

Was it that spirit of imagination, which seemed to cling to the Medicine Lodge like the smell of fresh bread to a bakery, that accounted for the next turn of events? Whatever was in the air, Zoe and I found our calling in life that heady summer of 1960, no small achievement for twelve-year-olds.

She's always claimed she was the one who spied the story in the *Weekly Gleaner* unfolded on Pop's desk, and I've always maintained I spotted it first. There is no argument whatsoever that we both reacted less than surely to that headline lying in invitation on the desk: SHAKESPEARE TO VISIT GROS VENTRE.

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"You want to go?"

"I dunno. Do you?"

"I guess. If you do."

We went. Even if all the world's a stage, it still was something of a surprise that our own scanty public park in an elbow of English Creek qualified. Or at least a patch of grass there large enough to hold a dozen or so actors and actresses in full raiment. Drama students from the university in Missoula, they were spending the summer traveling around the state in a repainted school bus with *The Bard On Wheels* on its side. The play, cleverly, was *As You Like It*, which let the troupe get away with any kind of outdoor setting; the creek-side cottonwood grove where the park sat served just fine as an eventual forest of exile. Zoe and I settled in a shady spot to spectate. The audience wasn't numerous, and pretty much predictable: high school teachers, library staff, some women's clubs, key members of the chamber of commerce that had put up sponsorship money, Bill Reinking from the newspaper, and even his wife.

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Cloyce, who generally held herself above civic doings.

~~performance~~  
The play commenced with a herald stepping from behind the bus and announcing, "We begin our revels in the garden of Sir Oliver." A pair of actors strutted out, speaking in round tones, and the world changed for two twelve-year-olds.

Miracles sometimes come in disguise, and certainly this one came in costume, wearing pumpkin-style pants and puffy dresses long enough to step on and speaking a language such as we had never heard. *As You Like It* is wordy Shakespeare, if that's not redundant. Much of the ornamented dialogue was over our heads, although lines about copulation of cattle and laughing like a hyena were not. Yet we could catch the strangely wonderful melody of it, issuing out of the characters like spoken music. And things didn't drag along at an Alamo pace, everybody was always coming, going, thinking out loud to one another.

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Zoe sat entranced, as did I, soaking up every gesture and straining to take in every curlicue of language as the student actors exclaimed "How now!" and snapped their fingers grandly to summon or dismiss one another. Under the phony beards, drawn-on mustaches, and lopsided wigs, the cast was miles too young for the parts they were playing, but in some strange way the obvious makeup made them all the more convincing. I am going to say it hit both of us at the same time, like forked lightning.

The realization that living, breathing figures, with a sprinkling of greasepaint and a few ruffs of wardrobe, could not only imitate people of centuries before, but could mimic life. Life with anything imagination could add onto it, even.

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The disguised identities and all the costumes the Bard always had up his sleeve clinched it for us.

Zoe's eyes shone as she watched Rosalind strut around bossily in men's clothes. I wanted to be Orlando, the suitor dressed to the hilt like a gentleman. Or possibly the chamois-shirted shepherd Silvius—I certainly knew a lot about shepherders—driven hilariously cross-eyed by love for Phebe. Better yet, maybe, the fast-talking clown Touchstone in crazy, floppy rags.

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“We will begin these rites,” the rosy-cheeked actor with a scruff of beard that made him a duke proclaimed, forming up the dance after all the lovers finally got their identities sorted out, “as we do trust they’ll end, in true delights.”

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Truer words were never orated. The play ended, but not our state of excitement as we left the park.

“So let’s get this straight, he was proposing to her even though he didn’t know it was her—”

“Sure, silly, because she was pretending to be a man—”

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“—who he thought all the time was just rehearsing him—”

“—for when he proposed to her for real. Wild, huh?”

“Weren’t they great at talking that stuff?”

“Wow, their tongues must be tired.”

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Hearing us at this, the Reinkings slowed down in front of us until we caught up with them. “Vox populi, I believe I hear,” Bill addressed us gravely but with a glint behind his eyeglasses, “just what an overworked editor needs to fill space. So tell me, as patrons of the thespian art”—despite the jokey way of putting it, he appeared to be professionally curious—“what did you think of the play?”

“Swift!” we cried simultaneously.

His mustache twitched. “I’ll have to try to work that plaudit into my column.”

“I’ve never heard of anything you couldn’t, Bill,” his wife twitted him puckishly, if that was the word, as Zoe and I fell in step with them. Cloyce Reinking was generally known around town for being as frosty as her silvery hair—the story was that she came from a family that made movies in the early days, and Gros Ventre was a longer way from Hollywood than a map could measure—but even she seemed to have liked *As You Like It*, although that didn’t stop her from assuming the role of drama critic. She went over the finer points of the performance to her patiently listening husband while we drank it all in, until she came to Silvius, the cross-eyed shepherd, when she had to outright laugh in tribute. “The business with the eyes, wasn’t he good at it, Bill? That goes back to Ben Turpin, before

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talkies. Remember? It's been years and years since I've seen anyone do that bit."

Those last three words went off with a bang in ~~our~~ twelve-year-old minds. Instantly Zoe was looking at me, mouthing a silent *Ooh*, and I must have done the same. What a revelation, that when we did gangster talk or mimicked shepherders, it wasn't just kid stuff of trying to be funny—we were doing bits! Performing little tricks of stage magic as old as Shakespeare, and we hadn't known it! Then and there, the two of us entered into the honorable company of Groucho Marx wiggling his eyebrows like caterpillars and Bette Davis dropping the words "What a dump" like a stink bomb and the rest of history's glorious virtuosos of lasting gags. How those careers got started, we had no idea, but for us, we had just been given a license—learner's permits, of course—to dream up the performing mischief that went under the honorable old theatrical name of "shtick."

After the Reinkings turned at their street to go home, Zoe and I jabbered about the play and the performers' bits, as we now ~~know~~ <sup>collegially</sup> knew them, all the way back downtown. Still in the spell, one of us finally dared to say it.

"We could be like them, I bet. Be actors, I mean. When we're a little older."

"Yeah. Wouldn't that be neat?"

"Traveling around that way—"

"Dressing up like that—"

"—getting paid for it and everything."

Out front of the Top Spot, Zoe sighed a gale at having to part with Shakespeare and me. "See you at supper."

Never let it be said of me that, at such an opportunity, I did not do my bit. Goofily I crossed my eyes, more or less, and gabbled, "How now?"

She stifled a giggle and snapped her fingers bossily. "Be gone!"

My mind going like an eggbeater, I cut through the alley to the rear of the Medicine Lodge. The

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back room seemed newly magical to me, the biggest costume trunk imaginable. I seemed to float up to the desk on the stair landing. Eagerly checking through the vent, I was in luck. The saloon was empty except for Pop, who was on the phone. "No, that's okay, I appreciate it, really. . . . Yeah, g'bye." As soon as he hung up, I raced down the stairs.

"Pop!"

Looking spooked, he ~~pivoted~~ <sup>whirled</sup> from where the phone silently sat.

"Guess what, I'm gonna be an actor!"

His brow cleared ~~a little~~ <sup>slightly</sup>, then clouded again. I knew I was not supposed to be in the barroom when the saloon was open and wouldn't have been, except for my uncontrollable excitement, but he simply looked at a loss about how to deal with me. "Rusty, listen, kiddo—" He stopped, whatever he was about to say eclipsed by the gleeful shine on my face.

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"Actor, hey?" he switched to, flicking his lighter a couple of times to start a cigarette. "Better drink an orange and tell me about it." Digging the bottle of pop out of the cooler and handing it to me, he studied me with a deep squint. "Like the shoot-'em-up guys in the movies?"

"No, in plays! Shakespeare and stuff!" As I rattled on about the performance in the park, he smoked and listened.

"That's really something," he provided when I finally ran down. He gazed at me a moment more, then started busying himself at the sink under the bar. "An actor has to memorize a lot, you know." I nodded nonchalantly; he himself said I had a memory that wouldn't quit. "And learn how to walk around without knocking over the scenery." That hadn't occurred to me in the acreage of the park. Still making conversation with his head down, he went on: "Slick work if you can get it, I suppose. Spend a couple of hours pretending to be somebody else and get paid for it. Not bad. Beats running a joint, I bet." He cleared his throat and looked up from the sink work. "Speaking of that, it's business hours and you better scoot into the back before some ess of a bee reports us." He made enough of a face to soften

that, and I grinned my way out of the barroom, each of us drifting back to our clouds of thought.

