

older than bunions and ought to be tossed onto the retirement heap.

But didn't something like his perseverance on those Duffs, that truck, the river, go to show that he--

He moved wrong on the hip, and gasped with pain. ~~Christ~~^{God}, how could his own body jab him so? He considered buzzing for the nurse, ask her to dig out a pain pill from the bottle in his top dresser drawer. But he detested pills, about as much as he despised asking for help.

Slowly he caught his breath and waited out the misery in his hip, taking a look around his room for the how manyeth time. This place. Not much to recommend it, life in here, but he was doing what he could with it. Meals, which everybody else in here tried to make a big deal, he merely went through with because he had to. Ate alone whenever he could, and purely silent if somebody ended up having to share a table with him. And ~~just~~^{only} one good television night in the week, when he could watch America's Most Wanted, with the sound off. Give himself a chance to study the wanted-poster faces, and try to guess ahead in the crime re-enactments the actors did.

Beyond those few things, getting by in here was a matter of maintaining

his ornerness the way he did. By now he had a full theory of it: a philosophy of why to be difficult, if anybody ever took the trouble to ask him. All right, there were those who'd say he did not even need to work at being mean, it came as natural to him as a morning piss. But that radically underestimated the ~~exertion~~^{effort} he was making, if they only knew. Huh uh, this was an entire new deal, the extent to which he made himself stay furious against the walled-in world. ~~What the hell,~~
~~everything~~^{pecker} ~~all~~ else had shriveled up; his ~~pecker~~ no longer worked, his hip gave him constant torment, he sat here at the mercy of white uniforms twenty-four hours a day. (Yet people thought he was in a problem mood because he was lonely; the dumb bastards, they didn't even know he ~~had~~^{always} the Duffs.) So this was what he had arrived at, careful and constant exercise at staying stubborn. Crabby, contrary, owly, behaving like a mean little bastard: whatever term you care to call it by, he would tell you that the capacity for being ornery was the one power left to a person in old age.

Finally Carl Kinnick checked the calendar again, and this circled day. September 22nd again. That and the fancily printed 1991. ~~Huh.~~^{Huh.} The century had reached the point where it read the same forwards or backwards.

He wouldn't be that way himself for another eight years yet, would he,
at 99. There had been a spell of years when he hated aging, could not
figure out why people shouldn't ^{just} conk out at some given point, like car
batteries ~~always~~ do the month after their warranty is up. During that
time he half-wished that he had not corrected his patrol car's veer toward
the ditch that Watergate election night. But ending up as blood, gristle,
and windshield shards didn't appeal, now that he could study back on
that alternative. No, Carl Kimnick had got over wanting death's quick
cure of everything. Traveling with the century wasn't easy, but so what.

Part Five

PLUGGING THE RIVER

1936-1937

It was the middle of February and the wind had been shoving at the north side of the house all of 1936 so far. This morning, the stillness woke Meg up. She burrowed out from under the six blankets heaped over her and Hugh, just far enough to raise her head and listen into the crystalline silence. The cold of the air pinched inside her nose.

"Hugh!" She turtled her head back under the load of covers and desperately nestled herself spoon-fashion against the length of him in his longhandle underwear. "Hugh-it's-freezing!"

Groggily he rumbled: "Margaret, it'd be news if it wasn't. We've had freezing weather since around October, for God's sake."

"I mean, in here! The fire's gone out!"

Hugh absorbed this. Then said in the tone of a man wronged:

"Goddamn that soft coal."

He lurched from under the mound of bedding toward the stove and could tell at once this was not merely the feel of a fireless house, this was deep cold. He rattled open the firebox of the stove and swore at the dead ash of the coal he had banked the fire with at bedtime. Crumpling yesterday's entire Glasgow Courier, he stuffed it in the stove, grabbed up a double handful of kindling and chucked that on top of the paper, and, shivering hard now, made himself position dry sticks of wood atop it all so the flame would draw. He struck a match and lit the paper and hovered miserably until the kindling at last caught fire, too. Then he lunged back to bed. Meg rewarded him with a clasp of warm arms. At that moment, the thermometer outside the Fort Peck Administration Building read 61 degrees below zero.

—————
Bruce was goddamned if he was going to walk anywhere in this kind

of weather. Before getting the stove going, he dumped the cold ashes in an empty lardpail, then used the kerosene can to sop them. In his cap and mackinaw, he ran out to the car, knelt in the snow, shoved the pail under the oilpan, leaned back as far as he could and tossed in a match. When he was reasonably sure the flaming kerosene was settling down enough not to burn up the car, he jumped back in the house to wait for the crankcase oil to thaw enough so he could start the engine and drive down to the winter harbor.

#

Owen was goddamned if he was going to fool around with a car in this kind of weather. He put on dress socks, then work socks, then wool socks; piled on two pair of pants over long underwear, and a flannel shirt over his work one. He molded some newspaper into his overshoes for insulation, put them on, wrestled into the buffalo hunter coat he'd bought for just this eventuality, clapped his cap on with the earflaps down, bandannaed a scarf across his nose and mouth, stuck one of his office oxfords in each side pocket, pulled on thick mittens and walked to work at the winter harbor.

#

"'19, that was another cold bastard of a winter," Tom Harry reflected. Proxy had not been in the sin business long enough to have

other big winters for comparison, so it seemed to be up to him to forecast the economic climate accompanying such cold. "On the ~~one~~ hand, this kind of weather, you'd think guys wouldn't have anything better to do than drink and diddle," he set out. "Hell, people even manage to do it up north in igloos, after all." He paused, then asked ~~Proxy~~ ^{with} in a rare note of uncertainty: "Don't they?"

"How the frig do I know? This place"--Proxy indicated the frosted-over front windows of the empty Blue Eagle--"is the only igloo I've been in."

"I about went bust, though, there in '19," Tom Harry recounted. "Guys holed up, wouldn't come downtown just because it was a little cold. A lot like now, Shannon." He still called her that, even though she regularly pointed out that she had a married name now.

"Things are tough all over, Tom," she gave him with her mildest mocking smile. "Even the birds are walking."

"Shannon, what would you think about a buddy night at your end of things, maybe once a week--What're you looking at me like that for? The moviehouse does it every so often, has one guy pay and lets his buddy in free. Builds up the trade."

"Speaking for myself, I'll go take up choirwork before I ever let two guys have a poke for the price of one."

"Okay, okay, just an idea, all it was. Jesus Christ, though, ~~Shannon~~ you're getting awfully particular since you had your knot tied."

He gave her a sidelong look. "How is married life anyway?"

"Not half bad."

"Holy state of madderemoany." He shook his head. "I could never see it, myself."

"That's sure frigging astonishing to find out," ~~Tom~~ ^{the} ~~Tom~~."

"Sarcasm never got anybody past St. Peter," ~~Shannon~~ ^J Now come on, ~~goddammit~~, give me a hand with the thinking here."

"How would hot toddies go?"

"They wouldn't. The only time a Montana ⁿ/~~x~~ will sip a toddy is when he's halfway to pneumonia."

"Rum, then?" Proxy began to take on a faraway look. "Did I ever tell you about my uncle who raised St. Bernard dogs and the time there was this coyote in heat and--"

"No, you didn't and you're not going to. This is a goddamned business

meeting, Shannon. Besides, where the hell would I get rum? Half the time I can't even get the Great Falls beer trucks to come up here, the way the roads've been." He shook his head. "You call that thinking?"

STET

"O-kay, ~~Tom~~" Proxy intoned, "you show me what real thinking is."

Tom Harry passed a hand over his face, turned around, dusted off his cash register, turned around toward Proxy again, and studied off into empty barroom and dance floor.

~~the frost-tinted emptiness of the Blue Eagle.~~ Finally he said:

"I don't think it looks good, until spring."

"So should we close up shop?" ~~Proxy inquired.~~

"Hell, no." He looked as if she had insulted him down to his shorts.

"What kind of a way is that to run a saloon?"

#

DROP CAP

Back at the onset of winter, in the courthouse at Glasgow Proxy had needed to think madly to recall "Susannah" as the given name she'd furnished Darius and then she had to give him a dig with her elbow when he started to fill in "Renfrewshire" as county of residence instead of "Valley," but they managed to do the deed, nuptially.

"What now?" she asked him a little nervously when the Justice of the Peace was through with them. "Give each other a bath in a washtub of champagne?"

He looked ~~at her as though~~ surprised. "We get the family over with, of course. Then we settle in like old dozing spaniels." He pulled her to him and there on the Justice of the Peace's front porch gave her a kiss that she felt to her ankles. "Don't you know thing one about married life, woman?"

But the jitters caught up with Darius as soon as groom and bride began making the rounds ~~of the Duffs~~. Inches inside the doorway at Owen and Charlene's, an exceedingly thin grin plastered on him, ~~Darius~~ ^{he} introduced Proxy. "I've gone and got you an aunt. Please may I present Proxy, ah, Duff, she would be now, wouldn't she."

"Uh huh," issued out of Owen as he gave that night's first blink of recognition. Jesus, that one. ~~Perfectly vivid in memory was All the male Duffs, with the prominent exception of Darius, had been in the Blue Eagle the evening Proxy flattened the redheaded taxi-dancer.~~ "Well. Congratulations. Come in. Uh, sit down."

"Yes, do," said Charlene, all interested. Here you go, Owen. You wanted Fort Peck, here's a case of it in the family for you. She looked Darius in the eye and then Floozy, no, Proxy it was, wasn't it. "You've

got to get over being bashful newlyweds sometime."

"No, no, we're not staying," Darius interjected. "We merely called by to enlighten you."

Proxy studied Charlene. "I've seen you."

The altitude of Charlene's eyebrows said it was mutual. "I operate the A-1," she responded. She studied Proxy's bottle-blond hair. "If you're ever in need."

"Anything off for family members?"

"Proxy, love," said Darius, "we've to--"

"Sit down," said Owen again, "take a load off, why don't--"

"I wouldn't think discounts are a good idea," Charlene said cheerily, "in any business."

