

"In the back room. Paying bills. Why?"

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

Zoe and I looked at each other, agape with the sense of deliverance. From the way Del was behaving, France must have walked off with something of his, and now he knew the situation without my having to spell it out to the end of the alphabet. Hurriedly, we trailed him as he marched down the driveway and across the alley to the Medicine Lodge. He stepped into the back room like a man on a mission. Pop looked down from the landing, cocking an eyebrow at the sight of our contingent.

"Hey, Delano," ~~His greeting carried a note of surprise. "Stuck on something a mudjack said?"~~

"Can you have France come in here? It's important."

"What for?"

"It's important."

"I grasp that it is," said Pop, ~~eyeing him with curiosity.~~ studying him from A to why. "Hold on, if there's nobody at the bar, I'll have her lock up for a few minutes."

While he went and attended to that, Del walked in a tight circle, hands thrust in his pockets and shoulders hunched so high he looked like a scarecrow, still wearing that strange expression he'd had in the confines of the van. Watching him, Zoe picked at her elbow nervously and I kept swallowing with a dry throat. Was he going to charge France with something so awful, it would get her thrown into the adult version of juvie? That was more than I bargained for, but it was out of my hands now.

Pop arrived back, took one look at the circling figure, and simply folded his arms and waited.

France came buzzing through the door from the front, towel still in hand like a true bartender.

"What was it you wanted, T—"

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

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

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

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

"I'm not leaving."

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

"Isn't that phenomenal?" Del was grinning as much as his face could hold. "The powers that be were so impressed with the mudjacks tapes and transcripts, they want me to stay and keep right on with the Missing Voices, here. Do another series of interviews before a subgroup vanishes from history." He beamed at each of us in turn, last and longest at France. "They, ah, gave me another grant." He looked almost bashful. "Alan Lomax usually gets them all."

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

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

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

“Sheepherders.”

Roomful of silence again.

No one wanted to be the first to say it. Finally, twisting her towel as if wringing out the words, France ventured, “You dead sure about that, Dellie?”

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Pop was looking nearly as stunned as if he had been hit by a flying elbow. “She’s right, where the hell do you get the idea sheepherders are vanishing? Cripes, most of the time you can hardly turn around in the Two Medicine country without bumping into one. Delano, are you sure you don’t have any tick fever?”

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

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“The marble farm,” Zoe said in a ghostly voice.

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

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

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“What? Yeah. Do that.” Pop and the other two of us tried not to be too obvious about looking on

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while she and Del did not quite blow kisses to one another, but the hint was there. As soon as she was gone, Del turned to Pop, bright as a button. "What I was wondering..."

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

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

"Besides"—Pop started to reach for his cigarettes until he saw me looking—"herders aren't anywhere you can get to them right now, anyway."

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

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"Where they always do this time of year," Pop said impatiently, "when they're not in here drinking their wages away. Way to hell and gone up in the mountains, herding on the national forest."

Zoe was nodding, even she knew that. Evidently the self-trained expert on the subgroup called shepherders did not.

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

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

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

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

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

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is!”

“Dode has him herding some kind of bunch up the South Fork,” Pop was saying to me. “Seen the wagon on the way to fishing, remember?” Before I could even bob my head, Del was asking eagerly,

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“Do you think he’d consent to be interviewed?”

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

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Del was back to buoyant just that fast. Gravely he bowed in our direction. “I don’t suppose you’d be interested in coming long, Miss Zoe, parental authorities permitting?”

“Pleeease?”

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

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

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

Pop did have a point, though. It would be just like the old cuss to give Del a hard time or even run him off, simply because he could. With me on hand representing Pop and the Medicine Lodge, sort of, his manners might—*might*—improve. Riding in the passenger seat to be navigator, I was silent with such thoughts—at least it was a brief respite from having a kleptomaniac half sister on my mind—as Del drove us toward the sheep camp that afternoon, a rare sunny one. Dode Withrow’s pasture was nice green bottomland where the South Fork of English Creek ran down a long coulee. With the mountain cliffs stretching up and away everywhere ahead of us and the Rainbow Reservoir dam at the far end of

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the creek, like the front step to their succession of heights, our journey from town was actually quite a scenic excursion. Zoe occupied the back of the van, perched behind the seat as I had been on the Fort Peck trip, she and Del talking away.

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

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

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

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“He’s afraid of the timber.”

“Hmm? Run that by again?”

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

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

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

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

Sunday-school picnic?"

"Whoa," murmured Zoe, getting her first good look at the herder. People still had goiters then, and Canada Dan had a dandy, as if he had swallowed a lemon. Long underwear yellowed with age showed at the neck of his shirt. The cud of tobacco that had given me so much spittoon work showed in his cheek. The hard effects of time and weather and drink showed on the rest of his face and personage. Not exactly a picture of hospitality standing planted there in the wagon doorway, but Del forged ahead.

"Mr. . . . ah, Dan? I wonder if I could have a little of your time."

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

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

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

"Rusty," Zoe was whispering, "what's wrong with those sheep?"

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

The herder laughed harshly. "What's it look like? It's the hospital bunch, next thing to pelters. Some has got maggots. Others got blue\_bag, can't nurse their lambs. Some are just old and broken down, like me."

"I see. Well, that doesn't really matter, I suppose." A false supposition, if Zoe and I had ever heard one. Plain as anything, these sheep were down on their luck, and anyone assigned to herd them was

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even deeper in misfortune. Dode Withrow may have been ready to wring Canada Dan's neck for that loss of lambs in the spring blizzard, but he had since given him what amounted to a charity job. Tending these cripples and invalids barely qualified as shepherding. Nonetheless, Del held out an inviting hand toward the open van and its recording equipment waiting at the ready. "Let's just step in and I'll get the tape going and—"

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"Nothing doing." The one-man subgroup of Missing Voices backed away from the van. "Come on in the wagon, where we can gab comfortable-like."

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

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

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

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"I guess I got nothing better to do," the herder muttered unpromisingly. Since Zoe and I would practically be on top of the pair of them no matter where we tried to sit, I took the initiative in saying we'd wait outside, if that was all right. "Suit yourself," our host grunted. "Moses is shaded up under the wagon. He might growl at you now and again, but he don't mean it."

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

"Poor pooch," she whispered solemnly.

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

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"Daniel Korzenowski."

"Age, please, Mr. Korzenowski?"

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

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

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

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

"Don't matter to me."

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

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

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

"Both of us are showing it, too."

"And born where in Canada?"

"Who said I was hatched up there? I'm pure hunnerd percent American. Born right up here this side of the border, on the Milk River. My folks was homesteading, or thought they was. I don't know where you got that Canada notion."

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

"He knows. He just doesn't want to."

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

"Rugged! That don't begin to say it." This set the raspy voice going without stop. The family was skunk broke most of the time, to hear him tell it.

If grasshoppers didn't get the crops, hail did. The nearest neighbors were a mile away and the nearest town was thirty, so if a person was sick or hurt in an accident, you might as well say your prayers. Zoe and I listened hard as he came to the part about riding horseback to a one-room school. "My schooling stopped in the third grade. Had to help out at home, it didn't matter none that I was just a kid." That gave me a twinge of sympathy for him, although a person can be deprived and still be naturally ornery. Del let him talk on, occasionally nudging or coaxing with a quick question, until steering him toward the sheepherding life.

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

Beyond that, though, the interview turned rocky. Del would try to keep things on a historical track, and his veteran of sheepherding would wander off to some topic like the weather. I had listened in at Fort Peck enough to know that, thanks to Del's lines of questioning, the mudjacks' stories had a beginning, middle, and an end. Canada Dan's started anywhere and went in no particular direction. Del's patient tries at getting him to describe the herding life down through the years produced mainly

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prolonged gripes about gut-robbing ranchers and tardy camp tenders. "You wouldn't believe what a man has to put up with."

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At last Del managed to slip in: "The Two Medicine country is known for its fine summer grazing in the mountains. What can you tell me about that kind of herding?"

This may sound strange, but Canada Dan could be heard not saying anything for some moments.

41 Zoe and I looked at each other. Was this it? Was he going to kill off the interview and throw Del out of the wagon? Then we heard him say tightly, "Them mountains. It's rough up there. Coyotes. Bear. Poison lupine. If it ain't one thing to raise hell with your sheep, it's a goddamn 'nother. I'm more of a flatlander myself, in my herding. Makes better sense. Now, if them ranchers had any brains worth mentioning—"

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

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

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Del was looking worn, but, trouper that he was, he said of course she could, "But let's get it for posterity." He knelt and had the recorder going almost instantly. "This next voice is Zoe Constantine," he intoned into the mike, "at the advanced age of twelve, trying out a career as a seeker of Missing Voices. Go ahead, Zoe."

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He passed her the mike and she took it in both hands and asked Canada Dan, innocent as anything: "Have you been around pack rats much?"

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

"Only about as many as there is Chinamen in China," Canada Dan said gruffly into the microphone

she was aiming practically down his gullet. "Why're you asking, girlie?"

"I was only wondering. When a pack rat takes a thing... does it ever bring it back?"

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

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

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

"How's the piano girl doing in the bar? Learning any new tunes?"

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

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"Yeah, it's a bugger"—he gave me more of that nasty grin—"getting somebody who knows what they're doing behind a bar."

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Del had only half caught our exchange, broodily heading toward the van. All at once he stopped and turned back.

"Ah, Dan, before we leave, I'd like to try something, if I may. Could you walk through the sheep with me? I'd like to pick up some ambient sound to add to the interview, if you wouldn't mind."

"You want to take a constitutional through a hospital bunch of sheep?" Canada Dan cackled. "I thought I'd heard of everything." Capitalizing on what would plainly be a good tale to tell during the next drinking spree, he swept an arm toward the grazing ewes and lambs, those healthy enough to be on their feet. "Sashay on in, the mutton population is ready and waiting."

"I need something from the van, I'll be right back."

Giving each other the look that says, Now what, Zoe and I tagged close after Del as he vaulted into the Gab Lab and grabbed his headphones from the desk equipment. "What do you want those for?"

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What's 'ambient' mean?" we demanded in whispers.

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

"Wish me luck, *amigos*."

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Drawing on whatever limited wisdom he possessed, Canada Dan had been doing some thinking. "Sheep don't take real good to being disturbed. You kind of got to pussyfoot through 'em, and even so, they spook easy." You just never know when things will mysteriously chime. Del was being instructed in how to bobbasheely, sheepherder-style. The squinched-up keeper of sheep next took charge of Zoe and me before we knew what was happening. "You shavetails stand there and there, don't let the buggers get in the brush. Stay, Moses." He pointed the disappointed dog to the wagon. In the same rough tone, he told Del, "C'mon, if you're still of a mind to do this."

