

how I turned my head. If this wasn't the recipe for a thirty-year winter, I didn't know what was. Beneath the bare cottonwood trees, English Creek was frozen over, an icy pond that went on for miles. The entire town of Gros Ventre looked like something that had been left in the freezer too long.

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

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

"Hi, Eskimo." Howie's croaky greeting past the cigarette nursed in the corner of his mouth did not tell me what I wanted to know.

"Isn't... isn't he back yet?"

A shake of the old bald head.

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

"That's hunnerd percent gospel truth," Snoose Syvertsen backed that up with vigorous nods.

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

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

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

"Why isn't he back by now?"

"He's delayed, is why," Howie said crabbily. He parted with his cigarette long enough to pluck a shred of tobacco off his tongue. "The road's closed up there." Apology was not in Howie's vocabulary, but his tone softened a trifle as he said, "He'll show up. Now scoot."

Comma needed to clarify it's not that the road is closed up there (somewhere), but is closed, up there (in Canada).

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

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"Hunnerd percent," Snoose Syvertsen wagged his head sadly.

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

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This night was the darkest of my life in every way. I lay under strange old heavy blankets in that musty bedroom, listening to the wind, knowing it was whipping up the snow into a ground blizzard, the

absolute worst thing for Pop if he was out there somewhere trying to drive home. My thoughts swirled and whirled as well. I blamed him for going by himself in this terrible weather, I blamed myself for not throwing such a fit he'd have taken me with him, for if I had gone along he would not have dared to let anything disastrous happen, right? In theory, anyway. This night I resented the existence of thirty-year winters, this night I could not get rid of the fear under the covers with me, fear that this time Pop's trip was going to lead to unimaginable disaster, except I was imagining it.

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There in the bone-chilling dark, the two dangers of his trips merged treacherously in my mind. If he had a love interest that kept drawing him north, there was an insidious side to such an affair. Namely, what if he stumbled into "maddermoany," as he'd done once already, and this woman didn't want a kid around? Wouldn't he be forced to abandon me, in one unwelcome direction or the other? Then which was worse, Arizona or somewhere unknown? In my years with him, Phoenix had gradually diminished to Christmas cards and birthday cards curtly signed, "Ever, Aunt Marge." It still was very much on the map, though, down there with the sand and sidewinders and cactuses. Ending up back in Aunt Marge's maniac den with Ronny and Danny seemed to me a one-way ticket to hell. But against that known peril was the great unknown one, my vanished mother. I simply knew virtually nothing about the woman who had borne me. She existed only in my father's extremely few remarks about her, mainly this one: "We split the blanket when she pulled out on me and you, and that's that." It wasn't, as far as I was concerned.

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I had learned her maiden name the hard way, by innocently asking Pop after I understood enough about marriage to be curious about that. "Joanie Jones if there ever was one," he let out in one long, exasperated breath. "Why?" My stammered answer must have amounted to, Because. He reminded me yet again she had pulled out on us when I was still in the cradle and it was best for all concerned to have her out of our life. And while that was that one more time, I came out of it finally able to fit "Joanie Jones" onto the hazy outline of the woman who gave me birth. I went to school with a Janie and a

Susie, so the girlish first name did not trouble me, although if you had a choice, you want your mother to be named something nice like Gwendolyn, don't you. "Jones" I found harder to deal with; how anything about her could be figured out from that, I hadn't arrived at. In any case, her name could not tell me why she up and left a husband and a baby, and I harbored my own version of what must have divorced her from Pop, and, for that matter, me. The Medicine Lodge, what else? It made sense. If, say, she disapproved of liquor, as there were people in the world who did, would she stay married to a bartender? Plainly not. Admittedly, leaving me—by way of Pop—to the clutches of Aunt Marge's clan did not win her any high marks as a mother, but parents do whatever suits them, for good reason or not, every kid learns that.

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Yet, gone from almost my entire life though my mother was, what if I was handed over to her if the worst happened to Pop? Would she even want me, reared in saloon circumstances as I was and by a man she couldn't stand? For that matter, would I want to be with her, a total stranger, a dozen years of separation the only thing we had in common?

My thoughts kept jittering back and forth: better the demon I knew—Ronny—or the phantom I didn't—her—if this diabolical trip did my father in, one way or another? Everything churned in my mind, except anything resembling a right answer. I huddled miserably under the covers, ashamed that I was near tears not only for him but for myself.

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I heard Howie get up in the night. The toilet flushed, the slap-slap of slippers stopped at my bedroom doorway.

"You're awake, aren't you." I could see his bald head in the light from all the snow.

"Uh-huh."

"How about some warm milk to help you sleep?"

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

"There's a path wore in the floor about that," Howie readily granted. He shuffled back to bed, but

not before saying: "Your old man generally knows what he's doing. He'll make it back tomorrow, you'll see."

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

"Hey. Kiddo. Rise and shine."

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

"Wh-what time is it?"

"Saturday. Come on, upsy daisy, let's get over to our place."

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

The two of us floundered out to the Packard, purring like a limousine, through fresh snow up to the top buckles of our overshoes. He looked like he'd been pulled through a knothole, mussed, weary-eyed, distracted. But he drove home capably enough, taking advantage of the deep set of wheel tracks someone earlier had left, then, at the untouched snow of the alley and our driveway, he floored the gas pedal and fishtailed the old car to its natural parking spot beneath the bare-bone branches of Igdrasil. The gunboat Buick, in its spot, was under so much snow, it resembled an igloo, and I wished for the same to happen to the Packard, if that's what it took to keep Tom Harry home.

