

He stared across the houseboat at her.

"Anybody can make a boat rock on water," she said. "How are you at getting one going on dry land?"

#

The bulldozer crew foreman Vern Bantry ^{glowered} ~~glowered~~ at the quintet of Duffs. Any of the four restlessly ranked behind Owen he would not have lent a rollerskate to, let alone a bulldozer. Owen the fillmaster was a considerably other matter, though. But even so. . .

"Does it really have to be one of my D-10's?" Bantry demanded.

"Afraid so," Owen tried answering minimally. When Bantry kept eyeing him, Owen provided: "We've got something we need to move and it's going to take a sonofabitching lot of pulling power."

Bantry looked twice as suspicious now. "What's the something?"

"It's nothing anywhere on the project," Owen assured him and mentally added unless you include the river.

Bantry was back down to merely skeptical. "A D-10 Cat doesn't run itself. Who's your catskinner here?"

"I--" Bruce brightly started to speak up for himself.

"No," Bantry declared.

"Neil can operate it," Owen said fast.

The dozer foreman ignored the rest of them and told Owen, "Get it back here by next shift or they'll fire all our asses." Then thought a moment and amended, "Fire and jail all our asses."

— The ten-cylindereed Caterpillar bulldozer, Neil proudly at the levers, detached itself from the turmoil of earthmoving at the upstream face of the dam and like a stupendous bumblebee began lurching along the west bank of the Missouri.

At a roaring pace, the big dozer bore down on the setting-up crew for the dredge Jefferson. Once there, the bright yellow machine and the five tall skinny men perched all over it tried nonchalantly to rumble on past.

"Hey!" called out the startled foreman there. "Where the dickens do you think you're--"

"Got a priority order," Owen called back in a voice twice as loud, "to clear something off the site, up the river."

Charlene and Rosellen and Meg and ^{Kate}~~Phonda~~ and the baby and, hostess to it all, Proxy were already waiting at the houseboat.

It took some doing, not to mention some splashing and cussing, but the men managed to loop a cable around the houseboat at waterline and winch it up taut to ~~attach it to the drawbar of~~ the idling D-10. Watching back over his shoulder, Neil eased the Caterpillar ahead and the houseboat was drawn up through the soft mud onto the bank.

Bruce cheered and Rosellen clapped and the rest enthused in other ways, even Meg joining in a bit at the feat of this. But Darius was shouting to Neil, "Wait, wait, wait."

When Neil halted the tow, Darius sprang up onto the houseboat and delved inside. After a minute, he reappeared with an empty beer bottle and hopped down to the ground.

"I've been in on the launch of a good number of them into the wet," Darius was in high good humor, "but this is the first time in the other direction. It's what I would call an occasion, is it not."

He knelt to the river, holding the bottle neck tipped into the flow. When the bottle had filled, Darius held it out and said quietly:

"Do the honors, love."

Proxy's cheeks colored. She sneaked a look around at all the Duffs

to see if they were going to make fun of her on this. None showed any sign of it. They were the damnedest bunch to try figure out. Tear into each other at the drop of a hat, but stand together if the world so much as looked cross-eyed at them. Proxy came over by Darius, took the bottle, and turned to the houseboat. [#]"O-kay, then. I christen you the--" and she stopped.

"'Prairie Schooner,'" Rosellen provided, which Owen thought was really pretty good.

"Damn right," said Proxy, and smashed the brown bottle over the stern.

The houseboat slid on the prairie grass, the bulldozer leading it up the ridge. Neil was quick-learning enough as a catskinner to steer clear of dips and cutbanks, although occasionally the houseboat plowed through a mound of dirt around a gopher hole or badger den. Hugh and Meg volunteered to take Jackie with them in the truck to the crest of the ridgeline. The rest chose to tag along beside the tow job, kidding, laughing, the great bald blue sky of summer's best evening over them.

At the top of the bluff, Neil maneuvered the houseboat to Darius's orders and Proxy's counter-orders, walking it into place with careful little yanks on the D-10's steering levers.

Owen, who had backed off to watch this emplacement process with

a professional critical eye, all at once broke out laughing.

"What," Charlene asked, coming over to him with crossed arms and a little smile. "What's tickling your funnybone?"

"Nothing," he had to maintain to her, had to keep the jingle of it to himself. What had hit him as he watched the siting of the houseboat, afloat on the grass above Wheeler, above the river, above all of Fort Peck: Proxy and Marxy's ark.

#

The fingerprinting of Fort Peck occurred the next Friday, a day hotter for some than even the soaring Ad Building thermometer indicated.

"New regulation from the alphabet guys in Washington, D.C.," was all that anyone in charge could tell the workers. That, and to line up at the personnel annex to the Ad Building first thing that morning.

#

The line tailed out onto the prairie. Word was rapidly passed back that inside the annex the government types who had come over from Butte to do the fingerprinting were tripled up on the job, funneling people to three separate desks at a time. Even so, everybody griped about how long this was bound to take and about having to carry the new identification cards with their thumbprint on it--the paperpushers must

have worked their tiny minds overtime to come up with this, it was universally agreed in the long line.

Several ahead of him there in the impatient rank, Hugh recognized a beaky nose in profile. He asked the man behind him to save his place, then stormed up and pulled the figure away, behind the nearest parked car.

"Birdie, you great fool! What do you think you're doing here?"

There already had been a perceptible evaporation from Fort Peck of those who did not want the arm of the law registering any more about them than it'd already had occasion to.

"I checked with that undersheriff guy," Birdie whispered. "He says he never heard of them getting fingerprints off of feathers."

Hugh's mouth came open, but he had nothing to controvert that. Besides, Birdie was staring at him and wanting to know, "Was we supposed to dress up for this?"

Uncomfortably peeking down at the white shirt prominent beneath the bib straps of his overalls, Hugh furnished: "Must not've noticed what I was putting on. The morning after can be that way."

#

The fingerprinting was supposed to have come without warning, but

of course Fort Peck's tide of rumor ran days ahead of anything. So, Darius had plenty of chance to think through the matter, let the American government make its damned daub of his flesh in its ink and take the chance that the imprint would never wend off to Scotland Yard and the Crawford, George homicide case file there, ^{Am caps} or pack up himself and Proxy and go. Neither appealed. Which had brought him here, a dozen spots behind Hugh in the shuffling and conversing throng of men, as the line snaked slowly into the propped-open double doors of the personnel ~~section~~ ^{annex}. As soon as he could crane a look in from the corridor, Darius had a panicky moment when he saw Rosellen there in the office. He tucked himself as thoroughly as he could behind the broad-shouldered pipefitter ahead of him in line and watched. Evidently Rosellen's was one of the desks commandeered by the fingerprinters and she simply needed something out of one of the drawers. Spying Hugh, though, as he lent his right thumb to an inkpad at another of the desks, she waited to walk out with him. Button-bright at his side, she kidded Hugh about having a black thumb now instead of a green one until he declared to her he was going to wash off Uncle Sam's ink this very moment. As Hugh veered into the men's restroom

and she went on down the corridor, Darius relaxed slightly. No one else familiar was in the office or on line around him now.

He began coughing as he stepped toward a desk, a different one from where Hugh had gone through, and tried to smother it with his hand as he gave his name and address and nearest relative--it still startled him a little to designate Proxy--to the card-typing male clerk. When told to put his signature on the identification card he managed to do so despite the spasm, but as he started to provide his thumb to the man doing the fingerprinting, a really wracking outbreak hit him, ~~half~~-gagging him, doubling him over with his hand over his nose and mouth.

"Hey, now, take it easy," the fingerprinter said, coming around the desk to whomp him on the back. Darius at last straightened up, eyes running and nose sniffing. "Catarrh," he pronounced, which in his burr sounded perilously like the onset of another glottal earthquake. He looked apologetically at his damply slimed right hand, the fingerprinter giving it his full regard too.

"The old handkerchief's a bit full," Darius croaked and snuffled, drawing out of his pocket a ghastly yellow-mottled limp rag, "but--"

"Oh, for cripes sake," the government man broke in on him. "Go clean that off with water," he ordered with disgust, setting aside Darius's identification card and fingerprint form, "then come back and cut in line so we can finish you up."

Obediently off to the restroom went Darius. To the figure at the sink next to him, wearing a shirt as memorably white as his own and identical bib overalls, he said: "Confusion to our enemies, Hugh."

"Yours, anyway," Hugh told him tightly, ~~took a breath, and walked~~ went out and edged back into line, ~~put~~ bracing to present his well-scrubbed thumb in place of Darius's.

"Where've you had your thumb that you don't want anyone to know about?" he had asked when Darius waylaid him the night before.

"It's, well, I'm embarrassed to even tell you, Hugh, but it dates back to the Clydeside. An old matter of politics, a person would have to say."

Was Jerusalem builded here. Whinstone streets and roundheaded walls of rock and every second Scot granitic with an idea to perfect the world, that was the land he and Darius derived from. Will not cease from Mental Fight. It surprised Hugh less than he would have expected--somehow he

now had the translation of something familiar--that Darius had been into
the thick of it at the Clydeside. Old Ninian Duff and that telegraphic
bombardment from the Bible, Darius and his Blake and who knew what other
songbirds of dogma. Men of the word, his uncle, his brother.

Darius now told him as if making a clean breast of everything since
puberty:

"They barred me from the shipyards, there at the last. You
remember they liked to make a habit of that, the big bugs--bar a person
if he'd been too active in favor of a strike. And I'd become a bit
active. So you can understand I don't want them matching me up here
with any of that over there--I'm not honestly one of you preferentially
hired Montana specimens, am I."

Hugh understood enough; that Darius for whatever reason would vanish
off the map of Fort Peck rather than undergo this fool fingerprinting.
He was thinking over the advantages of that when Darius came out with:

"Money, you mentioned a time back, Hugh. This stunt would be worth
that to me." (And to Proxy, although she did not know it. A certain
size of metal washer exactly matched that of a silver dollar and,

while Darius regretted it, whatever necessary of Proxy's stash
of Bull Durham sacks were about to hold washers.)

Hugh knew his needed sum to the very penny. To make sure, he
doubled it in what he named to Darius.

Blowing his nose vigorously, which provided his face some cover
from his handkerchief and his left hand, Hugh barged his way to the
head of the line, right thumb at the ready.

