belongs,
you wouldn’t have that problem so much.”

“Free advice, eh? Worth about what it costs.” He laughed harshly at his
own humor. Then he let out:

“Girlie? Didn’t I give you a tenspot?”
France never even glanced up from her crossword puzzle. “Not unless it had Abe Lincoln on it.”

I couldn’t believe what I was watching. She didn’t make a move toward the cash register at all. She was ignoring Pop’s commandment to pull the greenback in question from its resting place and prove its denomination to the customer.

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

Calmly she called to him: “It was a five. You got the right change, I counted it out in front of you and you didn’t kick about it then, all right?”

It wasn’t. The herder argued on, his voice growing louder and I began to feel really apprehensive. “It ain’t fair. Treatin’ a man like a turster. Swipe his money right out from under his nose. What’s this place comin’ to?”

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

“Oh uh, nothin’ doin’.” With that flair a drunk can sometimes have, all at once he was on his feet, staggering but determined. “Goin’ down to the Pastime,” he declared with injured dignity. “See if they can treat a man honest there.”

“Fine,” France said sweetly. “I’ll miss you with all my heart.”

As he made his unsteady way out without so much as looking at her, I was panicked at the prospect this presented. Canada Dan on a weeklong bender, telling his troubles at the rival saloon, run by the leading town gossip Chick Jennings and now frequented by Earl Zane to boot. As surely as night follows day, they’d spread word around town that Tom Harry’s barmaid would swipe money from you right under your nose. And while I wildly hoped not, they might be right. But Canada Dan might have been mistaken about a ten-dollar bill, too; I couldn’t let the reputation of Pop and the Medicine Lodge depend on that.
Closing the vent decisively, I slipped down the stairs and out the back door and dashed for the house. Pop was in another session with Del in the Gab Lab, straightening out Fort Peck language, and I didn’t dare burst in on them anyway with something like, “France is being called a thief and maybe she is, if she didn’t learn her lesson in juvie.” Instead I rushed up to my bedroom and the dresser drawer stash of money from my swamping chores. Pop always paid me off in silver dollars and I let them accumulate until there was a model plane kit or something else I wanted to buy. Now I grabbed out five—-it depleted my stash markedly—and raced down the alley to head off Canada Dan.

I rounded the corner of the block where the Pastime was situated just as he as he approached the entrance, muttering angrily to himself.

“Dan! Wait!”

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

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

“Well, ain’t that something.” Swaying over me, he clinked the silver dollars from one hand to the other to make sure how many there were. His sour old face leered down at mine as if we shared some dirty secret. “Tell her I knowed she was wrong and I’m just glad she caught up with herself,” he rasped, nodding as if he was sober as a judge. “It wouldn’t do to be cheatin’ good customers.”

This wasn’t like me, but I didn’t even tell Zoe about the incident, it was just too murky or too open to question, too something. Canada Dan full of booze was about as unreliable an accuser as could be found anywhere. Or maybe even a drunk knew full well when he was being cheated. Or maybe France had made an honest mistake, or hadn’t made one at all. Or, or, or. I made up my mind to let the matter
stew in its own confusion, and it might have done so if the next day had not been yet another Saturday, my morning to swamp out the bar room.

Pop was breaking France in on this aspect of bartending too, so she was washing and shining up an army of glasses, while he rolled a fresh beer keg in and checked the rest of the beverage supply behind the bar, while I did spittoon and toilet duty to get the worst out of the way first. I had just grabbed my broom and came back into the bar room to start sweeping when I heard him exclaim: “Hey, when did this show up? I thought you said somebody must have walked off with it.”

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

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

“That’ll happen,” Pop said good-naturedly. “Sometimes I’d lose my head if it wasn’t tied on, right, Rusty?”

“Uh, right.”

“But you need to keep track of something like this,” he said for France’s benefit, twirling the shot glass so that the blue eagle caught the light. “It makes the job easier when you have the right thing to work with, doesn’t that stand to reason?”

“Oh-kay,” she said with a slanty smile, “I’ll remember that.”

What I was remembering as I slowly pushed the broom was the moose tooth watch which also had mysteriously disappeared and reappeared. Put that together with juvie and Canada Dan’s tenspot, and now I knew I had to tell Zoe.

“You got something on your mind besides your hat, Ace,” she sensed right away.
“Funny you bring that up, Muscles. I’m in a sort of a fix.”

“Bad one?”

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

Zoe gasped. “Doesn’t France have any more smarts than that? She’s not back to stealing cars, is she?”

“No, that’s the weird part, it’s dumb little things.” I ticked off the moose tooth watch and the shot glass story, and related what had happened with Canada Dan. Zoe listened as only she could, her violet eyes never leaving mine, her generous mouth pursed in contemplation. The instant I was done, she said:

“And you’re in a fix about whether to tell your dad or not.”

“You got it.”

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

“Wh-what kind of maniac is that?”

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

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

“Del.”

Zoe left it at that until I gasped, “You think he’s one, too?”

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

“Sure. Right down to the skin.”

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

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

“There you go, then. Piece of cake.”

“Yeah, well, maybe.” I drew a deep, deep breath of resolve. “Let’s go ask him.”

“Ah. The fearsome twosome.”

Del wasn’t doing a bit, though, when he admitted us into the van and sank back into his Gab Lab seat, only acknowledging us in a distracted way. He did not appear to be busy, but certainly seemed occupied. I fidgeted, waiting for him to show attention in our direction, but there was no sign of it. Zoe urged me on with a little snap of her fingers that he didn’t hear. I mustered:

“Del, I was sort of wondering if you could help me out, us out I mean, by—what’s wrong?”

He was barely hearing anything I said, a peculiar glazed expression on him while he gazed around the Gab Lab as if enumerating every item in it. As if—looking for what was missing? In the same instant Zoe and I glanced at each other.
This was too good to be true. France must have walked off with something of his, and now he knew the situation without my having to spell it out to the end of the alphabet.

He sat up so abruptly it made me step back. “Where’s your father?”

“In the back room. Paying bills. Why?”

“I just found out something he had better know.” He shot to his feet, still wearing that odd look as he ducked out the van door. “Come on. You may as well hear this.”

Hopes up, Zoe and I trailed him as he marched down the driveway and across the alley to the Medicine Lodge. He stepped into the back room like a man on a mission. Pop looked down from the landing, cocking an eyebrow at the sight of our contingent.

“Hey, Delano,” his greeting carried a note of surprise. “Stuck on something a mudjack said?”

“Can you have France come in here? It’s important.”

“What for?”

“It’s important.”

“I grasp that it is,” said Pop, eyeing him with curiosity. “Hold on, if there’s nobody at the bar I’ll have her lock up for a few minutes.”

While he went and attended to that, Del walked in a tight circle, hands thrust in pockets and shoulders hunched so high he looked like a scarecrow, still wearing that strange expression he’d had in the confines of the van. Watching him, Zoe picked at her elbow nervously and I kept swallowing with a dry throat, hoping he was not going to charge France with something so awful it would get her thrown into the adult version of juvie. Pop arrived back, took one look at circling figure, and simply folded his arms and waited.
France came buzzing through the door from the front, towel still in hand like a true bartender. “What was it you wanted, T--”

She jammed to a halt at the sight of us all. Natalie Wood stopped by a cop for something. Apprehensively she asked, “Somebody call a prayer meeting?”

Pop inclined his head to the determined keeper of the Gab Lab. “So, Delano, what’s eating you?”

As though an electrical current was running between us, Zoe and I shared that held-breath feeling of drama, the theatrical high point when Rosalind reveals her identity to Orlando, when Lady Bracknell bestows her lofty blessing on Algernon and Cecily and Jack and Gwendolen, when the confusions of love are solved and all’s well that ends well. Only in this case one lover was about to lower the boom on the other.

Del shifted restlessly, looked around at us all, and blurted it out.

“I’m not leaving.”

The big room was silent as this registered on us in individual ways. I nearly swallowed my Adam’s apple for good.

“Isn’t that sensational?” Del was grinning as much as his face could hold. “The powers that be were so impressed with the mudjacks tapes and transcripts, they want me to stay and keep right on with the Missing Voices, here. Do another series of interviews before a subgroup vanishes from history. They, ah, gave me another grant.” He looked almost bashful. “Alan Lomax usually gets them all.”

There went that, I savvied before he was even finished speaking. Not a chance in the world that a diagnosis of kleptomania would be forthcoming from him if the midnight meetings in the van were going to go merrily on. According to the way he was gazing at her, France could be stealing the fillings out of his teeth and he wouldn’t notice. Beside me, Zoe was thinking the same, I could tell. We had to be happy for Del, fellow bit player that he was, and glad he wasn’t going away yet,
but we knew there was no approaching him about France and her problematic habit, now. We weren’t up to the role of heartbreakers yet.

“Well, swell, Dellie,” France sounded relieved and enthusiastic all in the same breath. She gave him the nicest kind of smile. “We’d miss you around here.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want things to get dull,” Pop seconded that. He squinted companionably at his partner in mudjack lingo. “So, Delano, who’s got their voices missing now?”

“Sheepherders.”

Roomful of silence again.

No one wanted to be the first to say it. Finally, twisting her towel as if wringing out the words, France ventured:

“You dead sure about that, Dellie? We don’t seem to have any shortage in here, huh, Tom?”

Pop was looking nearly as stunned as if he had been hit by a flying elbow.

“She’s right, where the hell do you get the idea sheepherders are vanishing? Cripes, most of the time you can hardly turn around in the Two Medicine country without bumping into one. Delano, are you sure you don’t have any tick fever?”

“Trust me on this,” Del held his hands as if halting traffic. “I did the research, before I came out here from the Library. You have to understand, the sheep business is in what economists call a gravitational decline, which means steep. Sheepmen are simply up against too much.” He fingered his elaborate shirt, not a stitch of wool in it, as evidence. “Synthetics, cheaper imported lamb, new grazing regulations, higher costs of everything--the usual kinds of horsemen of the apocalypse that do in old family businesses.” He paused soberly. “It’s sad, of course, but it can’t be helped. And when the sheep ranchers go, it’s perfectly plain what that will mean for herders.”
“The marble farm,” Zoe said in a hushed voice.

“Well, no, they’re not exactly going to die off like dinosaurs,” Del belatedly sought to temper that. “But their numbers are bound to decline, and now’s the best chance to record their lives for the archive.” He paused again as if a thought had only now struck him, or at least gave a good imitation of it. “Ah, Tom, I wonder if I might ask you for a favor.”

“While that’s going on,” France saw her chance, “hadn’t I better get back to tending the bar?”

“What? Yeah. Do that.” Pop and the other two of us tried not to be too obvious about looking on while she and Del did not quite blow kisses to one another, but close enough. As soon as she was gone, Del turned to Pop, bright as a button. “What I was wondering--”

“Delano, I know all about your wondering and the answer is no. I cannot trot around hunting up shepherders with you, I have a fishing derby to get everything in readiness for and a joint with a green bartender to oversee and every other damn thing that takes up time in life. Got that?”