Proxy laughed, and her smile began to skew treacherously. "Dancing the dimes out of joes doesn't leave much room for bargaining, you're right, but--"

"Really, we've to be going," Darius hastily stepped in. "Calling in on Bruce and ^{Kate}~~Rhonda~~ next," he explained as if it were a continental journey. Capturing Proxy by an elbow, he steered for the door.

"Hey, wait."

Darius and Proxy turned around at something in ^{Owen's} ~~that~~ blurt.

What the hell do I know about a combination like this, or you
either, Charlene, humm? A bareheaded decision about how we act, that's
all that's up to us. Darius and a wifey who could kick the giblets out
of Joe Louis, that's his problem.

"How about if we come along?" Owen said, Charlene beside him
 nodding keen agreement. "Make it more of a family shindig, that way."

By the time Bruce and ^{Kate} ~~Rhonda~~ and the baby snowballed into the
 procession and the whole bunch of them reached Neil and Rosellen's, they
 were too many for the Packard that Proxy had borrowed from Tom Harry,
 but Neil and Bruce charged out into the night to rig up the truck so
 they could all ride in that. They crowded and kidded, and their every
 sound carried on the cold night air to Wheeler neighborhoods half a mile
 away. It having been unanimously voiced that brides and mothers with
 small children rated the cab of the truck, Proxy scooched in next to
 Neil then ^{Kate} ~~Rhonda~~ next to her with Jackie in a bundle. Jee Zuz! A
papoose, too, even. Proxy always figured she had her work cut out

for her in trying to be sociable with women who ^{weren't} ~~didn't~~ happen to be ~~the~~ in ~~her~~ same trade; but at least the Charlene one could dish it out, and the other two didn't seem any slouches either. The men ^{she} had ~~only~~ noticed separately around town before, but seeing them in one bunch tonight made her realize they were all Darius's basic Duff frame of rake handles and door knobs. And if Darius was a fair sample, they had the stamina of wolfhounds. [#] Now banging broke out on the roof of the truck cab, along with urgings to Neil to tromp on the gas and at least give the frost a run for its money. Charlene and Rosellen and Darius and Owen and Bruce, in caps, coats and blankets close to mummification, stood up behind the cab and held onto the boxboards, giddy with the purified air of the winter night and the colder glitter of starshine overhead. Every one of them knew that in chasing off on this makeshift shivaree they were showing about as much sense as a pan of gooseberries, but was it their fault if nonsense was suddenly contagious?

They piled out at Meg and Hugh's house, calling mock warnings ahead that they had lovebirds out here.

Hugh took the announcement of Darius and Proxy with a prudent if

not successfully deadpan expression, Meg took it like a pin under the skin.

What was to be done, though, with the entire family grinning in the doorway?

"Come--come in. Sit yourselves. ^{Kate}~~Phonda~~, Jackie can be tucked in our bed. Hugh, take their coats while I--" The production of coffee began. Hugh insisted they all move on in to the Blue Room. Gamely confronting the blueprint decor, Proxy declared it real interesting, it somehow reminded her of a place she once worked in that had mirrors everywh-- Darius asked if the coffee was ready yet. Speaking of ready, Hugh tossed back at him, Darius had taken a scandalous length of time to gird himself up for matrimony, had he not? Sounding as valiant as he could, Darius maintained that he had been overnight converted by the example of the other husbands in this room attaining such magnificent mates. Tell us, Jealous! one of the men chimed above the general acclamation, he thought it might have been Owen. Just then Rosellen, clued in by swift whispers from Charlene on the way over in the truck, wanted to know from Proxy how she ever got into taxi-dancing. Oh, Proxy generalized, from pretty early in life she had been on her own. On her back is more like it, Charlene thought and smothered a giggle.

Owen, his arm around her, gave her a complicit hug; for his part, he was looking ahead with fascination to the mixed tints of Red and peroxide. Neil was pondering the avarice of love, how it was capable of snatching the socks off anybody at any time. Bruce for once was tongue-tied; to him Darius was old as the hills, but here he was, fixed up with the kind of woman who could do it to a guy until his eyes popped. ~~Kate~~ ~~Phonda~~ meanwhile was wondering what the various ways were that Darius and Proxy reached mad pash, as much practice as they'd probably both had; Bruce in bed pretty much had one gear--true, it was high gear--and so a person could not entirely help wondering, could she, how others went about matters. She thought to herself, I wonder if Rosellen knows what I'm thinking...

"And here I thought you were a confirmed bachelor," Meg said in lowest tone to Darius when he happened to drift over to her while the others were carrying on.

"I thought that too, Meg. We were both off."

Proxy was making sure to watch, with quick little angled glances, as Darius and Meg traded something else ~~back and forth~~ too low to hear, and then Darius conspicuously rejoined the general ruckus. So that's where that stood; behind bottled brother Hugh's back. Darius, you're

quite the family man. But you didn't get very far with her, did you,
or you wouldn't have thrown in with me. Serves you right; that drypuss
sis-in-law there looks to me like a lost cause from the first.

Hugh was watching his brother with something like vexed admiration.

Darius had always been the kind who'd send one present to cover three boys and could get away with it; the same way that steam engine toy sailed in from the Clydeside, here courtesy of Darius Devilment Duff was the latest plaything from the Blue Eagle, tossed in the family face. Owen, there with your instruction-manual look on you: it runs on peroxide,
doesn't it, this one. Quite the device, really. What's that ^{wife} joke---
"You screw it on the bed and it makes mince of you," eh, Darius? Of
course it may depend on how easy you are to mince.

For once Darius was hoping Hugh could see under the surface of him. As of today, Hugh, the old question is over. We are quits, in the matter
of Meg. I cede and concede. When I uttered "I take thee, Proxy," we
each gained a wife. Man, will you not credit that?

"Least we can do is give her a chance," Bruce said after they were home.

"She looks like she knows what to do with a chance when she gets one," ~~Rhonda~~ ^{Kate} said.

"Huh!" was all Neil said, ~~when home.~~ ^{afterward}

"I guess!" said Rosellen.

"That look on your mother! I thought she was going to give up the ghost, right there!" Charlene said the instant they were home. She yawned and added: "I don't know, I kind of got a kick out of Mrs. Darius Duff."

Owen, busy mulling everything ~~over~~, said nothing.

DROP CAP

February's glacier of cold air slid down from the north

until it covered Montana from corner to corner, then stood there
for two solid weeks.

Her fingers waiting at attention on the keys, Rosellen read that over. Owen had given her a funny look when she poked her head into his cubbyhole and asked how a glacier ~~acted~~ ^{behaved}. But he reeled off enough of an answer that she could give the next part a whirl:

Temperature readings were its cutting edges, red stubs of
mercury in the bottoms of thermometers across six hundred miles,

saying--

Pushing with her toes, she scooted to the window in her typing chair, its rollers raucous in the noontime-empty office, peeked out at the kingsize Ad Building thermometer, then trundled speedily back.

--repetitiously 35 degrees below zero at noon, 38 degrees below zero at dusk, 45 degrees below zero in the night.

With a slight frown she looked that over, yanked open her desk drawer and thumbed through the used edition of Say It with Synonyms that Neil had given her for Christmas. Fingers at the ready again, concentrated on the keys, then kersplinky, taking out repetitiously with an overstretch of xxxxxxxxxxxx and tapping above it the substitute monotonously.

People tottered with the cold when they had to be out in it.

Herself, to name one. Merely to come to work, a person had to load on so many clothes she felt like she was traveling in a closet.

Fort Peck's around-the-clock moviehouse gained new patrons,

workmen bundled with everything they could get on, clumping in

to stand behind the back row until they thawed out enough to trudge

off on their errands again.

Neil. Shivering in, for each day's hypnotic five or ten minutes of gray-and-white newsreel. (What's this Hitler? How does a place like Spain get by with everybody fighting everybody?)

(ext)

A diesel boredom--

She backspaced and put the x key back to work.

(ext)

A diesel monotony broke the silence of the frigid spell and

simultaneously made Fort Peck go even more groggy--the engines

of the bulldozers were never shut down in weather this cold, merely

throttled onto idling all night long.

~~Kate~~
~~Rhonda~~

swore that the most effective lullaby on both Bruce and

the baby was a Caterpillar D-⁸~~6~~.

(ext)

Mealtimes at the cookhouse, the air went stale with cigarette

smoke and the accumulated pack of not recently bathed bodies--

Meg swore she was going to don Bruce's diving suit for her job, if winter and odor didn't let up soon.

(ext)

--but then the instant you stepped outside, the air's keenness

would all but take the lungs out of you.

As if reminded, Rosellen stilled the machine gun chatter of her

typing, threw her shoulders back and took a seismic breath. Here it was, keys and brainstorm going together at last. If Owen sat in there sopping up everything about the dam and glaciers and whatever else came his way, if Proxy was an obvious whiz at the, hnn, tricks of her trade, if Darius knew how the Queen Mary was put together, if Neil recognized every rattle in the truck, she was just as much on top of her vocation today. Drunk on writing, she couldn't believe the clock telling her that lunch hour was nearly over and she was about to have to go back to manufacturing paychecks. ~~But then~~ she hit the ~~typewriter's~~ carriage return with ecstatic force, there were enough minutes left if she kept slamming away at the words on the paper.

(ext) | So, in the shacks of Wheeler, the shanties of Park Grove
and McCone City and New Deal, the sod huts of Free Deal, the
tidy but not overly warm houses of the Corps townsite--

Charlene, the poor abused thing, claimed you could get frostbite from the nailheads in their walls.

(ext) | --the houseboats along the wintered-over river--

Darius scraping a peekhole in the iced window of the houseboat

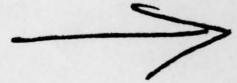
p. 470A follows →

so that he could look out at more ice.

--the parlors of the Happy Hollow brothels and the saloon precincts

of taxi-dancers--

Proxy. Woohooohoo. Talk about a family addition.



—in beaverboard kitchens and drafty living rooms, Fort Peck's
people fed fires and hunkered in to wait out the record winter
of 1936, the year they had all been looking for.

#

He rattled when he coughed, and he was coughing a lot.

Never one to let a little thing like a bad cold get him down, Hugh rode out the spasm, cleared his throat and blew his nose, sucked in as much breath as he could, and, glad that the weekend was nearly here, put his mittened hands to the wheelbarrow's handles again.

