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mythic ~~thirties~~ coming to life, little knowing that ~~someday~~ the ~~sixties~~ would echo the same way. The interviews, as conducted by Del, were like jazz, or, yes, the blues; riffs of memory in a language all their own. So I learned that Fort Peck's populace had been such working fools that even the barbers wore bib overalls, and shantytown living conditions were so barny, you'd half expect to wake up in the morning next to a horse, but that never stopped married couples from pouring foundations in the dark—I figured out this meant making babies happen—and a job at the dam was as welcome as Christmas because when the eagle laid—payday—a person so broke he was dragging the ground would at last have some cartwheels—silver dollars—to rub together. And over and over, it was said that the day of the big slide, you'd have thought ~~hell~~ was afloat and the river rising.

Comment [CE55]: Okay to transpose?

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What is it about human nature that dwells on close calls? As Del and I hung on their ~~tales~~ ^{stories}, the mudjacks, almost to a man, had stories of terror when the face of the dam slid, of riding the pipeline down the avalanche of mud as if on the back of a dragon, of being pulled from the island of mud and debris, of narrowly escaping drowning before the rescuers could get there. I listened with shivers, especially as they all said in one way or another that if the dam had broken, it would have been the dammedest flood ever.

But that was what this day was for, those memories, those ~~tales~~ ^{supremely} stories. Del was in his element, and the mudjacks ~~were~~ ^{gloriously} in theirs, and the reels of tape ran and ran, the voices becoming permanent echoes of a certain time, a certain place, a rediscovered *lingua americana*.

Eventually Pop showed up with another fresh supply of ~~mudjacks~~ ^{interview candidates}, listened for a few minutes, then signaled me with a jerk of his head. "That ought to hold Delano for a while," he said with satisfaction. "Let's grab some grub."

Generally a reunion is an occasion with the worst of the past rinsed away by the passage of time, and this one now was determinedly lighthearted. On the flatbed of a truck the Melody Mechanics were playing vigorously—sure enough, Curly was strumming a guitar as if ~~three~~ ^{a few} fingers were plenty—and

between numbers an announcer with the patter of a livestock auctioneer worked the crowd to find out who had come the longest distance, who had produced the most children, and so on. The air had turned heavy—big prairie thunderheads were building up in the distance; I could tell what Pop meant about nature having it in for Fort Peck—but no one seemed to mind the weather this day. Skirting the throng, he and I stayed on course down to the riverbank, where the food tables were, then found a spot to sit under a scrawny shade tree with our paper plates of macaroni salad and hot dogs. We were barely settled before I could not contain the question one moment longer.

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“What’s a taxi dancer?”

my question as well as his

“You would ask.” He chewed on a bite of hot dog as well as my question. “Let me put it this way. when you pay a dancer for how long you’ve danced with her, It’s a dance partner you pay for her time, just like cab fare to go someplace.”

Comment [CE56]: Edau: “Chewed on a bite” is a little redundant; maybe “He chewed on his hot dog as well as my question”?

hire these...
“You mean, guys would rent these, uh, partners right there in the Blue Eagle?”

Comment [CE57]: Maybe “It’s when you pay for a dancer’s time”?

“Yeah, in the joint. It brought in herds of customers, savvy?”

I was starting to, putting two and two together, and it was adding up rapidly. “All those renters and taxi dancers ever did”—I could hear how dubious I sounded—“was just dance?”

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He hesitated. “With some of the taxi dancers, that was kind of open for negotiation if the customer wanted to go farther than that, I guess you could say.”

“So,” I pressed on dangerously, “really it was like on First Avenue South in Great Falls?”

The sigh of ages, as the topic of prostitution no doubt has produced down through history. With his forehead scrunched, the famous owner of the Blue Eagle set to the task of explaining matters for me.

“Not every taxi dancer was a whore, if that’s what you’re thinking. Most weren’t. Plenty of them ended up married to those dance partners, I could point out some of them here today.”

He saw me trying to keep up with this and finding it hard.

“Rusty, here’s the how of it. Things were different in the thirties, and Fort Peck was even different, if that’s a word. The Depression, when it hit”—he looked off across the still water of the

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man-made lake as though searching back into that time—"it did things to people it's hard to believe now. If you were on a farm out here, chances were your crops dried up and blew away year after year, until all you were left with was tumbleweeds and a foreclosure notice, and you lost everything. If you were a working stiff, you got laid off because ~~some damn fool place called~~ Wall Street crashed, and next thing you knew, the bank down the street went under and took your life's savings with it."

I had read all this in school, but hearing it from him sank in vastly deeper. He was grimacing painfully as he spoke.

"It changed people, they had to do whatever they could to get by. Curly wasn't only kidding about eating gophers—~~plenty of~~ some families in this part of the state were that desperate." He lowered his voice, as grave as I had ever heard him. "I still don't know why there wasn't a revolution. But people toughed it out until Roosevelt came into office and projects like this dam got under way. Then before long there's these thousands of mudjacks drawing wages, and others who showed up here because the mudjacks had money in their pockets." His voice gathered itself and he mustered a kind of smile. "Cripes, that was me, too, if you can imagine."

He drew a breath. "Okay, that's the long way around the barn to taxi dancing, but it's all connected, see. There were women who had to make a living, too, and getting out on the floor with a guy for two bits a dance was a way to do it. Any talk of business beyond that, let's say, was up to them, not me."

By this point I was practically memorizing his each word. Zoe was going to want every tiniest detail of this.

"The dance partner more than likely would buy the woman a drink or two and a few for himself," he went on doggedly, "so there's where it paid off for me. It was what you might call a sideline. Like letting the Medicine Lodge customers hock stuff. Same kind of thing."

Renting out women didn't sound to me like the same kind of thing. Was there even any way it

sounded legal? The past casts a tricky shadow, I was discovering.

Pop read my face, then gazed off toward the truck bandstand, where the Melody Mechanics were producing another spirited tune and the crowd around them was clapping and whooping.

"Kiddo," he said softly, "you have to understand, every night in Wheeler was Saturday night." He listened to the raucous music for a few moments. "It was a different time back then. Everybody was young and hot to trot, excuse my Latin. Sure, people liked to drink in the Blue Eagle, the way I ran the joint, but what they really liked was to drink and dance and kind of get to know each other, the way men and women do. If I was going to be in business here, that's what had to happen." He tipped his hat back with a forefinger to look at me more openly. "Got all that?"

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"I . . . I guess so."

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"That takes care of that, then," he said, sounding like he was trying to convince himself as well as me.

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Nothing known to man has stopped you yet. What is it now?"

"Were you a bootlegger, too?"

He winced at "too." "What makes you think I was?"

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"The Packard. Somebody said it's a bootlegger special."

"Somebody did, did they?" He frowned in the general direction of Del. "That's bee ess, kiddo. I just liked the looks of the old buggy. Seemed like a lot of car for the money. Anyway, bootlegging . . ." He took a couple of hungry bites of hot dog before I could come up with any more pesky questions.

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"Naw, I never did any of that, not the kind you're thinking of anyway." This was not the definitive answer I was looking for, he could tell from my expression. "Here's how it was, see. Fort Peckers were a pretty thirsty bunch, so the joint would run low on booze sometimes ahead of a Saturday night. It's a hell of a ways to Great Falls or anywhere else out here, so the easiest thing was to run up to Medicine

Hat and load up the car with Canadian booze.”

“Why there?”

He shifted uneasily. “The Hat is kind of a crossroads, on the Canadian railroad and the highway to Calgary and like that. You can get a lot of business done there if you hold your mouth right. Anyway,” he plowed on again, “that’s all it was, some cases of rye and other Canuck hooch packed home in the Packard. This was after Prohibition, no law broken, but”—he underscored that last word with a careful look at me—“if the state liquor board didn’t have somebody at the border to collect tax at two or three in the morning, that was their tough luck. Get the picture?”

It could not have been clearer if painted by Charlie Russell, so I nodded. My father, the living legend, maybe had not crossed the line of the law in the Blue Eagle years, but he had danced and driven right up to it, from all it sounded like. Yet, as he said, it was a different time back then. He couldn’t change the past, I couldn’t change it, we had to go on, and together; as he’d ~~said~~ ^{proclaimed} more than once, we weren’t doing too bad with what we had to work with, and we didn’t give a flying fig for other ways of being father and son. I couldn’t really argue with that.

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Gazing off again into the gathering, he asked reflectively: “Now do you get why I wasn’t red hot to come to this? Things happen sometimes that can be misunderstood.”