The man in charge of the inkpad glanced up, recognizing the ^{telltale} white
shirt and the general lineaments of the snuffly figure, and said in
annoyance, "Hold your horses, mister." He processed the person at the
head of the line and seemed about to go on to the next one, leaving
Hugh standing there prominent to the world.

"Ahaharghh!" Hugh cleared his throat in mucous-churning detonation,
making as if to bring his right hand up to the phlegm supply.

"Oh, for--" the fingerprinter grabbed his hand, drawing it down to
the inkpad as he fumbled for the paperwork that had been set aside.
Taking hold of Hugh's thumb, he rapidly made the impression of it first
onto the identification card and then onto the employment record of

Am
Cops

Darius Duff. "You want to go invest in some cough medicine, fellow,"

the man muttered to Hugh without giving him so much as a look.

—

"You're pitching in on this pretty enthusiastically." No sooner was Hugh outside the Ad Building than the voice made him jump. He shot a glance along the line, now longer than ever, and found Owen's face there.

As Hugh came over, Owen, appearing bemused, jerked his head to indicate the army-sized ^fcolumn behind him. "I thought I saw all your dredgeline crew together back there somewhere. You're the first guy in the whole bunch I've ever been able to get ahead of me on any schedule."

"Figured I'd get the nuisance over with early," Hugh held to.

"Yeah, I know. Nobody's favorite thing, more paper plastered on us." Owen gave a little grimace. "You know the deal about Fort Peck, though, don't you? The weight of the paperwork has to come out even with the weight of the dam."

His father laughed at that to an extent which surprised Owen. Then Hugh went on his way, fortified in the reasoning he and Darius had reached the evening before, that if ever it was noticed his thumbprint was on

Darius's identification card the assumption would be clerical error, a mix-up somehow because of the same last name, a piece of paper somehow handled wrong; in paperwork was their foe, his and Darius's, and in paperwork was their salvation. # Not even the fingerprinters themselves would have disagreed with that proposition. On through the day, whorl after whorl, professionally and automatically ~~the~~ ^{they} did what they had been sent to do, compile the shadows that men left whenever they touched anything. Even at the end of the day when the last damworker was given back his smudged thumb the fingerprint crew did not start home for Butte, but simply went ~~over~~ ^{across} to the Fort Peck hotel for the night. They knew from experience that they would have some business tomorrow too, men who would show up on the job claiming they'd been sick or hungover or otherwise detoured and now, sheepish or resigned, would be told to go get fingerprinted or keep on going. The fingerprinters, and the authorities behind them, were realistic enough to accept the paperwork bargain, that either an identity be registered in lasting ink or its possessor perform a vanishing act.

Among those already gone for good was Tim Jaraala.

—————

DROP CAP

Am
capsMary had a little lamband it was made of mutton.Every time it wagged its tailit showed its Landon button.

The sheriff sighed. He passed on by the political ditty neatly lettered and tacked up beside Tom Harry's evidently permanent Franklin D. Roosevelt ^{campaign} ~~election~~ poster, and made his way toward the bar. You wouldn't catch the sheriff arguing against that writing on the wall, actually; the only way Alf Landon and the Republicans were going to see the White House was if they got in line with the tourists. But what a hell of a note elections were, and this one in particular, as far as Carl Kinnick was concerned. That Red goon Mott was running again over in Sheridan County. The Democratic congressional candidate from across the mountains, O'Connell, was another wildman. The whole country seemed to be turning pink around the edges. And Carl Kinnick, who to be sheriff had to be elected, knew nothing to do but tuck himself under the wing of Roosevelt again.

It had taken the proprietor of the Blue Eagle about two seconds to

cotton onto the sheriff's presence on his premises; the sheriff often wished the rest of the citizenry was as swift on the uptake as bartenders and prostitutes.

9 Kinnick
While the sheriff picked his way to the bar, Tom Harry was doing a rapid inventory. Shannon was on a day off, couldn't be her bringing this little law dick down here from Glasgow. Birdie Hinch was nearby guzzling a beer, but Birdie always took off like a shot if he didn't like the way a cop looked at him, and today Birdie was eyeing the approaching sheriff with merely professional curiosity. Crossing off suspects, Tom Harry didn't like how the list narrowed toward himself.

"Help you, sheriff?" he asked, hoping he sounded just dubious enough.

"You could put up this poster." The sheriff had tried this both ways, making Peyser or another undersheriff or some so-called campaign worker traipse around with this stuff, or do the traipsing himself, and the evidence was clear. His ^{campaign} ~~election~~ posters went up and stayed up if he inflicted them in person.

Tom Harry held the poster out at arm's length and went over it as if it were an eyechart. "Heck of a likeness." The head-and-shoulders

picture of the sheriff with his Stetson cocked down didn't reveal how much of him was hat.

Kinnick

When he realized that ~~the sheriff~~ was going to stand there frowning until he saw the poster go up, Tom Harry plastered it on the big mirror behind the bar. When the sheriff still stood there looking edgy, Tom Harry took over the frown and asked:

"Something else, sheriff? Bring you anything? Blonde or otherwise?"

Kinnick

~~The sheriff~~ was just finishing up his estimate of the saloon, not very crowded at this time of day. "On the contrary," he said, straining to be civil. "I figured I'd buy a round for the house. Goes with this campaign crap, you know."

Tom Harry all but smiled. "Big of you, sheriff. Everybody in here will vote for you early and often. Got one thing to attend to, then we'll get your round of drinks set right up." He stopped by Birdie Hinch and whispered something that sent Birdie sidling toward the door. By the time the first of the Blue Eagle denizens had a drink in their hands and were shouting thanks in the sheriff's direction, crowds were on their way in from the Wheeler Inn and the Buckhorn Club and the other joints where

Birdie was spreading the word. The sheriff stoically pulled out his wallet at each fresh onslaught. Just because he hated Wheeler didn't alter the fact that it was full of votes for a Democratic candidate for anything.

#

Hugh dropped into a chair at the kitchen table, not knowing whether to hoot or commiserate.

"Fired from government work? Meg, I didn't know you had it in you."

Elbow to the table, chin propped to her small tight fist, Meg said as if prosecuting: "The man could not even crack an egg properly. It was unbelievable." ^{W.} Hugh.

He clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth as though that was certainly the case.

With her free hand she moved the salt and pepper shakers into alignments until they shouldered together in the center of the table with a resigned clink. "Besides, I will have you know I was not so much fired as quit."

Hugh kept his eyebrows up in interest until she burst out:

"Hugh, really, the end result was some of both." It had come to war between her and Jaraala's successor, a sallow ex-Army cook named Platt, with due speed. "The man is a...a...a bean-burner. I finally had to tell him in plainest English--well, you needn't know what I told him," ["]Hugh."["]

I can about imagine, though. "Where, eh, would you say this leaves us, Meg?"

On the spot. Very much on the spot, is how I would describe it,
at least in your case, Hugh. Aloud, though, she ~~carefully~~ kept to:

——— "With you as the provider of the paycheck now, naturally."

The truck beetled down the middle of the spillway cut, at uncertain speeds and evidently trying to follow the haul[#]-road, although tending to drift off one side of the roadtrack and then the other. As the river-end of the spillway grew near, the vehicle sped up, slowed, sped up again, then jerked to a halt as if lassoed.

"How was that?" asked Darius, still standing on the brake.

Proxy unbraced her arms from the dashboard and caught her breath.

"Darius, you drive like a man with a paper ass."

Forehead furrowed, ^{he}~~Darius~~ said: "I thought I was beginning to catch the knack."

"It'd help," she stated yet one more time, "if you'd remember-to-use-the-frigging-clutch."

"Ah. Ah," he said sagely. "The other foot-lever. Depress that one together with the brake, do I need to?"

"Scoot your tail over here," she instructed wearily. "Watch me again, okay?" She climbed over him and nestled behind the steering wheel, backed the Ford ^{Triple}~~Double~~ A around, and drove up the huge excavation toward where the spillway gates were under construction, reciting the gears to still-furrowed Darius as she shifted through them, calling his attention to the clutch the whole while.

"How do you come by this?" he eventually asked about her automotive teamstering ability.

Proxy lit up at this chance to embroider out loud as she gunned the truck back to the ^{head}~~start~~ of the spillway. "That bootlegger I told you

about?" she launched into. "That I was the private nurse for? Learned all the driving tricks there are from him. ~~Some~~ I drove loads in from Canada for him while he was laid up. At the border crossing they wouldn't suspect me, see. They'd ask what I was hauling and I'd bat my baby-blues and just say, 'Crockery. My missionary aunt died in Lethbridge and left me all the family dishes.'"

"That definitely explains everything," Darius remarked.

"Your turn again, chickadee," Proxy said, wheeling the truck around so that it faced down the spillway cut to the distant river again. Before switching places with him, though, she thought she ought to offer: "Tell you what--if you want, I'll go to Plentywood with you this next time while you're getting used to this overgrown flivver of Neil's. Share the driving with you."

Instantaneously, "No."

Proxy gave him a look.

"I need the driving practice, don't I," Darius tried to clothe his naked refusal. "And I know you're never much one for political doings."

And I'm not good enough for your Bolshie band? Is that it, too?

She debated with herself about whether to pitch into him with that, but decided it would save her a lot of trouble--not to mention some excruciating hours of watching Darius herd this truck along a highway--if she just left the Red Corner to him.

#

"Mother, I didn't know you had it--"

"Owen. Never mind, please." She was dandling Jackie on her knee, his doll-like hands in hers, cantering him to Banbury Cross; the more deeply solemn she promised him ^{hand} "rings on your fingers and ^{hand} ~~bell~~^{bells} on your toes, Jack shall have music wherever he goes, ^{hand} the happier the gape of smile on the child.

Righty right. Never mind. Owen fidgeted, inside and out. This
household is so famously well off, almost up there next to the Vanderbilts.
You and the Old Man are just going to have money to burn, sure, uh huh.
He'll burn through the only wages you've got left, anyway, and does he
ever know how. For the third time in as many minutes, Owen wondered why he was expending his lunch hour this way. Meg was minding Jackie while ^{Kate} ~~Rhonda~~ had her hair done; ergo, ^{Kate} ~~Rhonda~~ was off gaining a fresh

perm, and probably a good time in the blankets as well if this was one of the noons when Bruce popped home, while he, Owen, was perfectly welcome to share a nursery rhyme. ^{He} ~~Owen~~ tried to stow all that and concentrate on the business at hand. "Let me put it like this, then, Mother. If you've sacked the cookhouse, what the deuce do you think you're going to do from here on?"