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

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The house was so chilly, we kept our coats on at first. Neither of us saying anything, I set the table and things like that while he made coffee. He crucially needed some, I saw. He still was looking nearly done in, the lines in his face deeper than ever, his pompadour flopping to the sides. Worst of all, his pouring hand shook a little in filling the coffee cup. But when the house warmed up <sup>some</sup> a little, he shed his coat and took over the kitchen, as though he were back in the barroom, getting out the soup bowls and big spoons.

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

“Oyster.”

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

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

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

“Howie said the road was closed.”

“Howie is not the last word on every damn thing.” He started to dip his spoon, then felt my look.

“It was shut overnight, is all.”

“Then where did you spend the night?”

The only answer was a slurp of soup, which he chased with a swig of coffee.

“Pop? Did you hear? Where’d—”

“In the car, if you really have to know.”

At least he hadn’t been with some woman. Or had he? “Were... were you stuck?”

“Hell, no. There was just a roadblock until the snowplows got things cleared.”

The trickle of fear in me ever since last night pooled into terror. “But... don’t people die from the

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exhaust, sitting there like that?"

Irritably he tried to spoon up an oyster, which slipped back into the bowl. "I didn't, did ~~...~~ Will you get your mind off this? The Mounties are the highway cops up there, and they kept checking on all the cars so nobody went to sleep with the motor running. Satisfied now?"

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Not by a million miles. I swallowed hard, which had nothing to do with breakfast, and spoke the plain truth. "I don't want you to go on these trips like you do."

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"I wouldn't need three guesses on that."

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"They scare me worse than anything."

"Hey, don't exaggerate," he gruffly instructed.

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

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

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

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

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"Then why do you have to?"

"There are things that just won't wait."

"What things?"

"Things," he **despaired**, as if those were too numerous to face over breakfast. "You see me fighting the bills like I do, sometimes it's just worse, is all." He started to say something more, but stopped and ran a hand through his hair, smoothing the black in with the silver. "Rule number one is, you got to play

**Comment [CE22]:** Ed/au: "Despaired" is not a speech verb; should this start as a new sentence, or can it be changed to "he said despairingly, as if ..."  
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the hand you been dealt.”

“I thought it was don’t wait until you hear from—”

“Don’t split hairs at this time of day, okay?” With obvious effort he steadied his voice and his gaze at me. “The back-room loot helps out with things, that’s all there is to it.”

“But why do you need to go all the way to Canada? Why can’t you just make a trip to someplace close for a change, like Great Falls? When it’s not snowing like crazy?”

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

I must have looked immovably skeptical.

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

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

“Really? That much? For those old things?”

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

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

“We’ll see. Pass the crackers.”

Comment [CE23]: Change to Pop for new paragraph?

STET

A Saturday, even in the heart of winter, meant getting ready for Saturday night, and so he pretty soon directed himself to the saloon, and I stuck right with him, making up for lost time if I could. Howie wisely had left the heat up overnight and the place was livable when we stepped in and started doing things. Pop took a look in the barroom, where the floor showed all the evidence of snowy feet tracking

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in while he was away, but he only muttered, "First mess first," and climbed the stairs to the landing to contend with the stack of bills that had come in at the end of the year. I kept busy down below at my small chores of sorting empty bottles and seeing to the supply of towels and aprons while he sat at his desk, writing checks. I noticed him looking at his watch a number of times, and when the phone rang, he already was frowning as he answered it.

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

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

"Can't you just hire me? I can do all that stuff."

He looked at me in surprise. "You aren't even—"

"Yes I am! Almost."

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

"Sure!"

"Sweep and mop and dust the whole joint?"

"Uh-huh."

"Clean the spittoons?"

I hesitated, then nodded.

"The toilets?"

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

He still did not look entirely convinced. "Okay, I'll give you a try. But you better be up to the mark. I'd hate to fire my own kid."

That was my introduction to broom and mop and toilet brush. And in one of those tricks life likes to play on us, that first Saturday forenoon and the ones to follow I came to truly know my father as a bartender.

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

In spite of such scrutiny, I was proud and pleased to have the job and particularly the pay, not that it was much. My favorite part of swamping out the saloon was mopping behind the bar, where I got to see what a master bartender kept out of sight under the bar top. A sock filled with metal washers to bust apart ice cubes. Bottle openers of every design. Countless swizzle sticks. A hot plate with a coffeepot to keep him going through the long shifts. A plump stash of fresh towels, the secret behind his always having a clean white one in hand. The Medicine Lodge clientele **preponderately** took its drinks straight, but just in case someone came in wanting something more fancy, he had a storehouse of makings ready

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**Comment [CE24]:** Stet; is found in Webster's 11, although *preponderantly* is more common.

under there, maraschino cherries and a few limes and lemons and bottled olives and even cinnamon sticks—a regular little grocery shelf, it seemed to me. And down at the far end of the bar, the amen corner as he called it, was tucked away a stack of those paperback mysteries with racy covers for reading when business was dead, and a pair of bedroom slippers to give his feet some relief in the long hours behind the bar. All this was like seeing a secret side of Pop, and as Saturdays went by, I never was back there in his working domain with the winter light casting a kind of hush over everything without feeling I was someplace special to him, and therefore to me.

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

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

“This Kennedy maybe has what it takes,” he said with satisfaction. “FDR, though, he topped them all. A giant among men. We maybe wouldn’t be up against so much of it,” he ruminated, as if to a listening customer, although I was the only one around, “the Russians acting up the way they do and this Castro in Cuba and the country going to the dogs, if Franklin Delano Roosevelt was still the man in

charge." He gazed at the large face of FDR some moments more. "I heard him give a speech once, you know."

"Really? Here?"

