

~~of her hip, the sort of thing he wanted.~~

"Owen and Charlene made out all right in here," he said hopefully, remembering in fact how the bachelor version of himself had almost burnt up, from the inside out, watching Owen go home noons and nights to this cute trailer and cuter Charlene.

The scene out the window still had <sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ abstracted. "So what's going on? Are Mum Mum and I the only ones who aren't on idle time today?"

Bruce had been curious about that himself, the dredge shut down all this while. He came over to peer out beside <sup>her</sup>~~Rhonda~~, expecting more than not to see Owen storm up the gangplank and kick things into gear again.

Instead they both saw the eruption of action spreading out from the field telephone in the lever house, commotion that spilled down the decks into men running and shouting, "Dam!...Gone out!..."

<sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ half-spun, toward the door, the truck, the scream to be let out for Jackie and Meg, but Bruce caught her arm.

<sup>Katy</sup>~~Rhonda~~ "I don't think so, ~~Rhonda~~," he said with monumental calm. "Or we'd be seeing about a hundred-foot wall of water heading our way, wouldn't we."

am  
caps

# —

The ~~two-hundred-foot~~ deep gulch of the slide had eaten westward in the dam, along the core pool ~~for what looked like half a mile.~~ Owen knew that the core pool ~~would~~ <sup>must</sup> have emptied <sup>into the lake</sup> like a broken flume when the slide got underway, adding a lubricant into the shifting mass of fill. Oh God oh why... He plunged down the cavity of the core pool, the wet gravel making heavy going, and wallowed his way until he could struggle up onto the far part of the dam crest. The railroad tracks <sup>resumed</sup> ~~broke off~~ out of ~~there;~~ <sup>it</sup> ~~into mid-air,~~ beyond ~~them~~ the rest of the dam face, the three and a half miles of it westward, stood securely unchanged, another world entirely from the blowout of mud, gravel, water and stone. Grimy and bedraggled with it, Owen read the slippage like a textbook, sick inside himself at the lesson of half a mile of engineered earth strewn out into the lake.

Men along with it. Where's... Owen leaped from boulder to boulder down the riprap until he was at lake level, the muck-flat of the slide to his left, the islands of the broken-away sections of the dam face in front of him. He took a testing step out onto the slurry; there was enough gravel in it that he could flounder toward the broken line of ~~dredgeline~~ ~~dredge~~ pipe, pilings sprouting up from it like small bones. Portions



of the slide were large enough to have dry humps of ~~land~~<sup>ground,</sup> which he could gain footing on and plunge across to the next. ~~Owen~~<sup>He</sup> came up over one of these to be confronted with what looked like a crazy cannon, a Big Bertha elevated to fire into the lake. It stopped him cold for a moment, until he saw that it was a thirty-foot length of discharge pipe hurled atop the tipped-over cab of the crane.

The calculations Owen could not help doing as he plunged across the slide ~~flat~~<sup>worse than awful,</sup> were coming out ~~terrible~~. Five or six million cubic yards, he was sure it couldn't be any less, gone in this slippage. Sections of the dredgeline had been carried at least a thousand feet by the slide, every snaking surge of the big pipe amid enough damfill to bury the whole population of Montana, let alone a single missing Duff. Neil, damn you, where-- Neil could be anywhere out here, under any depth of muck. Yet most of the dredgeline, crippled as it was, had ridden out the slide, (been ushered down into the lake still oddly intact.)

Owen was at the first still-standing section of dredgeline now. filled He ~~filled~~ his lungs to shout Neil's name, looked out at the long stretch of kinked and zigzagging ~~dredgeline~~<sup>pipe</sup> in front of him, and held the lungful of breath. Beyond on the east shore he could see the intake-gate towers, four in a row, unscathed, people everywhere up there, and men coming down into

the slide area with prodpoles. They were too distant to be of any help in his search ~~for Neil~~. He was in motion now, following the pipe sections out across the muck as it still gurgled and seethed, the slide carrying on an awful conversation with itself. Owen clambered alongside the dredgeline until it occurred to him, furious with himself, to climb atop it. The footing wasn't the greatest, and every dozen feet or so he had to step over a support pole ~~laying~~ half over the huge pipe, but he made better time than wading down there in the mud. He watched below his feet for the collar of the trap.

When he came to it, his hope sank. The pipeline had buckled and kinked down into a crevice of the slide, hardly any of the metal showing above the muck. He reached down to a piece of glop wedged between the pipe and a support timber. A jacket.

Now Owen let out with a roar of "Neil!" and balanced himself atop the dredgeline, trying to figure out where best to plunge down and start digging. Then, halfway along the length of pipe from the drain trap, he saw a bump in the mud, almost under the big roundness of the pipe. The bump slightly turned toward him, and eyes opened in it.

Owen in six careful steps went to a place on the pipeline just beyond the mud-globbed head, spraddled down and then slid off into the mud. The <sup>blob</sup>~~figure~~ mired under the pipe had shoulders now.

"Neil?! Neil, don't go dying on me!"

"Get your...goddamn...dam off me then."

The mud-caked figure gave a ragged combination of gasp and giggle, head wobbling back to give Owen a full white-eyed stare, <sup>as</sup> making sure he was really there. Neil was drawing in tortured breaths ~~as if having~~ <sup>deep and ragged</sup> ~~as if he had~~ <sup>run for miles,</sup> but at least it constituted breathing. <sup>#</sup>Frantically Owen dug barehanded at the heavy mush of earth encasing <sup>him</sup> ~~Neil~~. "Stay still," he ordered.

"Did it...all go?"

"Shut up. Just breathe, okay?" Owen pawed away. "No, the dam didn't all go. Just this one--slippage." He saw the relief register in Neil's eyes, but a tight squint of concern quickly came back.

"Birdie. He...somewhere..."

Still clawing muck away from Neil, Owen shot a look around. "There isn't any sign of Birdie," he said in a guilty strangled tone.



How long he dug by hand, fingernails tearing, skin tender and hurting, Owen had no idea. Neil occasionally groaned or gasped, but otherwise lay perfectly still as Owen had ordered him to. This worried Owen.

"You doing okay?" he asked Neil, as if demanding so.

"Hurts...on the side."

Owen drew a hard breath. He hated what he was going to have to do, but he needed to know whether this was an internal injury or--

"Here?" He laid the palm of his hand on Neil's ribcage.

"OWWW!" Neil's eyes had opened twice as wide. "Hell, yes...there!"

He gulped painful air into himself, and used it to say: "Ownie, you'd massacre a man...while you're saving his life."

Owen pursed his lips, either against a madman smile or a sob of gratitude, he wasn't sure which. "Broken ribs," he told Neil. "They'll hurt some more, but I can get you out of here now."

#

All that endless afternoon, at last into common dusk, Fort Peck tried to pick itself up off the floor of the big slide. Searches went on until there was deemed no chance anyone<sup>e</sup> could have lasted beneath the flood of muck, the mosquito buzz of planes with newspaper

photographers already overhead as rescue parties slogged and poked and slowly retreated from the slideflat. Queasy communities downstream from the dam, Park Grove only the first of the number along the Missouri's descent toward St. Louis, had to swallow hard and decide where to sleep that night, somewhere on high ground or in the valley cut by the river's eternal longing to wander.

# —————  
Birdie Hinch felt all beat to hell.

Gravel had gone over him and roaring water from the core pool had surged him free and then there was a pell-mell mudswim, half dogpaddling and half being oozed along, out into the mush at the head of the slide. His shirt <sup>had</sup> filled with so much mud it weighted him into the mess like a lead sinker on a fishing line, but he managed to tear it off and bob better.