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The hospital herder set off into the flock at the slowest of gaits, Del right behind him, with the hefty recorder in one hand and the microphone deployed in the other. Stationed where we were, motionless as sentinels, the coulee began to speak to us, Zoe and I listening for all we were worth. Grasshoppers whirring in flight over the meadow. Creek water rattling musically past. A magpie yattering in the willow thicket. With the headphones alerting him to every slightest sound and using the microphone like a baton, Del was gathering it all out of the air. A few of the sheep blatted restlessly at the moving men, and now a bell tinkled as a dark-fleeced wether hobbled toward them.

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"There's Coalie," Canada Dan said, as if introducing the animal. "He's a lead sheep, or anyway was, until he ruptured hisself. I told Dode any number of times we ought to turn him into coyote bait. Here, you old bum." He dug in his pocket and fed the sheep some pellets of cottonseed cake. "Old good for nothing," the herder said gruffly, "about like me," and moved on.

Del kept quiet except for an occasional brief question as Canada Dan eased through his band of casualties. "This ewe, now, she got snagged on a down tree. See that rip in her side? I turpented it up

good, keeps the flies out. She'll come around." He pointed to another with blue stains at the bottom of her legs where dip had been applied. "Hoof rot. Awful, ain't it. There's just no end of things can go wrong with sheep. Keeps a man hopping to tend to 'em, the poor critters." Like a doctor on his rounds, the herder led Del among the woolly forms, the mike all the while picking up the ambience of the sheep camp around the rough old voice like no other. You can tell when something remarkable is happening. Zoe had the same spellbound expression I did. This wasn't the Forest of Arden, Canada Dan definitely was not the smitten shepherd Silvius, but there was a recognizable touch of dramatic magic in the portrait in sound Del was orchestrating.

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Upon our triumphant departure, the van was not even out of the coulee before Zoe was leaning in from the backseat, bursting with the question, "So why is he called Canada Dan? How come he's not Milk River Dan or Polack Dan or something?"

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Del had been grinning his head off ever since he shucked the tape out of the portable recorder and hopped in behind the steering wheel. Now he sobered up enough to lift a hand toward me and invite: "Any theory, Sherlock?"

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

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

"That would make sense," Del thought it out as if a grant depended on it, "A behavioral nickname rather than an associative one. I'll have to note that in the interview transcription."

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"Why, what's the difference?"

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

~~Short-handed~~  
~~Three Finger Curly~~, I furnished.

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

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

“You bet,” she made up as fast as I had, “a concert pianist.”

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

“That’s it. Just what he said.”

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

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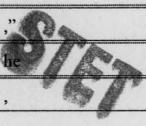
“Oh, no, no, no. Farther away than that. In Butte.”

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

“Recuperated from the excitement of sheep camp yet?” he asked as he poured some condensed milk into the pan to stretch the breakfast soup for himself.

“Getting there, I guess.”

“Glad that worked out. I kind of wondered, looking at you and Zoe when you got back, but Delano seemed as happy as if he had good sense.” The Romeo of the VW van doubtless had spent an even happier night, according to how late France had come in, but I kept my mouth shut about that.



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

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

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

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me like a historical exhibit—when it doesn't want to leave.

The reservoir was discharging water plentifully when we arrived, the spillway frothing in a way Pop remarked he hadn't seen it do in years. Even so, there seemed to be a lot more lake than usual, the blue surface reflecting the sky like a closely held mirror.

"It's kind of high for fishing," I invoked the only angler lore I possessed as Pop busied himself with our gear, "isn't it?" For starters, the boulders where we usually stood to cast our lines were underwater.

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

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

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For once we were not out in the first blinks of dawn, but otherwise this fishing trip was almost like a memory coming to life, the morning brilliantly blue over us, the mountain cliffs so near and high, the timbered canyon bending away out of sight behind Roman Reef at the far end of the lake, and in the other direction, the olive-green stands of willow and greener cottonwoods marking the course of the South Fork and eventually English Creek, all the way to town, distantly visible beyond the dirt face of the dam. Much else seemed so close to the same as it was our first time here, six years before, Pop appreciatively taking in the scenery while he had a cigarette and drank coffee from the thermos and fitted together our fishing poles—it was a ritual I'd known by heart ever since. Yet while it was the same two of us here, the picture had changed with us, from then to now. The difference was that I had

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Comment [CE83]: "Much else" and "too" together are redundant.

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grown taller while he had only grown older, time's unfair trick on a father and for that matter, a mother.

"Got the chicken guts ready, kiddo?" His question snapped me out of such thoughts, and I began cutting up gooey strips of the guaranteed surefire bait, a nasty task that had not changed at all over the years. Meanwhile, committee chairman to the hilt, he was surveying the setting for the derby, figuring out loud where portable picnic tables and extra trash cans ought to go—the mudjacks reunion was turning out to be a valuable rehearsal—and shrewdly settling on a strategy against the Rotarians and their despised beer booth. "Gonna let the esses of bees do it, same like always," he confided to me, "I don't want any ruckus over that. But I'm having Zoe's folks set up a food booth, and nobody can kick if they just happen to sell soft drinks along with the grub, right?" He chuckled in satisfaction. "Lots of wives will steer hubbies right past that Rotary beer, you can bet your bottom dollar."

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

The footing was not any too good without the boulders to stand on, and the soil of the dam <sup>with</sup> ~~was~~ soaked from all the rain, causing him to crease his brow and ~~say~~ <sup>think out loud that</sup> the derby crowd <sup>had better be</sup> ~~would have to confine~~ <sup>whole damn</sup> ~~itself~~ to the shore bank, so that he and the committee ~~wouldn't~~ spend the day pulling people out of the lake. I agreed that sounded like further shrewd chairmanship. Satisfied, he tested his reel and his wrist, addressing the hidden population of the reservoir. "Watch out, rainbows, here we come."

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I stood back and let him cast first, so I could watch the knack, as he called it. It had something to do with the flip of the wrist, which whenever I tried it merely sent my baited hook whirring out in a feeble arc instead of sailing a good distance into the water. Practice was supposed to make perfect? It

hadn't even made me passable in casting, as yet.

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

"Hey, not bad," Pop called over when he saw the ring on the water where my line had gone in. "You're getting the knack."

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

"I've got a bite!" I hollered, although I had much more than that, my pole curving as the fish nearly pulled me in the water. I dug my feet in as best I could on the slippery dam bank and gripped the pole for dear life while trying not to lose my head. Supposedly the greatest allure of fishing is the thrill of the fish putting up a fight. I say it's tricky work, attempting to levitate an extremely reluctant living object out of the water on the end of a thin line and a long stick.

"Hang on to him!" Pop grew excited now, putting aside his pole to scramble over and coach me. "Don't horse him, just keep your line tight and reel in slow and walk him out, that's the way."

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

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

"Too bad you couldn't have saved that for the derby."

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This was my chance. Now if ever.

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

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"Yeah? So?"

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

The unlikelihood of another leviathan trout yielding itself up to me aside, the rest was pretty much unarguable. He started to say something, but I sneaked in ahead. "Then everybody would want to know what my bait was, and they'd find out about chicken guts."

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

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

"That's that, then," he said, giving me and my prize catch another glinting look. "I better get to catching fish if I'm not going to be disgraced by my own kid."

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

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

“Pop?” I raised my voice just above the lapping of the water. “Can I tell you something, just between you and me and Pat and Mike and Mustard?”

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

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

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

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

“It's not that.”

“So? What is it then?”

“She's maybe a pack rat.”

“Say that again?”

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

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think we, that is me, was squealing on her, but she hasn't, has she, so—"

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

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

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

"A car. When she was fourteen."

I saw him wince hard. Pole in hand, fishing abandoned, he stalked over by me and sat down heavily.

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

"Maybe not there, but—"

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

I reminded him of the eagle jigger he couldn't find no matter where he looked behind the bar, and then days later, there it magically was, and related the similar tale of my silver dollar that went missing and showed up again.

He could hardly believe it about France's personal version of shoplifting, on us. "What the hell would she bother with little things like that for?" he said in bewilderment. "And why bring them back?" Then something like a sudden headache seemed to come to him.

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

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I doubted that a mental institution was in prospect for him or me, either, although I would not have bet against incarceration of some sort for my ersatz cousin, if recent behavior was any indication. I felt a whoosh of relief that I hadn't been accusing her of behavior imperceptible to anyone else. Now I stayed quiet to let him try to sort matters out. "What's she doing, playing some crazy game with us? Damn it, she's a grown-up, she better act like one." Firm as a father could be, he drew a conclusion: "I'll tell her to cut out the nonsense and—"

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

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

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

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By the time I was done, he was squinting so hard, it looked like it hurt. "That puts a whole different light on it." His voice sounded hollow, barely hearable over the gushing spillway. "Shortchanging any customers is a death warrant for a joint, that's rule number one." Taking out the lighter again and fumbling a little, he lit a cigarette as for once I watched sympathetically. As the first puff of smoke settled, he wondered aloud, "Why do you suppose somebody—I'm not naming names, understand—didn't tell me any of this before now?"

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"Maybe they"—I guiltily took the little cover that was offered—"wanted to give her a chance. See

if her conscience might start kicking her in the wazoo.”

“I suppose that’s it. Can’t blame them too much for good intentions, I guess.”

He smoked in silence for a while.

“That still leaves us with what to do about her,” he finally broached. “I hate to have to can her, the way things have been going. We’re right back in a fix about the joint, if I do. And there’s no getting round it, she’s my—our own flesh and blood.” He looked sick about the situation. “Then there’s Delano, he couldn’t fall any harder for her if you hit him with a club.”

He ground out his cigarette in the damp soil. I could tell he was casting around for some other answer than firing France, and slowly he brought out: “Tell you what, we’re gonna have to put up with her until I get done with the derby. Howie’s too old to cut the mustard anymore, full time, so I don’t see any damn choice but leave her behind the bar for now.” Frowning again as if it hurt, he concluded, “But then she’s gonna have to turn honest or hit the trail.”

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“I told.”

“Whoo. Was your dad mad?”

“More like sad.” <sup>Rapidly</sup> I filled Zoe in on what had transpired at the reservoir. Our conversation was hushed, even though the saloon was not yet open, and so neither was the vent. Looking like a man trying to juggle hot potatoes, Pop had gone on to derby business at the community hall as soon as we got back from fishing, and France was out front, setting up the bar as usual, if she hadn’t lapsed into stealing ashtrays or some such.

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

No doubt I was touchy about the matter, but Del seemed to be drawing more sympathy over the disclosure about France than was I, directly related to the juvie veteran and presumed pack rat. The elements were not helping my peevish mood, the day having deteriorated practically by the minute ever

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since Pop and I left the reservoir, with dark clouds rolling in over the mountains behind the Packard, as if racing us to town. Now rain was pouring down yet again and thunder was rumbling like beer kegs rolling off the delivery truck. More thirty-year weather.