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“But everybody here seems to think you’re”—I stumbled for the words— “something great.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what time can do to you, once in a while. Among other things.” He turned my way, watching me anxiously. “That enough answers for you for one day? Rusty? Things still more or less okay between us after all that, I hope?”

Slowly I nodded again. “Still are, Pop.”

“Right. Come on, eat up and let’s go see how Delano is doing.”

It was slow going through the crowd, with Pop being greeted like strolling royalty by anyone who

hadn't done so before, and as hard as I tried to envision these paunchy men and their broad-beamed wives as lean, young hot-to-trot drinkers and dancers, twenty-five years stood in the way. That was not the case for the majordomo of the Blue Eagle, who accepted slaps on the back and outpourings about the old days in an easy fashion, now that we could see Del industriously interviewing mudjacks, ~~with~~ beer still serving its purpose among those waiting under the shade of the tarp. "He's got it made," Pop said with satisfaction as we were closing the distance to the Gab Lab, "so all we need to do is keep everybody happy with ~~plenty of~~ ~~enough more~~ Shellac and—"

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Comment [CE58]: Ed/au: "Enough more" sounds contradictory; delete "enough"?

He stopped in his tracks so suddenly I bumped into him.

"Damn," he let out under his breath. "Why doesn't he have anything better to do than prowl around here?"

"Who, Pop?"

"You'll see."

"I might have known who I'd find if I followed the trail of beer bottles," a voice with a scary amount of authority in it made itself known. A small man in a cowboy hat strutted over to us, looking annoyed. His meager face seemed set in that one expression, like a doll's head carved out of a dried apple. Everything about him was half-pint in size, except for the star-shaped badge on his shirt pocket. "Tom Harry is still among the living, huh? Imagine that."

"If it isn't my favorite sheriff." I could tell from Pop's voice that the lack of warmth was mutual. "Been a while, hasn't it, Carl, since you would drop by the Blue Eagle for some recreation of a certain kind."

"That's past history." The Fort Peck lawman, as much of him as there was, took me in at a glance.

"Who's this? Got yourself a grandkid, you of all people?"

"My son," Pop said stiffly. "Rusty, meet Carl Kinnick. He's been sheriff in this county since the grass first grew."

"Hi."

Kinnick didn't answer me, merely nodded as if his neck hurt. "Tom Harry a family man? I'll be a son of a bitch." He smirked at Pop. "Will miracles never quit?"

Pop said levelly, "I hope not."

I started to worry, not even knowing why. At my age I didn't have Pop's long experience in reading people's character, but this person had *mean* written all over him.

Now the sheriff was back to giving Pop a gimlet gaze. "I wouldn't have thought you was the sentimental type, showing up at a shindig like this."

"Life's full of surprises," Pop offered with deceptive casualness. "Didn't I read somewhere that you've switched to Republican? After all those times of riding Roosevelt's coattails here?"

This evidently hit a touchy spot on Sheriff Kinnick. "The Democrats weren't worth it anymore," he huffed. "Adlai Stevenson was a loser if there ever was any invented."

"Kennedy maybe won't be," Pop laughed, "if the other choice is Dickybird Nixon."

"I'll take my chances," the sheriff said, as if it were costing him teeth. He went up on his toes to peek past us to the Gab Lab, where Del was poising the microphone just so while a lean gray veteran of dam work regaled him between swigs of beer. "Who's the jaybird over there people are yakking to?"

"Delmer Robertson," Pop improvised politically. "High-powered historian from back east. Talking to folks about working on the dam. Rusty and me are helping him with his on-the-ground research."

"They start them awful young in on-the-ground research, don't they," the sheriff said with a suspicious look at Del and then at me. "Present company excepted, huh, barkeep?" he shifted his beady attention to Pop. "Just to keep things on the legal up-and-up, let's see your event permit for selling beer."

I knew it. We were going to be thrown in the clink because this badge-wearing retreaded Republican son of a bitch—he used the word on himself—didn't like the looks of us.

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"No need," Pop saved us, "I'm giving the hooch away."

Surprised, the sheriff laughed unpleasantly. "That isn't like you."

"Good works sneak up on a person, haven't you ever noticed?"

"Not hardly—I didn't get where I am by believing in fairy tales." Peering from under his cowboy hat, the little lawman watched one person after another fish out a bottle of beer from the icy tub and walk away without any show of money. He took another long look at Del and the recording apparatus, then sourly moved off, saying over his shoulder to my father: "Better be careful spreading those good works in my jurisdiction, hear? Every twenty-five years is about right."

I began to breathe again. My feeling of relief lasted only as long as it took Pop to get a gleam in his eye and call after the retreating figure, "Hey, Sheriff? Speaking of past history. Anything ever come of that case of the truck in the river?"

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Kinnick halted and turned around, scowling. "Don't be funny. I'm still working on it. You'd have heard it all over the state if I got that solved."

"Just wondering. You know I always had an interest in law enforcement."

That unpleasant laugh again. "From a healthy distance, yeah."

Pop persisted: "Any of the Duffs here?"

"That tribe? Hah. They wouldn't show their faces after that."

"People surprise you sometimes, though, don't you find?"

Before turning to go, the sheriff preened up on his toes again, shaking his head. "You're getting soft, Tom. That's bad for your health."

I held in what I was dying to ask until the badge-wearing runt was out of earshot.

"What truck in the river?"

"Can't you take lessons from Delano in being hard of hearing?" Pop sounded on edge, although my question seemed to me perfectly natural. He still was watching the sheriff recede. Aware that I was not

going to let the question rest, he lowered his voice and began: "If you really have to know, it was something that happened in '38, not long after the slide. A couple were parked in a truck on the dam one night. The thing somehow rolled into the water and drowned them both."

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Put that way, it sounded like a pure accident. But if so...

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"Why is the sheriff still working on it?"

"Kiddo"—Pop wrinkled his brow at me—"I don't know where you get it from, but sometimes you know more than the situation calls for."

He pulled out his day's half-pack of cigarettes and found it was empty. "Damn," he said through his teeth, and opened a fresh pack. I didn't say anything. The commotion of the reunion picked up as the Melody Mechanics swung into "Pennies from Heaven" and much of the crowd sang along. Over at the van, Del could be seen, absorbed as ever in mudjack gab. The sun shone, the famous dam stood strong as eternity, the Blue Eagle was worshipped in memory, the sheriff was taken care of, everything was clicking just right for Pop on this day of days, except for the bundle of inquisitiveness relentlessly tagging at his side.

"Okay, if it'll get it out of your system," he said, as if it had better, "I'll tell you." He lit the sinful cigarette, blew a wreath of smoke, and began. "Like I said, the two of them were in the truck in the middle of the night when it rolled. But that was only the half of it. They were—"

I couldn't wait to tell Zoe about it.

"Bare naked? Both of them?"

"That's what Pop said."

"Watching the submarine races," Zoe whispered in her knowledgeable way. Practically breathless, we were camped beneath the vent, trying to sort through the happenings at Fort Peck and those since, and at the same time follow along with the voices rising and falling in the barroom, neither one a simple

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task. For the moment, the tip of her tongue showed her concentration on the mystery couple. "But if they were married, why weren't they home in their own bedroom instead of making out in a truck?"

"That's just it, see. Married, but not to each other."

"Oooh. That's different."

So different that it kept me busy filling her in on the story as I had it from Pop. The pair in the truck both belonged to a large family working on the dam, which caused the scandal, but it was the man's name that meant something. "Had a customer in the old days," ~~the echo of~~ ~~and my father, introducing me to~~ ~~in~~ a summer snow of seed fall from a giant cottonwood the day of my arrival in Gros Ventre, "Darius Duff, how's that for a name? He was kind of a political crackpot, but he knew things. He'd start feeling his oats after enough drinks, and one time he got going on Igdrasil, the tree of existence." I skipped the Igdrasil part to catch Zoe up on the mean little sheriff and how touchy he still was about the unsolved crime, if that's what the drownings amounted to. "Pop thinks it was an accident. The truck getting knocked out of gear when they were, um..."

"Screwing," Zoe helped out.

"Uh-huh, and it rolled down the dam into the lake, just like that."

"Wild!"