Here at the mouth of the tunnel, ~~where~~ the river one day would
 siphon into ^{along with} ~~this and~~ the three other huge boreholes through the base
 of the dam, outcroppings of ^{weathered} crumbly shale still were being shaved down
 with rocksaws ^{The men} ~~and those of them~~ who had been assigned onto the 'barrow
 crew for the winter merely had to trundle these sawcuttings ~~of the not~~
^{to} ~~heavy rock to~~ the conveyor which--

To his surprise, all ^{at once} ~~of a sudden~~ his wheelbarrow was on its side,
 and he was on his, too. His head, light as a balloon, seemed to be
 somewhere above his fallen body, watching, taking note of the confusion,
 the scream of the rocksaw suddenly shut down and the ^{rest} ~~other~~ men of the

crew shouting for help ~~for him~~. Next he went in and out of consciousness, and in the moments of light-headed clarity he felt quite offended.

Technically speaking, he was not even in the tunnel, where pneumonia bred.

Over the weekend, Hugh Duff grew old.

Owen saw it immediately in the white whiskers salted among his father's stubble, when he and Charlene stopped by the hospital again before work ~~that~~ ^{on} Monday morning; his father had always been an immaculate shaver. Recuperation, this was supposed to be, the oxygen tent having done its part, Hugh's lungs clearing and his breathing better, but the grizzled figure in the hospital sheets had a long way to go yet to reconstitute into anything like Hugh Duff.

"How the hell are you?" Owen let out before realizing it was not the best sickroom hello.

"Pretty well done in, if you want the truth." ~~Hugh even sounded~~

~~weary of himself.~~

"Yeah, well, it'll take a little time for you to mend," Owen said uneasily. He cut a quick ~~little~~ glance to Charlene, wishing she would pitch in; women were better at this convalescent kind of talk, weren't

they? When she simply kept ~~on~~ ~~sending his father~~ the automatic smile you ~~send~~ ~~give~~ someone you don't like but have to have sympathy for, Owen had to do the next part, too: "How long are they going to keep you here?"

"Don't know yet." Hugh went into a coughing fit that was hard to watch. Then his chest heaved a few times, and he was having to breathe with his mouth. "Until I can whistle opera, I suppose."

"We ought ^{to} at least get you a shave," Owen said in a bothered tone.

"Your mother says she'll tend to that," Hugh coughed out, then shifted ~~a little~~ in the hospital bed, twirling his finger to indicate he wanted it cranked up some. When Owen brought him up to a semi-sitting position the heaving lessened ⁵ ~~in the mechanical bed, he heaved less with the effort of taking in air~~ ~~he managed to~~ and finished what he had been saying: "It's her best chance to scrape me and see any real result." He brought a hand up to his face and paused it there, as if surprised at the seriousness of the bristles. He scratched his whiskery neck while he considered his visitors again. "How's the Charlene?" ~~Was as it was, Hugh's question to her penetrated.~~ ⁹

"I'm getting by, Hugh," Charlene produced. Dressed for business, hair done in exemplary fashion for her day's customers, she looked slick

"Where is Meg anyway? We figured sure she'd be--" as a racehorse. ~~"What, though, isn't Meg here with you? We thought she--"~~

"She went off to the cookhouse to smuggle me a real breakfast.

The food in here is a threat to one's health."

"Jaraala's grub is bound to help, yeah," Owen laughed ~~in relief.~~

"Anything else we can bring you? Name it."

STET

"Years off my life, ~~Owie~~, would be all. I swear to Christ, this

time yesterday I was your age." Hugh's voice was reedy, but reporting

to its pulpit. "I don't know whether it's me or--" he grimaced at the

hospital window to indicate outside, all of Fort Peck. "But I went

through winters on the place that would frost the tallywhacker off a

brass monkey--~~I'm~~ sorry about the language, Charlene--and never came

down with anything like this."

"Dad"--Owen was exasperated without quite knowing why--"this is the worst sonofabitch of a winter any of us have ever seen. If it's any consolation, that's what it took to get you down."

"One more record, eh, Ownie?"

"I have to run." Charlene's words were meant for Hugh, but she was looking toward Owen. "It's almost opening time. Don't do anything

in here I wouldn't do, Hugh."

Charlene had barely gone when Owen checked his watch. "I'm going to have to clear out of here pretty quick, too."

Weak though he was, Hugh jumped all over that. Owen didn't like being around sick people, did he. Well, Hugh didn't either, particularly when he was one of them. "Christ in his nighty, Owen, stay until your mother ~~gets back,~~ ~~shows up,~~ can't you at least?"

"Sure." Owen watched him in some alarm until ^{Hugh's} ~~his~~ breathing calmed down, then went over to the window. He was surprised at how hard it was to discern the dam from here. In fresh snow camouflage, the plateau of fill nearly blended with the bluffs of the valley, chalkings of outline against the greater gray of sky. Blots of gravel showed through on the dam in a few places, and the frozen crater lake that was the core pool could be picked out if you knew where it was, but the prairie's flat winter light didn't give ~~things~~ ⁹ much of a sense of scale. Owen turned away, moved restlessly around the hospital room, ~~then thought~~ ⁹ ~~of something to ask his~~ [→]

father, "You having plenty of company?"

"Everybody, yes. Except your uncle and esteemed aunt." Hugh

~~breathed a couple of times with his entire upper body.~~ "No, that's not

quite the case. They must have been here while I was asleep. Darius

left me some high-toned reading."

Braced for Marx, Engels, Sorel, or The Little Red Songbook, Owen
picked up the slim olive volume from the bedside stand. William Blake.

Poems and Illuminations.

"Tiger, tiger, burning bright," Hugh rasped, "isn't he the one?"

"Yeah, other stuff too," Owen answered slowly, holding open the pages
marked by a slip of paper. "This, ah, your place marked here?"

And did the Countenance Divine

Shine forth upon our clouded hills?

And was Jerusalem builded here

Among these dark Satanic mills?

Bring me my bow of burning gold!

Bring me my arrows of desire!

verse
ext.

cap
&
S.C.

Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!

Bring me my chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,

Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand,

Till we have built Jerusalem,

in England's green & pleasant Land.

Vase
ext.

#

#

"No, Darius must've left that in." Hugh seemed to go deep into thought. "Darius has never given me so much as a whit before. I must really be a goner."

"You're not any kind of a goner, damn it," Owen slapped the book shut, "you're going to be up and around and ornerier than ever in no time now. Then you're supposed to take it easy for a while, is all. Make you a deal, along that line. How'd you like a new job come spring? I'll get you on as a watchman. Give you a chance to build yourself back up and--"

"No."

That first word was more than audible, but Owen thought he heard wrong

on the rest of Hugh's answer. It had sounded as if his father wheezed out:

"I quite like poking traps."

—

Hugh, do you know there are times when this is the way I most love

you? Absent.

Meg attacked the chores the instant she got home from the hospital each evening, woodbox-coal scuttle-waterbucket, windowshades drawn down even though they waved discouragingly in the drafts around the window casings, a rag rug flung against the bottom of the breezy door for all the good that would do, too. Hugh's regular hand at the shack, she did miss. But not your main habit. The drift that starts in you, so that you begin to be not yourself even before you're off onto one of your jags and then dragging yourself home looking like death warmed over.

Absent entirely is preferable to that, Hugh, and although I hate to speak ill of the ill, I am relieved when this skimmed version of you in the hospital is out of my sight, too. The water in the kitchen stove reservoir was warm enough, barely, to wash herself up a bit before going to bed. I remember, in one of our fights about leaving the homestead, or perhaps it was English Creek or even Inverley, you told me I could

dampen spirits at a funeral. Maybe I am not much good at mending the
world. My father did think he was a tailor of souls--what can a reverend
think if not that?--but in the end he could not even fashion mine, a
stroppy young kissing fool named Hugh Duff did that for me. She undressed
 there in the kitchen by the stove and shimmied her flannel nightgown on
 as fast as she could, then raced for the bed. But Hugh, what I mean
about love for you in absentia is that the hard parts of us do not rub
together then. In memory or for that matter anticipation we cushion each
other, or at least I do you. Of course, under these covers--when there's
not such a mountain of them, anyway--we manage it, too. You tell me
I am sweet to the bone, here, and I in all honesty
can say the same for you. But elsewhere--otherwhere--the veers you make...
What is there about the Duff squad of manhood? You with a will to drink
the world dry, while Darius falls for a dyed mopsy at the drop of an
eyelash. "Don't be so high and mighty, Meggie," he said to me on their
shivaree night. That was uncalled for. I wish now, though, that I had
not told him back, "Better that than the other--low and insipid." You
see, Hugh, there have been times when Darius seems to fasten in where
you curve away from me, when Darius and I... That avenue was gone now.

Or was it. A man's term with that Proxy was normally a matter of minutes,
~~a lifetime of marriage.~~
~~not marital longevity.~~ So, Hugh, I hate your habit of risk. But I

perhaps grasp it better than you think... Meg, curled in the middle of

the bed, sank into the chilly sleep of the alone.

—

When the weather moderated--it had no other way to go--and the temperature at last was up around zero, the dam crews picked up at their usual schedules, except in special cases.

"We do what?" Bruce asked incredulously at the winter harbor.

"What the hell for?"

"You're putting us at what?" Darius asked at the same moment in the boatyard. "Whose bright notion is this?"

"What the dickens can I tell you?" the foreman answered, ^{so swaddled} ~~it~~ it could have been either Taine or Medwick--and gave a not-my-doing shrug. "You guys have been detailed off to this, until spring gets here. You're icemen now."

—

"Take a seat, Duff." First names did not come naturally to Major Santee.

