

of gravel and turning to run back past the other three sets of men to the fourth dumper car back in line, following beside it until the "Pull!" signal again. They finished the first train, two thousand tons of gravel gone to the river bottom, and the next train immediately came.

#

Suppers went uncooked. The crews were not going to be home until the river was plugged or the bridge was lost. Light lingered, this time of year, and as the blue evening came on, wives drove down from Wheeler or walked across from Officers' Row in the Corps townsite and clustered on the bluff by the Ad Building. Rosellen said something to Charlene about having to get used to being bridge widows for however long, and while Charlene didn't answer, she thought there was no getting used to anything at Fort Peck.

Proxy showed up, saying with fine disgust that taxi<sup>4</sup>-dancing was slow tonight anyway, all it took was a nice evening and males were occupied with softball, she said, making it sound like a social disease.

The three of them and the other women watched the activity at the truss bridge and the river gap, where tiny figures scurried and

constant  
traincars marched in file and bulldozers lurched across slopes; from their distance, it looked like the place on an anthill where boiling water had been poured.

"Making the gravel fly pretty good, aren't they." From the sound of him, Bruce was the ~~complete~~ authority on stopping rivers. He had come up without any of the three women noticing until here he stood with his hands in his hip pockets, ~~permeisseur~~ expert appraiser of the roiled water beneath the bridge.

"Decided to hang around the widows' club, mm?" Charlene looked glad to have a chance to kid him as a break in the monotony. Proxy cold-shouldered him without making a big issue of it. It was Rosellen, until then absorbed in watching the drama at the truss bridge, who cut her eyes over to Bruce a couple of times and right away wanted to know:

"What'd you do with Kate? Isn't she along for this?"

"Doesn't get off until <sup>nine</sup> 9," he handled that in a breeze. Actually, he added, he was on his way to the Rondola to pick her up after work.

"But the view is better from up here." Whereupon he grinned around at Charlene and Rosellen and Proxy in turn, although only for the barest

instant at Proxy.

Rosellen caught him off guard by asking:

"Don't you kind of wish you were down there closing the river off for good?"

"There'll still be stuff to tend to, don't worry your head about that," Bruce gave her. "For a while yet I'll keep on doing the clog dance on the river bottom."

He flinched when Proxy, as if to herself, hummed a snatch of "When We Danced Close and the World Stood Still." But then Charlene began a big conversation about Fourth of July intentions, whether Bruce and Kate would be available if everybody could get together for another Nettle Creek picnic. "That last one was a lot of fun," she smiled as if calling back a favorite dream. "Sure it was," Bruce laughed, "because you shot the pants off everybody else."

Rosellen could have slapped them both. Here the time was, the dam taking hold, the river changing forever, Fort Peck within inches, minutes, of becoming the monument they'd all spent these years making, and the two of them chose now to go coo-coo at each other about

p. 660B follows

that stupid shooting match.

Expert reader of faces that she was, Proxy kept watch on Rosellen.

*Itals*  
Smile, chile. If Big Sis wants to get her jollies by teasing Bruce-ums,

not a thing in this world we can do about it. She'd just better know

when to turn it off, is all.

*#*

"There goes the river," Hugh wanted to say in the worst way. All that prevented him was the understanding that it would be the worst way. *ital*

Meg would lay into him like a catamount if he took a dig at Owen's triumph.

He believed it constituted unnatural forbearance, but he stoppered himself

while he and Meg and Jackie watched the ~~river drama~~ <sup>action at the bridge</sup> from the roof of the

Rondola. Customers passing beneath into the cafe joked about hoping the

roof held long enough for them to get a cup of coffee, and it was true

the flat tarred surface groaned a little as ~~half~~ <sup>9</sup> a dozen people at a time

took short turns as spectators, but the Duffs by some unspoken consent

had residence up there while the river was being pinched off between the

great halves of Owen's dam. Holding Jackie, Meg was keeping him mesmerized

with the tale of a selkie, a man who was also a seal--<sup>D</sup>"Think of it, Jack,  
*m*



he could catch himself a fish any time he felt like it and wear lovely fur trousers as well."

"Meg." Kate came climbing the ladder, careless of knees and more ~~from under~~ flashing out ~~of~~ her waitress uniform. "Let me have him a minute." She took the boy and turned so that he was looking with her toward the railroad bridge and the rumbling gravel trains. Hugh distinctly heard her say,

"I want him to see the river go."

#

In the bullgang, Darius did his work on the dredgeline supports with his hands only, his true attention on the contest between the might of the dam project and the strength of the river. Were it not for Owen and Neil, he found, he would silently cheer for the river.

#

Another train done, another came. Every time a carload was dumped now, some gravel was swept away in the current as if the Missouri was determined to deliver it to St. Louis, but some stayed, a loose and shifting pyramid there under the water.

Neil, sprinting and wondering along with the other seven gravelmasters how much more of this there would be, how much more they could take,

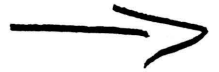
glanced up at Owen whenever he could. Braced there in the girders

like a spiffed-up steelworker in a Stetson and pressed khakis, Owen

looked somehow distracted, gazing off at the channel shoulder instead

of watching the bombardier-bursts of gravel into the river. What do I

expect, though, that he's going to act like some kind of radio announcer



up there calling a fight? "Here's a haymaker from Neil Duff... followed by a wallop of gravel from Birdie Hinch... but the Missouri is absorbing all the punishment they can throw at it, so far. "Huh uh. Owen is going to go about it his own way, whatever it is." Catching himself at this, knowing he was going a little giddy from exertion, Neil concentrated on his running, staying exactly even with the next dumper car, the little hop-skip when "Pull!" was shouted again and the thunder of gravel.

# — Owen could, He could feel it all, through the bridge. The slow rumble of the train, the concussive force as each carload was dumped: the incessant rhythms came up through his shoes, and sideways out of the girders into his gripping hands. Owen He knew better but he could wish, couldn't he, that he and the bridge were taking into themselves all the tremble of plugging the river, that none could reach and dislodge the slipped area of fill. So far, the wishing had worked.

# — In the half-dusk, the gravel dumping slowly but unstoppably gained, the hail of pebbles gravel building up in a rough slurry which would show for an instant above the riverwater and then slip from sight.

Tired as they were, the gravelmasters worked like acrobats now,

bouncing to the catwalk railing to peek down at the effect of each  
dumpload, then back into the rhythm of catching their next dumper car,  
yanking the springpin--

In the end it was a carload dumped by Birdie Hinch and a very tired  
Neil that brought the shout:

"That one's staying dry!"

Neil scooted to the railing ~~beside~~ <sup>beneath</sup> Owen's perch and the two of them  
stared down. In the vast wallow of gravel mush below, a low conelike  
heap--as Darius would have said, "Not two hands higher than a duck"--  
was a drier gray. The Missouri, by just that much, was captured now.

PN

## Part Six

PT

## THE SHERIFF

1937

The big gravy spreader himself came to show off at the dam after they had managed to pen up the river, to the sheriff's steaming despair. Franklin Delano Roosevelt at his rosiest, jaunty as if he'd built Fort Peck Dam with his own pink hands, when the fact was he couldn't even maneuver himself from his special train to the presidential touring car without a gang of help. Didn't seem to matter, though, to this President's smiling repeal of the law of averages, the disgusted sheriff thought; three thousand counties in the United States and here was Roosevelt majestically roostering around in his, for the second time in one lifetime.

Waiting, watching, the sheriff hardly knew where to start in being nettled. Glasgow, the depot sign read as the President's entourage began to disgorge from the train, but to Carl Kinnick it might as well have announced Nightmare. For the past two weeks now the Secret Service advance man Boatwright, barging into everything as if Valley County all of a sudden belonged to him; the elaborate chain of command it took for the sheriff to get the simplest thing done, such as roping off the depot platform; the wise-ass Highway Patrol special contingent who wanted to know whether the President's motorcade was going to go for the speed record from Glasgow to Wheeler; the on-loan police from Great Falls who figured they knew everything because they were from a city; the couple of hundred of the National Guard called into uniform and deployed along the presidential route, who figured that because they were military they knew more than any cops; and all that only brought you to Roosevelt's own voluminous retinue of staff and newspaper people and the mob of politicians from far and wide, to be dealt with starting now. As a Democratic officeholder the sheriff had to be part of the political folderol, too, and it was amazing to him as he herded them through to the train, the number of

delegations who on the Fort Peck example wanted to talk to the President about a water scheme for the Marias River or the Two Medicine River or whatever their closest river happened to be; you'd think, the sheriff thought, Montana could be dammed up enough to irrigate this entire side of the earth.

