

1 Half a thousand votes. Good Christ, in Valley County a losing mar-
2 gin like that was as bad as five hundred million. As if the population of
3 China had swarmed to the polls and all voted to kill him off as sheriff.
4 Abruptly the tall grass at the edge of the highway danced in his head-
5 lights, the car drifting toward the ditch while he was in the trance of that
6 election result, and he'd had to sheer the steering wheel hard to keep the
7 car on the road. Wouldn't that have been something pretty, too, giving
8 the bastards a chance to say he couldn't take defeat and went and com-
9 mitted suicide.

10 A knock on his room door shunted aside that train of thought. Two
11 quick raps, by knuckles that knew what they were doing. Flinching all
12 the way, the sheriff wheeled himself around to face the door, then said
13 merely, "What."

14 The nurse came in to check on the LP, as the old sheriff was called by
15 the staff.

16 When she'd started working here she assumed it meant Long-Playing,
17 like an old phonograph record, because of Carl Kinnick's seemingly nev-
18 er-ending longevity. Soon enough, though, she'd heard somebody refer to
19 him as the Little Prick, and by then she understood. Just when you
20 thought he couldn't possibly surpass his record for orneriness, he found
21 some way to. The time when the recreation director Doris, new on the
22 job then, planned a surprise birthday party—must have been the LP's
23 eighty-fifth, ninetieth? who the hell could tell, or cared any—and gone
24 to the trouble of digging around in the Valley County Museum to find a
25 poster of Carl Kinnick running for election in the 1930s. Framed be-
26 tween his name on top and DEMOCRAT FOR SHERIFF underneath, pearl-
27 gray Stetson tugged down in a businesslike way, he made quite the
28 picture of a lawman, everybody thought. But he took one look at it and
29 cursed out the recreation director unmercifully. It ended up with him
30 shouting at Doris that if he ever wanted to be surprised, he'd let them
31 know about it first.

32 Now Kinnick appraised the nurse's body as he did every time she
33 came into his room, aware that she didn't like being looked over but also
34 knowing he could get away with it. No sense being so old and crippled
35 up if you couldn't at least run your eyes across an attractive young flank.

36 *Shitheaded old poot*, the nurse thought, but said:

37 "How's your hip today, Mr. Kinnick?"

38 "Hurts," he reported, the same flat way he did every day.

39 "You're supposed to exercise it more, you know that," she said as she
40 did every day. She herself could not see why a hip replacement had been

done in a person this ungodly old. For that matter, why this contrary little man had agreed to undergo the operation. But old age is some other kind of territory, people exist in it by their own lights, she always had to remind herself in this job. At least Kinnick didn't paw at her, the way the old grabber down the hall in 119 always tried.

1
2
3
4
5

"So are you going to?" she asked.

6

"Going to what?"

7

"Exercise-your-new-hip-joint," she stipulated as levelly as she could.

8

To her surprise, Kinnick squinched up that dried-apple-doll face and seemed to think over the matter. But then he pronounced:

9
10

"Doubtful."

11

"Mr. Kinnick, you're a case in more ways than one," the nurse spoke in a sweet-sour tone which she knew couldn't land her in any trouble, and went out of his room.

12
13
14

He hated to see her go, as always. The little spots of time when she was in his room were the only sample of real woman he had, anymore.

15
16

Peyser.

17

Norman Peyser.

18

That was the overgrown undersheriff's name, it came back to him now, along with the guy's football-shaped face. Naturally the big lum-mox hadn't had a shred of a theory as to what happened in that truck at the dam and so he, the sheriff, had to do it all on the Duff case, from scratch. The undersheriff wordlessly in tow, Carl Kinnick traipsed the Fort Peck project and its rickety towns from one end to the other—good God, one set of Duffs lived like badgers on a houseboat; what kind of people were these?—as he tried to figure out that truck shenanigan. Go around and question them all. Work on them, make them account for every minute of their whereabouts that night of the drownings. Sort through the possible motives, although the Duffs were a bunch you could not easily nail down; every time you thought you had a motive clear, some new angle popped out from another Duff. And while he was working on them, plenty was going on amongst them, he could sense. Against him, against the world of justice he represented, they closed ranks. But he was as sure as anything that they were having some pitched fights, and there were obvious silences; the, what, eight of them surviving the drowned pair were trying to sort out what they had left, which even the sheriff could see amounted to one another, not the most comfortable sum after what had happened. Dealing with that family of Duffs, the sheriff for the first time in his life entertained the thought that maybe orphans did not have it so hard after all.

19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

even

1 Well, what the hell can you do, though, when you come right down
2 to the pussypurr question of how people are going to behave.

3 Almost a dozen terms in office, and he still hadn't been able to pre-
4 dict with any real certainty. He had sheriffed as hard as he knew how,
5 given his every day and far too much of his nights on behalf of law and
6 order in Valley County, and in the end they threw him out just because
7 he happened to be wearing the same political eartag as Tricky Dick
8 Nixon. Sure, he knew that some were saying, even then, that Carl Kin-
9 nick was older than bunions and ought to be tossed onto the retirement
10 heap. But didn't something like his perseverance on those Duffs, that
11 truck, the river, go to show that he—

12 He moved wrong on the hip, and gasped with pain. God, how could
13 his own body jab him so. He considered buzzing for the nurse, ask her
14 to dig out a pain pill from the bottle in his top dresser drawer. But he de-
15 tested pills, about as much as he despised asking for help.

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

26 Beyond those few things, getting by in here was a matter of main-
27 taining his orneriness the way he did. By now he had a full theory of it:
28 a philosophy of why to be difficult, if anybody ever took the trouble to
29 ask him. All right, there were those who'd say he did not even need
30 to work at being mean, it came as natural to him as a morning piss.
31 But that radically underestimated the effort he was making, if they
32 only knew. Huh uh, this was an entire new deal, the extent to which
33 he made himself stay furious against the walled-in world. Everything else
34 had shriveled up; his pecker no longer worked, his hip gave him constant
35 torment, he sat here at the mercy of white uniforms twenty-four hours
36 a day. (Yet people thought he was in a problem mood because he
37 was lonely; the dumb bastards, they didn't even know he always had
38 the Duffs.) So this was what he had arrived at, careful and constant
39 exercise at staying stubborn. Crabby, contrary, owly, behaving like a
40 mean little ~~bastard~~: whatever term you care to call it by, he would tell

Short 39
ormal 40

hyena
To avoid repetition of "bastard" from line 37

BUCKING THE SUN

you that the capacity for being ornery was the one power left to a person in old age.

Finally Carl Kinnick checked the calendar again, and this circled day. September 22nd again. That and the fancily printed 1991. Huh. The century had reached the point where it read the same forwards or backwards. He wouldn't be that way himself for another eight years yet, would he, at ninety-nine. There had been a spell of years when he hated aging, could not figure out why people shouldn't just conk out at some given point, like car batteries do the month after their warranty is up. During that time he half wished that he had not corrected his patrol car's veer toward the ditch that Watergate election night. But ending up as blood, gristle, and windshield shards didn't appeal, now that he could study back on that alternative. No, Carl Kinnick had got over wanting death's quick cure of everything. Traveling with the century wasn't easy, but so what.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24
- 25
- 26
- 27
- 28
- 29
- 30
- 31
- 32
- 33
- 34
- 35
- 36
- 37
- 38
- 39 Short
- 40 Normal



Part Five

PLUGGING THE RIVER

1936—1937

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

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

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

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

Hugh absorbed this. Then said in the tone of a man wronged: "God-damn that soft coal."

He lurched from under the mound of bedding toward the stove and could tell at once this was not merely the feel of a fireless house, this was deep cold. He rattled open the firebox of the stove and swore at the dead ash of the coal he had banked the fire with at bedtime. Crumpling yesterday's entire *Glasgow Courier*, he stuffed it in the stove, grabbed up a double handful of kindling and chucked that on top of the paper, and,

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19

1 shivering hard now, made himself position dry sticks of wood atop it all
2 so the flame would draw. He struck a match and lit the paper and hov-
3 ered miserably until the kindling at last caught fire too. Then he lunged
4 back to bed. Meg rewarded him with a clasp of warm arms. At that mo-
5 ment, the thermometer outside the Fort Peck Administration Building
6 read 61 degrees below zero.

7
8 Bruce was goddamned if he was going to walk anywhere in this kind of
9 weather. Before getting the stove going, he dumped the cold ashes in an
10 empty lardpail, then used the kerosene can to sop them. In his cap and
11 mackinaw, he ran out to the car, knelt in the snow, shoved the pail under
12 the oilpan, leaned back as far as he could and tossed in a match. When
13 he was reasonably sure the flaming kerosene was settling down enough
14 not to burn up the car, he jumped back in the house to wait for the
15 crankcase oil to thaw enough so he could start the engine and drive
16 down to the winter harbor.

17
18 Owen was goddamned if he was going to fool around with a car in this
19 kind of weather. He put on dress socks, then worksocks, then wool
20 socks; piled on two pair of pants over long underwear, and a flannel shirt
21 over his work one. He molded some newspaper into his overshoes for in-
22 sulation, put them on, wrestled into the buffalo hunter coat he'd bought
23 for just this eventuality, clapped his cap on with the earflaps down, ban-
24 dannaed a scarf across his nose and mouth, stuck one of his office ox-
25 fords in each side pocket, pulled on thick mittens and walked to work at
26 the winter harbor.