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

**Comment [CE25]:** Ed/au: Again, *dismissed* is not a speech verb; replace with "he said, dismissing ..."?

STET

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

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"Didn't I?" He came to life. "It was a doozy of a speech, all about the Missouri River and how when the water was put to work, so were people who hadn't had a job in years." He tapped the Scotch tape in the palm of his hand in some odd rhythm of memory to envision the scene for himself as well as for me. "His train came right to the dam, and they had loudspeakers rigged up so when the man himself came out on the rear platform, you could hear that voice of his for a mile. I tell you, kiddo, it was like

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

"Pop, wasn't he in a wheelchair?"

"Don't sweat the small stuff, okay?" His gaze still lingered on the posters, the foxy old campaigner side by side with the youthful president-to-be. "Damn it, some people just shouldn't have to die. They're too good to put in the ground." He shook his head. "Life cheats on us sometimes."

Deleted: President

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

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

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"Guess what, Pop!"

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

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"History, hey? That's a deep subject, as the well\_digger said." He tossed me his towel. "Snow on your eyebrows."

I mopped that off. "Things like, how come—"

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

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

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

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

I wasn’t satisfied, and immediately wrote to Aunt Marge, airmail, in my careful fifth-grade fashion

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asking about my namesake back there in family history. She wrote back, saying she had no idea what my father was talking about.

Confronted with this, Pop swabbed the wood of the bar this way and that, studying me out of the corner of his eye. "Okay, if it'll make you quit asking." He pointed his chin to where *Meat's Not Meat* *Till It's in the Pan* hung slightly askew on the far wall. "You're named after him."

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

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

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

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

He winced the way he always did when things led in this direction. "Rusty, you're better off if I don't say anything about your mother." Rubbing the side of his head as if it ached, he continued: "When you go through a gate, close it behind you, right? That's how it is with me and her." A shrug. "I've told you she was nothing but a Jones, anyway. Hard to do anything with that."

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

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

"I can't, Pop. It's school."

"What"—his eyebrows climbed—"getting yourself out of something that has you stuck doesn't

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

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"Huh-uh," I said, although I couldn't see why it mattered, "just us in the first half of the alphabet. The others are doing town history and what it means to them."

"You've got it made, kiddo. Grab your tablet and get up there in the back room, where you can hear."

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

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

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

bucking chutes, at the Calgary Stampede in the old days. Laugh, I thought I'd cry."

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

"I meant to talk to you about that. This month's caught me a little short of—"

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

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

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

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Secretly I didn't mind if fishing season was delayed. As far as I was concerned, the rainbow trout could swim in peace indefinitely. I was content to be in the company of my busy father and the zoo of animal heads and the other comfortable surroundings of the barroom—even the dumb hunting painting by my namesake painter—on mornings like this, with Pop more like his old self now that we both had settled down some after that Canada trip of his. Money makes a difference in life, I had to admit, and since that trip he showed no sign that we were running out anytime soon, paying bills with only the usual muttering to himself.

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Things were back on track enough that I was daydreaming a little when I started my chores with the push\_broom to get up the worst of the mud before mopping, still in the thrall of living through a historic time, although even for me, the winter had proved its point by now. This latest surprise storm had dumped several inches of heavy, wet snowfall not twenty-four hours before, and now the day was innocently bright and clear. The barroom was washed in light from sunshine reflecting off the snow, although washed may not be the <sup>most</sup> appropriate word, given the dusty places atop the booths and other surfaces showing up in the unaccustomed brightness. Pop had not pointed out my housekeeping lapses yet, but I knew I was in for an extended session with the dust\_cloth after I finished sweeping and mopping, and I felt put out at the weather. I wasn't the only one. "This isn't exactly great for business," Pop muttered, irritably flicking his towel at an imaginary mote on the bar.

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

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

"I did," came the sour reply. "He canned me. Ran me off the place. I caught a ride in with the

county plow.”

Pop and I almost had to laugh at this latest in the long-standing story of cantankerous herders and fed-up ranchers. But the look on Dan's face stopped us. We watched silently as he hoisted himself onto a bar stool with a grunt and grimaced toward Pop. “Something wrong with your pouring hand?”

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

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

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Pop stood motionless and my broom and dustpan halted.

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

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

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

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

"He's *what*? The phone line practically sizzled. "We're still in the middle of lambing! What's he doing in town?"

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"Getting drunk as fast as he can."

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

"Dan says you, uhm, ran him off the place."

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

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

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something about always having smelly old shepherders around the joint, "and they'll get there soon enough." Canada Dan looked halfway there now as he hoisted his shot glass to his lips with a trembling hand. I slowly wiped down booths and fiddled with other chores so I could watch what would happen when Dode Withrow got hold of him.

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

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

"Thumb."

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

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

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

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

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

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Blinking in confusion, Canada Dan swayed over him. "You hurt yourself, Tom?" he asked considerably.

"What in blazes is going on in here?"

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

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Both hands covering his eye, Pop gasped to steady his breath. "Dan's crazy bone got in my way, is all," he managed. "These things happen." Mustering himself, he directed me: "Get me some ice in a towel, Rusty ~~hido~~." And to Canada Dan: "How about planting your stupid butt over there in a booth like I told you?"

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"Hunky-dory," the herder said, as if he were the soul of cooperation, and staggered over and sat down.

With Dode and me helping to steer him, Pop made it to the amen corner and dropped onto the high-backed stool there, clasping the ice pack to his eye. "Don't take a fit," he told us, mostly me, "see, it's only a shiner." It was going to be spectacularly that, all right, a real raccoon job of a black eye. I was relieved, but still shaken, too, aghast over that image of him collapsed on the floor until Dode helped him up. As a unit, the three of us looked across the room to the booth where Canada Dan was mumbling his trials to the Buck Fever Case in the picture on the wall. "I hung onto the ess of a bee until you could

get here," Pop told Dode in a resigned exhalation, "he's yours to deal with now."