We paused to listen tensely to the voices out front, the familiar and the new. Nothing was changing there, although at the same time everything was, and I was impelled back to the rest of the story of the mudjacks reunion. How Del, exhausted but triumphant, finished the last interview as people were heading for their cars, calling out good-byes and vows to do this again in five years. Meanwhile Pop and I filled trash cans with empty beer bottles—"The Shellackers in Great Falls ought to put up a plaque here, too," he observed—and carefully stacked the empty beer cases so they wouldn't blow away. Now that the reunion was all but over, he acted more like his usual self, going about business as if nothing else on the face of the earth mattered, but a couple of times I caught him watching me ~~anxiously~~ ^{tensely}

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Something seems to be missing.

seed fall one word

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to gauge my reaction to the day and its revelations. I hardly knew how to measure it myself. This father of mine had proved to be everything Del credited him with, legend and institutional memory and icebreaker. ~~Why not say it all the way?~~ Leadbelly of the mudjacks. Yet he also was shown to have been something like a landlord of women who went with men for money—I may have been only twelve, but I could figure out that taxi dancing might have ~~further~~ ^{serious} implications after the music stopped—and he and the sheriff poked at each other in a kind of scary way. What was I supposed to think?

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When Pop wasn't busy glancing at me as we loaded up to leave, I eyed him, trying to decide. "Tom, you were fantastic! You too, Rusty." Del by now was practically floating against the ceiling of the Gab Lab as he stowed the precious reels of tape, recounting to us one mudjack's tale or another in giddy fashion. Gradually I made up my mind. When Del at last showed signs of running down, I butted in sharply.

"I have a question."

I looked right at Pop as I said it, and my tone ~~sent~~ Del silent. I could see Pop, his expression frozen, bracing himself against five Ws and an H and whatever else of the alphabet of inquiry possible about his doings in his Fort Peck years. I let that hang in the air just long enough before I asked, "Why was the eagle blue?"

Comment [CE50]: Ed/au: One of *send*'s definitions is to impel or thrust, but it usually would work in tandem with another verb; change to something like "my tone made Del go silent"?

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I realize it was an imaginary whoosh of relief from him, and for that matter from Del, who sensed that this was one of those family matters where the stakes were dangerously high, but it cleared the air, nonetheless. With a look of replenished confidence, Pop enlightened me that the blue eagle was something from the New Deal, a symbol businesses showed off to say they were complying with wage standards and other codes of the National Recovery Administration, and he'd figured it made a good name to slap onto a saloon at the grandest New Deal construction project of all. "Anything to do with Roosevelt, Fort Peckers were hog wild about"—~~he was~~ ^{got} talkative now that my question had proved easy as a breeze—"so they thought it was patriotic to drink in the joint. Not bad, hey?"

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Head cocked, Del had been crouched in the Gab Lab, happily listening. "Great story! History making itself felt in the thirst glands," he enthused, joking or not, I couldn't tell. "Tom, you absolutely must let me capture that on tape when we get back."

"We'll see" sounded more positive than it usually did from him.

Hesitantly, Del put forth, "I, ah, hope you're glad you came?"

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Pop paused. He gave that a rueful wrinkled smile, sharing some of it to me, before answering.

"Glad' maybe isn't quite the real best word. But it's been interesting."

His gaze went distant as he cast a look at the dam and then at the vacant hillside, where the Blue Eagle once stood, and around at the reunion site, where he had walked like a king. I silently watched while he loosened his bow tie and folded it away, the same as I had seen him do so many times after his nights of bartending. Standing there as if catching his breath, he looked like he did after bouncing someone from the saloon, shirt crumpled and the gray in his pompadour mussed in with the black hair, brow furrowed but no wounds showing. I was the one hurting, with our life scheduled to change unimaginably as soon as we got home and the Medicine Lodge passed from our hands, and this father whom I loved, in spite of anything today's evidence said about him, would turn into an old man waiting for the marble farm. It didn't seem right.

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After his breather, if that's what it was, Pop snapped to. "Delano, you don't have to kiss every tape," he called into the van, where Del could be heard still squirreling away things, "we need to get a move on or we'll be at the tail end of the traffic out of here." Already, departing cars were jammed at the approach to the road up the bluff, except for one coming off the dam and heading in our direction at a surprising speed, from the looks of it someone who couldn't wait to use the boat ramp now that the crowd was clearing away. Del hopped out, and while I made myself useful folding up chairs, he and Pop began taking down the van awning. Busy with that, they weren't paying any attention to the rapid arrival, but, naturally curious, I watched the car zoom right past the boat ramp and keep coming in a

storm of dust.

Zoe had been following my whispered telling of this, as if she didn't dare miss a word. I stopped, seeing it all again.

"Then what?" she breathed.

"This big red Cadillac pulled up." The voices coming through the vent rose at this point, the woman's above the others. "And she got out."

“Back in business in the old neighborhood, Tom?” The voice was husky, the smile a bit tilted, the appearance startling, to say the least. “Mudjacks haven’t forgotten how to drink, I betcha. How was the take?”

Pop watched, wide-eyed—Del and I did, too—as this late-arriving surprise left the car to join us. The woman was, according to the saying I had never fully appreciated until then, an eyeful. In lavender slacks that had no slack between the fabric and her, and a creamy blouse also snugly filled, the vision of womanhood providing us that slinky smile was not what is standardly thought of as beautiful, yet here were three males of various ages who could not stop staring at her.

As she came up to us, it became evident she was middle-aged, but unlike Pop’s version, in the middle of resisting the years. Her complexion was that mother-of-pearl kind in ads in magazines, and whatever maintenance it took to discourage wrinkles had been done. Even more striking than any of the rest of her, though, was the mane of hair so blond it approached white; “milk blond” said it about right. She resembled someone well known, although in the surprise of the moment I couldn’t quite think who, nor could Del, according to his quizzical expression.

Pop seemed taken aback by her appearance, in both senses of the word. “It’s nothing like the old days, Proxy,” he said, not sounding like himself. “We were giving it away.”

“For free?” she laughed. “You know what I think about that.”

“Let’s not go into it.” He was awfully nervous all of a sudden, glancing back and forth from her to the two of us, his brow working. “So, what brings you to a reunion you’ve managed to miss entirely?”

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More of that skewed smile. "You're here, I'm here. Nicer without all those curious types around, don't you think?"

Del and I, standing there with our faces hanging out drew her attention, especially me. "Hey there, sunshine. Do I see a family resemblance?" she asked, as if looking for one.

Gruffly, Pop identified us to her, and her to us. "Meet Proxy Shannon. She used to"—he put it carefully—"work in the Blue Eagle."

She shook her head as if to say, *Men*. "The old marriage certificate reads 'Duff, Tom.'"

"I know that. I just never liked it on you."

That exchange electrified me. Now I knew, absolutely knew, who this was. Wife, widow, survivor, whatever the unfortunate mate should be called, of the male half of that naked couple in that truck in the river. Talk about history, here was some a good deal juicier than Del's tape recordings. The sheriff had made it sound as if those with the cursed name of Duff would be too ashamed to show their faces around Fort Peck, yet she was certainly showing hers, bold as can be. Hungry as I always was for a story, I could hardly wait for more of this one.

Of course, Del knew none of that, and regarded the dazzling newcomer as a surprise pearl in the day's treasure chest of mudjacks. "Shall we get out of the sun?" He gallantly took the role of host, since the tarp tent still was stretched between the van and the nearest trees. "Here, I'll set up the chairs." I scrambled to help.

Pop seemed less than thrilled with Del's burst of good manners, but in ~~a matter of minutes~~ ^{no time} the four of us were seated in the shade, with the water of the captured river lapping in the background, almost as if all this were intended.

"I could have sworn I heard you say you were giving away throat medicine around here," our unexpected guest kidded Pop, if it was kidding.

Del vaulted up to fish out a beer for her from the last remnants in the tub. "It's been such a

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phenomenal day, I believe I'll have one with you, Mrs. Duff."

"I could use one, too, Delano," said Pop, making me wonder what gets into grown men at a time like this.

"A phenomenal day at Fort Peck, huh?" the glamorous betrayed widow, as she now starred in my imagination, investigated Del as he returned with the clutch of Shellacs. "That's one for the books." She peered around him to the equipment cubbyholed in the van. "What are you, some kind of gypsy reporter?"

"Hmm? Not quite." He happily expounded to her about the Gab Lab and the mudjack interviews and how he couldn't have done them without Pop as the institutional memory and what a historic day this had been for the retrieval of Missing Voices, while Pop looked more and more as if he wished Del would lose his.

During this, she raised one eyebrow and then the other, which I noticed were not perfectly blond. Finally Del slowed down enough to ask, "Is your husband, ah, available for me to interview sometime?"