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“Yeah, but,” I started, “isn’t it a whole lot better for him to find out now than—”

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

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

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

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

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She gave me an odd look, and then one to Zoe, sitting there by the raincoat with a theatrical expression that implied if it were up to her, she would waft the forbidden garment onto France’s shoulders like a royal cape. “Some people have funny habits,” sighed Zoe in universal regret.

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“Yeah, the dumb bow tie is in that category, too,” France said, reluctantly turning to trot down the stairs to where I was flourishing some sheepherder’s yellow slicker. “Don’t let the joint float away before I get back,” she left us with, and dashed out into the downpour.

“That was close,” Zoe said.

“What isn’t, with her,” I said.

As if Proxy had some sixth sense about showing up when no one was looking for her, the very

morning of the fishing derby she came wheeling into the driveway, casual as you please. Our soup spoons poised to dig into breakfast, Pop and I heard the definitive crunch of the red Cadillac on the gravel. France wasn't even out of the bathroom yet.

"What is this," he burst out, already beset with assignment sheets and voluminous other derby busywork spread around him, "some crazy phase of the moon?"

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

"We're gonna get her straightened out right here and now, or know why not," he vowed as he marched out to conscript Proxy for that duty.

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

"Hold on to your irrigation hose, can't you," the occupant responded laconically, "I'll be a couple more minutes."

"It's not that. Pop told me to tell you your mom is here."

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

Back downstairs, where Pop was waiting stiffly—I could tell he was bottling up everything until France arrived on the scene—and Proxy was lounging around the living room as if she owned the place, I met once more with that unsettling gaze, as if she were sizing me up. After a moment, she cracked a smile. "Hey there, Russ. The big day, huh?" Turning back to Pop, she kidded: "Jeez, chairman of the whole fishing shebang. You've come up in the world, Tom. If you don't watch out, you'll be mayor next."

"I have enough headaches already," he said shortly. Anything further was cut off by rapid steps on

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the stairs and France making her appearance.

“Hi, Ma”—she came in talking fast—“come to see if all fishermen are liars or only liars fish?”

When I say making her appearance, this day she really had worked on how she looked. She must have cleaned out the Toggery of its most exotic items, a vividly striped red, white, and blue blouse and a fringed deerskin vest that went with her leather bracelet, plus crisp new blue jeans. Topping it all off, her black hair, with a fresh sheen to it, had been teased nicely into a kind of crown effect. In a word, she was an eyeful, and the three of us stared as if making sure it was her, the old Francine.

“Look at you,” Proxy eventually said, guardedly. “Bartender clothes have changed since my day.”

France glanced in a nervous appeal at Pop, and he came through with, “She’s not behind the bar today. The joint’s always closed for the derby.”

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

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

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

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

“He got a grant,” I helpfully provided.

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

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

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Proxy ~~studied~~ <sup>scrutinized</sup> the trio of us, the crimp between her eyes saying more than she did for a few seconds. "Oh-kay, the young folks will have their fun," she conceded. If there is such a thing as a warning smile, she gave France one now. "Just don't let having a good time get in the way of what counts, all right?" With that, she briskly gathered herself. "Well, I guess I might as well hit the road, busy as everybody is around here."

"Don't rush off." Pop's tone erased the look of relief on France. He looked regretfully at Proxy.

"We have something to talk over."

Here it came. I was divided between anticipation and apprehension. Pop wasted no words: "Things have been going missing."

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

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

It is never good news when a parent resorts to your full name. The blood seemed to have drained out of her. "Oh boy. That again." She defensively looked back and forth from Proxy to Pop. "People are always thinking I steal."

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"How come they think that?" he pressed.

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

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

Resigned to that reputation, she dipped her head. "I figured you'd heard about it from one source or another." With a hurt expression, she gestured around to Proxy and me as if we were the suspects. I couldn't tell if I was watching a master class in acting or if she was as sincere as the day was long, but

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she rallied to look Pop in the eye. "It's not something I wanted to tell you myself, is it. 'Hi, I'm your daughter and, guess what, I was a teenage convict.'"

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

"I don't want to have to be the one to keep count all the time," he flung back, as frustrated as I had ever seen him. "Damn it, Proxy," he exploded, "the two of you don't get off that easy, especially you." He looked pained to have to do this to her, but driven to it. "Does it run in the family or what, one Jones after another acting up, until a man can't count on any kind of behavior but bad?" His old companion from the Blue Eagle Days flinched almost to the roots of her milk-blond hair, but sat and took it. "Let's try a little past history"—his temper kept going—"such as why did I ever give in to you when I knew better? Both times, no less. Second chance," he ground out woefully, "I could use one myself, every time you show up."

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

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

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Probably it was piling on, but Proxy couldn't stop herself from saying crossly, "Francine, you told me you'd kicked that kind of fooling around. No more sticking this, that, and the other in your pocket, you promised."

The younger woman blinked, as if coming to. "Fine, I shouldn't have done any of that, but why does everybody have to flip about it? I put the stuff back, didn't I? That's something in my favor, isn't

it?"

It was an impressive try, but not even her bravado could withstand two deadly parental stares. I could see her lip quiver as she confessed, "It's a tough habit to kick. I have to fight it like crazy every time. That's... that's why I put things back, see."

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

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

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

"The way she makes change."

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

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

Proxy was giving her a look that could be felt ten feet away.

"But see, I made up for that," Francine protested.

"Made up for it? How?" Pop demanded.

She tugged at the fringe of her vest like a little girl. "I felt kind of bad about doing it to the old coot. So the next customer in, I overcharged."

"Over...?" He couldn't believe what he had just heard. "Gave back too *much* change?"

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"Sure thing. It was what's-her-name, the stuck-up one."

"Velma?" Pop ventured cautiously.

"You got it, her. I slipped the same five into the money back for her drink. Watched her count it a couple of times like she couldn't believe it. But she didn't give back the fiver, did she."

We sat there like the three monkeys, fixed on her. Nothing stirred in the room except Francine's nervous fingers. Pop came to life first, mustering himself as if facing the most difficult of barroom behavior cases.

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"Look, bartending doesn't work that way. I don't know what kind of cockeyed conscience you have, but you can't cheat one customer and pass it along like gravy to another one and have it come out even. All that'll get you is both of them thinking you're playing fast and loose with the cash register. And word like that gets around, don't think it doesn't. The joint's reputation would be down the drain in no time." Plainly this was his limit. "I hate like everything to do it"—he threw up his hands—"but I'm gonna have to can you."

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

"Cut her a break, Tom," she pleaded. "She's just a kid."

"Twenty-one?"

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

"I guess I have to get with it or split the scene, don't I," came the sulky answer, along with more demure tugging at the vest fringe.

"You're damn right you do," Pop weighed in. He looked exasperated but uncertain. If I knew anything about it, his own conscience was giving him too much trouble. I saw him start to say something, stop, squint, as if squeezing out a decision, and then deliver it in the slowest of voices: "I'm probably going to kick myself for this, but if I give you another try, will you behave different?"

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Francine tossed her head, as if deciding to change her life then and there. "I'll do better," she vowed, "but you've got to do something for me, Tom. You and Rusty."

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

"Don't tell Del about what I got myself into?" she practically whispered it. "I mean, let me clue him in, after today." She gave us an intensely pleading look. "Honest, I'll tell him everything. Just not right now, okay?"

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

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"Uh, okay."

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

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

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"The family gathering go all right?" Del asked, a smile on him as big as the day, when I reached

the van. He was busy stuffing extra tape reels and other odds and ends of recording gear into his safari shirt.

“Right as rain.” One of Pop’s sayings that I never understood in the first place came to my rescue. I still was trying to cope with the mental lightning strike back there in the middle of his tirade to Proxy. I had to try to find out in a hurry, France would be there any minute. “Say, mister,” I piped up in a stagey voice, “how are you fixed for answers?”

“They’re running out my ears, my good fellow,” Del generously joined in the bit while still putting things here and there in his shirt. “In what manner may I enlighten you?”

“Is Jones ever one those nicknames, like Canada Dan?”

He stopped loading his pockets to think that over. “A behaviorial one? I can’t imagine how, a plain standard family name like that. What makes you ask?”

“Oh, there were a couple of tourists in the bar,” I made up as fast as I could think, which was none too fast, “and so, one of them did something the other one didn’t like, and the other one seemed to be calling him a name like that, something about how with him it was one Jones after another acting up until you couldn’t count on any kind of behavior from him but bad, so I wondered.”

He clucked his tongue in sudden understanding. “Ah, of course, *that* kind of jones. Small *j*. It means a compulsion, something you keep doing, against better judgment. Monkey on the back,” he did a sudden scary bit, twitching jerkily, as if trying to shake off a clinging simian. “Got a jones about that, man.” I stood petrified, needing to hear no more but at the mercy of Del’s encyclopedic tendency as he parsed the matter further. The expression, he guessed, might have come from the jazz world, where various kinds of unwise behavior were not unknown. “That tourist must be a real problem case,” he finished.

“Huh? Yeah. Awful.”

“Who’s a problem case?” The whippy voice caught us by surprise. “Nobody I know, I hope.”

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Coming up on the van from the yard side, the piano girl, as I couldn't help thinking of her ever since hearing it from Canada Dan, looked tense as a tightwire walker, but then she often did. Her fixed grin of greeting, if that's what it was, flashed at me before settling onto Del. I shook my head so swiftly, my eyeballs rattled, to show her I hadn't told him about her pack rat episodes and the rest.

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

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"Can't hardly wait." Her fingers played in the buckskin vest fringe as she worked up to saying, "You know what? I've gone back to Francine. By popular demand, sort of."

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"Hmm?" Del puzzled over her name switcheroo a moment, then smiled unconcernedly. "'By any other name,' as the poet said," he proclaimed, a gallantry that evidently was as far over her head as mine. Nonetheless, Francine gave him a gaze full of reward.

The lovey atmosphere was growing too thick for me. Besides, I badly needed a chance to sort things out in my head. "I have to put the banner on the Packard," I started to make my escape, "I better get at that."

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

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

"Uh-uh, I insist."

Knowing I was in for it from her—Pop obviously had not learned about the shortchanging episode from the angel Gabriel—I fetched the banner out of storage and trudged down the driveway to the hulking old car, my problematic half sister shadowing me as if I might get away. Behind us, Del was happily trying his portable tape recorder, "Testing, one, two, three..."

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I wondered if she knew the Packard was where it happened—*she* happened—because of its spacious damn backseat. If so, she didn't let on, and simply ~~eyed~~ <sup>surveyed</sup> the banner as I flopped one part of it—

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CATCH 'EM—onto the trunk and then the other—TO THE LIMIT! She still didn't say anything until

we were nearly done tying the thing to the taillights and trunk handle and so on.

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

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I was wary. “How was that any favor?”

She tossed her head, as if clearing that black mane of hers out of the way. “It makes me get myself squared away. Don’t have any choice now, do I.”

Skittishly watching her, I wondered if a person could make a jones go away just like that. The one that was giving me a waking nightmare didn’t show any sign of going anywhere.