^{Meg} ~~She~~ bucked Jackie on her knee some more. "This," she said.

#

~~"You don't mean ^u Bruce is actually going to let you?" Assaying~~

~~the news that ^{Kate} ~~Rhonda~~ was going back to waitressing, ^{intrigued} ~~Charlene~~ tried to wondering what kind of ~~imagine the campaign it must have taken on Bruce, who had the attention~~~~

~~span of a soap bubble; Charlene still wondered how in the world he~~

~~managed to concentrate enough to survive under the river every day.~~

^{Katy,} ~~Rhonda~~ "What'd you have to do, ~~Rhonda~~, kick him in the slats?"

"He talked himself into it after a while," ^{she} ~~Rhonda~~ responded,

streaming water as Charlene finished the rinse. Even as wet as an

otter, ^{Kate} ~~Rhonda~~ looked imperturbable, life floating no surprises past

her, or so she seemed to Charlene. But what the heck do I know, though,

Charlene thought. Maybe being married to ~~Wild Goose~~ Bruce is interesting

what's supposed to be good for you.
in a way. Dessert all the time, instead of all different courses. "Last
 night he ~~finally~~ reached the point where he said if I wanted to go back
 to herding flies at the Rondola, ^{he supposed} it was up to me," ^{Kate's} ~~Rhonda's~~ report went
 on, "and so I am."

"Mmm, and our ma-in-law and Jackie are a good match, at least until
 he gets old enough to talk back to her," Charlene said while turbaning
^{Kate's} ~~Rhonda's~~ head with a towel and bringing her up out of the rinse sink.
 "Handy."

"Owen will have the dam done by then," ^{Kate} ~~Rhonda~~ said offhandedly.
 "We'll all be scattering."

"That's supposed to be the case." Charlene did not say aloud and
I for one can barely bear to wait, but it conveyed itself. Vigorously
^{Kate's} drying ~~Rhonda's~~ hair, she heard her say something. ^{"Katy,} ~~"Rhonda,~~ sorry, I
 didn't quite catch that."

"My working--we always need the stupid money," ^{Kate} ~~Rhonda~~ said in a
 clear and level tone. "It just goes."

"Mmm," said Charlene, co-signer with Owen of notes financing
 Neil's truck and Bruce's diving rig, and delicately left it at that.

"Ever hear the one about the kid in school?" Proxy asked, not waiting on an answer. "They've all got their teeny-tiny primers out on their teeny-tiny desks, and little Johnny raises his hand and asks the teacher, 'Is this readin' or is it writin'? Because if it's readin', it's sure writ rotten.'"

Nervous as she already was, Rosellen's giggly nhn came out almost a hiccup.

"Hey, though." Proxy ran her eye down the listings on the cover of The Alabaster Quarterly. "'The Wreck of the Prairie Schooner.'" Sounds like this place." The houseboat, because she and Darius were the only ones ever here, presented just two spots to sit amid the spill of random groceries and much else that had never been put away, tossed clothes and ~~un-put-away groceries and other sundries~~, and Rosellen was meticulously drawn up on that other perch. Proxy glanced curiously at her, then back at the elegant little magazine, with the curiosity distinctly turned off. "Well, thanks, Boots, I can always use some reading material. I'll get to it sometime when--"

"Proxy, I have to ask. Will you read it right this minute? Please."

What, just because some other smarty thought of calling a high-and-dry

houseboat a prairie schooner too? Proxy shot ^{her} Rosellen a pinsharp look,

then shrugged and began perusing the story.

"Uh huh," eventually she pronounced, Rosellen breathless for more.

But Proxy flipped back to the first page and with a little mocking smile

read off: "'By Nell DuForest'?"

"That's my nom--I used a pen name."

"Oh, one of those. I've known people who ended up in the pen for how they used names, sure." Seeing the panic on Rosellen, Proxy said:

"Kidding. Come on, don't go goosy. How come you did that, though, hide your name? Don't the rest of the tribe know you wrote this?"

"Neil, is all. Plus you."

"Naturally I'm honored all to hell." Proxy's tone was more amused than piqued, but some of both. "How come you chose to let me in on your little nommy plume?"

"I didn't feel right, about your not knowing I'd written something with, well, sort of you in it and so I--

"Don't kid me," Proxy demolished that, rough as a rasp. "That's not why."

Rosellen surprised her with a flinchy grin, still looking a little

guilty and perched-on-a-pincushion but grinning most definitely. Rosellen, Proxy had always figured, had to know the score more than she let on, but from her own veteran standpoint ^{she} Proxy couldn't help but regard her as primarily still a cute kid, although now that she stopped and thought about it Rosellen had been married ages longer than she herself had, and reportedly Rosellen ruled the roost over there at dam headquarters with that lickety-split typewriter of hers--Proxy redid her estimate of the chesty younger woman before the bright-eyed younger woman Rosellen even finished owning up:

"You've got me, on that. I guess I didn't care a snap whether you knew I'd drawn on your, humm, past career. You maybe want to throw me out on my ear, Proxy. But I need to know, does it ring right? The sound of things there in the story?"

Proxy pursed her lips judiciously. "It's kind of...watered-down."

"Well, you bet. I can't put in every last little hotsy-totsy detail."

"Nah, not that." Proxy thumbed through the story. "I mean you make it sound like a doctor visit or something, the business with the joes. Me in here--"

"Proxy, no, she's not exactly y--"

"--what's the name... 'Easter Russell.'" There's one I'll have

to remember, ⁹ to use sometime. "It sounds in here like I don't care

if any of the bastards know their way around in bed or not, I just herd them through. That's not quite it." Proxy stopped to think. "Okay, it's a lot of it, but it's not all of it--any line of work has its complications, huh? Men have got those things on them for a good reason. So, a hobo girlo like Easter and me, we might as well make the most of it whenever we can, don't you think?"

Rosellen looked as if she wanted to be writing this down on something.

"So you don't just herd--"

"Matter of attitude, is all it is," Proxy proclaimed. "Men are like anything else, you could throw away the majority of them and no loss. But that doesn't mean they can't do you some good, if you play your cards right." Proxy paused for obvious thought. "Take ^{Kate} ~~Rhonda~~," she said matter-of-factly. "She has to play kissynums with a short deck, now doesn't she."

Rosellen's blank expression--in fact, what was more than blank?--made Proxy impatient. She pressed her hands flat onto her breasts to proportion them down to ^{Kate's} ~~Rhonda's~~ size, which took some doing. "Fried eggs, is about what she has to work with, see? But that Bruce of hers is all over her, all the time, from every indication. So she must make

up for it in attitude, that's what I'm saying."

"And you never run short on attitude?" Rosellen sounded as though her throat had gone a little dry.

"These days, I get a lot of help," Proxy gave a self-mocking laugh and tossed her hand around to indicate the marital houseboat. "Far as I can tell, Darius can hang his cap on the front of his pants about any time of the day or night. Some guys are just always ready to go." Proxy stopped to reconsider. "Well, not always, maybe, but pretty damn--" She broke off upon noticing that the expression on Rosellen's face still wasn't the greatest. "I guess this isn't doing your story any good, though, huh?"

Proxy dipped back into The Alabaster Quarterly, but then glanced up as if in afterthought. "How's Neil?"

"Fine. Busy."

"Huh uh, how is he at the needful? What we were just talking about. The jazz in bed."

"Oh. Good. I guess." As Proxy kept ^{watching} ~~looking at~~ her, something flared in Rosellen's eyes. "I don't have a whole set of comparisons."

Vitamin G. Guts. "Okay, I asked for that," Proxy said, sounding a bit pleased. Once more she put her finger and attention into the literary block of print. "Listen, though. This part where I--"

"~~Proxy~~, it's not really you. I mean, I changed lots about--"

"--tell this Pierre shitepoke that if he's going to get tough with me--"

"--really, you're not the--"

"--he better have his casket clothes on. I like that part."

Rosellen knew from a hundred missives from editors what the next word was going to be.

"But."

On that creed Proxy seemed to be gathering her forces.

"Truthfully? The whole jigaree^{Rosellen?} I don't get how it comes out."

She frowned intensely into the last page of the story. "I mean, this."

In a Sunday-school reciting voice she read: "...their two shadows across the prairie like reflections pendant in water before them."

"See, but, what that is," Rosellen mustered, "there's meant to be a sense of everything sort of hanging out there ahead of them--"

"Honey, I know what a pendant is. But you mean that's all? Easter and Pierre just end up there stuck with each other, like clothespins on a line?"

"It's, well, implied."

"I guess I like mine a little more plied."

Employ the eraser, hnn, Proxy, you're telling me, Rosellen thought,

~~with dread and despondency and despair and all the rest.~~ Drat the endings, how to work

out a version of people that was--well, conclusive. What were the cusswords

Neil and Bruce let loose with whenever they were good and mad at something?

Cat shit, rat shit, and guano. She ^d like to have used those now. Finally,

though, ^{she} ~~Rosellen~~ puffed out her cheeks, then let the exasperation leak

out in a rueful grin. "All right. I wanted to know. Now I sure as the devil do."

^{Rosellen}
Before ~~she~~ could gather to go, though, Proxy lifted a finger inquisitively, as if testing a breeze. "Now you tell me something, okay? It's probably no big secret I--work extra at the Blue Eagle, some nights." When I come in here, those times, Darius is dead to the world and we don't, umm, get up to anything until the next morning or

noon or sometime." To Rosellen, for the first time since the shivaree night Proxy seemed jumpy. "Listen," she was asking urgently, "this married stuff--would it be better if I hurry my butt home and be here when he comes off work, do you think?"

"It maybe wouldn't hurt," Rosellen said conservatively.

"I ask you because that Neil of yours is gone so much. I mean, I know it's not his fault, in a way. But he doesn't seem to figure he has to be on hand, any particular time. And you seem to put up okay with that. So, I wondered. Whether it matters a hoot or not."

"Proxy, I...every..."

"You're going to tell me we have to freehand it as we go along, like everything else?" Proxy laughed, but it sounded salty. "Major ~~the~~ news, huh, Rosellen?"

"~~Proxy~~ I don't know about everything else. But in marriage,

yes, I guess that's the news."

—
DROP CAP

Summer turned its corner at Labor Day, the heat records and giant days of work and long blue evenings under empires of stars behind now.