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I spent days after that in that same stagestruck haze, sneaking off to a mirror every so often to practice crossing my eyes and other actorly expressions. I know Zoe was doing the same when we weren't prancing around the back room dressed up in rain slickers and cowboy hats and other costumes Shakespeare surely would have approved of if he'd had the chance.

Suppertimes at the Spot, we had to behave ourselves like civilized people, but that didn't stop us from whispering up a storm about what life as actors would be like, all the while secretly watching the café customers for bits to do later. The tourist couple from somewhere unimaginably South, for instance, who had to ask Zoe's mother three times whether there was a grudge in town where they could get their tar fixed before she figured out to direct them to a garage that fixed tires. Or the Double W hay hand, a little worse for wear from a prior stop at the Medicine Lodge, blearily holding the menu so close it appeared he was about to kiss it. Pickings were good and the two of us were gliding along in our amateur mischief until mealtime, when Bill Reinking came in, which was unusual in itself, and went straight to the counter to lean over and say something to Zoe's mom and they both headed into the kitchen to talk to Pete.

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Watching, Zoe groaned in concern. "I hope my dad didn't stiff him on this week's ad." Aw, crud, was my own reaction to the kitchen conference; now my milk shake was going to be lumpy and my cheeseburger burned crisp as a shingle.

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Directly, the gray-mustached editor emerged from the kitchen and startled us by coming in our direction, even though there were plenty of empty places to sit. "May I join you?"

"Help yourself," we blurted in chorus, both trying to think what we had possibly done to attract the attention of the Gros Ventre *Weekly Gleaner*. The saying was that a newspaper was the first draft of history, and the *Gleaner* week by week told the story of Two Medicine country to a remarkable degree.

Far and wide, people read it to catch up on the doings of their neighbors across the distances of benchlands and prairie and mountain slopes, and for perspective on the world beyond. A life could be changed by those words in ink, because an article in the *Gleaner* meant that some set of ambiguous circumstances had been distilled by Bill Reinking or one of his rural correspondents into recorded fact, replete with those basic ingredients of truth, five Ws and an H. Zoe and I then had only a beginning grasp of this, but we understood that a very important grown-up was pulling up a chair to our table for some reason.

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"You're no doubt wondering why I called this meeting," our visitor joked seriously to start with. Taking off his glasses, he breathed on each lens and polished them with a paper napkin as he deliberated to us. "I've checked with the powers that be"—we understood that to mean Zoe's folks and evidently Pop—"to see if it's all right to offer the two of you a job."

Zoe with her Butte smarts asked first: "What kind of a job, and what would we get?"

"It's one well suited to junior thespians," Bill Reinking was saying gravely as he fitted the specs on one ear at a time. Zoe and I traded glances. Did that mean what we think it do?

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Evidently, ~~so~~ as the *Gleaner* editor, who was said to be smart as a dictionary, now invoked Shakespeare. "The play's the thing, and all that. Cloyce"—catching himself, he cleared his throat significantly—"Mrs. Reinking, as you may or may not know, sometimes performs with the Prairie Players in Valier when the proper role comes up. There's one such now, and she needs someone to help her with her lines before rehearsals start. This has created a crisis."

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Glancing around the café as if the three of us were conspirators, he lowered his head and looked at us over the tops of his glasses, confiding: "The crisis is, if you don't do it, I'll have to."

Naturally we were wild to, and the dab of pay he named for each session of thespianism or whatever it was didn't hurt.

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"You've spared me," He smiled with relief and told us the curtain would go up, so to speak, at ten

the next morning at their house. "If you want to stay on the good side of Mrs. Reinking" he cleared his throat again → "be on time."

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"How are we doing?" Zoe asked anxiously.

I was carrying the pocket watch, complete with a Benevolent and Protective Order of the Moose tooth fob, that someone must have dug out of a father's or grandfather's trunk to hock and Pop had let me borrow from the back room for the occasion. It was raining torrents again and I had to wipe the watch crystal to read the time.

"Three minutes till. Slow up, there it is at the end of the block."

The Reinkings lived on the west side of town. Houses were nicer here, the ground a little higher, the view to the mountains more grand. Coming up the front walk to their big, generously windowed house at a robotic pace dictated by my sneaked looks at the watch, we arrived at the door at ten, straight up.

At our knock, it swung open to Cloyce Reinking, regal and bone-dry and eyeing the dripping pair of us as though wondering whether to mop us down before she let us in. I was wearing the rain slicker Louise had cut down for me, although it was still voluminous, and Zoe looked aswim in more ways than one in the long gabardine coat her mother had foraged from somewhere.

"This weather," the rather forbidding woman in the doorway said, as if we had brought it with us. "Well, let's hang your wet things over the cat box, that's what I do with Bill's when he's been traipsing around, getting soaked in the name of higher journalism. Sheba can't complain too much." Maybe not, but the fluffy black Siamese or whatever it was meowed and scampered off when it saw the ominous cloud of clothing over its bathroom spot.

"That's done, come on in." Mrs. Reinking briskly led us to the living room, the kind with a rug that almost tickles your ankles and chairs too nice to sit in comfortably and pictures certainly not painted by

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Charlie Russell. I tried to take it all in without staring impolitely, while Zoe couldn't help making a little O with her mouth.

"Now, then," we were being addressed with a mild frown, "I suppose the Svengali I'm married to told you why you're required?"

We nodded in mute unison. Cloyce Reinking did not appear to lack requirements of any other sort in life. Tall and straight, with prominent features that on a man might have been horse-faced but looked distinguished on her, and natural frost in her perfectly kept hair, she seemed to us the living picture of a rich lady, although Pop had said that wasn't entirely so. "A little more money than most of us, maybe. She just wears it different."

"This may be foolish of us, of Bill and myself, I mean," she surprised us with. "All I said was something about not knowing what do with myself in this awful weather, and he said he knew just what it took to change the climate, and rang up the director in Valier. And here we are. But I don't know." All of a sudden she was looking like she wished she had shooed us back out into the rain. "Today may be a waste of all our time. It's been so long since I was on a stage."

Zoe and I traded looks of dismay. This did not show signs of being long-term employment. I stammered, "We thought you acted with the Prairie Players all the time."

"Years and years ago, yes," she waved the past off. "*Arsenic and Old Lace. The Man Who Came to Dinner.* All the old warhorses that audiences find impossibly funny. Speaking of which," she said doubtfully, "we may as well give this a try."

Busying herself setting three straight-back chairs around a coffee table as we stood there awkwardly, being no help, she asked over her shoulder: "Bill didn't say—have you both been in school plays and such?"

"Sure," I vouched for myself, "every Christmas. I'm always a shepherd because I have my own sheep\_hook."

"The innkeeper's wife every time," Zoe similarly reported her theatrical experience. "In Butte, the Catholic girls were always Mary."

"I see. Well, sadly enough, there are no Nativity scenes in this."

Sitting us down and then herself, she handed us each a playbook with a cover of that bubblegum color ~~that boys at least called pantie pink.~~ ~~Zoe studied the author's name.~~ ~~clutched hers in both hands and~~

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"Oscar Wil-dee?"

"Wild, my dear."

~~trying to figure out~~

I was ~~looking at~~ the title, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "Is that how that name is spelled?"

"You're getting ahead of the play," she cautioned me with a ~~slight~~ ~~little~~ lift of her eyebrow. "Now, then, how to begin." She gave us a gaze that seemed to estimate our capacity for inspired nonsense, although little did she know. "I'll just read a straight run-through," she decided, putting on glasses, the newer horn-rim kind rather than her husband's type of wire frames, "until we reach the pertinent part. It'll give you some idea of the play."

It did, all right, although that was not the same as understanding it. Some of the first act, such as the butler who didn't think it was polite to listen as his master fooled around on the piano, was funny enough, and some of it went right over us, cucumber sandwiches and high-toned exchanges about going to the country and so on. Regardless, while we followed along in the script Mrs. Reinking read all the parts, Algernon and Jack and the butler, in distinct voices, and Zoe and I shifted more and more uneasily in our chairs. If this woman could perform Oscar Wilde's witticisms all by herself, what did she need us for?

Then she reached the section with the lines "Ah! That must be Aunt Augusta. Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner" and our role, or roles, in this began to come clear.

"Now we get down to business," she said, fanning the script book in front of her a few times, as if clearing the air. With a tight-lipped smile she turned to me. "You are no longer Rusty, but Algernon, and

occasionally Jack, also known as Ernest.”

Zoe giggled.

“And you, child, are Gwendolen now and Cecily later.” That sobered Zoe right up.

“And I,” said our star performer, “am Lady Bracknell.”