27
28 "'19, that was another cold bastard of a winter," Tom Harry reflected.
29 Proxy had not been in the sin business long enough to have other big
30 winters for comparison, so it seemed to be up to him to forecast the eco-
31 nomic climate accompanying such cold. "On the one hand, this kind of
32 weather, you'd think guys wouldn't have anything better to do than
33 drink and diddle," he set out. "Hell, people even manage to do it up
34 north in igloos, after all." He paused, then asked with a rare note of un-
35 certainty: "Don't they?"

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

"I about went bust, though, there in '19," Tom Harry recounted.

"Guys holed up, wouldn't come downtown just because it was a little cold. A lot like now, Shannon." He still called her that, even though she regularly pointed out that she had a married name now.

1
2
3

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

4
5

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

6
7
8
9

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

10
11

"Okay, okay, just an idea, all it was. Jesus Christ, though, you're getting awfully particular since you had your knot tied." He gave her a side-long look. "How is married life anyway?"

12
13
14

"Not half bad."

15

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

16
17

"That's sure frigging astonishing to find out."

18

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

19
20

"How would hot toddies go?"

21

"They wouldn't. The only time a Montanan will sip a toddy is when he's halfway in pneumonia."

22
23

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

24
25
26

"No, you didn't and you're not going to. This is a goddamned business meeting, Shannon. Besides, where the hell would I get rum? Half the time I can't even get the Great Falls beer trucks to come up here, the way the roads've been." He shook his head. "You call that thinking?"

27
28
29
30

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

31

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

32
33
34

Finally he said:

35

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

36

"So should we close up shop?"

37

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

38

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

39 Short
40 Normal

to
as per ms

1
2
3 **B**ack at the onset of winter, in the courthouse at Glasgow,
4 Proxy had needed to think madly to recall "Susannah" as the
5 given name she'd furnished Darius and then she had to give him a dig
6 with her elbow when he started to fill in "Renfrewshire" as county of
7 residence instead of "Valley," but they managed to do the deed, nup-
8 tially.

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

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

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

21 "Uh huh," issued out of Owen as he gave that night's first blink of
22 recognition. *Jesus, that one.* Perfectly vivid in memory was the evening
23 Proxy flattened the redheaded taxi dancer. "Well. Congratulations. Come
24 in. Uh, sit down."

25 "Yes, do," said Charlene, all interested. *Here you go, Owen. You*
26 *wanted Fort Peck, here's a case of it in the family for you.* She looked Dar-
27 ius in the eye and then Floozy, no, Proxy it was, wasn't it. "You've got to
28 get over being bashful newlyweds sometime."

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

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

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

35 "Anything off for family members?"

36 "Proxy, love," said Darius, "we've to—"

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

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

40 Proxy laughed, and her smile began to skew treacherously. "Dancing

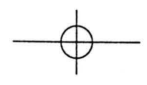


h



Uh
as per
ms

h



Short
Normal

the dimes out of joes doesn't leave much room for bargaining, you're right, but—

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

"Hey, wait."

Darius and Proxy turned around at something in Owen's blurt.

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

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

By the time Bruce and Kate and the baby snowballed into the procession and the whole bunch of them reached Neil and Rosellen's, they were too many for the Packard that Proxy had borrowed from Tom Harry, but Neil and Bruce charged out into the night to rig up the truck so they could all ride in that. They crowded and kidded, and their every sound carried on the cold night air to Wheeler neighborhoods half a mile away. It having been unanimously voiced that brides and mothers with small children rated the cab of the truck, Proxy scooped in next to Neil then Kate next to her with Jackie in a bundle. *Jee Zuz! A papoose, too, even.* Proxy always figured she had her work cut out for her in trying to be sociable with women who weren't in the trade; but at least the Charlene one could dish it out, and the other two didn't seem any slouches either. The men she had noticed separately around town before, but seeing them in one bunch tonight made her realize they were all Darius's basic Duff frame of rake handles and doorknobs. And if Darius was a fair sample, they had the stamina of wolfhounds.

Now banging broke out on the roof of the truck cab, along with urgings to Neil to tromp on the gas and at least give the frost a run for its money. Charlene and Rosellen and Darius and Owen and Bruce, in caps, coats and blankets close to mummification, stood up behind the cab and held on to the boxboards, giddy with the purified air of the winter night and the colder glitter of starshine overhead. Every one of them knew that in chasing off on this makeshift shivaree they were showing about as much sense as a pan of gooseberries, but was it their fault if nonsense was suddenly contagious?

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

ag#

1 Hugh took the announcement with a prudent if not successfully
2 deadpan expression, Meg took it like a pin under the skin. What was to
3 be done, though, with the entire family grinning in the doorway?

4 "Come—come in. Sit yourselves. Kate, Jackie can be tucked in our
5 bed. Hugh, take their coats while I—" The production of coffee began.
6 Hugh insisted they all move on in to the Blue Room. Gamely con-
7 fronting the blueprint decor, Proxy declared it real interesting, it some-
8 how reminded her of a place she once worked in that had mirrors
9 everywh—Darius asked if the coffee was ready yet. Speaking of ready,
10 Hugh tossed back at him, Darius had taken a scandalous length of time
11 to gird himself up for matrimony, had he not? Sounding as valiant as he
12 could, Darius maintained that he had been converted overnight by the
13 example of the other husbands in this room attaining such magnificent
14 mates. *Tell us, Jealous!* one of the men chimed above the general accla-
15 mation, he thought it might have been Owen. Just then Rosellen, clued
16 in by swift whispers from Charlene on the way over in the truck,
17 wanted to know from Proxy how she ever got into taxi dancing. Oh,
18 Proxy generalized, from pretty early in life she had been on her own. *On*
19 *her back is more like it*, Charlene thought and smothered a giggle. Owen,
20 his arm around her, gave her a complicit hug; for his part, he was look-
21 ing ahead with fascination to the mixed tints of Red and peroxide. Neil
22 was pondering the avarice of love, how it was capable of snatching the
23 socks off anybody at any time. Bruce for once was tongue-tied; to him
24 Darius was old as the hills, but here he was, fixed up with the kind of
25 woman who could do it to a guy until his eyes popped. Kate meanwhile
26 was wondering what the various ways were that Darius and Proxy
27 reached mad pash, as much practice as they'd probably both had; Bruce
28 in bed pretty much had one gear—true, it was high gear—and so a per-
29 son could not entirely help wondering, could she, how others went
30 about matters. She thought to herself, *I wonder if Rosellen knows what I'm*
31 *thinking . . .*

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

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

36 Proxy was making sure to watch, with quick little angled glances, as
37 Darius and Meg traded something else too low to hear, and then Darius
38 conspicuously rejoined the general ruckus. *So that's where that stood; be-*
39 *hind bottled brother Hugh's back. Darius, you're quite the family man. But*
40 *you didn't get very far with her, did you, or you wouldn't have thrown in*

with me. Serves you right; that drypuss sis-in-law there looks to me like a lost cause from the first.

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

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

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

"She looks like she knows what to do with a chance when she gets one," Kate said.

"Huh!" was all Neil said, afterward.

"I guess!" said Rosellen.

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

Owen, busy mulling everything, said nothing.

February's glacier of cold air slid down from the north until it covered Montana from corner to corner, then stood there for two solid weeks.

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

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

insert drop cap
to make evident that the extract goes with material from line 27 down not above

Wont help
if inserting a small drop cap makes space too tight, "for" can come out

insert hyphen

^

1 —repetitiously 35 degrees below zero at noon, 38 degrees below
2 zero at dusk, 45 degrees below zero in the night.

3
4 With a light frown she looked that over, yanked open her desk drawer
5 and thumbed through the used edition of SAY IT WITH SYNONYMS that
6 Neil had given her for Christmas. Fingers at the ready again, concentrated
7 on the keys, then kersplickety, taking out *repetitiously* with an overstretch
8 of ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ and tapping above it the substitute *monotonously*.

9
10 People tottered with the cold when they had to be out in it.

11
12 Herself, to name one. Merely to come to work, a person had to load
13 on so many clothes she felt like she was traveling in a closet.

14
15 Fort Peck's around-the-clock moviehouse gained new patrons,
16 workmen bundled with everything they could get on, clumping in
17 to stand behind the back row until they thawed out enough to
18 trudge off on their errands again.

19
20 Neil. Shivering in, for each day's hypnotic five or ten minutes of
21 gray-and-white newsreel. (What's this Hitler? How does a place like
22 Spain get by with everybody fighting everybody?)

23
24 A diesel boredom—

25
26 She backspaced and put the *x* key back to work.

27
28 A diesel monotony broke the silence of the frigid spell and simulta-
29 neously made Fort Peck go even more groggy—the engines of the
30 bulldozers were never shut down in weather this cold, merely throt-
31 tled onto idling all night long.

32
33 Kate swore that the most effective lullaby on both Bruce and the
34 baby was a Caterpillar D-8.

35
36 Mealtimes at the cookhouse, the air went stale with cigarette smoke
37 and the accumulated pack of not recently bathed bodies—

38
39 Short Meg swore she was going to don Bruce's diving suit for her job, if
40 Jormal winter and odor didn't let up soon.

—but then the instant you stepped outside, the air’s keenness would all but take the lungs out of you.

1
2
3

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

4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16

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

17
18
19
20

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

21
22
23

—the houseboats along the wintered-over river—

24
25

Darius scraping a peephole in the iced window of the houseboat so that he could look out at more ice.