Something moved, whirled, at the corner of the sheriff's vision, and he twisted in that direction with his hand on his gun butt. Tornado of pigeons, scared up from the grain elevator on the other side of the railroad tracks. Nerves. The sheriff wished he didn't have any.



Ital.

America the Beautiful, the Glasgow high school Kiltie band <sup>now</sup> let

loose with, red-kneed in the October wind. The crowd had been gathering for hours, the street behind the depot solid with people across to the Goodkind Block and all the way down to the Coleman Hotel, and wouldn't you know there'd be at least one, some smart-aleck Caruso at the front of the throng warbling out the popular mock version:

"My country 'tis of thee,  
Sweet land of Franklin D.,  
next thing to king!  
Won't you please run again,  
Third term for fun again..."

LINE-FOR-  
LINE  
EXT

ITAL

The serenade did not actually constitute disturbance of the peace--  
 hell, the peace was already disturbed by the President himself--so the  
 sheriff folded his arms and turned around to reconnoiter the trackside  
 situation again. The delegations wanting this or that had been busily  
 trooping through the presidential Pullman, and the schedule pretty quick  
 called for Roosevelt to emerge onto the rear platform to smile and wave  
 at the crowd, then descend into the open touring car for the drive to



the dam. About time, the sheriff told himself as he was given the high sign by McIntyre, the President's secretary, to step up into the Pullman with the final delegation of supplicants. *Ital.*

In there, the presidential parlor car was surprisingly old-fangled. Velvety. Kind of musty, to tell the truth. Not that Carl Kinnick was there to sightsee. He knew from the '34 visit that the presidential rail quarters would be chockfull of important hands to be shaken, and he first of all made sure of Governor Ayers's and Senator Murray's and Congressman O'Connell's and then merely shook whomever until it came his turn at the President's. Giving the sheriff the most famous smile this side of the man in the moon, Roosevelt assured him how perfectly delightful it was to be in Glasgow ~~once~~ more.

*ital.* Even the FDR handshake--<sup>T</sup><sub>m</sub> the master ~~campaigner's~~ ~~politician's~~ proffer of just-enough: this much touch of my flesh shall ye have, and not a pore more--<sup>T</sup><sub>m</sub> provoked the sheriff, as he stepped back to watch the political menagerie in here sort itself out. Conspicuous by his absence this time was Senator Wheeler, who by now was at odds with the President for the New Deal having veered ~~so~~ <sup>so</sup> far to the left. Here and appearing thoroughly unhappy about it was

Congressman O'Connell, who appeared to suspect that Roosevelt didn't know where real left was located. The thought of FDR dainty-handing his way through the whole damned national picture like this, maybe even for another term after this one, was just about more than Carl Kinnick cared to look ahead at.

Right now, though, the local officeholders were going to be accorded the privilege of following FDR out onto the train's rear platform so their constituents could view them in the presidential presence. Roosevelt had to be got onto his feet. The sheriff was determined not to miss this. He forged his way around the end of the milling group of aides and politicoes in the Pullman so he would have the clearest possible shot at seeing. A Secret Service agent scrutinized him sharply, then evidently decided this was only a short man's natural behavior.

From the waist up, Roosevelt there in his chair was monumental. Even his head seemed sizes larger than anyone else's. Commensurate shoulders and chest. The sheriff knew the story, how Roosevelt swam, swam, swam after polio hit him. All that work in the water and the exertion of the wheelchair had built him a torso that would have done a lumberjack .

proud.

The legs, though.

Even to the unsympathetic sheriff it appeared pitiful and painful, Roosevelt's ritual of going clenched from the jaw on down, gearing himself for the lurch upward so the metal leg braces could be locked to hold him in a standing position, his son James there on his left, his weak side, to provide firm ~~clenched~~<sup>tensed</sup> biceps he could grip onto, now the President of the United States grunting himself ready, then the actual massive tottering rise like--

The sheriff didn't know like what, but it was damn sure unforgettable.

#

The town of Wheeler, democratic and Democratic, antic and frantic, was boiling over for Roosevelt.

Cheers ~~sang~~<sup>sang</sup> out at the approach of the motorcade of the President who put the country back to work, who provided a wage to those whose pockets had been emptied by the Depression, and, not incidentally, who re-opened the nation's saloons. Theoretically the dam work was going on uninterrupted until FDR's big speech upon leaving Fort Peck, but somehow there were crews, complete with foremen, who saw the President from vantage points such as the Wheeler Inn and the Blue Eagle as well as

from the job site later on. Toddlers and taxi-dancers and cardsharps and Corps wives in their Sunday best jammed in next to the damworkers on the board sidewalks. When at last it arrived in the procession, the open touring car gave them their money's worth, the confident presidential smile and wave as Roosevelt was borne along the main street of Wheeler until the motorcade proceeded, naturally, to Delano Heights.

# ———  
Back in the jampacked Blue Eagle, a patron shouted out: "How about a free round in honor of the President?"

"How about go screw yourself," Tom Harry replied from the busy cash register.

# ———  
As the motorcade wound down the ridge to the dam, the sheriff in the follow-car behind the President's brooded ahead. Not that Franklin D. himself seemed to have a care in the world, jovially letting his ear be bent by Colonel <sup>Armenter</sup> Pemberton in the jump seat or the Governor or the Senator alongside him on the big back seat. The man truly did possess the ultimate politician's knack of appearing interested in every gopher hole and dandelion.

All Carl Kinnick could think about was what could go wrong, here in his county, as the rajah of the Hudson River was shown the conquered Missouri, transported across the great earthfill, shown the entire sprawling dam project from the overlook on the east abutment, then driven up into the hills to the <sup>S</sup>pillway and at last to the spur railroad where the special train had been brought around for the presidential speechmaking.

The sheriff's heart, or at least the place where he pinned his badge, and the winter harbor parking lot sank as the speaking site grew into view. There and waiting were thousands. Thousands of cars, to only start the matter off; the intermittent sun caroming off all those windshields, the dazzle of vehicles looked like the mass lot at Ford's Rouge River plant and it didn't take much figuring of how many people would have piled into each car to come to this and then adding on, what, ten thousand damworkers already swarming around here--  
Sheriff Kinnick knew this was going to be even worse than

his worst dream of it.

The sheriff hopped out fast when the motorcade pulled up alongside the special train. He spotted his undersheriff Peyser, a head taller than the rest of the cordon at the ~~rear~~<sup>back end</sup> of the train. Cussing his way through the crowd, the sheriff wriggled in to make sure Peyser was doing what he was supposed to, keep an eye on the radio guys who were putting up microphones on tall stands to catch the President's speech from the train's rear platform.

"How you doing, Carl," the undersheriff placidly greeted him.

Sheriff Kinnick scowled at the poker<sup>3</sup>-faced Peyser in return, then stared up through the grillwork of the ~~train's~~ rear platform to where the hen herd of politicians was forming up around Roosevelt and his microphones.


What if somebody took a shot here at Roosevelt the way that crackpot did back East in '33?

The sheriff was no connoisseur of history, but he knew a lot about blame. Oh, sure, the gunman there in '33 potted the Chicago mayor right FDR next to ~~Roosevelt~~ instead, <sup>but</sup> people in Montana were good shots. No,

if the President—particularly this President—was killed in Carl Kinnick's county, that would be it for his career as sheriff. He'd might as well ~~go~~ pick grit with the chickens, if that happened.

And unfortunately he could think of just countless ways it could happen. Somebody mad about being let go from his job at the dam. Some liquored-up bottomlander who was sore about losing his land to the dam. Some Republican driven nuts by the New Deal. Some Communist; you never knew what that bughouse bunch was up to, but the report was that they hated FDR for keeping the country from going far enough to the left; incredible to the sheriff.

Or some woman. So far as he knew, women hadn't taken their turn yet at assassinating. (Congressman O'Connell's young knockout of a wife, prettily stationed right up there at the presidential elbow. Beauty turned beast, bango. Wouldn't that be a setup.) God, if the women ever started cutting loose...



So there was every kind of possibility here in this Fort Peck crowd, and one of the uncomfortable thoughts wasn't only the danger to Roosevelt. Supposedly the Secret Service bodyguards were to ~~humanly~~ shield the President from assassin peril, but where were those boys when the Chicago mayor got picked off? The sheriff knew that if it came to that, if he spotted somebody here yanking out a gun, he'd have to put himself between that gun barrel and Roosevelt. He'd take death. There wasn't any choice, sheriffing.