On the holiday itself, the three couples and the child were on a

picnic at a place better than it sounded, Nettle Creek. Upriver from Fort Peck far enough that the dredges looked like white trinkets, the overlook offered a pleasant grassy coulee below and the soft rattle of cottonwood leaves over the jumpable little creek. They knew cold weather would have its way before long, but this first September Monday was well-behaved, perfect early fall. Ample supply of picnic sunshine for them, with a few pantaloons clouds restless in the sky off to the west.

"This is more like it," Neil approved.

By now they were full of food, sated with ^{Kate's} ~~Rhonda's~~ fried chicken which everyone swore they could taste before they even picked up a piece and Charlene's salad specialty with noodles broad as a finger and rich with a seasoning she refused to disclose, the feast topped off with pie of the venison mincemeat that Rosellen made from deer neck, magical. Owen, eldest, had had to do a mock recital of the Old Man's inevitable pronouncement after such a holiday meal: I have had an elegant sufficiency, any more would be a detrimental superfluity. Earlier the men had hunted, not very far nor ambitiously, for Hun pheasants. The women had traded war stories from work. Jackie had been passed around among the six of

them like a lucky ^{charm} ~~souvenir~~.

Rosellen tickled Neil's ear with a piece of grass until he batted at the imaginary fly, and they all got a charge out of that. She sat up and took in the scenery again. Gazing over into the coulee and cottonwood grove, she asked: "So will this go in the lake?"

Owen sent her a look.

"Hey, I'm not being critical," she said with a hasty laugh. "I was just thinking about, when the dam is done--"

"--and the gophers get this country back," Bruce chipped in--

"--when the dam is done," Rosellen threw a pinch of dust at Bruce, "what the valley will look like, all in through here. It'll be like the sea came back, won't it?" She hoped that was the way to put it, to show Owen he and she had a meeting of minds on the glory of the dam. Charlene could yawn all she wanted about Fort Peck, but anybody with any imagination could see that the dam was going to redo this part of the world.

Owen sat up now too, enough to study the capacious river valley and the join of the coulee. "You got it, we're building an ark lot here,"

he ratified Rosellen's little rhapsody. "I'd estimate it'll fill up along this stretch about to the base of that rimrock. Couple of years from now, we can picnic up top there and be catching fish at the same time."

"Not yours truly," vowed Bruce from flat on his back and hat over his face. "Off to the deep sea by then, for me and you and Master Jack, right, Katy?"

"Why not, you were pearl-diving when I met you," said ^{Kate}~~Phonda~~.

*sm
cops*

"I can see it now, 'Treasure chests found for you and your dishes done at the same time,'" came from Charlene, who never missed a chance on Bruce.

"Sure, pick on a guy when he's down," Bruce droned drowsily under the hat.

"Somebody else is about to go down for the count, aren't you, Jackson," ^{Kate}~~Phonda~~ scooped the little boy in. "Squirming won't get you out of it. A NAP, a NAP, a nap nap NAP, for Jack Jack JACK!" she nuzzled

at him until he reluctantly chortled. With the child corraled in her arms, ^{Kate}~~Phonda~~ looked over at the truck parked facing into the sun.

"I'll pull it around," Neil volunteered. "Get Snickelfritz a little shade." He climbed in and started the engine.

"Hey, wait!" Bruce yelled, remembering. "I stood the Hun gun--"

His yell came too late. The truck had driven over the .22 rifle Bruce had left standing against the front bumper.

"Aw, horseshit!" When Bruce scrabbled the rifle up out of the grass, there was a noticeable ^{bow} ~~dent~~ in its barrel.

"Could be good for shooting around corners," Owen called over to him. "You might need that capability, when the Old Man finds out what you've done to his gun."

"Yeah, sure, pour it on," Bruce said bitterly. "Damn it to hell, Neil, why'd you have to go and move the--"

Without a word Neil snatched the rifle from Bruce. He took it around to the front of the ^{Triple} ~~Double~~ A, inserted the long gun barrel between the bumper and the truck frame, and pried. In what seemed still the same motion he pulled the .22 back out, sighted along the barrel into the air, then gave it another, gentler pry against the truck frame. He squinted along the barrel once more and handed the rifle back to Bruce. "Try it out."

~~three~~
The ~~women~~ and Owen were all sitting up straighter than they had been, watching this. Bruce now looked dumfounded as well as angry.

"Seniority," Owen announced, getting up and coming over between his brothers, past a quick grateful glance from ~~Rhonda~~ ^{Kate}. "If you two are done bending things, better let me see how it sights in."

Owen took the rifle, leaned across the hood of the truck in a steadied position, and aimed at a lone old fencepost across on the bank of the coulee. The rifleshot was instantly echoed by the tunk of the bullet hitting wood.

"Shoots like a charm," Owen verified. "Neil, you ought to set yourself up in the gunsmith business."

The grin on Neil could have been seen for a mile. "Fluke of luck," he murmured, but the bask of it for him wasn't the just-right straightening of the rifle; it was the private delicious feeling that he had known he could do it. Not known how; but knew, some uncallable way, that the gunbarrel metal would come out of its bow if he put muscle and eye to it; that he would show Bruce. Maybe that was as much name as the impulse had.

~~abruptly all business.~~
"All right, now," Bruce was ~~a hundred percent enthusiasm again.~~

"Let's do some real shooting. Pair off, how about, make it interesting."

He glanced toward Charlene and decided to risk his neck. "Vas you dere, Sharlie? Come on, lady, let's show this bunch how to hit a target."

Amid everybody's hesitation after that, Kate was heard from. "Neil is the only one of you I've seen do anything special with that gun," she tossed behind her as she went over and bedded Jackie down in the shade of the truck. "I want to be on his side." That left Owen and Rosellen to uphold the pride of the Ad Building during this gunnery, they gamely agreed.

"You're stuck now," Charlene notified Bruce with a shake of her head. "What's that little ditty of Darius's--'Don't let the awkward squad fire over me'? I'm it."

"And then for the grand finale--" Bruce in full impresario flourish went to the picnic supplies in the back of the truck and pulled out his lunchbox. He opened it to show them it was stuffed full of rags, and nestled in the rags lay a blasting cap. "Followed me home from work the other day," ^{he} ~~Bruce~~ explained.

"I thought you had enough blow-'em-up last winter," Owen said, amused.

"Learned my lesson," Bruce claimed. "Leave the dynamite alone, stick with the small stuff. Okay, let's get this shooting match going. Duffs against Duffs against Duffs. Heads up, world."

The men banged away, marksmen all, but Bruce measurably the best, the other two in vociferous agreement that the Old Man had always let him sneak off to do the deer hunting while they did all the work on the place. When the women's round came, Kate proved to be a decent shot, having learned enough gun-handling as a youngster to cope with rattlesnakes and skunks around the ferry landing. As she plinked the majority of her shots into the silvered fencepost they were using as a target, Neil took the opportunity to slip to Bruce: "Ought to make you think twice, being married to somebody who can shoot like that."

But Rosellen in her turn showed a tendency to squint the wrong eye or both eyes. "Where're the keys on this thing?" she spoofed as her bullets plowed around the fencepost in no predictable pattern. "Looks like you're safe enough, anyway," Bruce laughed to Neil.

Up next, Charlene heard Bruce say so softly it was intended only

for her: "You can do okay at this, if you let me lay out how."

Ordinarily, she would have felt duty-bound to flippantly question that on both counts. As much in honor of Bruce taking the trouble to be sly as anything else, Charlene tossed her head back and told him:

"Show me, then, Sergeant York."

"You need to get down on your belly," he said, with what sounded to her like actual apology in his tone.

She and Owen were always the clothes horses of the bunch, and she had on nearly new garardine slack^s and a Brigham light-wool shirt much too good for wiggling around on the ground. Besides, both Rosellen and Kate had done their firing standing up, using the hood of the truck as a gun rest. Charlene made sure of Bruce for some judicious moments, then went to her knees, and silkily stretched face-down in the grass.

"Woo-oo!" Neil let out, but the others stayed silent, watching.

Kneeling next to Charlene, Bruce held the rifle where he wanted it against her right shoulder and instructed her to squirm until she got herself comfortable in the prone position. And she did begin to feel cupped to the ground, the shapetaking sensation of it meeting her from

her bosom and diaphragm down her middle to the pelvic press of earth.

"Shift your--lower half out to the left," Bruce's voice came.

She maneuvered her legs in that direction.

"Not quite there yet," Bruce again, then a pause before she heard him ask Owen: "Okay to show her by hand, mister of the house?"

"You're the family sharpshooter, but be a little careful where you aim those hands," Owen's retort drew a general chuckle.

Then typical Bruce, he yelled the warning "Everybody close your eyes!" as he guided her hips with his fingertips, showing her by touch where to make move. "Keep your shoulder where it is and the gun straight ahead like that," he directed, voice back to normal, "but the rest of you has to angle out some more to the left, there, that's it."

Kate looked on in wonder. Miss Fastidious was getting dirt down her front, cheatgrass barbs in her slacks and socks, and she didn't even seem to care.

Neil was watching as if wanting to memorize Bruce's hands and Charlene's anatomy. Why couldn't he have been the one to think of this? Look at the leeway instruction gave a guy, right out in the open.



"Almost nearly ready, just about," Bruce funned in encouragement to Charlene. "Bring your right leg up some," he tapped the side of her knee, "to jack the pressure off your breathing, okay?" She felt her chest lift itself just enough. By now Bruce was administering her ankles. "Toes out--there you go, stabilizes the legs." Her feet, in his prescribed imaginary triangle from the resting toes up through the inturned heels, all at once did become invincibly anchored.

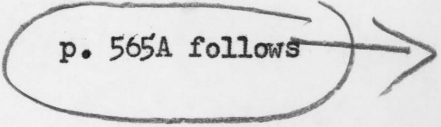
"Last little tricky part next." Now she held the rifle firmly, Bruce steadying the length of it against her shoulder and below the bone of her cheek and out to where the gunstock and its slim barrel resided in her hand, saying as he did so, "You need to plant your elbow right under the gun, line everything up along your arm. Feel it come to rest?" Immediately, she could: the angle of her arm magically taking the weight of the rifle and propping in place as firmly as strutwork.

"You look pretty solid," Bruce couldn't help sounding pleased.

"Now all you got to do is take your time and aim."

While she did so, she spoke up for the first time, over her shoulder but obviously to Owen:

p. 565A follows



"How about letting me have a couple of practice shots, on account of it's such a nice day?"