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

"You know better than that."

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

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

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

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

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

"That wasn't any too bright of you."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Long silence.

"You still sore at me for losing them lambs?"

"No more than I was."

Longer silence.

"That's sore enough, ain't it."

"Yeah, it'll do. You ready to quit tearing the town up and go back to the ranch?"

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" Wobbling to his feet, Canada Dan called over to where

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woolgrowers, one word,  
is in actual name of  
the organization

we were watching: "Sorry if I inconvenienced you any, Tom."

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

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

This goes to show you how much I knew about handling the embarrassment of a black eye. I'd have been sick with mortification until the telltale mark of a losing battle was fully gone. Not Pop. He practically turned that record shiner into a public attraction, imperturbably tending bar in the same style as ever and answering the obvious question by saying no more than, "Hey, you should have seen the other guy." And guess what, in the course of all the razzing he took about learning when to duck, customers often had a second drink or a third. "Business has picked up, kiddo," he reported in my bedroom doorway, untying his ~~bow tie~~ with a flourish, a week or so after the incident in the ~~barroom~~. "I probably should cut Canada Dan in on the proceeds, but I'm not gonna."

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Relieved as I was at that outcome, it still bothered me to see him going around with that doozy of a shiner, which turned various, sickening colors on its gradual route to fading. On the other hand, he hadn't vanished on a trip since that nightmare one at the start of the year, so if I didn't have an unblemished father, I at least had one steadily on the premises. Even the weather improved now that the winter that threatened never to leave finally went away for the next thirty years or so, and spring, what little was left of it, settled in.

True, it rained notably more than usual as June approached, but that merely revived the old saying among the customers in the ~~barroom~~ that in Montana too much rain is just about enough, and beside our house, English Creek ran high and lively and Igdrasil greened up in cottonwood glory. I sprouted, too.

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Almost before I knew it, I awoke one morning a year older than when I had gone to bed twelve at last, which immediately felt tremendously better than being merely eleven. In my newfound maturity, I managed to sound enthusiastic—if not totally sincere—about the new fishing pole Pop gave me for my birthday.

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

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

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

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

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

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"What's his name?" I asked ~~unenthusiastically.~~ with total lack of enthusiasm.

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

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

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

Comment [CE27]: Okay

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Her smile dimmed a bit when I ordered my usual butterscotch milk shake and cheeseburger, but she punched the meal ticket without saying anything.

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

Listening in, Mrs. Constantine beamed in my direction again and provided, "You're about to have

company." I waited tensely as you do when someone from a different page enters the script of your life. Would he be hard to get along with? Would I?

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

"Hi," she said faintly.

"Hi," I said identically.

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

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

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

while I waited edgily for mine. I was close to panic, thinking of endless suppertimes ahead with the two of us about as conversational as the salt and pepper shakers, how was this going to work?

She spoke first.

"I bet your dad was in a knock-down, drag-out fight, wasn't he. That's some black eye."

"Uh, yeah. You should have seen the other guy."

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

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

"She's, she's not around anymore."

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

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

"Wild! Are you making that up?"

"You can't make something like that up, nobody would believe it."

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

"You're so lucky."

I was so stunned I could hardly squeak out: "Because I don't have a mother I've ever seen?"

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

"Wh-why?" I sneaked a look at her father in his undersized cook's hat, flipping a slice of Velveeta

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onto my cheeseburger, as if he'd just remembered that ingredient. "What's the matter with him?"

Zoe waved that away with her fork. "Nothing much. He's just not swift about a lot of things."

This was another stunner from her. *Swift* did not merely mean quick at handling things, it meant swift-minded, brainy, sensible, and quite a number of other sterling qualities she evidently found lacking in her father.

"He couldn't beat up anybody in a fight, like I bet your dad can," she was saying, as if she would trade with me on the spot. "Besides, my mom could have made your burger while he's standing around looking at it." In fact, Mrs. Constantine kept revving the milk\_shake machine as she waited for the cheeseburger to find its way out of the kitchen; my shake was going to be thin as water.

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

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

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

"Do you get to be in your dad's saloon," she wrinkled her nose at the less than impressive confines of the café—"ever?"

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

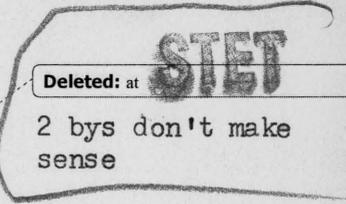
She gave me the kind of look you give a bare-faced liar.

I began by convincing her by recounting my job as swamper every Saturday morning. Disdainfully she let me know this did not win me any bragging rights, *her* parentally ordained job was to fill the sugar dispensers, salt and pepper shakers, ketchup bottles, and napkin holders and things like that every single day, from her tone a life sentence of café chores.

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No way was I going to be trumped about the joint, though. "Yeah, well," I responded, elaborately casual, "I just about live in the saloon, I'm there so much. In the back room, I mean."

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

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

"All kinds of stuff?" she whispered eagerly. "Years' and years' worth? And people are still doing that?"

"You bet. Sometimes the same people, over and over."

"How do you know that?"

Everything that goes on.

"I hear them at it, don't I, out front with my dad."

~~"Whoa, are you serious?"~~

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

"Don't be silly," I got back at her for that word, "it's not that. All it takes is—"

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

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

"Uhm, yeah."

Her eyes shone. "That sounds neat! Can I come listen to them, too?"

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

suppertimes ahead. Between milk shake slurps, I inquired, "What grade will you be in?"

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"Sixth. Same as you."

"How'd you know?"

A quick, devilish look. "Your father bragged you up."

"Uh-huh." I swirled my milk shake in man-of-the-world fashion. "We'll have old lady Spencer for a teacher."

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"Is she hard?"