## —————  
As the Governor launched into amplified greetings to ~~Montana for~~ Roosevelt and his trainload, the sheriff went and claimed the roof of the cab of the truck that had been pulled up parallel to the presidential Pullman for the ~~thirty or so~~ newspaper photographers and reporters to see over the crowd.

"Governor Ayers, and I almost said 'My old friends of Fort Peck,' because some of you were here three years ago."

The presidential voice now, and if the sheriff had been a praying



man he would have asked that Roosevelt just say it was nice to be in Montana, accept a bouquet and kiss Miss L-H Beef on the cheek, and scoot

back inside the railroad car. ~~Even doing it that way wouldn't be bulletproof,~~

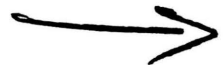
~~but infinitely less risky than standing up there front and center as a~~

~~target for however long an all-out speech took.~~ But The sheriff knew FDR,

blast his <sup>lordly</sup> ~~gaudy~~ guts, was not going to pass up a chance at an all-out speech ~~anything.~~

Roosevelt looked out around the Fort Peck valley and at the dam as if making sure of something.

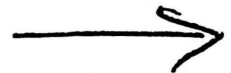
"The one thing that I have specialized on ever since I started



collecting postage stamps at the age of ten years is geography. The geography, especially, of the United States."

The squire next door, this familiar kindly confiding tone of Roosevelt's was. The sheriff shook his head. You had to half-admire how much the man could get away with. But then after predictably wafting himself and his audience out here "beside the wide Missouri," FDR turned up the oratory:

"This great river gathers into story, the written and told tributary, out of passages cut by large desires. Beginning, so far as we know, with



the first cleaving of its water, by downstream Indian adventurers whose tribal name for 'canoe' was 'missouri'--<sup>T</sup><sub>m</sub>never bettered, may I say, as a beautiful name for an inspiring river. Then came Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery, the day-by-day eyes and inks that captured onto paper for us the two<sup>E</sup>-thousand<sup>E</sup>-three<sup>E</sup>-hundred<sup>E</sup>-mile arch of the river from St. Louis to its Three Forks headwaters. Then followed the building of forts, America coming west by military and trading<sup>#</sup>-post handholds along the Missouri's immense chain of drainage. From that, the axe<sup>E</sup>-quick renunciation of the river's forest silence as woodhawks, perhaps within sight of here where we stand today, chopped trees into boiler<sup>E</sup>-lengths to feed the steamboats. And onward, then, to the imprints of homesteaders and townplanters on the floodplain of this great river. Until now, a little more than one<sup>E</sup>-third of the way through this century, the pattern is as set as cry and echo, each annal desiring a next<sup>T</sup><sub>m</sub>--the human tide and the Missouri River, hungrily flowing together into storied destiny."

Roosevelt paused, to let the applause roll before he went on to the invocation of the dam and the useful work it had brought and the future in <sup>which</sup> ~~which~~ every drop of the river's water would do its duty. The

sheriff stared at him from his trucktop, finally grasping this President's bargain with danger and all else.

*Ital.*

Surfacing. That was what it was like, the way Roosevelt rose.

The sheriff himself was only a so-so swimmer, nothing like this famous habitue of therapeutically warm pools, but he suddenly savvied FDR's way of thrusting himself up out of that wheelchair. Breaking upward through the polio that had sucked him down into it; rising past the political turbulence that ought to have sunk him. And once up there, having breached crippling infirmity and gravity and whatever the hell else, the irons clamped on his more or less legs to hold him in place, the

*ital.*

presidential sonofabitch presided. You couldn't not listen to <sup>him,</sup> ~~the lordly~~

~~So~~ the sheriff had to admit, even if you thought you couldn't stand any more of that voice sanded so smooth by old family money. No, you listened, to his old tricks, new tricks, whatever he brought up to the surface with him this time <sup>when</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt dove up into the air, onto a political platform and on out into the ethers of radio, he took you over by all the tricks that ever swam.

The majority of the President's hearers in the crowd had seasons of Fort Peck behind them, the making of the dam the prime calendar of their lives, and like the intent little sheriff, they listened as if <sup>they were</sup> being paged one after another. Damworkers of every stripe, householders of Wheeler and the other shantytowns and the apple-pie Fort Peck townsite, in their thousands they took in the grand words FDR had come to give them. There were absences. Nan and J.L. Hill, with the wages of laundry and dynamite, gone back to their ranch country of English Creek. <sup>self-vanished,</sup> ~~Jaraala~~ of course. But others and others were here, shareholders in this, ~~the day of Roosevelt.~~ The Birdie Hinchies of this earth, by that name and many others. Tom Harry in shining fresh shirt and blackest bow tie. The crisp officers of the Corps. Years' worth of Duffs, in plentiful scattering across this Fort Peck scene. The Fort Peck they had cooked and notched its paydays one after another. ~~for. Hairdressed. Waited on. Typed up. Danced with and more. That~~ they had cleared brush off. Built dredges for. Walked beneath in diving uniform. Fashioned an earthfill onto. Carpentered and dug and labored for in a dozen different ways. Now they listened hard to the great voice telling them this dam was theirs as much as anybody's. A searching eye

with enough patience could have picked the tribe of them out of even this crowd, family resemblance in the way they stood akimbo but attentive, like soldiers picketed, one here, another over across, pair there, the Duffs as ever unmistakably in evidence; all but two.

#

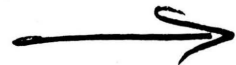
No one would notice, today. That much they knew about this. The rest was the treacherous part.

Where they were, the sound of Roosevelt and the crowd's roars of applause were a distant surf.

They kissed hard, as if to get past any doubts.

Holding to each other, they clung so close their heartbeats registered on each other's skin. When they broke apart for breath, her fingers walked up the cleft in the middle of his chest. She asked, "Are you thinking about supertime?"

"No." Last thing on his mind; the way they were touching each other crowded out all else. "Why would I be?"



"That's when we have to start pretending." He knew what she meant.

From here on, careful at home, careful at family get-togethers, to not say each other's name too often. Or too seldom. "I'm not going to like that," she whispered, although there was no need for whispering. "It just came to me, the feeling of dreading supper tonight. And I wondered if maybe I was picking it up from you."

His hand cupped the back of her head as if weighing its contents judiciously. "Am I getting myself in with a mind reader here?"



Her fingers went back down the dale there on his chest. Not whispering now, but softly enough, she offered: "I suppose we'll see."

"Then we had better hope it doesn't run in the family," he provided back to her.

Slowly their hands moved down on each other to where things begin.



PN

## Part Seven

PT

## SLIPPAGE

1938

"Know something,  
~~by you know what,~~ Shannon? I'm hungry for mountains."

"Tom, what the sweet hell do you expect me to do about that?"

Although she immediately knew.

"All I'm saying, it doesn't hurt anybody to think ahead. Fort  
Peck isn't going to last for—"

"Cut the guff. How ~~soon~~<sup>quick</sup> are you pulling out?" she demanded.

"While yet. Before winter hits again." Proxy kept up her icepick  
gaze at him until he had to specify. "End of October. Gonna try it over  
in the Two Medicine country. Pretty, around there." He folded his arms

on his chest, looked at her and said as if reminding them both:

"Mountains."

"Have fun." Proxy's smile was so slanted that Tom Harry muttered about bookkeeping to tend to and strode to his back office. She watched him go, the entire length of the Blue Eagle. She would miss this place, not to mention its contribution to her stash of Durham sackfuls of dollars. Wouldn't be the first in either category, though. <sup>Jee</sup>~~Holy~~ <sup>Zuz</sup>~~rapola~~, though. End of October. Next month already. Tom was playing his cards so close to his chest they had to be read through the back of his shirt. One thing sure, she was in no mood to fend with some new cherry of an owner here; didn't want the hassle of breaking a fresh one in to the way she went about things. The new stupe probably wouldn't even have a Packard. Briefly she wondered whether to ask Tom to put in a word for her with Ruby Smith. That skag Snow White was working the Wheeler Inn, though; room for two milk-blondes? Proxy decided not to ask, she didn't want to be obligated. As Tom Harry had always put it, no hobblegations.

# ———  
"Funnily enough, Owen, I am for war."

They had been back at their surgery of the world, arguing through mouthfuls and dipping philosophical sustenance out of open lunchboxes, during the spectacle of Munich. for the past week of noons, Darius, considerably red-eyed from sitting up nights with the radio and the Czechoslovakia crisis, could not help but feel history was dogging him personally. Down your tools, boys!