Even if his words had not registered on Del, Pop’s dangerously wrinkled brow would have. “I just thought I’d ask,” he murmured, burying his hands in his pockets again.

“Besides”--Pop started to reach for his cigarettes until he saw me looking--“herders aren’t anywhere you can find them right now anyway.”

Del went stone-still. He turned his head to one side as if to make sure he’d heard what he’d heard. “They’re not? Where did they go?”

“Where they always do this time of year,” Pop said impatiently, “when they’re not in here drinking their wages away. Way to hell and gone up in the mountains, herding on the national forest.”
Zoe was nodding, even she knew that. Evidently the self-trained expert on the subgroup called sheepherders did not.

"But, but," Del spluttered, "when do they come back down?"

"Shipping time," said Pop. "That's, oh, three or four weeks yet. You can take life easy for a while."

"No, I can't! My grant calls for an immediate start," the ins and outs of oral history practically poured forth in a babble, "the powers that be think I already have interviews lined up and waiting. I had to, ah, stretch matters a little in the proposal."

"You got to be kind of careful in proposing," Pop advised. But he didn't like to see Del in distress any more than we did. Squinting in thought, one eye in particular toward half closed, he muttered: "Of course, there's always that cockeyed ess of a bee Canada Dan."

Del brightened as if a switch had been thrown. "Perfect! I never did get to ask him what a turster is!"

"Dode has him herding some kind of bunch up the South Fork," Pop was saying to me. "Seen the wagon on the way to fishing, remember?" Before I could even bob my head, Del was asking eagerly: "Do you think he'd consent to be interviewed?"

"I wouldn't predict what he'll do from one breath to the next," Pop seemed bemused at the thought of Canada Dan fending with Del and vice versa, "but you can try him." Then his conscience must have kicked in. "Better take Rusty along, he knows Dan--that might help."

Del was back to buoyant just that fast. He gravely bowed in our direction. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in going, too, Miss Zoe, parental authorities permitting?"

"Pleeease?"
“Don’t worry, Tom. I’ll keep an eye on them.”

“I was more thinking about them keeping an eye on you.”

I was not any too enthused about being assigned to this. To me Canada Dan represented several kinds of a headache, from that wayward elbow that struck Pop, up to and including the dispute with France that had cost me five dollars. As far as I was concerned, he could fester in obscurity forever and it would serve him right.

Pop had a point, though. It would be just like the old cuss to give Del a hard time or even run him off, simply because he could. With me on hand representing Pop and the Medicine lodge, sort of, his manners might—might—improve. Riding in the passenger seat to be navigator, I was silent with such thoughts—at least it was a respite from having a kleptomaniac half-sister on my mind—as Del drove us toward the sheep camp that afternoon, a rare sunny one. Dode Withrow’s pasture was nice green bottomland where the South Fork of English Creek ran down a long coulee. With the mountain cliffs stretching up and away everywhere ahead of us and the Rainbow Reservoir dam at the far end of the creek like the front step to their succession of heights, our journey from town was actually quite a scenic excursion. Zoe was in the back of the van, perched as I had been on the Fort Peck trip, she and Del talking away.

Gandering through the windshield at the wallrocks and crags of the national forest that rose and rose all the way to the Continental Divide, he exclaimed: “What luck that he’s not herding somewhere up there. I wonder why not?”

“Maybe he gets nosebleeds in high places,” Zoe theorized.

Del chuckled that away as he turned off the county road onto the rutted set of tracks where I was pointing. A not very large flock of sheep grazed
picturesquely in the bottom of the steep coulee. “Likely he’s been given this spot down here because it’s less rugged terrain for a man of his age, wouldn’t you think, Rusty?”

“He’s afraid of the timber.”

“Hmm? Run that by again?”

“Canada Dan is scared to death of herding in the timber where he can’t see all his sheep every minute and he’s no good at it. The ranchers know it and they don’t put him any closer to the mountains than this.” I did not add that Canada Dan only got herding jobs at all because he was living and breathing and handily available when he wasn’t drunk.

By now the van was jolting down the track to the creek where the white-canvased sheepwagon sat next to the willows. “I see,” Del said in a less sure voice as a stumpy figure came peering out the dutch door of the wagon at our approach.

When the van bumped to a stop in the small creekside clearing, Zoe and I scrambled out while Del composed himself in more professional fashion, smoothing his various pocket flaps and so on. We were met by a mottled white and gray sheep dog growling as it came.

“Quit, Moses,” Canada Dan called off the dog but not his distrustful eyeing of us. “What’s this, a Sunday school picnic?”

“Whoo,” murmured Zoe, getting her first good look at the herder. People still had goiters then, and Canada Dan had a dandy, as if he had swallowed a lemon. Long underwear yellowed with age showed at the neck of his shirt. The cud of tobacco that had given me so much spittoon work showed in his cheek. The hard effects of time and weather and drink showed on the rest of his face and personage. Not exactly a picture of hospitality standing there in the wagon doorway giving our arrival a suspicious squint, but Del forged ahead.
“Mr.--ah, Dan? I wonder if I could have a little of your time.”

“There’s plenty of it out here in the sticks, ain’t it.” He gave me a grudging nod out of respect for Pop and included Zoe because she seemed to be with me, but Del received something between a frown and a scowl. “What’s on your mind, when you’re not standin’ in the way of my sheep?”

Del forced a chuckle about that incident and explained about his interviewing mission.

“That a fact?” Canada Dan stepped down out of the wagon as though he had to inspect him for common sense. “You come all the way out from town to talk to a mutton conductor?” Spitting an amount of tobacco juice that did not seem to diminish the cud in his cheek, he shuffled over to us and gestured to the nearby grazing ewes and lambs as if we were welcome to them. “Got the goddamn mutton on the hoof for you, that’s for sure.”

“Rusty,” Zoe was whispering, “what’s wrong with those sheep?”

Before I could tell her, Del had caught up with the bedraggled nature of the creatures in Canada Dan’s care. “What kind of a, mmm, flock do you call this?”

The herder laughed harshly. “What’s it look like? It’s the hospital bunch, next thing to pelters. Some has got maggots. Others got bluebag, can’t nurse their lambs. Some are just old and broken-down like me.”

“I see. Well, that doesn’t really matter, I suppose,” a false supposition if Zoe and I had ever heard one. Plain as anything, these sheep were down on their luck and anyone assigned to herd them was even deeper in misfortune. Dode Withrow may have been ready to wring Canada Dan’s neck for that loss of lambs in the spring blizzard, but since had given him what amounted to a charity job. Tending these cripples and invalids barely qualified as shepherding. Nonetheless Del held out an inviting hand toward the open van and its recording equipment waiting ready. “Let’s just step in and I’ll get the tape going and--”
“Huh-uh.” The one-man subgroup of Missing Voices backed away from the van. “Come on in the wagon where we can gab comfortable-like.”

Momentarily thrown, Del was quick to improvise. “I’ll be right there, just let me grab a portable recorder.” It hardly rated that description, Del digging out a hefty machine with a handle on it like a suitcase. While he was hurriedly threading in tape reels, Zoe scrambled to find him a spare microphone for the machine and I commiserated in a low voice, “Pop always says if there are any more ways Canada Dan can be a pain in the wazoo, they have yet to be invented.”

“No, no, it’s all right. I’ll get this done,” he said with determination. “I need to send in something in a hurry so my grant doesn’t get pulled. Alan Lomax is always around to scoop up loose funding.”

Anticipatory audience of two, Zoe and I followed as he swung the recorder and then himself into the sheepwagon. The design of sheepwagons is on a narrower wagon bed than, say, the prairie schooners we all know from history books, and the canvas roof is more snug and igloo-like, compressing the inside into something remarkably on the order of a grownup dollhouse; small stove, miniature cabinets, bunk where one person will just fit. A really dirty dollhouse, in the case of Canada Dan’s abode. The grumpy cooking utensils on the blackened stove showed he had the cooking philosophy that a washed pot never boils. I recoiled at how tight the quarters were and I sensed Zoe doing the same, but Del seemed right at home. Setting up the tape recorder and microphone on the small gateleg table where Canada Dan had slid in one side, he took the other, and practically knee to knee, he smiled across at his interview subject. “Ready for some conversation, are you?”

“I guess I got nothin’ better to do,” the herder muttered, not exactly the best start. Since we would practically be on top of the pair of them no matter where we tried to sit, I took the initiative, to Zoe’s evident relief, in saying we’d
wait outside if that was all right. "Suit yourself," our host grunted. "Moses is shaded up under the wagon. He might growl at you now and then, but he don't mean it."

Shading up sounded right to us, and we scooted under the wagonbox where we could lounge against some sacks of sheep salt and cottonseed cake in something like comfort. The dog kept watch on us with those pale border collie eyes, but made no sound. Zoe reached to pet him. "Huh-uh," I warned in a whisper. "Sheepherders don't like to have their dogs spoiled by petting."

"Poor pooch," she whispered solemnly.

"Shall we get started?" Del's voice reached us. We grinned at each other. We could hear everything, right overhead. This was as good as the vent at the saloon. "Your full name is--?"

"Daniel Korzenowski."

"Age, please, Mr. Korzenowski?"

"Too goddamn much of it, that's for sure."

Del chuckled a little, waiting, but that seemed to be the full answer. "I'm only asking for archival purposes, you understand. So, the year of your birth?"

"Back there a ways, let's just say."

"Mr. Korzenowski--Dan. Surely you don't want me to have to guess the year you were born."

"Don't matter to me."

"Very well, then. Eighteen hundred and ninety-"

"Eighteen hundred nothing! Nineteen hundred even, damn it."

"That makes you sixty, am I right? As old as the century."

"Both of us are showin' it, too."

"And born where in Canada?"
"Who said I was hatched up there? I’m pure American. Born right up here near the border, on the Milk River. My folks was homesteadin’, or thought they was. I don’t know where you got that Canada notion."

"Hear that?" Zoe was whispering in wonderment. "He doesn’t know he’s called Canada Dan?"

"He knows. He just doesn’t want to."

"Sorry about that, I must have misheard something," Del scrambled to recover. "What can you tell me about life on the homestead? It must have been rugged in those days."

"Rugged! That don’t begin to say it." This set the raspy voice to going without a stop. The family was skunk broke most of the time, to hear him tell it. If grasshoppers didn’t get the crops, hail did. The nearest neighbors were a mile away and the nearest town was thirty, so if a person was sick or hurt in an accident, you might as well say your prayers. Zoe and I listened hard as he came to the part about riding horseback to a one-room school. "My schoolin’ stopped in the third grade. Had to help out at home, it didn’t matter none that I was just a kid." That gave me a twinge of sympathy for him, although a person can be deprived and still be naturally ornery. Del let him talk on, occasionally nudging or coaxing with a quick question, until steering him toward the shepherding life.

"It ain’t for everybody," the coarse voice started in slowly. "You see this sheepwagon--not exactly the Waldorf, ain’t it. Out like this, you have to live with muskeeters and mice and skunks and packrats and all those. Hell, I been in places where I couldn’t leave my bridgework out at night."