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

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

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

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"Pop, is that you?"

"No, it's Nikita Khrushchev."

I had not yet gone to sleep by the time I heard the nightly sounds in the bathroom and then the hallway, my mind turning over and over all that was to be digested from my first meal with Zoe. It should have been exhausting, but it was the opposite.

Pop came and leaned against the doorjamb, smoothing the cloth of his undone bow tie between his hands as he peered at me in the dim bedroom. "How'd you do with your supper partner?"

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"She's"—I cast around for the right way to put it—"different."

That immediately turned him into the listening bartender.

"Not *bad* different," I spelled out. "She's real smart, for a girl."

"They can be like that," he said drily. "Try to get along with her, okay? It puts us in a bind if we can't grab a meal at the Spot. We'd have to live on pig knuckles and embalmed eggs." That was meant

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to be a joke, I understood, but it was not that far from the dietary probability if we had to fend for ourselves every suppertime.

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

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

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

You always hate to disrupt an artist, so I did not tell her the inspirational piece of luggage actually

was owned by some snoose-chewing herder whose belongings were securely in his sheep wagon out in the foothills while he hocked the suitcase when his money ran out before finishing off a big drunk. Besides, Pop's habit of that last cigarette at bedtime made *ka-whoosh!* something I didn't like thinking about.

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

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

"Oh, sure."

That was cast into doubt, however, by her next find. The shoe\_box half full of metal cigarette lighters. Zoe's eyes went big in amazement. "Who smokes this much?"

"No one guy," I responded like the ~~back-room~~ veteran I was. "See? They're engraved. Soldiers trade them in." And had been doing so for a long time. Rummaging, we found a tarnished lighter with the engraving MONTANEER JUNGLE FIGHTERS, which dated back to the Montana National Guardsmen who served in the tropical hell of New Guinea in World War II. Another one read INCHON SEPT. 1950 THE MARINES HAVE LANDED from the Korean War. Newest and shiniest were some engraved with MINUTEMAN MISSILEMEN AMERICA'S ACE IN THE HOLE, from Air Force troops, flyboys, as we somewhat inaccurately called them, stationed in missile silos out there under the prairie. "Pop takes one out and uses it until the flint wears out," I explained the plenitude of lighters. "He says he got tired of ~~digging through his pockets for a matchbook~~ <sup>running out of</sup> all the time."

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

"You bet. Like Pop says, they can't drink with their feet."

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

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odd texture and funny greenish shade. "What are these fancy things?" she wondered, fingering one.

"Snake boots."

"Rusty, you're making that up." Nonetheless she jerked her hand away.

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

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

Unlike me, however, Zoe saw nothing odd about the eagle being blue. "I bet it's the only paint they had that day," she said, resolving the question, and moved on.

Comment [CE30]: Okay?

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

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

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"This place is really something, Rusty," she marveled.

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

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

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"You're living proof of that, Velma." Pop's reply was punctuated with the sounds of a ginger-ale

highball being mixed. "I can quit winding my watch now that you're back."

Zoe pressed so close to the metal grille, her ear practically kissed the slats. "Ooh." She turned to me, instinctively whispering, "It's just like you said, we can hear every word! This is wild!"

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

"How was Mexico?" Pop's voice kept its distance from Velma's.

"Same as ever. Fiestas and tortillas."

Craning her neck, Zoe took a good look at Velma's tailored outfit and eternally chestnut hair. "She looks pretty swift," she murmured over her shoulder to me. "How come your dad doesn't fall for her?"

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

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

"Yeah, sure."

Zoe looked at me keenly. "You don't ever hear from your mom at all?"

"Not really," I blurted, surprised into dumb honesty. I was not yet used to the fact that the mind of Zoe was like a pinball machine; the flips and bounces came so suddenly, you were left blinking, trying to know the score.

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"Christmas or anytime?" she pressed the point.

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"It doesn't matter."

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

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

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STET

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

Deleted: bar room

"Ring me up one, Tom," Bill Reinking had walked in on schedule. "Something to get my mind off the state of the world again this week."

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"Shot of scotch, water on the side," I stated without looking.

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

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

"How's it any different?" Zoe insisted. "People come and tell their troubles, and they get to feel better because somebody is listening to them."

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"Yeah, but it's my dad they know is listening, not us up—"

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

Comment [CE31]: Okay?

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

That was the start. Zoe quickly became as regular in the back room as some of Pop's customers out front. In no time, we were thicker than thieves, as that accurate enough saying goes. When we were together, almost anything tickled our funny\_bones, particularly overheard snatches from the barroom that arrived to us through the vent. In no time we adopted old shepherders' "Hunnerd percent" and "Wouldn't that fry your gizzard" equally with young flyboys' "Listen up, troop" and "Outstanding!" and

Deleted: bar room

any number of other gleeful bits we made our own, lingo overlapping in us as though we were time travelers. Inevitably added to that was every particle of radio serial and comic strip and movie dialogue we'd ever encountered that was silly enough to remember, piled up and waiting in two active twelve-year-old brains like ingredients filling a flour sifter. All it took for that powder of imagination to sieve through in good measure was for one or the other of us to turn the crank.

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

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

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

Zoe had yet another surprising side to her. With boyish trepidation—she was first and foremost a girl, after all—I had given her a hasty tour of my aspiring air force of Hellcats and Spitfires and Airacobras and the like hovering on their fish\_lines from the rafters, figuring she would have about as much interest in model-plane building as I would in learning to sew. How wrong I was, luckily. Whether it was the pugnacious aircraft names or what, she took to my balsa\_wood kits as though they were magic sets. "Neat! Show me how it all fits together." I did more than that, finding the courage from somewhere to show her my most precious possession, the X-Acto knife Pop had given me for Christmas. "Ooh," she breathed, just that, exactly the right response to the beautiful little instrument that was a cross between a pen and a scalpel.