26
27
28

—the parlors of the Happy Hollow brothels and the saloon precincts of taxi dancers—

29
30
31

Proxy. Wooohoo. Talk about a family addition.

32
33

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

34
35
36
37

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

38

Never one to let a little thing like a bad cold get him down, Hugh rode out the spasm, cleared his throat and blew his nose, sucked in as

39 Short
40 Normal

1 much breath as he could, and, glad that the weekend was nearly here,
2 put his mittened hands to the wheelbarrow's handles again.

3 Here at the mouth of the tunnel the river would one day siphon into,
4 along with the three other huge boreholes through the base of the dam,
5 outcroppings of crumbly weathered shale still were being shaved down
6 with rocksaws. The men who had been assigned onto the barrow crew
7 for the winter merely had to trundle the sawcuttings to the conveyor,
8 which—

9 To his surprise, all at once his wheelbarrow was on its side, and he
10 was on his, too. His head, light as a balloon, seemed to be somewhere
11 above his fallen body, watching, taking note of the confusion, the scream
12 of the rocksaw suddenly shut down and the rest of the crew shouting for
13 help. He went in and out of consciousness, and in the moments of light-
14 headed clarity he felt quite offended. Technically speaking, he was not
15 even in the tunnel, where pneumonia bred.

16
17 Over the weekend, Hugh Duff grew old.

18 Owen saw it immediately in the white whiskers salted among his
19 father's stubble, when he and Charlene stopped by the hospital again
20 before work on Monday morning; his father had always been an im-
21 maculate shaver. Recuperation, this was supposed to be, the oxygen tent
22 having done its part, Hugh's lungs clearing and his breathing better, but
23 the grizzled figure in the hospital sheets had a long way to go yet to re-
24 constitute into anything like Hugh Duff.

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

27 "Pretty well done in, if you want the truth."

28 "Yeah, well, it'll take a little time for you to mend," Owen said un-
29 easily. He cut a quick glance to Charlene, wishing she would pitch in;
30 women were better at this convalescent kind of talk, weren't they? When
31 she simply kept on the automatic smile you send someone you don't like
32 but have to have sympathy for, Owen had to do the next part, too: "How
33 long are they going to keep you here?"

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

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

38 "Your mother says she'll tend to that," Hugh coughed out, then
39 shifted in the hospital bed, twirling his finger to indicate he wanted it

Short
Normal 40

✓
t the

cranked up some. When Owen brought him up to a semi-sitting position, the heaving lessened and he managed to finish: "It's her best chance to scrape me and see any real result." He brought a hand up to his face and paused it there, as if surprised at the seriousness of the bristles. He scratched his whiskery neck while he considered his visitors again. "How's the Charlene?"

"I'm getting by, Hugh," Charlene produced. Dressed for business, hair done in exemplary fashion for her day's customers, she looked slick as a racehorse. "Where is Meg anyway? We figured sure she'd be—"

"She went off to the cookhouse to smuggle me a real breakfast. The food in here is a threat to one's health."

"Jaarala's grub is bound to help, yeah," Owen laughed. "Anything else we can bring you? Name it."

"Years off my life, Ownie, would be all. I swear to Christ, this time last Friday I was your age." Hugh's voice was reedy, but reporting to its pulpit. "I don't know whether it's me or—" he grimaced at the hospital window to indicate outside, all of Fort Peck. "But I went through winters on the place that would frost the tallywhacker off a brass monkey—sorry about the language, Charlene—and never came down with anything like this."

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

"One more record, eh, Ownie?"

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

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

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

"Sure." Owen watched him in some alarm until Hugh's breathing calmed down, then went over to the window. He was surprised at how hard it was to discern the dam from here. In fresh snow camouflage, the plateau of fill nearly blended with the bluffs of the valley, chalkings of outline against the greater gray of sky. Blots of gravel showed through on the dam in a few places, and the frozen crater lake that was the core

1 semi-sitting
2
3 insert
4 hyphen for
5 clarity's sake
6
7
8
9

39 Short
40 Normal

going

1 pool could be picked out if you knew where it was, but the prairie's flat
2 winter light didn't give much of a sense of scale. Owen turned away,
3 moved restlessly around the hospital room. "You having plenty of com-
4 pany?"

5 "Everybody, yes. Except your uncle and esteemed aunt. No, that's
6 not quite the case. They must have been here while I was asleep. Darius
7 left me some high-toned reading."

8 Braced for Marx, Engels, Sorel, or THE LITTLE RED SONGBOOK,
9 Owen picked up the slim olive volume from the bedside stand. William
10 Blake. POEMS AND ILLUMINATIONS.

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

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

14
15 *And did the Countenance Divine*
16 *Shine forth upon our clouded hills?*
17 *And was Jerusalem builded here*
18 *Among these dark Satanic mills?*

19
20 *Bring me my bow of burning gold!*
21 *Bring me my arrows of desire!*
22 *Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!*
23 *Bring me my chariot of fire!*

24
25 *I will not cease from Mental Fight,*
26 *Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand,*
27 *Till we have built Jerusalem,*
28 *in England's green & pleasant Land.*

29
30 "No, Darius must've left that in." Hugh seemed to go deep into
31 thought. "Darius has never give me so much as a whit before. I must re-
32 ally be a goner." m

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

39 "No."

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

Short
Normal

given

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

"I quite like poking traps."

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

Meg attacked the chores the instant she got home from the hospital each evening, woodbox-coal scuttle-waterbucket, windowshades drawn down even though they waved discouragingly in the drafts around the window casings, a rag rug flung against the bottom of the breezy door for all the good that would do, too. Hugh's regular hand at the shack, she did miss. *But not your main habit. The drift that starts in you, so that you begin to be not yourself even before you're off onto one of your jags and then dragging yourself home looking like death warmed over. Absent entirely is preferable to that, Hugh, and although I hate to speak ill of the ill, I am relieved when this skimmed version of you in the hospital is out of my sight, too.* The water in the kitchen stove reservoir was warm enough, barely, to wash herself up a bit before going to bed. *I remember, on one of our fights about leaving the homestead, or perhaps it was English Creek or even Inverley, you told me I could dampen spirits at a funeral. Maybe I am not much good at mending the world. My father did think he was a tailor of souls—what can a reverend think if not that?—but in the end he could not even fashion mine, a stropky young kissing fool named Hugh Duff did that for me.* She undressed there in the kitchen by the stove and shimmied her flannel nightgown on as fast as she could, then raced for the bed. *But Hugh, what I mean about love for you in absentia is that the hard parts of us do not rub together then. In memory or for that matter anticipation we cushion each other to ourselves, or at least I do you. Of course, under these covers—when there's not such a mountain of them, anyway—we manage it, too. You tell me I am sweet to the bone, here, and I in all honesty can say the same for you. But elsewhere—otherwhere—the veers you make . . . What is there about the Duff squad of manhood? You with a will to drink the world dry, while Darius falls for a dyed mopsy at the drop of an eyelash. "Don't be so high and mighty, Meggie," he said to me on their shivaree night. That was uncalled-for. I do wish now, though, that I had not told him back, "Better that than the other—low and insipid." You see, Hugh, there have been times when Darius seems to fasten in where you curve away from me, when Darius and I . . . That avenue was gone now. Or was it. A man's term with that Proxy was normally a matter of minutes, not a lifetime of marriage. So, Hugh, I hate your habit of risk. But I perhaps grasp it better than you*

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

1 *think* . . . Meg, curled in the middle of the bed, sank into the chilly sleep
2 of the alone.

3
4 When the weather moderated—it had no other way to go—and the
5 temperature at last was up around zero, the dam crews picked up at their
6 usual schedules, except in special cases.

7 “We do what?” Bruce asked incredulously at the winter harbor.
8 “What the hell for?”

9 “You’re putting us at what?” Darius asked at the same moment in the
10 booyard. “Whose bright notion is this?”

11 “What the dickens can I tell you?” the foreman answered, so swad-
12 dled it could have been either Taine or Medwick, and gave a not-my-
13 doing shrug. “You guys have been detailed off to this, until spring gets
14 here. You’re icemen now.”

15
16 “Take a seat, Duff.” First names did not come naturally to Major Santee.

17 Owen sat and watched the major frown at his memorandum. *He*
18 *wouldn't know a good idea of it came along and bit him in the butt.* This was
19 the Friday before ice became the new career of Darius and Bruce, and
20 Owen's idea had not yet made its way through the channels of the Corps.
21 God only knew, he thought, how furrowed up the major would be if the
22 memo called this ice plan what it actually was, the Murgatroyd process.

23 It had come to Owen while he was passing the first morning of
24 March by staring alternately at the white river and the mostly white cal-
25 endar leaf, equally unyielding. Now a mare six weeks until dredging was
26 supposed to start, and there lay the river under a lid of ice thicker than a
27 railroad bed. In Owen's most pessimistic moments he figured this big
28 winter's armor of ice would be off by about Labor Day, and in his opti-
29 mistic ones he thought it might only take until the Fourth of July. In any
30 case, an April 15th startup of dredging gave every indication of being a
31 long way out of the picture. *So, okay, if the Archangel Murgatroyd right*
32 *this minute came along and asked what you most wanted done, it would*
33 *have to be to melt that sonofabitching ice off the dredging areas, wouldn't it.*
34 *Murg, my friend, that would do nicely, get the damn stuff out of my way by*
35 *the fifteenth day of Ap—*

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

40 “You’ve already been to the colonel, I suppose?” Major Santee said

e mare

now, wafting the one-page memo up and down a little as if trying to guess its weight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Darius did see the principle of the job he and Bruce and several dozen others were about to be put to, clustered out here on the river like Dutchmen who'd forgotten their skates. But that did not make the task any less dismaying to him, either. Wrestling blocks of ice from the stiffened river was going to be ~~damnable~~ cold heavy work.