Birdie had been constantly amazed at the kaleidoscope of clear thoughts coming to him as the muck avalanche tossed him along: Wouldn't this have to happen just when we found that nicest buffalo skull...I'm gonna die, out of this. Ain't yet, though...They just can't pay a man enough to put up with this... And at last, gingerbread man of mud gasping on one

of the isles of the slide, I'll be a sonofagun, look at those guys  
running out onto this. <sup>#</sup>Rescued, and with somebody's practically new  
 mackinaw jacket draped over him, and deposited to the hospital where the  
 ambulatory ones such as him had to wait while the worse injured were  
 rushed into care, he found a corner to limply sit in and ache, watching  
 the parade of casualties ~~come~~ <sup>pour</sup> in. Muddied and bloodied, the thirty or  
 so men who had undergone the slide <sup>and lived</sup> weren't much recognizable, but toward  
 the last Birdie saw Neil, bunged up but obviously going to make it, brought  
 in by Owen and some of the rescue workers, and was glad of that.

Right in the middle of the hospital hubbub a flustered timekeeper  
 pressed into service by the Ad Building was running around with a clipboard,  
 taking down names of survivors.

Birdie, one of the world's talents at overhearing, caught the timekeeper's  
~~thin~~ voice when that pintsize sheriff popped in to check with him: "We're  
 up to three known dead and <sup>five</sup> ~~four~~ still missing."

When the sheriff whirled back out, the timekeeper scanned the hospital  
~~uproar~~ <sup>commotion</sup> for any fresh arrivals and lit up when he finally spotted  
 Birdie. He hustled over, pencil and clipboard ready, to take Birdie's



name.

Birdie looked him in the eye and said as if badly put upon:

"Duff. But don't you already got me down there, from when I come in the door?"

"Aw, yeah, hell, I'm sorry," the embarrassed timekeeper said, his finger finding Duff, N. on his <sup>hasty</sup> ~~lengthy~~ list of survivors. "You guys look all alike with the mud on you."

<sup>By nightfall</sup> That was all it took. <sup>was</sup> The name of Birdie Hinch ~~was~~ everlastingly among Fort Peck's missing, <sup>and</sup> <sup>he</sup> the man ~~who~~ had been <sup>was hopping</sup> ~~him~~ hopped a boxcar ~~that night~~ on a Great Northern train bound for the Pacific Coast and a next life.

# ————— <sup>hospital</sup> They crammed into Neil's <sup>hospital</sup> room the minute the doctor would let them.

Except for the way his face drew down a little on one side in the direction of the sharp complaints from his ribs, he looked like a Neil who had been severely scrubbed, bleached and wrung dry and was happy that was over. Sitting beside his bed Rosellen, eyes wide, kept watching him as if he might go out of sight against the hospital sheets in the manner a winter-pale rabbit does against snow.

"Neil," Meg began, "that was a ride we do not want you to repeat."

"Came pretty close to the line that time, didn't you, brother," Bruce began, in what sounded oddly like envy.

A majority of the Duffs chimed in that way, Neil able to grin and kid them back between winces ~~caused by his ribs.~~ <sup>But</sup> Everyone uncomfortably knew that the worst <sup>casualty</sup> ~~tender spot~~ in the room was Owen's, who looked as though he'd been hammered directly on the heart. Charlene <sup>ed</sup> ~~was staying~~ always next to him, ~~right there but not saying much,~~ ~~the best she could do~~ ~~on the matter of the dam and its wound to him.~~

Proxy, to contribute, said Owen ought to take up fortune-telling, if he was able to pick out where Neil ended up in all that crap of the slide.

"All I could see of him were eyes and teeth," Owen managed to vouch.

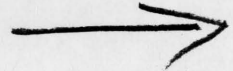
One saves the other, and by doing, something of himself, Meg was pursed with thinking, rue and relief and an oddly sad love mixing in her as she watched her sons. The ladders of this family run up and down, both, don't they ever, Owen.

"You'd grin too when you saw it wasn't some geezer with a halo and

p. 760A follows →

wings coming for you," Neil spoke up from the bed. Then, as if he had been giving this some thought, he said: "Unk, you must've known a shortcut off the dam."

Hugh stirred, and sensed a warning look from Proxy as he did. He





too had been curious, at Darius's spotless deliverance while the rest of the bullgang and poor devil Birdie were handed a flood of mud. In no position himself to bring up precise whereabouts at the time of the slide, Hugh waited with terrible interest Darius's answer on his.

More fool you, Neil, to be scrabbling around at that trap rather than tending to the goings-on around you, as I was. Aloud, though, Darius had ready: "Nature called at the right time and in the right way, in my fortunate case, Neil. I was on my way to visit the littlest of houses, when the dam began to shimmy."

Small Jackie, tongue-tied for once in this confusing hospital visit, was awed at <sup>Grand Unk</sup>~~Muckle Uncle~~ 'Rius telling everybody about going to the little house.

Darius shook his head to show them all his wonder at his own escape.

"I gave a shout," he declared, looking to the hospital bed as though Neil had been truant.

In the starched sheets, Neil tried to remember. The shudder of the dredgeline, the tremor he had thought was a big piece of equipment ramming the pipe, was the first thing that would come back. Then the

ground under him giving way, and his instinctive scramble atop the dredgeline. Life as he now possessed it began with those.

Owen stared across him to Darius. He couldn't recall any shout from Darius either, only the wordless sprinting figure who had gone past him on the dam crest. "I didn't hear that," <sup>Owen</sup> ~~he~~ said, "but you did whistle by me getting off the dam."

Darius locked eyes with him. "Now, Owen, I'll deny to my last breath that I was running. But I will say, I overtook a good many who were."

The assembled Duffs at last laughed, all but Owen and Hugh.

# ———  
DROP CAP Stained with disaster but still standing, Fort Peck Dam met each

morning now in the company of hollow-eyed engineers and Corps officers and construction bosses. They took turns staying up nights in the Ad Building, emerging with a fresh day's schedule for the work of repair, and then machines and crew<sup>s</sup> would go warily into the half-mile gouge of the slide area.

"It went fast," Darius mused. "You wouldn't think soil could outrun a man. <sup>Eight</sup> ~~Seven~~ men." # He and Proxy had formed the habit of watching out the houseboat window at this work, before time for their own. By now,

pretty sure she had seen what there was to see, Proxy had gone back to <sup>morning</sup> favorite pursuits, such as propping up on the bed and studying her picture in the old copy of LIFE. Darius had sometimes warned her, humorously, that she would wear that page out with looking. But right now he was all intent himself as he watched a railroad speeder go across the dam to the slide area and stop, the section crew climb off. "Very damn nearly nine, counting our Neil," Darius said as if in afterthought.

Proxy still did not say anything.

He kept watching the railroad repair crew as he asked: "Where exactly again were you when the news came, love?"

"The usual." The sound of her turning the pages. "Yakking with Tom Harry. He was telling me again all about how he plans to pull up stakes and go off where he can see a mountain <sup>any time</sup> ~~when~~ he feels like it, and I was saying to him gopher holes are more his style. Same old routine."

"Liar, liar," Darius crooned in schoolyard singsong, then dropped his voice harshly: "cunt on fire."

Proxy sat up rigidly on the bed and stared at his back.