Zoe could tell right away I was a mental mess.

“What happened?” she asked in a stage whisper, rushing out of the café after I feverishly tapped on the window. “A knock-down drag-out?”

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

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She waited until I reached my stopping point to say in some puzzlement, “So didn’t everything work out peachy keen? France-cine”— she caught up with the renaming—“has to go straight or hit the road, right?”

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“That isn’t all,” I echoed Pop.

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

"Huh-uh, it's not that."

"What, then?"

"I think I found out—"

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

"I think I found out Proxy is my mother."

It made a crazy kind of sense, gaps filled in, veils lifted, the full story revealed after all this time. Pop's pained version of my mother, whenever I ventured to find out anything whatsoever about her, must have been that she was a jones, a bad habit, not a phonebook Jones, as I'd thought. By his own saying so, Proxy fit that; the jonesiest kind of compulsion, according to his outburst in the house, overcoming him twice. It was the *twice* that hit home with me.

The first time, that "one damn time" in the Packard, with Francine as living proof of unrestrained behavior. But the other: it did not take much imagination to conjure it happening in Canada, he on one of those trips to sell off back-room loot and she in the business of taxi dancing or worse, and they cross paths again, by every indication in Medicine Hat. "The railyard district, Tom," in that silky voice. "No place like it when we used to know it, was there." And out of that intersection comes me, nine months later. An awful lot was explained that way. Proxy's fishy manner of looking at me. Pop's hazy description of my nativity, the housekeeper story much more convenient than one beginning, "See, there's this taxi dancer I used to know who keeps turning up like a bad penny and we got a few drinks into us one more damn time, and—" As for Francine, she could be in on the secret, or this all could have transpired without her ever knowing, given Proxy's motherhood record of being absent for years at a time. Either way, it would make me the last to know that the girlishly named missing mother I had tried so hard to imagine was actually a milk-blond hustler full of schemes, wouldn't it.

As this spilled out of me, Zoe had the logical question. "So why didn't your dad and Proxy get married when they knew they were having you?"

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"I bet she wouldn't do it," I hazarded not much of a guess. She was a different breed of cat, Pop had outright said so. And not the marrying kind at the time, particularly with a scandalous first husband to live down. No, it made sense to me that Proxy, as she was then, would have dealt herself out of any matrimony, and probably me into the nearest orphanage, except for Pop saying something like—I could almost hear him—"Then I'll raise the kid myself," and depositing me in Phoenix, and the rest was history.

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

"I . . . I can't make up my mind." Neither choice held real appeal. I'd been ~~grinning~~<sup>st</sup> and bearing it ever since two dangerously smiling women came along out of nowhere to upset our perfectly sound bachelor life, and forbearance was getting profoundly wearing. Yet there are some questions you don't like to ask because of the answers they might bring. What if I mustered myself to question Pop as to whether Proxy was in truth my mother, and he let his conscience run away with itself and replied, "You know what, she is, and now that it's out in the open, she and I ought to fix this family situation and do it right for a change and get hitched and we all live together. How's that grab you?"

Right where I did not want to be grabbed, that's where. If it was selfish not to want to share my father's life and mine with a catamount, then I was hopelessly selfish.

Shocked, Zoe asked, "Your dad wouldn't really do something like that, would he?"

"Who knows?" Hellish good company, he'd characterized Proxy in their Blue Eagle time together. The first part of that, I could agree with. "He complains about her and how she's always up to something, but he ends up doing what she wants. That's what scares me. You saw her in the back room—she's not making eyes at him just for practice."

Biting her lip in sympathy, Zoe watched me without knowing what to say, for once. In the stillness of the back room, not even the model planes stirred overhead, and the menagerie of items down on the

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floor and along the walls were like a museum everyone but the two of us had passed through, I could see her working on my predicament as mightily as I was, but the answer wasn't revealing itself.

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

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

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The Derby Day crowd, even as early as Pop and I and the Packard pulled in to the parking lot on the bluff, already was starting to put the Mudjacks' Reunion to shame for size and high spirits, and while the dam was modest compared to Fort Peck, it held an even more impressive amount of water than when I had caught my trophy trout. By now Rainbow Reservoir was practically brimming, as if all the weather of the year had collected within its banks in liquid form. If a hell of a lot of water did mean a hell of a lot of fish, then Pop and Bill Reinking were in luck. As we were getting out the loudspeaker equipment and other derby paraphernalia he was in charge of, being greeted all the while by people bristling with rods and reels, Pop surveyed the scene of the crowd, staking out spots along the gravelly shoreline. "How about that, maybe I knew what I was doing," he said with satisfaction, looking toward where someone from his committee had roped off the muddy top of the dam, as he'd directed. "Not that it wouldn't be fun to see a Zane or two slip into the water, hey?"

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Just then we heard a familiar twang, Turk Turco calling out from where he had parked a highway department flatbed truck, donated or at least borrowed for the day, on the shoulder of ground just above the dam to serve as the speaker's stand. "Over here, Tom, we'll get the glory horn set up for you if Jojo doesn't electrocute himself doing it."

"Montana Power to the rescue," Joe Quigg grunted as he swung heavy batteries onto the truck bed

to operate the loudspeaker and amplifier.

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

To me now, that culminating day of the summer—of the year, really—seems like one long, twisty dream, everything that began with Proxy's Cadillac nosing into the driveway and the thunderous disclosures that followed, and then the tremendous gathering at the derby, as if the audience had come to see what Tom Harry would bring about next. There are some days in a person's life, only ever a few, that are marked to be remembered forever, even while they are happening. <sup>As if in a trance,</sup> ~~Hypnotically~~ I watched Pop master his chairmanship tasks—"I wouldn't make too much of that 'ace in the hole' business if I were you, Sarge, there are some jokers in this crowd. . . ." "I'm sorry, Louise, but like I told Howie, the ladies will just have to get by with one table for pies. . . ." "You didn't think to bring a tub of ice, Fred? That's sure too bad, I guess people will have to get used to warm beer"—the most important person in the Two Medicine country, at least for the day. I should have been busting my buttons with pride for him, and mostly I was, but the repeated history of him and Proxy, creeping closer all the while, incessantly kept

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haunting me. Her for a mother. What does it take to empty a head of something you do not want there?

Trailing after him with this churning inside me as he strode from one derby duty to the next, I was sticking so close, I was nearly riding his shirttail. It wasn't until he ducked around to the side of the Frog and Goose booth to catch his breath and have a cigarette that he had a chance to read my face.

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"Hey, you doing all right, kiddo?"

"Trying to."

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

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

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

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

Off we went, life finally feeling right to me with Zoe at my side. She fell quiet as we roved the scene of the event. You could have walked away with the town, so many people from Gros Ventre had come out for the big day. Even Cloyce Reinking was on hand, in spousal loyalty to Bill's chamber of commerce position, we figured. Spying us, she provided a comically elevated eyebrow, very much as

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Lady Bracknell might have done at the news that people pursued fish when foxes were so much more visible to the eye, and we couldn't help but giggle.

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

As if the Zanes were a bad omen, Zoe grew more somber when we wandered past family bunches visiting gaily with one another along the reservoir shore while waiting for the derby to start. At the section where ten- to thirteen-year-olds were grouped, my horse buddies Jimmy and Hal and some others spotted us and waved and hollered. "Come on," I tried to put some enthusiasm into my social role, "better say hello to the guys, they're in our grade."

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

I gestured to <sup>our</sup> ~~my~~ curious classmates that we were urgently wanted by waiting parents and we kept going. Zoe was looking vacant eyed in a way that I knew was no bit.

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"Something the matter?"

"Ooh, nothing, really."

"Zo-oe, tell me."

"It's hunnerd percent dumb."

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

A teeny smile trembled on her at that, but then she looked away and around at the crowd. "You know everybody here. And all the kids. For me, they're"—she struggled to put it into words—"it's all going to be new, Rusty."

As fumbling as her emotion was, I felt in a flash exactly what she meant. The calendar was closing in on us, bringing on the jaundiced feeling that kids get when summer is leaving in a hurry. Without ever having to say so, we shared the haunting sense that our education together would end when school started. And if Zoe was on the verge of crying, that made two of us. It was right there in our faces; there

might be other summers, other years, but never again like this.

I tried to make the best of it. "School doesn't get us for a couple days yet."

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

"Don't worry ahead," I said as if I wasn't a prime example. "We'll employ our brains and think of something, Muscles."

That twitched a grin out of her, and at the same time I saw her eyes widen as dramatically as ever. "Here they are," she whispered, ready for the next act, "the piano girl and her main squeeze."

Whatever they had been up to, Del and Francine were conspicuously tardy in arriving. I could tell by the giddy expression on him as he hopped out of the van that she had not yet told him anything, except maybe any cooing between kisses. Francine met us with her best poker face, and I supposed it counted in her favor if she was dead, set on bluffing her way through the day without upsetting Del in his work. But then?

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

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

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"An estimable question, mademoiselle." He paused to check the connections on the portable tape recorder and scanned the busy scene. The answer seemed to come to him from the dam, where so much overflow was gushing out the floodgate and cascading down into the South Fork that it sounded like a natural waterfall. "Aha!" He cocked his good ear. "The sound of white water, as some poet must have

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said.”

“Ambience,” Zoe confidently defined for the benefit of Francine, who looked like she needed it.

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“Let’s go, derby fans.” Del set off with headphones slung around his neck and the recorder

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swinging at his side like a suitcase, the three of us in his wake. Swiftly he headed for the speaker-stand truck, where Pop was going over last things with various committee members about to take up their assignments, everyone jaunty as free spenders at a carnival.

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

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The next voice was Pop’s, <sup>as he read</sup> greeting Del and Francine with a mock frown, or maybe not, as he glanced up from dispatching the last of his committee volunteers. “Get lost getting here, did you?”

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

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No doubt remembering the tick episode, Pop gave him a warning look. “Promise not to slip and fall in?”

“Absolutely.”

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

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

“Coming?”

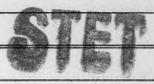
“Not this kid” she and her clean new britches shied back from the muddy dam. “I’ll cheer from here, thanks.” I didn’t blame her, knowing how single-minded Del could be when he had the microphone on and the tape reel hypnotically turning; not exactly lively company. Resigned to going solo, he was already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

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

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Relief flooded her. “Fine,” she said hastily, and started to scooch up onto the truck beside Zoe and me before conscience seemed to catch up with her.

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She worked her mouth, as if tasting the words carefully first. “Tom? I’m sorry about . . . you know, everything.”

“That puts you back in the human race,” he accepted gravely. “Come on, rest your bones until Delano gets back.” She hopped up as Zoe and I squirmed over to make room for her.