"What're those," Owen wondered, "Toston rules? This is the part the rest of us never get in on," he advised the other three onlookers, forgetting that it applied to Rosellen, too. "To be a Tebbet."

One side of the coin of Rosellen was transfixed with the story, right in front of her eyes, of Bruce coaxing Charlene into markswomanship. The opposite side wanted to know what was going on, where did Bruce come up with being this slick at gunnery instruction and since when did Charlene care whether she could hit the broad side of a fencepost or not? But after the remark Owen had just made, she felt she had better pitch in for the sisterly side of the family a little. "You bet, a Tebbet knows the angles. Show these gorillas how it's done, Charlene."

Charlene aligned the .22's sights by fractional movements, adjustments as devoted as licks of love. The round pin top of the rifle's front sight steadied for her into the matching notch on the rear sight. She held her breath on the first shot, and it flew just high of the post. Murmuring from where he squatted beside her, Bruce instantly coached

that she needed to take a deep breath, let it out ever so gradually, and squeeze the trigger somewhere in that relaxed slide of its outgo. She drew in air as he instructed, the ground meeting it under her. Her exhale coaxed the shot, which with a nicking sound tore a silver splinter off the fencepost. Her third shot thudded squarely into the post. So did her fourth. Her fifth, too.

"Okay, deadeye, hold your fire," Bruce awarded her the contest.

He loped across the coulee to the fencepost and carefully placed the blasting cap in a split in the wood. He walked grinning back up to the picnic site, where Charlene still lay prone.

Bruce and the others all ~~half~~^{held} held their breaths as she took time in sighting, regulating herself. Then Charlene fired, and the post blew apart.

—————



Why now?

He hurried up the ridge toward the houseboat, breathing hard, his tightened Adam's apple not making the process any easier.

Why in the name of the Nazarene couldn't this have waited until after...

Of course, better if it hadn't ever happened, it's never a pretty thing when...But still, why now?

Proxy in bed yet, trying for a full morning's sleep, opened an eye as he hurled in. "What now?" she yawned. "Forget your dingus?"

"I've to go to Plentywood," Darius let out between his teeth. "I'd like you with."

Startled, Proxy let loose her questions by the bunch. "You sure? Right this frigging moment? What for?"

"A funeral."

#

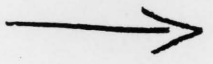
Near the top of the town, overlooking the square streets of Plentywood and the bends of Big Muddy Creek and turning a paintless cheek to the new county courthouse being built with WPA largesse, the Temple of Labor

p. 567A follows →

was surrounded with trucks and pickups, the Packard a distinct minority among them. Proxy had burned up the miles from Fort Peck, asking Darius only once if he didn't want a turn at driving. "If I so much as hit a mosquito with Tom Harry's vehicle, I would never hear the end of it," he begged off.

At the door of the hall Lawrence Mott met them, a leaning tower of grief. With a few quick blinks, Proxy wiped away her reaction and put on the straight face intrinsic to prostitution, poker, and other pursuits she had been around. Behind his thick eyeglasses Mott ^{squeezed his eyes nearly shut} ~~squinted~~ to keep tears from brimming.

"Sorry to hear of this, Lawrence," Darius offered, along with his



hand which instantly was lost in Mott's grip. They stood that way, oddly like first lovers holding hands, until Proxy cleared her throat significantly. ~~delicately~~ Darius indicated her. "My wife, ahmm, Susannah."

Proxy made herself look steadily up into the eyes, big as onions behind jar glass, while Mott leaned nearer and peered until he could take in the details of her face. "We thank you for this show of support, Mrs. Duff."

"Least we could do, seems like." Before she could come up with anything to tack onto that, Darius took her elbow in surprisingly formal fashion and they promenaded on into the meeting hall, where the crowd was already wall to wall. Slatbutt wooden folding chairs had been set up in solemn rows, and the people sitting in them were craning around uncomfortably.

Darius stopped short, all at once his hand tightening so hard on Proxy's elbow she reached across to make him quit. "Damnation," she heard him let out under his breath.

In the front row, Aagot Mott was crying in a way that would shear your heart out. It took Proxy no time to realize, though, that Darius

was staring beyond the sobbing mother to the catafalque and the casket it supported. The cloth draped over those was the Red flag, the hammer and sickle centered squarely on the casket of nine-year-old Harald Mott.

As Darius stood frozen, Proxy by habit reconnoitered the entire room. Wuh oh, he doesn't know the half of it yet. Maybe she was not up on politics, but anyone with an eye in her head could see that the draperies which swagged the windows were also red with the gold hammer-and-sickle embossed, blazoning Communism out to the town.

Darius ~~lurched a little from a clout~~ ~~felt a half-clout~~ on his shoulder, Mott's gesture as he passed them in the aisle and made his way toward the casket. Without quite knowing how he dropped there, Darius found himself sitting in the middle of a row of sunbaked men wearing their marrying-and-burying suits and stoveworn women in dresses of somber shades. Proxy now had a grip on him, and the voice at the front of the meeting hall, keening yet reverberant, could only be Lawrence Mott launching into eulogy.

cc

Drowned while at a boy's delights, juggling minnows in the creek,
Harald Earl Mott, beloved son.

Out these windows, Mott's pealing voice intoned, you could see

to the sharp spot on the creekbank where Harald had fallen in.

Thus the swags, the proper frames through which to ~~see a life~~ ^{view a lost life} of promise / such as Harald's.

For young though this lost son was--Mott dipped his voice in the direction of his wife's suppressed sobs--Harald was a Red. A brave fighter for the day.

And if there was any solace, Lawrence Mott announced as though comforting a filled cathedral, it was that Harald now would forever stay so, the littlest comrade under the banner of the struggle.

There was more but Darius let in little of it, hearing instead the shifting of bodies on chair slats and stiff dress shoes flexing against the floor. Of all the audience, probably only Proxy sat still throughout Mott's performance, and even she peeked sideways every so often at the vein hammering blue in Darius's temple.

"And now, please, turn to page thirty-two," Mott brought it to conclusion at last. "We will sing the anthem of Harald's cause, and our own."

People reached under their chairs, then, after a moment of uncertainty,

stood up to sing. Proxy with twin indents of intentness between her eyebrows flipped past "Joe Hill" and "Pie in the Sky" ^{When You Die} to the proper page and held the little songbook over to share with Darius. He didn't bother to glance down at it.

DMP copy
]
"The workers' flag is deepest red,
It shrouded oft our martyred dead."
[

Darius's voice quit on him after the first line. The Temple of Labor congregation was doing a morose droning job of the song, but there was no missing the gallant rhythm, no escaping, ever, the ~~remembered~~ ^{habitual} little blown tromp of this anthem. Like a chanting wind in the forest of memory, Jaramala's whistling of this, ~~wordless habit of creed.~~ ^{Tim,} man, wherever you took yourself off to, you managed to miss the choir at its worst.

]
"And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold
Their life-blood dyed its every fold."
[

Proxy thought it was a hell of a note that while Darius felt free to clam up, she was ~~expected~~ ^{expected} ~~supposed~~ to keep singing along with this. She gave him a notifying glower, but nothing seemed to register on him right now,

so she concentrated back onto the ^{red-covered} songbook. Stiff, cold, blood; these Bolshies were as grim as Baptists.

"Then raise the scarlet standard high;

Beneath its folds we'll live and die..."

If only it would stay raised. Darius stared ^{forward} at the towering frame of Mott, songbook held up close to the milky eyeglasses. Elsewise the folds slap us in the face, do they not, Lawrence.

"Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer..."

And Crawford. I killed you for flinching, did I not, George. For your treason to hungry men, for giving in to yourself instead of holding to. For the sneer behind pocketing those food tickets, I took the life-blood out of you. For the bloody words atop this tune.

"We'll keep the red flag flying here."

"This tears it," Darius ^{rasped out} ~~said~~ on their way to the car.

"I would sure think so," Proxy concurred. "Those farmers looked like somebody shat in their hat."

He seemed not to have heard her. "You saw the expressions on them."

The churchly ones you could expect it of, even though Mott didn't seem to, poor damned sad baboon. But even those who aren't Bible-habited..." Darius broke off. They might have swallowed Fusion, a little socialism-and-water, at first, these restless farmers, but undiluted Communism on a funeral day was bound to set their tidy moral Scandinavian stomachs to churning, damn Mott, poor Mott, poor everybody in the Red Corner now, keened in Darius. Proxy knew his word for the miles-away look on him now, the vacancy there: elsewhere. As if to himself, Darius finally murmured: "That--that in there shook them."

And not just them, Proxy thought. These politics of his always were the one thing he was a Holy Joe on, but Darius was going to have to do some adjusting now. "Listen, don't let it get you down. This isn't the only Bolshie outfit in the whole--"

He opened the passenger-side door of the Packard and slumped into the car seat, slamming the door ~~shut~~ in her face.

"Well, horse pucky, Darius, what've you got to be so frigging upset about," she lit into him, or tried to, through the closed car window. "The man lost his little boy, how can you expect him to think straight at a time like--"

"Evidently you can't," he intoned, although so low she couldn't

hear it.

Proxy bit the corner of her lip and marched around to the driver's side. Isn't this going to be fun and a half, driving home with him shut up like a constipated toad. But as soon as the car started, so did Darius.

"Why does it forever happen? Almost more damned times than I can count, the movement has tripped over itself this way." Proxy had the Packard floored, telephone poles ~~flitting~~ ^{flicking} by like fenceposts, but she let up a little to keep tab on ~~Darius~~ ^{his expression} and what he was saying.

"You get people halfway lined up behind the cause," he was going on, "manage to make them see what a fraud the old order is, push things to a brink of getting some good done--and then it all clatters down."

"Hey, maybe not all." Half by habit--she didn't usually have to perform this while steering a car--she reached across and put her hand on a friendly visit to the inside of his thigh; if that didn't cheer him up, she didn't know what would.

But Darius wasn't having any. "Mott. I know he's a grieved man," she heard him say as if to himself. "But he lost all sense of tactics with that funeral."