Ital.

The cobble streets of Scotland in '15, ringing against war. The fields of death are hungry... They still were. Across them now, though, the big bugs in brown shirts, black shirts, trousseau of goosesteppers. There's this bit, too: pick the bones of truth out of it and I myself have already employed war. Against Crawford.

Ital.

"What, for King and country?" Owen winged in on him as if snapping down a playing card. "Where's that in the workers' catechism all of a sudden?"

"You have to understand, Owen, this Hitler is an armed daftie."

#

Nineteen thirty-eight, Munich's year, spun out of the sun in days spoked with fierce light and shadow.

ital

Marx's grave at Highgate in midnight gloom while a steel dawn slides across the eight time zones ruled by Stalin.

Hitler, howling hate in the Nuremberg torchlight.

Spain a political bed of cinders, under Franco. Italy the dark  
bootprint of Mussolini.

Japan's flag of a bloodbright rising sun, catching the morning  
across the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The United States can quench all this at our shores, say Senator  
Burton K. Wheeler and Charles Lindbergh and other isolationists. Water  
will do it, oceans lay between America and the world.

Meanwhile, Roosevelt and his people govern on the principle that  
almost anything, including water, can be amended.

#

"They're feeding Europe to him like a tray of buns," Darius went on. He shook his head at what passed for statesmen these days. "Joe Chamberlin's chinless lad Neville. You can bet the best part of him ran down his daddy's leg."

Owen shifted a bit on the shale cutbank where he was sitting on his coat. His attention tended to drift when Darius got going on British political Pooch-Bahs. From this lunch spot on the east abutment, above the core pool, the dam lay below like a scale model on a classroom

table and bone-weary as Owen was from the pace of work, he never grew tired of this instructive view. The jigsaw puzzle pieces around the edges of the project--railway spurs, haul roads, maintenance yards, the spillway three miles over the hills behind him--done now. The dam itself already functioning, the four giant steel-lined diversion tunnels taking the regulated flow of the entire fifty thousand square miles of river the ~~Missouri~~ drainage. The beautiful physics of this, the matter of the water funneled to become white foaming energy, the contained Missouri fauceting out of this one-of-a-kind dam, he had tried and tried to make Darius see. He was the one of the whole damn family who ought to be able to see it, grasp the process. But the only physic that seemed to interest Darius was the one he wanted to administer to the world and make it purge its political guts. While Darius went down his list of major fools in charge of things, Owen contented himself with his inventory of the dam. Oh sure, a few items of it he happily could have done without. This shale under the seats of their pants, to name the foremost, with its damnable tendency to crumble off the abutment and mess up the waterlevel in his core pool. Bearpaw, yeah, it wouldn't

take much of a bear to paw this crackerass rock apart. # To name the

other, he never had liked the scheduling setup on the face of the dam,

where he as fillmaster was responsible for the gravel layer but not

the riprap work which was always treading on the gravel crew's heels.

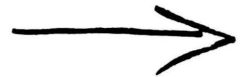
How about all or nothing for me there

*Hals.* on the facework? he'd tried on Major Santee. How about doing it the Corps

way for once? the Major put the kibosh on his try. # Minor stuff, though,

either of those, compared with the big thing they were leaving to him,

the topping-off. Twenty feet to go, on the last of the mountain of fill.



Height of a nice two-story house, is all. Okay, it'd be a two-story

house four miles long, but so what. Off in the haze along the autumn

river, his dredges were flushing fill in from as much as five miles

downstream and doing it smack on schedule. Darius was not a hundred

percent wrong, the world was a worry, but Owen's own bit of high ground

couldn't have looked better this cool September noon. He knew almost

to the day, now, when Fort Peck would be topped off.

"And France." Darius was shaking his head twice as strenuously.

"The French, Owen, have gone steadily downhill ever since Sorel."

"Speaking of downhill," Owen seized that opening and stood up,

unaccountably intent--to Darius--on not missing any minute he could

spend on the dam. "We better get back down on the job, world or no

world, while we still have one."

#  
DROP CAP

The year was producing something like armor on the Fort Peck Dam,

the riprap boulders steadily being lodged into place on the upstream side.

A blanket of gravel was laid first, down the slope of the dam, so the

gravel trains still ran incessantly across the ghost trestle. Bruce

shook his head every time he glanced over there where the trestle had

been systematically buried, footings and pilings and everything except the railroad track itself, every high-stepping inch of it now under two hundred feet of Owen's earthfill sluiced in since last spring. No sign of the river channel ~~any more~~, either; by now the dam made a solid blunt horizon across the entire valley, and while Bruce granted that it was nice all their work, especially his, had added up to this piece of geography the world had never before seen, it left him restless and bored.

Goddamn it, though, we ought to up and leave. Going to have to pull out anyway when...but yeah, when is when?

Bruce didn't like being of two minds this way. Mostly he was on idle time any more, "getting paid for drinking coffee" as he liked to boast of it, just a little. Whenever he was summoned to dive, these days it was usually to inspect the end wall of the inlet to the tunnels or to deal with something caught in the trash rack there where the river funneled through the dam. Lots of yawn time, though, as now. He wandered over to the middle of the dam, where the truck ramp came down to the snubnosed dock called Port Peck, and watched the crane barge unload base boulders for the riprap, each one a truckload in itself. When the appeal



of that shortly wore off, he prowled back to where the diving barge was moored, trying to look like a contented man of leisure. <sup>he couldn't help it,</sup> But the not-diving made him hungry for the river. The lake, as it was awfully quickly turning into. The plugging of the river had changed the look of things there, underwater; without the channel flowing, the water had muddied up, gone filmy. Curtained. The last dive he'd done he had tried as many as three of the thousand-watt underwater lamps at once and they weren't much better than, what, candles. Far from cursing it, the new darkness of the Missouri intrigued him. Nighttime in the river, mid-day. It all went with what Bonestiel had told him, when he was breaking Bruce in at diving. Watch out for the kill-line. A kill-line, said the Louisianan, was where the tidal salt of an ocean surged up a river delta and certain freshwater fish went belly-up. Difference is, you can't see our kill-line. Which is why you got to watch for it-- Bonestiel tapped him in the center of the forehead--in here. The Missouri's new dark drew a diver's kill-line a little closer, Bruce knew, but kept him on his toes more, too. And that was what Bruce wanted, that kind of edge to toe up to but no farther. Standing on

the idle diving barge, he yawned and wished a little something would go wrong, a clog in the trash rack maybe, so he could suit up and go down.

It helped keep life interesting.

#



Hugh as dispatcher of rattlesnakes was still making the rest of the Duffs uneasy, but as Meg would have been the first to point out, when had he ever made them easy?

It's not exactly a livelihood we can take with just anywhere, though,  
eh, Meggie?

Whop. Another rattler off the living list.

Not sheathing his machete yet, staying poised atop the riprap until he was sure the severed snake didn't have a companion down there in its lair, he pondered whether it was worthwhile to keep collecting the tails. The rattle trade was in decline, with the dam workforce at only about half what it was a year ago. Birdie insisted sales would take a turn up, any time now, as soon as it dawned on everybody that now was their last chance for a Fort Peck keepsake, but Birdie was not someone you wanted to set your watch by. Although who was he, Hugh, to think that.

What am I, any more? Graduate of Carteret, class of ~~621~~ days ago.

(Keep track. Take pride in your new calendar of life: another Carteret golden rule.) Dry days, every last blessed damned one of them. Now that I have the moisture out, though, I amount to--what? Farmless farmer.

Damless damworker, about to be. Where our next wage is going to come  
from, I suppose we shall need to see, eh, Meggie? Winter in this country  
does have a way of concentrating the mind.

He stepped down off his refuge of riprap and took the rattle off  
 the snake.

#  
I am not a forgetter, Hugh. Haven't you done well, at staying on  
the wagon; but there is still your large record, from before. To this  
day I can hear you, prating against Owen's dam. <sup>roman</sup> Hugh the yew hewer,  
you scoffed at yourself when you were put at clearing the bottomland.

"Meg," you said, "this piddly work-by-the-hour, this is never us."

Fort Peck has not always been my cup of tea either, but without it,  
where would we be? Shorn of the boys' wives, each of whom I occasionally  
wish I could give a good shake, but all in all, not a bad lot. Darius  
would be an ocean away, still, and while I cannot commend his taste for  
peroxide, he has stirred you to life more than once, has he not. (You  
are better off not knowing the stirrings he induced in me.) And we might  
lack Jack, <sup>5</sup> Companion of my unemployed days.