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With the three of us under control, Pop looked all around the reservoir scene and drew a sighing breath, the kind that told me he really wished he had time for a cigarette. “I got a fishing derby to run instead, don’t I.” His eye caught mine. Setting his face the way he did when he was about to open the Medicine Lodge for business, he signaled to Bill Reinking over at the sign-up table that all was in readiness. Seeing this, Turk or Joe did something to the sound system that caused the customary

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~~amplifier~~ screech, startling everyone but Del, earmuffed as he was by his headphones, out on the concrete apron of the spillway, setting down his recorder to punch buttons and read dials. "Cripes, it sounds like we're murdering a cat," Pop muttered as he climbed onto the truck in back of where Zoe and I and Francine were perched. Gingerly taking the microphone Joe handed up to him, he cleared his throat a couple of times and began the proceedings.

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

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

Squinting hard at a sheet of paper the sun was catching, he rolled on: "BEFORE WE GET SET STARTED THROWING FOOD TO THE FISH, THERE ARE SOME FOLKS I HAVE TO THANK FOR—" and I relaxed about at least one peril.

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While he was conscientiously droning through that list, more than ever I felt like a spectator to a colossal dream, memory mingling with all I was witnessing. In the nearest area of contestants strung thick along the reservoir, the little kids pointed their fishing poles in as many directions as quills on a porcupine. Remembering when I was like them, how mature I felt. At the same time, an inch away from me on one side sat, wondrous Zoe, the summer's gift, whom I would have given almost anything to have for a real sister, and all but touching on my other side, the actual one, Francine, the newcomer whose middle name seemed to be Trouble. Trying to fit the contradictory two of them into my own

small world, how childish I felt, hopelessly twelve years old in circumstances that would have taxed much older brains. Meanwhile my singular father, author of disappointments and triumphs and regular surprises in between, stood there, bigger than life, on his stage for the day, his voice rolling out over the water and shore, as central a figure in this panorama as he had been on the occasion of the Fort Peck reunion. Tom Harry as historic as Leadbelly. How clear and simple that had seemed before Proxy pulled up in a Cadillac typhoon of dust. Before the story of my life started coming unraveled in me.

Zoe, thank heavens, had been restlessly dandling her legs over the edge of the truck bed and taking everything in while I was so absorbed with myself. I snapped to at her sudden words under Pop's amplified ones. "Whoa, is that supposed to be like that?"

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

"Pop!"

"Tom!"

Our simultaneous yells surprised him to a stop in midsentence, and he must have sensed the situation from the alarm in our shouts. Quicker than I would have thought humanly possible, he was madly motioning everyone to stay back from the causeway and roaring into the mike. "DELANO! GET OFF THE DAM! DELANO!"

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

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

"HEY, NO!" Pop's shouts now were followed by the death shriek of the mike as he scrambled off

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the truck in pursuit of us. No one else was near enough to be of any help, except Francine, who with presence of mind caught up with Zoe and wrested her, struggling and howling bloody murder, back toward shore as I raced onto the causeway.

There's a saying that you run from danger with your heart in your mouth, and that was even more true as I ran headlong into it; not brave, not even close, just blindly determined to reach Del before a reservoir full of water did. As best I can re-create the experience, adrenaline replaced the blood in my system and instinct took over from sanity. I simply ran and ran, the causeway seeming cruelly long, the kneeling figure ahead ever at an awful distance. How I kept to my feet on the muddy top of the dam, I do not know, except maybe through the gripping fear of falling. By now Del, taking his sweet time with his cherished equipment, was just yards away, but I felt the dam do something under me. Stories of the slide at Fort Peck had it all too right; there is an odd sensation of time suspended when the ground begins to move.

Out of breath, or so scared that my breathing wasn't working right—it pretty much came to the same—I floundered onto the concrete apron of the spillway and practically bowled Del over as I snatched his headphones off.

“Ow!” He grabbed a smarting ear, a look of surprise on him at my bad manners. “Rusty, what—?”

“The dam's leaking, come on!”

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

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legged run, like a man in some ridiculous picnic race.

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

"Watch out, it's gonna go!" Pop cried, grabbing me around the waist and practically carrying me with him as the bunch of us stumbled our way up the shoulder of higher ground, Zoe still in Francine's clutch as pandemonium spread among the crowd. People would be saying for the rest of their lives they were there that day, when the Rainbow dam broke. Actually it was a series of collapses, avalanches almost in slow motion, as pockets of soil big as side\_hills slid off the core of the dam, one after another.

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

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

Whatever is worse than a sob burst out of me as I buried my face in my father's chest, and he ducked his head to mine, still gripping me tight.

"Don't," he said brokenly, and choked up in a spasm of his own.

It was Zoe, farther up the slope, who cried out, "There he is!"

Not much of him, actually, the red head the only thing that wasn't mud-colored there against the side of the bluff, where he had been flung, and was clinging to a rock outcropping like a swimmer to a reef. If she had not spotted him in time, who knows?

He was barely holding on by the time Turk and Joe could scramble down to him, risking themselves so close to the cascade of earth and water. Between them, they managed to drag him up the slope and get him to the truck, where he collapsed on the running board. His head back against the door, Francine hugging him, muddy mess that he was, and Pop and Zoe and me asking him a dozen ways

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whether he was all right, Del ultimately gasped out, "Now I know what the mudjacks were talking about."

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

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“This waiting is driving me up the wall, kiddo.”

Up and over and out into some neighborhood of frustration constructed specially for a proprietor of a historic saloon downstream from a dam disaster, was more accurate. You might think the aftermath of a flood is destined to be an anticlimax. Even biblical stories lose ground after Noah and the Ark, don't they. Yet I fully remember the suspense of those next days, when Pop and I were reduced to living in the Packard at the swollen Red Cross camp on the cemetery knoll above town, waiting for the authorities to allow the stranded population of Gros Ventre back to their homes and businesses, if any still fit that description.

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During the nerve-wracking wait for the water to go down, Pop looked more worried than I had ever seen him, his face fixed in a cigarette squint and his hat down on his brow as if it were raining, even though it finally wasn't. When he and I weren't pitching in on unloading emergency supplies from trucks or standing in endless toilet lines or eating ladled-out tent meals, I would catch him staring down at the watery ghost town somewhere under its shroud of trees for long spells at a time.

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Not that I was very well pulled together myself. Pop hadn't really said much about my mad dash onto the dam before it broke except to ruffle my hair with a rough hand and mutter, “That was close. Cripes, that was close.” Something of a celebrity around the camp, I kept being greeted and hailed by those who witnessed my feat at the reservoir—even Duane Zane mumbled, “Nice going, guy,” when I bumped into him in the chow line—but it was a good thing heroism is not transparent, because only now did I feel scared through and through. Not so much from that narrow escape, but of whatever lay

ahead when the slowly receding water showed what we had been left with.

Until that could happen, Del of all people was our saving grace. Maybe lacrosse had taught him to shake off life's body blows in a hurry, but in any case, no sooner was the disaster camp being set up and reporters flocking in than he found a radio station van and wangled the loan of a portable recorder. Pop and I were pounding in tent pegs as the latest delivery of emergency shelters was being unrolled when we heard Zoe let out an "Ooh." We had practically inherited her while her parents volunteered at the meal tent, and depend on it, she first spotted Del striding our way, Francine keeping up with him, as inseparable as his shadow.

Pop straightened up with a grunt at the sight of the two of them, or rather all three, counting the recorder swinging at Del's side. Suspicious, he asked, "What are you gonna do with that thing?"

Del could hardly contain himself. "Tom, it's the chance of a lifetime! A sound portrait of this camp," he gestured around, as if scooping in the atmosphere of the flood aftermath by the armful. "Just think, if we had something like that from right after the Fort Peck slide. It would be historic!"

Certainly there was plenty of sound, diesel generators sputtering to life and the anxious tones of neighbors asking after one another and the bellow of Red Cross bullhorns making announcements and countless other noises of people laboring to get their lives together on a makeshift basis. Pop listened a few moments as if the commotion hurt his ears. "Yeah, well, you're welcome to it, Delano."

"Ah, I was hoping," Del stood on one foot and then the other, "you could go around the camp with me a little and point out people I might talk to. Break the ice, so to speak."

Pop just looked at him. "You know what, I could do without any more chances of a lifetime for a while." He cut off Del's immediate further plea with a tired shake of his head. "Have Francine lead you around, she knows enough of these folks by now."

She shook her head so ~~quick~~<sup>fast</sup> her hair flew. "Not like you, Tom. Please? Pretty please? Dellie needs you in on this." She gestured awkwardly. "You . . . you're trusted."

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That drew another sizable look from Pop. "Dellie needs his head examined," he growled, "and he's not the only one." Puffing out his cheeks, he turned resignedly to Del. "Okay, let's get at it. You stick close with us, kiddos."

The two of them set off into the confusion of the camp, Francine and Zoe and I tagging after. You really had to hand it to Philip Delano Robertson, gawky fledgling westerner from points east; not all that many hours before, the worst flood in Two Medicine history had done its best to inundate him, and here he was his bushytailed self again, somehow managing to listen to Pop and deploy the microphone toward anything that caught his interest and adjust settings on the recorder slung at his side, all at the same time. For his part, Pop singled out personalities who would stand out in a portrait, sound or otherwise, starting with Cloyce Reinking, sitting outside a tent like a queen in exile. She sent Zoe and me the kind of look that passes among old theatrical confederates, then turned to Del's mike with aplomb.

"So what do you think, gang?" Francine muttered as we hung back out of range of the interview. "Am I washed up?"

"Wh-why?" I responded, really asking *What now?*

"Are you in some kind of trouble like got you thrown in juvie?" Zoe breathlessly went the full route.

"Nahh, that's not what I meant." Francine toyed with the leather on her wrist. "My bartender gig. What if the joint is a total wreck?"

Leave it to her to ~~blat~~ it right out. At least her tongue was honest. Zoe wisely left the matter to me. Where I found it in me, I don't know, but I sounded more like Pop than he himself sometimes did: "You got to play the hand you been dealt. That's rule number one."

Francine gave me quite a look for a few seconds, then one of those grins that didn't leave the corner of her mouth. "Thanks, champ. I'll remember that."

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On through the course of that day and the next couple, anytime anyone looked up, the tall intent red-topped figure and the tall silver-streaked familiar one were on the prowl through the camp, the one wielding the microphone like a magic wand, the other introducing him around as if he were the sound portraitist of the ages. Through it all, Francine stuck right there at Del's side, helping out any way she could. Appearances can deceive, but she gave every sign of being genuinely attached to him, rather than, as might have been suspected, snuggling up because the Gab Lab happened to be the coziest accommodation in the camp. He, of course, continued to look at her as though she were the perfection of a rose. Zoe had a better sense of these things than I did, and she pointed out that Francine had a lot to offer a man if he did not know about her habit of taking things. Still, I couldn't help wishing Del savvied what he was getting with her.