Beyond that, though, the interview turned rocky. Del would try to keep things on a historical track and and his veteran of shepherding would wander off to some topic like the weather. I had listened in at Fort Peck enough to know that thanks to Del’s lines of questioning, the mudjacks’ stories had a beginning, middle,
and an end. Canada Dan’s started anywhere and went no particular direction. Del’s patient tries at getting him to describe the herding life down through the years produced mainly prolonged gripes about gut-robbing ranchers and tardy camptenders. At last Del managed to slip in:

“The Two Medicine country is known for its summer ranges in the mountains--what can you tell me about that kind of herding?”

This may sound strange, but Canada Dan could be heard not saying anything for some moments. Zoe and I looked at each other. Was this it? Was he going to kill off the interview and throw Del out of the wagon? Then we heard him say tightly:

“Them mountains. It’s rough up there. Coyotes. Bear. Poison lupine. If it ain’t one thing to raise hell with your sheep, it’s a goddamn ’nother. I’m more of a flatlander myself, in my herdin’. Makes better sense. Now, if them ranchers had any brains worth mentionin’--”

“You were right,” Zoe mouthed silently to me. “Afraid of the timber.”

Del gamely kept on with questions for a while, but there is a limit to how many sheepherder gripes you can listen to in one stretch, and we were growing bored by the time we heard him wrapping up the interview. We were out from under the wagon as he exited it, the herder right behind him, and I was more than ready to depart the company of Daniel Korzenowski and go back to town. To my surprise, Zoe piped up:

“Can I ask Mr. Dan something?”

Del looked bleary, but trouper that he was, he said of course she could, “But let’s get it for posterity.” He knelt and had the recorder going almost instantly. “This next voice is Zoe Constantine,” he intoned into the mike, “at the advanced age of twelve trying out a career as a seeker of Missing Voices. Go
ahead, Zoe.” He passed her the mike and she took it in both hands and asked Canada Dan, innocent as anything:

“Have you been around packrats much?”

I could have kissed her. Why hadn’t I thought to ask this myself?

“Only about as many as there is Chinamen in China,” Canada Dan said gruffly into the microphone she was aiming practically down his gullet. “Why’re you askin’, girlie?”

“I was only wonderin’. When a packrat takes a thing—does it ever bring it back?”

“Funny question, ain’t it.” The herder rubbed his whiskery jaw. “But I’ve known it to happen. Somethin’ shinier catches its eye and maybe it’ll leave the first thing out where you can find it.”

Now we knew, did we? Francine was maybe a packrat kind of kleptomaniac. Surely a less serious sort, right? Not the car-stealing kind that I should get up my nerve and tell Pop about?

Zoe thanked Canada Dan sweetly, and Del shut off the tape recorder, and that should have been that. Except Canada Dan turned to me with a crude grin.

“How’s the piano girl doin’ in the bar? Learnin’ any new tunes?”

I didn’t have time to think, only react. “She’s doing fine,” I answered nervously. “Pop is awful glad to have her helping out, you know how hard it is to find good help.”

“Yeah, it’s a bugger, ain’t it,” he gave me more of that nasty grin, “gettin’ somebody who knows what they’re doin’ behind a bar.”

Del had only half caught our exchange, broodily heading toward the van. All at once he stopped and turned back.
“Ah, Dan, before we leave, I’d like to try something. Could you walk through the sheep with me? I’d like to pick up some ambient sound to add to the interview, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“You want to take a constitutional through a hospital bunch of sheep?”
Canada Dan cackled. “I thought I’d heard of everything.” Capitalizing on what would plainly be a good tale to tell during the next drinking spree, he swept an arm toward the grazing ewes and lambs, those healthy enough to be on their feet. “The mutton population is ready and waitin’, ain’t it.”

“I need something from the van, I’ll be right back.”

Giving each other the look that says Now What?, Zoe and I tagged close after Del as he vaulted into the Gab Lab and grabbed his headphones from the desk equipment. “What do you want those for? What’s ‘ambient’ mean?” we demanded in whispers.

“That interview needs all the help it can get,” he said grimly. “I’m going to try for a sound portrait. I’ll explain later.” He plugged the headphones into the portable recorder and clapped them over his ears. “Wish me luck, amigos.”

Drawing on whatever limited wisdom he possessed, Canada Dan had been doing some thinking. “Sheep don’t take real good to bein’ disturbed. You kind of got to pussyfoot through ’em, and even so, they spook easy.” He took charge of Zoe and me before we knew what was happening. “You shavetails stand there and there, don’t let the buggers get in the brush. Stay, Moses,” he pointed the disappointed dog to the wagon. In the same rough tone, he told Del, “C’mon, if you’re still of a mind to do this.”

The hospital herder set off into the flock in the slowest of gaits, Del just behind him with hefty recorder in one hand and microphone deployed in the other. Stationed as we were, motionless as sentinels, the coulee began to speak to us, Zoe and I listening for all we were worth. Grasshoppers whirring in flight over the

You just never know when things will mysteriously chime. Del was being instructed in how to bobbasheely sheepherder-style. The squinched-up keeper of sheep next
meadow. The creekwater rattling musically past. A magpie yattering somewhere in
the willow thicket. With the headphones alerting him to every least sound and
using the microphone like a hand, Del was gathering it all out of the air. A few of
the sheep blatted restlessly at the moving men, and now a bell tinkled as a dark-
fleeced wether hobbled toward them.

"There's Coalie," Canada Dan said if introducing the animal. "He's a lead
sheep, or anyway was, until he ruptured himself. I told Dode any number of times
we ought to turn him into coyote bait. Here, you old bum." He dug in his pocket
and fed the sheep some pellets of cottonseed cake. "Old good for nothin'," the
herder said gruffly, "about like me," and moved on.

Del kept quiet except for an occasional brief question as Canada Dan eased
through his band of casualties. "This ewe, now, she got snagged. See that rip in
her side? I turpentinised it up good, keeps the flies out. She'll come around." He
pointed to another with blue stains at the bottom of her legs where dip had been
applied. "Hoof rot--there's just no end of things can go wrong with sheep. Keeps
a man hoppin' to tend to 'em, the poor critters." Like a doctor on his rounds, the
herder led Del through the woolly forms, the mike all the while picking up the
ambience of the sheep camp around the rough old voice like no other. You can tell
when something remarkable is happening. Zoe had the same spellbound
expression I did. This wasn't the Forest of Arden, Canada Dan definitely was not
the smitten shepherd Silvius, but there was a recognizable touch of dramatic magic
in the portrait in sound Del was orchestrating.

Upon our triumphant departure, the van was not up out of the coulee
before Zoe was leaning in from the back seat bursting with the question.

"So why is he called Canada Dan? How come he's not Milk River Dan or
Polack Dan or something?"
Dell had been grinning to himself from the minute he shook the tape out of the portable recorder and hopped in behind the steering wheel. Now he sobered enough to lift a hand toward me and invite: “Any theory, Sherlock?”

“Uh-huh,” I had been working on this, “I bet it still has to do with him being spooked about the mountains. I can about hear Dode Withrow say something like, ‘He’ll push the sheep out in the open all the way to Canada instead of putting them in the timber.’ You can ask Pop to be sure.”

“Ooh.” Zoe wrinkled her nose at the thought of being tagged that way all through life.

“That would make sense,” Del was thinking out loud about my guess, “a behavioral nickname rather than an associative one. I’ll have to note that in the interview transcription.”

“Why, what’s the difference?”

“Well, one is the sort of nickname that comes from some physical characteristic people associate with a person, such as—”

“Three Finger Curly,” I contributed with a high degree of confidence.

“Right. Behavioral ones, though,” he went on as the van reached the county road and trundled toward town, “come more from something a person picks up a reputation for doing. Wrong Way Corrigan getting himself turned around on his transatlantic flight. Mittens Mitchell, the shortstop who couldn’t field grounders. That sort of thing.” Del winced a little. “‘Canada Dan’. Poor old bugger,” he did a decent imitation of that barbwire voice. As if reminded, he sent me a puzzled look. “Did I hear right, back there? He called France ‘the piano girl’?”

“Oh, yeah, sure, you know how she is, with those long fingers. We heard him tell her she ought to be playing the piano on stage somewhere, didn’t we, Zoe.”

"Exactamente," he trilled the bit in whatever language that was.
“You bet,” she made up as fast as I had, “a concert pianist.”

“Pianist,” said Del, still in a puzzled tone.

“That’s it. Just what he said.”

“Hmm. Imagine him coming up with that. He’s full of surprises.” Del checked over his shoulder with another questioning look. “So, Miss Zoe? Is there a packrat in the store room of the Spot?”

“Oh, no no no. Farther away than that. In Butte.”

Along with my soup and crackers, I was digesting Canada Dan’s knowledge of takers of things when Pop showed up in the kitchen the next morning, uncommonly early for him these days.

“Recuperated from the excitement of sheep camp yet?” he asked through a yawn.

“Getting there, I guess.”

He poured some condensed milk in the pan to stretch the soup for himself.

“Glad that worked out. I kind of wondered, looking at you and Zoe when you got back, but Delano seemed as happy as if he had good sense.”

The Romeo of the VW van doubtless had spent an even happier night, according to how late France had come in, but I kept my mouth shut about that.

Pop himself was looking pleased about something. Before even firing up the coffee pot, he announced “The weather’s better,” which meant it was not raining that very minute. “What do you say we go up to the rezavoy? I ought to look things over before the derby.” He was in such a good mood I could tell what was coming next. “We’ll grab our fishpoles, just in case we feel the urge to catch rainbows while we’re there, hey?”

If fishing would make him happy, even temporarily, it was up to me to muster the urge to catch rainbows, and I took over fixing the thermos of coffee
while he rustled up a bait can of choice chicken guts out of the freezing compartment of the refrigerator. Taking care to be quiet while leaving the house and crossing the yard—France and Del still were in bed, innocently separate beds at this time of day—we skirted around to where the cars were parked under Igdrasil’s leafy care. To my surprise, Pop opened the trunk of the Packard instead of the Buick to deposit our fishing gear.

“We’ll give the old buggy some exercise,” he answered my questioning look, “get it ready for the big day. Climb in.” I did so, as happened usually only once a year, Derby Day itself. Big and boxy as the Packard was, you might expect it to be as gloomy as a hearse inside, but it wasn’t, really, with the luxurious seats almost like sofas and the instruments on the dashboard set in fancy chrome and a good hardy smell to it all like that of the Medicine Lodge’s back room, of old leather and hat sweatbands and other traces of men at work, no doubt lingering from Pop’s last loot trip to Canada. Installed behind the fine-grained wooden steering wheel as the straight-eight cylinders purred us out of town, he looked so contented that I was determined not to get carried away with the car’s history, especially that event in the back seat involving him and Proxy and subsequently Francine, as she came to be. However, I may have been noticeably untalkative on the way up the creek valley to the reservoir, as he glanced over across the spacious front seat every so often and remarked on the hay crop or Canada Dan’s sheep camp as we passed it or other this and that. I responded as best I could, although it is hard to get something off your mind—the consequential back seat was right there behind me like a historical exhibit—when it doesn’t want to leave.