The part seemed to fit. Cloyce Reinking was famous for her New Year’s Eve parties, where everyone who was anybody in the Two Medicine country showed up. We were never invited, Pop being busy with one of his most profitable nights of the year. Not that we would have been anyway, I suspected, mentally comparing the housekeeping here with our approximate sort. I figured Zoe’s folks probably shouldn’t hold their breath, either. Telling myself that was neither here nor there or in between, with a feeling of mild panic I scanned the swaths of fancy-pants talk Algernon and Jack/Ernest were responsible for, trying to figure out how to say it anywhere near right. Zoe’s lips were moving uncertainly too as she encountered Gwendolen going on for half a page at a time.

Mrs. Reinking was paging ahead, marking her pieces of dialogue with a red pencil. “This ought to come back to me more than it is,” she said with quite a sigh, in character or not, I couldn’t tell. “I’ve played Lady Bracknell before, during the war.”

Zoe began to ask “Which—?” before I shot her a warning glance.

“Nineteen forty-three doesn’t seem that long ago,” the silver-haired woman probably no older than my father knitted her brow over some paragraph that took a lot of marking—“but I’m not as young as I was.”

Why grown-ups always said that was beyond me. Zoe stated what seemed to us logical: “That’s okay, neither are we.”

“What?” Putting the pink playbook facedown on the coffee table, the lady of this house took off her glasses and twirled them in one hand while rubbing the bridge of her nose with the other. “I didn’t have to wear these things then. They say the eyes are the first to go.” She shut her eyes tiredly. “The

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gray cells aren't what they used to be, either."

It began to dawn on Zoe and me more fully why Bill Reinking had enlisted us, if his wife was going to approach this play as if it were the clap of doom.

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"Well, that's why we're here," I sang out, Zoe bobbing her head like a bouncing ball to back up my bit of phony cheer.

"So you are." Straightening herself up, Mrs. Reinking turned back to the page where she had stopped reading aloud. "Let's take it from the start of this scene."

Shortly I was alternating back and forth between Algernon and Jack, telling Gwendolen she was smart and quite perfect, and Zoe was trilling back she hoped she was not that, it would leave no room for developments and she intended to develop in many directions. Then Lady Bracknell's part began in full gale force, with her recounting the call on a friend whose husband had recently died: "I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger."

The grand manner Mrs. Reinking put into this made the two of us snort little laughs. Her lips twitched a bit. "Don't get carried away. I gave that line too much. Farce has to be played straight."

We sobered up, and went on feeding her lines that produced Lady Bracknell's wacky pronouncements. Most were reasonably funny, although by the time Jack told her he had lost both his parents and she responded that to lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune, but to lose both looked like carelessness, Zoe and I were cutting glances at each other. If we were in over our heads, though, Cloyce Reinking showed no sign. At the end of act 1, she whipped off her glasses again. "That's enough stretching of the brain for one day," she said with a wintry smile apparently intended for herself. Zoe and I waited anxiously. She hesitated, seeing the look on our faces. "Well, we'll take it from the top again tomorrow and see whether my memory held up overnight."

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"What's this play about, again?"

Pop lounged against the doorjamb, trying to fathom Oscar Wilde, which I had to admit was not easy. I sat up higher in bed and patiently explained that one character was using the phony name Ernest when in town and his real name of Jack in the country, and there were all other kinds of sleight-of-hand as to who was a guardian to whom and who was left as a baby in a handbag, but it all worked out in the end with Jack, now Ernest for good, free to ask for the hand of Gwendolen and Algernon entitled to woo Cecily, with Lady Bracknell presiding as loftily as imaginable.

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“That’s pretty deep for me,” Pop said, then asked what he really wanted to know. “How’d you get along with Cloyce Reinking?”

“Pretty good, I think.” He caught my slight hesitation. “I mean, she’s kind of hard on herself about gearing up to be Lady Bracknell. She doesn’t sound like she’s sure she can do it anymore. And that seems to really bug her.”

He considered that in silence, then shifted his weight on the doorjamb. “Let me tell you a little something about her so you don’t get yourself in hot water, okay?” He ran his hand through his hair. “Don’t repeat it, this is just some skinny between us.”

That flustered me. “But Zoe’s there with her just like me, too, and if there’s gonna be any trouble—”

“All right, you can tell your partner in crime,” he granted. He drew the kind of breath needed to begin the story. “Cloyce Reinking started off with all the advantages in life, down there in Hollywood. As I heard it, her folks made a pile of money in the movie business in the early days. But these things happen—he shrugged fatalistically—“she lost out on all that somehow and she ended up here, with Bill. You couldn’t ask for a better human being than him, but she’s, how would you say, never taken to the town the whole way. Some people are like that, they like a bigger pond to swim in. Get what I mean?”

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“I think so.”

“She’s not my all-time favorite person”—he stuck his nose in the air indicatively—“and I doubt that she thinks any too highly of a run-down bartender. None of that matters. My guess is, getting up in front of an audience and being Lady What’s-her-name means a lot to her. You don’t want to mess that up for her, you wouldn’t want that on your conscience, would you.” I shook my head that I certainly wouldn’t. He made himself clearer than clear. “So even if she has to gripe her way into it every inch of the way, just lay back in these rehearsals and give her some rope, right?”

“I will, honest. Zoe, too.”

“Okay, that’s that.” He shoved off from the doorjamb and headed for his bedroom. “Don’t let the ladybugs bite.”

“Pop?” I called after him.

“Yeah, what now?”

“What’s a Svengali?”

“It’s a Swede who says ‘Golly’ a lot.” His voice grew muffled as he went on down the hall.

“Although you might check that against a dictionary.”

“Let’s take it from the top again. There has to be a better approach to this.”

We were in the third or fourth straight day of Cloyce Reinking despairing at doing Lady Bracknell theatrical justice. Practically ramming her glasses into the bridge of her nose, she faced down into the script and tried in a fluting voice:

“I have always been of the opinion that a man who desires to get married should know everything or nothing. Which do you know?”

The script said Jack should hesitate before answering, so I did. “I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.”

“I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance.”

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Zoe patted her hands together in silent applause, but Mrs. Reinking wasn't having any. With a groan, she pulled off her glasses. "It would help" she was back to her own throaty tone "if Oscar Wilde were less clever and more substantial." She eyed the script as if feeling sorry for it. "This is such a flimsy piece of work in the long run, isn't it," she reflected. "There's an old saying that there are only two stories that last and last. A mysterious stranger rides into town, and somebody goes on a big journey. There you have it, from *Shane* to *The Odyssey*."

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Truthfully, that did seem to match up with the experience of two twelve-year-old drama critics, recalling John Wayne cantering into the Alamo and the entire cast of *As You Like It* transported in the turn of a phrase to the Forest of Arden. For that matter, Zoe's magical arrival was the story of my summer so far, and her parents' consequential migration from Butte to the Top Spot was hers.

"But it's funny," I felt I had to stick up for *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "Isn't it?"

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"Very well, Rusty," Mrs. Reinking granted with a twitch of her lips, "it has its moments. I wish I had mine anymore." She snapped her fingers like a shot. "The time was when I could absorb a script like that and know by instinct how to play it. Now?" She shook her head in that way that made us afraid she was about to call it quits. Instead she just murmured, "Well, let's take a break."

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Perhaps to make up for the play's lack of reward, this day she had fixed a pitcher of Kool-Aid of some strange flavor—persimmon, maybe—and set out a plate of tired macaroons. I went right at a couple of the cookies while Zoe took one for politeness and, after licking off a shred of coconut, put it aside.

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With an eyebrow arched, Mrs. Reinking watched this. "Child, do you ever touch food?"

"Y-e-esss," Zoe said back. True as far as it went; I had seen her move it around on her plate like a card trick artist. Mrs. Reinking was getting to know us, but she still had a lot to find out, such as how fast Zoe could change the subject. "Did you really live in Hollywood?"

"Of course," came the surprised answer. "Why?"

“What was it like?” Zoe said eagerly, and I followed up with, “Who was there?”

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Cloyce Reinking shifted restlessly. “You really want to know, do you. All right, my parents were among the pioneers, you might say, in the film business. Movies were silents then, so at parties, there might be Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, people of that sort.” She twirled her glasses while thinking back to that time. “Everyone had mansions, including us—I sound like Lady Bracknell, don’t I,” she laughed slightly in spite of herself. “But it was true. I suppose”—she looked uneasily at us and our circumstances—“it made me a little spoiled. For instance, my parents let me use their roadster whenever I wanted when I was only a few years older than you.” Zoe and I goggled at that. “Of course I couldn’t drive in public quite yet,” she went on, as if even the rich faced certain drawbacks, “but up and down our orange groves, I probably was a holy terror.”

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Plainly, living in Gros Ventre was small potatoes after that. But that’s where we all were, and Zoe now brought matters back to earth.