"He's out of reach," she said, without the ^{slightest} crack in her expression. It was driven home to me how much Zoe and I had to learn about facial control if we were going to be actors. Next came a teasing little grin at Del, as if she'd caught him at something. "Del-a-no. Is that your honest handle?"

He reddened, back to college boy. "As I've told Tom and Rusty, my father worshipped Roosevelt." It was his turn now, though. "If you don't mind my asking, Mrs. Duff—"

"'Proxy' will do, thanks. 'Mrs.' is for grandmas, and I'm not there yet."

"—that's positively what I was curious about, the derivation of 'Proxy,' I mean. A great historian once said names are the signposts of the soul."

"The hair, honey." She tossed her head as if he might not have noticed the bleach job that stood out like a full moon. "I had to use peroxide, in the old days. They've got better drugstore stuff now." That's progress for you.

Until now Pop had not been saying anything, just sitting there, nursing his beer and keeping watch

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on her. "If we're through with hairdressing and the history of names, maybe you could tell us why you're here. There's Nevada plates on that Caddy." He couldn't help looking appreciatively at the big car with tail_fins like a rocket ship's. "That's a ^{hell of a} long way to come, Proxy, just to wait until everybody packs up and leaves."

"Now, Tom, is that the best you can do for a welcome? Been a little while since we saw each other, I thought absence is supposed to make the heart grow fonder."

"How'd you know I'd even be here?"

"Had a hunch. An old-timey Fort Peck get-together wouldn't amount to anything without Tom Harry, would it." That came from her with an admiring smile, genuine or not, I couldn't tell. "Institutional memory, huh? Jeez, I wish I had one of those."

"I seem to have enough for everybody," he said with a pointed look at Del. "Okay, let's get to it, Proxy. You didn't come looking me up just to stroll down Memory Lane."

She studied her red fingernails. "I need to talk to you about a job."

"A job?" Pop couldn't help but laugh. "Excuse my saying so, but you're slipping. Don't you know I'm not running that kind of joint anymore, haven't been for more than twenty years? And, besides, I'm about to—"

"Don't get excited. Not that sort of job." That crooked smile. "I'm danced out anyway. Reno has plenty else to offer." My mind was practically flooded with all this. Nevada was where people went to get divorced quick, and Reno its center of that activity; Velma Simms had shed any number of spouses there. But this Cadillac-driving mystery woman from there, ^{What possible job could she want from} in his respectable Gros Ventre life Pop? Proxy Shannon in his telling, Proxy Duff in her own, this latest exchange told me she was no

stranger to taxi, dancing and the wilder doings in the Blue Eagle, besides being the victim of a husband who strayed to his death at the bottom of the Missouri River right out from where we were sitting. She'd had a ^{lot} busier existence than we were used to in the Medicine Lodge.

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Naturally Del had his head cocked to hear every word she said—he had that look on him as if he wished his tape recorder were catching all this—and she glanced at him and then at me. “I didn’t expect to have to do this in front of an audience.” Again, I had the feeling that for some reason I was of particular concern to her. Del, though, gave a start, as if he’d been poked in the ribs. “Ah, maybe Rusty and I should go look at the scenery.”

“Sit tight,” Pop ordered. “You, too, Rusty. I’m not going to have two cases of itching curiosity to ride home with.”

“Oh-kay,” Proxy said in throaty singsong. “Then here goes.” A tiny indent of concentration—or was it calculation?—appeared in the place between her eyebrows as she peeled at the label of her Select bottle with her thumbnail before saying anything more. “I saw that newspaper piece about you and your famous joint, Tom. It set me to thinking.”

“You can give your brain a rest,” Pop duly headed her off. “I’m about to sell the Medicine Lodge. Gonna quit the business. Be a gentleman of leisure.”

“I sort of wondered if that wasn’t in the wind. ‘Sure gonna miss you when I’m gone’ is something I used to tell customers when their time was up, remember? Always good for a laugh, and they’d go away feeling better, the dumb joes.” Her slanted smile seemed to excuse the three of us from that category, whether or not we deserved it. “But from the story in the paper, it sounded like you might mean it if you don’t watch out.”

“Didn’t I just say in so many words I’m selling the—”

“It sounds like a real nice joint,” she didn’t miss a beat. “Right up there with the old Eagle, I bet. You always were the best at running a barroom. Jeez, Tom, you don’t want to give up something like that. Sure, you maybe could use some time off, not work yourself half to death anymore—I feel that way myself sometimes. But you don’t have to throw the whole business away to get to that.” She paused. “I can about guess the fix you’re in. Russell here”—either I was imagining it or she had said my

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given name as if trying to get used to it—"has some years to go before he can help out behind the bar, doesn't he."

"He isn't ever—"

"See, that's why I came all this way to make you a proposition." The other two of us were following this as if it were a volleyball match. Proxy gave us another sidelong look, then leaned sharply in on Pop. "What you need is a working partner. An ¹~~A-one~~ bartender to take some of the load off."

"Now, there's a whale of an idea if ~~ever~~ there was one." He met that with something between a laugh and a scoff. "What's got into you? Have you forgot what a grind it is behind a bar? Slinging drinks to a full house isn't like cozying up to some guy who's feeling frisky, you ought to know that from those years of watching me at it." Amused ^{now} as much as anything, he shook his head definitively. "No slap at you, understand, but you wouldn't last one night tending bar."

"Not me, wise guy. Her."

Pop wrinkled his brow. "Who's 'her'?"

"Francine."

"Proxy, have you slipped a cog? I don't know any—"

"My daughter." The smile sloped more than ever this time. "Yours, too."

Dumbstruck is a word you use when you're out of others, but it fit then. Pop stared slackly at the tinsel-haired bearer of this news. Del rubbed his good ear as if to make sure it was working right. My head swam. What was it about Fort Peck that kept a person gasping to keep up?

More to the immediate point, how could this woman have a daughter by my father if she had been married to the man in the truck in the lake—I mean, it was conceivable, so to speak, but all kinds of questions followed that one. Starting with, why had he never known about this Francine person until this very day, as I only had to look at him to know this was total news to him. His brow bunched with so

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many furrows it looked like it was made of wicker. My own ^{mind} ~~head~~ swirling, I tried to think straight, arithmetic first. Anyone dating back to the Blue Eagle in the 1930s would be a ~~grown-up~~ by now, would need to be if she was a candidate to tend bar. The revelation, if true, that I had some sort of adult sister boggled me as much as if I'd been told Igdrasil the ancient tree was a relative.

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Professional listener or not, Del was sitting there with his mouth pooched in a silent whistle of amazement. Pop was recovering enough to speak.

"This is wacky. If you've got a kid going back that far, sure as hell it came from Darius. He could barely keep his pants on, thinking about you, even after you were married. You and I only ever—"

"Nice try, Tom, but Francine doesn't take after him in ^{whatsoever} ~~any way~~," Proxy brushed that aside. "Besides, him and me weren't that friendly there toward ~~the end~~, if you take my meaning. I've always kept it a secret from the other Duffs about her being from some other pasture. But no question, Tom, she's yours." She locked eyes with him. "Women know these things." Then a different smile from her, that found time for me before returning to Pop. "Excuse me for saying she's a chip off the old bar, but you'll see. Wait till you meet her."

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The long, long drive back to Gros Ventre that night was like being in a darkened tunnel that stretched on and on. Instead of cruising home wrapped in the memory of our phenomenal day at Fort Peck, the three of us were under a far different spell, Del rabbit-eyed behind the wheel, me in a state of emotional commotion in back, Pop dourly smoking his way through one cigarette after another.

An uncertainty named Francine rode with us. When Pop demanded to see this supposed offspring with his own eyes, Proxy promised to produce her just as soon as she could catch a plane from Reno. "I figured we ought to do this sort of gradual," she'd generously left us with, "so everybody could get used to the idea of her." That did not show any sign of taking hold as the van monotonously traced the highway out of the deeper black with its headlights.

Ultimately Del cleared his throat a little. "Ah, Tom and Rusty, I feel like an intruder. This actually is none of my business. I mean, I can't help but think about it, but—"

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"Delano, don't get started," Pop begged. "You wanted to hear about life at Fort Peck, you got one more earful than you bargained for, let's leave it at that." I watched him hesitate a couple of times before he half turned to where I was perched behind the seats. "How you doing, kiddo? Kind of a surprise, isn't it." The match lighting his next cigarette showed his face, so serious and seamed. Strange how a moment's glimpse like that can last a lifetime. "It sure as hell was to me." He shook his head, blowing a soft stream of smoke. "Shouldn't have happened."