Rainbow Reservoir was discharging water plentifully when we arrived, the spillway frothing in a way Pop remarked he hadn’t seen it do in years. Even so, there seemed to be a lot more lake than usual, the blue surface reflecting the sky like a more closely held mirror.
“It’s kind of high for fishing,” I invoked the only angler lore I possessed as Pop busied himself with our gear, “isn’t it?” For starters, the boulders where we usually stood to cast our lines were some feet under water.

“Bill Reinking has been hearing that from people, too,” he acknowledged with a mild frown at the level of the lake. “We’ve decided to say a hell of a lot of water means a hell of a lot of fish. It stands to reason, right?”

This dictated fishing from the bank, a challenge to my already questionable casting ability, and I immediately began to worry about making a fool of myself on Derby Day if I couldn’t get my hook and line out farther than, say, the rocks we ordinarily stood on. That weenie Duane Zane would be right there sneering and making mocking remarks, I could count on that. Determinedly I postponed that fret, not wanting to spoil Pop’s outing today. “That’s nature for you,” he was shrugging off the extra feet of water for trout to hide under, “you got to play the hand it deals you.”

For once we were not out in the first blinks of dawn, but otherwise this fishing trip was almost like a memory coming to life again, the morning brilliantly blue over us, the mountain cliffs so near and high, the timbered canyon bending away out of sight behind Roman Reef at the far end of the lake and in the other direction the olive-green stands of willow and greener cottonwoods marking the course of the South Fork and eventually English Creek all the way to town, distantly visible beyond the dirt face of the dam. Much else seemed so close to the same as our first time here, six years before, too. Pop appreciatively taking in the scenery while he had a cigarette and drank offee from the thermos and fitted together our fishing poles—it was a ritual known by heart ever since. Yet while it was the same two of us here, the picture had changed with us, from then to now. The difference was that I had grown taller while he had only grown older, time’s unfair trick on a father and for that matter, a mother.
"Got the chicken guts ready, kiddo?" His question snapped me out of such thoughts, and I began cutting up gooey strips of the guaranteed surefire bait, a nasty task that had not changed at all over the years. Meanwhile, committee chairman to the hilt, he was surveying the setting for the Derby, figuring out loud where portable picnic tables and extra trash cans ought to go—the mudjacks reunion was turning out to be a valuable rehearsal—and shrewdly settling on a strategy against the Rotarians and their despised beer booth. "Gonna let the esses of bees do it, same like always," he confided to me, "I don’t want any ruckus over that. But I’m having Zoe’s folks set up a food booth, and nobody can kick if they just happen to sell soft drinks along with the grub, right?" He chuckled in satisfaction. "Lots of wives will steer hubbies right past that Rotary beer, you can bet your bottom dollar."

"Swuft, Pop," I had to hand it to him. Now were it not for the fishing part of the fishing derby, I could look forward to the occasion with something approaching anticipation. Slim hope of that, though. In all the years I still had not caught anything that rated more than honorable mention in the posted results, and anyone with a pole got that. Sighing to myself over the stubborness of fate, I picked up the bait can and my rod and reel and trailed Pop along the dam bank to where he declared the rainbow trout were surely awaiting us hungrily.

The footing wasn’t any too good without the boulders to stand on and the soil of the dam soaked from all the rain, causing him to crease his brow and say the Derby crowd would have to confine itself to the shore bank, so that he and the committee didn’t spend the day pulling people out of the lake. I agreed that sounded like further shrewd chairmanship. Satisfied, he tested his reel and his wrist, addressing the hidden population of the reservoir: "Watch out, rainbows, here we come."
I stood back and let him cast first, so I could watch the knack, as he called it. It had something to do with the flip of the wrist, which whenever I tried it merely sent my baited hook whirring out in a feeble arc instead of sailing a good distance into the water. Practice was supposed to make perfect, it hadn’t even made me passable in casting, as yet.

Nevertheless, I was about to give it the usual try when I recalled Del’s introduction to Rainbow Reservoir those weeks ago. Surf casting, he’d said his strenuous let-it-fly overhand style was. I thought about that for a minute. Where was it in any rules of fishing that you needed to have an ocean of surf instead of a lapping lake in order to cast like that? I sneaked a quick look at Pop, busy with his own fishing; that helped. To hell with flip of the wrist, I decided, planting my feet, gripping my pole with both hands like a baseball bat, and with a mighty grunt I gave a two-fisted heave that sent my hook and line sailing way, way out into the reservoir.

“Hey, not bad,” Pop called over when he saw the ring on the water where my bait had gone in. “You’re getting the knack.”

I would have settled for that cast for the whole day, content to let the morsel of chicken gut sit on the bottom of the lake or wherever it had ended up. But something that felt like it wanted to start a tug-of-war had other ideas.

“I’ve got a bite!” I hollered, although I had much more than that, my pole curving as the fish nearly pulled me in the water. I dug my feet in as best I could on the slippery dam bank and gripped the handle of the pole for dear life and tried not to panic. Supposedly the greatest allure of fishing is the thrill of the fish striking, taking the bait, putting up a fight, challenging the sportsman. I say it’s tricky work, attempting to levitate an extremely reluctant living object out of the water on the end of a thin line and a long stick.
"Hang onto him!" Pop grew excited now, putting aside his pole to scramble over and coach me. "Don't horse him, just keep your line tight and reel in slowly and walk him out, that's the way."

It took what seemed an unearthly amount of time, with the stubborn fish thrashing and twisting and turning but gradually coming to shore. We were of the drag-'em-out school, not bothering with fanciness like a net, so in the end I tottered backward up the bank towing the glistening trout out onto solid ground and Pop pounced on it before it could flop back in the water.

It was a beauty, royally speckled with the colors of the rainbow that gave the species its name. And it was kingsize, a foot and a half long if it was an inch. Pop looked even more proud of it, and me, that I was of myself. The two of us stood gazing down at my whopper of a catch with the same rueful thought. He was the one who said it.

"Too bad you couldn't have saved that for the Derby, kiddo."

This was my chance. Now if ever.

"I was going to bring that up. The Derby coming and all."

"Yeah? So?"

"I think I better not fish this year, don't you? I mean, it wouldn't look good if I won and I'm your son, see what I mean? What if there's another rainbow like this one, its mate or something, and I caught it too, now that I know how?"

The unlikelihood of another leviathan trout yielding itself up to me was of course colossal, but the unarguable part about my being his son in a contest he was in charge of made him stop and think. He started to say something, but I sneaked in ahead:

"Then everybody would want to know what my bait was, and they'd find out about chicken guts."
Of course he wasn’t fooled. But I had a point about the secret of chicken guts leaking out, so to speak, if he was busy elsewhere.

“Okay, you win,” he gave a resigned shrug, only the hint of amusement in his eyes telling me he knew what I was up to. “This year you can be assistant to the Derby Day committee chairman, how’s that grab you?”

Right where I most wanted to be grabbed, heart and soul.

“That’s that, then. I better get to catching fish if I’m not going to be disgraced by my own kid,” he said heartily.

While he went back to baiting up and casting, I was excused to clean my champion trout, conscientiously tossing its guts into the gushing spillway so as not to litter the bank and covering it in our creel with moss out of the lake to keep it cool. Instead of stretching my luck and fishing some more, I found a relatively dry spot to sit and watch him at it.

How peaceful everything seemed, and how fleeting. Fishing is supposed to clear the head and put a person at one with nature and all that. I can’t really say I felt any divine inspiration, but this excursion did give me a pocket of time alone with my father, without other people complicating the scene. These minutes together counted heavily, I somehow knew. This was beyond my sophistication, but it came to me more as a whisper of suggestion than the fundamental adage that it is: the deep truth—if it is not biblical, I shall always believe it should be—that all of us need someone who loves us enough to forgive us despite the history. Watching the figure who fathered me, now with gray at his temples and a certain stiffness in his casting arm, I no longer cared about his quirks and questionable habits, about whatever happened in the Packard and the Blue Eagle and any other of his circumstances out of range of my knowing. I had to hope that he could forgive in turn my tardiness in what I was about to do.
"Pop? Can I tell you something, just between you and me and Pat and Mike and Mustard?"

"I guess so, if it won't cause blisters and blindness." Still smiling over my catch, he glanced around at me. "What's on your mind now, kiddo?"

I drew the biggest breath I could, and let out the words along with it.

"You maybe ought to watch her a little closer. France, I mean."

"What for?" He remained mainly interested in casting his line out far enough to impress the fish. "Seems to me she's doing okay on her own behind the bar. But if you've heard her messing up on drinks, I suppose I better give her a refresher on--"

"It's not that."

"So? What is it then?"

"She's maybe a packrat."

"Say that again?"

"See, she has a, uh, kind of a jail record from taking something that didn't belong to her," I rushed on, "she told Zoe and me so, but we figured it would be better if she told you herself, so you wouldn't think we, that is me, was squealing on her, but she hasn't, has she, so--"

"A kind of a jail record?" he exploded, although it wasn't clear if it was at her or at me as the bearer of the news. "Rusty, are you sure she wasn't pulling your leg?" he demanded, his brow drawn down in the severest way as he studied me.

"I don't think so, Pop. Why would she kid about a year and a half in juvie?"

By now he was reeling in furiously, the chicken gut bait skipping across the surface of the water. "Cripes, they must have thrown the book at her if that's true. What'd she 'take'?"
"A car. When she was fourteen."

I saw him draw a very deep breath. Pole in hand, fishing abandoned, he came over by me and sat down heavily.

"Okay, let's think about this," he started trying to parse through the matter. He was welcome to it, after all the brainbending I'd done on it. "Let's say that's the straight scoop and she served her time. It ought to have taught her a lesson, right? Scared her straight, if nothing else." Making every effort to be fair to her, he countered the juvie record. "I've been keeping a real close eye on the cash register, just to be on the safe side, and I'm pretty sure she's not taking from the till." He tapped his forehead. "I'd know."

"Maybe not there, but--"

"Not there? Then where? Come on, spill it."

I reminded him of the Eagle jigger he couldn't find no matter where he looked behind the bar and then days later, there it magically was. "Stuff like that is starting to happen in the back room, too," I reported miserably.

He could hardly believe it about the moose tooth watch. "What the hell would she do that for? That old thing is nothing but a keepsake, you couldn't get anything for it if you tried," he said in bewilderment. "But it showed up again too, after a few days? You're sure that's what happened?"

"Uh-huh. Zoe was right there too, she'd tell you the same."

Something like a sudden headache seemed to come to him. "This maybe explains something," he began slowly. Reaching in his shirt pocket, he pulled out a cigarette lighter. a shiny ACE IN THE HOLE one. "Couple of days ago, I was certain as anything I had left this on my nightstand. Just, you know, in case," he tried to appear as if this had nothing to do with smoking in bed. "But when I remembered while we were opening up the joint and went back for it, I couldn't find the thing. Then the other night when I turned in, I reached over to the
nightstand for a book off the pile and the lighter was right there, sort of tucked behind the stack. It really threw me, how I could have overlooked it the first time. Made me wonder if I was ready for the funny farm."