“Boy oh boy, they sound like the best parents ever. Are they still around?”

The woman in the chair opposite us went rigid, as if she might not to answer. But then: “They were killed in a car wreck. Right after Bill and I were married. We were young, still teenagers really, and the movie company fell into other hands.” She made a gesture as if brushing all that away. “These things happen in real life.”

“Wow,” one of us said softly, it may have been me.

“Well,” Mrs. Reinking stirred uncomfortably and picked up her script but didn’t open it. “Back to *The Importance of Being Earnest*,” The dubious expression had returned to her. “Or not.” Abruptly she threw her glasses down on the coffee table. “Bill must be out of his mind, pushing me into this,” she said angrily. Zoe and I traded apprehensive looks. “I’m sorry, children, but I really think we’re not getting anywhere and had better give this up as a bad—”

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We had talked this over and agreed it would be best coming from Zoe. “Mrs. Reinking?” she

interrupted. "Before we start again," just as if we were going to. "Can you do that bit for us? The Ben somebody one you told us about after Shakespeare that day?"

She frowned, taking a minute to remember. "The crossed eyes? No, why should I fool around with that?"

I leaped in. "Don't you think it might be kind of funny if somebody as, uh, stuck up as Lady Bracknell did that? Not all the time, but every once in a while?"

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Drawing farther into her chair as if backing away from the suggestion, she looked askance at our eager faces. "Children, I don't think that's in my repertoire."

"Just try?" we pleaded.

With considerable reluctance she did, slowly directing her eyes, as if trying to see the end of her nose. Her attempt was more wall-eyed than cross-eyed, but it altered her looks fantastically, pulling her strong features into a comical prune face.

Zoe and I grinned, giggled, outright laughed. "You should see yourself."

"You two." She shook her head, but looked around for a mirror. Getting up swiftly, she led us into the hall, interrupting the cat at its business in the box. "Scat, Sheba, that will have to wait." Posting herself at the mirror beside the hat rack, she drew herself up, took a breath to compose herself in the reflection, and said: "Give me a line, please."

Zoe recited in her Cecily voice: "Mr. Moncrieff and I are engaged to be married, Lady Bracknell."

"I do not know whether there is anything peculiarly exciting in the air of this part of Hertfordshire," even the dowager voice sounded better, "but the number of engagements that go on seems to me considerably above the proper average that statistics have laid down for our guidance."

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The three of us gazed into the mirror as she held the expression leading up to the finish of that. Her try at crossing her eyes at the climax of this did not actually yield dueling eyeballs, but it did produce a

classic caricature of a snooty lady looking down her nose.

Letting her face relax, Mrs. Reinking nodded slowly to her reflection and the pair of us. "It has possibilities."

Giddy with the assured prospect of further rehearsals—"Ten sharp, remember," we had been reminded with a smile that was at once tart and sweet—Zoe and I practically sailed back downtown, talking a mile a minute. As we rounded the corner to the Medicine Lodge, however, I caught sight of something that made me tighten inside. Howie's bald head instead of Pop's dark one showing through the plate-glass window. Zoe was so busy chattering she didn't notice, and I managed not to say anything beyond our usual "Later, gator" as she sashayed off to her chores at the Spot.

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Hurrying around to the back of the saloon, I checked across the alley. The Packard was parked where it always was, so at least Pop wasn't loading up for another trip. Yet.

I charged into the back room and there he was, idly rambling around the room to no clear purpose that I could tell, hands in his hip pockets, gandering at this and that like a museumgoer. "Hey, how'd it go today?" he greeted me, still looking around. "Did Cloyce Reinking need much help being theatrical?"

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"What... what are you doing? Why's Howie here?"

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"Just kind of looking things over," he said, gruff at having been caught at it. "Howie's handling a shift while I take a little inventory up here." He tapped his temple, circling the room some more. "Cripes, there's stuff tucked away here I'd forgot about."

I watched him, not knowing what to think. He looked the way he had lately, as if there was a lot on his mind. Maybe the weather was getting to him. There hadn't been a chance to go fishing yet this crazy year. That was the least of it, though. Summoning my courage, I sneaked a look at the tarp. To my surprise, it didn't appear to have any surplus under it. Still, I asked suspiciously, "You're not gonna

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make a trip again already, are you?"

By now he was over at the shoe\_box of cigarette lighters, burying a played-out one to the bottom and trying out a shiny Ace in the Hole type. When it flamed on first try, he grunted and closed the lid, tapping the lighter in the palm of his hand contemplatively as he looked at me. "Naw, not right away, anyhow, you don't have to worry your hair off about that." He held his gaze on me. "Guess what. If and when I do, it'll be a short one, maybe a day." He made this sound casual, although it was anything but. "Down to the falls, most likely."

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Did I hear him right? Those trips that plagued me like nothing else, over and done with, in just that many words? My voice thick with hope, I made sure: "Not Canada anymore? Ever?"

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"That's about the size of it," he said, resuming his inventory stroll again. "Tell me about the rehearsal."

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It was amid this run of luck that I stepped out of the house one morning to the strangest sight: All over town, the cottonwoods were suddenly snowing, the fluffy seed filaments they were named for drifting down like the most tardy flakes of the thirty-year winter, and there, through the heart of this soft storm out of old wrinkled Igdrasil and fellow trees, a rainbow was glowing. I stopped, amazed, as if the mighty seasons of this year were colliding in front of my eyes. Glimmers of rainbows had not been uncommon after all the rains, but this was a true one, a hypnotic arch stretching from somewhere beyond the Medicine Lodge and the other downtown buildings to the far hay\_fields of the creek valley. I watched, riveted, its full band of colors from red through yellow to violet phenomenally mixed with the snow-white fluff, until it gradually faded, and I think of that signal morning whenever I look back to that time now half a century ago, as if to the pigments of that many-hued year.

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Still under the spell of that spectacle, I went on my way across the alley to the Medicine Lodge to await Zoe as usual, for our next session of being Ernest and Algernon and Cecily and so on. The beer

truck with GREAT FALLS SELECT blazoned on its side in big red letters—and below ~~that~~, that immortal slogan *When you Select, it's a pleasure!*—was backed up to the rear door, as it was every week. The beer man Joe greeted me like an old comrade as he rattled a last case of empty bottles into the truck, while Pop was occupied in reading something that must have come with the usual invoice. I noticed that the more he read, the more his eyebrows climbed. Finally he could not contain himself:

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“No bee ess? This on the level, Joe? They chose this joint?”

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The beer man laughed and thumped him on the back. “Says so right there in the letter, don’t it? You’ve been an A-one customer all these years, Tom, it’s only fair. Have a helluva good time in the falls.” Climbing into the truck, he gave us a beep of salute and pulled out, leaving Pop standing there, reading over the piece of paper, looking as pleased as I’d ever seen him. I almost didn’t want to interrupt the moment.

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“Who’s it from, Pop?”

“Some bigwig at the brewery, no less. Guess what, kiddo. The Medicine Lodge is the Select”—he drew it out into *See-lect*—“Pleasure Establishment of the Year. It beat out every other joint in the entire state. How about that, hey?”

“Wow! Is there a big prize?”

“Let me see here.” He ran his thumb down the letter. “A twenty-five-percent discount on next week’s beer order—that’s better than a kick in the pants, anyway—plus a tour of the brewery, an award luncheon, and guest seats in the company box at the Selectrics game this Sunday.”

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“Outstanding, Pop! Can I—”

“Don’t sweat it, you’re along. It says right here ‘honoree and family.’”

“Can Zoe come with us?”

“What am I, an adoption agency?” That did not sound promising, but if I played my cards right, it might not be the last word, I sensed. Seeing my face fall and stay that way, he reconsidered. “Just the

two of us” —he rubbed his jaw as if taking count—“I guess we are a little short on family. If her folks say it’s okay, I don’t see any overpowering reason why she can’t come.”

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The day dawned bright and clear, like stage lights turned high. Dressed to the teeth as Pop and I also were, Zoe sat in the middle in the car, because that’s what females did in those days of front seats that held three people. The drive to Great Falls felt like a storybook journey, the polar crags of the Rockies beyond, the nearer fields so unbelievably green the color needed a new name, the creeks and rivers running high, wide, and handsome in a countryside usually starting to gasp for moisture this time of year. Pop declared he could not remember a summer quite like this, and Zoe and I could readily believe it. He was in an expansive mood as our route stepped us down from the altitude of the Two Medicine country, pointing out for my benefit a landmark square butte that Charlie Russell had painted any number of times, and for Zoe’s, the sky-high smelter smokestack, visible from thirty miles away, where copper mined in Butte ended up. Never mind the Pyramids, the Alps, the topless towers of cities of legend, we had sufficient marvels to behold as the Buick gunboat sailed us along.