I had no way of knowing if he meant Proxy materializing like a ghost risen from the reunion as she did, or whatever transpired on some unbridled night in the Blue Eagle twenty-some years ago, or what. The best I could muster was a shaky "Yeah?"

"You've got every right to be upset," he granted. "But this isn't what it's stacked up to be, as heaven is my witness." That was maybe not the best choice of words from a man never known to go near a church.

Trying to look like he was concentrating only on the road, Del was listening as strenuously as I was. "The odds are still sky-high any kid of hers is not mine," Pop spoke as if it were flat fact. "Proxy and I didn't fool around in the Eagle. Strictly business, me in back of the bar and her on the dance-floor side. All those years we kept our paws off each other."

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"Then why is she—"

"Except that one damn time."

For several seconds the hum of the tires on the road surface was the only sound. Finally Pop hitched around in his seat toward Del. "How about you, Delano? You ever been in a squeeze like that? Where the brain shuts off and the other body part doesn't?" I sensed this man-to-man talk was for my benefit, somehow.

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"Not quite to that extent," Del confessed.

"You're lucky, then." Pop shifted in his seat again, for once not lighting up a cigarette, simply gazing out at the night. "What happened between me and her came smack out of nowhere. Like I said, we'd behaved ourselves for, what, five years, working together since the dam_work started up. And it wasn't many days before I was done with Fort Peck, I'd already put money down on the Medicine Lodge. But there was one last big Saturday night in the Eagle, and after we closed the joint, Proxy wanted me to have a drink with her to celebrate what the Eagle had been for us. One led to a couple or three." This still sounded like man talk directed at Del, but I had the very real impression of being the listener in the dark as the only parent I had ever known leaned against the bedroom doorway and told me what was most on his mind.

"We got sloppy," ~~He was continuing that same way.~~ "She was drunk, she was having trouble with that husband of hers, and I guess I didn't resist all that much. It was kind of a good-bye." He gave that the sigh it deserved. "Some good-bye."

Del judiciously left the question to me. "Then... then what?"

"We both came to our senses in a hurry, right after. Darius Duff wasn't someone to have mad at you, if he'd ever caught on. Proxy and I didn't go near each other again, and pretty quick the slide happened, and that was the only thing on anybody's mind. Then I pulled out for Gros Ventre, and the rest is another story, isn't it." Saying that, he turned his head toward me, our eyes meeting. "What can I say? Life throws you for a loop sometimes, Rusty. Try not to get all worked up about this, okay?"

Did he think I wasn't trying, ever since the fateful words "She's yours"?

He went on: "Hell, maybe Proxy just has a wild hair and nothing will come of this."

I didn't believe that the least little bit, and I doubted that he did, either. "What if"—my voice was so thin, Del was practically leaning out of his seat to hear—"it doesn't turn out that way?"

"Don't get ahead of the stampede," Pop warned crossly. His gaze moved off into the dark again.

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"We'll sort this out when they show up at the joint."

"But what about the deal with Earl?"

"Didn't I just tell you not to—" It took some doing, but he reined himself in. "First things first, right? Earl will just have to wait his turn in the complaint line a little longer. He's used to it."

So many conflicting thoughts contended in me that my brain felt knotted up. As much as ever, I did not want him to give up the Medicine Lodge, and if this Francine could turn out to be really a working partner and take the strain off the bartending, wouldn't that be the best possible thing? How much would she take over things, though? Everything? Would she live with us? Would she boss me around? What if she turned out to have a disposition like that other relative, Ronny the Phoenix menace? The doubts began to win in me. Come right down to it, I didn't really want to be related to anyone in the world except Pop, did I. Call me spoiled, if that's what being an only kid with free run of the back of a saloon amounted to, but I was utterly leery of my life changing that way. If I were to have a sudden sister, I would want her to be a duplicate of Zoe, smart and funny and ready to do bits and sharp of eye and keen of ear where the mystifying beings that were grown-ups were involved, and what were the chances of that?

Comment [CE64]: Ed/aut. If I were suddenly to have a sister?

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In other words, I was irrevocably finding out for myself the drawback of the age of twelve, the awkward stage of not yet old enough to master such things but past the simple arithmetic of being just a child. The one certainty was that those two trains of thought, for and against a total newcomer in the family, put me in a real fix. Pop's familiar commandment not to get myself in an uproar or hydrophobic or some other upset state of mind was not helping at all. Opposite as were the outcomes I could imagine ahead, either of them scared me to my eyeteeth to think about, and I never did know any way to shut off thinking.

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The silence that had settled on the van lasted only as long as Del judged was respectful. "Ah, excuse my asking, but why is the husband missing in this?"

"He met with an accident," Pop replied reluctantly, "right after I left Fort Peck. Drowned in the river."

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"Maybe she did it," Zoe had a ready theory when I told her about the ^{bare-}naked couple found in the truck. "Sneaked up on them and let them have it somehow."

"That's what I thought, too. But when I tried Pop on that, he said ^{huh-uh,} there was no way she could have, she was in the Eagle with him and about a hundred other people when it happened."

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"That lets her off the hook, then," Zoe couldn't help sounding disappointed.

"Yeah. That one, anyway."

Glancing at Pop as much as at the road, Del waited for more, although I could tell it would have to come from me later on. Unfazed, he pursued in another direction. "That's an odd name, if I heard it right. Darius was a Persian king."

Pop laughed, the reflex kind when something is more bizarre than funny. "He was a strange bird in a lot of ways. Bony kind of guy who always looked like he could use a good meal—the Duffs ^{were all} built like hungry cats." That description cleared my mind a little. I would have been told I was jumping the gun again, but a family characteristic like that ought to settle the whose-daughter-is-she issue in a hurry, hadn't it? Look at the Zanes, senior and junior, you could tell at first glance they were the same make of fool. And while Pop and I didn't take after each other all that much except for build and our hair black as shoe polish, the likeness was unmistakable. Even Zoe had her mother's eyes. Resemblance didn't lie, right?

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"Sometimes I thought Proxy married the ess of a bee"—Pop ^{was still} on Darius—"just to have somebody to fight with. He was a bright enough guy, knew his stuff about history and so on, but he'd argue politics until your ears would fall off."

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Del was quick to pick up on the implication of that. "Against Roosevelt?"

"Can you imagine?" Pop sounded as indignant, as if this had all happened yesterday. "FDR was way too tame for him. 'Capitalism and soda water,' he called the New Deal. All the while he's drawing good wages on the dam like ten thousand other guys who would have been bums on the street without the government doing something. See what I mean? When it came to politics, he needed his bolts tightened." With a shake of his head, he delivered the final verdict: "Not the best customer there ever was."

Del absorbed all that for a few moments, then wondered, "Was Mrs. Duff—"

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"Do me a real big favor and use her other name, okay?"

"Sorry. Was Proxy politically inclined then, too?"

Pop snorted. "Hardly. Her inclinations ran in other directions." He dug for a cigarette, but halted before striking a match and turned to me. "How many is this today?"

"Four, on your second pack," I said crossly.

"I'm surprised it's not more." He lit up and took a lung-filling drag. "Damn, what a day," came the exhalation. "Anyway, that's Proxy for you. I have to admit, she's still a looker, isn't she." His tone of voice toyed with that. "Still a handful, too, when she puts her mind to something." He leaned back reflectively, his cigarette a glowing dot in the dark of the van. "Back there in the Blue Eagle she was a catamount, for sure."

"What's that?" I asked immediately, with Del looking glad I had.

"Pretty much the same as a wildcat, only multiplied by about ten." The bartender of the ages shook his head, as if still trying to believe her behavior. "There was the time she got into a big argument with another taxi dancer who'd tried to swipe a customer from her. I was busy behind the bar, I told them to knock it off and wasn't paying any more attention. The next thing I knew, Proxy is up on the bandstand, taking a running start. She sails off there and catches the other dancer around the waist with her legs

and her arms locked around the head. They hit the floor like a ton of bricks, Proxy of course on top. She was just starting to bang the other dancer's head on the floor when I managed to pull her off."

I listened as openmouthed as I'd been about the making of mud until it piled up into the greatest dam in the world, and the all-night hammering that laid the floor of the Blue Eagle, and other wonders emanating from the front seat. The Gab Lab certainly was living up to its name on this round trip.

Still thinking back across the years, Pop sounded more than a little rueful now. "Proxy was quite an attraction for the joint, in more ways than one. And we got along together just fine when she wasn't trying to massacre somebody. The thing is, she was hellish good company when business got slow in the Eagle. Always had something to say, some tale to tell."