Owen sat and watched the Major frown at his memorandum. He wouldn't

know a good idea if it came along and bit him in the butt, Owen was inwardly convinced but tried not to let it show. This was the Friday before ice became the new career of Darius and Bruce, and the idea had not yet made its way through the channels of the Corps. God only knew, Owen thought, how furrowed up the Major would be if the memo called this ice plan what it actually was, ^{the} ~~Murgatroyd~~ ^{process:} ~~factor.~~

It had come to Owen while he was passing the first morning of March by staring alternately at the white river and the mostly white calendar leaf, equally unyielding. Now a mere six weeks until dredging was supposed to start, and there lay the river under a lid of ice thicker than a railroad bed. In Owen's most pessimistic moments he figured this big winter's armor of ice would be off by about Labor Day, and in his optimistic ones he thought it might only take until the Fourth of July. In any case, an April 15 startup of dredging gave every indication of being a hell of a long way out of the picture. So, okay, Duff, if a guy named Murgatroyd, the archangel Murgatroyd, right this minute came along and asked what you most wanted done, it would have to be to melt that sonofabitching ice off the dredging areas, wouldn't it. Murg, my friend,

that would do nicely, get the damn stuff out of my way by the fifteenth day of Ap--

Owen sat up then. Huh uh. No. Christ no, melt didn't really matter. Just get the SOBing ice off, so the dredging material would have time to soften up and the dredges would have a clear channel to move in. The right kind of crew, of ice-cutters and haulers, could do that.

"You've already been to the Colonel, I suppose?" Major Santee said now, wafting the one-page memo up and down a little as if trying to guess its weight.

"Unofficially," Owen said carefully about having gone over the Major's head, and with even more care: "He's made it known the dredging schedule counts for quite a lot with him."

Santee passed his frown over Owen and on out to the Missouri. "There's a world of ice on that river. How do you expect to cut enough of it to make any difference?"

Owen did not smile, didn't even grin, but nonetheless his expression was that of someone fortified by all the aces in the deck.

"I've been talking some to Sangster about that. Seems to us, we ought to just use the buzzsaw ~~factor.~~ ^{process.}"

#

The contraption resembled a mammoth nasty insect. A long low chassis,

two wheels at the back beneath an engine out of a Fordson tractor, and at the front where the stinger would be, a three-foot diameter buzzsaw blade. Ungainly and makeshift, when the thing was started up it blared like a captive motorcycle and when the whirling sawblade met the ice there was a ceaseless ear-reaming whine, and as Sangster and Owen had guessed, it could cut ice like nobody's business.

Bruce, for one, was unimpressed. "I still don't savvy what good this is gonna do," he maintained, obviously reluctant to put his effort into either savvy[#]ing or ice-hauling.

Darius did see the principle of the job he and Bruce and several dozen others were about to be put to, clustered out here on the river like Dutchmen who'd forgotten their skates, but that did not make the task any less dismaying to him either. Wrestling blocks of ice from the stiffened river would provide dredging earlier than waiting for everything to thaw, that was evident. It was also going to be damnable cold heavy work.

"Aw, hell, Walt," Bruce now tried on Jepperson, their new foreman, "we probably can't even haul ice out as fast as the river'll make more."

"One way to find out," Walt Jepperson told him, telling them all.

They sawed the ice out in slabs as big as steamer trunks, then grappled a sling around one end of the slab, then signalled to the operator of a windlass which slid each iceblock up a long ramp onto the riverbank, where a stacking crew built a careful pile of them. You'd have thought ice was the latest in construction material.

"Duff, you be the rigging slinger," Jepperson had assigned to Bruce.

"Other Duff, you might as well help him out with that," he told Darius, perhaps moved by how miserable the older Scotchman ^{looked} while standing around between the transit of slabs.

The two of them took turns trudging back from the ramp with the sling and tow rope. Darius steadily tromped around in a circle to keep from freezing while waiting his turn with the rigging. As Bruce approached with the sling over his shoulder and the length of rope snaking behind him on the ice, Darius thought out loud:

"Have a guess as to what I'd rather be doing."

Bruce did not always fathom this uncle, but he figured he had a pretty good chance on this. "Warming your toes on Proxy's tummy."

Darius quit stomping and peered at Bruce. Then he downright giggled.

"Toes!" The rest of the day, every so often he would hoot: "Toes!"

—

The river found one last way to give the Fort Peck winterers a bad time.

Darius and Bruce had been watching the situation build, out in the main current downstream from their ice pond, and wondered. Owen had been eyeballing the middle of the river the past week and didn't even need to wonder, he knew too well what this was adding up to out there. Huge chunks of ice were mounting and mounting, a jagged barricade clogging the flow of the Missouri.

"Just what we always wanted, a dam out ahead of the dam," ran the sarcastic reaction around the Ad Building. Came the day when the Corps officers trooped up onto the bluff to have a look, their overshoes buckled firmly so that their pants bloused out like jodhpurs and their breath making an echelon of little clouds. The eight men of the civilian engineering staff formed a motley covey around them. A little off to one side stood the Colonel's silent, ever-present driver. As usual Owen took a ribbing about his buffalo coat, and as usual he was the only one of them complacently warm as they stood around in the snow.

Colonel Parmenter studied the ice jam with distaste and addressed

them compositely:

"We weren't thrown off schedule by the other ice jams, the other winters. What's the worst this one could do?"

An alarming number of the civvie engineers had versions to offer.

~~Nevins~~
~~Katcavage~~ from the tunnel project lost no time predicting some washout, he couldn't specify how much or how little along the diversion channel banks if the ice jam caused real flooding. Owen pounced in to point out the possibility of delay in the dredging startup, after they'd spent a month's worth of effort in clearing out ice to avoid precisely that. A couple of others had their dire say. Then Sangster, not wearing his glasses because the nosepieces hurt his nose in the cold, squinted and formulated:

"How about, it'll take out the truss bridge."

Fourteen trained minds simultaneously calculated what a sheer mess that would be. If the railroad truss bridge went, swept away by ice floes on the rampage, the dam construction would be stopped in its tracks for nobody knew how long, the diversion tunnels would be stopped, the spillway would be stopped. Everything they could think of would be stopped except

the instructional chalk in engineering classes which would be studying this fiasco for the next hundred years.

Everyone on the bluff knew what Colonel Parmenter was going to say before he finally puffed out an exasperated plume of breath and ordered:

"Blow the bugger."

~~#~~ —————
Bruce never after was sure how J.L. Hill roped him into the job of dynamiting the ice jam.

It seemed to happen in as purely simple fashion as J.L.'s neighborly stroll over to him there on the ice-cutting pond and borrowing him like a cup of sugar. "Kind of like to have somebody along who knows the river," Bruce was suddenly hearing out of J.L., "and ^{you've} ~~had~~ been on both the top and bottom of it."

"Yeah, but--"

"Danamite," as J.L. said it, "is best to handle when it's cold."

He looked at Bruce as if that should take care of all worries.

Stunned, Bruce tried surreptitiously to check J.L.'s mittened hands, see if he still had the trembling. Tunnel pneumonia had been only the half of it, that time last fall when J.L. was hospitalized; from what

Bruce had heard, something on the packing paper of dynamite boxes had given J.L. Hill a shaking affliction. "I thought you still weren't feeling any too good."

"I'm not. But if you think I'm going to pass up a crack at blasting something like this"--J.L. jerked his head in the general direction of the frozen river--"you've got another think coming."

"Yeah, well, it'd be up to Jepperson or not, whether he can spare me," Bruce stalled, ~~trying to think how best to bring up to the ice boss~~ ~~his indispensability.~~

"Jepperson says it's jake with him. Already transferred your pay record for tomorrow. You draw an extra thirty cents an hour, working with danamite."

"Thanks all to hell, J.L.," Bruce managed to express. "That'll make me feel a lot more prosperous in my coffin."

J.L. nodded as if in acknowledgment, still looking straight at Bruce. Lunch his way out of this one, why ~~doesn't~~ ~~don't~~ he. Aloud, J.L. said:

"We'll put the danamite to it in the morning."

—

The morning came without horizons, a milky sky fading down into the snowy bluffs above the valley of the Missouri. From the east bank of the river where J.L. and three other men from the powder gang and Bruce were grouped, the ice pack in mid-river was ghostly, slurred.

Since J.L. was not supposed to be around the packing paper, two of the others were prying open the wooden box which held sticks of dynamite. Bruce nervously watched back and forth between the dynamite box and where a man named Quincy ~~or Kingsley or something like that~~ was fondling blasting caps. A trudge of half a mile or more out across the corrugated river lay between them and the ice jam.

"We just...walk out there with this stuff?" Bruce asked.

"Walk kind of careful, is a good idea," J.L. answered without losing count of the coils of detonation wire he was shakily accumulating.

None of these detonationists, it turned out, had ever dealt with ice before, although they assured Bruce they had blown up most other known substances. ~~Kingston and Quentin or whoever~~ ^{Quincy} ~~he was~~ ^e had helped to blast out a log jam once. "Logs went flying pretty as anything," he reminisced. "It's just only a matter of placing the charge right."

"Yeah, but where's that"--Bruce nodded toward the jumbled geography of ice out in front of them--"in a deal like this?"

"You're the river guy," J.L. said, the ^{flint-gray}~~pale blue~~ eyes straight at Bruce again. "That's where you come in, showing us where the channel's the deepest and fastest and so on."

#

Smithereens, ran in Bruce's mind. What are those? Little smithers, but what's a smither? Nothing he hankered to learn about from first-hand experience, he was dead cer--he was certain of that much.

Steady, he told himself as he kept abreast of J.L. and the other three as they trudged across the ice with their explosive goods. The motorcycle didn't get him, he went on telling himself, the mud avalanche in the pump barge didn't get him, the diving didn't get him (yet crept into that last one), so why should one little excursion with dynamite get him?

Because! Because (a.) J.L. Hill trembles like an ash grove in a high wind, and (b.) there was that highly unfortunate pass Bruce made at Nan Hill and (b. 1.) Bruce didn't even know ^{this part} ~~it~~ but the neighbor across the alley, Tarpley, had figured it bore mentioning to J.L. that he'd

seen Bruce Duff slinking home from the Hills' house, and (c.) the competence of the other three here in the blast crew was a totally unknown quantity to Bruce except for ~~Whatchamacallin's, Quinn's or~~

~~Quincy's~~

~~King's~~ pleasure in causing log-size items to fly, and (d.) this was

not some piece of equipment that Bruce himself was in charge of, such as a motorcycle or a diving suit, this was the cast-iron winter river,

this was a wilderness of ice and a guessing ~~game~~ of dynamite.