—

DROP CAP

*at the end of that summer*The camera came to town ~~that autumn~~. It took a look around, day

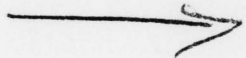
by day, aimed by the famous photographer. First it found a metal-hooded welder at work on a dredge cutterhead big as a whale skull, and then a cow munching over a find in an overflowing garbage barrel in a spectacularly junky back alley of Wheeler. It registered Colonel Parmenter and Major Santee and Captain ^a~~Briscoe~~ spiffy and officious in their uniforms, but next Ruby Smith vigilantly eyeing the take in the Wheeler Inn. The camera seemed deliriously random, popping up on its tripod in unlikeliest places, but it knew what it knew. Into its film packs, on measured winks of light ~~which~~ ^{that} would be distilled into famous magazine pages in New York City, were to be put Fort Peck Dam and the damworkers' shantytowns.

—

Extra early, Neil started the truck's long low-gear climb out of the bottomland at the homestead, the morning fog off the river sealing away the terrain above so that only a steady amount of steep grade, about a hundred feet of sloping twin ruts, kept showing up ahead. The lugged drone of the truck was monotonously unchanging, too. Nonetheless, Neil whistled a bit, the warbly swatch of "Aura Lee" that it took a

virtuoso to do; he could not help but feel he had the jump on the day, plenty of time to make this haul between now and noon when he had to go on shift at the dredgeline. Glad, too, to have the last of the floorboards and siding onto the truck and no more of these scavenger runs to the homestead. The Old Man can kiss the place goodbye now. He palmed the gearstick knob beside his knee for a moment, tattoo of vibration up from the gearbox into his hand. The ~~Double~~^{Triple} A took a beating on these hilly hauls, but he had it in mind to snag Bruce or Owen one of these soon weekends to help him take down the transmission, check the gearteeth and all.

The truck finally dug free of the fog, up ~~into~~^{toward} the grass horizons of the ridgeland. Not quite dawn yet here, Neil was surprised to find; the sky was staying more inky than he expected, making him wonder if his



watch was fast. Or maybe the fog had something to do with it. This last climb of the road from the homestead switchbacked into a long curve eastward, and even before the road topped the ridge, he saw that the lid of cloud lay on the river in that direction the entire way ahead. At Fort Peck they doubtless were cussing the damp gray morning, and he whistled some more at the prospect that the fog would burn off into a bright day by the time he hit the dam.

The sun came up now, Neil conscientiously squinting down ^{toward} ~~at~~ the side of the road, same as he always did the first minutes of bucking the sun on any of these drives into dawn or dusk. Foggier than he'd thought; the cheatgrass along the bank of the road seemed dim today, not catching the first light in pastel flame flickers as usual.

Curious, Neil glanced up to gauge the sunrise and instantly ducked his head as if slashed in the eye, both eyelids clamped shut but a green jagged arc of light under the left one.

Everything tipped. His hands on his eye had cost him the steering wheel, the truck off the edge of the road, then he balled himself up inside the rollover, hearing the sound of houseboards avalanching.

—————

"What the dickens--?" Birdie Hinch flung down his shovel and got ready to run, if he only knew where. "It's turning night again already!"

The dredgeline foreman himself appeared dumbstruck at the darkness falling at 6:30 a.m., until he remembered.

"Eclipse. It was on the radio. Couple of minutes' worth, is all, then it'll be regular light again. Everybody take a smoke, why not, while this gets over with."

"End of the world, Birdie!" someone on the crew teased in the double dimness. "St. Peter'll be sorting us out here in a minute, you better figure out which chicken you're going to start repenting on."

"Lay off him," the foreman called out. Then to Birdie: "But don't be gawking up there, in case that fog lifts. They say you can get your eyeballs fried by looking into one of those."

—

Nothing broken on him. Except there in the eye, the green wound blazing there.

The power of panic drove Neil up out of the toppled truck, wrenching the driver's-side door open into the sky overhead, then scrambling out like a frantic sailor through an escape hatch. He lit on the ground hard,

the truck on its side hissing shrilly through its radiator. His back to the sunrise, he tried clapping a hand, then both hands, over the eye but it did not help any. The scald of color, the shape of a large glowworm, stayed vivid within the eye, no, Jesus, brighter! when he covered it that way.

Neil grasped by now that this was not from the shatter of the windshield, some sliver of glass. Somehow this was a slice of the sun itself driven into his eye. The, what was it called, corona, branded green into his vision; they'd been warned about it in school every so many years, blindness if you ever looked into an eclipse. But he hadn't even known this morning there was going to be an-- The thing swam, maddeningly front and center, always just out from his nose. This wasn't blindness, this was maybe worse, something forever there you didn't want to see, couldn't stand to see but couldn't keep from seeing. Hunched, Neil stared down at the ground, the crooked crown of sunfire against it. His throat tightened so much he felt half-choked as he tried to think how to deal with this. My God, how could you ever even sleep with this ~~burning like a green coal~~ ^{smoldering} in your eye.

In a jolting lope he ran down the road toward the river. When he entered the fog, the sting of color grew even more vivid again, lifting and falling according to his strides but never leaving his vision, never dimming from its hot turquoise arc inside his eyeball.

Panting desperately from his plunge down the ridge and from the terror of the brand in his eye, Neil reached the river. He clambered out onto a gravel bar, dropped to his knees and madly sloshed water, handfuls as fast as he could scoop, onto the eye. The cold shock of the Missouri made him gasp, shudder, but he kept applying the water until his hands grew too numb. The fuzzy green eyebrow still glowed in the center of his vision.

He lurched to his feet, gravel clattering under him, the river purling past, and looked around wildly, trying to shoot glances here and there more quickly than the green tuft of fire could follow. But it was always there, in fact it seemed to squirm to wherever he looked an instant ahead of his sense of looking there. Impossible as outrunning your shadow, he realized this was.

But what, then--can't go through life like this, can't, this'd

drive a person batty before-- Got to do something with--

It hit him then, that maybe the only way to get the green burn out would be to have the eye taken out.

Doctors, do they do that? Jesus, though, can I even stand it long enough to get to a--

He knew nobody in his right mind could pluck his own eye out.

What, though, if it drove him crazy enough to?

Quit thinking that! Don't even--I--That's crazy to even--But what'm I--

He was afraid to even cry, not knowing what that might do to the crippled eye. By now he had backed off the gravel bar, floundering up onto the riverbank. Dazzles of light came off the water at him now, the sun had cut through the fog. Neil ducked away, frantically turning his head toward the stand of cottonwoods. The green corona in his eye merged somewhat with the green mass of leaves.

Trembling, he tested this out. As long as he kept his eyes fixed into the cottonwood patch of green, the corona's clinging glow seemed not quite so bright against it. Every time he shifted his eyes to

anywhere else, there it flared. The alfalfa field, when he tried it, produced too deep a green, the sun-molten one crawled floridly atop it.

He snapped his gaze back to the cottonwoods again.

Quivering with hope now, he forced himself to sit still on the riverbank, knees hugged to his chest, and stare on and on into the leaves.

Surprisingly hard, to make yourself do nothing but stare. Rosellen.

He thought about her, craved having her here but in the next instant

decided no, how could he explain even to her what was going on in his eye. He tried to occupy himself with the place, ^{thoughts of the past life} ~~memories~~ here. Cold

mornings, the boy him taking his turn at the chores starting with the

~~#~~ milkcow, milking the first squirts onto his hands to warm them; Owen

had taught him that trick. Bruce and him, twinned in even where they

slept, those tussles the two of them waged over who was taking up too

much of the bed, until the night the Old Man came into their room and

laid a cedar fencepost down the center of the sheets for a boundary.

The Old Man and Mother, their long devotion to disagreement about this

place. The river chiming in, any ~~season~~ ^{season} ~~season~~, road of water that the luck

of a year either came on or didn't. Their last winter here, the big
freeze that left this stretch of the Missouri and its tributary Go-Devil
Creek like a series of ice rinks; the cows from the Austin ranch that the
Duffs were wintering on shares slipped and slid on the ice, the calves
were born backwards that hellish calving time. Then, though, the annual
hope that was alfalfa, the melt in the mountains coming down the canyon
as rapid tan water and perking into the riverbank fields to push up the
green growth. But before spring was half off the calendar, summer was
crowding in, the Old Man going hermitic once more, Mother skeptical about
everything, Bruce itching to pull out, himself trying to fathom where
things were heading. Summer of grasshoppers again. The view from the
running-board during the poisoning, the tires of the pickup leaving behind
twin slicks of crushed grasshoppers. Then that feeb in the government
Chevy. Then the dam. And the truck. And this...

Gradually he could determine that the green squiggle was fading,
just perceptibly. After many minutes, it turned to dull red. Wild with
relief, when he shifted his gaze off the cottonwood canopy now, after

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each blink the glow seemed to go down a little in color.

When the last of the sun scar was finally gone, Neil, drained as he was, thought to check his watch. As best he could tell, the immense time it had taken for the green fire to fade from his eyesight was an hour.

—

"It's all beat to hell on that one side," Owen diagnosed the truck after they had righted it with a tractor borrowed from the Austin ranch. "But the garage in Glasgow can bang most of that out, don't you think?" He badly wanted Neil to think that, rather than notions toward a new truck. Charlene will have my scalp for sure if we lay out money for another damned rig.

Going through the motions with Owen of looking over the mistreated Model Triple ~~Double~~ A, while Rosellen tried to stay at his side and yet out of the way, Neil appeared both dulled down and uneasy. He still had trouble believing what had happened here had really happened. There was no telling how much longer Bruce was going to keep ragging the daylights out of him for trying to teach the truck to roll over like a cocker spaniel. His mother, on the other hand, stated "These things happen, Neil," without managing to give

p. 581C follows →

it a reassuring sound. The Old Man had simply looked at him as if Neil had turned back into a nine-year-old. Except for Rosellen, he had only told any of them that the sun got in his eye and the truck flipped over when he lost sight of the edge of the road. He knew it was like saying he had been singed with a match when he had been jabbed by a red-hot (green-hot) branding iron. But how could he say to them he had been singled out by an eclipse?

"Sure some mess, huh?" Neil muttered to Rosellen as if he hadn't heard Owen's prescription for the truck.

ital "You're not hurt, that's all that counts. Tell me again. The eclipse and all," she said yesterday after he'd had to hitch rides all the way back to Fort Peck and she was holding him.

She had begged to come with them on this salvage of the wreck and the interminable tow job ahead, and now she put her arm through Neil's, the way she figured a wife was supposed to furnish adhesive encouragement here, although she was close to

→
p. 581D follows →

bursting with the belief that yesterday would have been her real chance.