"Woman, you think I don't hear? You ought to be married to yourself--



you'd soon find out. Every loose mouth at Fort Peck lets me know who you've been with. Oh, casually, of course. Merely making a bit of joke. 'Saw that goodlooking wife of yours dancing the pockets off of old Smitty, wish I had a means of support like that,'" he mimicked. He kept on looking out the window. "When the slide went, you were monkeying around with Hugh."

Proxy hurled the magazine at his back. "Whatever the hell happened to 'we don't need to oversee each other just because we're married!'"

Darius reached down, swung around and slammed the magazine back at her, pages wildly flapping. "I didn't count on caring so much <sup>about</sup> ~~for~~ you!"

"Huh uh, Darius," Proxy told him tensely but levelly. "What you didn't count on is caring about any frigging thing but those politics of yours."

"And you?" he said in worse than a whisper. "You know all the ins and outs of caring about, do you, Proxy?"

#

He walked out onto the silent spillway, alone this time.

Why didn't I savvy...

In the back of his mind he was aware of the watchman's uneasiness, off behind him on the approach to the highway bridge over the spillway, where he had parked the government pickup. But Owen Duff made a lot of people uneasy, since the slide.

Neil, in that mess...it would have to be...job I put him on...why'd

I ever...

This time Owen was atop the spillway's imperial gate piers pictured by the LIFE camera, the highway bridge going across them like the <sup>lofty</sup> ~~the~~ trough of an aqu<sup>e</sup>duct. Beneath the slowly walking man and the mid-air highway were the sixteen great gates of the spillway, waiting to regulate overflow from the lake into the spillway channel. If the dam, his dam, would ever hold together long enough to produce an overflow.

When he reached the middle of the ~~gate~~ <sup>g</sup> structure, Owen stepped up out of the road onto the walkway and halted there, hands resting on the waist-high balustrade while he stared down at the vast concrete trench below as if it mirrored everything. <sup>g</sup> The sonofabitching Bearpaw shale.

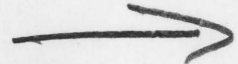
Here they had known to rock<sup>exposed</sup>saw the ~~the~~ shale and haul it out, or to face it over with waterproof bituminous compound; known they did not dare let

any scour of moisture in to crumble that shale to mud under the heavy concrete channel. But no, Duff, you couldn't carry that idea for only three miles over those hills and... Why hadn't he demanded rockcutting the entire face of that bluff, or bitumen sealing of everything in sight, or a mammoth retaining wall, something, anything, back there at the east abutment where that bank of shale kept tormenting his core pool. Having the bluff, one whole wall of the valley, as the anchor bank of the core pool was supposed to have been an advantage; sure, bits of it might crumble, but as soon as the impervious fill built up onto it and the core pool water was drained away, there the sealed east end of the dam was supposed to be, natural and perpetual. Except that shale sidehill had its own ideas about how it was going to behave around water, didn't it, Duff. The lost face of the dam's east section--now he knew, too late he knew--had slid on a wettened underbank of that shale like a hog on ice. Huh uh, slicker and quicker than that, even. Owen could envision instantly the railroad tracks, like pieces of a model-train setup neatly pulled apart, out there on the several slide-islands. Couldn't have asked for smoother sledding. The geologists--Christ, toboggan experts would've been better--



the geologists back there at the core sampling and porosity tests had missed the deep-seep process, that saturations could keep spreading down through the abutment shale like water through a monstrous sponge. The Kansas City blueprinters of the dam had missed it. And he himself had missed it, in worrying about what the shale was doing to his core pool instead of what his core pool was doing to the Bearpaw shale.

The board of inquiry wasn't going to miss it.



Owen leaned into the balustrade, elbows on it now, still seeming to contemplate the mile-long concrete floor down there. Corps scuttlebutt had it that Quigley, the Harvard ~~brain~~ ~~mucky-muck~~ on the investigating board, was saying the dam was not worth finishing. Its other eight engineering whizzes, though, were not likely to conclude that a slide of three percent of its total earthfill was anywhere near fatal to Fort Peck Dam. No, they were going to want the slide fixed, weren't they, and by whatever prescription needed to make damn good and sure it did not happen again.

# Engineering truly was a clever whore, Owen Duff at this moment would have told you in something like wonder and nausea: no sooner did it allure a person into committing a phenomenal disaster than it came flirting back with the exact cure. ~~Owen~~ <sup>He</sup> had seen the fix to be made there in the dusk of slide day, after he had Neil to the hospital and found his dazed way back to the edge of the gouge in the dam. ~~Stick in a sheet-steel wall,~~ <sup>Piledrive a secondary cut-off</sup> ~~cover it with~~ <sup>inside about</sup> a fifty-foot core of impervious fill, then replace the dredged material in a gentler slope; with that kind of <sup>barrier and a</sup> dry and compacted mass over it, the shale would have no way to pull the rug out from under four million yards of earthfill again. That was all that was necessary

on fixing the slide.

On himself, Owen was not at all sure what was needed. Over the side here, off this bridge onto that expanse of concrete, would do it quick enough. Be like dropping an egg off a cliff. He knew to the specified inch the height of this spillway gate structure; plus a three-foot balustrade to climb up onto and drop from. The equivalent of a six-story building, down to death. Not a record, but far enough.

Or stay. Stay in life. Face down the board of inquiry--I followed every spec, on the core pool, the fill, everything; the core of the dam never budged, did it; the dam didn't go out, did it--and make the case for fixing the slide area as he knew how. Fixing it might take a year, time enough to get himself back to normal. Whatever the hell normal was, any more.

Like a man dizzy, Owen backed away from the balustrade.

# ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~  
~~Rhonda~~ Kate was doing battle with the ready-counter of the Rondola, asking whether her orders of ham and eggs were past the oink and cluck stage yet, when in Mr. Important walked and marched right past the counterful of customers. He turned her around to him, lifted her off



the floor in a full-length bear hug, and carted her like that through the swinging door into the kitchen.

Dola and Ron and the dishwasher swiveled to the arrival of the enwrapped pair, then looked studiously elsewhere.

It was only inches worth, but <sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ stared worlds into Bruce's face, until he set her down.

"All the fixing up after the slide?--they've decided they have to bring in a dozen divers for it," he told her, grinning a mile. "The inside skinny is that we'll be diving here all next year, maybe more. And guess who's being made the lead guy."

<sup>Kate's</sup>~~Rhonda's~~ dazed expression failing to change, he spelled it out for her.

"I've got all the seniority, hon. Crew chief--that'll be me, just got told. At twice the money."

Finally out of things to reel off to her, <sup>now</sup>~~now~~ Bruce was the one who looked dazed. <sup>Katy,</sup>~~Rhonda,~~ "we've got it made, again."

## Part Eight

## THE SHERIFF

1991

With grunts of pain that he could barely prevent from being yelps Carl Kinnick rolled the wheelchair to his bed, reached over and yanked down hard on the emergency call cord.

The nurse was there in under a minute. She whipped into the room, white britches swishing, then stopped short at the sight of him, scrunched in his wheelchair same as ever.

"Going on the dam trip," he notified her.

"Like fuck huh uh, you are." In her surprise she even forgot to professionally cushion the words with his name. "Can't, can you? The way your hip hurts you?"