"You suppose?"—for once she was almost shy in asking—"I could try it out sometime?"

I didn't have to think twice. "Right now, if you want," I said, with my heart thumping as I pulled out the model kit I had been saving for after the Fourth of July rodeo, when summer started to stretch on. "I'm going to build my biggest one yet. A Flying Fortress."

There were more oohs from her as I laid out the balsa\_wood sheets of the framework of the B-17

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bomber. With the care of a surgeon I cut out the first wing to show her how it was done, and then handed her the X-Acto knife to do the other one herself. She handled it like a treasure, I was gratified to see, tracing the wing outline with the sharp point as slowly and precisely as I could do it myself.

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

Deleted: bar room

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

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

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STET

He went back to grappling the keg, but not before reciting the warning about beans and nose with an oddly pensive look at the so youthful pair of us.

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

"Hi."

She gave me a little look, but then bounded up the stairs as usual and started to settle in next to where I was dithering over our half-built Flying Fortress. I had the louver slats of the vent open to try to improve my mood, and right away we heard the bar phone being answered. Nothing got past Zoe in the

Comment [CE32]: I'd been?

Yes

sieving of voices from the barroom—at times like this, I wished it would—and at the first guttural word, she went alert as a sentry.

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“That’s not your dad,” she whispered.

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

“Is he sick?”

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

“No, silly, your dad.”

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

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

“He’s... ~~he’s~~ away on a trip.”

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“He is? For how long?”

“Couple of days.”

“Oh, good, that’s not much.” She read my face. “Although it’s kind of a lot, too. Why didn’t he take you along?”

“I didn’t want to go,” I said, hoping the opposite of the truth would end this. “All he’s doing is selling some of this old stuff.”

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

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

"Uhm, he makes more money."

"Just by going across the border? How does that work?"

"They're short of American stuff up there, I guess."

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

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

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

Zoe and I were back at the B-17, the X-Acto knife doing most of the talking as we traded back and forth at cutting out delicate small parts and gluing them into the complicated bomber fuselage. Worried sick and not able in the least to keep it from showing, I knew she deserved better company than I was

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Comment [CE33]: my?

managing to be. She was all sympathy, I could tell, but she had that carefully pursed expression a person has around someone something is wrong with. Mustering myself, I cast around for some way to make up for my mood. Fortunately I was not without resources, Pop having given me a couple of dollars of conscience money before he left.

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

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“You bet,” said she, ready for anything. Until she thought it over for a second or two. “You think we both should? Together, I mean.” She picked at her elbow uneasily. “That’s kind of . . . you know.”

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Yes, it was awfully public. Gros Ventre was a small town where people knew one another’s business almost before it happened. We could be teased to death if the wrong party—Duane Zane came to mind—spotted us sitting together in the movie theater. That was a chance we would have to take, and I had an inkling of how.

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

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

THE ALAMO

STARRING JOHN WAYNE

Comment [CE34]: Design: Should this be centered?

DIRECTED BY JOHN WAYNE

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

Can we please be in

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

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"Scared of her own shadow."

"Well, all right, but you'll have to clear out if there's a squaller."

We would cross that high water when we came to it. Meanwhile the crying room, a small soundproof cubicle next to the projector booth where a parent or two could sit with a squalling baby, was all ours. Unseen by the audience below, we could watch the show in royal privacy and make cracks about it out loud to our hearts' content. Zoe was already nearly giddy with our fortunate spot and I was glad to have my mind somewhat off my absent father.

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"Outstanding, Rusty! Hunnerd percent!"

"Almost." I ran back down to where Charlie Hooper doubled as clerk at the candy counter and bought us each a roll of Necco wafers. This was pure kid instinct. The thin candy discs of a variety of flavors, all of them faint, were kind of like sucking on nickels, but I had a hunch Zoe would be as crazy for them as I was.

"Boy oh boy, Ace," Zoe grinned a mile as she cracked open her Necco roll, "this hideout is the best idea ever."

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One thing about a movie called *The Alamo*, there was no doubt about how it was going to come out, so instead of following the plot very closely, we could sit back sucking Neccos and evaluate the actors and the funny way they were dressed. Laurence Harvey ~~was~~ <sup>played</sup> Colonel Travis, in charge of the mission fortress threatened by the Mexican forces of Santa Ana, and whatever anyone in Texas was actually wearing in 1836, this version of the colonel raced around in tight white pants and a really big hat. It was headgear so wide-brimmed it wouldn't have lasted a minute in Montana wind, and we couldn't help snorting laughs whenever a camera angle caused it to dwarf the head under it. It seemed like in every scene, Colonel Travis ~~was~~ <sup>tromped around</sup> in the same bad mood. For the whole first part of the movie, he and Jim Bowie, played by Richard Widmark, with the trademark knife—about the size of a dozen X-Actos—strapped to his hip, were so mad at each other that the Mexican foe somewhere out there seemed an afterthought.

As history dragged along at the Alamo, Zoe said impatiently, "Isn't John Wayne even in this?"

"He must be waiting for something to happen before he shows up," I rolled what was left of a mint Necco around in my mouth. "Guess what, that's not ~~his~~ <sup>even</sup> real name."

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"You're making that up."

Bet you anything it's really

"Not either," I said, confident of what I'd read somewhere, "Marion Morrison."

We both snickered at the sissy sound of that, or as it would have been in the schoolyard, the thithy thound.

"You suppose, back then," Zoe giggled her way into a lisp, "when someone asked what his name was, he didn't like to have to thay 'Morrithon'?"

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"Marion, ithn't tho hot, either, ith it."