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

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

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

"Duff, you be the rigging slinger," Jepperson had assigned to Bruce. "Other Duff, you might as well help him out with that," he told Darius, perhaps moved by how miserable the ~~other~~ Scotchman looked while standing around between the transit of slabs.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

Walt
foreman's name, Walt
around
as per ms

older
as per ms

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

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

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

9 Darius quit stomping and peered at Bruce. Then he downright gig-
10 gled. "Toes!" The rest of the day, every so often he would hoot, "Toes!"

11
12 The river found one last way to give the Fort Peck winterers a bad time.

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

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

28 Colonel Parmenter studied the ice jam with distaste and addressed
29 them compositely:

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

32 An alarming number of the civvie engineers had versions to offer.
33 Nevins from the tunnel project lost no time predicting some washout,
34 he couldn't specify how much or how little, along the diversion channel
35 banks if the ice jam caused real flooding. Owen pounced in to point out
36 the possibility of delay in the dredging startup, after they'd spent a
37 month's worth of effort in clearing out ice to avoid precisely that. A cou-
38 ple of others had their dire say. Then Sangster, not wearing his glasses be-
cause the nosepieces hurt his nose in the cold, squinted and formulated:

dam
as per ms

Short 39
ormal 40

“How about, it’ll take out the truss bridge.”

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

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

“Blow the bugger.”

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

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

“Yeah, but—”

“Danamite,” as J. L. said it, “is best to handle when it’s cold.” He looked at Bruce as if that should take care of all worries.

Stunned, Bruce tried surreptitiously to check J. L.’s mittened hands, see if he still had the trembling. Tunnel pneumonia had been only the half of it, that time last fall when J. L. was hospitalized; from what Bruce had heard, something on the packing paper of dynamite boxes had given J. L. Hill a shaking affliction. “I thought you still weren’t feeling any too good.”

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

“Yeah, well, it’d be up to Jepperson or not, whether he can spare me,” Bruce stalled.

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

1 J. L. nodded as if in acknowledgment, still looking straight at Bruce.
 2 *Lunch his way out of this one, why doesn't he.* Aloud, J. L. said: "We'll put
 3 the danamite to it in the morning."
 4

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

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

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

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

18 None of these detonationists, it turned out, had ever dealt with ice
 19 before, although they assured Bruce they had blown up most other
 20 known substances. Quincy had helped to blast out a log jam once. "Logs
 21 went flying pretty as anything," he reminisced. "It's just only a matter of
 22 placing the charge right."

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

25 "You're the river guy," J. L. said, the flint-gray eyes straight at Bruce
 26 again. "That's where you come in, showing us where the channel's the
 27 deepest and fastest and so on."
 28

29 *Smithereens*, ran in Bruce's mind. What are those? Little smithers, but
 30 what's a smither? Nothing he hankered to learn about from firsthand ex-
 31 perience, he was dead cer—he was certain of that much.

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

38 *Because!* Because (a.) J. L. Hill trembles like an ash grove in a high
 Short 39 wind, and (b.) there was that highly unfortunate pass Bruce made at Nan
 Normal 40 Hill and (b.1.) Bruce didn't even know this part but the neighbor across

th# /

the alley, Tarpley, had figured it bore mentioning to J. L. that he'd seen Bruce Duff slinking home from the Hills' house one noontime, and (c.) the competence of the other three here in the blast crew was a totally unknown quantity to Bruce except for Quincy's pleasure in causing log-size items to fly, and (d.) this was not some piece of equipment that Bruce himself was in charge of, such as a motorcycle or a diving suit, this was the cast-iron winter river and a guessing game of dynamite.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7

Bruce wished he had not yet been born.

8

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

9
10
11

"Somewhere around here, you think?"

12

J. L. was addressing him, he realized.

13

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

14
15
16
17

"Back a ways toward shore, is where I'd do it," he at last suggested. He took a chance and pointed at a pyramid-pile of ice chunks, a hundred yards in that direction. "About there, maybe."

18
19
20

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

21
22
23
24

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

25
26

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

27
28

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

29
30

"What we wanted. Right, boys?" J. L. hefted his plunger box. "Advice from the horse's mouth."

31
32

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

33
34

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

35
36
37

While two of the men embedded the sticks of dynamite and J. L. began affixing the blasting caps, Bruce and the other man spliced wires from the caps into the firing wire and began unreeling it all the way to

38
39 Short
40 Normal

1 the plunger box. "Don't be letting that wire touch those terminals until
2 I get there," J. L. warned over his shoulder, and Bruce definitely didn't.

3 When all was in readiness, the dynamite quartet plus Bruce gathered
4 around the plunger box on the welcome solid ground of the riverbank.
5 Spectators flocked up onto various high points. In the Ad Building con-
6 tingent on the crest of the dam, Bruce could discern shaggy-coated
7 Owen looking like the world's tallest leanest buffalo. At the end of an-
8 other lineup of gawkers stood Neil, arms folded, probably with a grin on
9 him like a Chessy cat: if people insisted on getting Neil and him mixed
10 up, Bruce considered, conscription into the iceberg squad would have
11 been a good time for it. Actually, though, Bruce was starting to feel bet-
12 ter about this dynamite deal. Originally he'd thought of invoking the
13 fact that he was freshly a father, although J. L. Hill and Fort Peck fore-
14 men in general didn't seem overly impressed, and he had almost gone to
15 Owen to get him out of this, but goddamn it, if he was the government
16 diver he was the one who was supposed to know the course of the river,
17 wasn't he. Now he nodded in synchronization with the other blasters
18 when J. L. Hill asked, "Everybody happy with this so far?"

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

21 "FIRE IN THE HOLE!"

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

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

26 "*Goddamn/sonofabitch/bastard!*" was heard in mixed chorus from the
27 other three, but neither J. L. nor Bruce spoke. Until after a minute J. L.
28 provided:

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

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

33
34 Out they trudged again, J. L. Hill with his plunger box under an arm
35 and a sack of blasting caps swinging from one quivery hand and coils of
36 detonation wire in the other, Bruce two steps behind carrying the dyna-
37 mite charge in both hands like a museum vase.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All right. We'll call this even."

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

the

halves

S



1
2
3 They all thought spring couldn't come fast enough to suit them,
4 but whatever it was about 1936, the melting season highballed
5 in as overdone as winter had been. Toasty chinook winds billowed in all
6 the way from Hawaii, it felt like, warm gales from the west that would
7 pin your eyelids back.

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

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

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

15 Wheeler looked leprous, its usual state at the start of spring. With
16 snow going off in patches, rubbish resurfaced from the previous autumn,
17 usually squarely amid a backyard swamp of mud, and the thaw also re-
18 vealed the gray remains of that slaggy soft coal which all winter long had
19 produced more ashes than heat.

20 *. . . we're going to be moving fill as easy as passing the butter.*

21 From startup on the fifteenth of April until only the first of May,
22 Owen's quartet of dredges moved nearly a million more cubic yards than
23 in the same span of time that had been so cruel and fumbling the year
24 before. Week by week after that, he checked and rechecked his figures,
25 and unmistakably they kept jumping. The holy average of three million
26 yards of riverbottom muck to be dredged and pipe up onto the dam
27 every month, hah. Owen could see ahead now—it would be August—
28 when the dredging pace would reach an exalted total of four million
29 yards a month.

30
31 "Toston? Oh, my cousin lives there—Etta Drozner? I bet you must
32 know her. I'll have to write to her that we met up, here of all places."

33 *You just do that, old biddy,* Charlene thought, and resisted the urge to
34 frizz the back of the woman's head to a fare-thee-well. Here was one
35 more reason why Charlene wanted out of Fort Peck and for that matter
36 Montana, everybody knowing everybody else's business in the entire
37 state. She had gone all through school with horsefaced Etta Drozner, you
38 bet, and could have enjoyably enough passed the rest of her life without
Short 39 ever thinking of her again. Now the word was on its way back to Toston
Normal 40 that Charlene, Helen Tebbet's older girl, was hairdressing, too.

Handwritten notes on the right margin: a large checkmark, a small circle with a crosshair, the letter 'd', and the word 'piped' circled in a hand-drawn oval.

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

That roundabout route drew her along the side of the neatcut Corps town which was nearest the river, the blufftop view there the same one of the dam site as Owen had first shown her, except that instead of Christmas white everything for miles now was the color of unsuccessful fudge. As she always had to do with the dam project, which changed all the time as mammoth things were being built and things twice that size were being gouged out, Charlene scanned through the scraped-brown sprawl until the railroad truss bridge gave her her bearings. A long lattice box of steel which spanned the Missouri with nothing under it but two hundred feet of air and water, *Sangster's running jump across the river*, Owen called it. Whether or not the truss bridge was as miraculous as he said, she could always read the dark VVV of its girders from up here.

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

What maintains love?