The last day came, with Pop summoned along with some other of the town's leading lights to a meeting with the camp administrators. Zoe and I were again killing time by trailing after Del and Francine, so we were right there when he slipped the microphone into the circle of law enforcement officials briefing Bill Reinking and the other reporters on the final tally of lives lost in the flood. Nearly all the victims were tourists who had been camping or fishing or picnicking at creek side, names that meant nothing to us, the kind you read in newspaper stories of distant terrible happenings. Until the Polish-sounding final one.

Swallowing hard, she and I retreated into the maze of tents and makeshift avenues of people either sitting around with nothing to do or rushing this way and that. Hearing Canada Dan's name read off crushed the best efforts of our imaginations, the possibility that he and Moses had herded the hospital bunch up onto the coulee slope that day and the flood rushed by below, man and dog and ailing sheep safely high and dry. Twelve years old was awfully early to meet up with what inevitability does to possibility. Never had I expected to be choked up over the fate of one ornery old sheepherder, not even

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a very good one. But that was Canada Dan for you.

In the general hubbub I almost didn't hear when Zoe said in a tight voice, "What if the dam had gone out that day we were at his sheep camp?"

That was one I hadn't thought of.

"Curtains, Muscles," I tried to make light of it but it came out as a kind of croak.

Without saying anything more for a time, we wandered the encampment. Never had I known Zoe to be so downcast. Her eyes glistened, next thing to crying, although I could tell she was fiercely determined not to.

"Don't get all shook up," I managed, "we lucked out like crazy at the sheep camp and the dam. That's something, isn't it?"

She nodded miserably. "I know. But—"

"But what?"

It took her a couple of tries to say it.

"I heard my dad telling my mom, if the café is in real bad shape, we'll have to go back to Butte."

I felt as if all the air had been sucked out of me. I was trying to stammer something when Pop's voice caught up with us.

"Been looking all over for you," he beckoned impatiently, "let's get to getting." He had the news that people who ran essential services, such as the bank and the mercantile and gas stations, were about to be allowed into town ahead of everyone else. The first trace of his old self in many hours flashed across his drawn face. "Guess what, they couldn't leave the Medicine Lodge off the list. Princess, better go tell your folks what's up, okay? We'll see you in town."

Zoe sped away. Casting around for Francine and Del, Pop spotted them at the edge of the graveyard next to the camp, crouched over the recording equipment, catching the sound of wind in the long grass bordering the cemetery. "Hey, you two!" he hollered. "They're letting us back in town, if you

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can tear yourself away from the marble farm. Make it snappy, Proxy's waiting at the Packard."

That was the next jolt down to the bottom of my shoes. Now her, all of a sudden, along with everything else?

By now the camp was buzzing, with everyone anxious to find out what shape the town was in, and we wended our way to the cars through a chorus of encouragement to Pop to get the lodge open for business the first possible minute, and he steadfastly said he would have to see what was what. My mind was taken up with what lay directly ahead, the red Cadillac poking out beyond the black bulk of the Packard, and there she waited, in the lavender slacks and creamy blouse and the hair still the shade of tinsel on a Christmas tree, leaning against a fender as composed as you please. My mother the jones. Abandoner of children until they suited her purpose. Seducer of my father anytime she really put her mind to it. The wild card in the deck.

I asked darkly, "Where's she been, anyway?"

"They weren't letting anybody but emergency vehicles through until now," Pop excused her, naturally. But that was the kind of parent she'd be, all right, I could feel it in my bones. Absent until you least expected her, and then everything had to revolve around her.

Proxy met us with a more off-kilter smile than usual, as if she had been caught up in something that took a tricky amount of thinking. Immediately, though, she fastened onto me with one of her disturbing gazes. "Aren't you something, Russ. I hear you go around saving people's lives."

The only answer I was willing to make to that was something inconclusive, kind of a shrug and nod at the same time, for history was unmistakably in the air, that midnight episode at Fort Peck when a truck went in the river. The story practically cried out in my very being. If something like my action had occurred then, Darius Duff might still be her husband and Francine's apparent father, and I'd be, what? Nonexistent? The offspring of Pop and someone more fitted to be a mother? It is the kind of thinking

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that does not get a person anywhere, but it ruthlessly leads you on even so.

"Twice in one lifetime, Tom. What are the cockeyed odds on that?" I caught up with what Proxy was saying as she bummed a cigarette and he lit hers and then his while we waited for the procession into town to get under way.

"We don't have much luck around dams, do we," he interpreted that. "I hope it's not as big a mess as the time at Fort Peck." He glanced keenly at her. "I still have bad dreams about that, how about you?"

"It can't be," she said, ignoring the dreams part. "The slide took a whole frigging year to fix. Don't be so down in the mouth. Francine will be good help getting the joint back in shape in no time, you'll see." The little crimp appeared between her eyes, as if this had just occurred to her. "Fact of the matter is, I can spare some time myself to hang around and try be useful."

My heart flip-flopped. Here she came, right into our lives.

"Yeah, well, we'll see how it all sorts out," he responded, a far cry from turning her down flat, as I wildly wished would happen. "We need to get ourselves in there first and take a look at things." Pacing and smoking, he kept an eye on the law-enforcement types in charge of dispatching cars into town, meanwhile frowning around in search of Francine and Del. At the last minute they showed up, dodging their way toward us, still lugging recording equipment and looking like a couple you couldn't separate without surgery.

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Watching Proxy, I had the feeling Del was a complication she gladly would have done without. However, she did the polite thing, remarking to him that he was quite the survivor.

"It's quite an experience," he replied, not in his usual bouncy way, but looking straight back at her with Fort Peck knowledge in his eyes.

Evidently his close call was on Francine's mind, too. While the others went on making talk, she drifted around to the other side of the Packard, where Pop had dispatched me to roll down the windows to let stuffy air out.

Half covering her mouth with her hand so only I could hear, she began, "You want to know something?" Not much choice when it's put that way, is there. I glanced sideways at her, her expression that same flat-honest one as when she told of being in juvie.

"You were crazy to run out there to Del," she said so low it was practically a whisper.

Neither admitting nor denying, I cranked down the rear window as if it took all my attention.

"Lucky thing, too," she murmured, "but that's not what I mean. Me, I couldn't have. Didn't, did I."

Modesty, if that's what it was, found my tongue. "One of us crazy is probably enough."

"Fine," she laughed sharply. Then gave me a strange, warm grin. "I can dig that—somebody else's turn for a change."

"Let's go, everybody!" Pop ended that with a shout, finally getting the high sign from someone wearing a badge. Del sprang off toward the Gab Lab with headphones dangling and recorder swinging, although not before one last promissory look at Francine. In the rush to go, the next thing was Proxy proposing that she and Francine ride with us, inasmuch as she didn't want to take the low-slung Caddie down there into the flood mess, and Pop drily telling her the Packard always had room to spare. One more thing to unnerve me. It was happening already, the slapped-together family, with Proxy's bossy style that hit like lightning when it happened.

But as we went to jump in, Francine all of a sudden backed away. "Know what," she said, as if it had just occurred to her, "my things are in Dellie's van, I'll ride with him." Her expression was hard to read, except it was one hundred percent resolved. "Always up for an automotive adventure, you know me."

About to climb in the notorious rear seat, Proxy whipped around and started to say something. But then thought better of it, simply smiled a few moments longer than that kind of smile should be held, and left things at, "Oh-kay, it's like that, is it. See you and the lady\_killer in town."

"Parting is such you-know-what," Francine bestowed, and bolted off. Proxy came up to the front

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seat with us, lodging me uncomfortably in the middle between Pop and her. "She's got it bad." She solemnly watched her daughter trot away down the line of cars. "When you get to that age, keep your head on your shoulders, Russ."

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"She could do worse." I was grateful to Pop for sticking up for Del, and then he nosed the Packard into our spot in the line of cars, and we all went silent as the caravan slowly wound its way past the marble farm toward town.

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The ride in, while short, seemed as momentous as my arrival to Gros Ventre half of my lifetime ago, the sign at the city limits still standing on its higher ground before the highway curved decorously down to branch into streets, the same green roof of trees over everything ahead. The difference rapidly made itself known at ground level, a foot or so of dark water still standing wherever the soaked soil could not absorb any more. As we reached the first houses Pop said, "Damn," once and definitively, at the ravages of the flood; driftwood snagged on porches, household goods sluiced into yards, and a smelly scum of mud and mildew everywhere, as if the town had been dropped into a swamp.

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Bulldozers and graders had cleared a rough lane through the muck and debris of Main Street and were working on the back streets now. As the Packard crept past silent mud-coated storefront after storefront, I saw the Top Spot, sitting grimy and abandoned, and the Odeon, darkened and ghostly, and had to fight back a choking feeling. Emotion piled on emotion in me. You are only young once, the saying goes, but that is a terrible miscount. On that slow journey through the stricken town, I was young any number of times over, and each time different; young and lost without Zoe if her family moved away, young and spooked out of my wits at the unsettling tinsel-haired woman next to me emerging as my second parent, and most of all, young and stricken myself for my beleaguered father and what lay ahead of him at the Medicine Lodge.

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At last the car eased to a stop at the familiar end of the street, and we sat saying nothing for a

~~short while~~  
~~minute~~. Still standing, the poor old saloon looked its age and then some, like a ghost town derelict abandoned to history. Flood debris had buckled the front door so that it stood drunkenly blocking the entranceway. A water stain so ugly it made me want to puke dirtied the building up to the ~~plate-glass~~ windows, and we could tell the flood had to have left the same rind of filth inside.

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Taking in the scene, Pop looked as sick as I felt, but ~~only~~ <sup>at last</sup> said, "That door's had it, we'll have to try the back."

When he wrestled the rear door of the saloon open, what awaited us was beyond the meaning of mess. The water had swept through savagely, mingling spittoons and boots, bedrolls and saddles, empty Shellac bottles and anything within reach on the walls, and mud, mud, mud. The back room that had been the realm of exploration and costumes and every wild bit of imagination Zoe and I were capable of was a sodden dump now. It took everything in me not to break out bawling and cause Pop more woe. Grief does not always come out in tears.

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Things were no better when we checked on the ~~barroom~~; bar stools collected in a tangle like a beaver dam and booths still bleeding maroon where the flood had sat. Even the painting of the Buck Fever Case was curling away from the bottom of the frame. Pop took a look behind the bar and swore to himself.

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Proxy had been silently biding her time. Now she gazed around, appraising everything as if it ~~were~~ hers. "How's the insurance?"

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Pop wobbled a hand. "So-so, like it always is."

"Then the thing to do is get the place going even before it's cleaned up," she said, the soul of reason. "You can't do business if the joint isn't open, isn't that the truth? You remember how it was, everybody at Fort Peck needed a stiff drink and some company right after the big slide, they practically stampeded in on us."