"She sounds almost, ah, institutional in her own right," Del ventured with a sideways glance at him.

"Yeah, well, that's a pretty good description." Pop in turn studied Del in the dim glow of the dashboard for a moment. "So, Delano. At least you got your Missing Voices. You'll be pulling out now, I expect?"

"Hmm? Oh, I was going to bring that up. Actually, I'd like to stay on while I transcribe the interviews, if that would be all right. Put the Gab Lab to further use."

"Help yourself." I was secretly glad to hear Pop say, "There's plenty of room to park in the driveway behind the Packard." He let out the same kind of big sigh as he'd done earlier. "Cripes, the Packard."

"What about the Packard?" I probably beat Del to it by a half a second.

Pop didn't say anything for about a minute. Then, "That's where it happened." His tone left no mistake what "it" was.

"In the car?"

"Kiddo," he said tiredly, "you have to realize, a sizable number of the population gets its start in a

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backseat, that's just life."

He turned around to me and I waited apprehensively for what else this endless day would bring.

But he only said, "Better grab some shut-eye. We got a lot ahead of us when we get home."

We thought she looked like a beatnik when the Cadillac pulled up to the house that Sunday and, ready or not, here Proxy and she were. That's because we didn't yet know what a hippie was.

There in the driveway beside her mother—at least there did not seem to be any outstanding question about that—the young woman appeared frayed and tousled, maybe from the plane flight from Nevada, maybe habitually. She was in blue jeans on their last legs, so to speak, a threadbare pinkish shirt, not a blouse, beaded mocassins, and some other kind of decorated leather thing on one wrist.

Peer at her as hard as I could through the kitchen window, with Pop's description of Darius Duff to go by, the "hungry cat" part might have been more a matter of what she was wearing and how she wore it. This Francine person wasn't particularly bony anyplace I could see. On the other side of the resemblance question, certainly she was better looking than either of us, in a sulky kind of way. Mainly, if this newcomer resembled anyone within a hundred miles, disregarding the way she was dressed, it had to be Proxy. Similar, very womanly figure, but not nearly so round, so firm, so fully packed, as the male clientele of the Medicine Lodge would have said. I still was unsure what to think. Because, plain as day, any other comparison—light complexion, facial features, characteristic tilt of the head—literally paled beside the matter of hair. Hers, in a kind of shaggy cut that did not come from any beauty shop, was the identical indelible hue as mine and Pop's where his had not silvered, as if the three of us had been dipped in black ink together.

Watching over my shoulder, Pop scrutinized the new arrival as intently as I did. "Cripes," he said mechanically about that family hair. With that and the pearly skin, if you closed one eye and

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concentrated, she did look like she was out of the same hatch as us, particularly him. He startled me by rubbing his hand on the crown of my head, as if for luck. "I don't know what we're in for, kiddo. But let's see how this pans out."

Out we went, to where Proxy was fixing her face in the side mirror of the Cadillac and Francine was eyeing the old Packard and Del's VW van with curiosity.

Comment [CE65]: Ed/au: curiously eyeing the old Packard and Del's VW van?

The usual breeze along English Creek rustled through Igdrasil's leafy branches overhead, sprinkling cottonwood fluff ahead of us as we approached. The four of us variously uttered "hey" and "hi" and "hello," and then it was up to Pop.

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"I don't know any rule book for this kind of situation," he addressed Francine straight off, his voice tight. I had the impression he and I were being studied as fully by her as she was by us. "Proxy kept me in the dark about you."

"Same here," came the surprising reply. "She ought to start a mushroom farm." Francine swept her hair away from a hazel eye, the color of her mother's, further proof, if wanted, that these sudden arrivals into our life were two of a kind. Up close, she looked a lot like the movie actress Natalie Wood, but after a hard night. The line of her mouth was set in a pinched way that seemed to say, the rebellious streak starts here. I began to wonder what I was in for with her for a sister, if that was going to be the case.

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"Don't pour it on, you two," Proxy protested lightly. "I had my reasons. There wasn't any sense in upsetting things when there was nothing to be gained by it, and now there is, all around." She smiled sharply at Pop, as though he needed reminding why we were all standing across the alley from the Select Pleasure Establishment of the Year. "What could be better? You get a working partner, missy here learns the tricks of the trade from you, the joint gets a new lease on life—give me credit, Tom, I couldn't deliver more if I was Santa Claus."

Francine gave her the kind of look that came from long habit. "Mom, don't break your arm patting

yourself on the back.” Depending on how you wanted to hear it, that was either teasing or sarcastic.

“Kids these days,” Proxy said imperturbably, with a glance that included me. “Right, Russ?”

Sticking close to Pop against the onset of these women, I was not actually tottering from one foot to the other, but the inside of me felt that way. Perhaps it came up through the shoe soles from the giant roots of Igdrasil, watered by the fates of past, present, and future. Which one would prevail was the decision Pop was struggling with mightily, as I could tell by the record number of wrinkles in his forehead. If he nixed this Francine—twenty-one or not, she did look a lot like a stray kid in those beat-up clothes and with that barely tamed hair—and turned her and Proxy down on the whole matter of paternity and responsibility, then that was that, the Medicine Lodge was a thing of the past for us. If he did the supposedly honorable thing and gave her a chance behind the bar, he could look ahead to endless explaining to the Two Medicine country who she was and why she was there.

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“Let’s sort this out a little more.” He backed off the tightrope of fates for the moment. “I’m not doubting you might have what it takes, understand,” he ~~said~~ ^{told} Francine none too convincingly, “but are you sure you savvy what jumping into something like this would be like? You’d have a hell of a lot to learn. And bartending is long hours and short rest.”

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Francine’s mouth twitched in a funny way. “Sounds a lot like life, generally.”

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“Smile, chile,” Proxy prompted with a terse laugh. “The man needs a working partner, not a wet blanket.”

Her daughter did not actually smile, but she stopped looking like a rain_cloud. “Sorry,” she mustered, facing Pop. “Only trying to be honest.” She looked up at him, a head taller than she was, and wiped the hair away from her eyes again. Up close, it was apparent she’d had her dark eyebrows shaped the way women do, perfect as a picture. At the moment she was not exactly a composed portrait, however. “Listen, I’m still getting used to not having a dead Scotchman for a father. Makes me a little messy upstairs.” She fiddled with the leather bracelet on her wrist. “I don’t even know what to call you.”

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... 'Pop,' is it?"

"Tom," he said firmly, which for some reason I was glad to hear.

"Oh-kay," she responded, sounding like an echo of her mother. "So, anyhow, Tom, I'll bust my tail to learn the job." She spoke in a rush now. "Mom says you're the greatest at tending bar. I'd have to be a total ~~space case~~ ^{wacko} to pass up this chance, wouldn't I."

Well, at least that showed some spirit. Pop continued to look Francine up and down. Having conscientiously told her the drawbacks of bartending, now he had to tell her yes or no about how she stacked up for the job. I still believe he had not made up his mind until that very moment. He glanced at Proxy, standing there a little akimbo in a milk-blond way that possibly suggested the old days in the Blue Eagle. I guessed what was coming when he rubbed the top of my head again as he spoke.

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

Her mouth twitched that funny way again, but she sounded fairly reasonable in saying: "That's jake with me." Automatically I filed that away to share with Zoe.

"See?" Proxy winked at me, or was it meant for Pop. "It all works out for the best, just like I—"

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

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Comment [CE66]: Editor. The use of this term, in 1960, seems anachronistic; according to Webster's the use of the term "space cadet," in its meaning as a "flaky, lightheaded, forgetful person," did not enter the language until 1979; "space case," a variant of that expression, would be out of place.

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Drawing a deep breath, he acknowledged the hair problem and so on. "Okay, here's what we're gonna do when customers get nosy about any resemblance. We'll say Francine is my niece." He appeared uncomfortable with that white lie, if that's what color it was, but I could tell he was set in rock about this. "My sister's kid that I'm breaking in on the job out of the goodness of my heart. People can think what they want, but that's gonna be our story. Everybody got that?"

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

Mother and daughter glanced at each other. Whatever passed between them, it was Francine who turned to Pop with the hint of a sassy grin. "If that's the way you want to play it, Unc."

"Tom," he warned her.

By now Proxy was eyeing me, and I was instantly on my guard. There was something in the way she looked at me, as if I were a cause for concern. "Some little man will ^{need} have to watch his mouth real careful, won't he."

"Rusty knows what's involved," Pop stoutly took up for me, squeezing my shoulder as he spoke.

"He won't give the act away. Right, kiddo?"