I doubted that a mental institution was in prospect for him or me either, although I wouldn't have bet against incarceration of some sort for France, if recent behavior was any indication. But I stayed quiet to let him try to sort matters out. "What's she doing, playing some crazy game with us? Damn it, she's a grownup, she better act like one." Firm as a father could be, he drew a conclusion: "I'll tell her to cut out the nonsense and--"

I couldn't let it end there. "Pop, there's something else she's doing."

He looked at me with extreme reluctance. "What's the something else?"

I told him the story of Canada Dan's tenspot. "And I saw Velma Simms count her change two or three times, that last time she was in."

By the time I was done, he was squinting so hard it looked like it hurt. "That puts a different light on it." His voice sounded hollow, barely hearable over the gushing spillway. "Short-changing the customers is a death warrant for a joint. We can't have that." Taking out the lighter again and fumbling a little, he lit a cigarette as I watched sympathetically for once. As the first puff of smoke settled, he wondered aloud:

"Why do you suppose somebody--I'm not naming names, understand--didn't tell me any of this before now?"

"Maybe they"--I guiltily took the little cover that was offered--"wanted to give her a chance. See if her conscience might start kicking her in the rear."

"I suppose that's it. Can't blame them too much for good intentions, I guess."

He smoked in silence for a while.
“That still leaves us with what to do about her,” he finally broached. “I hate to have to can her, the way things have been going. We’re right back in a fix about the joint, if I do. And she’s my—our own flesh and blood.” He looked sick about the situation. “Then there’s Delano, he couldn’t fall any harder for her if you hit him with a club.”

He ground out his cigarette in the damp soil. I could tell he was casting around for some other answer than firing France, and slowly he brought out:

“Let’s hold off until Proxy shows up again. She got us into this, she damn well better get us out of it.”

“I told.”

“Whoo. Was your dad mad?”

“More like sad.” I filled Zoe in on what had transpired at the reservoir and the outlook that everything now hinged on Proxy, as seemed to be inexorably happening ever since she showed up at the mudjacks reunion. Our conversation was hushed, even though the saloon was not yet open and so neither was the vent. Looking like a man trying to juggle hot potatoes, Pop had gone on to Derby business at the community hall as soon as we got back from fishing, and France was out front setting up the bar as usual, if she hadn’t lapsed into stealing ashtrays or some such.

“Poor Del,” Zoe mourned. “He’s in for a surprise when he finds out about her, isn’t he.”

No doubt I was touchy about the matter, but Del seemed to be drawing more sympathy over the disclosure about France than was I, directly related to the juvie veteran and presumed packrat. I mean, I had plenty of reason to be concerned about her larcenous behavior, didn’t I? What if something like that ran in the family, like stovetop-black hair? Or at least if people got the idea that it
did? I could just hear Duane Zane mouthing off about what a pack of thieves the Harry family amounted to.

The elements were not helping my peevish mood, the day having deteriorated practically by the minute ever since Pop and I left the reservoir, dark clouds rolling in over the mountains behind the Packard and gathering strength until now it had begun raining yet again and thunder was rumbling like beer kegs rolling off the delivery truck; more thirty-year weather.

"Yeah, but," I started to argue the point about poor Del over poor me, "isn’t it a whole lot better for him to find out now than--"

Unexpectedly the door from the bar room flew open, making us both jump.

It was the piano girl herself, France barreling into the back room and, from the look of it, not simply to replenish something behind the bar.

"Hi, you two, think the rain will hurt the rhubarb?" she wisecracked, and to our surprise, started racing directly up the stairs to us. "Not if it comes in cans, huh? Guess what, I forgot my bowtie. Tom will have kittens if he catches me not wearing it. I’m gonna borrow that slicker to run back to the house for it." She meant, Zoe and I realized in a single convulsive gulp, the one hanging over the vent.

Alarmed, I leaped up, nearly bumping France backwards at the head of the stairs. "Huh uh, that’s Pop’s. He gets really, really upset if anybody uses it but him. Come on, I’ll get you a better one down here." I pattered past her to the hanging haberdashery below.

She gave me an odd look, and one to Zoe, sitting there by the raincoat with a theatrical expression that implied if it were up to her, she would waft the forbidden garment onto France’s shoulders like a royal cape. "Some people have funny habits," sighed Zoe in universal regret.
“Yeah, the dumb bowtie is in that category too,” France said, reluctantly turning to trot down the stairs to where I was flourishing some sheepherder’s yellow slicker. “Don’t let the place float away before I get back,” she left us with and dashed out into the rain.

“That was close,” Zoe said.

“What isn’t, with her,” I said.

As if Proxy had some sixth sense about showing up when no one was looking for her, it was the very morning of the fishing derby before she came wheeling into the driveway casually as you please. Our soup spoons poised to dig into breakfast, Pop and I heard the definitive crunch of the red Cadillac on the gravel. France wasn’t even out of the bathroom yet.

“What is this,” he burst out, already beset with assignment sheets and voluminous other derby busywork spread around his place at the table, “some crazy phase of the moon?”

Swearing under his breath--considerably beyond mentioning the Nazarene--as he scooped together the paperwork and reared up from the table, he got hold of himself enough to instruct me to pour breakfast back in the pan and then fetch France for the confrontation.

“We’re gonna get her straightened out or know why not,” he vowed as he marched out to concript Proxy for that duty.

All too aware of my part in bringing this about, I mounted the stairs with my heart thumping at every step and knocked on the bathroom door.

“Hold onto your irrigation hose, can’t you,” the occupant responded laconically, “I’ll be a couple more minutes.”

“It’s not that. Pop told me to tell you your mom is here.”
All too aware of my part in bringing this about, I mounted the stairs with my heart thumping at every step and knocked on the bathroom door.

“Hold onto your irrigation hose, can’t you,” the occupant responded laconically, “I’ll be a couple more minutes.”

“It’s not that. Pop told me to tell you your mom is here.”

Something clattered in the bathroom. “Proxy?” came the muffled question, as though she might have some other mother. “Now? She sure knows how to spoil a good time.”

Back downstairs, where Pop was waiting stiffly and Proxy lounged around the living room as if she owned the place, I met with that unsettling gaze from her that seemed to size me up for some unknown reason. After a moment, she cracked a smile. “Hey there, Russ. Big day, huh?” she spoke so offhandedly I knew she meant the fishing derby. Turning back to Pop, who I could tell was bottling up everything until France arrived on the scene, she teased: “Jeez, chairman of the whole shebang. You’ve come up in the world, Tom. If you don’t watch out, you’ll be mayor next.”

“I have enough headaches already,” he said shortly. Anything further was cut off by rapid steps on the stairs and France making her appearance.

“Hi, Ma,” she came in talking fast, “come to see if all fishermen are liars or only liars fish?” When I say making her appearance, this day she really had worked on how she looked. She must have cleaned out The Toggery of its most exotic items, a vividly striped red-white-and-blue blouse and a fringed deerskin vest that went with her leather bracelet, plus crisp new bluejeans. Topping it all off, whatever she had done to fix her hairdo into a nice longer length, her black hair had a fresh sheen to it. In a word, she was an eyeful, and the three of us stared as if making sure it was her, the old Francine.
“Look at you,” Proxy eventually said, guardedly. “Bartender clothes have changed since my day.”

France glanced in nervous appeal to Pop, and he came through with:

“She’s not behind the bar today--I always close the joint for the derby.”

“Civic, huh?” Proxy adjusted to the situation. “So much the better,” she gave France a sort of maternal wink, if those two things do not cancel each other out, “it’ll give us a chance to catch up with each other. I don’t know about you, but I’m not much for hook, line, and sinker. What do you say we go into Great Falls, ladies’ day out?”

Now France really showed the jitters. “Sorry, Mom, no can do. I didn’t know you’d blaze in here like this. See, I’m going to the derby with”—she managed a twisty shrug and toss of her head that ended up pointing out the window toward the Gab Lab parked beneath the bower of Igdrasil—“um, well, Del.”

I swear Proxy took in the van and the Packard beyond it, shined up for the day’s event, in a single lightning glance.

“It’s like that, is it?” her tone said she remembered all too well how such things were. “I thought Carrot Top is supposed to be chasing down voices out on the coast by now.”

“He got a grant,” I helpfully provided.

“He’s after sheepherders,” Pop supplied simultaneously.

“He’ll be here for a while yet,” France imparted at the same time.

Proxy studied the trio of us, the crimp between her eyes saying more than she did for a few seconds. “Oh-kay, the young folks will have their fun,” she conceded. If there is such a thing as a warning smile, she gave France one now. “Just don’t let having a good time get in the way of what counts, all right?” With that, she briskly gathered herself. “Well, I guess I might as well hit the road, busy as everybody is around here.”
“Don’t rush off,” Pop’s tone erased the look of relief on France, “we’ve got something to talk over.”

Here it came. Zoe was going to be pea-green about missing this. At the moment, however, I was divided between anticipation and apprehension. Pop wasted no words:

“Things have been going missing.”

Mother and daughter went rigid in the same instant. You could have heard a false eyelash drop in the silence before Proxy at last sighed:

“What things?”

“Little things that disappear and then, surprise, surprise, show up again,” Pop said pointedly. “Wouldn’t you say that’s what happens, Francine?”

It is never good news when a parent resorts to your full name. Grateful it was her instead of me, I watched Francine, as she definitely was back to during this prosecution. Some of the blood seemed to have drained out of her.

“That, again,” she defensively looked back and forth from Pop to Proxy.

“People are always thinking I steal.”

“How come they think that?” Pop pressed.

The leather bracelet was getting a nervous workout. “See, I did kind of take something, back when I was wet behind the ears”--I didn’t appreciate that she indicated in my direction as illustration of that condition--“and didn’t know any better. I learned my lesson, honest.”

“In juvie, right?” Pop did not relent. “For auto theft?”

Resigned to that reputation, she dipped her head. “I figured you’d heard about it from one source or another,” she gestured around to Proxy and me as if we were the suspects, not her. Her hurt expression was like that of a kicked puppy. I couldn’t tell if I was watching a master class in acting or she was as sincere as the day was long, but she rallied herself to look Pop in the eye. “It’s not something I
wanted to tell you myself, is it. ‘Hi, I’m your daughter, and guess what, I was a teenage convict.’”

“Past history,” Proxy rushed into the full silence following that. “No sense getting excited about something that happened way back there. Tom, anyone deserves a second chance.”

“I don’t want to have to be the one to keep count all the time,” he flung back, as frustrated as I had ever seen him. “Damn it, Proxy, the two of you don’t get off that easy, especially you. Does it run in the family or what, one Jones acting up after another until a man can’t count on any kind of behavior but bad?”

She flinched but sat and took it. “Let’s try a little past history,” his temper kept going, “such as why did I ever give in to you when I knew better? Both times, no less. Second chance,” he said savagely, “I could use one myself, every time you show up.”

There may have been more to his outburst, but if so it didn’t register on me in my stunned condition, trying to catch up with the thunderclap of what I had just heard.