Bruce wished he had not yet been born.

The cold river air, meanwhile, was damp and penetrating. Bruce felt it meet the sweat on his body, and resignedly figured pneumonia next onto his list of mortal hazards here.

"Somewhere around here, you think?"

J.L. was addressing him, he realized.

"Uh, let me study this out a little." Bruce sighted through the two halves of the dam to the dark steel webwork of the railroad bridge, trying to put together in his mind ~~his~~ the underwater hours and this vast ice lid, to ~~divine~~ ~~scipher~~ where the channel ran strongest.

"Back a ways toward shore, is where I'd do it," he at last suggested.

He took a chance and pointed at a pyramid-pile of ice chunks, a hundred yards in that direction. "About there, maybe."

The four dynamiters gazed back along their tracks in the snow, then at Bruce. One of them who had not said anything so far scowled and stated: "What we don't want is to have to come back out here a second time and try blow this."

"Yeah, that'd be tricky," J.L. agreed. "Quite a lot better not to be prancing around on ice you've already used danamite on."

Bruce felt all eight eyes on him. "You're downright sure," J.L. was asking, "that's the fastest part of the river?"

"Pretty sure. Now, downright sure, J.L., I don't just know how to be that sure when there's all this ice on top of--"

"What we wanted. Right, boys?" J.L. hefted his ~~back of fusss~~ ^{plunger box.}

"Advice from the horse's mouth."

The other three snickered mightily and fell in line like elves behind J.L. as he headed for the ice pyramid.

—————
The detonation preparations went fast, as though everyone wanted to get this over with.

While two of the men embedded the sticks of dynamite and J.L. began affixing the blasting caps, Bruce and the other man spliced wires from the caps into the firing wire and began unreeling it all the way to the plunger box. "Don't be letting that wire touch those terminals until I get there," J.L. warned over his shoulder, and Bruce definitely didn't.

When all was in readiness, the dynamite quartet plus Bruce gathered around the plunger box on the welcome solid ground of the riverbank. Spectators flocked up onto various high points. In the Ad Building contingent on the crest of the dam, Bruce could discern shaggy-coated Owen looking like the world's tallest leanest buffalo. At the end of another lineup of gawkers stood Neil, arms folded, probably with a grin on him like a Chessy cat; if people insisted on getting Neil and him mixed up, Bruce considered, conscription into the iceberg squad ^would have been a good time for it. Actually, though, Bruce was starting to feel better about this dynamite deal. Originally he'd thought of invoking the fact that he was freshly a father, although J.L. Hill and Fort Peck foremen in general didn't seem overly impressed, and he had almost gone to Owen to get him out of this, but goddamn it, if he was the government diver

he was the one who was supposed to know the course of the river, wasn't he. Now he nodded in synchronization with the other blasters when J.L. Hill asked, "Everybody happy with this so far?"

J.L. looked in every direction, twice, then shouted out the warning of blasting:

"Fire in the hole!"

As soon as that had echoed away, he pushed the plunger.

The explosion was a healthy boom, and a satisfying shower of ice hunks rained down in the middle of the river, and the ice pack massively shifted, grinding and groaning. Then jammed again.

"Goddamn/son-of-a-bitch/bastard!" ^{was} ~~were~~ heard in mixed chorus from the other three, but neither J.L. nor Bruce spoke. Until after a minute J.L. provided:

"A little bit off, on that one. I think I know where to set the next one by myself."

Bruce knew he could not let that be the case. "I'll go with,"

he said shortly.

—

Out they trudged again, J.L. Hill with his plunger box under an arm and a sack of ^blasting caps swinging from one quivery hand and coils of detonation wire in the other, Bruce two steps behind carrying the dynamite charge in both hands like a museum vase.

The icescape in front of them had been stirred around marginally by their first ~~dynamiting~~ try, but mainly it was still jumbled, still jammed, still massively more ice than the river seemed to know what to do with.

J.L. halted well short of where they had set the previous charge and said, "Let's think this out a little bit."

He put down his detonating equipment, Bruce gladly doing the same with the dynamite.

As J.L. walked off a little way to squint at the ice conformation ahead, Bruce trailed him but kept his mouth conspicuously shut as though giving J.L. more thinking space.

The two of them heard the ice groan, then a sound more ragged than that. They could not see any difference yet in the pile of floes ahead of them, but it sounded for all the world as if the heavy winter load

of the river was shifting.

"Whoa, a minute," Bruce heard out of J.L. "Maybe we aren't even going to have to give it another shot of dan--"

The ice cracked at their feet. Then crumbled, mushed up and fell away, beneath J.L.

He was in the water to his waist, arms flung out on the slushy edge of the unbroken ice where Bruce was backpedaling away. For the first time, J.L. Hill looked perturbed.

Aw, don't, river, was the full thought that came to Bruce and stayed with him. He hated having to, but he flopped down in the slush and wriggled his way on his belly to the ice edge where J.L. was clinging. He got his mittened hands under J.L.'s armpits and pulled for all he was worth.

J.L. was gripping into Bruce's coat at the shoulders, clenching so hard that the coat bunched onto the scruff of Bruce's neck and half over his head. "Let go...up...there!" Bruce got out in gasps, slush against his face and down the front of his neck. "Elbows...put your... elbows...to work...damn it...J.L...." J.L. hung on ^{to him,} his eyes oddly calm as they stayed locked on Bruce's from inches away; then he let go his

grip and began levering himself up onto the ice with his elbows ^{as Bruce tugged away.}

Upright on the ice and lurching for shore, J.L. soaked from the waist down, Bruce from the waist up, the mismatched halves of a freezing being were met by those who had been onlooking from shore and were bundled into Colonel Parmenter's staff car with the heater turned up full blast. After the pair of them were thawed and looked over at the hospital and declared not much the worse for wear but delivered home with orders to rest up, J.L. turned to Bruce, before Bruce climbed out of the ambulance to go in to ~~Rhonda~~ ^{Kate} and he to go in to Nan, and said: [#] "All right. We'll call this even."

—————

DROP CAP

They all thought spring couldn't come fast enough to suit them, but whatever it was about 1936, the melting season highballed in as overdone as winter had been. Toasty chinook winds billowed in all the way from Hawaii, it felt like, warm gales from the west that would pin your eyelids back.

Christ along the Yukon, though. Can this be right? If this keeps up...

Fort Peck's snow enthusiastically degenerated into Fort Peck's mud. Clods of clay like squashed bricks were churned ^{everywhere} up by the crawler tracks of the bulldozers. Tough damworkers watched their chance to sidle off alone and stand for a minute as if looking around for something, actually just to sniff the talcum smell of spring.

...and there's no ~~senofabitching~~ reason that I can see yet why it can't keep up...

Wheeler looked leprous, its usual state at the start of spring. With snow going off in patches, rubbish resurfaced from the previous autumn, usually squarely amid a backyard swamp of mud, and the thaw also revealed the gray remains of that slaggy soft coal which all winter long had

produced more ashes than heat.

...we're going to be moving fill as easy as passing the ~~butter~~ ~~gravy~~.

From startup on the fifteenth of April until only the first of May,

Owen's quartet of dredges moved nearly a million ^{more} cubic yards ~~of material~~

~~more~~ than in the ^{same} span of time that had been so cruel and fumbling the

year before. Week by week after that, he checked and rechecked his figures,

and unmistakably they kept jumping. The holy average of three million

yards of riverbottom muck to be dredged and piped up onto the dam every

month, hah. Owen could see ahead now--it would be August--when the

dredging pace would reach an exalted total of four million yards a month.

#

"Toston? Oh, my cousin lives there--Etta Drozner? I bet you must know her. I'll have to write to her that we met up, here of all places."

You just do that, old biddy, Charlene thought, and resisted the urge to frizz the back of the woman's head to a fare-thee-well. Here was one more reason why Charlene wanted out of Fort Peck and for that matter Montana, everybody knowing everybody else's business in the entire state. She had gone all through school with horsefaced Etta Drozner, you bet, and could have enjoyably enough passed the rest of her life without

ever thinking of her again. Now the word was on its way back to Toston that Charlene, Helen Tebbet's older girl, was hairdressing too.

Fiddlesticks. But what can you do, if somebody insists on being a fool. When she closed up the beauty shop at the end of the afternoon, she told herself she had better walk home the long way, give herself a spring airing. See if that would help the merry month of May at Fort Peck, anthill of the construction world, any.

That roundabout route drew her along the side of the neatcut Corps town which was nearest the river, the blufftop view there the same one of the ~~dam~~[#] site as Owen had first shown her, except that instead of Christmas white everything for miles now was the color of unsuccessful fudge.

As she always had to do with the dam project, which changed all the time as mammoth things were being built and things twice that size were being gouged out, Charlene scanned through the ^{scraped-brown} sprawl until the railroad ^{truss} bridge gave her her bearings. A long lattice box of steel which spanned the Missouri with nothing under it but two hundred feet of air and water,

Sangster's running jump across the river, Owen called it. Whether or not the ^{truss} ~~railroad~~ bridge was as miraculous as ~~Owen~~^{he} said, she could always read

the dark VVV of its girders from up here.

Owen's dredge fleet, she knew, lay out of sight upstream behind the west half of the dam, but she was proud of herself for managing to pick out, even at this distance, the dredges' constant input into the core pool; the piped waterfalls that unloaded the fill material in their steady gush. And right there near each of those cascades, the human specks that were the dredgeline maintenance crews.

What maintains love?

Every night any more, she and Owen threw the supper dishes at each other. No, they didn't. But they might as well, the battle of Fort Peck seemed determined to go on in all guises. Owen was flying so high as fillmaster this time around that he looked ready to crow with joy when he totted up the fill figures each night. That's fine, well and good, she had tried on him a time or two, then why wouldn't this be the best chance to clear out with everything you came here for? You whipped the dredging setup and the boost problem and the ice. They'll write you up as the engineer who got the kinks out of the Fort Peck project. Owen, why not take all that now as ammunition onto the next job? And regularly

back from him, the vocal equivalent of a volley of crockery. Huh uh,
we've got to see it through, Charlene. I wish to Christ you could get
that into your head. To build a dam you've got to build it all, there's
no halfway that's even worth talking about. And nothing is really whipped
here. We don't even have the river plugged yet, for crying out loud.