I swallowed. "I'll, uh, watch my mouth."

That satisfied Proxy only so far. Now she was frowning in the direction of Del's van. "Then what about Carrot Top? Where is he, playing with his machinery?"

Pop indicated to English Creek, which was making that pretty sound of water dancing over rocks just beyond the yard. "I told him to go fishing while we worked this out. Don't worry, I'll fill him in as soon as he gets back. Delano won't be a problem."

That seemed to take care of Proxy's concerns. "Then I can make myself scarce, can't I?"—she patted the fender of the Cadillac—"and go tend to my business interests. How about if I just slip by here"—she nodded toward the house—"once in a while to kind of check on things?"

Pop chewed his lip a little before conceding that might not hurt. "But steer clear of the joint when

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you do. There are people around here who were at Fort Peck and would recognize you at the drop of a hat. We don't want the sight of you to give them funny ideas, do we." Solo parent again for the second time in one lifetime, he turned to look speculatively at Francine, busy plucking cottonwood fluffs out of her hair and dispatching them in the breeze. "I suppose we better get at this," he said as much to himself as to her. "Rusty can show you the house, how about. Give her the bedroom next to yours, okay?" It wasn't, but what else could I do but nod.

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Pop turned to Proxy. "Hey, before you hit the road"—he frowned, checking his watch—"come over to the joint with me. I need you to help me with the guy who thinks he's got a deal to buy it or I'll never hear the end of it from him. You're going to have to be Aunt Marge, whose darling daughter needs to learn bartending if she's ever going to amount to anything."

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

"Pop, wait! I have to tell you something."

He swung around, Proxy halting as well. "What is it, kiddo?"

My big gulp did not constitute an answer, but it told him that what I wanted to say was for his ears only. Frowning, he came back and bent down so I could whisper it.

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

"Cripes. I didn't think about her." He pondered for several moments before whispering back:

"She's gonna have to be your department. Hog-tie her into not telling anybody else about this, not anybody, right?"

"R-right."

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

although I was about to find out.

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

Ordinarily I did not have trouble making conversation, but I didn't know how to commence in this situation, and Francine was no help until I showed her to the bedroom next to mine. Looking it over, she said, "Seen worse." Noticing me stiffen more than I already had, she hoisted an eyebrow much in the manner of her mother. "Joke. Meant to be, anyhow." She gave the room a flourish of her hair. "It's nice enough. This takes some getting used to, is all."

I was with her on that, definitely. I watched as she stashed the kit bag in the corner by the dresser and flopped her suitcase onto the bed, flipping it open to establish residency, I supposed. Female undergarments brimmed into sight before I could hastily look away. Moving restlessly to the window after that, Francine looked down at the driveway, quite a parking lot now with the Packard, the Gab Lab van, our Buick, and the Cadillac. "So, who's Carrot Top that the old folks were talking about?"

I had to blink past that characterization of Pop and Proxy before delineating Del for her. I must have done a decent job, because she folded her arms on her chest and listened civilly enough. "Fine. Another one with Fort Peck on the brain," she said—not a bad summary, really—when I'd finished about Del. "Must be contagious."

Appraising me more openly than before, she tested the matter of the two of us with a little grin. "Russell, huh? Pretty distinguished. Where'd that come from?"

"I like Rusty, better," I dodged.

"Oh boy, I know what you mean. What were they thinking when they fastened fancy names on us, anyway? I always think Francine sounds like some dumb perfume." She bobbed agreement with herself.

"The shorter the better, ain't it."

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Sometimes you know when to take a shot in the dark. "Are you from Canada?"

That caught her by surprise. "All but. How'd you know? Grew up out in the sticks north of Havre—the boundary line was practically in the backyard."

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"But she... your mom doesn't talk that way."

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"Nahh. She wasn't around to pick up any lingo like that, was she. See, my father's"—she checked herself and flashed me a quick look—"my *previous* father's relatives raised me. Uncle Hugh and Aunt Meg. Square as cubes, but I didn't exactly get to choose, did I. They'd been at Fort Peck, along with all the other Duffs. So they did the honors on me, while Mumsie was busy in the divorce industry and so on. Wasn't there somebody named Reno Sweeney? Reno Proxy was more like it," Francine laughed, if something that short and sharp was a laugh, "all the time that mother of mine put in down there in Nevada." Boy, she could talk once she got going. "Anyhow, that's pretty much the story of Mommy and Francie. Probably won't make the nursery rhyme books."

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I was about to ask more when she swung back to the window, craning to see what she could of town, which was mostly the alley and the backs of the buildings on Main Street. Off in the distance, past Igdrasil's snowing branches, though, the cemetery knoll showed up greener and prettier than anything else in sight because of the carefully watered grass. "This is one of those towns, huh?" She sounded as if she had been sentenced to Gros Ventre. "Dead people get the view."

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"Maybe they need it more."

That drew me a keen look and then a sharp laugh. "Aren't you a kick. I'm glad some kind of sense of humor runs in the family. Something good should."

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

"Better believe it, I was." She gave her hair a flip and said carelessly, "Kind of a nice change, though. It beats having a Communist one."

My jaw dropped. At the time, calling someone that was like saying the person was a mad-dog enemy of all things American. "You mean like in *Russia*?"

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"Nahh, I guess not." Francine treated that as though it did not make much difference one way or another. "From what I picked up from Mom and the relatives, Daddy Darius was his own kind." For a moment, she looked more thoughtful than she had at any time yet. "As I get it, he figured the Russkies had it backward. His big idea was that people on the bottom ought to run things." Another flip of the hair, and that keen look at me. "Well, you know, not to stick up for the old devil or anything, but maybe they wouldn't do any worse job of it than the usual stupes." She regarded me for a moment, as if making sure, and of course she was. "Anyhow, he set out to remake the world and ended up in a truck in the river with the wrong woman. You heard all about that, I bet."

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"Pop told me when you, um, came into the picture."

"Fine. Takes care of that." She stirred from where she'd been standing by the window. "Know what? I better get unpacked."

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

"Try me."

"We're supposed to pretend to be... cousins, aren't we?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"See, Tom got a little ahead of himself in putting the joint up for sale," she was explaining to him ever so nicely in a voice smooth as a purr. "This is what you might call a God clause, like in an insurance policy when an act of nature comes along and makes things go flooey. Tom just didn't know how much the matter was going to change when my daughter and me expressed our interest in keeping the saloon in family hands." It really was quite an appealing story in her telling, that if a young woman starting out on her own in life and who incidentally was Pop's niece merely required a bit of experience in the art of bartending under the tutelage of the master himself, was that so much to ask?

In conclusion, Proxy gave Earl a smile that I was learning to recognize as one with long practice behind it, probably all the way back to taxi dancing. "No reflection on you. These things happen."

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

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Comment [CE69]: Ed/au: Could have been heard in the back room? Rusty and Zoe being glued to the vent has no real bearing on how far Earl's voice travels.

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"Don't get yourself on fire, Earl," Pop was heard from, sounding strained.

Maybe on that dark drive home from Fort Peck, with more history attached to him than even he

had known, he was pulled in paradoxical directions, the same as I was, and ~~came out~~ ^{wound up} teetering away from giving up the Medicine Lodge quite yet. Maybe the stage was set by the sorcery of drama that enveloped two theater-struck twelve-year-olds that certain summer. In any case, Zoe and I were the breathless audience as my father spoke his lines like a man taking his medicine.

"What's happened is, I need to hang on to the joint for a while and give the girl a chance. I'm sorry as hell you got your hopes up. My mistake, and I'll make it up to you if you're out any money on legal fees or whatever, ^{all right} okay?"

A cat will puff itself up when provoked. Earl did something like that now. "What did they serve at that Fort Peck get-together, loco weed? Goddamn it, Tom, you already put off selling the place to me once. ~~It's getting to be a habit. A deal's a deal, where I come from.~~"

Zoe turned her head to whisper to me. "Del doesn't know what he's missing out on."

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

"No," Earl admitted, "but—"

"Have you put down any earnest money?"

"Well, no, Tom understands it'll be along as soon as—"

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

"She's got you there, Earl."

"THAT'S ENOUGH OF THIS!" I might have considered that a cry from the heart if I wasn't sure Earl, like his mouthy son, had a heart the size of a prune. His eruption had Zoe and me bumping heads at the vent. The scene is indelible in me. Like always, Pop was behind the bar, but in the new order of things, had not put his apron on. Across from him, Proxy leaned against the bar with veteran ease as she faced the wrath of Earl perfectly poker-faced. As for Earl, though, the slats of the vent sectioned him, as

Comment [CE70]: Ed/au: use "wound up" instead? Placing two expressions of movement, "came out" and "teetering away," side by side makes the sentence too weighty.