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Finally the supposed star of the show showed up on-screen. However he came to be John Wayne,

This has to be consistent with 'Morrithon'

**STET**

he sure was a-talkin' slow when he came on the scene as Davy Crockett, coonskin cap and all in the <sup>blazing</sup> Texas sunshine. A ragtag bunch with him were his Tennesseans, and promptly enough they were in a big drunken fight scene in a cantina, the most action yet in the movie. Then appeared a busty señorita, whose main role seemed to be to stand sideways so John Wayne could get a good look.

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"Wooh, how about the front porch on her," said Zoe, which freed me to grin appreciatively.

The movie slowed down drastically after that—after all, it *was* a siege—and we spent more of our time peeking down at the audience to see what was going on. Attendance at the late show ran heavily to couples on dates, so there was sometimes ~~some~~ interesting behavior in the dark. It must have been some of the more evident necking that brought the question to mind in Zoe.

"Rusty? What if"—it was eerie to hear her say my most haunting two words there in the dark—"what if your dad met somebody he liked on one of these trips? A Canadian lady, maybe? Would you want a new mother?"

Zoe had an incredible knack for zeroing in when a person least expected it. Blinking in the dark, I answered thinly: "Are you kidding? You said it yourself, remember? One parent is plenty."

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"I know."

"Then why'd you bring it up?"

She rattled out a Necco before answering. "That was real dumb of me, wasn't it," she said in a small voice. "Excuse me all over the place." She did her best to erase all doubt. "Besides, your dad is too swuft to do that to you."

He'd better be, I thought but didn't say. Instead, I resorted to: "Boy, if this movie doesn't end sometime, we'll be eating Neccos for breakfast." Relieved to change the subject, Zoe piped up: "Maybe they lost track of the ending, you think, Ace?"

In the course of time, with a lot of preachy dialogue along the way, things actually were building to a climax at the Alamo, and the arrival of Mexican soldiers on-screen by the apparent thousands for the

attack was really something, we had to admit.

"This is kind of like Custer, isn't it," Zoe observed, both of us back in movie-critic mode.

"Reckon so, ma'am," I responded, John Wayne-like. "It don't look good for the Texicans."

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The Alamo battle scenes were serious blood and guts; heaven help the human race if war ever ceases to be sobering, even at its most make-believe. And yet, right there amid the explosions and bodies falling everywhere, the scriptwriter and the director included a scene where two mortally wounded Tennesseans are pinned against a wall and one of them asks, "Does this mean what I think it do?" The other one answers, "It do," and they both expire.

And we had something new for our vocabulary of the summer.

The next night was another story. I went to bed at Howie and Lucille's in hopes of a call of "Hey, kiddo" rousing me. It didn't happen. The third day came, and Pop didn't show up and didn't show up. Zoe did her best to cheer me up—"Maybe he has to look real hard to find anybody to buy the snake boots, is all"—but by nightfall, I knew I was in for another spell in that tomb of a bedroom.

Breakfast the next morning with Howie and Lucille had me downcast about as far as I could go. As they ate their stewed prunes and took their pills, I fed on toast and jam and watched the clock. Theoretically, I was free to come and go now that it was broad daylight, but I didn't want to miss Pop when he came for me, if that ever managed to happen. From the concern on Lucille's kindly face and Howie's crabby expression—awfully early in the day for that—I was not the only one wondering why he hadn't shown up long since. I had some more toast and jam and stayed sitting there, waiting.

At last came what we had all been straining to hear, the Packard's heavy crush of gravel in the driveway.

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I was outside before Pop had time to climb out of the car. "Hey, where's the fire?" He sounded like always, but didn't look it. His shiner had finally gone away, but there were dark pouches under his eyes,

and the deepened lines in his face told how tired he was. He had been driving with the window rolled down, I saw, something a person does to stay awake at the wheel.

I babbled a greeting of some kind, cut off by the slam of the screen door behind me. Unexpectedly, Howie had followed me out.

"You're stretching it some, Tom. The boy was getting awful worried."

"I'd just as soon that didn't happen," Pop said levelly, looking from one of us to the other. "Anyhow, here I am, right? Climb in, kiddo."

He drove home as if the huge old car knew the way by itself, his mind elsewhere, and for the first few blocks I didn't say anything. The streets that had been whited out with snow the last time were now a tunnel of leafy trees, the dappled green that happens when a breeze stirs a column of cottonwoods. Every house lazing in the shade possessed a carpet of lawn or at least grass outdoing itself to be green, from the moist spring and summer. Lilacs were blooming like big purple bouquets left at porches. If there ever was a market for momentary Americana, a day like this was the time to sell off the town of Gros Ventre, complete and entire. My mood didn't match the pleasant scene, however, emotions going every which way in me. I was dizzily relieved Pop was home in one piece, and at the same time I was so mad at him, I could taste it. Something needed saying, even if I wasn't sure what.

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"Did you get a lot of money from the loot?" I asked sullenly.

He looked at me from the corner of his eye and then back to the road. "I made enough. Don't sweat it."

"What, did you have trouble selling the things this time?"

"I got it done."

"Did you have to drive through the flood?"

"It wasn't where I was."

The next logical question was whether he'd been too busy with some floozy to come home on

time, but I managed not to ask it, quite. "Then how come it takes longer every time?"

"I hadn't noticed."

"It's longer. Every time."

"If you say so."

"Even Howie thinks so."

He let out a sigh of ages. "This is one of those days. Right away Howie takes an ornery fit, and you don't seem to be in the absolute best frame of mind, either." One hand on the steering wheel, he knuckled the bags under his eyes with the other. "How about letting me catch a couple of hours of sleep, and then we'll tackle the joint, would that suit you?"

I looked at him blankly.

"It's Saturday, remember?"