As the name implies, Great Falls has a river at its heart, the renowned Missouri, and the broad, powerful current was brimming almost into the bank-side brewery, as though the water could hardly wait to become beer, when we pulled up to the front of the big brick building. The brewery looked disappointingly like a factory, one from long ago at that. There could not have been anything more up to date, however, than the gigantic electrical sign up on the roof spelling out GREAT FALLS SELECT, with that vital last word blinking bright red every few seconds.

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“This seems to be the place,” Pop said with a straight face as we got out. While he bent down to adjust his bow tie in the reflection of the car window, Zoe and I gawked around. Both of us had trouble keeping our eyes off the hypnotic sign. Suddenly the thought hit Zoe: “Mr. Harry, is this the beer they call Shellac?”

“The exact same one, princess,” he replied, straightening up to his full height, “although none of us are going to say that word again today from this minute on.” He looked at her forcefully, then the same at me. “Got that?”

We bobbed our heads like monks in a vow of silence, but you know how difficult it is when you deliberately try to put something out of your mind. *Shellac, Shellac, Shellac*, the huge sign seemed to register in its every blink.

Checking his watch, Pop hustled us into the brewery. Waiting for us was a well-dressed man of large girth, who introduced himself as the vice president in charge of brewing operations. “I see to it the barley comes in and the beer goes out.” He gave an encompassing sweep of his hand as if that explained everything.

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Talking every step of the way, he led us off on the tour of the brewery. There was a bewildering variety of vats and boilers and other equipment strung throughout the building, with an army of workers reading gauges and adjusting dials and opening and closing valves and so on. The manufacture of beer, it turned out, was full of words that Zoe and I thought we knew but look on evidently far different meanings when spoken by the vice president, such as *malt* and *mash* and *hops*. It might not be everyone’s idea of a prize outing, but trooping through the Select production maze behind our indefatigable tour guide was decidedly educational, I suspect even for Pop, although he kept nodding wisely and murmuring *mm hmm*, as if he knew all about how beer was made.

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Naturally the brewery had an intoxicating aroma, a heady odor that seemed to go farther up the nostrils than other smells. While the vice president gabbed to Pop, with us trailing behind, Zoe could not resist crossing her eyes as if she were drunk, and I had to make myself not dissolve in giggles. I got back at her by whispering, “Don’t look so shellacked.” She puckered up at the forbidden word, and now we couldn’t help it, both of us laughed through our noses as if sneezing.

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Pausing in his discourse to Pop, the vice president turned and smiled indulgently at the sunny pair

of us. “Cute children you have, Mr. Harry. What are they, twins but not the identical kind?”

Pop shook his head and gave the kind of wink that passes between men of sophistication. “Different mothers, if you know what I mean.”

“Oho,” said the vice president, not entirely as if he knew what that meant.

When at last we had been shown everything there was about beer\_making, our host leaned toward Pop as if confiding a business secret.

“Of course, we can brew our product until it runs out our ears, but we can’t sell one drop without superb skill such as yours behind the bar. That’s why we here at Select were so pleased to”—he chuckled—“select your establishment for this year’s award.”

Pop took this as imperturbably as a captain of industry. Nodding gravely to the activity in every precinct of the brewery, he responded: “I’m glad to see I’ve got your crew working Sundays to keep up.”

“That’s saying a mouthful!” the vice president acclaimed that. He thumped Pop on the back as Joe the beer\_man had done with the delivery of the award letter; I mentally tucked away the bit of behavior as the Great Falls Shellac—whoops, Select—salute. “Well, onward to the luncheon,” our host exclaimed. “I’ll meet you at the Buster.” He smiled tolerantly at Zoe and me again. “I hope you brought your appetites with you.”

Like the brewery, the Sodbuster Hotel—so named in tribute to the grain-growing region that Great Falls was at the heart of—was a place Pop and I, and for that matter Zoe, might never have encountered in the ordinary course of our lives. Classy enough to invert itself into the Hotel Sodbuster in the terra-cotta name on its facade, it also made sure to boast *Great Falls’ finest!* in a banner over the front entrance. The marble lobby and overstuffed furnishings and potted greenery showed that it was not merely claiming that honor by default, and in those surroundings I’m afraid our threesome looked like

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Comment [CE43]: Ed/au: Should this be full caps, roman, for consistency with other signs? See, for example, nine paragraphs up, where GREAT FALLS SELECT is written on the side of the factory.

just what we were, Sunday visitors who were in over our heads in a fancy hostelry. Not a thing in the brewery excursion had seemed to faze Pop, but he looked nervous about this.

A desk clerk a lot better dressed than we were coolly directed us to the banquet room. Pop halted outside the big oaken doors, though, and jerked his head for Zoe and me to follow him down the hallway. "Anybody who has to take a leak, now's the time." Zoe did not yet have the skill of blushing on cue, but she otherwise acted ladylike enough as she minced into the properly labeled restroom while we went to the one marked GENTLEMEN.

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The Hotel Sodbuster had deluxe restrooms, More of that marble on the floor, and sinks that nearly snowblinded a person. Even the places to pee gleamed, and, thinking of my dreaded latrine duty at the Medicine Lodge, I wished out loud its facilities were as nice as these.

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"Sure," Pop muttered as we lined up side by side to do our business, "just what the joint needs, a Taj Mahal toilet."

"Pop? Are you worried about something?"

"What do you think? It's an award ceremony, isn't it, so they're going to expect me to get up and say something, aren't they. And I'm no public speaker, am I."

"Can't you just say, 'Gee, thanks,' and sit right back down?"

"What kind of an ess of a bee wouldn't have any more manners than that?" He zipped up, and checked me over to make sure I had done the same. "Okay, let's collect Zoe and go get this over with."

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Stepping into the gathering in the banquet room of the Buster was like entering a forest of business suits, with a few of the dignitaries' wives sprinkled in to coo down at Zoe and me. The vice president from the brewery greeted Pop and us like old friends and led the trio of us around to be introduced. The roomful was quite an assortment—the slickly dressed mayor of Great Falls and sunburned farmers from the barley growers' association and up-and-comers of the local chamber of commerce and burly beer distributors from all over the state; names flew by us in bunches as Pop shook hands endlessly. With his

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height and the silver streak in his hair, he stood out in the crowd like a cockatoo, and I could tell he was uncomfortable with the marathon of one-sided conversations people were making with him. This was one of those occasions where much was spoken, but very little was actually being said. Zoe and I were asked over and over how old we were. It was a relief when the vice president clattered a spoon against his beer glass and announced it was time to take our seats.

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Thanks to Pop's eminence, ours were at the head table, and with a roomful of people in front of us to be spied on just by looking, Zoe and I now were in our glory. We sat watching, keen as magpies, as the grown-ups socialized variously. I was storing away the tongue-tied expression on the barley farmer who had ended up next to the mayor's wife, when I heard a finger snap under the table, a signal either from the ghost of Shakespeare or Zoe.

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Leaning toward her in response, I whispered, "How now?"

She giggled, but whispered back with concern: "Your dad looks awful serious. Isn't he having a good time?"

"He has to get up and make a speech of some kind."

"So? He doesn't have stage fright, does he?"

"He doesn't have a speech."

"Ooh, that's not good." She thought for a moment. "Maybe he can tell them it fell out of his pocket back at the brewery and went into one of those big vats, and so the next time they have a beer, they'll have a taste of what he meant to say."

"I don't think he'd go for that."

As if by radar, Pop turned from valiantly keeping up a conversation with the vice president and said under his breath, "Don't get carried away, you two." We obediently straightened up, mute as puppets.

Waiters in white jackets flocked into the room, and the food came. I studied my plate to learn what

a banquet consisted of. Mashed potatoes, no surprise there. String beans, harmless enough. Roast beef, pink in the middle. Very pink. In Gros Ventre, someone would have been sure to joke that they had seen critters worse off than this get well.

I had never met anything yet I couldn't eat, so I went right at my meat. Zoe, though, only tweaked hers with her fork.

Observing this, Pop told her out the side of his mouth, "Dig in, princess."

"It's not cooked," she whispered to him.

"It's rare, is all. Give it a try."

"I can't. The color turns my stomach."

"Better chew with your eyes closed, then. Come on, people are watching. Saw some off the edge and eat it."

"Do I have to?"

"Hell yes," he said, giving her a look. "It's good manners."