She would have given anything to have been along with him when the sun struck his eye, when the truck somersaulted. By now she had thought up

all different versions, how she would have raced on foot the five miles

to the Austin ranch for help ~~for Neil~~ or stayed and cradled ⁱⁿ ~~him~~ her arms

while the thing in his eye went away, whatever was best for him. Never

in a jillion years would she have said so to Neil, bunged up and feeling

low as he was, but the same way she had been secretly a little thrilled

by ^{his} ~~Neil's~~ inexplicable fistfight with the tough Swede that time, what had

happened to him here put ^{her} ~~Rosellen's~~ imagination on full perk.

Past her, Owen snuck another hard look at Neil. It wasn't like Neil to spill a truck on a straight dry stretch of road like this; Owen felt half-embarrassed for his brother the minute he saw the wreck site.

Maybe there was some angle to this that Neil wasn't owning up to,

but it was an odd damned piece of driving.

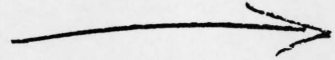
"That's what you think we better do, then?" Owen applied on him again. "Give the guys at Moore Motors a go at pounding it back into

p. 581E follows →

shape?"

"Sure," Neil at last said, swallowing. "I guess."

—————



The camera all but licked the lips of its lens when the big tunnel liners, plate[#]-steel culverts thirty feet in diameter and cobwebbed inside with crisscross support rods to hold them rigid until they were placed in the diversion tunnels, came into view. What the famous photographer was famous for were photographs of sections of machinery so abstract they looked like metal fossils, and here was a spiral pattern, seashell magnified by industrial design to the size of a silo, to make you dizzy with awe. Workmen, silhouetted, were climbing all over in there, hitchhiking on mid-air, on the support rods--the rods and the boltcollars in the middle into which they were cinched were called tension spiders--and even one man clinging on the outside of the big round form, upper left, as if he was at the ten o'clock point of scaling the clockface of Big Ben. The tripod spraddled out, the camera eye focused. That's fine, perfect, called out the photographer to the men glancing down in curiosity, don't look at the camera, and not more than half of them did.

Darius sipped thermos tea, hanging at the edge of a group of catskinners greasing and fueling up their bulldozers. He had been

up on the opposite side of the tunnel liner, bolting down a flange at the two o'clock spot, when he spied the photographer coming. Now he waited, deliberately out of the picture, impassively watching the others ride the tension spiders.

—

Rosellen popped out of the Ad Building at quitting time, pretty as a bouquet, yanking her aquamarine scarf out of her coat sleeve to put it on.

He stood a moment, just admiring, then fell into step with her.

"Thought I'd walk you home. Now that we're afoot."

"This isn't the previous Neil," she gave him a grin and glommed on to his arm in a kidding way. "Coming up to a married woman in broad daylight. Next thing, you'll be asking directions to my room."

Catercorner from the Ad Building, the hotel of their first night drew a comical gawk simultaneously from them both, then they chuckled together and began walking up through the kempt Corps townsite toward Wheeler.

November's evidence was in the wind, chilly on Rosellen's legs, teasing at Neil's hat. This was nifty, though, she decided, sashaying

home arm in arm, ~~Neil's~~^{his} familiar long frame the warmest thing in Fort Peck's larder of wind. There was no fancier word needed for it. Nifty of him, too, to think to--

"Maybe we ought to clear out of here," she heard come from him, not in any dreamy planning way but as if it had been pent up. "Tell Fort Peck we've had a sufficiency."

"Neil, no. Why?"

"We're going to need to eventually anyway. Trestle monkeys aren't long for this world here. About all that's left is the channel trestle and then my kind of work shuts down to--

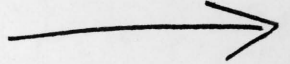
"Mine'll still be going, though. The last two people on this dam will be one working and me doing paperwork and paychecks on him." That didn't bring the laugh from him she'd hoped for. A little wildly, she looked at him from the side, wondering where the Neil who always preached perseverance to her had gone. Clear out, when this place was going great guns? She couldn't even imagine anything to match the dam, the stories, the ingredients of life here. "And didn't you say yourself there'll still be hauling jobs when they start topping off the dam?"

"Yeah, I did," he said in a thin tone.

"Then, what? What, sweetheart?" she persisted. "Your accident?

Is that what has you thinking like this?"

He bridled at her choice of words. What had happened, there with



the truck, his eye, the green--he shook his head sharply. Beyond accident. Wasn't ^uaccident ^usomething that happened to you when you were about half-asking for it, like not checking your safety belt and climbing spikes before you scaled up a bridge piling? This other came down out of the fairy blue and slugged you. Tried to blind you.

"Rosellen, I'm not asking for static, over this. It was just an idea. I'll--we'll ^{need}~~have~~ to take a look at things before the topping-off gets underway, though."

She
"I know." ~~Rosellen~~ was still wondering how they had gotten into this nearest thing to a fight. "When we have to, we will."

How in the name of Holy Pete can a guy be expected to sort it all out, wondered Neil. What was ^{it}~~that~~ Owen said, To be a Tebbet.

Sisters didn't look to be an any more understandable proposition than brothers. Charlene would give just about anything to kiss off Fort Peck, Neil knew, and here Rosellen couldn't be budged from the place.

They walked on home, not saying anything.

#

The camera went up in an airplane to look down on Fort Peck. Glimpses, though, were all it could manage; the dam project from overhead proved

to be simply too big and sprawling and, well, unphotogenic. The four tall gatehouses that would regulate the river into the tunnels under the dam were being erected on geography that looked reptilian. ^{curved} The Fort Peck townsite, in its extreme regularities, looked like sets of false teeth in a rusty basin. So it went, uncooperative earth down there. The famous photographer was considerably less than pleased, but did manage to shoot a panorama of the town of Wheeler in underexposed glowery murk, which the editors in New York would have cropped off if they had not wanted a glowering murky sky over their notion of Wheeler. But how bright did New York look when it was two years old?

Owen watched the airplane make its circles. There's what I should have done. Grabbed Charlene out of the beauty shop today, told her we're celebrating, hired us some wings and gone up for a spin. Not that his mood could have been any higher, even up there.

He was on the deck of the Gallatin, the first dredge that had started moving fill onto the dam and thus his favorite, in a sidepool of the river where an immense borrow[#]-pit of dredging material had been clawed out. Exultant in every direction, he kept taking time out from

everything he had to do and sneaking long looks at the dam. The dam now stood in two distinct halves, marching ramparts with a single vee of channel between them. The west side's dike section, as it was called because the fill was being banked against the low hills there, was the harder to appreciate because it fit like a jigsaw into the existing ~~geography, but that was the plan.~~ ^{exactly as planned.} The east half of the dam, two full miles of engineered ridge with the core pool up atop it and every conceivable piece of construction equipment all over it, that eastern half was self-evidently prodigious. Owen, who had been to Gettysburg, knew that the piece of earth he and his dredges had patted into shape here was bigger than ~~Seminary~~ ^{Cemetery} Ridge where entire armies fought.

This lovely fifth day of November, he didn't mind shutdown for 1936 at all. His dredges and pipelines had moved a magnificent five million cubic yards of fill in October. They had done the same in September. As far as Owen as fillmaster could see, they could pretty much do the same from here on, picking up in '37 at the same ~~sweet~~ ^{swift} pace and pour fill around on the dam like gravy onto mashed potatoes after the plugging of the river, next summer, and keep it right up through the topping off of the dam in '38. No, ~~to hell with~~ ^{never mind} the airplane, and celebrating in thin

air. This was where he wanted to be, this day. On the Gallatin. Amid ^{the pack of power-feed pontoons,} the mosquito fleet of workboats, the plump booster-pump barges, the dredgeline crews uncoupling the huge pipes from the Gallatin and the three other ^S~~dr~~ges, Madison, Jefferson, Missouri, the dredge crew here joking its way through the season's last tasks. Everywhere around him, the navy of Owen Duff.

Calhoun the dredgemaster had ~~come~~ ^{clambered} down from the lever house and was standing next to him. Owen, still telling himself he really ought to go topside himself and buckle down to all the ^{paper} ~~chores~~ of shutdown in ~~in~~ in his fillmaster quarters--got to get at that stuff, Duff; on the other hand, ^{until we're in winter harbor} the hell with it ~~for a minute~~--turned around to see what Cal wanted.

"The guys, uh, kind of would like to mark the occasion. They wonder if it's okay, though."

"Why, what do they want to do?"

~~Calhoun~~ ~~Flagen~~ glanced aside as if just noticing the tan sidepool of the river. "Throw you in."

Owen shot a look to the Gallatin's crew, two decks of grins directed at him.

"Hell, I'll do it myself!"

They cheered as he stripped off his short sheepskin mackinaw-- he would need all the warmth he could get after that water--and tossed his Stetson down on it. He stepped to the very edge of the Gallatin's deck, feeling giddy, feeling perfect. He turned around, his back to the water. The way kids did when they slung a big rock into a creek, he sang out: "And Billy Mitchell SANK the battleship!" And peeled off backward, arms flung, legs out, falling body given over to gravity, smacking the water with a thunderous splash. When he came back up, even above his sputtering and chattering and thrashing he could hear the dredge crew laughing like lunatics, and as best he could while swimming for the Gallatin, Owen laughed crazily too.

—

The famous photographer, who was a woman, threw the Corps officers into a tizzy by wanting to visit Happy Hollow. When she asked about the brothel situation, the Colonel, who had been providing her his own driver, hemmed and hawed that well, yes, it was only to be expected, construction boomtowns had plenty of whatevers. Then let's see one of your whatevers, the photographer said, and off they and the camera headed, to the Riding Academy.

The photo session in the parlor of the Riding Academy did not go particularly well--the only one who didn't look self-conscious was the house dog flopped on the flowered linoleum--but within the hour Owen and everybody else in the Ad Building had heard the story that when the photographer asked the names of the uneasy trio of subjects on duty in the parlor, she got back the jingle, "We're just three destitute prostitutes." Well, maybe. By the end of the afternoon, Charlene had heard from half a dozen different hair customers the tale that while the Colonel's driver went into the Riding Academy first to clear the way for the photographer, a drunk tapped on the car window and asked if she was in the market for a man. "I already have one," she said. "He's inside." The drunk stared and said, "You are the most even-tempered woman I ever heard of." Well, maybe.

The night after the election, Darius was in a mood a crocodile would have spat out.