Every night anymore, she and Owen threw the supper dishes at each other. No, they didn't. But they might as well, the battle of Fort Peck seemed determined to go on in all guises. Owen was flying so high as fill-master this time around that he looked ready to crow with joy when he totted up the fill figures each night. *That's fine, well and good*, she had tried on him a time or two, *then why wouldn't this be the best chance to clear out with everything you came here for? You whipped the dredging setup and the boost problem and the ice. They'll write you up as the engineer who got the kinks out of the Fort Peck project. Owen, why not take all that now as ammunition onto the next job?* And regularly back from him, the vocal equivalent of a volley of crockery. *Huh uh, we've got to see it through, Charlene. I wish to Christ you could get that into your head. To build a dam you've got to build it all, there's no halfway that's even worth talking about. And nothing is really whipped here. We don't even have the river plugged yet, for crying out loud.*

Crying out loud, mm, Ownie? Their situation could stand more of

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

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

11 Somewhere down there in the dam confusion, rocksaw teeth started
 12 cutting into shale with a piercing howl, stopped, started up again,
 13 stopped, started. The playful shriek only added to her theory that they
 14 liked the commotion of Fort Peck, the excitement when things went
 15 wrong, even the dangers of it, men did. While she herself just could not
 16 see the attraction. What she yearned for was the day she and Owen
 17 would leave here, climb in the car and go. No, wash the car first. She
 18 didn't want to take even Fort Peck's dust with them.

19 But for now Charlene stayed, hands thrust into the pockets of her frock,
 20 there on the bluff a minute more and looked steadily at the truss bridge,
 21 the one item of the Fort Peck Dam she knew something sure about.

22
 23 *Across from Toston, the river wide between them and the adult world, the*
 24 *girls stalked in the willows until they could peek upward to the osprey nest in*
 25 *the big dead cottonwood tree. They did not have to wait long before the fish*
 26 *hawk flew in, a trout in its talons to feed its young. The Tebbet sisters*
 27 *watched a while and then Charlene hugged her arms across her chest—her*
 28 *breasts had begun to come and she monitored them frequently that way—*
 29 *and said it was time to go home. Rosellen was still only a slip of herself, pesky,*
 30 *curious about everything. When they got back to the highway bridge from*
 31 *this osprey outing, they met a cattle drive, cowboys from the Sixteenmile*
 32 *country in the mountains back of Toston. Charlene hurried Rosellen and her-*
 33 *self across the bridge and over to a telephone pole they could stand half be-*
 34 *hind to watch without spooking the herd of cattle. The bridge was a trio of*
 35 *trusses with dark steel girders up its sides and overhead, and the cattle did not*
 36 *like the look of it. The bawling herd wadded itself up at the approach to the*
 37 *bridge. A slender rider wearing spectacles guided his horse into the cows and*
 38 *with the end of a lariat fought a little bunch of cattle out onto the bridge. In-*
 39 *stead of pushing the bunch into a trot, though, the cowboy reined back to the*

foot of the bridge. He did this three times, nudging a bunch of cows out a little way but then retreating, which disappointed Rosellen no end—she wanted to see what it would be like if the whole herd hightailed over the bridge at once. Charlene had to agree that this seemed like a dumb slow way to move cows. The rider wasn't very far from the pair of them when he backed his horse around for the next batch of cattle, so she spoke up:

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

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

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

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

"You have to stay right here," Charlene issued, "until I get back. If you so much as move, I'll spank you inside-out." Her little sister could be a real handful when she put her mind to it. Rosellen might have her nose in a book one minute and be inspired to climb the dizzying fire ladder on the grain elevator the next. "Promise, now? You won't—"

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

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

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

1
2 Rosellen was about ready to give up. She had sent out "Glacier of Mer-
3 cury" to every magazine from *Country Gentleman* to *Woman's Home*
4 *Companion* and the editors must have been waiting behind the mail slots
5 like baseball catchers, the rejections came back so fast.

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

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

28
29 Neil was experiencing gumbo. He had been around oceans of it, every
30 spring while he was growing up here, but it was still amazing how mud
31 could wad up on the rear dual wheels of the Triple A until you had to get
32 in there with the end of a tire iron and more often than not your own
33 bare hands and claw the stuff out. By this point of this trip he and the
34 truck were both painted with the gumbo, but the load he'd put on ought
35 to give him enough traction to make it up the long slope out of here, he
36 was reasonably sure. Now that the homestead was reduced to lumber, he
37 had promised the Old Man he'd haul it all, they'd leave the place clean as
38 a bone, but that didn't necessarily mean he had to do it all in mud sea-
39 son, did it. If he pecked away at it in loads when he had no other truck-

ing to do, he'd still be able to finish up here by summer's end. For right now, he wished he was sitting at home watching Rosellen write.

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

"Makes no nevermind to me," Proxy assented, "as long as you collect from the tightwad rather than me having to try to." She took the stack of shirts wrapped in butcher paper and tied with string, and set it atop her own bundle. She kept on peering next door, though, toward what she could see of Bruce and Kate's house through the lines of laundry kicking up in the wind. Hard to figure, how things take the cockeyed turns they do. "I'm in-laws with your neighbors now," she tested on the washerwoman, as if saying it out loud would make it sound any less wacky.

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

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

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

Had anyone else asked, Nan might have lightly recited the sunny day, the stimulating breeze, the glad sight of the day's loads of washing done and hung. But she found herself saying to Proxy Duff:

"So that I won't forget how."

Proxy watched the sails of garment bucking on the wind. She saw a shirt with a large pattern of a horseshoe sewn on the back, and laughed. "We've got at least one customer in common."

At the early show that night, gathering their strength to go dancing afterward, the three couples nudged and chuckled among themselves as the cartoon came on with a typewriter keyboard busily going SPLICK SPLICK SPLICK as a cockroach wearing a porkpie hat hopped from key to key to introduce himself as *archy* and his friend, the cat from the alley outside the newspaper office, as *mehitabel*. Rosellen giggled the most of

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34

35

36

37

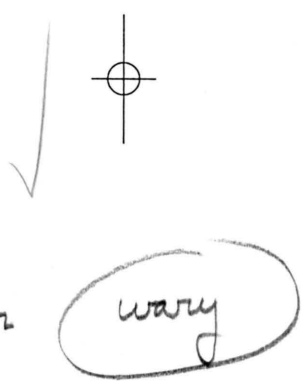
38

39 Short

40 Normal

1 any of them at archy's bouncy typing as it splatted onto the bottom of
 2 the movie screen, and whispered along the row to the others that she
 3 could use a crew of bugs like that for payday. Neil and Bruce sat back
 4 grinning like grade school kids again; every movie they ever saw was
 5 their favorite the minute it came on. Folded comfortably into his seat
 6 Owen relaxed as competently as he did everything else, and even Char-
 7 lene loosened up appreciably on these get-together nights, in Kate's con-
 8 sidered opinion. More than any of them Kate, after the past half-year of
 9 tooth and nail motherhood, was ready for a night out. She wouldn't
 10 want anyone to get the wrong idea, she was simply glad of a whole
 11 babyfree evening at last, with Bruce's arm cozily around her and the
 12 funny stuff occurring up there on the screen with mehitabel, who was
 13 convinced she had been Cleopatra in an earlier life (*cleopatra* was of
 14 course the best archy could do for her because he couldn't work the shift
 15 key), and the big brute of a rat named freddy. Then, though, came
 16 mehitabel's lament of her current life—*what have i done to deserve all*
 17 *these kittens*—and Kate shrank a little lower in her seat as though singled
 18 out. She knew she had all the right feelings for her baby, there was no
 19 way she would trade Jackie for—well, *not* having him. But mehitabel's
 20 yowl hit home in her, if a person was going to be honest about it and
 21 Kate habitually was. When Jackie wasn't spitting up he was producing at
 22 the other end, it seemed like, not even to mention the crying, the feed-
 23 ing, muss and fuss of all kinds. You could love that kind of a little mess-
 24 maker, Kate with weariness had come to believe, but you couldn't
 25 necessarily like one every minute of every day. It wasn't like mad push
 26 with, well, Bruce on their old noonhours, where the feelings took care of
 27 themselves, no complications. So, she sank into that seat as if taking
 28 cover, a little way of mehitabel and herself. It ended up not that funny a
 29 cartoon anyway, because it was the one where freddy the rat, full of poi-
 30 soned cheese, took on the banana-boat tarantula who had got loose in
 31 the newspaper office and was making everyone's life miserable. After the
 32 brave rat triumphed and succumbed, archy batted out a key at a time, *we*
 33 *dropped freddy off the fire escape into the alley with military honors*. Res-
 34 olutely Kate looked forward to going dancing.

35
 36 Next thing to useless. Shame to have to admit it about herself, but there
 37 was no getting around it. Take tonight. Payday night, and him with no
 38 pay. Had to resort to the pretense of walking for exercise. Not that she
 39 made any great show of believing him. But she didn't have to bother to,
 40 did she. Wageless as he was, she plainly counted on, he couldn't inflict



much on himself. She had a point. There was that about being an invalid, it didn't pay worth a damn.