“If I’d raised you,” he finally switched back to the daughter situation, “you would’ve had that stealing habit taken out of you in the first five minutes.” Dazed as I was, I realized he had the look in his eye that told a customer to settle down or clear out and Francine knew it too. “You better get serious about life,” he concluded bluntly as the object of his ire stood there rigid as a cadet, “or you’ll end up somewhere a hell of a lot worse than juvie.”

Probably it was piling on, but Proxy couldn’t stop herself from saying crossly, “Francine, you told me you’d kicked that kind of fooling around. No more sticking this, that, and the other in your pocket, you promised.”
The younger woman blinked as if coming to. "Fine, I shouldn't have done any of that, but why is it such a big deal? I put the stuff back, didn't I? That's something in my favor, isn't it?"

It was an impressive try, but not even her bravado could withstand two deadly parental stares. I could see her lip quiver as she confessed:

"It's not an easy habit to break, ain't it. I have to fight it every time. That's--that's why I put the things back, see."

"There now." Proxy saw an opening. "No real harm done, huh? Just a little confusion and now that everybody savvies the situation, she can straighten herself out like you said, Tom."

"That isn't all," he said ominously.

"Then what is?" She cast a questioning glance at Francine, who was looking genuinely surprised.

"The way she makes change."

Absorbing that for a moment, Proxy tried to laugh it off. "Tom, you always was one to pinch pennies until Lincoln needed a hernia belt. Come on, you know how it is, all the way back to the Eagle and I bet it's no different in this joint--guys get to drinking and they spill chicken feed all over the bar and you have to make change from it all night long, it won't come out exactly right a million percent of the time, how can it? A few dimes' difference here and there--"

"No, he's right, Mom," Francine blurted. "I shortchanged a sheepherder because he got my goat." She faced Pop as if pleading before a judge. "I know what you told me, mutton conductors don't always know how to act around people and we have to just leave them alone to soak up drinks and talk to themselves and I've been doing that, really I have. But this one made me so mad I took it out on him, five bucks' worth, in his change." To Pop's credit, he listened as if I had not already given him my eyewitness report on Canada Dan and her. "He caught me at
it, but I bluffed him down, so nothing came of it,” she finished her side of the story.

Proxy just looked at her.

“But see, I made up for that,” Francine protested.

“Made up for it? How?” Pop demanded.

She tugged at the fringe of her vest like a little girl. “I felt kind of bad about doing it to the old geezer. So the next day, the first customer, I overchanged.”

“Over--?” He couldn’t believe what he had just heard. “Gave back too much change?”

“Yeah. It was what’s-her-name, the stuck-up one?”

“Velma?” Pop ventured cautiously.

“Sure, her. I slipped the same five into the money back for her drink. I saw her count it a couple of times like she couldn’t believe it. But she didn’t give back the fiver.”

We sat there like the three monkeys, fixed on her. Nothing stirred in the room except Francine’s nervous fingers. Pop came to life first, mustering a deep breath before starting in.

“Look, bartending doesn’t work that way. I don’t know what kind of a conscience you think you have, but you can’t cheat one customer and pass it along like gravy to another one and have it come out even. All that’ll get you is both of them wondering what kind of cockeyed bee ess is going on. And word like that gets around, don’t think it doesn’t. The joint’s reputation would be down the drain in no time.” Plainly that was his limit. “I hate to do it,” he threw up his hands, “but I’m gonna have to can you.”

Francine looked resigned to the verdict, but Proxy did not.

“Cut her a break, Tom. She’s just a kid.”

“Twenty-one?”
“Some of us grow up slower than others,” Proxy hedged. She turned to her daughter. “Honey,” she said sorrowfully, “you couldn’t have messed up this chance any worse if you’d tried.” She paused for effect; Marilyn Monroe could not have done a better job of creating breathy expectation. “But that’s in the past,” she reasoned, although it barely was. “You’re going to quit doing it, aren’t you. Stop taking things that aren’t worth taking in the first place?”

“I guess I have to, don’t I,” came the sulky answer, along with more demure tugging at the vest fringe.

“You’re damn right you do,” Pop weighed in. He looked exasperated but uncertain. If I knew anything about it, his own conscience was giving him too much trouble. I saw him start to say something, stop, squint as if squeezing out a decision, and then deliver it.

“I’m probably going to kick myself for this, but if I give you another try, will you behave different?”

My mind still stuck on the lightning bolt way back there, it was as much as I could do to follow where all the back-and-forth seemed to be ending up: with me having a straightened-out sister? Was that possible?

Francine tossed her head as if deciding then and there. “I’ll do better,” she vowed, “but you’ve got do something for me, Tom. You and Rusty.”

Me? Why? How did I get into the bargaining? Panic must have been written all over me because Pop said, “Don’t come unglued, kiddo. Let’s hear what she means.”

“Don’t tell Del about what I got myself into?” she practically whispered it, she was so intense. “I mean, let me do it somehow, after today.” She gave us a pleading look. “Honest, I’ll tell him everything. Just not right now, okay?”

Pop seemed to consider this from up, down, and sideways before finally replying. “As far as I can tell, you haven’t been shortchanging Delano,” he said
drily. "If he’s happy to be in the dark, we’ll keep our traps shut for now. Right, Rusty?"

"Uh, okay."

Proxy had the last word. "See how things work out when you don’t get excited?"

Busy fussing the Gab Lab into readiness, Del looked on curiously as we poured out of the house, Pop rushing off to deal with last-minute derby details, Proxy gunning the Cadillac down the alley, Francine giving a quick yoo-hoo wave and calling out that she’d be ready after one more little thing in the bathroom, and me scooting across the yard to stay safely out of her vicinity.

"The family gathering go all right?" Del asked, a smile on him as big as the day, when I reached the van. He was busy stuffing extra tape reels and other odds and ends of recording gear in his safari shirt.

"Right as rain," one of Pop’s sayings that I never understood in the first place came to my rescue. I still was trying to cope with the mental lightning strike back there in the middle of his tirade to Proxy. That and a future with a sister to go straight but who had never managed to do so before, and a father pulled this way and that by his conscience, and--I had to try to find out in a hurry, France would be here any minute. "Say, mister," I piped up in a stagey voice, "how are you fixed for answers?"

"They’re running out my ears, my good fellow," Del good-naturedly joined in the bit. "In what manner may I enlighten you?"

"Is ‘Jones’ ever one those nicknames, like ‘Canada Dan’?"

He stopped loading his pockets to think that over. "A behavioral one? I can’t imagine how, a plain standard family name like that. What makes you ask?"
"Oh, there were a couple of tourists in the bar," I made up as fast as I could think, which was none too fast, "and so, one of them did something the other one didn’t like, and the other one seemed to be calling him a name like that, something about with him it was one Jones acting up after another until you couldn’t count on any kind of behavior from him but bad, so I wondered." He clucked his tongue in understanding. "Ah, of course, that kind of Jones. Small j. It means a compulsion, something you keep doing, against better judgment. Monkey on the shoulder," he did a scary bit, twitching jerkily as if trying to shake off a simian that wouldn’t let go. I stood petrified, needing to hear no more but at the mercy of Del’s encyclopedic tendency as he pondered out loud the further meaning of having a Jones, guessing that the expression came from the jazz world where various kinds of unwise behavior were not unknown. "That turster must be a real problem case," he finished.

"Huh? Yeah. Awful."

"Who’s a problem case?" The whippy voice caught us by surprise.

"Nobody I know, I hope." Coming up on the van from the yard side, the piano girl, as I couldn’t help thinking of her ever since hearing it from Canada Dan, looked tense as a tightwire walker, but then she normally did. Her fixed grin of greeting, if that’s what it was, flashed at me before settling onto Del. I shook my head so swiftly my eyeballs rattled, to show her I hadn’t told him about her packrat episodes and the rest.

"La belle France," he greeted her in a goofy boyfriend way. "You look sensational," he admired, taking a good long look. "Ready for all the fishing?"

"Can’t hardly wait." Her fingers played in the buckskin vest fringe as she worked up to saying: "You know what? I’ve gone back to ‘Francine’. By popular demand, sort of."
"Hmm?" Del puzzled over her name switcheroo a moment, then smiled unconcernedly. "'By any other name,' as the poet said," he proclaimed, a gallantry that evidently was as far over her head as mine. Nonetheless, Francine gave him a gaze full of reward.

The lovey atmosphere was growing too thick for me. Besides, I badly needed a chance to think, given all that had happened in the last little while. "I... have to put the banner on the Packard," I started to make my escape, "I better get at that."

"I'll give you a hand," said Francine.

"No, no, I can do it myself, honest."

"Uh-uh, I insist."

Knowing I was in for it from her--Pop obviously had not learned about the shortchanging episode from some stray little bird--I fetched the banner out of storage and trudged down the driveway to the hulking old car, the former France shadowing me as if I might get away. Behind us, Del was happily trying his portable tape recorder, "Testing, one, two, three--" wondered if she knew the Packard was where it happened--she happened--because of its spacious damn back seat. If so, she didn’t let on, and simply eyed the banner as I flopped one part of it--CATCH 'EM--onto the trunk and then the other--TO THE LIMIT! She still didn’t say anything until we were nearly done tying the thing to the taillights and trunk handle and so on.

"I’ve been thinking, buddy." She kept her voice low so it wouldn’t carry to the van. "You did me a real favor by tipping off your--our dad about me messing up the way I did. So, big kissy thanks."

I was wary. "How was that any favor?"

She tossed her head as if clearing that black mane of hers out of the way. "It makes me get myself squared away. Don’t have any choice now, do I."
Gingerly watching her, I wondered if a person could make a jones go away just like that. The one that was giving me a waking nightmare didn’t show any sign of going anywhere.

Zoe could tell right away I was a mental mess.

“What happened?” she asked in a rushed voice, rushing out of the cafe after I feverishly tapped on the window. “Everything nailed down come loose?”

“Just about.” There wasn’t time, as we headed like homing pigeons to the Medicine Lodge and the sanctum of the back room, to tell her all that had happened at the house. I rushed through the parts about Proxy showing up unexpectedly and Francine owning up to packrat behavior and Del being kept in the dark until the right time, whenever that was, while she listened hard. I was wrapping it up, none too tidily, by the time we mounted the landing and claimed our spot under the mute vent, the saloon silent around us front and back. She waited until I reached my stopping point to say in some puzzlement:

“So, didn’t everything work out hunky-dory? France-cine,” she caught up with the renaming, “has to go straight or hit the road, right?”

“That isn’t all,” I echoed Pop.

Sounding worried, Zoe examined me more closely. “Rusty, you look peaked. You aren’t going to throw up or something, are you?”

“Huh-uh, it’s not that.”

“What, then?”

“I think I found out—”

The words wouldn’t come, until I forced them to.