"Don't care." He kept squinting at her as neutrally as he could,

needing her help on this.

him the four little words,

All she would have to do to dispose of this situation was to ask

"Did you sign up?" Shit no, he hadn't signed up for the outing to the dam, she knew. He hadn't done anything except sit here and be ornery for as long as she had worked here. Why on my shift? she reflected as she angrily stretched past him to flip the emergency call button back to OFF. Why couldn't the old poot take it into his head to go to bingo tonight, if he finally wants to get out of his room? She didn't even really have to think through all the kinds of trouble involved in letting him go to the dam. They would need to take the cabulance van instead of the rec bus because of him in his wheelchair, and Mosteller the driver would shit a brick about that. Doris the recreation director went miles out of her way to avoid Carl Kinnick ever since that birthday party fiasco; she'd be spooked silly to have him show up for her pitty-pat little visit-to-Fort-Peck this afternoon. Howls would go up from the other residents on the excursion too, the nurse could just about hear those already: old devil him anyway, has to spoil it for everybody else, coming along and sitting there like death warmed over.

On the other hand, such as it was, the Little Prick had never before



shown her he really wanted anything.

"If I let you," she said in her tone that kidded and didn't,

"promise not to come back?"

#

Mosteller, the longhaired ~~young~~ driver, had earphones on and wobbled his head from side to side in tune with whatever musical ~~noise~~ racket it was he was listening to. In the old days the sheriff would have slapped a reckless-driving ticket on him so fast his head would swim.

There weren't all that many on the dam trip. The bridge-club biddies from the third floor, and Theresa Machias who used to work at the courthouse and was the only one who so much as said hello to him, and old Danvers who was half ga-ga three-quarters of the time, and of course Doris, who kept slipping nervous eyecorner glances at him. He wished the dirtymouthed young nurse was along.

He and the wheelchair were cinched in at the back of the cabulance, the others' gray heads and Danvers's empty bald one poking up in front of him from the bench seats. Tail gunner on the hearse, he thought of, and pursed a tiny smile to himself.

This very first part, right out of town, was the only bit of this

familiar route he cared anything about. The intense green, a color almost savage (although the sheriff found it restful), of the cottonwoods concentrated along the Milk River, before the road headed over the ridge toward the Missouri. Otherwise this drive down from Glasgow still did not amount to much, by his standards of interest. ~~interestwise~~ The traffic deaths of speedball damworkers had all happened before white roadside crosses were put up to mark car-wreck fatalities, so the sheriff couldn't even pick out the spots where he'd had to gather up the crushed and flung bodies.

What still surprised him, as the cabulance topped the last little ~~little~~ rise before starting down to the river, was that the town of Wheeler had vanished absolutely. The hasty frame buildings had been easy pickings, torn down for salvage or hauled away to farms and ranches for use as granaries and chicken coops. The sheriff enjoyed the thought of Wheeler ending up as barnyards.

Fort Peck, the town of, still featured the big dark hotel and the Swiss gingerbread theater, and a Corps of Engineers office with a Spanishy red-~~tile~~ roof in the permanent portion of the old Ad Building. Then it thinned radically, to a couple of neighborhoods of cookiecutter

houses fixed up and a luncho-gaso-laundromat. Not nearly as gone as Wheeler, New Deal, Square Deal and all the others, but plenty depleted.

As were those Army Engineer big shots who went on into the war, the sheriff ruminated as the cabulance drove on. <sup>armentee</sup> Pemberton, Santee, and

Roscoe--no, Brascoe. Dead, dead, and dead. <sup>Santee</sup> ~~Brascoe~~, the story they

told on him was that he'd been assigned as one of those top-secret couriers sent places with a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist, and that he'd somehow lost one of those courier cases. Killed himself, over it. Huh. Those prettypants Corps boys all gone and here he still had breath in him.

Suddenly, the dam.

You were on the thing before you could ever recognize it as such.

It had never seemed right to the sheriff that the downstream slope of the dam had grassed over, looking like a sidehill hayfield that had been there forever. Overall, the dam now resembled a narrow-topped and particularly flat benchland which somehow happened to stand in the way of a body of water backed up across the curvature of the earth.

(Out there on the water was another thing the sheriff was never going to grow used to, the everyday sight here of boaters and fishermen.



Hell, tourists even, a few anyway.) You had to study this view inordinately to realize the scale of the dam, the immensity of fill that was diked across here. And over near the dam's east side there was not even a trace of where the big slide had happened, they had riprapped over that so it looked as innocent as virgin scenery, too.

The cabulance's destination, site of the tour that Doris was hugely determined to herd them through, could be seen poking up down by the outlet channel where the river came out of the tunnels: the pair of powerhouses that had been added after the dam was done. Twin concrete skyscrapers amid the gopher holes. More federal money, in the sheriff's estimation, typically pushed up into the air instead of just let slide down those gopher holes. He shifted in his wheelchair, so as not to solidify in one position, and was careful to gasp behind the clench of his mouth so the others could not hear the pain.

Slowly the cabulance drove and drove across the dam, west to east, one full mile, two, three. Far down the slope now, at the toe of the dam, the river tore out of the diversion tunnels in a narrow white gush. On the dam's other side, upstream, across that entire half of the horizon

the lake lapped against the midriffs of hills. Outdoing the original intentions of the engineers, Fort Peck Dam backed up the waters of the Missouri for 135 miles from here. The sheriff read somewhere once that this lake's load of standing water affected the rotation of the earth, and he didn't doubt it a bit.

"Almost there," Doris sang out.

The lake steadily slapped at the riprap below the road, coloration on the boulders marking how much higher the waterlevel had been during runoff, late last spring. Just ahead now, at the east abutment of the dam, an overlook ringed with small boulders jutted up, wayside signs there telling the history and vital statistics of the dam.

"This'll do," he pronounced. "Pull over, in there."



The recreation director badly wanted the voice to be that of poor old Mr. Danvers, who harmlessly piped up at odd moments. But, whittled down and propped in a wheelchair though he was, Carl Kinnick vocally still had an unmistakable edge, about like a ~~buzzsaw's~~ <sup>police siren's.</sup>

She turned to him with the best smile she could manage and said, "Now then, Mr. Kinnick, if you need to...go, in just a minute now there'll be restrooms at the powerh--"

"Not a matter of me going. Staying put suits me."

Even the bridge-club bunch, normally Doris's most durable allies, tittered at that. And Mosteller the driver, who had heard Carl Kinnick's ~~tone over the commotion~~ <sup>din</sup> in his headphones, was already pulling over into the outlook parking area, stopping to see what was the matter.

Doris unbuckled her seatbelt and went to the back of the cabulance, ~~sheriff situation.~~ <sup>to the LP trouble.</sup>

"Just leave me off here," ~~the sheriff~~ <sup>he</sup> ordered, if she was hearing properly. "Pick me up on your way back."

"But what..." The reasoning against that was automatic, it was as plain as the wrinkles on his face. "Mr. Kinnick, we can't just go--"



drive off and leave you here all alone."

He stared back at her as if giving her a minute to learn common sense.

"Don't you see?" she said against that stare. She was also aware that the whole contingent in the cabulance, from Mosteller on back, was watching intently, sopping this in. "We simply can't...the responsibility..."

"Any responsibility for me is mine."

"...is a big one and..."

"I'll stay and keep the sheriff company," Theresa Machias spoke up from one of the front seats. "I've seen that powerhouse nine Septembers in a row."

Doris turned in the direction of Theresa and said that was certainly nice of her but was she sure, and Theresa said of course she was sure or she wouldn't have opened her mouth in the first place.

Then Doris was hovering over the sheriff again, asking whether it suited him to have Theresa stay with him, which he thought he concurred with civilly enough, considering. <sup>4</sup> Even so the recreation director hesitated, hanging on in his vicinity but staying a little away from him, too.