That had skipped my mind entirely—this summer every day was Zoe day, I wasn't keeping track of much else—but I stiffly maintained: "Howie and I were going to do the setting up and the swamping by ourselves if you didn't get back."

"Saint Peter will put you both in the book," he said wearily, and aimed the car into our driveway, where Igdrasil waited with its top reaching to heaven and its roots watered by seasons of fate.

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"Imagine that," Pop stepped into the saloon, still yawning after the few hours of sleep he'd snatched but with his bow tie in place and his apron on, "the place didn't fall down without me." While that was true enough, the barroom definitely had missed his presence, glasses mouth down in the breakfront slightly out of line from usual, stools not quite squared up to the bar, ashtrays emptied but not washed clean, and so on—Howie had his own way of doing or not doing things. Somehow the long old room welcomed its proprietor back, as an empty theater changes when an actor strolls onstage. Even the familiar gallery of taxidermed heads upon the walls appeared more inviting with my father and his

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black-and-white mane on the premises. And he looked miraculously recuperated, now that he was back where he belonged. Why couldn't he just stay here forever and tend to the business of bartending instead of vanishing off when I least expected and maybe getting himself in some love situation I didn't even want to think about?

Still burning inside, I'd trailed him into the barroom with broom and mop and bucket, ready to get at my swamping job, but he circled the floor a couple of times, looking around at things, lost in thought, having a leisurely cigarette.

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"You're getting as bad as Howie," I complained for the sake of complaint, "I wish you didn't smoke so much."

"That's funny, I wish that sometimes, too," he said, taking a deep drag. "Usually between cigarettes." Taking philosophy further, he mused, "If you're in the habit, you might as well stay there. Saves confusion."

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He glanced my way. "Hey, didn't I tell you to go down to Shorty's and get your ears lowered while I was away? You look like a beatnik." We wouldn't have known a beatnik if one thumped his bongo drum at us, but it was what he customarily said when I needed a haircut.

"I forgot."

"That's what I do about quitting smoking." He squinted at me critically. "Cripes, Rusty, don't tell me you just sat around being down in the mouth to your eyeteeth all the time I was gone."

"No-o-o," I dragged it out to the fullest extent of indignation. "Zoe and I went to the show."

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"Yeah? Good for you, I guess. Get all the training you can in dealing with females." Next came one of those grown-up pronouncements as hazy as the blue nicotine cloud following him around this morning. "You'll need it."

Now that we had thoroughly gotten on each other's nerves, he turned back to contemplating the barroom. I couldn't sweep with him there stargazing like that, so I hinted heavily: "Aren't you going in

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the back and pay bills?"

"Right away," he said, showing no sign of going. Finishing his cigarette, he tossed it in a spittoon, then cocked a look at me different from any yet. "Tell you what. We need to do something else first. I'll help you at it. Get out the stepladder."

"What for?"

"It's time to shine the eyes."

Time to what? I goggled at him, then around at the ever-staring eyeballs of the stuffed heads.

"Theirs?"

"Hell yes. We don't want the deecor going dim, do we?" He gazed up at the one-eyed buffalo over the front door as if it might nod in agreement. "Better get at it. I'll hold the ladder for you."

Feeling vaguely foolish, I fetched the stepladder. "Start with him." Pop still was in communion with the cyclopean bison. "Break you in easy."

"I've never, uh, shined eyes before that I know of. What do I use?"

"Tickle your brain a little," he advised. "Didn't some fancy writer say eyes are the windows of the soul?"

I went and got the Windex bottle and a rag.

While I climbed up and positioned myself beside the huge bearded head, Pop steadied the ladder and watched the procedure critically. The buffalo's single eye, like a sizable black marble, could use some help, I had to admit, however lifelike it may have looked when the taxidermist inserted it, over the years it had gone dull and cloudy from cigarette smoke and other tolls of midair life in a very active saloon. Rather tenderly I spritzed the bulge of glass and wiped with the tip of my finger wrapped in the rag until a gleam came up. It was uncanny, the feeling that grew in me as that dark eye brightened almost to life. In ~~that~~ <sup>such a</sup> situation you know perfectly well the shaggy old beast has been dead for an eon, not to mention decapitated, yet there is the odd illusion that its gaze matches yours. The buffalo in fact

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had the advantage with that staring eye, and the other socket squinted closed in a shrewd, piratical way.

Curious about that, I wondered out loud: "What happened to the other eyeball?"

"It's somewhere in the back room."

"Really? It fell out, you mean?"

"Hell no," Pop answered offhandedly, "I had it taken out, long time ago. You'd be surprised how hard it is to find a taxidermist who'll do that. Professional ethics or something. I had to pack that head all over Great Falls before I found one who would agree to it."

I felt a little dizzy, not just from altitude of the ladder. Wild! Wait until Zoe heard this!

"Okay, Pop, I'll bite. Why'd you have poor old bruiser here operated on like that?"

"Think about it," he said, as if telling me I had missed a speck of dust. "Isn't a customer gonna be more interested in a one-eyed buffalo than one with twenty-twenty vision? Maybe he'll get to speculating about where that eye went, like you just were, and order another drink while he's at it." He shrugged. "If the guy doesn't care how many eyes a buffalo has, we don't want the ess of a bee for a customer anyway."

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I couldn't argue with any of that. Pop and I moved on from the twinkling buffalo to the elk, with the coyote and deer and bobcat and the others beadyly waiting their turn, every eye in the joint starting to shine, mine included. Every little while I looked down at the lord and master of the Medicine Lodge, this father of mine with his bag of secrets, like chicken guts and one-eyed animal heads and who knew what else. Damn, he was difficult to ever stay mad at.

Comment [CE35]: Ed/au: twinkling or winking?

STET