And you, <sup>5</sup> Hugh, would be the specimen you so long were, a bottle  
worshipper any time the moon charged.

*1 fol.*

So, we are past much. A corrected man, you of the Carteret cure,  
at least in that one habit. But there is yet old distance to be made  
up, between us. That, Hugh, has not changed.

*#*

She was practicing her eavesdropping. Charlene was in her hair but properly so, pushing a wave in and then making it hold with the marcelling iron, and while this was going on there was no reason not to rubber in on the A-1's other customers, one woman done under the dryer and waiting to be combed out and her permed friend waiting for her and both with tireless tongues. Blue Eagle and dancing had been uttered.

"Who's on?" the one asked.

"The Melody Mechanics," said the other.

"Oh, them. I can't stand to see that Three Finger Curly on the guitar. It gives me the willies, the way those stubs--"

*1 fol.*

Three Finger Curly! I never in a million years could get away  
with a name like that in a--

"I like the one who foodles around with the clarinet, though."

Rosellen could not help but despair for a moment. Try as she might to invent people in her stories, in life they simply sat around and,

well, foodled themselves beyond what she could think up.

Uneasily waiting to take her out for a bite at the Rondola before they went home, Neil was sitting up front by the coatrack, whizzing through magazines. The beauty shop even smelled to him like someplace a male shouldn't be. The two biddies gabbing at the back had given him an acute looking-over when he wandered in and took a seat while Rosellen was being finished up, and Charlene had not helped matters any by kidding: "Relax and enjoy it, Neil. Blessed art thou, among women."

He sneaked <sup>peeks</sup> ~~little looks~~ between flipping pages, rare chance to see what went on in here. Each time the marcelling iron came out hot from its midget oven, Rosellen's hair benefitted that much more. Working over her, Charlene still had on a full-front apron from putting the chemicals in on the permed pair, but being Charlene, she simply looked like a million dollars that happened to be wearing an apron. Neil had heard that a place like Chicago had lady barbers, one of the prime attractions for ranchers who rode the trains in with their cattle, and he could see the benefits over having just any old guy rubbing the hair slickum in, yes he could.

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Rosellen had her eyes closed now, waiting out Charlene's ministrations to her hair. She had spent this week, which seemed like forever, typing up the Corps' history of the dam project, Colonel <sup>Carmenter</sup> ~~Pemberton~~ having instructed Major Santee to compile it and Major Santee having delegated it to Captain Brascoe, and Captain Brascoe might as well have written with only one letter of the alphabet, zzzzzz. ~~Churning out the Captain's~~ version Rosellen had wished, now that everybody's time at Fort Peck was numbered, that Charlene or <sup>Kate</sup> ~~Rhonda~~ or even Proxy or Meg had lived somewhere else, so that she could have written letter after letter telling whichever one all the things of these years here. (Toston would have done, for Charlene. Proxy was harder to imagine a place for, she had worn out so many addresses already.) That wasn't quite it, because Charlene and any of the rest of them who had alit to Fort Peck, including Darius down from the moon, were all part of the story. There'd need to be another Charlene or whoever, the way Neil and Bruce were twins. In any case, someone out there on the other end of the words. But, lacking that correspondence in the invisible ink of wish, all she could do was keep ~~restlessly~~ ploughing along with Captain Brascoe's compilation, ~~livening it up with a little~~

mischievous now and then. (In Fort Peck's realm of natural attractions, the major items lacked distinction she'd giggled at and deliberately misdid as the major's item lacked distinction.) Even Captain Brascoe's handwriting provoked her. He printed, ~~about~~ like a super-scrupulous fourth-grader, so in effect she was plunked there at the typewriter turning pages of neat little block letters into pages of neat slightly ~~littler~~ block letters. Rosellen, not much one for sighing, sighed now.

Hugh and Meg and no doubt Darius had a saying for doing anything that annoyingly useless: Pulling up nettles to clear a way into the thistles.

"About done, hon," Charlene's voice broke in on her drifting.

Alert again, Rosellen realized Neil had been watching her get the beauty treatment, and she rewarded his patience with a quick grin and wink.

On his part, Neil had been saving this for supper, but for the sake of something to do besides sitting here like a bump on a log he offered it ~~at large~~ now:

"Your hubby is landing me a new job," he said as if talking to Charlene about the weather.

"Hey, don't I get to hear this, too?" Rosellen let out, as he'd

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figured she would.

"You're hearing it, aren't you?" Neil grinned at her over an opened magazine.

"All right, Secretive," Charlene said. "We bite. What is it?"

"Poking traps."

When he said that, he saw eyebrows go up in an identical way

on both Rosellen and Charlene behind her. After a moment, it was ~~Rosellen was still looking~~

~~surprised when~~ <sup>who</sup> Charlene giggled and said, "In the footsteps of giants,"

meaning Hugh and Birdie.

"Size <sup>twelves</sup> 12s." Neil shed the magazine, onto the pile he'd been through.

"I'll be working with Birdie, so it's kind of an easy-chair job, in a way."

Rosellen hoped she was looking convincingly surprised. She hoped a lot harder that her having wangled this fresh job for him would simmer Neil down on his inclination to quit Fort Peck before she was ready to.

"Keep at it," you're always telling me. You don't know the half of it.

"Duff, Neil Milne, dredgeline trap inspector," she tried out loud, just the way she had it already down on the payroll roster. "I like the sound of that, Neilliepoke."

~~"Duff, Neil Milne, dredgeline trap inspector," Rosellen grandly  
recited his new payroll designation. "I like the sound of that, Neilliepeke."~~

"Yeah, well," he said, wishing she wouldn't call him that in the hearing of the biddies at the back, "it was Owen's doing."

~~... this didn't work~~ <sup>out</sup> ~~so that we could~~  
"Too bad ~~we can't~~ all get together tonight," Rosellen said on impulse,

as much to Charlene as to Neil. The three couples of them, supper at the Rondola and then the movie and afterward maybe seeing what those Melody Mechanics amounted to, would have been fun; but Bruce and ~~Phonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup> any more could only afford a night out on payday, a full week from now, and Owen was working late on paperwork he'd been putting off. "How about coming with for supper?" she tried for Charlene at least, make some kind of occasion out of ~~it~~ <sup>this</sup>. "Birdie Hinch's new right-hand man will probably even buy, hm, Neil?"

"Likely to be chicken, real fresh," Neil got in the spirit with Rosellen.

"Just because you're beautified and ready to paint the town," Charlene said to the back of Rosellen's head. "Some of us know the meaning of work." Addressing the intent two customers at the back of the shop: "Mrs. Foraker is going to have my scalp if I don't get to hers right after this, isn't

that right, Mrs. Foraker?" The two tittered, and went back to an uneasy low conversation.

"It sounds like you're stuck with only one of the famous Tebbet sisters for dining companionship," Rosellen informed Neil in a kidding la-di-dah voice.

"Aw," he registered disappointment. "Too bad you weren't quints, my odds would be better."

*Ital.*  
Just listen to them, Charlene thought as she manipulated the marcelling iron. Two dews in a ducat, that saying of Darius's about any lovebird behavior. (She'd finally had to ask Meg what the devil it meant. Why, Charlene. 'Two doves in a dovecote,' came the amused mother-in-law enunciation.) *Ital's* A lot more than Rosellen, Charlene wished she and Owen had the night off, could go out with the others and frolic. They both could stand that kind of a change. Nights lately, he had been giving her a hard time about life after Fort Peck. Or pretending to.

The Corps has levees on the Mississippi up the gigi, Charlalene, he teased. I could latch on there and build forty-foot versions of Fort Peck the rest of my life, how about. *Ital.*

worse yet:  
Or ~~the worse~~

*I feel*  
They're already talking about another big Missouri dam, over in North Dakota, bright as a new penny, him. Who knows, if they think this one is a sweet enough example they may go for dirt on that one, too.

She wasn't sure how much of it was teasing. She figured Owen was not any too sure, either. What she had managed to pin him down on was leaving Fort Peck.

*I feel*  
Around the time we put the dredges in winter harbor--he caught himself, with what sounded to her like rue, and laughed. Okay, we'll be quits with the dam around the first of November, does that suit you better? No winter harbor, this year.

*#*  
Maybe not here, she thought to herself. A little closer to the time, though, and she would try out her own ideas on him. Bozeman; they could hole up there until spring, sort themselves out in a nice town. Or go out and have a look at the Coast; Seattle, Portland, California, things were always being built in those places.

*#*  
In any case, harbor for winter, just for themselves. That would be different and was she ever ready for it.