She evidently couldn't make up her mind whether he was more likely to pitch over and die, or reach up under and snap her garter. After another uncertain hover, <sup>Doris</sup> ~~she~~ backed off and asked him:

"Will this be all right for you, are you sure? It's so windy here."

He couldn't help looking at her as if she was a complete fool.

"There's always wind in this country."

"Yes, well--" She bit her lip and told Mosteller, "All right then, Jerry," and the driver operated the cabulance's <sup>lift</sup> ~~elevator~~ platform and indifferently wheeled the sheriff off and over to the <sup>lake end of the overlook.</sup> ~~side of the turnout.~~

Theresa Machias sensibly had a coat with her and her donut cushion to sit on, Doris was a little relieved to see as she trailed after to supervise getting the two of them settled. Already the sheriff was ignoring her, refusing to swerve his gaze from one particular <sup>promontory</sup> ~~point~~ of the river bluffs, ~~land~~, across there to the west, even when Doris's hand darted in and tucked his jacket collar closed around his neck. She heard him say:

"It was up there."

The recreation director tried to follow the line of his gaze, across the lake to the high blunt bluffs. "What, Mr. Kinnick. What was?"

Didn't she wish she knew. The sheriff shook his head, holding in the tiny smile until he was sure she had turned away.

After giving the pair of them one last assurance that she would be back before they knew it, Doris climbed into the cabulance and the vehicle trundled ~~went~~ down the slope out of sight behind a powerhouse.

Theresa had parked herself on a <sup>sittable</sup> ~~big~~ rock a decent distance from the sheriff's wheelchair. She dug a pack of cigarettes and her silver-plated retirement lighter from her coat pocket. After lighting up, and then letting out a crashing cough which somehow seemed to satisfy her, she offered the pack in the general direction of the sheriff for politeness' sake. "But you never used these, did you."

"Hmm-nn. They stunt your growth, Therese."

Snorty chuckle from her, something <sup>equivalent silently</sup> ~~silent equivalently~~ from him.

Then, shriveled up there in his wheelchair, he turned his head from her, back toward the bluff across the dam.

Theresa periodically emitted smoke and checked up on Carl Kinnick with a glance. What a little sonofabitch on six wheels he had been, when he was sheriff all those years. Bite your head off if you couldn't



put your finger <sup>immediately</sup> ~~instantly~~ on whatever piece of court paper he was after.

She timed another casual glance at him. Two-wheeled now, though.

# \_\_\_\_\_

**DROP CAP** It was up there, that he had gone through it that other time.

Procedure took him to the point, back there in 1938 in that aftermath of the truck, where he had questioned the remaining Duffs until the questions wore out. Their answers, though, showed no wear at all.

I was at home. Or: Working my shift. Or: We went to the show that night,  
both of us. Their chain of alibi, always somebody handy to vouch for this or that in their stories, except on the central matter of the pair in the truck cab.

No idea he was up to anything like that, the widow of the drowned unclothed man maintained.

Never knew there was anything going on between them, the husband of the dead and unclad woman swore.

Then the sheriff would have to backtrack, go through the questions again, trying to weave a case that would catch one or another or, for all he cared, five or six or all eight of the damned surviving Duffs.

p. 780<sup>A</sup> follows →

At last, he gave in and borrowed the truck.

More like confiscated it, if you want the truth. Well aware that his undersheriff would blab something like this all over Fort Peck, the sheriff went by himself to Moore Motors in Glasgow and ~~told~~<sup>informed</sup> Ted Moore he was taking that reconstituted Ford ~~Double~~<sup>Triple</sup> A for a couple of hours, making sure to mention to Ted that he'd be piloting the truck to the dam project to check out a circumstance. But halfway down the highway to Fort Peck, the sheriff veered off, west, along an old sectionline road, no more than a set of ruts grooved alongside a stretch of barbwire fence. The truck jolted across the prairie on the twin wheeltracks, the sheriff perched on the edge of the ~~wide-bodied~~ seat, up close over the ~~large~~<sup>sizable</sup> steering wheel,



grimly absorbing the bumps.

After a matter of more miles than he had remembered on this route, the sheriff came out above the Missouri, on a high bluff some ways upstream from the dam. Below at the turn of the bluff a little treed-over stream called Nettle Creek used to empty into the river, but the lake had filled back this far by now. What little of the bottomland that was left to view looked eaten into, a dredge's trademark bites with huge scalloped edges. At the dam, a fleet of barges and workboats had been pulled in to work on repairing the slide; the sheriff could see their boxy forms against the scar of the slide, but at such a distance no one could see what he was up to in the truck.

Here the slope to the water was quite sharp, higher and steeper than the <sup>ramp</sup> ~~one~~ the truck had freewheeled down at the dam<sup>#</sup>site to its plunge into the lake, so Kinnick took care in nosing the truck to a stop, facing down to the valley of the Missouri. Wasn't sure why he needed the actual water below him for this; knew it was basically a dangerous idea, if the truck should happen to get away from him ~~during this~~. And wouldn't that be one sweet hell of a way to go: the whole county talking about



him drowning, too, same as that Duff affair, and not even a woman keeping him company. He ~~in fact~~ wished there had been a way to bring a woman along for this, make it considerably more real; but if word about something like that escaped, he'd be laughed out of office. Drowning would be simpler.

So he sat alone and thought through the onset of this maddening case.

The truck parked as it was, barely over the brow of this big ridge, enough tilt for an absolute panorama of the river but not enough for much sliding forward if you lay down across the seat: somebody trying to use a moonlight view of the river to encourage the clothes off somebody else might find this the best angle, he figured.

The sheriff took off his hat and hesitantly placed it on top of the back of the seat against the rear window, couldn't see what else to do with it in the circumstances.

Even though he had examined this vehicle, to the point of eyestrain, before the remaining Duffs turned it back over to Moore Motors, now he made himself systematically scan the inside of the truck cab one more time,

and then the emergency brake, defunct, of course, starting at the steering wheel and sideways and down to the gearstick angling up from the transmission housing in the floorboards, and across the wide ~~phony-leather~~ seat to the passenger-side door, and on up and around to the rear window where that cloud of their clothing had damply clung. Only to divine the same thing again, nothing.

Maybe he was carrying the experiment kind of far with this next maneuver, but he unscrewed the standard black knob of the gearshift, tossed it in the glove compartment, and screwed on the fancy amber whorly one that had been there when the truck went into the river.

Nothing more to do but do it.

The sheriff licked his lips. Lips and licking were pertinent to what he was attempting to emulate, sure, but he wasn't employing them out of pleasure.

Staying as studious as he could, he lay down, extending himself across the seat to the passenger side, belly down in the male position.

The seat felt a little cool, ungiving, against his freshly shaved cheek. Not like the woman's skin would be, there, but he couldn't help that. He checked back over his left shoulder to the knob of the gearstick.

It was within range of his hip, but not nearly touching. The sheriff was sure as anything that the truck had been <sup>left</sup> in low gear, the night of the deaths; that's what people do, after all, when they park a vehicle anywhere that it might roll, jam it into grandma-gear.

Drawing a deep breath, feeling foolish but impelled at the same time, he nudged his hip against the gearshift knob, as might happen if a man went a little sideways in excitement.

Nothing. His hip twinged, but the gearshift stayed steadily in place.