"That was different," he answered hollowly, both hands braced on the bar as if he needed the support. "The Missouri River didn't touch the Blue Eagle. This place was underwater for days and days." The age lines in his face appeared painfully deep as he gazed around at what was left of the Select Pleasure Establishment of the Year, the plaque still on the wall and the animal heads shiny-eyed above it all and the posters of Roosevelt and Kennedy intact but peeling at the corners, while everything below showed where English Creek had lately been. Besides the wrecked stools and booths and the rest, the floor was a mud bank to a depth that made a swamper's heart sink.

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"Come on, don't let this get you down," Proxy did not let up. "The beer and whiskey didn't float away—"

"It might as well have, everything else did."

"—and we get Francine in action behind the bar, things will improve lickety-split. Now that she's straightened herself out, she can take on more of the running of the joint, spare you some of the headaches. You'll see." This was said as if it were a done deal, making my head spin. "The house didn't look bad," she was saying next, "so that's a load off the mind, isn't it." True enough; on our way into the back, we could see across the alley that the house seemed to be simply waiting patiently for its missing porches, front and back, and other than those it did not appear to have suffered much water, thanks to its high foundation. The Buick, too, had survived in gunboat fashion, two-toned with muck halfway up its sides but still squatting in place on the driveway. Survivors under the leafy protection of Igdrasil, whatever its powers were.

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"I never was any great shakes at housekeeping," Proxy dealt herself in further, "but I could help hold things together over there while Francine and you get the joint back on its feet." She glanced impatiently toward the one functioning doorway of the barroom. "What's keeping her and Lover Boy, anyway?"

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"Delano probably stopped to record a frog crossing the road," Pop sighed, wearily drawing himself

up behind the bar. "Then we're supposed to count on Francine being here to save our skins, just like you've been doping it out, hey?" he mulled, looking no less haggard. He held up his hands before Proxy could say anything. "I'm not contesting that. If it wasn't for her, I'd think I'd sell off the joint for whatever it would bring. Earl Zane might still be fool enough to buy it for practically nothing." He studied me as if I held some kind of answer. "I don't know, that might still be the best way to go. Get us all out from under."

I was torn. Was I ever. If the Medicine Lodge went, so might the problematic sister and the mother from nowhere. Women with slanted smiles out of our life. But without the saloon, what would Pop's life and my own amount to?

"Tom," Proxy negotiated with the patience of a taxi dancer and more, "you're not seeing the chance here." She swept a slow hand around the mess that was the barroom. "The joint is an attraction after what's happened. People are gonna be curious, word will get around and they'll come in for a look and buy a few rounds. I'd bet my bottom dollar on it." I am almost sure she didn't wink as she said the next, but the effect was the same. "And plenty of them are going to be hard up for ready money, aren't they. You can stock up the back room again in nothing flat."

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"I hear what you're saying," Pop said tensely, "but—" And I had, too, even before Proxy came right out with it.

"Speaking of ready money, there'll be every kind of construction crew passing through here after what's happened, won't there." Either she forgot about me in her effort of working on Pop or figured I didn't have anything to say about the matter. "Judging by Fort Peck," she gave a knowing grin, "some interesting stuff might turn up to be traded in, huh? And I bet we could—"

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By now it was all lining up like the script of a nightmare. Canada. Medicine Hat. Those trips.

Without thinking—no, with all too much thinking left over from solitary parentless nights while blizzards blew and worries piled up, I let out in a burst, "Pop? Remember what you promised."

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Startled, Proxy shot a look at me and then at him. "That didn't sound much like a Christmas list."

"It's something between Rusty and me," Pop said, as if coming to. He started to say more, but broke off on seeing Del outlined alone in the doorway at the rear of the barroom, however long he had been standing there. The other two of us followed his gaze to the unspeaking figure. Accompanied only by what he lugged at his side, Del appeared strangely unmoored without Francine inches away.

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"The lost are found," Proxy greeted him but peered past. "Where's that daughter of mine? We need to put her to work."

"Gone."

The word hanging in the air, he stepped on into the barroom, pale as he'd been during the tick bite episode. "Oh, and she said to tell you she's borrowing the Cadillac."

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For a second or two, the trio of us at the bar took that in as dumbly as the stuffed animal heads. Recovering first, Proxy started, "She didn't ask—gone where?"

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"The coast. The Pacific one," Del added punctiliously, his face blank. "She said it was time for her to leak into the landscape." He plowed through the mud on the floor as if not noticing it, to the bar, where the three of us were congregated. "And she told me to go to her room and get this." He swung what he was carrying onto the dully gleaming surface.

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I recognized the ditty bag <sup>right away</sup> ~~instantly~~, although not <sup>ahead of</sup> ~~before~~ Proxy. "Her toiletry stuff, is all. I'll take it and—"

"I'm afraid not," Del overrode that, pushing the kit bag away from her. "She made me promise to give it to Tom and Rusty. You'll see why, she said."

Comment [CE99]: Ed/au: Add some preposition, like "around" or "about" or "nearby"? Something seems missing.

Pop's brow narrowed. I hovered as he dug into the contents the distasteful way men do in women's purses and such, until his hand found something that made his face change. Ever so slowly he lifted out a bottle of hair dye and set it on the bar top. Midnight Black, the label read.

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"Why'd you try to pull this?" he said in a deathly tone, squinting at Proxy as if she were hard to

see.

She sagged against the bar. The other three of us in the picture composed from that bottle—father, brother, lover—stood waiting for whatever truth she had in her. If Del was right and there was a moral edifice embodied in remembrance, we were owed a masterpiece of confession.

“I had to do something with Francine,” Proxy began in a defeated voice. “She was getting to be more than I could handle. Didn’t have any direction in life and about to turn into man bait. What’s a mother to do, that stupid old saying.” With an effort, she met Pop’s steely gaze. “Then I stumbled across that newspaper piece. You seemed to have everything going for you, just the right material for a father. ~~Still looking stricken,~~ Having a kid sounded like it suited you, Tom, like it never did me.” She glanced at me, and our eyes held for a long moment. “And Rusty for a brother, who’d maybe take her mind off herself for a change, that fit right in, too. I figured the two of you would be good for her.”

“Besides a famous saloon she just might inherit,” Pop spoke in his same unrelenting tone, “if the two of you played your cards right.”

Her expression turned strangely wistful. “That didn’t hurt, either.”

“I bet it didn’t. It might even have been the main point.”

Proxy had nothing to say to that, her silence the deepest confession of all. All these years later, she was still under the spell of the Blue Eagle. A storied saloon, an institution of its kind that bestowed reputation and a good living on its possessor—no wonder it was such a tempting memory. I could almost sympathize.

Pop ~~only~~ <sup>simply</sup> looked at her for what seemed an eternity, as Del and I stood silently by. Finally he flicked a finger against the bottle of hair dye. “Just for the record. Francine isn’t mine, is she.”

“Don’t I wish.” Proxy stirred from her slump against the bar. “She’s Darius’s, tooth and nail. Her hair’s even like the Duffs had, trying to be red.” The rest was spoken even more dolefully. “She takes after him in how damned spiky she is, too. That’s one reason I let his side of the family raise her. It

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**Comment [CE100]:** Ed/au: proprietor? ~~X~~

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turns out not to be the best decision I could've made, huh?"

The admission seemed to take a lot out of her. Blinking hard, she smiled, with the effort showing. I honestly felt her gaze coming before it ~~found me~~ <sup>returned to</sup>. This was what I had most feared, the moment when she would openly say something like, "That leaves Rusty. Our real kid. We better call it a draw about Francine and the joint and so on, and get ourselves together about raising this one right, now that we both know how, don't you think? A family's a family, even with a few interruptions." My imagination could hear it all before she actually said, "So, anyway, Tom. The ~~back-room~~ business we could do, up north? If Russ could see his way clear to let you out of whatever you promised?"

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Pop shook his head.

She sighed the way he sometimes did. "Then I guess there's nothing for me to hang around for."

I waited breathlessly.

"No," he said, "there isn't. I couldn't trust you as far as I could throw you, after this."

Proxy showed a flash of pain, remorse, regret, who knows what at those words, but shrugged like the veteran of life that she was. "That's the problem with being inventive. It's not always appreciated." Trying for her tough smile, she turned to Del, who had been listening as comprehensively as I had. "So, Prince Charming. Can I bum a lift back to the camp, see if I can catch a ride to the Falls from there?"

Comment [CE101]: Stet cap; referring to Great Falls?

Before he could respond, Pop slid a key along the bar to her. "Never mind. Take the Packard. For good. I have a hunch you're not gonna see that Cadillac again."

Hesitantly she reached for the car key and turned it over a time or two before pocketing it. She angled her head a certain way as she looked back along the bar to him. "Who knows, I may bring the old jitney back sometime."

"Don't hurry," he said with emphasis.

She shook her head regretfully. "You're one of a kind, Tom. Too bad we didn't take a little time for ourselves in those years at the Eagle and explore that some."

"Lots of things in life are too bad, Proxy," he said quietly. "Time to move on."

My mind a muddle of emotions, I watched her go, the small, sad smile as she gave the barroom one last sideways glance, and then just the back of her, the hair and figure that defied mere motherhood as she picked her way through the flood's leavings and out to the old car.

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Finding his voice, Del broke the spell she left behind. "Francine told me all of it. She said we'd never be able to stick together, with her habits and me as I am." Wincing, he went on: "She's either too honest or too much the opposite. It's beyond me. Whatever, that's that, as I've heard someone say before." His face ~~looked~~<sup>ing</sup> bleak but trying to get over it, ~~"Can I use the phone if it's working? The powers that be are going to be wondering if I still exist."~~<sup>he asked,</sup>

Comment [CE102]: Okay? Otherwise, it would sound as if his face were trying to get over it.

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"Help yourself. It'd be nice if somebody got something done around here that didn't draw blood." Pop signaled me with a motion of his head, and we excused ourselves to the back room.

Light-headed with the mercy of Proxy exiting from our life, I followed him into the strew of waterlogged items, still trying to catch up with all that had happened. Francine gone, leaving everyone a little scorched, more than a little amazed, definitely a standout memory. Even now I half expected her to materialize at the base of the stairs to the landing, black bow tie tied as nicely as the ribbon on a gift box, flashing a sassy grin and saying "Oh boy, some mess in here, ain't it." Whether or not it was her and her checkered conscience and a Cadillac heading west that was on his mind, too, Pop ~~was~~<sup>wore a</sup> pensive expression as he gazed around at the watery remains of the Medicine Lodge.

Comment [CE103]: Strew is a verb, not a noun; change to array, pile?

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Comment [CE104]: looked?

"Pop," I broke in on his mood, there was no help for it, "can I ask you something?"

"You know I've been pretty short of good answers lately," he said ruefully. "But fire away, I guess."

"Do you wish she'd been really your daughter?"

He hesitated, studying me as if making sure I could stand the honest answer. "Fifty-fifty." He teetered a hand. "She wasn't too bad a bartender, you know." Stooping, he rescued the Blue Eagle sign

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from a seaweed-like tangle of horse harness. "How about you? You gonna miss having a sister?"