Kate

It gets to be a lot, ~~Rhonda~~ thought. The waitressing hours she could handle, Jackie as a wildcat three-year-old she could more or less handle, the complicated raft of Duff in-laws she could handle, even ~~well, handle was too strong a word there;~~ Bruce in his less sterling husbandly moments ~~she had been able to handle~~ was the better expression, for now. But anyway, ~~or at least put up with~~ ~~But~~ handling them all together would test Houdini,

she was beginning to believe. She felt guilty for feeling so, but take right now, when she just had rounded up Jackie from Meg and was trying to keep an eye on him and listen to him chatter about his day with Mum Mum while at the same time supper had to be figured out and an educated guess be made on Bruce, whose hours were more unpredictable than ever now that he was on idle time.

"--an' it scared me pooppy, Mommy."

That nailed her attention. "Jackie, honey, let's don't be saying that, all right?" With his particular grandfather, two uncles and great-uncle added onto his father, not to mention the general run of mouths in Wheeler,

Kate

~~Rhonda~~ considered it a wonder that Jackie's language wasn't saltier than it was. "If you say that around Mum Mum, Mum Mum will have kit--

Mum Mum will not be very happy." She snared the boy to her, then knelt down

on one knee to be at his level. "Now then, Jackerado, what came along and scared you?"

"My nap."

The boy watched the tip of his mother's tongue peek out between her lips, and then she was making a frown at him.

"How--what scared you about that?" <sup>Kate</sup>~~Phonda~~ asked, doing the best she could with her voice. Normally Jackie slept in the style of his father, like a petrified log.

"There was--<sup>T</sup>there was a, a, a swimmy thing."

The tightness in her throat now threatened to shut off words there entirely. Instead they flooded to her mind. Dreams aren't--<sup>T</sup>I can't have passed it on to--<sup>T</sup> She worked her dry mouth and throat, the boy looking in her face reproachfully. "Tell Mommy"--<sup>T</sup>she knew what she had to say, although not what to do if Jackie started telling her about being tied to the thing in the river--<sup>T</sup>"tell Mommy all about it."

The boy lifted his shoulders nearly to his ears. "Nighthorse!"

"Night--<sup>T</sup>?" Meg is going to have him talking in Pig Latin, if I don't watch out. "Yes, honey, everybody gets those. But in yours,

what did the swimmy thing look like?"

The boy pouted tragically. "Like a washclaw."

~~Kate~~  
~~Rhonda~~ nearly fell forward in relief. Jackie resisted baths. She and Meg long since had enlisted Bruce to do tub combat with him, and even so it took all of Bruce's persuasive and other powers before the boy would let himself be subject to soapy water and washcloth.

"Mum Mum says don't let the old nighthorse get me. I too big to, Mum Mum says."

"That's right, Jackie. Be big." That's what we all have to try to be, against the nightmares.

#  
**DROP CAP**

It was tricky, finding ways to meet, be alone together.

The two knew that carelessness, even once, would do them in. All it would take was some other member of the family noticing the least little thing, odd coincidence of her and him. Or picking up a bit of gossip: I thought I just spotted your better half on (her) (his) way into...

Reading it back into the behavior they both tried to keep so pussyfoot.

Then word would be dropped, well-intentioned and devastating: They're not going off together to learn to play the zither, are they.

They'd managed to meet three times before, this way, and if the third time was a charm, did the count grow better or worse from here on?

They did not absolutely have to, but they made love in whispers.

Afterward, other whispers:

"They're going to catch us yet."

"Not if we quit this now."

"If."

#  
**DROP CAP**

With so much of Fort Peck done, there was a general expectation that the last of the damwork would fly into place. Veteran and expert as they were at it by now, and with only the topping-off and the riprap left to do, virtually anybody of the workforce would brag that the dam could practically finish itself now.

Darius, however, had noticed something to the contrary.

A hiccup in the system always attracted him, and this one had locomotive proportions. What had been the regular rhythm of the gravel trains, laying the way for the riprap work, seemed to have a skip in it now. Keeping track day by day from his vantage spot in the bullgang, he found that the interruption sometimes stretched to half an hour or



more, before a train would come backing onto the crest of the dam from the east--<sup>m</sup>opposite of the usual rail flow<sup>m</sup>--and hurriedly dump its gravel cars. The third time this happened, he also caught sight of <sup>Owen</sup>~~Ainsley~~, ~~the gravelmaster~~, in an arm-waving argument with the train dispatcher.

Interesting. Here they have this piece of work by the throat and it slips away on them that little while, every day.

Owen would <sup>tell him</sup>~~know~~ in a trice, what the problem was. For the sake of tactics, of course, the one person Darius was not going to ask was Owen.

That night he said to Proxy, "Dust off your in-law manners, love.

I want to have Hugh and Meg over for supper one night quite soon."

"My ears must be playing out," Proxy told him. "It sounded like you said have people over. Here."

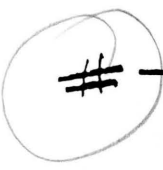
"The last I knew, here is where we live," he said with what she thought was undue reasonableness.

"But look at this place!" She seemed genuinely scandalized by the muss of the houseboat, as if heaps of this and stacks of that had crept in on them during the night. "There's stuff everyfriggingwhere!"

"Paint it all gold," Darius said airily.

Proxy looked at him narrowly, but knew there was no seeing it yet.

What he had up his sleeve.

 Lima beans of extraordinary hardness and a meat loaf dry as Melba toast and an <sup>unfortunate</sup> ~~unlucky~~ brown gravy and mashed potatoes with the gravity of dumplings--Meg could not have been more pleased with the meal Proxy produced, believing as she did that food was a direct index of morals. Hugh, too, appeared to take the philosophical approach. Nothing like these tastes, he thought, since those shots of goop at the Carteret Institute.

Munching gamely, Darius kept up the conversation through the meal while the other three made pretenses with their forks. At the predictable point where Proxy scraped the leftovers into the slop pail and Meg insisted she would like to help with the dishes and Proxy sharply said never mind, they'd just put the plates outside to poison the gophers, Darius cleared his throat a trifle.

"Umm, Meg," Proxy issued. "Want to see the view from out on deck?"

Actually Meg felt quite at home in the clutter of the houseboat and had been daydreaming a bit again of Inverley and when she and Hugh and Darius were green in judgment and trying to make up for it in kisses and

flirtation, but Proxy sounded as if she had something on her mind.

ital. Such a novelty is not to be missed, the Milne attitude toward battle formed up in Meg, and the two women went out.

"Hugh, you're a man of exalted position now," Darius said genially, meaning Hugh's hopping route atop the riprap and the burrows of snakes.

"You'd know this. What's the bind with that gravel crew every infernal day? We're racing past them with the rockwork."

"I do my best to be on hand up there," Hugh said like a regular at the opera, "just to hear <sup>Owen</sup> ~~Ainsley~~ cuss a blue streak when he's short that train."

"Whyever are they running fewer gravel trains? I thought a big push was on to--"

"They're not. What they're trying to do is squeeze in an extra train, on our shift. That's their headache."

"Pull my other one, Hugh. How can they be carrying in more gravel and ending up with less?"

"It takes some doing, I admit. But figuring out when to squeeze that train in, get it backed down onto the dam and so on, that's what's

giving them fits. Owen no doubt can cite you chapter and verse as to how soon now they'll have it worked out and the extra train will be one more feather in--"

"No, no, I wouldn't want to take up Owen's time with such a small matter."

# ———  
"An exceptional meal, Proxy," Meg was saying.

"Sure, you bet. Dessert is going to be a stomach pump."

"No, now, don't go hard on yourself," Meg said as if glad to do it for her.

Evening brings all home. From the deck of the houseboat, riding the swell of ridge above the long dam and the waterglassed valley it now stopped the way of, the two women could see the lit curving streets of Fort Peck, the dashes and dots of lantern-yellow windows in the shacks of Wheeler and Delano Heights and Park Grove and the other thrown-together towns, nocturne of the Missouri. They watched the car lights streaming out of the harbor lot as the last of the day-shift went off work.

"Quite a picture, huh?" Proxy said at last.

"Quite," said Meg.

"Had an offer once from a guy to come in with him on a photo studio up near ~~at Lake~~ of the Woods," Proxy spoke as though this tale was being spelled out

to her in the lights of the night. "I could be his darkroom assistant, he said. It all seemed kind of phony, though. I mean, here he was, lining up honeymoon couples under cardboard trees in that studio of his, and right outside there was this real woods." Proxy shook her head like an auction-goer.