He had just paid off Proxy the ten silver dollars he had bet her, against the chorus of beery jubilation roaring around them. Landslide for Roosevelt understated it, even Darius could recognize. FDR had won

every state in the Union but Maine and what was that other one, not Piedmont, Vermont. Locally, if the Blue Eagle was a fair sample, Wheeler was greeting Roosevelt's re-election as though it were the civic version of the Second Coming.

Darius grouched, "I thought you told me you do not know squat about politics."

Proxy gave him her wickedest smile. "I don't." ~~Which, the more~~

~~he thought about it, made it worse.~~

"Guess what, though," she provided him next. "Had my picture taken. Gonna be famous," taffying it out to fay muss. When that didn't bring any kind of a rise from him, Proxy put her hand on his arm, trying to fondle him out of his grumpiness. "That photographer came in here so p.o.'d about the Riding Academy, she took pictures like crazy. Had me stand here at the bar all by my lonesome, toss down a few drinks. She said I'm a natural subject--^{what}so do you think of your pretty-posey wife, bub?"

Darius passed a hand over the bottom part of his face. "I think, Proxy, that the camera is not nearly the only one who likes to lap you up--meaning myself, of course," he roughly tagged on, "and secondly,

that I would like a series of drinks."

"Don't get too plotzed to polka, later on," she decided was the best she could ^{do} with him for now. "Listen, I have to go be dancing, this is the biggest ~~deezy of a night~~ ^{we've had in here} ~~Tom has had~~ since the Fourth of July."

Darius felt her kiss on his temple, then was alone in the celebrating mob.

A very drunk constituent tottered in next to Darius, imparted "Here's to the greates' ^{kg} president ever, Frank'n Eleanor Roosevelt," clinked his beer bottle against Darius's before Darius could whisk his away, then surged deeper into the saloon. May you have a dozen noses and pepper in your snuff, Darius bestowed after him. Yet Darius had to grant, even through the beers he himself was polishing off, that Roosevelt was only the, what did they call it, proximate cause of his dreadful state of mind. Plentywood. Mott. The Red Corner that had paled out. Those were the real shafts in the ribs. Mott had been soundly defeated. No, trounced. No, ground into the dirt of Sheridan County. So much for Fusion, the fuse that fizzled. Back to square one again. No, Darius, be honest with yourself; if you can't, who will? Back before square one, that's where the movement ^{stands} ~~stood~~ now, somewhere off the damnable political

checkerboard entirely. That funeral...the boy...the same with Crawford...

why does blind chance forever have to intrude every blasted time we...

Darius brought himself to, and turned to face the next tormentor awaiting him, grinning sardonically down the bar. The election bet he had lost to Tom Harry amounted to twenty dollars, fortunately unbeknownst to Proxy.

———
Hugh had not intended to be drawn into the election celebration, but wasn't it forever being said that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was magnetic? Here in the screeching Wheeler Inn therefore ~~he~~, Hugh, was; attracted by the historic moment, joining in every toast to the shantytowns' favorite President, the begetter of Fort Peck Dam, the big wheel of the New Deal. What was that joke, yes he had it now ~~oh yes~~: A man's got to believe in something, so I believe I'll have another drink. Beer providentially in hand. Bottle in either hand, now that he took conscious inventory. Hugh shrewdly put one back on the bar in reserve, pleased with his reasoning power. He had handed his wages over to Meg as usual, last week's payday; she'd be baffled how he had the money to go on this toot. Confusion to our nemeses, eh, Darius? Wiping beer foam from his

mouth with the back of his hand, drunk but still capable, Hugh bit the skin there gently but firmly to keep from laughing aloud. Wouldn't do to laugh out loud at Meg.

#

The way Bruce had it figured, he was owed a little fun. Wasn't diving season all but over, now that Owen was putting the dredges into winter harbor? Hadn't he weathered the bends, survived the river again, soldiered through this tricky ~~darned~~ year, ice to overheated, like a good fellow? ^{Kate} ~~Rhodie~~ wouldn't be home until after midnight from dishing out T-bones to the election celebrants, and he could swing by and pick up Jackie from Mother and the Old Man before that and put him snug abed, then be waiting up casually to hear how ^{Katy's} ~~Rhodie's~~ night had gone. Meanwhile, there was his own to be tended to.

#

Look, Tom Harry just had explained to Darius, think of the United States as a ^{great} big envelope, and the only ^{states} ~~ones~~ that hadn't voted for Roosevelt were the two pitiful little stamps up in the corner.

Darius had begun remarking what an infuriating bastard Tom Harry could be without even half trying, when he heard at his ear:

"Hey, unk, celebrating the election? Old FDR sure showed them his rosy rear end, didn't he?"

Darius said with resignation, "Another country heard from." He made room for Bruce at the bar. "For the love of heaven, man, buy us a round before this barkeep steals the shoes off us."

Bruce in fact bought more than one, standing there spectating the fate of the world as argued by Darius and Tom Harry, but his heart wasn't in philosophy. Up on the bandstand, the ~~Rhythmaires~~^{Minstrelaires} were braying out dance music. A nice familiar tension started at the back of Bruce's throat. He peered over a bunch of heads and spied the whitish-blond hair.

"I haven't said hello to Proxy," ~~yet,~~^{yet,} Bruce let drop to Darius. "Guess I'll go pay my regards, maybe see if she'd like to dance with a relative for a change. Be okay with you?"

His uncle gave him a glance, then waved a dismissing hand and resumed on the education of Tom Harry.

Maybe it was his imagination, but Bruce thought Proxy studied him like he was horseflesh when he went over to her. "Everybody is on the

loose tonight, huh?" she met him with but included a little smile.

"You in here irrigating your way to health like the rest of them, Bruce?"

"A person can do better than lipping on a bottle," he observed, which cocked Proxy's smile a little sideways. "I know you get your fill of dancing," he went right on to, "but could you stand one more?"

She had to admit she was an eeny bit curious about Bruce. ~~Kate Rhonda~~

hung onto this flirtface for some reason. Maybe the kid had something to flirt about all the way down, so to speak.

Checking in Darius's direction, she made out that he was deep into telling Tom Harry the history lesson of the workers at The Times of London coming back from tea-break and finding that the owners had settled their labor dispute by wheeling in ~~Gatling~~ machine guns, The bloody Times of toffee-nose London, man! Which proved that not even the most elegant of the big bugs could be trusted, not FDR nor any--

To Proxy, history was one thing, commerce was another. "Sure, if you want to give it a whirl," she said to Bruce, taking care to make it seem a natural transaction. "If your money's no good, I can sic the rest of the family on you."

Hugh patted himself down three times, more surprised with each pat to find his pockets drained. Quite a feat, really, that the half of Darius's sum ~~to him~~ that he had set aside for this sort of liquid expenditure had already been expended, not to mention liquidated. Hugh shook his head in wonder at himself. Wouldn't he be up a dry creek without a tiddle if he didn't know precisely and exactly--ah ha! prezactly where to obtain further funds. Taking a woozy bearing toward an elaborately embroidered horseshoe on the back of a shirt, perched where its wearer could kibitz down at the Wheeler Inn's ceaseless poker game, Hugh began plowing through the press of bodies.

#

Proxy had danced with every kind of specimen, tall, short, neither, drunk to the gills, shy as virgins, obvious tomcats, puffy deacons in suits and vests, and once even with a traveling salesman with a wooden leg, and as far as she was concerned surprises were few and far between. Bruce was one. He danced like somebody who had been studying up on it since grade school.

"Will this do?" he asked as if he had a patent pending on it.

"Suits me," she had to admit. "In this job, people do more walking

on my feet than I do."

Bruce gave her the winning grin of a kid who always counts on getting the large half of anything. "Your tootsies will get good care from me."

He hugged her into him a little more, as other dancers squashed past on both sides of them. Dance[#] steps were mostly only a matter of survival,

in a crush of couples like this. Yet and so, Proxy could tell that

Bruce had a first-class sense of rhythm, surprising in somebody with

the male Duffs' customary build of long extremities joined with hard

knots; her main complaint about Darius so far had been that his bony

knees were wicked in bed.

"Not much running room on the floor tonight, is there," Bruce now observed softly, and pressed her close enough that she could feel the bump in his pants.

^{OK?} ~~Snug dancing was one thing, and Proxy if she~~^{IF} wanted to lure a potential John D. out to the Packard^{she} could put herself on him like melting beeswax. ~~But~~[≡] that wasn't the case with Bruce. She wasn't volunteering much, but he was front and center on her and exploring for more.

"Speaking of room, how about a little breathing space?" she made it sound like a suggestion.

Bruce's concentration was elsewhere. Among his fascinations were Proxy's slacks. Peter-cheaters. Is that why she always wears them, to string things out a while longer? Then her bountiful blouse. She's got a full house there, for sure. Maybe it was his imagination again, but he believed that her nipples were standing out more and more at attention, the cozier they danced.

Proxy got his attention by pulling on his earlobe.

"This is not such a real great idea," she told him.

"Bought this dance fair and square, didn't I?" he murmured, looking at her as if spooning her up. "So I get to lead. Relax and put yourself on automatic, why not?" ¹¹ Proxy. ¹²

Instead, she lifted onto her tiptoes to peer around Bruce toward the bar. The back of Darius's head was still evident as he stayed busy being disputatious with Tom Harry. The swaying throng of other dancers was solidly elbow to elbow surrounding her and Bruce, which was the only way you could get away with this. She smiled her smile of long practice

at Bruce and decided to give him a buckle job.

He appeared startled, then thrilled, then beyond that, when her right hand slid away from his back and crept around front and gripped onto his belt buckle, riding there jammed recklessly between them as they danced closer than close, then slowly the fingering reach down behind the buckle, touching exploratorily, skin greeting skin, the tips of her fingers cupping down over the tip of his ^{hard-on} ~~erection~~ and staying there.

There was not much motion to dancing like this, but what motion there was Bruce could feel with embarrassing intensity.

"Proxy, whoa," she could hear the strain in his whisper, "can we go--"

"Hm mm. A little buckle-fuck will fix you right up, don't you think?" she whispered mockingly back. "You bought yourself a dance.

This is a dance."

In alarm, agony, and a dizziness that seemed to extend all the way down to that place in his throat, Bruce thought the music would never let up. The instant it did, he was saying thickly: "Proxy, ^u~~Proxy~~ come on now, I'll wait out back or wherever until you--"