Crying out loud, mm, Ownie? Their situation could stand more of that, too. This was not the time of day to be thinking about sheet music, the bedtime variety, but what was she supposed to do when the thought kept at her? The Bozeman memories--for that matter, one from Glasgow--of the rumpus Owen and she used to make, the outcry of coming to each other in the bare skins of dark; then, as they lay spent, she would ever so slowly provide her hip and leg in a cat rub against his and he would respond to the luxury of that, or if not, then her hand, seeming to drift, touching there where he went hard; and then a second go. She couldn't really say it was an exact comparison, but she and Owen needed a second go at sorting out Fort Peck.

Somewhere down there in the dam confusion, rocksaw teeth started cutting into shale with a piercing howl, stopped, started up again,

stopped, started. The playful shriek only added to her theory that

they liked the commotion of Fort Peck, the excitement

when things went wrong, even the dangers of it, men did. While she

herself just could not see the attractions ~~of it~~ What she yearned for

was the day she and Owen would leave here, climb in the car and go. No,

wash the car first. She didn't want to take even Fort Peck's dust with

them.

But for now Charlene stayed, hands thrust into the pockets of her

frock, there on the bluff a long minute more and looked steadily at the
truss

~~railroad~~ bridge, the one item of the Fort Peck Dam she knew something sure

about.

#

itals

Across from Toston, the river wide between them and the adult world,

the girls stalked in the willows until they could peek upward to the

osprey nest in the big dead cottonwood tree. They did not have to wait

long before the fish hawk flew in, a trout in its talons to feed its

young. ^{The Tebbet sisters} ~~They~~ watched a ~~little~~ while and then Charlene hugged her arms

across her chest--her breasts had ~~just~~ begun to come and she monitored

them frequently that way--and said it was time to go home. Rosellen was

still only a slip of herself, pesky, curious about everything. When

they got back to the highway bridge from this osprey outing, they met

a cattle drive, cowboys from the Sixteenmile country in the mountains

back of Toston. Charlene hurried Rosellen and herself across the bridge

and over to a telephone pole they could stand half behind to watch

without spooking the herd of cattle. The bridge was a trio of trusses

with dark steel girders up its sides and overhead, and the cattle did

not like the look of it. The bawling herd wadded itself up at the

approach to the bridge. A slender rider wearing spectacles guided his

horse into the cows and with the end of a lariat fought a little bunch

of cattle out onto the bridge. Instead of pushing the bunch into a trot,

though, the cowboy reined back to the foot of the bridge. He did this

three times, nudging a bunch of cows out a little way but then retreating,

which disappointed Rosellen no end--she wanted to see what it would be

itals

like if the whole herd hightailed over the bridge at once. Charlene had to agree that this seemed like a dumb slow way to move cows. The rider wasn't very far from the pair of them when he backed his horse around for the next batch of cattle, so ^{she} ~~Charlene~~ spoke up:

"Why do you fool around with a few at a time, if you want them all to go across?"

The cowboy winked at her. "Easier to show you than tell you, sis. Hop up behind. Then I'll give Missy there her turn." He slipped his boot out of the stirrup, the empty U of it now an open invitation for her to climb on behind his saddle.

For an instant Charlene wished somebody else was there to nix this. His back that she would have to hold ^{tight} on ~~against~~, her new chest and all. The cowboy was old enough to be her and Rosellen's father. But not as old as their father.

"Oh, Charlene!" Rosellen hopped with every word. "Can we? You first! Then me! Aren't we going to?"

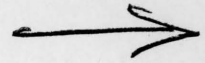
"You have to stay right here," Charlene issued, "until I get back. If you so much as move, I'll spank you inside-out." Her little sister

504A follows →

(itals)

could be a real handful when she put her mind to it. Rosellen might have her nose in a book one minute and be inspired to climb the dizzying fire ladder on the grain elevator the next. "Promise, now? You won't--"

"~~Charlene~~ I won't move an inch!" Rosellen hugged the telephone pole for proof.



itals

In the next instant, Charlene was up onto the horse and riding double behind the cowboy as he worked a considerable number of cattle out onto the bridge and this time hazed them into a dead run. But midway across the bridge, centrally atop the Missouri, the cowboy reined the horse to a standstill and glanced half over his shoulder toward Charlene as if to say, You wanted to know.

She could feel it, all right, even up there on the horse: the shivering of the bridge. The mass vibration set up by the cows' running hooves, a thunder shaking the bridge from inside its plank roadbed and metal girders.

Quickly the cowboy spurred the horse around toward the approach to the bridge and shut down on the next cattle who tried to run, deliberately breaking the dangerous quaking rhythm. Push some, hold some. Charlene swung down off the horse onto the bank and boosted Rosellen up behind the cowboy's saddle so that she, too, could go onto the vibrating bridge and know something new. That everything trembles, sometime.

end
itals

#

Rosellen

~~She~~ was about ready to give up. She had sent out "Glacier of Mercury"

to
every magazine from Country Gentleman to Woman's Home Companion and

the editors must have been waiting behind the mail slots like baseball catchers, the rejections came back so fast.

~~She~~
~~Rosellen~~ knew she shouldn't let it get her down; ~~ca~~ Nome wasn't built
in a day, as everyone at Fort Peck went around saying when the square winter palace of ice slabs piled up and up on the riverbank. Maybe writing, getting anything taken by one of the numbskulls in charge of magazines, was like that. Sling the stories out, and eventually one of them would stack up properly with the iceblocks that were editors' hearts. Right now, though, ~~she~~ ~~Rosellen~~ wished she could have a chin session over this with ~~Kate~~ ~~Rhonda~~, who of course was scarce any more, having her hands full with the baby. But she knew anyway what ~~Kate~~ ~~Rhonda~~ would say: "So if it makes you blue, don't do it." Which to Rosellen didn't seem to cover the trying-to-write dilemma, somehow. Only Neil, and not even him entirely, savvied how depressing the constant stream of rejection letters were for her. "It about drives me crazy, to do the absolute best I can and they shoot it right back in the next mail," she had burst out. "They'll catch on someday," he had said back in his steady way. "You put in your time

at it and you'll get there eventually. ⁶

On this Saturday, though, instead of getting underway at the writing, Rosellen doodled. Black squares, midnight in a coal mine. Zigzag mountains, terra firma going vice versa. She sat there and sat there at the kitchen table, trying to cook up stories, but it was all succotash today. She wished she had climbed in the truck and gone with Neil on his run to the Duff homestead.

~~##~~ — Neil was experiencing gumbo. He had been around oceans of it, every spring while he was growing up here, but it was still amazing how mud could wad up on the rear dual wheels of the ~~Double~~ ^{Triple} A until you had to get in there with the end of a tire iron and more often than not your own bare hands and claw the stuff out. By this point of this trip he and the truck were both painted with the gumbo, but the load he'd put on ought to give him enough traction to make it up the long slope out of here, he was reasonably sure. Now that the homestead was reduced to lumber, he had promised the Old Man he'd haul it all, they'd leave the place clean as a bone, but that didn't necessarily mean he had to do it all in mud season, did it. If he pecked away at

it in loads when he had no other trucking to do, he'd still be able to finish up here by summer's end. For right now, he wished he was sitting at home watching Rosellen write.

#

—

"Yours is all ready." Nan Hill produced the large bundle of freshly done laundry. How and under what circumstances, Nan could only guess, but women of this sort went through clothes even faster than the damworkers. "Did you want to take Mr. Harry's shirts for him, too?"

"Makes no nevermind to me," Proxy assented, "as long as you collect

p. 506C follows

from the tightwad rather than me having to try to." She took the stack of shirts wrapped in butcher paper and tied with string, and set it atop her own bundle. She kept on peering next door, though, toward what she could see of Bruce and ~~Phonda's~~ ^{Kate's} house through the lines of laundry kicking up in the wind. Hard to figure, how things take the cockeyed turns they do. "I'm in-laws with yours neighbors now," she tested on the washerwoman, as if saying it out loud would make it sound any less ~~crazy~~ ^{wacky}.

"So I hear." Nan Hill ^{gave} ~~while giving~~ this latest Duff a neutral ^{thinking} ~~thought~~ smile, that the biblical remains of old Ninian Duff must be churning loudly in his English Creek grave.

Proxy eyed the ^{pretty in a somewhat worn way} small neat woman, Married to some guy with a case of the dynamite shakes, from what she'd heard. That must make it interesting when he eats his peas.

"Tell me one damn thing," Proxy blurted, then indicated with her gaze the mass of laundry that this wren of a woman had drudged at today, drudged at every day. "Why do you go around here smiling?"

Had anyone else asked, Nan might have lightly recited the sunny day, the stimulating breeze, the glad sight of the day's loads of washing done

and hung. But she found herself saying to Proxy Duff:

"So that I won't forget how."

Proxy watched the sails of garment bucking on the wind. She saw a shirt with a large pattern of a horseshoe sewn on the back, and laughed.

"We've got at least one customer in common."