The sheriff swore quietly at the gaudy knob, then tensed himself and battered it as hard as he could with his hip. Still nothing, except the major bruise he knew he was going to have there. The sheriff could not believe the woman's hip would have been more lethal, but in the interest of research he turned over onto his back as he imagined she would have been, knees somewhat sticking up, and banged against the gearshift with his other hip, hard and harder. Next he flung out an arm sharply against the gearknob. Then he tried a tumble against it, half-falling off the seat so that all his sideward weight went against the taut metal rod. He thought for a moment, then scrambled behind the



steering wheel, and careful not to let the truck start rolling, jammed a foot on the brake while he shifted <sup>gears</sup> ~~the gearstick~~ into reverse, toward the dashboard. His personal theory was that the couple would have been so involved they wouldn't have bothered with getting the gearshift a little more out of their way, but okay, say they did. With the truck now in reverse, the sheriff lay back down to see if he could bounce the shiftstick out of this gear, either, with his hip.

In any combination of positions that Sheriff Carl Kinnick could think of, any semblance of accidental bump or shove or knock or thrust or lunge during the blind concentrations of lovemaking, the gearshift would not pop out of gear.

# ———  
**DROP CAP**

And so the truck at the dam<sup>#</sup>site had to have had help in starting to roll, coasting down the slope of the ramp in its deathride to the floor of the river.

Back then, more than half a century ago, the sheriff despised the feeling of frustration after his failed re-enactment, and it still got him worked up, just thinking about it.

Accident, the answer that would have closed the case then and there, simply did not fit the picture.

From his solo session there in the truck cab the sheriff was positive there was no inadvertent way to depress a clutch pedal while having sex, either, and even if something that weird had managed to happen and some way there was the shift of gear out of low <sup>or reverse</sup> into neutral, why couldn't the man or even the woman have tromped on the brake pedal, or flung a door open, or swerved the steering wheel, or anything like that to save themselves? Okay, say they were going at each other to the point of oblivion <sup>≡</sup> the sheriff still found it very hard to believe that the jolt of the truck starting into motion down that rough <sup>planked slideway</sup> ~~bluff~~ wouldn't have interrupted even 101% passion.

Murder, then?

Both of them knocked over the head and sent rolling into the river? The <sup>bodies</sup> two ~~were~~ were a bit banged up, but that dodo of a coroner had not been able to single out any contusions that the plunge in the truck wouldn't itself have caused. In his own mind the sheriff could come up with a way for it to happen at gunpoint: somebody following them to their tryst on the dam slope ramp, surprising them there naked in the middle of the action, shoving a gun in their faces and forcing them to start the truck

rolling, the gunhandler riding the running board until the last moment, leaping off as the truck sailed into the Missouri. But that scenario was a stretch, several <sup>ways</sup>. And how come the pair still couldn't have bailed out as soon as the truck hit the water?

Two lives gone. And others thrown into a hell of a tangle. That fed the sheriff's fury, too. Anyone who encountered Carl Kinnick at, say, a car wreck would remember forever his snappishness, his coil of what seemed to be affronted anger. Which is absolutely what it was. The waste of lives drove him wild: how dare they? how could they throw away, through too much speed or booze ~~or dope~~ or showing <sup>off</sup>, the sum-result of themselves? Sherifing could not control everybody's behavior, he had ~~reluctantly~~ <sup>with reluctance,</sup> concluded, but that did not alter the fact that it needed some controlling.

And so, the final so he always came to, the Duff case always had been doubly perturbing to him because the deaths in the truck stacked up as a deliberate forfeit of life. Not just <sup>the</sup> foolishness of making seatsprings sing in the night, although there plainly was some of that involved in this episode. But beyond that, what had happened <sup>was done</sup> intentionally.



What people were capable of thinking up. That was the lasting question, wasn't it. Carl Kinnick supposed it had better be, or he might as well be wadded up and tossed in this lake instead of still pursuing thoughts along that line.

"--move around some, so I don't stiffen up like a rock," he heard Theresa Machias say, in the tuned-up tone people use when they're saying something a second time. "Anything you want done, <sup>Carl,</sup> first?"

He moved his head enough to see her, on her feet now but still a healthy distance from him. "Doing okay the way I am, Therese," he told her, and as she went off on a little walk to the other end of the outlook, he turned his attention back to the bluff across the water.

He sat there, hunched, confined, older than the hill of manufactured earth beneath the wheels of his chair; sat and with all the ardor left to him kept at it. Kept <sup>Furious at</sup> ~~hating~~ the Duffs for the mystery they lived with and two of them died by, and just as helplessly loving them for this last <sup>slick</sup> ~~hard~~ stone of sheriffing to gnaw on, this case of theirs that would not let itself be solved.

## Part Nine

## TRUCK AND RIVER

1938

You wait in the weeds long enough and sometimes something good will come along. He almost couldn't believe the luck of this, this midnight chance at her.

Here where they were parked, the lightpoles along the dam showed the spew of the dredgeline, small silver waterfall in the torn canyon left by the slide. On out into the lake, the temporary lights of the slide-islands were as pretty and crooked as star formations, clusters strung wherever the crews were at work salvaging the drowned machines or scavenging the riprap boulders onto barges for use again when the

face of the dam was fixed.

"Going day and night, patching the roof of the Missouri River," he said to break the hard little distance of silence between them there in the cab of the truck.

She did not say anything. Day, night, still not enough to fix how wrong this had all gone.

He looked over at her. It was going to be like this, was it. Mood, when he'd prefer her nude.

All right, she had reason to be upset. She was not the only one.

"Proxy--" he began in a blurt that even surprised himself, and broke off huskily.

In the dark of the cab of the truck, she could just see his profile. They all looked inescapably alike, the Duff men, as though traced on paper several times over. Although she was finding out their differences.

"Proxy is climbing Hugh's leg," the words came bitterly out of him, "good Lord, woman, haven't you seen that?" She watched him take off the cap, run a hand through his hair, hesitate for a place to set the cap.

You came saying you tip your cap only to yourself, didn't you, Darius.



Here you are, still at it. Looking <sup>across</sup> ~~over~~ at her again, he put the cap up on the back of the seat behind him. "Proxy hot to trot, time for a new Duff, a little taste of brotherly love direct from my brother? Hasn't everyone seen that?"

She didn't answer.

The truck stayed silent except for the hum of the heater, and as if all at once deciding the cab was warm enough, she felt down to the ignition key and turned it off. Darius waited for her move toward him, but none came.

He put a hand over to her, to see what it might bring.

"Does that engineer even do this by blueprint?" he asked, touching her skillfully enough to change her breathing.

"No." She swallowed, but then got the words out. "At least not with me."

More of Darius's hand. She concentrated past it to the note of mockery in his chuckle, kept herself tensed toward the hateful sentence she knew was coming. "But with Charlene," he was saying it, "it must have got that way for our man Owen, why else."

There in the dark, small tight fists resting on the steering wheel, Rosellen hated him all the way back to first principles. Bone, blood, breath, everything of Darius Duff she hated. The force of this was beyond anything she had ever imagined, it was as if there were suddenly several of her, furious cast of characters all of them her, packed into everything she felt against him. She hated him on behalf of Neil, Charlene, Owen, herself, any and all who would have their lives come apart if he told what he knew.

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He had been looking high and low for Owen, core pool to the toe of the dam, as the crowd poured to the Fort Peck railroad siding and the presidential train, waiting for Roosevelt. In their tournament of argument, noontimes, FDR was ever there like the mercury in a thermometer, register of what Owen believed was politically far enough and Darius believed was doctrinally never enough, and Darius could hardly wait now to keep company during the speech and then argue it degree by degree with Owen. A chance to see America's royal trickster in action, it would be a treat for any thinking man, as they both were. Word had reached the crowd that the President's motorcade was on its way, down through the hills from the

spillway, and Darius was as keen for the coming performance as any.