If he were the decider over it all, he would stamp himself underfoot like a grasshopper. On the other hand, not so fast. Hugh had never been one to write himself off entirely. In lieu of life, there was always some other plan. And for once he had been ahead of himself, putting the trade beads away when he had. True, tonight it took a little doing to find the truck among everything parked at the recreation hall, but he had persevered. In there at the dance, he well knew, were Owen and Charlene and Neil and Rosellen and Bruce and Kate and combinations thereof; they ought to get together more, someone of them had the bright idea, and so Jackie was left with him and Meg (well, Meg at the moment) while they kicked up their heels. *Dance up a storm, you six, before the time goes . . .* When he at last tracked down where Neil had parked the truck, he had only to feel around under the seat until his hand found the handkerchief bundle of beads. Next stop, downtown Wheeler. He still had to shun the Blue Eagle, where Proxy's presence virtually guaranteed Darius's. Unto the Wheeler Inn, then, barter the beads there. Bargaining with Ruby Smith was like gnawing the bark off a tree, but at last she scooped the tiny blue beads into the palm of her hand and told the bartender how many beers to set him up, not nearly as many as he liked. Craved.

So, then, now. Only half in the bag, are you, Hugh, eh? he estimated himself. And the walk home, in the night that was pitifully early yet, was causing even that much to wear off. The intoxicating air of Montana. Didn't he wish it were so.

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

t

at

1 Home before he knew it, and now Meg inspected him as he came in.
 2 That ditchline of mouth on her and on Owen. But she couldn't help
 3 showing a bit of pleased surprise. Hugh looked not much the worse for
 4 wear. Turning off the money on him maybe worked. (Among other
 5 steps, she had cornered Birdie Hinch and threatened him with dismem-
 6 berment if he lent Hugh funds to drink.)

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

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

10 She decided to risk it. There weren't even the makings for breakfast
 11 in the house and besides, now it seemed safe enough to cash her pay-
 12 check at the grocery store, with Hugh off his prow. "I need to run to the
 13 store. Quick and back."

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

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

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

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

21 But coming home, from two streets away she could hear Jackie
 22 squalling, and hastened toward the house to comfort him and afflict Hugh.

23 *I will beat on him unmercifully, she vowed, I will throw him piecemeal*
 24 *into the street. If he has let harm come to that child—*

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

28 "Where begin and where end, Jackiejack. Here you are already, the
 29 next Duff, while those of us so far barely know how to breathe circles on
 30 a looking glass. Were I you, Jack, I'd be bawling all the time about this
 31 crew you've come into, I would." The child obliged with a screech of
 32 *Eaahh!* "Yes, yes, yes, that's the boy. Cry it out." Jackie's bawling began to
 33 lessen as Hugh soothingly talked on. "You've a grandfather, myself here,
 34 who's had practice at being a thorough fool. Did you know that yet,
 35 Jack? And your father is something of the same, and vulcanized and un-
 36 derwater about it to boot. We have to hope he'll stay in one piece long
 37 enough to bring you up. Your mother, by some wild accident, is at least
 38 somewhere in the neighborhood of common sense. Whether Kate as
 39 Momma will outweigh the rest of this family, we shall have to see, Jack
 40 my man. You've one aunt who's as sharp as a pinch, and an aunt and an

uncle who think motion must be progress. Then there's your granduncle, who in a wild-ass way chases after the wrongs of the world. Not that the world doesn't need chasing. And we've taken into the family, or she us, your great-aunt Proxy. An approximate—how should we say, Jack? Dancing doxy, foxy dancer? Your Aunty Proxy will give you tales to tell in your old age, Jack lad." Hugh's pacing and the little patting sound on Jack were the only sounds for a few seconds, and then the murmuring of the child and Hugh's musing again. "The only one of us making a real go of it is your uncle who knows how to stop up rivers. Just now the world thinks that's something that needs doing, and so here we be, Jack, the lot of us dabbing away at Owen's great dam. Ah now, right you are, to squall over that." As Meg reached for the handle of the screen door again, she heard: "Your grandmother, did I think to mention, Jackie? Your grandmother I am still trying to figure out after battalions of years."

It was pith helmet summer at Fort Peck now, too hot for hats. All those, including the five male Duffs, who hooted at the light bowl-brimmed headpieces the first day the Corps officers sported them were fervently wearing them by the end of the first week of swelter. Shirts off, torsos oiled with sweat, ten thousand men, the most ever on an American dam, clambered in and out of the diversion tunnels and across the trench floor of the spillway and along the serpentine miles of dredgelines and everywhere on the sloped face of the damfill as if it were Tut's tomb. There were groans throughout the Ad Building when Major Santee won the office pool on how far the mercury in the thermometer traveled up and down at Fort Peck that year: 175 degrees, from February's 61 below to July's 114 above. Another record, naturally.

Jaarala, baggy-eyed as if he was at the end of a long choring day instead of just beginning one, came by for Darius on Saturday with the latest poker-induced loan of a vehicle, this one an olive-green Nash which bore a distinct resemblance to a tortoise. They set off for Plentywood with Jaarala's serene foot on the accelerator.

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

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24
- 25
- 26
- 27
- 28
- 29
- 30
- 31
- 32
- 33
- 34
- 35
- 36
- 37
- 38
- 39 Short
- 40 Normal

insert hyphen for clarity

Corps

N

1 Out of nowhere, which was to say the interminable equator of high-
2 way beyond Wolf Point, Jaarala imparted:

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

4 Darius's eyelids, half-drawn shades, opened for business. Evidently
5 1936 was going to be the year Jaarala had something to say.

6 "There's a bin of them to be got," Darius responded. "That's cer-
7 tain."

8 Jaarala nodded a fraction. "Their time is about goddamn up. People
9 are gonna catch on that the bastards who been running things run it all
10 for theirselves."

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

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

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

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

22 *And go where. Up the teetertotter on thesis and down on antithesis, and*
23 *sweetly level on synthesis. And then deciphering that, the map to the dialectical*
24 *holy land, past Marx's desk and out onto the cobblestones with Sorel and*
25 *by way of the Clydeside, where I put in a soldier's years, and across here to the*
26 *timberbeast camps where you slaved, Tim. And how far have we come? The*
27 *movement is stacked up with bloody apparatus in Russia, and it's being*
28 *warred on in Spain, and in this America when we back a Mott we have to*
29 *call him a Fusion candidate. But against is at least a direction of some sort,*
30 *isn't it, Tim. We do this against the bastards who own and run it all. How*
31 *dare they. How goddamn dare they, in your terms, Tim. Push comes to shove,*
32 *someday. We're to help it come, aren't we . . .*

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

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

37
38 Peter Stapfer was nervous without his Hutterite cap, new as he was at
39 putting together enough of a fib to explain where it had gone.

40 Clad in communal black, knowing he was as obvious as an over-

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

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

"Excuse me. I haf Canadian money." He held up the much-folded little batch of bills the Colony boss had entrusted him with for this trip. "Can I gif it you, for United States?"

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

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

"N-no," Peter Stapfer said unsurely. "Hutterite. Our *kommune*—our colony iss in Saskatchewan."

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

"Spiffy cap," the woman was saying, right to him. "Where do you get one like that?"

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

1 Peter Stapfer's heart nearly stopped then and there. He had hoped for
2 this very thing, although the cap was not what he had meant to part
3 with. Down his right pantleg, from his waist into his boot, was hidden
4 one of the short stock whips made at the Colony. Cattle ranchers prized
5 them for their hardiness in the shipping pens, and Peter Stapfer had in-
6 tended to bargain the whip for what he wanted. But no one in this house
7 of Hell resembled a cattle rancher.

8 Indeed, the saloon proprietor now made mockery by calling down
9 the bar to the woman: "Jiminy Christmas, Shannon, you gonna get reli-
10 gion next?"

11 "Tom, blow it out your—" Proxy veered, but then came back to
12 business. "Come on, fellow, how much are you asking for that cap?"

13 Peter faced the woman and managed to utter:

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

15 Proxy returned his look with a mixture of resignation and scorn.
16 "Sure. I ought've known. Another Holy Joe who wants to take sin out in
17 trade. All right, deacon, you can come have your little diddle. Let's go.
18 But that better be a good cap."

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

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

22 He cast a glance over his shoulder, worried that one of the younger
23 men would come searching for him and find him talking to this Jezebel.
24 "I gif you the cap for a picture." He spun his hands in search of the fuller
25 word. "Photograph."

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

27 "Me. To haf."

28 "That's all you want? Just your picture taken?"

29 Peter Stapfer bobbed his head.

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

32 The man bobbed and blushed some more. Proxy called out, "Tom.
33 Let me borrow your Brownie a minute."

34 "I must trust you," Peter Stapfer said to her rapidly. "The Colony,
35 they cannot know of this. Ve do not . . . haf such things, images, pho-
36 tographs. Mail it, please, in this." He thrust at her a seed company enve-
37 lope of the sort that came to him as vegetable boss of the Colony.

38 Nodding slowly, Proxy took it from him.

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

Peter Stapfer panted up to the pair of younger Hutterites awaiting him. He gestured to his bare head. "They are thieves, here."

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

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

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

He immediately saw he needn't have bothered.

In the lamplight Proxy was sitting up in bed, on top of the covers, stone naked except for the cap on her head.

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

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

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

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

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

Other times, only a few, he'd asked for the chamber more as a precaution, whenever the ascent back to the barge didn't feel quite right. At only river depths, the bends weren't supposed to be much of a problem. This time, though, blooey. He'd been tightening a big hex nut on a braceplate forty feet down when the next thing he knew he was wondering what the wrench was for in his vulcanized gloved hands and the barge boss Taine was in the midst of a conversation with him on the helmet squawk box and when he casually said he was feeling a little woozy, Taine fished him up in careful stages and clapped him into the chamber.