#

At the early show that night, gathering their strength to go dancing afterward, the three couples nudged and ~~chuckled~~ ~~laughed~~ among themselves as the cartoon came on with a typewriter keyboard busily going splick splick splick as a cockroach wearing a porkpie hat hopped from key to key to introduce himself as archy and his friend, the cat from the alley outside the newspaper office, as mehitabel. Rosellen giggled ^{the} most of any of them at archy's bouncy typing as it splatted onto the bottom of the movie screen, and whispered along the row to the others that she could use a crew of bugs like that for paydays. Neil and Bruce sat back grinning like gradeschool kids again; every movie they ever saw was their favorite the minute it came on. Folded comfortably into his seat Owen relaxed as ~~competently~~ ~~determinedly~~ as he did everything else, and even Charlene loosened up appreciably on these get-together nights, in ^{Kate's} ~~Thonda's~~ considered opinion. More than any

of them ^{Kate}~~Rhonda~~, after the past half-year of tooth and nail motherhood,
 was ready for a night out. She wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong
 idea, she was simply glad of a whole babyfree evening at last, with Bruce's
 arm cozily around her and the funny stuff occurring up there on the screen
 with mehitabel, who was convinced she had been Cleopatra in an earlier
 life (cleopatra was of course the best archy could do for her because
 he couldn't work the shift key), and the big brute of a rat named freddy.
 Then, though, came mehitabel's lament of her current life--what have i
done to deserve all these kittens-- and ^{Kate}~~Rhonda~~ shrank a little lower in
 her seat as though singled out. She knew she had all the right feelings
 for her baby, there was no way she would trade Jackie for--well, not
 having him. But mehitabel's yowl hit home in her, if a person was going
 to be honest about it and ^{Kate}~~Rhonda~~ habitually was. When Jackie wasn't
 spitting up he was producing at the other end, it seemed like, not
 even to mention the crying, the feedings, muss and fuss of all kinds.
 You could love that kind of a little mess-maker, ^{Kate}~~Rhonda~~ with weariness
necessarily had come to believe, but you couldn't like one every minute of every day.
 It wasn't like mad pash with, well, Bruce on their old noon hours, where

the feelings took care of themselves, no complications. So, she sank into that seat as if taking cover, a little wary of mehitabel and herself.

It ended up not that funny a cartoon anyway, because it was the one where freddy the rat, full of poisoned cheese, took on the banana-boat tarantula who had got loose in the newspaper office and was making everyone's life miserable. After the brave rat triumphed and succumbed, archy batted out a key at a time, we dropped freddy off the fire escape into the alley

with military honors. Resolutely ^{Kate}~~Shonda~~ looked forward to going dancing.

—

Next thing to useless. Shame to have to admit it about himself, but there ^{was}~~no~~ getting around it. Take tonight. Payday night, and him with no pay. Had to resort to the pretense of walking for exercise. Not that she made any great show of believing him. But she didn't have to bother to, did she. Wageless as he was, she plainly counted on, he couldn't inflict much on himself. She had a point. There was that about being an invalid, it didn't pay worth a damn.

If he were the decider over it all, he would stamp himself under foot like a ^{grasshopper}~~bug~~. On the other hand, not so fast. ~~He,~~ ^{Hugh,} had never been one to write himself off entirely. In lieu of life, there was always

some other plan. And for once he had been ahead of himself, putting the trade beads away when he had. True, tonight it took a little doing to find the truck among everything parked at the recreation hall, but he had persevered. In there at the dance, he well knew, were Owen and Charlene and Neil and Rosellen and Bruce and ~~Phonda~~^{Kate} and combinations thereof; they ought to get together more, someone of them had the bright idea, and so Jackie was ~~being~~^g left with him and Meg (well, Meg at the moment) while they kicked up their heels. Dance up a storm, you six, before the time goes... ^{at last} When he ~~finally~~ tracked down where Neil had parked the truck, he had only to feel around under the seat until his hand found the handkerchief bundle of beads. Next stop, ^{downtown /} Wheeler. He still had to shun the Blue Eagle, ^{where} Proxy's presence ~~there~~^g virtually guaranteed Darius's. Unto the Wheeler Inn, then, barter the beads there. Bargaining with Ruby Smith was like gnawing the bark off a tree, but at last she scooped the ^{tiny} ~~little~~ blue beads into the palm of her hand and told the bartender how many beers to set him up, not nearly as many as he liked. Craved.

So, then, now. Only half in the bag, are you, Hugh, eh? he estimated

himself. And the walk home, in the night that was pitifully early yet, was causing even that much to wear off. The intoxicating air of Montana. Didn't he wish it were so.

Half was some, it wasn't none. If I had the money for it, his thoughts ran to where they had become accustomed to lately, I think I'd do the thing. Outright damn do it. But it takes such a considerable...

Ask Owen? Not ready for that yet, not that hard up. Yet. No, work was the largesse from Owen. Darius, now, Darius at this late date was showing signs of wanting to be a charitable big brother. Frogs will be kissing princesses, next. Hugh had let slip something about his money wish and Darius quick wanted to know Hold on, Hugh, what would you do with ^{the} ~~wherewithal~~ if you had any? Be damned if he'd spill his guts to Darius. Back at work soon now, how recuperated did you have to be to poke traps on Ownie's blessed dredgeline. Maybe find treasure there. Right, Hugh, depend on it, he chided himself. Pirate gold on the tropical Missouri. No, find a way, he'd have to, to put his pay away until he had enough. He had priced it out, the necessary sum, and it amounted to a lot of putting away. Not easy. Never easy.

Home before he knew it, and now Meg inspected him as he came in.

That ditchline of mouth on her and on Owen. But she couldn't help showing

a bit of pleased surprise. Hugh looked not much the worse for wear, ~~this~~

~~obviously was not one of his blind benders.~~ Turning off the money on him

maybe worked. (Among other steps, she had cornered Birdie Hinch and

threatened him with dismemberment if he lent Hugh funds to drink.)

"You're good and early," she commended.

"Early, at least," he gave her, overdignified as always when he'd had a few.

She decided to risk it. There weren't even the makings for breakfast in the house and besides, now it seemed safe enough to cash her paycheck

at the grocery store, with Hugh off his prowl. "Hugh, ^uI need to run

to the store. Quick and back."

"The coast is clear now, Meg, eh? All along the shores of Bohemia."

Maybe he was not quite as sober as he looked. "Hugh, understand me. Jackie is asleep. Can you take care of him for just a few minutes, or can you not? Are you--feeling all right?"

"Margaret, woman, I am perfectly capable of minding my own grandson," he asserted.

"I'll be no time," she told him.

But coming home, from two streets away she could hear Jackie squalling, and hastened toward the house to comfort him and afflict Hugh. I will beat on him unmercifully, she vowed about Hugh, I will throw him piecemeal into the street. If he has let harm come to that child--

Before she could yank the screen door open, Hugh's voice came, and the ~~recognized~~ sound of him walking a slow back-and-forth as he had done when the crying baby he held was named Owen or Neil or Bruce.

"Where begin and where end, Jackiejack. Here you are already, the next Duff, while those of us so far barely know how to breathe circles on a looking-glass. Were I you, Jack, I'd be bawling all the time about this crew you've come into, I would." The child obliged with a screech of Eaahh! "Yes, yes, yes, that's the boy. Cry it out." Jackie's bawling began to lessen as Hugh soothingly talked on. "You've a grandfather, myself here, who's had practice at being a thorough fool. Did you know that yet, Jack? And your father is something of the same, and vulcanized and underwater about it to boot. We have to hope he'll stay in one piece long enough to bring you up. Your mother, by some

wild accident, is at least somewhere in the neighborhood of common sense.

Whether ~~Phoebe~~^{Kate} as Momma will outweigh the rest of this family, we shall

have to see, Jack my man. You've one aunt who's as sharp as a pinch,

and an aunt and an uncle who think motion must be progress. Then

there's your grand-uncle, who in a wild-ass way chases after the wrongs

of the world. Not that the world doesn't need chasing. And we've taken

into the family, or she us, your great-aunt Proxy. An approximate--

how should we say, Jack? Dancing doxy, foxy dancer? Your Aunt

Proxy will give you tales to tell in your old age, Jack lad." Hugh's

pacing and the little patting sound on Jack were the only sounds for a

few seconds, and then the murmuring of the child and Hugh's musing again.

"The only one of us making a real go of it is your uncle who knows how

to stop up rivers. Just now the world thinks that's something ~~which~~^{that}

needs doing, and so here we be, Jack, the lot of us dabbing away at

Owen's great dam. Ah now, right you are, to squall over that." As Meg

reached for the handle of the screen door again, she heard: "Your

grandmother, did I think to mention, Jackie? Your grandmother I am

still trying to figure out after battalions of years."

—

DROP CAP

It was pith helmet summer at Fort Peck now, too hot for hats,

all those, including the five male Duffs, who hooted at the light

bowl-brimmed headpieces the first day the Corps officers sported them

were fervently wearing them by the end of the first week of swelter.

Shirts off, ~~torsoes~~ oiled with sweat, ten thousand men, the most ever

on an American dam, clambered in and out of the diversion tunnels and

across the trench floor of the spillway and along the serpentine miles

of dredgelines and everywhere on the sloped face of the damfill as if

it were Tut's tomb. There were groans throughout the Ad Building when

Major Santee won the office pool on how far the mercury in the thermometer

traveled up and down at Fort Peck that year: ¹⁷⁵~~170~~ degrees, from February's

⁶¹~~60~~ below to July's ¹¹⁴~~110~~ above. Another record, naturally.

#

Jaraala, baggy-eyed as if he was at the end of a long choring day

instead of just beginning one, came by for Darius on Saturday with the

latest poker-induced loan of a vehicle, this one an olive-green Nash

which bore a distinct resemblance to a tortoise. They set off for

Plentywood with Jaraala's serene foot on the accelerator, just.

Coarse weather again. The sun like a ladle of molten steel swinging

over them the next many hours. The big car's wing windows drew in hot moving air in place of the one other choice, hot motionless air. Wincing constantly against the road[#]glare and the rush of air like convection off a stovetop, Darius understood why Americans are a squinting race.

Out of nowhere, which was to say the interminable equator of highway beyond Wolf Point, Jaraala imparted:

"We'll maybe get the goddamn bastards this time."

Darius's eyelids, half-drawn shades, opened for business. Evidently 1936 was going to be the year Jaraala had something to say.

"There's a bin of them to be got," Darius responded. "That's certain."

Jaraala nodded a fraction. "Their time is about goddamn up. People



are gonna catch on that the bastards who been running things run it all for themselves."

"How far up the slate do you think there's any hope?" Darius took the chance to ask. As best he could tell, the election that coming autumn extended from thimble inspector to Roosevelt, that mountain of cork. In such universal running for office, Lawrence Mott taking control of a county would be one thing, but for the CPUSA to make a broader showing would be monumentally another.

"That I can't really say," Jaraala answered slowly. "So goddamn many people think it's only a matter of who talks the slickest."

"There's a color of truth to that, Tim."