I started to say no, then veered toward yes, and in the end I simply shook my head in a way that said I didn't know how to answer that.

"Francine had that effect," he grunted, standing the hard-used sign in its place against the wall and stepping back as if he had done a day's work.

This was taking an awful chance, but I had to know. "Are . . . are you going to miss *her*? Our mother, I mean?"

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"Who?" He looked over his shoulder at me with a puzzled squint.

"Proxy. She's my mother, too, isn't she."

He went still as death. "How'd you come up with that?"

"From that funny way she was always looking at me like she owned me." It poured out of me. "And you were in Medicine Hat together back when, from what she said. And you called her a jones, and that's what you always said my mother was, and you gave in to her both times, you said, and so the second time must have been me, like the first time was supposed to have been Francine, and—"

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His expression worsened as I kept on and on. I hoped he wasn't having a heart attack. Finally he got me stopped. "Rusty, we need to talk this out. Come on up."

We climbed to the desk on the landing and sat facing each other, the vent soundless, as if listening to us.

He worked his jaw a time or two, the wretched look still on his face. "Cripes, where do I start?" He drew a ragged breath and the words came haltingly.

"I can see where you thought Proxy and me had it bad for each other. Particularly me for her—she's the kind that gets under a guy's skin, in more ways than one." Tense as I had ever been, I watched him give a little shake of his head, as if clearing it. "But she and I missed our chance way back there, when she fell for Darius. That's what that fling in the Packard was about, as much as anything. Kind of

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a consolation prize for both of us, if you see what I mean.”

Maybe I was beginning to. Yet I wasn't at all prepared for his next words.

“Your mother, your *real* mother, passed away. Earlier this summer. I didn't have the heart to tell you. She'd been ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ taken care of, the funeral and all, by the time the landlady figured out how to let me know. The phone call came, and you were flying high about how you're gonna be an actor and so on, and I just couldn't do it to you then. And things kept coming up, where the time never seemed right to tell you.” Hunched forward with his arms on his knees and his hands clasped, he looked at me as if from far away, although our knees were practically touching. “Kiddo, it was real hard to know what to do, as you can see.”

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I could barely hear myself ask, “What did she die of?”

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He didn't answer that for the longest time. Then said with resignation, “That's the rest of the story. She drank herself to death, finally.”

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“Where . . . where was she?”

“Canada.” He nodded. “Medicine Hat. I can see how it threw you when Proxy brought that up, but she was only ever there with me a time or two on those booze runs from the Eagle. Nothing ever happened between us, she was just along for the ride.” His eyes changed. “Different situation with your mother. See, she was a chambermaid in the railroad hotel up there after we . . .” His voice faltered.

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“Split the blanket,” I helped.

“Right. Jonelle, that was her name, Jonelle Jones, her folks' idea of something cute, I guess,” he recited this with care, “~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ Jonesie, she liked to be called—” I could tell he had to drag the next out of himself. “She wasn't cut out to have a kid. I was scared to death she'd drop you on your head or something. One day when you were only about a month old I came back to the house from the joint for something, and there was a hell of a smell in the place. I could hear you upstairs whimpering—you were good, you didn't squall much, but when you were hungry, you would kind of whimper like a

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desk—"until it happened again."

It was dizzying, the back room now as deep in drama as when this one-of-a-kind father held me over the rim of the Grand Canyon to spit a mile. He saw me staring toward the tarp that had drifted into the corner, ~~under~~ <sup>beneath</sup> the surviving saddles.

"Rusty, listen. I've never stole. Got that?"

A moment of hesitation that was its own explanation.

"It's kind of a fine line, maybe," he started in slowly, "handling things that don't come with a bill of sale, but every pawnshop in the world has to deal like that. If a foreman on a big road job or an oil rig showed up late at night and said he had some surplus stuff he'd like to trade in, I didn't figure it was up to me to ask any too many questions. Maybe the stuff had walked off the job, maybe it hadn't."

This seemed the hardest part yet for him. He started to say something more, halted, then turned up his hands as if letting the words free.

"Kiddo, I'm no saint on the wall. That's been my history, I guess you'd have to say. What I did at Fort Peck, throwing the Eagle open for the taxi dancing and what Proxy got up to, it meant I could afford to come to this town and buy this joint. Anything I did here, it let me afford you." He looked squarely at me, anxiety etched deep in his face. "Okay?"

You got to play the hand you been dealt. He always had, and if I was going be the son he deserved, I could do nothing less. To this day I have not regretted saying, "Okay, Pop, if that's the how of it," which seemed to be all that needed to be said.

His relief was brief, as was mine. "Can I come in?" Zoe called from the back doorway, coming in. "Whoo, this is some mess."

"That's for sure, princess," Pop greeted her, tiredly passing a hand over his face, "How is it at the café?" I tensed for the next turn of fortune in this epic day.

Dodging her way through the clutter on the floor, she shrugged elaborately but couldn't hold in the

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Comment [CE105]: Okay to transpose? 

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news. "My mom says she's seen worse in Butte. She has my dad already trying to cook hamburgers."

Her big grin faded as she trotted up the stairs and got a close look at us. "What happened? Where is everybody?"

"Mother and daughter are no longer with us," Pop said levelly. "Rusty can tell you the whole tale."

Zoe edged along the railing of the landing, sensing trouble. "When will you get the saloon open?"

Pop did not say anything for a moment, then sighed. "Princess, I won't. I can't hack it." He flung out a hand toward the barroom. "The joint would need new booths, stools, ~~an~~ ice machine," he went on down the list. "New bartender, for that matter." He was speaking as if to Zoe; I knew this was his way of softening the blow for me, but I still felt the words hit my heart. "I'm gonna have to sell the joint for salvage," he finished. He looked over at me apologetically, which hurt worse yet. "I don't see any choice, kiddo."

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"Ah, Tom?"

All three of us jumped at the sound of Del's voice calling through the vent. We were not used to being listened to from the barroom. "If you're through, can I duck around for a minute and discuss something with you?"

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"Sure, come on back," Pop spoke up. "~~We'll~~ compare war wounds. You and me, Delano. We sure know how to pick women, don't we."

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"Maybe it's not an exact science, Tom."

In no time Del joined us in the back room, halting at the bottom of the stairs, as if too bashful to come up. The bleak expression was gone, replaced by something mixed. He shuffled a little, as if looking for where to start, then began with it.

"That was quite some phone call. The powers that be loved the sheep camp sound portrait." He looked embarrassed, happily so. "They played it for Alan Lomax and he called it a phenomenal piece of Americana. He said Canada Dan's voice was the most original he'd heard since Leadbelly's."

Putting his hands in his pockets and lifting his shoulders, Del swayed a little as he **said the next**.

**Comment [CE106]:** Ed/au: spoke the next words?

“They want me to stay on and do as many Two Medicine sound portraits as I can for as long as it takes. Ranchers, roughnecks, hay\_hands, game wardens, forest rangers, any field of work I can think of—maybe even a bartender,” he said hopefully. “That’s besides the Missing Voices, of course. With everything involved, I figure it might take me all fall and maybe the winter, and that set me to thinking.” He gazed up with that bright-eyed expression from the first time he had set foot into the Medicine Lodge. “Since I’m going to be here anyway, Tom, if you could stand some help—in the saloon, I mean—behind the bar, I mean—well, here I am.”

Zoe and I were as still as statues, a moment that stays with me a half century later. We watched my father’s face change. Slowly he asked, “You mean, if I could pound enough bartending into Francine’s head to get by, I might be able to do the same on you?”

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“That’s more or less what I was thinking.”

“Bartending isn’t tea and crumpets, Delano.”

“Probably not.”

“It’s long hours and short rest.”

“So is oral history, actually.”

“The pay’s not much, you know.”

Del grinned. “Then I’ll have to count on the rewards being great, won’t I.”

**Furrowed** with thought, Pop reached in his shirt pocket for a cigarette and pulled out an empty pack. “Cripe\$”—he crumpled it and tossed it into the rest of the trash in the back room—“the joint needed cleaning out anyhow.” Squinting at the redheaded figure standing on one foot and then the other down there at the bottom of the steps, he came to life, and Zoe and I with him. “Okay, it’s a deal,” he said gruffly, rising to his full height and smoothing his pompadour to blend the white with the black. “Let’s take that front door off its hinges and get our aprons on, Delano. Rule number one, you can’t do

**Comment [CE107]:** Brows furrowed with thought?

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business if the joint isn't open."

It is all these years later, long after my father in great old age joined generations of the Medicine Lodge's customers in the marble farm on the knoll overlooking Gros Ventre—"That's another story," as he would have said—that the chance of a lifetime has come to me. What a set of chapters our lives have been, imbued with Pop's historic one, since we have all gone on from that phenomenal year of 1960. Delano Robertson to become the latter-day Alan Lomax, the now gray crew-cut eminence of sound portraits and *lingua americana*, presiding at the Library of Congress Archive of Oral History. Francine to knock around San Francisco in ways that probably should not bear inspection, until she found her niche as stage manager at the Fillmore West and grew to be a mother figure to bands of tie-dyed musicians and their raucous successors ever since. Proxy to disappear into her own style of business one more time, leaving us with those unbelievable tales of hers and the remarkable coincidence that when the filming of *The Misfits* was finally done, early in it Thelma Ritter yanks the lever of a slot machine she and Marilyn Monroe happen to be passing in a Reno casino with the explanation, "That machine loves me."

~~Comment [CE108]: early on?~~ No

And Zoe and I? I suppose ours has been a combination of the stories of lovers since time immemorial, of unrequited longing—the Gros Ventre school years—and of separation—college plus my military service—and of reuniting, falling for each other all over again when Cloyce Reinking saw fit to invite us both home, unbeknownst to each other, to her New Year's party after I came back in one piece from Vietnam. No sooner were we married than our luck held and our acting careers found their arc, in repertory theaters across much of the country ever since.

We have gone from being those young snips Algernon and Cecily in summer stock, to performing our goodly share of Shakespeare together, to gray-headed roles such as George and Martha butchering each other's nerves in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Now, though, there is one play that is going to be

mine alone. Zoe simply tickled me in the ribs and said, "Go for it, kiddo." I successfully auditioned for the much-anticipated Chicago revival of *The Iceman Cometh*. ~~And in the time it has taken me to tell~~ this, it is now opening night. Famously, Eugene O'Neill gave the lead actor, Hickey, one of the most sought-after roles ever written: bravura speeches, mocking the pipe dreams of the other customers in a saloon. I have the credits to play Hickey, a cinch and a stretch, both. But when tryouts came, I chose something else. The actor woven into everything that happens onstage, the bartender, Rocky. He pours the drinks for the lost dreamers, eternally swabbing the bar while listening to their stories, ever listening, and, yes, in the end has his own tale. It is my chance to give the performance of a lifetime. After all, I know the character by heart.

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