~~--- proxy~~ "So how could I trust him on that darkroom stuff either, right?"

When Meg chose not to comment, Proxy mused on. "Real picture shooting, that'd be something else. That fancypants photographer who was here, I asked her what kind of a deal she had. She said her wages were just okay, but the way that magazine paid her expenses was a dream. 'Here, hire an airplane.' I could go for that. But I've never had any too much luck, taking pictures. Not sure I've got the eye for it."

"A person can't have equal talent in all directions," Meg stated.

That got under Proxy's skin, as Proxy knew it was intended to. ~~mine~~

~~is all from the tits on down you mean, don't you, Lady Meggie.~~ She

turned her head enough to size up her adversary there in the dusk. Meg's composed profile, with that aggravating knack of staring off as steadily

as a figurehead. On down, she was better than okay in the entire figure department, too. Meg was a beckoning woman, still. Not that there were as many years between them as Proxy wished. Try this on for size, though, old sister--one of us used our time better on Darius, didn't I.

"Speaking of talent," Proxy returned the needle, "you're happy putting yours into being grandma these days, hm?"

Meg now turned her head and studied Proxy a moment, then seemed to go back to counting the lights of the dam and its towns. "I am attached to Jack."

"Attachments are tough," Proxy could agree.

# —————  
"I know these dammers are always pulling things out of hats," Darius was saying. "But wherever do they hide an extra train?"

Hugh, sudden dam expert, was only too glad to hold forth. "What, can't you guess? Someplace where they can tuck <sup>g</sup>about twenty gravel cars, then yard them down by gravity when there's a little time between other trains?"

Darius's head stayed cocked quizzically, which seemed to please Hugh.

As though Clydesiders were not the only ones who knew the ins and outs of equipment, Hugh now provided:

"The spur line, up at the spillway."

"Ah," said Darius.

#

Mouthfilling kisses led to this. Always had, always would. He hoped.

Honey and milk. Under the tongue. Solomon knew whereof he sung.

She granted.

Almost there, both, crashing at each other, their crazy pockets of passion about to spill, she under the tent of his elbows, he on her and in, straining together in sounds that threatened the shack and could tighten throats and make lips lick among the rest of the populace of Wheeler for all they cared right then.

Dust under the covers done, she caught her breath. "That was spirited."

"Margaret, you always let your praise run away with you," Hugh said through gasps.

Meg knew she was never going to be proficient in the afterpart of

p. 708A follows

this as, say, old campaigner Proxy, but she determinedly pecked a kiss onto Hugh's sharp cheekbone and let spring: "I wonder if they know what ingredients they put in at that Carteret establishment."

"Fruits of love, Miss Milne," he surprised her right back.

Combatants on the field of marriage so many years, they lay there a familiar number of inches apart, waiting for each other's speculations houseboat matters on ~~the full evening~~ to come to the surface.

"That brother of mine," Hugh finally mulled out loud. "He must have his eye on a foreman's job."

"Darius as a gold-watch gaffer?" Meg could picture a lot about him, but not that. "What do you read that from?"

"He's keen on the dam doings, all of a sudden. Wants to know how to twitch every switch, when it comes to Owen's fancy train set."

When it comes to many things, Darius has his wants. She shifted a little on the bed. In my experience, though, such as it is--I will spare you the details, Hugh--the pronouncements that count with him are of the all too private sort. Her fresh furrow of wondering about Darius kept carefully within the lines of conversation, she said now:



"Too true, you never quite know with him, do you. I know one job I'd see him have. Yours. Lord High Executioner of snakes. Hugh, I do worry--"

"There've been times when I'd gladly have sicced them onto him,"

Hugh announced in the dark beside her. "Just to nibble on him around the edges, mind you. Teach him some manners."

*Hals.* There's ever the question, isn't it, Meg held in private. How teachable

any of us are.

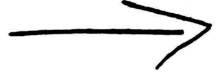
*#*  
**DROP CAP**

September had come chilly, with mean early frosts and a sharpness to the air, and Charlene drove to work these mornings. <sup>Why</sup> ~~Quite how~~ she had let herself in for this she wasn't sure, but she swung by to give ~~Kate~~ <sup>Kate</sup> ~~Shonda~~ a lift to work each morning now, too. Two lifts, as Charlene saw it: to Meg's to leave off Jackie and then on to the Romiola. Regular bus service. The Charlene Stage Line.

"Aum' Char'ene! Watch!! I being a pony!!!" Jackie thundered past her when she stepped in to collect ~~Shonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup> and him now. Charlene thought Jackie was as spoiled as they come, and equine behavior at <sup>8:00</sup> eight a.m. didn't sway her opinion any.

p. 708C follows →

"We're having a time of it this morning," reported ~~Shonda~~<sup>Kate</sup>, still in  
her slip. She ~~examined~~<sup>examined</sup> Charlene, dressed to a T, and wondered how she  
managed it at this hour of the day. Without a ~~stampeding~~<sup>stampeding</sup> ~~three-year-old~~<sup>three-year-old</sup>,  
that's how.



"Sorry, Charlene," <sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ said by rote. "We'll get ourselves lined out here, in no time. Won't we, ponyboy," she captured the scampering Jackie.

"What can I do to be vaguely helpful?" Charlene offered, to encourage matters along.

"Mum" <sup>Kate</sup>~~--Rhonda~~ glanced around from putting shoes on Jackie <sup>T</sup>~~--~~"my uniform still needs pressing. That fancy iron of Bruce's ran out of gas on me." Charlene firmly tucked her tongue in her cheek. Must be the only thing about <sup>him</sup>~~Bruce~~ that ever runs out of gas.

<sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ was saying, "Better let it <sup>T</sup>~~--~~ Jackie, honey, you are such a wiggleworm. Don't you want to go see Mum Mum?"

"I can contribute a swipe or two of ironing," Charlene <sup>offered</sup>~~provided~~, and unscrewed the spout cap on the gallon can of white gas.

"Jackie, you're going to squirm us both to death," <sup>Kate</sup>~~Rhonda~~ scolded.

Then remembered: "That iron maybe needs another minute to cool before you <sup>L</sup>~~--~~"

The WHOOSH of flame came then, over where Charlene had poured the first trickle of gas into the iron's teacup-sized tank. Fire flashed up the streamlet of gas into the can, then rivered across the floor as

Charlene had to drop the can. "Wouldn't you just know," she said almost conversationally. Then over her shoulder ~~to Rhonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup> sternly: "Get out! Take Jackie out!" Still so calm she was amazed at herself, she scanned around for something to beat at the fire with.

"Fire," Jackie said, sitting up and pointing at the flames.

~~Rhonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup> scooped him into her arms, but stood desperately hesitating, blocked by the spread of flaming gas across the floor. The dry wood of the shanty was burning like sixty.

Charlene tipped the blazing ironing board over, out of her way to get to the water bucket. She grabbed the bucket and sloshed ~~Rhonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup> and Jackie, bringing a shriek from the boy. With the rag rug from beside the bed she whapped out a spot in the fire nearest the wall, momentarily. "Now!" she directed ~~Rhonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup> "Go, along the wall!"

~~Rhonda~~ <sup>Kate</sup> hunched over Jackie, keeping herself between him and the flames, and twisted toward the door. Beating away with the rug, Charlene could hear her gasp at the heat, but then the door was open and the woman and child were outside.

Charlene saw that she and the rug were in a losing battle against the fire, and wished she had saved a ~~douse~~ <sup>douse</sup> from that water bucket to pour on herself. She backed across the room to the window, got it unlatched <sup>and yanked it up</sup>

with all her strength. It rose six inches in the windowframe and then the catchpins zinged into the casement holes. Oh, fiddlesticks, still <sup>twelve inches</sup> calm but needing to hurry. Another ~~foot~~ above those holding holes was another set and if she could just get the window open that wide, she could climb out. But she needed three hands to simultaneously pull up the window and manipulate the catchpins on either side of the window. She instead let the window down and grabbed the water bucket one more time. Scars are better than burning to death, she told herself, clamped her eyes shut, and with both hands swung the empty bucket to shatter the windowglass. She had no time to knock out every last shard that stayed in the frame, and felt one get her across her shin, but then she was out, free of the licking fire.

# — It was all over but the embers by the time Bruce arrived. The

Fort Peck fire department was parsimoniously hosing down the charred heap--not that much of a heap, either; the place had gone up like a wad of paper--from its tanker truck.

# —

All right, so it's bobbed. Maybe my customers will all want it,

too--the latest style, the bobcut with a singe.