What spooked Bruce was that missing time, between when he was nicely going about his business with the wrench and waking up, so to speak, in midyarn with Taine. Hadn't happened before. *Alertness* was always what happened to him there under the river. In the diving suit he felt as if he was at last wearing life; as if existence had come and found him and wrapped itself plumply around him. The top moments of

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

1 motorcycle speed, sure, they'd been fine; but the transformed gait be-
 2 neath the river, where he went along as solemn as one of those old
 3 pharaohs, *that* suited him so much better. According to how the river
 4 was running, leisurely and normal or fast with runoff, he might be
 5 weighted with as little as twenty pounds of lead or as much as eighty.
 6 Bruce would never had thought so beforehand, but the eighty-pound
 7 days were the ones he especially liked, the surge of the river meeting him
 8 strong and tricky as he descended from the diving barge and made his
 9 way down to affix a brace on a piling. Then the rooted feeling, from his
 10 fifteen-pound shoes and the lead weights on the belt of the diving suit;
 11 the calm, contained view out the circle eye of the helmet; he couldn't
 12 have invented it better himself. The only hard part was the time limit,
 13 only two hours of diving work allowed and then two hours of bunktime
 14 in the barge cabin, gathering strength again. Or as now, in the decom-
 15 pression chamber, letting the effect of the river work out of his blood-
 16 stream. Lying here this long, he was pretty sure he was getting over being
 17 scared, but he still was curious. Those moments that went missing; he
 18 wondered where they go.

✓
 VE have

21
 22 **A**nother day, another surprise out of Proxy. When Darius got off
 23 work and came home to the houseboat to burn himself some
 24 supper, she was still there instead of at the Blue Eagle. More precisely,
 25 she had set up shop at the table, operating a little hand-machine which
 26 took cigarette papers and loose tobacco and rolled them into cigarettes.
 27 The American genius for perfecting the trivial never ceased to astonish
 28 Darius.

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

31 "Generous Tom," Darius restricted himself to, not wanting to be
 32 drawn deeper into the topic of Bull Durham sacks and their contents.
 33 He was about to start rummaging for supper when he saw that Proxy
 34 had something more on her mind.

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

36 "Ah? Wanting what?"

37 "Us out of here."

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

40 "Houseboat and all, they want gone." Proxy concentrated on her

Short
 Normal

cigarette rolling. "Moving a dredge in. They're going to take this whole part of the riverbank."

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

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

He passed a hand over his face. He tried to imagine how it would be, living in one of the shantytowns. His comings and goings would be evident; the feel of being watched, nosed at. Whatever living quarters they could find, likely to be no better than that hovel Meg and Hugh were in.

"Proxy, I'm not sure I can—"

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

He stared across the houseboat at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," Bantry declared.

"Neil can operate it," Owen said fast.

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

pace

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

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

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

9 Charlene and Rosellen and Meg and Kate and the baby and, hostess
10 to it all, Proxy were already waiting at the houseboat.

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

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

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

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

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

27 "Do the honors, love."

28 Proxy's cheeks colored. She sneaked a look around at all the Duffs to
29 see if they were going to make fun of her on this. None showed any sign
30 of it. They were the damnedest bunch to try to figure out. Tear into each
31 other at the drop of a hat, but stand together if the world so much as
32 looked cross-eyed at them.

33 Proxy came over by Darius, took the bottle, and turned to the house-
34 boat.

35 "O-*kay*, then I christen you the—" and she stopped.

36 "*Prairie Schooner*," Rosellen provided, which Owen thought was re-
37 ally pretty good.

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

The houseboat slid on the prairie grass, the bulldozer leading it up

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

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

Owen, who had backed off to watch this emplacement process with a professional critical eye, all at once broke out laughing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Birdie, you great fool! What do you think you're doing here?" There already had been a perceptible evaporation from Fort Peck of those who did not want the arm of the law registering any more about them than it'd already had occasion to.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

Monday
changed so that the 2 days of fingerprinting take place on workdays, Th & Fri

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

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

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

9
10 The fingerprint was supposed to have come without warning, but of
11 course Fort Peck's tide of rumor ran days ahead of anything. So, Darius
12 had plenty of chance to think through the matter. Let the American gov-
13 ernment make its daub of his flesh in its ink and take the chance that the
14 imprint would never wend off to Scotland Yard and the *Crawford,*
15 *George* HOMICIDE case file there. Or pack up himself and Proxy and go.
16 Neither appealed. Which had brought him here, a dozen spots behind
17 Hugh in the shuffling and conversing throng of men, as the line snaked
18 slowly into the propped-open double doors of the personnel annex. As
19 soon as he could crane a look in from the corridor, Darius had a panicky
20 moment when he saw Rosellen there in the office. He tucked himself as
21 thoroughly as he could behind the broad-shouldered pipefitter ahead of
22 him in line and watched. Evidently Rosellen's was one of the desks com-
23 mandeered by the fingerprinters and she simply needed something out
24 of one of the drawers. Spying Hugh, though, as he lent his right thumb
25 to an inkpad at another of the desks, she waited to walk out with him.
26 Button-bright at his side, she kidded Hugh about having a black thumb
27 now instead of a green one until he declared to her he was going to wash
28 off Uncle Sam's ink this very moment. As Hugh veered into the men's re-
29 stroom and she went on down the corridor, Darius relaxed slightly. No
30 one else familiar was in the office or on line around him now.

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

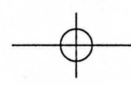
Short 39 "Hey, now, take it easy," the fingerprinters said, coming around the
Jormal 40 desk to whomp him on the back. Darius at last straightened up, eyes

H ✓

ing
fingerprinting
as per ms

better break:
rest room

fingerprinter,
singular



running and nose sniffing. "Catarrh," he pronounced, which in his burr sounded perilously like the onset of another glottal earthquake. He looked apologetically at his damply slimed right hand, the fingerprinter giving it his full regard too.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Was Jerusalem builded here. *Whinstone streets and roundheaded walls of rock and every second Scot granitic with an idea to perfect the world, that was the land he and Darius derived from. Will not cease from Mental Fight. It surprised Hugh less than he would have expected—somehow he now had the translation of something familiar—that Darius had been into the thick of it at the Clydeside. Old Ninian Duff and that telegraphic bombardment from the Bible, Darius and his Blake and who knew what other songbirds of dogma. Men of the word, his uncle, his brother.*

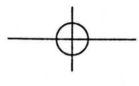
Darius now told him as if making a clean breast of everything since puberty:

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

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal



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

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

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

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

13 "AHAHARGHH!" Hugh cleared his throat in mucous-churning deto-
14 nation, making as if to bring his right hand up to the phlegm supply.

15 "Oh, for—" the fingerprinter grabbed his hand, drawing it down to
16 the inkpad as he fumbled for the paperwork that had been set aside. Tak-
17 ing hold of Hugh's thumb, he rapidly made the impression of it first
18 onto the identification card and then onto the employment record of
19 Darius Duff. "You want to go invest in some cough medicine, fellow,"
20 the man muttered to Hugh without giving him so much as a look.

21
22 "You're pitching in on this pretty enthusiastically." No sooner was Hugh
23 outside the Ad Building than the voice made him jump. He shot a
24 glance along the line, now longer than ever, and found Owen's face
25 there.

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

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

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

35 His father laughed at that to an extent which surprised Owen. Then
36 Hugh went on his way, fortified in the reasoning he and Darius had
37 reached the evening before, that if ever it was noticed his thumbprint
38 was on Darius's identification card the assumption would be clerical
39 error, a mix-up somehow because of the same last name, a piece of paper

Short
Normal

somehow handled wrong; in paperwork was their foe, his and Darius's, and in paperwork was their salvation.

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

Among those already gone for good was Tim Jaarala.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40

insert
drop cap

MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB
AND IT WAS MADE OF MUTTON.
EVERY TIME IT WAGGED ITS TAIL
IT SHOWED ITS LANDON BUTTON.

to make
evident
that the
extract
goes with
material
from line 2
down
not above

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

It had taken the proprietor of the Blue Eagle about two seconds to cotton on to the sheriff's presence on his premises; the sheriff often wished the rest of the citizenry was as swift on the uptake as bartenders and prostitutes.

Short
Normal

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

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

10 "You could put up this poster." The sheriff had tried this both ways,
11 making Peyser or another undersheriff or some so-called campaign
12 worker traipse around with this stuff, or do the traipsing himself, and the
13 evidence was clear. His campaign posters went up and stayed up if he in-
14 flicted them in person.

15 Tom Harry held the poster out at arm's length and went over it as if
16 it were an eyechart. "Heck of a likeness." The head-and-shoulders pic-
17 ture of the sheriff with his Stetson cocked down didn't reveal how much
18 of him was hat.

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

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

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

28 Tom Harry all but smiled. "Big of you, sheriff. Everybody in here
29 will vote for you early and often. Got one thing to attend to, then we'll
30 get your round of drinks set right up." He stopped by Birdie Hinch and
31 whispered something that sent Birdie sidling toward the door. By the
32 time the first of the Blue Eagle denizens had a drink in their hands and
33 were shouting thanks in the sheriff's direction, crowds were on their way
34 in from the Wheeler Inn and the Buckhorn Club and the other joints
35 where Birdie was spreading the word. The sheriff stoically pulled out his
36 wallet at each fresh onslaught. Just because he hated Wheeler didn't alter
37 the fact that it was full of votes for a Democratic candidate for anything.

38
39 Short Hugh dropped into a chair at the kitchen table, not knowing whether to
40 formal hoot or commiserate.