“I think I found out Proxy is my mother.”
It made a crazy kind of sense, gaps filled in, veils lifted, the full story revealed after all this time. Pop’s pained version of my mother, whenever I ventured to find out anything whatsoever about her, must have been that she was a jones, not a Jones as I’d thought. By his own saying so, Proxy fit that; the jonesiest kind of compulsion, according to his outburst in the house, overcoming him twice. It was the twice that hit home with me. The first time, the night in the Packard, Francine as living proof of unrestrained behavior. But the other--it did not take much imagination to conjure it happening in Canada, he on one of those trips to sell off back-room loot and she in the business of taxi-dancing or worse, and they cross paths, maybe in Medicine Hat--‘Yeah, I know all about the the railroad neighborhood’--and out of that intersection comes me, nine months later. An awful lot was explained that way. Proxy’s squinty-eyed manner of looking at me. Pop’s hazy description of my nativity, the housekeeper story much more convenient than one beginning, ‘Guess what, Tom. Remember that night in Medicine Hat?’ As to Francine, this all could have transpired without her ever knowing, given Proxy’s motherhood record of being absent for years at a time.
Zoe had the logical question as this spilled out of me. "Why wouldn’t your dad and Proxy get married when they knew they were having you?"

“I bet she didn’t want to,” I hazardred not much of a guess. She was a different breed of cat, Pop had outright said so. And not the marrying kind, particularly with a scandalous first husband to live down. No, it made sense to me that Proxy would have dealt herself out of any matrimony, and probably me into the nearest orphanage. except for Pop saying something like "Then I’ll raise the kid myself" and depositing me in Phoenix, and the rest was history.

"Whew." Zoe’s eyes were big with awe at this family saga of mine, and given her dramatic instinct, maybe a touch of envy. “Are you going to let on to your dad that you know?”

“I--I can’t make up my mind.” Neither choice held real appeal. I’d been gritting and bearing it ever since two women came along out of nowhere to upset perfectly sound bachelor life, and that was getting profoundly wearing. Yet there are some questions you don’t ask because of the answer it might bring. What if I boldly asked Pop whether Proxy was indeed my mother and he let his conscience run away with itself and replied, ‘You know what, she is, and now that it’s out in the open, she and I ought to fix this family situation and do it right for a change and get hitched and we all live together. How’s that grab you?’

Right where I did not want to be grabbed, that’s where, if it was selfish not to want to share my father’s life and mine with someone as slippery as Proxy Duff, then I was hopelessly selfish.

Shocked, Zoe asked, “Your dad wouldn’t really do something like that, would he?”

“Who knows? He grouses about Proxy and how she’s always up to something, but he ends up doing what she wants.”
Eyes big with sympathy, Zoe watched me in a hush. In the stillness of the back room not even the model planes stirred overhead, and the menagerie of items down on the floor and along the walls were like a museum everyone had passed through but the two of us. I could see her working on my predicament as mightily as I was, but the answer wasn’t revealing itself.

The bang of the door from the bar room side flying open jarred us both.

“There you are,” Pop peered up at us, sounding like a man in all kinds of a hurry. “Time to shake a leg, kiddo, we’ve got to get out to the rezavoy. Your folks will be looking for you, princess.” On whatever checklist a fishing derby chairman has to carry in his head, however, he paused for a regretful second to scratch one off: “Tell your dad we won’t need any chicken guts this time around.”

The Derby Day crowd, even as early as Pop and I and the Packard pulled in to the parking lot on the bluff, already was starting to put the mudjacks’ reunion to shame for size and high spirits, and while the dam was modest compared to Fort Peck, it held an even more impressive amount of water than when I had caught my trophy trout. By now Rainbow Reservoir was practically brimming, as if all the weather of the year had collected in liquid form within its banks. The spillway was a sight to see, so much overflow rushing out the floodgate in a white gush and cascading down into the South Fork that it sounded like a natural waterfall. As we were getting out the loudspeaker equipment and other derby paraphernalia he was in charge of, being greeted all the while by people bristling with rods and reels, Pop surveyed the scene of the crowd staking out spots along the gravelly shoreline.

“How about that, maybe I knew what I was doing,” he said with satisfaction, looking at where someone from his committee had roped off the muddy top of the dam as he’d directed. “Not that it wouldn’t be fun to see a Zane or two slip into the water, hey?”
Just then we heard a familiar twang, Turk Turco calling out from where he had parked a highway department flatbed truck, donated or at least borrowed for the day, on the shoulder of ground just above the dam to serve as the speaker’s stand. “Over here, Tom, we’ll get the glory horn set up for you if Jojo doesn’t electrocute himself doing it.”

“Montana Power to the rescue,” Joe Quigg grunted as he swung heavy batteries onto the truckbed to operate the loudspeaker and amplifier.

Pop gladly yielded the equipment to them so he could move on to overseeing the refreshments area, more his department, and in my unsettled mood I trailed close behind him as he plunged into all that needed doing, questions answered, directions given, decisions made. Booths had to be set up, the Rotarians with their inferior beer, the Constantines at their Top Spot hotdog stand, the Ladies’ Aid with tables of baked goods, and the goodwill ones beyond those. Across the years the Gros Ventre fishing derby had grown to such importance that the state Fish and Game agency, known as the Frog and Goose guys, now dispatched a couple of game wardens to sell hunting licenses and provide free fish gutting for the derby contestants; Pop wisely put them and their gut buckets farthest away from the food booths. Even the Air Force flyboys had a booth this year, under the banner “The Minuteman Missile—America’s Ace in the Hole,” where they gave away blue ballpoint pens. Then there was the sign-up table and the judges’ setup for measuring and weighing fish, that whole side of the parking lot a community encampment where Pop was something like the temporary mayor.

To me now that culminating day of the summer, of the year really, seems like one long dream, everything that began with Proxy’s Cadillac nosing into the driveway and the thundrous disclosures that followed and then the tremendous gathering at the derby as if the audience had come to see what Tom Harry would bring about next. There are some days in a person’s life, only ever a few, that are
marked to be remembered forever even as they are happening. Hypnotically I watched my constantly-in-motion father at his chairmanship tasks—‘I wouldn’t make too much of that ‘ace in the hole’ business if I were you, Sarge, there are some jokers in this crowd....I’m sorry, Louise, but like I told Howie, the ladies will just have to get by with one table for pies....You didn’t think to bring a tub of ice, Fred? That’s sure too bad, I guess people will have to get used to warm beer’—in charge by right of his years at it in legendary circumstances in the Medicine Lodge. The most important person in the Two Medicine country, at least today. I should have been busting my buttons with pride for him, and at times I was, but the repeated history of him and Proxy, creeping closer all the time, kept haunting me. Her for a mother. What does it take to empty a head of something you do not want there? I could not get over the deepset wish to have Pop for myself, to have life go on mostly as it had been, Francine notwithstanding, at the joint, at the house, at the four corners of our given world.

Trailing after him with this churning in my mind as he strode from one derby duty to the next, I was sticking so close I was nearly riding his shirttail. When he finally ducked around to the side of the Frog and Goose booth to catch his breath and have a cigarette, he read my face and asked in concern:

“You doing all right, kiddo?”

“Trying to.”

“Hey, don’t let this morning’s commotion get you down,” he lowered his voice just enough. “We got Francine onto the straight and narrow or else, didn’t we? That’s something.” Busy even when he wasn’t, he was keeping an eye on the derby doings while talking to me. “You know what, I still kind of wish you were fishing today, it’d take your mind off other things.” I must have shown alarm, because he gave me a wry look. “Relax, you’re right, I can’t have the chairman’s
son catching the prize rainbow. Go have some fun while I tend to things, can’t you? See what Zoe is up to, how about.”

She saw me coming as I wended through the crowd to her folks’ hotdog stand, and as quick as she pantomimed blindly eating a ballpark weiner, my spirits climbed, although it still was heavy lifting.

“I’m sprung, Muscles,” at least I wasn’t so far gone I couldn’t feebly do a bit, “what do you say we vacate the space?”

“That’s an idea if I ever heard one, Ace. Let me have a chinnie with the warden.” With business at the Top Spot stand keeping her mother hopping and her father laboring over the grill of curling frankfurters, her parents were as glad to shoo her off to our own pursuits as Pop had been with me.

Off we went, life finally feeling right to me with Zoe at my side. She fell quiet as we roved the derby area, being met everywhere with greetings by name to me and friendly if curious glances at her. You could have walked away with the town, so many people from Gros Ventre had come out for the big day. Even Cloyce Reinking was on hand, in spousal loyalty to Bill’s Chamber of Commerce position, we figured. Spying us, she provided a comically raised eyebrow, very much as Lady Bracknell might have at the news that people pursued fish when foxes were so much more visible to the eye, and we couldn’t help but giggle.

On the other hand, it was a middle finger lifted in our direction when Duane Zane came tagging after his father, Earl passing Pop’s vicinity with his nose in the air.

As if the Zanes were a bad omen, Zoe grew more somber as we wandered past family bunches visiting with one another along the reservoir shore while waiting for the derby’s starting time. At the section where ten- to thirteen-year-olds were grouped, Jimmy and Hal and some others spotted us and waved and hollered.
“Come on,” I tried to put some enthusiasm into my social role, “better meet the guys, they’re in our grade.”

“Huh-uh,” she surprised me, squirming her shoulders. “Later.”

I gestured to the curious classmates that we were urgently wanted by waiting parents and we kept going. Zoe was looking vacant-eyed in a way that I knew was no bit.

“Something the matter?”

“Ooh, nothing, really.”

“Zo-oe, tell me.”

“It’s a hunnerd percent dumb.”

“Come on.” I snapped my fingers all the way back to Shakespeare. ”How now, unhappy youth?”

A teeny smile trembled on her at that, but then she looked away and around at the derby crowd. “You know everybody here. And the kids. For me, they’re”--she struggled to put it into words--“it’s all new, Rusty.”

As fumbling as her emotion was, I felt it in a flash, exactly what she meant. The inchoate sense of things about to change. I couldn’t tell whether Zoe was on the verge of crying, but I was. We both knew, a teaching as tragic at our age as at any other we could imagine then, one that school was never needed for. It was right there in our faces, together; there might be other summers, other years, but never again like this.

“School doesn’t get us for a couple days yet,” I tried to make the best of it.

“Saved until the bell, I guess,” she said with the bravado I loved in her.

“Don’t worry ahead,” I said as if I wasn’t a prime example. “We’ll think of something, Muscles.”
That twitched a grin out her, and at the same time I saw her eyes widen as dramatically as ever. "Here they are," she whispered, ready for the next act, "the piano girl and her main squeeze."

Whatever they had been up to, Del and Francine were conspicuously tardy in arriving. I could tell by the giddy expression on him as he hopped out of the van that she had not yet told him anything, except maybe whatever they said to each other between kisses. Francine met us with her poker face, and I supposed it counted in her favor if she had decided to bluff her way through the day without upsetting Del in his work. But then? When she did get around to adding to the sweet nothings something like "Guess what, I'm kind of a thief by nature"—well, who could predict?

That was when and this was now, Del all business as he flung open the side doors of the Gab Lab. "And now, for a sound portrait of the Gros Ventre fishing derby, stay tuned," he intoned like the most baritone of radio announcers and began loading himself with recording gear.

Zoe and I had seen him at this before, but it was new to Francine, as was the glistening reservoir and the outdoor setting tucked against the mountains and the mob of people at the booths and the throng down along the shoreline. "Jeez, Dellie, everybody and his dog are here. How do you go about this?"