"I wouldn't necessarily say so. Mott at least bow-wows in the right direction. That's pretty much where we need to start from, don't we?"

And go where. Up the teetertotter on thesis and down on antithesis,
and sweetly level on synthesis. And then deciphering that, the map to
the dialectical holy land, ^{past} at Marx's desk and out onto the cobblestones
with Sorel and by way of the Clydeside, where I put in a soldier's years,

and across here to the timberbeast camps where you slaved, Tim. And
how far have we come? The movement is stacked up with ^{bloody} apparatus in
Russia, and it's being warred on in Spain, and in this America when we
back a Mott we have to call him a Fusion candidate. But against is
at least a direction of some sort, isn't it, Tim. We do this against
the bastards who own and run it all. How dare they. How goddamn dare
they, in your terms, Tim. Push comes to shove, someday. We're to help
it come, aren't we...

"Are things okay with you?" Jareala had turned his head from the road to look at him in concern.

Darius ran a hand over his eyes. "The weather's a bit on my nerves."
~~Tim~~ Montana doesn't seem to have seasons, merely Hot and Cold."

#


Peter Stapfer was nervous without his Hutterite cap, new as he was at putting together enough of a fib to explain where it had gone.

Clad in communal black, knowing he was as obvious as an overgrown crow in this strange town, he hastened back toward the vegetable truck, the two younger men from the Colony peering fretfully down the main street

to see what had become of him. Ears of sweetcorn, tomatoes, cabbages, snapbeans and peas in the pod lay boxed, each lovely in its row, in the back of the Studebaker truck, and a barrage of customers impatiently milled around waiting to buy. Peter was the bearded one in charge of this venture, the vegetable boss of the Frenchman River Colony, and in the Hutterite way of doing things he alone would handle the money here. He knew he also had to be the firm example of how the Colony, one of the communes born of Anabaptism in Moravia many generations ago, could deal with the outside world and yet not be of it; could stand under God's wing but go forth with their wares; each of the younger Hutterites had been along on selling trips to Saskatchewan towns such as Shaunavon and Swift Current, but they had never seen anything like Wheeler, Montana.

Peter Stapfer ostensibly had gone into the Blue Eagle ^{Tavern} ~~Saloon~~ to get American money for making change, in the vegetable selling.

"Excuse me. I haf Canadian money." He held up the much-folded little



batch of bills the Colony boss had entrusted him with for this trip.

"Can I gif it you, for United States?"

Tom Harry studied the black-triggered man who looked scared as a caught kid, in spite of the beginnings of gray in that chinline beard on him.

"Don't see why not," he muttered finally. "We need some of the Canadian dinero every so often." He took the bills the man thrust at him and started for the cash register, then turned back. "What are you, fellow, House of David?"

"N-no," Peter Stapfer said unsurely. "Hutterite. Our ~~gemein~~^{kommune}--
our colony iss in Saskatchewan."

As the saloon proprietor resumed his way to the cash register, Peter Stapfer became aware of the woman whose hair reminded him of cornsilk and whose blouse knew neither shame nor restraint. She was boldly sizing him up and down, in a way he would not ever dare to with her, and her gaze seemed to be lingering in a vicinity unexpected to him, the top of his head.

"Spiffy cap," the woman was saying, right to him. "Where do you

get one like that?"

"Ve...ve make them. All our wear, clothing, iss our own hand."

"I know somebody who's got just the head for one of those," Proxy decided with a wicked grin. "I'll buy yours from you, Jasper, how about."

Peter Stapfer's heart nearly stopped then and there. He had hoped for this very thing, although never even dreamed it would ~~be with~~ ^{come from} a woman, and the cap was not what he had meant to part with. Down his right pantleg, from his waist into his boot, was hidden one of the short stock whips made at the Colony. Cattle ranchers prized them for their handiess in the shipping pens, and Peter Stapfer had intended to bargain the whip for what he wanted. But no one in this house of hell resembled a cattle rancher.

Indeed, the saloon proprietor now made mockery by calling down the bar to the woman: "Jiminy Christmas, Shannon, you gonna get religion next?"

"Tom, blow it out your—" Proxy veered, but then came back to business.

"Come on, fellow, how much are you asking for that cap?"

Peter faced the woman and managed to utter:

"Money iss...no use to me."

Proxy returned his look with a mixture of resignation and scorn.

"Sure. I ought've known. Another ^{Holy Joe}~~Christer~~ who wants to take sin out
in trade. All right, deacon, you can come have your little diddle. ^{Let's go.}

But that better be a good cap."

As he grasped what the woman meant, Peter Stapfer blushed to his heels.

"No! No, not...that."

He cast a glance over his shoulder, worried that one of the younger men would come searching for him and find him talking to this Jezebel.

"I gif you the cap for a picture." He spun his hands in search of the fuller word. "Photograph."

"What of?" Proxy asked, eyes sharply narrowed.

"Me. To haf."

"That's all you want? Just

~~"You just want your picture taken?" she specified and doubted at the~~

~~same time.~~

Peter Stapfer bobbed his head.

"Just a picture of yourself," Proxy made doubly sure, "not of us doing--any funny business."

The man bobbed and blushed some more. Proxy called out, "Tom.

Let me borrow your Brownie a minute."

"I must trust you," Peter Stapfer said to her rapidly. "The Colony,

they cannot know of this. We do not...have such things, images, photographs.

Mail it, please, in this." He thrust at her a seed company envelope of

the sort that came to him as vegetable boss of the Colony.

Nodding slowly, Proxy took it from him.

Minutes later, completing his hurried return to the vegetable truck,

Peter Stapfer panted up to ~~the~~ pair of younger Hutterites awaiting him. He

gestured to his bare head. "They are thieves, here."

There. He had not actually said his cap was stolen, and among this awful collection of people surely must be some who qualified as thieves.

The younger men did not even seem to notice. They were asking Peter Stapfer in frantic German if now they could begin selling the summer's vegetables.

—

Returning from Plentywood, Darius eased open the door of the houseboat so as not to break Proxy's sleep.

He immediately saw he needn't have bothered.

In the lamplight Proxy was sitting up in bed, on top of the covers,

~~legs bent at the knees. And comfortably apart. She was~~ stone naked

except for the cap on her head.

"Got something for you," she greeted him, her smile at its crooked best.

Darius blinked it all in, only a little red star lacking above the blunt proletarian brim of the cap. Although Lenin likely never wore his like this.

Darius's smile now was at its utmost, too.

"Yes, I see that," he said, going to her. "And a cap as well."

—

The decompression chamber was the one thing about diving that Bruce had never liked, but that was before today. Today he lay in it gratefully and more than a little scared.

Other times, only a few, he'd asked for the chamber more as a precaution, whenever the ascent back to the barge didn't feel quite right. At only river depths, the bends weren't supposed to be much of a problem. This time, though, blooey. He'd been tightening down

a big hex nut on a braceplate ^{forty feet down} when the next thing he knew he was wondering what the wrench was for in his vulcanized gloved hands and the barge boss Taine was in the midst of a conversation with him on the helmet squawk box and when he ~~just~~ casually said he was feeling a little woozy, Taine fished him up in careful stages and clapped him into the chamber.

What spooked Bruce was that missing time, between when he was ~~nicely~~ ~~just~~ going about his business with the wrench and waking up, so to speak, in mid-yarn with Taine. Hadn't happened before. Alertness was always what happened to him there under the river. In the diving suit ^{he} ~~Bruce~~ felt as if he was at last wearing life; as if existence had come and found him and wrapped itself plumply around him. The top moments of motorcycle speed, sure, they'd been fine; but the transformed gait beneath the river, where he went along as solemn as one of those old pharaohs, that suited him so much better. According to how the river was running, leisurely and normal or fast with runoff, he might be weighted with as little as twenty pounds of lead or as much as eighty ~~pounds~~. Bruce would never have thought so beforehand, but

the eighty-pound days were the ones he especially liked, the surge of the river meeting him strong and tricky as he descended from the diving barge and made his way down to affix a brace on a piling. Then the rooted feeling, from his fifteen-pound shoes and the lead weights on the belt of the diving suit; the calm, contained view out the circle eye of the helmet; he couldn't have invented ^{it} better himself. The only hard part was the time limit, only two hours of diving work allowed and then two hours of bunktime in the barge cabin, gathering strength again.

Or as now, in the decompression chamber, letting the effect of the river work out of his bloodstream. Laying here this long, he was pretty sure he was getting over being scared, but he still was curious. Those moments that ^{went} ~~were~~ missing; he wondered where they ^{went} ~~go~~.

~~##~~ DROP CAP

Another day, another surprise out of Proxy. When Darius got off work and came home to the houseboat to burn himself some supper, she was still there instead of at the Blue Eagle. More precisely, she ^{had} ~~was~~ set up shop at the table, operating a little hand-machine which took cigarette papers and loose tobacco and rolled them into cigarettes. The American genius

for perfecting the trivial never ceased to astonish Darius.

"Tom's giving me his Durham sacks these days if I roll him his cigarettes," Proxy said, sounding quite pleased with the deal.

"Generous Tom," Darius restricted himself to, not wanting to be drawn deeper into the topic of Bull Durham sacks and their contents.

He was about to start rummaging for supper ~~instead~~ ^g when he saw that

Proxy had something more ~~to say.~~ ^{on her mind.}



"One of those spitshine Army birds was just here."

"Ah? Wanting what?"

"Us out of here."

"Out. . .what, off this--?" Darius's words stumbled. "Off this houseboat? But we live here! It's ours!"

"Houseboat and all, they want gone." Proxy concentrated on her cigarette-rolling. "Moving a dredge in. They're going to take this whole part of the riverbank."

"But I quite like this ~~boat~~^{vessel} of ours." Darius sank into a chair across the table from her and the cigarette makings.

"Somehow I don't think that matters a smidge to the Army birds, Darius."

He passed a hand over his face. He tried to imagine how it would be, living in one of the shantytowns. His comings and goings would be evident; the feel of being watched, nosed at. Whatever living quarters they could find, likely to be no better than that ~~shack~~^{hovel} Meg and Hugh were in. "Proxy, I'm not sure I can--"

"Could be fun," she cut him off, "when you think about it."