Charlene lay back in the easy chair, <sup>exhausted</sup> ~~exhausted~~, although it was barely noon. Silence at last, after the doctor murmuringly patching her up where the broken glass raked her leg, and Hugh and Meg ~~insistently~~ <sup>over and over</sup> telling her <sup>Kate</sup> ~~not to worry~~, they would see to ~~Rhonda~~ and Jackie until Bruce took hold, and Rosellen arriving breathless and pitching in to help her snip the fire-frizzed hair down to a presentable bob and making her comfortable here in the living room and insisting she and Neil ~~would~~ <sup>would</sup> bring supper over tonight, and--Charlene thought there had probably been even other chapters of commotion so far today, but she was losing track.

Her mind kept marching back to that blasted iron. Expensive purchase,

Bruce.

Now, finally, she heard Owen's pickup door slam, and he came charging in, stopping short and blinking at the sight of her <sup>radically barbered and</sup> ~~in the easy chair~~ with her bandaged leg up on the footstool. <sup>He</sup> He crossed the room and sat on the footstool, his hand lightly cupping her ankle, the nearest safe

place to touch.

"I hear you had yourself quite a morning."

"Mhmm. One like that will do me, for good."

Hurt no, scar yes, more of a scrape than a cut, heal up in couple of weeks, lucky it wasn't a lot worse...when they had done the topic of her leg, Owen said as if carefully taking stock:

"Glad you got the kid out."

*Ital*  
"You're glad. That was the part that scared the pants off me, Jackie in there." Now that it was over, the boy seemed to her the best kid in the world.

Owen kept nodding. With everything going on inside of him, he knew he had to be extra careful in what he said. As utterly sympathetic as he was toward Charlene about the fire, he also was spitting mad that there would inevitably need to be another loan to Bruce and company.

He knew it was the day that had him out of sorts, not to mention the shock of coming home to a shorn and wan Charlene, but he still felt entitled to be damned good and tired of having to pull strings for

*Pauls*  
members of this family. It's never-ending. Wouldn't you think somebody

*Roman*

*ital.*  
could hang on to what they got, for a change? No, now, that wasn't

fair, not even toward Bruce who had never heard of a piggybank, or

at least it wasn't what an attentive husband ought to be stewing about

while Charlene sat here looking badly used. To buck her up, he commended:

"When that undersheriff gave me the news, he said you had to have been cool as a cucumber, staying in there and trying to tackle that fire the way you did."

"What about dumber than a ~~bucket~~<sup>truckload</sup> of them, too, for trying to fill a hot iron." As Owen opened his mouth to loyally knock that down, she said in quickstep: "No, I didn't know it was hot, it was not my fault, nobody's fault, it could have happened to Eenie, Meenie, Minnie or Moe."

She stopped, to put together the next. "But something about it was dumb, Owen. The, I don't know, the situation was dumb, if nothing else." *ital*

"It must be catching," he surprised her with. She saw that he suddenly looked as tired as she felt. "Lot of dumb situation going around," he went on, absently stroking her ankle. "I got greeted with a gravel train that broke loose last night. A cut of twenty cars. *physical?*  
*NO*

They're scrap iron now." He brought his attention up from the ankle



and white-wrapped shin to her face. "That's why they couldn't track me down for you sooner. I was up there at the spillway, trying to get somebody to tell me how long that siding will be out of commission."

Charlene quickly put a hand to her leg so he might think her wince came from there. "That's dreadful, Owrie. Is it...going to put you off schedule?"

"It doesn't make a fillmaster's life one goddamn bit easier, that's for sure. Now I have to tackle the Colonel and Santee on squeezing in a few more gravel cars per train until--" he broke off the work talk, a little guiltily. "Well. I'm glad you're in one piece."

"Mhmm. Pretty much."

*Itol.*  
Rat-a-tat-ta-- Knuckles on the front door seemed to spring it open, and Bruce was standing there.

"Came to see the firebug."

started trying to fend:  
Before Owen could launch up from the footstool, Charlene fended.

"Sorry about how that ironing job turned out, Bruce. Really, I--"

"Hey, never mind."

p. 714B follows →

Plainly Bruce was in an ashen state of mind. Who wouldn't be? Owen had to admit, still tensed to head him off. But Bruce didn't seem to need any heading off. "I hate it that you got bunged up yourself," he told Charlene, giving her the most solemn expression she'd ever seen from him. She looked grateful beyond measure.

Big of the kid, thought Owen, amazed. If somebody had just burned up everything I owned, I'm not sure I'd--

Turning to Owen, Bruce kept his face arranged to hide what he felt. Christ Jesus, this was hard. He'd still rather take a beating than to have to deal with Owen. But he managed to say the rest of what he intended. "Mother's got matters under control—Kate and Jackie are getting her royal treatment. I seem to have a housing situation to talk to you about, though, Ownie."

Owen swallowed, and nodded.

They lived with Mum Mum and Gramp now. Daddy, Mommy, him.

"For good?" he asked Mommy.

p. 714C follows

She told him, "For worse, seems like, ~~Jackiebox~~ ~~Jackalossa~~."

Daddy heard and gave her a frown and him a tickle and told him

~~ca~~  
they were going to live in a tailor house soon.

#



**DROP CAP** Every morning now Darius stepped out onto the deck of the houseboat

feeling the world had gone farther downhill.

The minuet of the cowards, London and Paris to Munich and Berchtesgaden, played night after night from the pitiless radio. Proxy would arrive home in the small hours and find him hunched, captive to listening, mind on the Czechs and the Sudetenland Germans and the frantic diplomats and Hitler's troop movements. The first few times, she came over to where he sat, and did things to him until Europe couldn't compete.

Proxy could fondle a man crazy. But when this kept on, the choir of

woe from the radio holding him there each night, it irritated her to

have to draw his attention that way--it used to be, he was all volunteer--

and she took to stepping past him, turning the radio down low, and with

her fingers making a mocking walkie-walkie exit up his sleeve and over

his back and away, she drifted to bed alone.

He knew he could not get by with being automatic toward Proxy. Not for long. Part of him knew too that hypnotic flames such as Munich were the oldest hopelessness, man fated to be more savage than ~~any creature~~ ~~anything~~ the world had seen yet. It would have settled everything, the corner of

dour logic in Darius Duff said, if the first human looking into a fire had gone blind from it. Cats or ravens could have evolved into the arbiters of life. But no, the human species had learned to peek, and then to eye each other across the dancing blaze and argue the distribution of firepits. Politics, the answering corners of Darius said, were a necessary madness. If the argument with our own natures did not go on, why exist? And so, all apologies to Proxy and her wares, but these nights he was away to that other desire.

#

"Rough luck about Bruce and Kate and the lad."

"Yeah," Owen ground out around the sandwich he was wolfing into, "you bet." Darius was right on that score, at least. Bruce seemed to take it as a matter of course when Owen came through with not only a transfusion of money but the idea of <sup>his</sup> ~~Owen~~ and Charlene's old trailer house, now sitting surplus in Park Grove, which was taking some real finagling with the Corps. Not the easiest item to fit through channels, a kid brother with pernicious anemia of the wallet. Acting as if his household burned down every day, Bruce merely had said "Getting us a ringside seat for your dredging, huh, Ownie?" And it was true, the

Gallatin held sway in that vicinity, slurping away at a neighborhood of abandoned shanties, and its giant pipeline and all three from the other dredges snaked right through town--life in Park Grove, down from the dam, had the reputation of being like living under a sink. Owen felt sorry for Kate, reduced to those circumstances, but for Bruce, not noticeably. Beggars, it had never seemed more true, can't be  
choosers.

"Is that to be the story of what you in this country call 'the American century,' do you think, <sup>the</sup> Owen?" Darius was suddenly at. These noon jousts of theirs often took sharp turns, <sup>and</sup> ~~but~~ this one caught Owen mired in a mouthful of sandwich. Chewing fast to catch up, he stared inquisitively at Darius.

"Bruce and company hiphopping from handout to handout, makework to <sup>half-dredged</sup> makework," Darius inclined his head to the ~~half-eaten~~ sprawl of Park Grove below the dam. "While Owen and company"--here he mimicked doffing his cap to the dam and the Corps townsite beyond--"are the masters with the blueprints."

Owen swallowed furiously. "~~Darius~~<sup>L</sup>, you've been here since I forget  
when and you still don't savvy thing one about Fort Peck."

"I 'savvy,' as you say, ~~Owen~~<sup>J</sup>, that it has paid off handsomely for  
you. A good house for you and the lovely Charlene, a fancy wage,