He lacked only Owen.

Tracking down the engineer Sangster and wife in a good spot at the end of the roped-off area for Corps officers and their families and dignitaries not quite entitled to the presidential train's rear platform, Darius found out the most recent sighting of Owen. "Left a little bit ago. Had to go pick up Charlene."

Darius opened his mouth to set Sangster straight, then instinct snapped it shut for him. He moved off quickly into the crowd, thoughts weaving as he went.

Charlene already had been picked up and delivered here. By Proxy and Tom Harry in the Packard. By plan of Owen.

"Favor to ask you, Proxy--I'm going to be snowed under by Corps rigamarole on Franklin D. day," Darius could hear again Owen of a few nights ago, at one of those encouragement suppers at Hugh and Meg's.

"Can you give this working wife of mine a lift out to the shindig?"

Proxy had said sure, why not, somewhat unnecessarily adding that the Packard always had plenty of room, and then Charlene had joked about



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finally riding in style at Fort Peck. And just now, in this prowling for Owen, Darius had spotted the three of them, bartender and hairdresser and taxi-dancer, perched like nabobs on the Packard roof where they could see to FDR's train.

And Sangster, spectating in a coveted spot with his arm around his wife, did ~~not~~ much look as though rigamarole was overburdening the engineers this day, did he.

His brow knit with suspicion, Darius searched higher, heading up the bluff toward the Ad Building. (This is not like our Owen, to miss

Roman

out on a Roosevelt holy day. Latecomers from Glasgow and beyond were hurrying onto the bluff's slope here between the Y of the road to the Ad Building and the dredgeline road down past the winter harbor. The sidehill gave a clear view out over the gathering, FDR's motorcade in sight alongside the train down there now. Darius hesitated, lingered, then decided this onlooking site was as good as any, Owen or no Owen.

The preliminaries gradually came and went and then all at once the lordly Roosevelt cadences, of politics and the river, and of the river and politics, were rolling out over the thousands of cars and more thousands

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of listeners, including the impressed skeptic Darius. Voice like God's

town crier, he was thinking to himself, no wonder the man can get away with--

Then he saw the truck.

Triple

The Model ~~Double~~ A, unmistakable with its little cap-peak outside

visor, was on its way from the river, the oxbow section downstream from the dam where the dredges were working. Working, that is, except during this Roosevelt event, when all crews were given time off. Watching in

Triple

the ~~Double~~ A's direction, Darius could not help but wonder why Neil would

be trucking anything at this hour, this day.

The truck pulled in at the back edge of the winter harbor lot solid with

vehicles, a scrawny deputy sheriff pointing ~~to~~ to a parking spot. And

out hopped Rosellen, walking swiftly, head down, around the parked mob.

She looked for all the world like someone hastening back now from a quick errand, something tended to at home or the office, taken care of by dashing off in the truck. Except she had been on the fork of the road that went only to the dredges.

After a moment's incredulity, Darius laughed, knowing.

And in minutes here the other one came, in the familiar beat-up

itals

government pickup. Around to the motor pool lot, and then Darius could make him out on foot, Owen in long strides cutting across to see the presidential train pull away. Owen the fillmaster, from the dredge Gallatin where the fillmaster had quarters.

Roman

After that, Darius believed he could even tell the times when they were slipping off together to whatever hideyhole. Whenever Owen edgily excused himself out of a noon, it had been all Darius could do not to give him the oldest mocking smile there was and pipe out, "Have you tried a pantry yet?"

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Rosellen wished she and Darius had this over with. The ending, the going. Primed as she was for this, she found it hard to make happen. Rage of this depth was a new story to her. She felt half-dizzy <sup>between</sup> ~~with it~~ and the despondency; the same kind of desperate batty intensity she'd had after Neil looked into the eclipse and there was nothing she could do for him, and when stories she'd written her heart out on were mailed back to her with editors' polite scorn. Clenched all over; that was how she--

"Rosellen, love, how long do we have?" Darius asked urgently.

"Enough." Honey it as he would, love had nothing to do with tonight's deal.



She had come for him at the houseboat. "Not here," she had said.

"Not under Proxy's roof." He had chuckled, dry sound. Then followed her out and into the truck.

As she drove to the dam, he'd started to ask: "Where's--"

"At the show." Neil, Charlene and Owen, ~~Rhonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup> and Bruce, all five of them in the midnight dark of the movie theater, the newsreel coming on now; more Europe. They'd been determined, the three couples, to try to make a night of this, supper together as they used to and then the usual few beers and music at the Blue Eagle, Neil ~~needed~~ <sup>was recuperated</sup> enough to dance slowly

and gingerly. Everybody needed this Saturday night out, they said as if

it was a chorus, Owen the only one overly quiet but not the only one

deep into worry. Rosellen had pleaded a splitting headache when the

movie came up, but insisted Neil go with the others, he needed some fun.

The headache was close to the truth, although the sensation reached all

the way down through her, the ~~upset~~ <sup>harrowed</sup> feeling and the taut determination.

Darius had left the choice of site to her, she was the expert at slipping around to such places, wasn't she. She had driven with him, curious passenger in America, to the quiet end of the dam where the

riprap work stood stalled until the slide section was rebuilt. Deserted this time of night, the little dock called Port Peck was a dark stub into the water at the base of the dam. Where the planked ramp angled down to the dock and the lake, Rosellen parked carefully, on enough of the incline that they could see out to the temporary lights on the slide-islands, and killed the engine. "Scenic," Darius had commended then. "If it's the sort of thing you're here to see," she had said back, trying to sound composed.

Now his words broke in on her, the strings of lights still constellated across the truck's windshield. "I'll tell you a thing that board of inquiry ought to interest itself in, there. Why a man who knew shale could go slick as lard didn't call everyone off the dam, when we were all standing around flummoxed just before the slide. It'd have saved your Neil some woe."

All the long thoughts that led her here crisscrossed now. Neil would have to take the hurt of this, but less than if he had been hit with the news of her and Owen. Owen, Owen and Charlene, this was a way to make up for the trespass there, ~~to preserve them,~~ <sup>escapade.ing.</sup> wipe away his fling. Proxy? Proxy knew about stories

and consequences, she would grit and bear this and go on. The others,  
 they would ~~make~~<sup>close</sup> ranks against whatever the world said about this, as

Duffs always did when they had to. Rosellen only regretted this wasn't the  
 kind of thing she could run by her debating partner ~~Shonda~~<sup>Kate</sup>.

"That board yet could, you know," Darius's voice a goad in the dark.

"If someone were to put a word in their ear."

She didn't believe what he said about Owen and the slide. Or about  
 Proxy and Hugh, for that matter. Liar as well as everything else he was.  
 Next on that list would be snitch.

"Tell us, Jealous," Rosellen said.

He cocked a look at her. Sounding suddenly cautious, he asked:

"Whyever do you say that?"

"It's what came. Words have that habit."

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She remembered to the word how it started, it couldn't have been  
 a farther cry from what she was trying for on paper.

Seeing ~~that~~<sup>g</sup> she finally could get rid of the dredging report she'd  
 typed up for him, that April noon, she took it to Owen's office right  
 away after Sangster emerged from their session of dam talk and whistled  
 off to lunch. When she stepped in, Owen was turned in his chair, facing



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Roman

the window where he could see the river and the dam, the eraser on his pencil bouncing brup brup brup on his desktop as he sat there mulling.