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if he might fly apart. His face had turned so furiously red, it was a wonder his hat didn't boil off. In the next slot down, his arms waved in the universal gesture of disgust. Below that, even his beer gut seemed agitated, barely contained by a rodeo belt buckle. "Tom"—he swelled up even more, turning aside from Proxy, as though that might make her vanish—"I'm gonna lay it to you, man to man. I don't like to have to do this, but you leave me absolutely no choice."

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I tensed all through. I couldn't begin to imagine the extent of the threat he was working himself up to—a fistfight? a lawsuit?—and an inch from me Zoe was equally frozen in apprehension.

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

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

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

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

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

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

bartending?”

“That’s just it, see.” I voiced the uncertainty foremost on my mind. “Maybe she’s here to stay, if she’s good at it.”

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

“I can’t tell yet. She’s kind of different.”

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

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

“What would that be, Ace?”

“This.” I reached over to a peg where a spare rain slicker that Howie sometimes used was hanging and moved it to one where it concealed the vent.

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

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

“Some leeway there,” Francine joked, or maybe not.

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Comment [CEX1]: Ed/du: Not sure what this alludes to: First Rusty and then Zoe? Or looking first at the expanse of the back room, and then at the bar?

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

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

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

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

"Hey, no sense standing around like lawn ornaments, is there. Come on, I better show you the joint. Not you, kiddo." He'd evidently decided Francine was enough to deal with for the moment.

"Hang on here and when Delano shows up, tell him I want to see him right away, savvy?"

Of course I did not like being left out of things, but I thoroughly savvied that Del had to be clued in quick on the make-believe niece. Pop, Francine, myself, Zoe, Del; this was becoming a bit with quite a cast. I drifted to the house in a mood new to me. The old place had not known a woman's touch, except for Nola's feathery occasional housekeeping, since the year of my birth. As if drawn to the source of difference as distinct as perfume in the air, I went upstairs again and gazed into the neighboring bedroom that was now Francine's. Her suitcase remained open on the bed, with female undies spilling out. An old blue denim jacket with a beaded yoke had been tossed over the back of a chair. From what I could see, the only thing that had been put away somewhere was the whopping kit bag, but I figured she had to start somewhere. Housekeeping did not seem to be her strong point any more than it was ours, so maybe that much of our habit pattern was safe. Yet disturbance of some sort was on its way, I couldn't help but feel it coming, almost like a change in the weather. Already it felt strange to have someone else in the gallery of bedrooms that Pop and I had shared, just ourselves, for the past half dozen years. There

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are some days in a person's life, definitely not many, that mark themselves into memory almost from first minute to last. The one thing I knew for sure was that this Sunday was not going to leave me any time soon.

"Anyone home?" Del's cheery hello downstairs snapped me to. "The angler returns in triumph!"

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

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

"Huh-uh, it'd take too long. I'll start cleaning the fish."

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

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

"Maybe she just needs to get used to us," I tried to put the best face on things as he came over to the sink to pitch in on cleaning the rest of the fish, searching his maze of pockets for a jackknife. "How come you didn't limit?"

"Hmm? Oh, the angels' share."

"That's stranger than chicken guts, bub," I did a bit of a bit to prompt him.

He slit into a fish belly. "My father heard it from FDR"—you never knew what dose of history you were in for around Del—"when the Brain Trust and their top aides were called in to celebrate some part of the New Deal that had passed Congress. Eleanor happened to be on hand, and she ran the White

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House staff by her own lights, so the drinks were poured pretty weak." He slipped me a grin in acknowledgment of what Pop would have thought of that. "Anyway, Franklin Delano Roosevelt"—he of course made the middle name resound, as if it ~~were~~ the main one—"takes a sip of his and holds the glass up to the light and says"—here came a good imitation of that famous Fireside Chat voice—"Gentlemen, we seem to be experiencing that phenomenon of evaporation called the angels' share."

I laughed, but still didn't see what that had to do with fish. Rubbing the side of his head with a sleeve to satisfy an itch, mental or otherwise, Del went on, "It's silly, I suppose, but that saying caught on in our family." From being around Pop, I knew sayings were almost a second language, so I listened religiously to add this one to the collection. "Anytime a sock went missing or we ran short of milk at breakfast," Del elaborated, "we'd say it was the angels getting theirs. My father and I turned it into a joke when we fished together. We'd never catch the absolute last fish to fill out our limit. Leave that one for you know who. I won't say we were superstitious, but close enough." He spoke in that sober way ~~in which~~ the dead are recalled. "Families aren't easy to figure out, maybe you've noticed."

Was that ever the truth. ~~Each of us~~ ^{Both} lost in thought, we companionably thumbed guts out of split-open trout until Del rinsed a hand so he could scratch at a rib. "Phew. That is one brushy creek," he said in tribute to the hard-won trout. "There were places I had to get down on my hands and knees to crawl in to where I could cast."

"What's all the scratching about?"

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

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

I raced across the alley and burst into the barroom. To my shock, there was Francine behind the bar by herself, already looking things over, as if she owned the place, and Pop nowhere around. When I

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stammered out the question, she jerked her head toward the back of the barroom. "Said he needed to take a leak. What's up?"

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This was no time for good manners. I went and pounded on the toilet door and hollered, "Del's got ticks!"

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

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

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

"All my...? Why?"

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

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

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

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That may have been so, but with Francine crowded into the bathroom with us, Del hesitated at jumping in the tub and stripping, until Pop said impatiently: "She's not gonna see anything new in the human experience, get going." I was directed to cram his clothes in the wastebasket as he shed them, for soaking. "It's this tan getup of yours," Pop shook his head as Del peeled off the shirt of many pockets.

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"Makes you the color of a deer. Ticks see that and think you're their favorite food, venison."

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

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

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

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

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"There's one on his business end!"

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

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

"I... I can't tell," Del said shakily, staring at his threatened part.

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

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

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

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

"Let me see," Pop groaned.

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

Comment [CE72]: Okay? For clarification.

When I hustled back with the wire hanger, Pop mashed and twisted it, straightening the hook, until he had something holdable, with a prong sticking out. He lit a match with his thumbnail, the sulfur smell curling Del's nostrils and mine and Francine's, and heated the end of the prong in the flame.

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"Lift your arm," he told Del, and directed Francine to get a good grip on it and hold it steady in case he flinched. "This is gonna be a little warm. I have to make the tick back itself out, so the head doesn't break off in you."

It took exceedingly careful application of the hot wire onto the rump, if that's what insects have, and a bunch more matches, but at last the gorged tick gave up and dropped into the bathtub. I didn't

have to be told to turn on both faucets full blast to swash the thing down the drain.

"How you feeling?" Pop checked with Del apprehensively.

"Not so good. It kind of burns."

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

Duly instructed, I thundered down the stairs, while behind me Francine said she'd clear out, too, not to be in the way in the way of medical progress.

Mere minutes later, as the two of us stood beneath the leafy sweep of Igdrasil, watching Pop and Del speed away in the Buick, she had to admit: "This burg isn't as dull as it looks."

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

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

"Ready as I'll ever be," she responded, probably truthfully enough.

When they made their entrance into the closed and deathly still Medicine Lodge—somehow there is an added dimension of silence in a saloon on a Sunday—I trailed them into the barroom. Pop glanced over his shoulder at me, and before he could ask what I was hanging around for, I alibied: "I thought

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I'd, you know, sweep and mop and like that."

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

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

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

"Sure, I've been in joints before."

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

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

"That's only half the story. How about after work?"

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

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

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

Sobered in more ways than one by this sermon, she bobbed her head. "All right, I won't drink the joint dry either before or after, honest."

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"That's better." Pop led her down half the length of the bar to the beer spigot. "Here's where we start." He patted the draft handle. "The Shellac pump."

"The which? Wait, I bet I know. The Select whizzy that made this place famous."

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

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Francine pursed up without saying anything, unsure whether that was a joke. Pop drew perhaps the millionth beer of his career from the Shellac tap, and it sat there brimming to a head, pretty as a picture. He conjured another shiny empty glass from the breakfront and handed it to her. "Give it a try."

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

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

Francine gushed the glass full. It was all foam.

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

"Fine, I give," she muttered to Pop. "What's the holy secret?"

"Draw it slow and easy, with the glass tilted a little. Then let it sit until the head forms just right."