"Good question." He paused in checking the connections on the hefty portable tape recorder, making sure everything worked, and scanned the busy scene. The answer seemed to come to him from the dam, the rush of water making him cock his good ear. "Aha! Start with that."

"Ambience," Zoe confidently defined for Francine's benefit, who looked like she needed it.
“Let’s go, derby fans,” Del set off with headphones slung around his neck and the recorder swinging at his side like a suitcase, the three of us in his wake. He headed swiftly for the speaker-stand truck where Pop was going over last things with various committee members about to take up their assignments, everyone jaunty as free spenders at a carnival.

Memory heightens these things, but I have my own sound portrait as clear to the inner ear as if it all was happening again now, Francine sweetly saying to Turk Turco and Joe Quigg as we passed their side of the truck, “If it isn’t my favorite customers,” and as quick as she had gone by Turk moaning wistfully, “It must be nice, to be a ladies’ man,” and Joe telling him, “Eat your heart out, Turco, you’re never gonna have red hair and a crewcut,” and Del glancing back at them with a distracted “Hmm?” and Zoe silently delighting in it all with me as we had done so many, many times in the sift of the vent. If only the rest of life was as clear as the voices of that time.

The next was Pop’s, greeting Del and Francine as he looked up with an arched eyebrow from dispatching the last of his committee volunteers. “Get lost getting here, did you?”

Right away Francine looked guilty, but one thing about Del, you couldn’t deter him when he had something in mind. “I’m glad we haven’t missed anything,” he went right past Pop’s remark. And immediately inclined his head toward the rushing spillway. “Tom, Mister Chairman I should say, I need to go out there for a few minutes. It sounds like Niagara. It’ll be fantastic on tape.”

No doubt remembering the tick episode, Pop gave him a warning look.

“Promise not to slip and fall in?”

“Absolutely.”
"Okay, then, go to it," he shook his head at Del’s determination to catch noise while several hundred people waited to catch trout. "Make it snappy, we’re about to start the fishing."

Wasting no time, Del ducked under the rope, holding it up in hopeful fashion for Francine. "Coming?"

"Not this kid," she and her clean new britches shied back from the muddy dam, "I’ll cheer from here, thanks." I didn’t blame her, knowing how single-minded Del could be when he had the microphone on and the tape reel hypnotically turning; not exactly lively company. Resigned to going solo, already he was concentrating on his recording gear, checking his multitudinous pockets for things and automatically putting on his headphones, big as soupbowls, as he set off for the middle of the dam, careful of his footing while lugging the recorder.

Watching his progress, Pop suggested in a way that did not want any argument that Zoe and I hop up on the truckbed to sit during the derby, so he wouldn’t have any more stray wanderers to try keep track of. Having said that, he considered Francine, standing there by herself looking more than a little lost, the morning confrontation still clouding his brow as he studied her. "You too, I guess," his expression lifted as he jerked his head toward the truckbed. "All the problem children in one bunch, okay?"

Relief flooded her at the half-humorous note of forgiveness, tolerance, whatever it was she heard in that. "Fine," she said hastily and started to scoocho up onto the truck beside Zoe and me, before conscience seemed to catch up with her. She worked her mouth as if tasting the words carefully first. "Tom? I’m sorry about--you know, everything."

"That puts you back in the human race," he accepted that gravely. "Come on, rest your bones until Delano gets back," and she gratefully hopped up as Zoe and I squirmed over to make room for her.
With the three of us under control, Pop took a look around at the reservoir scene and drew a sighing breath, the kind that told me he wished he had time for a cigarette. “Yeah, I got a fishing derby to run, don’t I,” his eye caught mine.

Squinting the way he did when he was about to open the Medicine Lodge for business, he signaled to Bill Reinking over at the sign-up table that all was ready. Seeing this, Turk and Joe did something to the sound system that caused the customary amplifier howl, screechy enough it might have startled Del had he not been happily earmuffled by his headphones as he reached the concrete apron of the spillway and set down his recorder to punch buttons and read dials. “Cripes, it sounds like we’re murdering a cat,” Pop grunted as he climbed onto the truck in back of where Zoe and I and Francine were perched like important guests. He gingerly took the microphone Joe handed up to him, cleared his throat a couple of times and began the proceedings:

“WELCOME, EVERYBODY, TO THE GROS VENTRE FISHING DERBY, AGAIN THIS YEAR,” his voice resounded out over the reservoir and the clapping gathering. “HAVE YOU NOTICED THAT BLUE SKY? NO WATER FOR A CHASER TODAY, BY ORDER OF THE MANAGEMENT.”

The crowd really applauded now, perfectly willing to let the maestro of the Medicine Lodge take credit for the dry weather. Zoe of course watched Pop in his master of ceremonies role as if he were Shakespeare come to life, and Francine gave his opening effort a twitchy smile, but a smile. Myself, I prayed he wouldn’t get carried away and be reminded of a story as he’d done at the beer banquet; success doesn’t necessarily strike twice when it comes to bartender jokes.

Squinting hard now at a sheet of paper the sun was catching, he rolled on: “BEFORE WE GET SET STARTED THROWING FOOD TO THE FISH, THERE ARE SOME FOLKS I HAVE TO THANK FOR-- ” and I relaxed about at least one peril.
While he was conscientously droning through that list, more than ever I felt like a spectator to a colossal dream, memory mingling with all I was witnessing. At the nearest area of contestants strung thick along the reservoir, the little kids restlessly were pointing their fishing poles in as many directions as quills on a porcupine. How mature I felt, remembering when I was like them. An inch away from me on one side sat wondrous Zoe, who I would have given almost anything to have for a real sister, and all but touching on my other side the actual one, Francine whose middle name seemed to be Trouble, and in trying to fit the contradictory two of them into my own small world, how childish I felt, hopelessly twelve years old in circumstances that would have taxed much older brains.

Meanwhile my father, author of disappointments and triumphs and regular surprises in between, stood there bigger than life on his stage for the day, his voice rolling out over the water and shore, as central a figure in this panorama as he had been on the occasion of the Fort Peck reunion. Tom Harry as historic as Leadbelly. How clear and simple that had seemed before Proxy arrived in a Cadillac typhoon of dust. Before the story of my life started coming unraveled in me.

Zoe, thank heavens, had been restlessly dandling her feet over the edge of the truckbed and taking things in while I was so absorbed in myself. I snapped to at her sudden words under Pop’s amplified ones:

"Is that supposed to be like that?"

Francine and I saw in the same instant where she was pointing to on the downstream face of the dam, a portion of the earthen slope that did not look mud-brown like the rest but was glistening the way the sun reflects off something wet.

"Pop!"

"Tom!"

Our alarmed yells together startled him to a stop in mid-sentence, and he must have sensed what we were shouting about from the sound of our voices.
Quicker than I would have thought humanly possible, he was motioning everyone to stay back from the causeway and giving a full-throated roar into the mike:

"DELANO! GET OFF THE DAM! DELANO!"

It was no use, nothing at this distance was. The kneeling figure out there with earphones on blissfully tuning in the roar of the spillway was deaf to even amplified shouts, and Francine’s anguished "Dellie! Look up, damn it!" never stood a chance.

I suppose you never know what you will do in such a situation, until you do it. I launched off the truckbed running as hard as I could toward the dam, Zoe right behind me.

"HEY, NO!" Pop’s shouts now were followed by the death shriek of the mike as he scrambled off the truck in pursuit of us. No one else was near enough to be any help except Francine, who with presence of mind caught up with Zoe and wrested her, struggling and howling bloody murder, back toward shore as I raced onto the causeway. There’s a saying that you run from danger with your heart in your mouth, and that was even more true for me as I ran headlong to it, not brave, not even close, just blindly determined to reach Del before a reservoir full of water did.

How I kept to my feet on the muddy top of the dam was a miracle, maybe explainable by the gripping fear of falling; I simply didn’t dare lose my balance. By now Del, taking his sweet time with his beloved equipment, was only yards away, but I felt the dam do something under me. All the stories of the slide at Fort Peck had it right, there is an odd sensation of suspended time when the earth begins to move.

Out of breath or so scared my breathing wasn’t working right—it pretty much came to the same—I floundered onto the concrete apron of the spillway and practically bowled Del over as I snatched his headphones off.
“Ow!” He grabbed a smarting ear, a look of surprise on him at my bad manners. “Rusty, what--?”

“The dam’s leaking, come on!”

You most definitely did, Del, but not before scooping up your recording equipment. I wasn’t waiting around to argue the point, already flinging myself back along the causeway toward where Pop and Turk and Joe had rushed down to the dam and out as far as they could sanely risk on the shifting soil and were yelling every kind of encouragement, although I have always wondered if any of it ever registered on you, if you were deaf even to Francine’s screams of “Drop it! Dellie, leave the damn thing!” and Zoe’s wailing urgings to us both. In any case, when I reached firm enough ground to whirl and look back for a second, you were lugging your precious tape recorder in a struggling crablegged run like a man in some ridiculous picnic race.

Which is why I made it to the safety of the shore, and you didn’t.

“Watch out, it’s gonna go!” Pop yelled, grabbing me around the waist and pulling me with him as the bunch of us stumbled our way higher on the bank, Zoe still in Francine’s clutch up there as pandemonium spread among the crowd. People would be saying for the rest of their lives they were there that day, when the Rainbow dam broke, although actually it was a series of collapses, avalanches almost in slow motion, as pockets of soil big as sidehills slid off the core of the dam one after another.

The wet patch Zoe had spied was Del’s undoing. He was nearly to the end of the causeway—“Come on, you’ve got it made!” Pop shouted as I would have if I’d had breath left—when that section simply slipped sideways off the dam, carrying him like a surfboarder riding a wave of dirt.

Surely it happened in a matter of moments, but in memory it took much more than that, the long-limbed figure swept into the cascade of soil, the tape
recorder tumbling to its own fate. Pop was clutching me so hard it hurt as we watched Del disappear from sight.

Whatever is worse than a sob burst out of me as I buried my face in my father’s chest and he ducked his head to mine, still gripping me tight. “Don’t,” he said brokenly, and choked up in a spasm of his own.

It was Zoe, farther up the embankment, who cried out:

“There he is!”

Not much of him, actually, the red head the only thing that wasn’t mud-colored there against the side of the bluff where he had been flung and was clinging to a rock outcropping like a swimmer to a reef. If she had not spotted him in time, who knows? He was barely holding on by the time Turk and Joe could scramble down to him, risking themselves that close to the cascade of earth and water. Between them they managed to drag him up the slope and get him to the truck, where he collapsed on the running board. His head back against the door, Francine hugging him muddy mess that he was and Pop and Zoe and I asking him a dozen ways whether he was all right, Del gasped out, “Now I know what the mudjacks were talking about.”

All of this was happening in the thunder of the water as Rainbow Reservoir disgorged a coulee-wide torrent before hundreds of disbelieving eyes. The story of that day was far from over. For the floodwater had no place to go but down the course of the South Fork and on into the English Creek valley, where Gros Ventre lay in its way.