At first she wasn't sure he even knew she had come in, but then he said:

"Thanks. More paper ammo for the battle of Fort Peck."

Curious, she said: "You look like you're in danger of thinking yourself inside out. What about?"

"Winter harbor." The wide line of his mouth tucked down at its corners, his sign of joshing at himself. "It's only six months from now, so I figured I'd get a little headstart on the worrying."

"That's funny." The cute serious concentration marks showed up between her eyebrows. "The sun must be doing different things to us.

I just looked up the opposite of hibernation."

gave her an appreciative look and,  
Quick as presto, Owen was hooting with laughter about getting his seasons crossed, next thing he knew he'd be outside on Christmas trying to aestivate with the snow snakes. And after a surprised moment at all

that, Rosellen laughed because she was glad ~~he was.~~ the two of them chimed this way.

Is there such a thing as inadvertent flirting? Unintended ~~trysts?~~ mad pash?

She came to wonder, after that noon and others, as the two of them paid attention to each other, new ways, little ways, ways that did not necessarily

itals

have to lead dangerously far but could, could.

After they took the plunge, dazed and giddy and guilty and stimulated there in the tight shiplike quarters while everyone else was off seeing Roosevelt, she tried to sort out what was happening. Juanita and Gilbert chasing through the grass with her typewriter keys after them, chickenfeed. What she and Owen were drawn into was as complicated as a family album, it seemed to her. The best way she could put it was that they each wanted something like a portion of a person more, another helping, in their marriages. Not the first pair ever to catch catnip on the breeze at the same time, they both knew; plural of spouse is spice, but that oldest of jokes on humans is always freshly played. ~~Only slowly did they catch on to each other, implacable attachment to larger-than-life aspirations like sharing a sense sharper than anyone else's around them.~~ Slipping off to meet, their not many times--Rosellen's educated guess on Owen was that he tiredly wanted back his dating days of Bozeman, someone warm and willing and without Charlene's grudge against his work. Someone, instead, who prized Fort Peck as he did. Go for broke, the part of him beyond blueprint had chosen when the chance with Rosellen surfaced. Her

Roman

(ital)

diagnosis on herself didn't take much: a little starved, that was all, for somebody who when you asked what was on his mind, <sup>g</sup>he told you. And getting back at Charlene, of course that figured in, too--all the big sistering, any Bluebird Girl could spell that out in macaroni letters. Charlene and her prettiness, her fanciness, her little flirts traded with Bruce. Sisters paired like ark animals that didn't quite match, she and Charlene. On his side of things, Owen had to flinch past the fact of Neil; but brothers fork apart where a woman is concerned, ask anywhere in history.

So, neither of them meant anything lasting by their handful of times together. Rosellen pretty much knew what she was having with Owen wasn't actual love, although there were things about him she wished she could take home and put under the <sup>sheets</sup>bed. She didn't even think she was out of love with Neil, although as Proxy advised they did seem to need a fresh shot of each other. What Rosellen, pressed to it, would have said she loved was the experience itself; the experiencing of <sup>their tryst.</sup>~~it~~. The story, secret, then would just be there, put away in herself--and of course Owen--when

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they all left Fort Peck. Except that Darius had pushed himself into the picture.

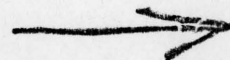
After the slide, the first time they'd managed a minute to be alone to talk, in the back hallway of the Ad Building, she had taken a look at Owen's painfully peaked expression and said, "Don't blame yourself to death. You went out there and saved Neil's skin."

"It's nothing as simple as a few million yards of mud," he responded. Darius had been at him about the two of them, he told her rapidly. Like a beak into a wound.

"Mad as hell about something, everything--I can't get him simmered down." Hollow-eyed, Owen shook his head as if finally having met the impossible. "Maybe having it to hold over us will be enough for him. Maybe he'll never say anything." Rosellen watched him, feeling it begin to burn at her, as Owen finished: "Except to me. And I hope not to you."

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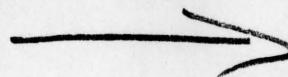
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"What's this 'Tell us, Jealous'?" Darius's mimicking voice rose in the truck cab. "Is there more where that's from? Because--"

"Because nothing. Forget I said anything." Rosellen gazed steadily across at him as if convincing herself of something. Then said: "I told you I'd make you a deal." She reached down and took her shoes and socks off. She began to unbutton her dress, turning toward him enough to make sure he could watch her at it. But before scooting over to the middle of the seat to finish undressing, she dropped her hand to the gearstick. "Better get this out of our way first." Stepping hard on the brake to keep the truck from moving at all, Rosellen pumped the clutch in with her other foot and moved the gearstick up into reverse, farthest away from the truck seat.

"Barefoot driving," Darius said of her quick exploit. "I am all admiration."



"Barefoot all over, next," Rosellen said, that saying <sup>of</sup> ~~borrowed from~~  
<sup>'s</sup> Proxy making him blink in the darkness. Then he felt the drift of her  
fingers onto the buttonline of his shirt. "You, too," Rosellen stipulated.

Darius complied, he would have taken his clothes off at high noon  
in Picadilly for this.

All garments at last tucked up onto the back of the seat with his cap,  
the two of them made what position they could on the long narrow truck  
seat, and it began. Never pass it up, ran in Darius's mind, not that he  
ever had or intended to, especially now. The world was a goner, since  
the festering cowards' peace at Munich, and a man may as well lose himself  
in his favorite hiding place of pleasure while he could. These otter-smooth  
maneuvers of woman, white magic of their thighs and their moon-touched  
breasts, the hidden delta where the loins meet, this and then this and  
yes this--

"Wait." She wriggled, out from under and up onto her side, <sup>breathing open-mouthed.</sup> "Let's...  
trade places."

Bare and bright-eyed, Rosellen moved partway over him, hands kneading  
the strategic hollows between his collarbones and the root of his throat.



He couldn't help but wonder whether she was taking tips from Proxy, where else did she learn spice such as this? Rosellen was surprisingly instructive, what a bonus, coaxing him to lay his head back, kissing her way down him, wait, she said again, and he did, letting her shift around to where she wanted, murmuring something tersely to him about not wanting to bump into the steering wheel, until he could feel her finding a position over his lower thighs. His head turned a little, he could see up at the windshield which had grayed over, steamed up from their breath and body heat. Darius would have chuckled at that if his throat had not been too tight with wanting. He shut his eyes a moment, all the desires humming in his head, Olivia, Jessie, Fiona, temporary Proxy, missed-chance Meg, as he waited for this next.

Rosellen paused in mid-motion there low on him. She had to slip behind the steering wheel, a bit sideways, for this. There was just room. She kept as much of herself applied to him as she could while her left leg angled down and her left foot just touched the clutch. This ending she had found in herself. Employ the eraser. On him, on the mess made of her own story and three others', on the way life was

ambushing all hopes. Over with. Rosellen pushed her foot down on the clutch and palmed the gearstick knob to her, out of reverse, out of gear.

"Wh--? We're going!" he let out, struggling to rise in the darkness.

Rosellen answered for everything with herself, flinging for all she was worth onto his neck, shoulders, any of him she could fight as he tried to get out from under, adding her weight and terrible determination as the truck tipping forward on the ramp started him sliding off the seat, Darius borne under her as the truck kept picking up momentum, coasting faithfully until it glided from the dam, into the gather of the water.

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