I knew that look, and braced for trouble. The last thing we needed in a roomful of important people was a contest of wills between my father and Zoe over a chunk of meat. But miracles do happen. Swallowing hard before the really hard swallowing, she cut a bite and ate it. Then another. I was amazed; in our suppers together in the café, I had seen her throw a fit over an undercooked pea.

Thus the banquet proceeded without warfare, and after sufficient beer had been served to the grown-ups, the vice president rapped his glass with a spoon again to draw everyone's attention.

He introduced the mayor, who said a few pleasantries and doubtless won some votes by promptly sitting down. The vice president got to his feet again and talked on for a while about the long and warm relationship between the brewery and establishments such as Pop's; I noticed the word saloon, never crossed his lips, let alone joint. In conclusion, he said it gave him the greatest pleasure to present this year's award to "an owner and bartender known as one of a kind, Tom Harry, for an establishment

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which also has no equal, legendarily the first place of business in the town of Gros Ventre and still its leading one, the Medicine Lodge!”

At that, Pop had to stand up and receive a copper plaque that surprised him with its size and heft. As he wrestled it into security in his arms, Zoe and I craned for a look at the thing. Besides the fancy inscription, it was a representation of that scenery around Great Falls we’d seen on the drive in—the river valley, the Charlie Russell square butte, the mountain background—but where the smelter stack would have been, a gigantic Select beer bottle loomed over everything.

Pop studied the engraved scene for a few moments, then said as if thinking out loud: “I have a customer this bottle is about the right size for.” That drew a laugh—Earl Zane would never know he had been his own best joke—and I felt relieved for Pop.

However, he looked not too sure about what he was going to say after that as he ever so gingerly deposited the award onto the table and faced the waiting audience. He ran a hand through his hair, as if trying to comb his thoughts into place. “Something like this comes as quite a surprise, although I guess it’s a long time in the happening. Down through the years, I’ve sold oceans of Shel—”

“*Ooh!*” Zoe squealed in the nick of time, as if I had goosed her.

“Kids these days,” Pop recovered hastily, giving her what amounted to a grateful frown. He cleared his throat and started again. “Like I was saying, I have sold oceans of *Seelect*”—he all but buttered the word and handed it on a plate to the brewery vice president beside him—“down through the years. Years of beers, hey?” he said, as if just noticing the rhyme. Now he squinted as he followed one thought to the next. “My, ah, establishment, the Medicine Lodge, does go way back. I’m kind of getting like that myself.” He shook his head as if thinking about the passage of time. “According to this nice piece of metal”—he tapped the plaque, making it ring—“all the days and nights behind the bar maybe do add up to something.”

There, that did it up perfectly fine, I silently congratulated him. Proudly I waited for him to say

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“Thanks” and sit down.

Instead he said, “It reminds me of a story.”

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What? Since when? My father who would not tell the least tale about anything? The man who made an art of listening, not shooting the breeze? I wanted to disappear under the tablecloth. I just knew the banquet room would become a tomb as people grew bored. Zoe caught my stricken look.

I will say, he did the familiar man-walks-into-a-bar cadence as if it were second nature when he began: “A bartender whose time is up goes to heaven.

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“Saint Peter is sitting there on a cloud with his gold-leaf book.” Pop pantomimed the celestial gatekeeper. “Hmm, hmm, remind me, . . . what did you do in life that brings you to heaven?” The visitor scratches his head over that, he’s a little embarrassed.” Deliberately or not, Pop acted this out sufficiently. “I’m a bartender,” the visitor finally comes right out with it, “and I have to tell you, I’m surprised to be here.” “You’re right about that,” says Saint Peter, “we haven’t had one of your kind in quite some time.”

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That hit the funny\_bone of the brewery vice president, who started chuckling unstopably. Encouraged, Pop squared himself up and continued, ““Come in, come in,” says Saint Pete. The bartender follows him through the golden\_gate, and there are all the angels, sitting up to a beautiful bar that’s so long it goes out of sight off into the clouds. The spittoons are made of gold, and the bar grub in jars on the back shelf”—Pop sketched this with his hands rather longingly—“is caviar and hearts of beef. Everybody is having drinks, but this being heaven, no one gets out of hand.”

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A more general murmur of laughter around the room at that, with Pop wagging his head about the comparative behavior of drinkers. He resumed: ““Come along and meet the Proprietor,” Saint Peter says now, and leads the bartender over to where the saints are sitting in the booths. One booth is bigger and grander than all the others, and he realizes it’s the throne, and there’s God Himself sitting there, bigger than life.

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“This is the bartender I was telling you about, Lord,” Saint Pete says by way of introduction.

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“God’s voice is the size of a thunderclap, of course. ‘Welcome,’” Pop imitated to the best of his lung capacity. He did it again. “‘Welcome. We’ve been waiting for you.’” I still rated it a miracle, but a lifetime across the bar from storytellers now paid off in his delivery of the ending: “God turns to the person sitting there in the booth at his right hand. ‘Jesus, have this fellow show you a thing or two about wine.’”

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As laughter swelled, led by that of the vice president, Pop modestly said, “Thanks,” and sat down.

“This is so much fun. I could spend forever with you and Rusty.”

“Don’t get too carried away, princess.” Pop himself was looking pleased with life, though, regally puffing on a cigarette as he navigated the Buick across the Missouri River bridge to the ballpark, the final installment of our honorific day. The vice president had given him a congratulatory smack on the back after his speech, if that’s what it was, at the hotel, and said he would leave word at the ticket office for us to go right into the company’s box and he’d meet us there. As Zoe chattered, I stayed mum, dreamily looking forward to seeing the Selectrics, those phantoms of the radio, play baseball, even the hazardous way they’d historically played it.

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The instant we set foot into the grandstand I fell under the dazzling spell of the emerald-green outfield and the inset diamond of infield; I was an American male, after all. An usher materialized to escort us as if we were the most important people in the park, Zoe prancing in our lead. Watching her bound down the steps ahead of us, Pop shook his head, saying aside to me: “Isn’t she a heller. How you holding up, kiddo?”

“Hunnerd percent.”

He looked at me oddly. “Since when did you start talking like a sheepherder?”

There at the roped-off box, the vice president met us with a glad cry and we took our seats, almost

in the third base coach's back pocket, only to hop right back up as the tinny public-address system played the national anthem. Then the Selectrics bounded onto the field, and the leadoff hitter for the other team, the Fargo Fargonauts, scuffed his way into the batter's box and it was unmistakably baseball, slower even than fishing.

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Like me, Zoe had never been to a game before, and I could tell she was fiendishly finding bits to store away, such as the coach's signs to the batters, which had him touching himself in surprising places and tugging at his earlobes and nose as if keeping track of his sensory parts. I concentrated on what was happening on the field, which was instructive in a way, some of the Great Falls fielders proving to be about as athletic as the recess bunch of us playing horse.

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Chatting away next to Zoe and me, Pop and the vice president shook their heads every so often at the local version of the national pastime. Surprisingly, however, Fargo did not manage to score, inning after inning, despite all the chances the Selectrics had handed them.

Then, in the bottom of the fourth, the first Great Falls batter let a pitch hit him in the butt, the sharpest play of the day by the home team. ("Ouch!" Zoe let out a little mouse cry that drew her a look from Pop.) There followed what passed for a rally on a team of anemic hitters, the lineup scratching together a pair of runs out of the hit batter and some walks and bloop singles. GREAT FALLS 2 VISITORS 0, the score flopped into place in the slots of the center field scoreboard, and hope sprang eternal that the Shellactrics, such losers on the radio, might actually reverse that in person.

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had makes it sound like the Selectrics had the chances handed to them

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Not for long. In the top of the fifth, errors produced base runners, a couple of Fargonauts hit three-run homers, and that was obviously that—another shellacking, to put it disloyally—although there were still four innings to go.

Zoe was starting to shift in her seat on a regular basis, and I confess I was losing interest in every ball and strike. The vice president noticed we were turning into wiggle worms.

"Say, how would you like to see a little of the game from the press box?" He checked with Pop. "If

it's all right with you, I'll get the traveling secretary, he can show the kids a good time for a couple of innings." He chuckled meaningfully. "We can have some of our product to keep us company."

Pop eyed the pair of us squirming hopefully, and with only the slightest fatherly hesitation okayed the proposition, and the vice president shepherded us through the grandstand all the way up to the press box, then went off to find the traveling secretary.

This was more like it, Zoe and I agreed without having to say so, luxuriating in our lofty new seats. The press box was like a long, low shed hanging from the grandstand roof. At the far end was the glassed-in radio booth, where the sportscaster could be seen gamely trying to milk excitement from the proceedings on the field. Also at that end of the booth from us, a few sportswriters were occasionally pecking at typewriters, but mostly talking among themselves in bored tones. Which left the two of us in splendid isolation to take in everything now below us, the pool-table green of the ball field, the players in harmless miniature, the beer vendors going through the stands shouting, "Seelect," the Sunday crowd a universe of details we could peer right down onto, even the bald spots on men and women's hair roots under bleach jobs. We grinned at each other, smug as spies atop the Empire State Building.

"Rusty, what if"—how something like this is possible I still can't explain, but I swear I knew Zoe's mind was about to go in some direction not on any compass—"a person couldn't see any of this?"

My heart beat faster. "You mean do a blind bit?"

"I bet all I'd have to do is—"

"Hi there, I'm Irv," Fate announced itself to us in a cheery voice. "Glad to have you as guests of the Great Falls Selectrics."

The traveling secretary was a chubby young man with the hearty attitude that so often substitutes for genuine ability; if I didn't miss my guess, he was the son or nephew of someone in the team's management. Smiling broadly, he asked what our names were, how old we were, and where we were from, right down the list. We answered by rote, Zoe giving him an unblinking gaze throughout this, until

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he confidently wanted to know if we were having a good time.

This caused her to stare, still as blank as a fish, toward the ball field and sigh heavily. "I suppose so."

Irv's heartiness diminished somewhat. "What's wrong?" he asked me.

"Nothing. She's blind, is all."

"Oops. I wasn't told that."

The crack of a bat and the groan of the crowd interrupted things. Zoe did a good job of gaping vacantly at the sky. "What was that? Lightning?"

"Don't be afraid, sis," I provided in my best phony-faithful manner, "it was only Fargo hitting another home run."

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"Ooh, I wish I could see one of those just once."

By now Irv was glancing around nervously at the circumstances of the press box, where a person could fall out and a foul ball could fly in. "Your folks don't mind if you're up here by yourselves?"

"It's just our dad with us, and he's busy with the brewery man." I took the opportunity for a fantasy of my own. "Mom"—Zoe perked up her ears at that unexpected word from me—"is home, tending bar."

"She is? I mean, well, your family is really dedicated to selling beer, isn't it."

"The Select Pleasure Establishment of the Year," Zoe recited. "When our dad read those words to me, I cried, I was so happy." She sniffled a little at the memory of it.

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"Well, ah..." Irv cast around for anything to head off tears. "Would you like a hot dog?"

A swift intake of breath by Zoe. "I've heard of those! I'd love to taste one just once."

"You haven't ever—?" Irv looked at me. I meekly shook my head.

"We'll fix that, right now. Sit tight, don't move." He bounded out of the press box to hunt up a vendor.

Zoe blinked about twenty times and rubbed her eyes. "Whew. All that staring is hard."

“But it’s working! Anybody would think you’re blind as a bat.”

“If my eyeballs fall out of my head from this, I will be.”

“*Shh*. Here he comes.”

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Irv came hustling back bearing hot\_dogs. Mine he handed me without trouble, but Zoe’s he couldn’t decide what to do with as she sat there staring into space. “Let me,” I said tenderly, lifting her hand into midair like a marionette’s and then depositing the hot dog into it.

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“Mmm. *Mmm*.” Actually munching away at the roll and wiener, she was really giving this her all. Talking with her mouth full, she wondered, “You’re the traveling secretary. Do you go all around the world?”

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Irv laughed, although not much. “Only to Canada, actually. Saskatoon and Medicine Hat.” I knew those were the towns, not far over the border, of the Saskatches and the Toppers, two more teams that habitually trounced the Selectrics.

“I bet it’s nice,” Zoe said dreamily, “flying everywhere, stewardesses bringing you pillows and stuff to eat.”

“Actually, we go everywhere on the team bus,” came the uncomfortable admission.

“Mister Irv?” She dabbed at some mustard on her chin and deliberately missed, which I thought was overdoing it somewhat. “I was too embarrassed to ask around the brewery man—but what are they doing out there? I mean the baseball players. It sounds like one side throws the ball for a while, trying to hit the other side, then the other side gets to throw the ball at them. Doesn’t it hurt, all that getting hit with the ball?” She gave me an apologetic stare. “My brother tried to explain the game to me, but he has trouble figuring it out, too.”

More perplexed than ever, Irv asked me: “You haven’t even heard baseball on the radio?”

“There’s a lot of static where we live.”

He turned back to Zoe and her big blank eyes. “Well, see . . . oops, I mean, if you can visualize,”

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he pursed up with the effort of this, "the field is made up of the infield and the outfield, and there are nine players on the field—"

"Lined up, but not very straight, I bet," Zoe put in knowledgeably. "I heard somebody say the Selectrics don't have a very good lineup."

"That's..." Irv stopped to ~~muster~~ <sup>regroup</sup>. "That's actually not what a lineup means. The players are more like... scattered around," he summarized as if just noticing this. He was spared further attempt at description by another crack of the bat and one more muted groan from the crowd.

"What was that?" Zoe asked excitedly. "Another home run for the Fargonauts?"

I deferred to Irv to see what would happen. "A ground ball to the shortstop," he reported for her benefit.

"Isn't it mean to call him that?" she scolded. "How short is he?"

"What? No, he's only called that because the position he plays is between second base and third, it's, ah, a shorter space than the other infielders cover."

"That doesn't sound fair to the other players. Do they get to take turns at being shortspot?"

"Shortstop, as in he stops the ball from getting through the infield—"

"Aren't they all supposed to? Rusty," She pouted as if betrayed, "You told me the players run all over the place after the ball, but now it sounds like there's only one in charge of stopping it."

"It's a funny game," I said.

Searching around for help, Irv had a sudden inspiration. "You know what," he confided to me, man to man, as though Zoe were deaf as well as sightless, "this is a terrific human-interest story, your sister at her first ball game. I'll get the Trib writer over here and—"

"NO!"

My outcry set him back on his heels. "No, please don't," I rattled out desperately while Zoe sat frozen, "our dad feels too awful about her being blind. It would ruin his day." Ruin a pair of smart-aleck

**Comment [CE44]:** Ed/au: *muster* means to gather together; an object would be necessary here, such as "Irv stopped to muster a better explanation"?

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twelve-year-olds along with it, for sure. I could already hear, drumming in my head, Pop's everlasting admonition: *Don't put beans up your nose*. And from her paralyzed look, Zoe knew as well as I did we had gotten ourselves into a noseful of trouble. What were we thinking—what was I thinking—in pulling a stunt like this, today of all days?

"Well, gee," Irv stood on one foot and then the other, "I sure don't want to upset anyone. It's a shame to pass up such good publicity, though. Why don't I go and try talk your dad into—"

Just then a Selectrics batter was called out on strikes, ending the inning. A leather-lunged fan below the press box hollered: "That was ball four if there ever was one! You're blind, ump!"

"Ooh!" Zoe came to life and clapped her hands. "They hire blind people in baseball? That's so kind of them."

While she furnished that distraction, I wildly tried to think of how to get Irv to evaporate. It would take a miracle and I couldn't think how to produce one.

"Could you get me a job here,"—Zoe was improvising like a trouper but she couldn't keep it up forever—"when I grow up? As a—what is it, ump?"

"Ah, chances aren't good," Irv equivocated. "See, I mean, you can imagine that to be an umpire you have to be able to—"

All of a sudden, as if the entire stadium of people had decided to give up on the Selectrics and go home, people in the grandstand below us and out in the bleachers were getting to their feet, but only standing and rubbing their tired behinds and working various kinks out, and I realized we were saved.

"Sis, remember? It's the seventh-inning stretch—"

"All right." Staying in her seat, Zoe stretched her neck like a languid swan, although telepathy told me she was as ready to bolt as I was.

"—and we're supposed to go back down to where the brewery man and dad are, aren't we. Let's hurry."

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"I'd better go with you," Irv prepared to spring into action. "Miss, if you could manage to take my arm and we'll—"

"That's okay, I'll lead her, I do it all the time at home," I babbled, and beat him to Zoe's side by a whisker.

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

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

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

"Was that great or what?"

"You were fantastic!"

"No, you were!"

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

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

"The whole bit," we chorused.

The journey home, in my memory, capped the day perfectly, Pop driving and smoking in

contentment, Zoe smiling as she dozed between us, while a sunset that would have made Charlie Russell ~~reach~~ <sup>grab</sup> for his paints drew down over the mountains and prairie. When the car cruised into Gros Ventre with the darkened trees over the town like a canopy of night and the lights softly on in the houses beneath, Pop roused Zoe with a gentle "Hey, princess" as we pulled up to the ~~cafe~~. Sleepily she got out and thanked him for the day and yawned us a good-night. But before I could close the car door, she whirled like a dancer and whispered as if giving me full credit, "Your dad is wild!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### THE MAN BEHIND THE BAR

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

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

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

His barroom has the look and feel of that vacation lodge you have always dreamed of finding, one small surviving corner of an earlier time but absolutely professionally up-to-the-minute in service. The man behind the bar looks almost too much like a bartender—bow tie, pompadour, lived-in face—to be real, but then he seemingly only glances in your direction and here's that drink you had in mind. You'd like to talk? He'll listen hard enough to turn you inside out, if you want. You prefer to sip in silence? Not another word is heard.

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

“Who the hell is Lamont Cranston?”

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

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

“Yeah, wow, Pop, you're really famous!”

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

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

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keep as one sentence, and not a question

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

We read to the bottom of the newspaper piece.

Tom Harry’s decades as the ideal bartender have carried forward the historical standing of the Medicine Lodge as an institution in its special corner of the world. The cavalcade of customers has gone from homesteaders and cowboys and sheepherders to tourists and businessmen and missile warriors, but the presence behind the bar has stayed steady as the mountains of the Two Medicine country.

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

“Sure gonna miss you when I’m gone.”

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

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

“Did you really say that to somebody?”

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

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

“Hey, don’t get constipated about it.” He mashed out his cigarette in the ashtray next to the bed,

trying to think. "It's a what do you call it," he mumbled, "figure of speech. Somebody I used to know said it all the time. She was always saying something." He caught himself. "I don't know why it popped into my head."

She?

Pop returned to the newspaper photo, wishing he'd gotten a haircut before the awards luncheon so he didn't look like a beatnik. I scarcely heard, my mind so taken up with "miss you when I'm gone" and the phantom who said it all the time. Who else could she be but my mother? A dozen years ago when they were splitting the blanket—and me into half orphanhood—how had she spoken it then to him? With the snap of drama, fit for Shakespeare's ear, if ~~he~~ <sup>the bard</sup> were still around? Or did it come out plain and bitter, good riddance to him and his booze business and everything that came with it, including an accidental kid? And *gone*, the question that hung off that. Did it admit a longing that she knew she could not entirely escape by pulling out on us, as Pop put it? Or did it mean the opposite, we'd never be missed as long as she lived? And if she saw the newspaper story, wherever she was, what would she think now? A Jones among the world\_full of names, how must she have felt at seeing our distinctive ones reappear like ghosts from another life?

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

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

In no time, the article was not just good for business, it was wildly so. There was such a flood of tourists stopping in to experience the historic saloon and its fabled bartender, besides the Two Medicine country proudly paying their respects by ordering up round after round, that Howie had to be summoned to help Pop behind the bar for hours on end. One particular brand of beer sold at a fantastic

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rate, as customer after customer—"even the Schlitz yayhoos," Pop had marveled to me in one of our bedtime conversations—ordered up a Shellac in tribute to the towering bottle on the plaque. Earl Zane got so carried away, he hocked his Calgary Stampede belt buckle for a week's worth of beer credit.

During all this, Zoe could not get enough of the vent's events, nor could I, once I somewhat got over the mystery of that utterance of Pop's that now existed in every newspaper under the sun. It was as intoxicating a time for the pair of us as for anyone bellied up to the bar, what with mornings of Cloyce Reinking steadily perfecting Lady Bracknell bit by bit and then the dialogues of the Medicine Lodge awaiting us the minute we climbed to the familiar comforts of the landing. Grinning widely at each other, we silently cheered Bill Reinking to the skies the first time he came in after the momentous newspaper story, although Pop folded his arms instead of producing a shot of scotch, water on the side.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That set of days passed like a parade, and before Pop's fame showed any sign of wearing off,

Saturday dawned and it was time for me to swamp out the barroom as usual.

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This particular morning, I didn't mind even the snottiest of chores quite as much. After proudly dusting the plaque on the wall, first thing, I emptied spittoons and swept and mopped and all else, while Pop seemed wrapped up in his own thoughts, doing little things behind the bar. A couple of times I noticed him checking the cash register, as though making sure the money piling up in the till wasn't a mirage.

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

"Got something to tell you."

He took a longer look than usual around the saloon, from corner to corner, and I expected to be told I'd missed a spot in my mopping. Instead, he said, "I've made up my mind I might as well sell the joint."

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

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Like wrong pieces of a puzzle, the words refused to fit together sensibly in my mind. Sell? The joint? *You can't!* Out loud, the best I could do amounted to, "But, but... why?"

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

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

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

Me? Now I was horrified as well as shocked. By taking on the job of swamper, I caused us to lose

the Medicine Lodge? I was the pebble that started this avalanche?

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

"I'm gonna be an actor, remember?"

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

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

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

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Now he did shrug, as if what he was going to say next were merely the tag end of that, although it was anything but. "I'm getting middle aged, you know. In the middle of getting too damn aged." Seeing my doubting expression, he sighed. "Hey, maybe you don't notice it, but I do. The body doesn't lie." He patted his stomach regretfully. "My belly's coming over my belt more all the time. When you can't see down to your business end, you know you're starting to hit trouble."

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Ordinarily I would have appreciated such man-to-man talk. This was no ordinary time. I absolutely did not want to have to think of him as too damn aged. So what if his middle was sagging, and his widow's peak was more pronounced than it used to be, and his forehead had a ladder of wrinkles now when he lifted his eyebrows? And that he hadn't been able to dodge a sheepherder's stupid elbow, something I continually told myself couldn't happen again in a hundred years? The sky color of his eyes

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

He leaned back against the breakfront, his arms firmly crossed, Franklin Delano Roosevelt at his shoulder, as if backing him up about the vicissitudes of life. "Listen, Rusty, the hours, day and night in here"—he glanced almost apologetically to the gleaming bar as he spoke of this—"are starting to get to me. Been that way since the start of the year."

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

"The house, too?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aw, hell, Tom, what do you want to do a terrible thing like that for?" ran the general howl of

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I had to hope so, did I ever. For there was one implication in Pop's decision that possibly was worst of all, that I couldn't bring myself to tell even Zoe about. That "for now" of his about at least keeping the house held a tremor I could feel in the distance, however near or far. It didn't take any too much imagination to conjure Pop one day saying, as people in our part of the country did when their

bones started aching some particular way, "You know what, we maybe ought to consider someplace warm. These winters are getting to be too much." Someplace warm spelled only one thing to me, Arizona. Worse, Phoenix. The vicinity of Aunt Marge, our only known relative, in case something really bad happened to him in the onset of age and he could no longer bring me up by himself. Treacherous cousins and all else loomed in that, and if my mood could be depressed any further, that was guaranteed to do it.

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We were on the landing, slumped at the desk, listless as puddles. Out front, at this early point of the afternoon, the barroom had no customers yet, but we could hear the small sounds of Pop puttering with things behind the bar, which he was doing a lot more of these days. The idle back room seemed to have caught a mood from the pair of us, rain\_slickers hanging slack, X-Acto knife looking dull and uninviting, model planes barely stirring in their suspended state. Attic of our imaginations, the big old expanse and its holdings had provided us with treasures beyond measure—costumery, an expanded vocabulary, a hundred bits we did, and of course, the listening post into the adult world. All of that, we knew disconsolately, was about to go. So were times together like this. My throat had been tight for days with that thought, and Zoe looked tragic most of the time now.

Comment [CE45]: Okay? *OK*

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Dismally she whispered, "What's going to happen to all the stuff?"

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

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

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

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

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

“Buy what?” Pop glanced around the barroom for anything Earl could possibly afford.

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

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

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“Damn, Earl!” he gasped and wiped his eyes with a towel as he made his way to the beer tap — “that’s the best one you ever told.”

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“I’m not joking,” Earl protested in a hurt tone. “You can’t understand plain English all of a sudden? I guess I got to say it again. I’ll buy you out, lock, stock, and barrel.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

beer along the bar.

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

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

Now the Medicine Lodge not only was going out of our existence, Pop’s and mine and Zoe’s, but was passing into the hands of the person who, if there were such an election, would be the strongest candidate for town fool. On top of that, although Pop hadn’t agreed to it yet, Earl Zane wanted the trove of hocked items to be included in the deal—“It’d get me my belt buckles back”—which would mean our beloved back room and its treasures would fall prey to that weenie Duane, while I would be across the alley eating my heart out.

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

Comment [CE46]: Ed/au: conscience?

Even Earl Zane had enough sense to agree with Pop that the sale of the saloon ought to be kept quiet until the absolute last minute. He admitted he had a few details yet to corral, such as working out final terms with the Californian who wanted to buy the gas station because he’d heard the Two

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