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

1
2

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

3
4
5

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

6
7

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

8
9
10
11

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

12

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

13
14
15
16

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

17
18

On the spot. Very much on the spot, is how I would describe it, at least in your case, Hugh. Aloud, though, she kept to: "With you as the provider of the paycheck now, naturally."

19
20
21

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

22
23
24
25
26
27

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

28

Proxy unbraced her arms from the dashboard and caught her breath. "Darius, you drive like a man with a paper ass."

29
30

Forehead furrowed, he said: "I thought I was beginning to catch the knack."

31
32

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

33
34

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

35
36

"Scoot your tail over here," she instructed wearily. "Watch me again, okay?" She climbed over him and nestled behind the steering wheel, backed the Ford Triple A around, and drove up the huge excavation toward where the spillway gates were under construction, reciting the gears

37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

✓
no comma

1 to still-furrowed Darius as she shifted through them, calling his atten-
2 tion to the clutch the whole while.

3 "How do you come by this?" he eventually asked about her automo-
4 tive teamstering ability.

5 Proxy lit up at this chance to embroider out loud as she gunned the
6 truck back to the head of the spillway. "That bootlegger I told you
7 about?" she launched into. "That I was the private nurse for? Learned all
8 the driving tricks there are from him. I drove loads in from Canada for
9 him while he was laid up. At the border crossing they wouldn't suspect
10 me, see. They'd ask what I was hauling and I'd bat my baby-blues and
11 just say, 'Crockery. My missionary aunt died in Lethbridge and left me
12 all the family dishes.'"

13 "That definitely explains everything," Darius remarked.

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

20 Instantaneously, "No."

21 Proxy gave him a look.

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

24 *And I'm not good enough for your Bolshie band? Is that it, too?* She de-
25 bated with herself about whether to pitch into him with that, but de-
26 cided it would save her a lot of trouble—not to mention some
27 excruciating hours of watching Darius herd this truck along a high-
28 way—if she left the Red Corner to him.

29
30 "Mother, I didn't know you had it—"

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

36 *Righty right. Never mind.* Owen fidgeted, inside and out. *This house-*
37 *hold is so famously well off, almost up there next to the Vanderbilts. You and*
38 *the Old Man are just going to have money to burn, sure, uh huh. He'll burn*
39 *through the only wages you've got left, anyway, and does he ever know how.*
40 For the third time in as many minutes, Owen wondered why he was ex-

pending his lunch hour this way. Meg was minding Jackie while Kate had her hair done; ergo, Kate was off gaining a fresh perm, and probably a good time in the blankets as well if this was one of the noons when Bruce popped home, while he, Owen, was perfectly welcome to share a nursery rhyme. He tried to stow all that and concentrate on the business at hand. "Let me put it like this, then, Mother. If you've sacked the cook-house, what the deuce do you think you're going to do from here on?"

Kate bucked Jackie on her knee some more. "This," she said.

"Bruce is actually going to let you?" The news that Kate was going back to waitressing intrigued Charlene, who wondered what kind of campaign it must have taken. "What'd you have to do, Katy, kick him in the slats?"

"He talked himself into it after a while," she responded, streaming water as Charlene finished the rinse. Even as wet as an otter, Kate looked imperturbable, life floating no surprises past her, or so she seemed to Charlene. *But what the heck do I know, though*, Charlene thought. *Maybe being married to Bruce is interesting in a way. Dessert all the time, instead of what's supposed to be good for you.* "Last night he reached the point where he said if I wanted to go back to herding flies at the Rondola, he supposed it was up to me," Kate's report went on, "and so I am."

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

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

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

"My working—we always need the stupid money," Kate said in a clear and level tone. "It just goes."

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

✓
S capital

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

3 "Hey, though." Proxy ran her eye down the listings on the cover of
4 THE ALABASTER QUARTERLY. "'The Wreck of the Prairie Schooner.'
5 sounds like this place." The houseboat, because she and Darius were the
6 only ones ever here, presented just two spots to sit amid the spill of
7 tossed clothes and random groceries and much else that had never been
8 put away, and Rosellen was meticulously drawn up on that other perch.
9 Proxy glanced curiously at her, then back at the little magazine, with the
10 curiosity distinctly turned off. "Well, thanks, Boots, I can always use
11 some reading material. I'll get to it sometime when—"

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

13 *What, just because some other smarty thought of calling a high-and-dry*
14 *houseboat a prairie schooner, too?* Proxy shot her a pinsharp look, then
15 shrugged and began perusing the story.

16 "Uh *huh*," eventually she pronounced, Rosellen breathless for more.
17 But Proxy flipped back to the first page and with a little mocking smile
18 read off: "By Nell DuForest?"

19 "That's my nom—I used a pen name."

20 "Oh, one of those. I've known people who ended up in the pen for
21 how they used names, sure." Seeing the panic on Rosellen, Proxy said:
22 "Kidding. Come on, don't go goosy. How come you did that, though,
23 hide your name? Don't the rest of the tribe know you wrote this?"

24 "Neil, is all. Plus you."

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

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

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

32 Rosellen surprised her with a flinchy grin, still looking a little guilty
33 and perched-on-a-pincushion but grinning most definitely. Rosellen,
34 Proxy had always figured, had to know the score more than she let on,
35 but from her own veteran standpoint she couldn't help but regard her as
36 primarily still a cute kid, although now that she stopped and thought
37 about it Rosellen had been married ages longer than she herself had, and
38 reportedly Rosellen ruled the roost over there at dam headquarters with
Short 39 that lickety-split typewriter of hers—Proxy redid her estimate before the
ormal 40 bright-eyed younger woman even finished owning up:

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

1
2
3
4

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

5

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

6

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

7
8
9

"Proxy, no, she's not exactly y—"

10

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

11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18

Rosellen looked as if she wanted to be writing this down on something. "So you don't just herd—"

19
20

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

21
22
23
24
25

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

26
27
28
29
30
31

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

32
33

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

34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

on

N

1 Proxy dipped back into THE ALABASTER QUARTERLY, but then glanced
2 up as if in afterthought. "How's Neil?"

3 "Fine. Busy."

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

6 "Oh. Good. I guess." As Proxy kept watching her, something flared
7 in Rosellen's eyes. "I don't have a whole set of comparisons."

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

11 "It's not really you. I mean, I changed *lots* about—"

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

13 "—really, you're not the—"

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

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

17 "But."

18 On that creed Proxy seemed to be gathering her forces.

19 "Truthfully? The whole jigaree, Rosellen? I don't get how it comes
20 out." She frowned intensely into the last page of the story. "I mean,
21 this." In a Sunday-school reciting voice she read: ". . . *their two shadows*
22 *across the prairie like reflections pendant in water before them.*"

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

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

28 "It's, well, implied."

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

30 *Employ the eraser, hnn, Proxy, you're telling me,* Rosellen thought. Drat
31 the endings, how to work out a version of people that was—well, con-
32 clusive. What were the cusswords Neil and Bruce let loose with when-
33 ever they were good and mad at something? *Cat shit, rat shit, and guano.*
34 She'd like to have used those now.

35 Finally, though, she puffed out her cheeks, then let the exasperation
36 leak out in a rueful grin. "All right. I wanted to know. Now I sure as the
37 devil do."

38 Before Rosellen could gather to go, though, Proxy lifted a finger in-
39 quisitively, as if testing a breeze. "Now you tell me something, okay? It's
40 probably no big secret I—work extra at the Blue Eagle, some nights.

When I come in here, those times, Darius is dead to the world and we don't, umm, get up to anything until the next morning or noon or sometime." To Rosellen, for the first time since the shivaree night Proxy seemed jumpy. "Listen," she was asking urgently, "this married stuff—would it be better if I hurry my butt home and be here when he comes off work, do you think?"

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

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

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

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

"I don't know about everything else. But in marriage, yes, I guess that's the news."

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

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

"This is more like it," Neil approved.

By now they were full of food, sated with Kate's fried chicken which everyone swore they could taste before they even picked up a piece and Charlene's salad specialty with noodles broad as a finger and rich with a seasoning she refused to disclose, the feast topped off with pie of the venison mincemeat that Rosellen made from deer neck, magical. Owen, eldest, had had to do a mock recital of the Old Man's inevitable pronouncement after such a holiday meal: *I have had an elegant sufficiency, any more would be a detrimental superfluity*. Earlier the men had hunted,

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

1 not very far nor ambitiously, for Hun pheasants. The women had traded
2 war stories from work. Jackie had been passed around among the six of
3 them like a lucky charm.

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

8 Owen sent her a look.

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

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

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

19 Owen sat up now, too, enough to study the capacious river valley and
20 the join of the coulee. "You got it, we're building an ark lot here," he rat-
21 ified Rosellen's little rhapsody. "I'd estimate it'll fill up along this stretch
22 about to the base of that rimrock. Couple of years from now, we can pic-
23 nic up top there and be catching fish at the same time."

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

27 "Why not, you were pearldiving when I met you," said Kate.

28 "I can see it now, 'TREASURE CHESTS FOUND FOR YOU AND YOUR
29 DISHES DONE AT THE SAME TIME,'" came from Charlene, who never
30 missed a chance on Bruce.

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

33 "Somebody else is about to go down for the count, aren't you, Jack-
34 son," Kate scooped the little boy in. "Squirming won't get you out of it.
35 A NAP, a NAP, a nap *nap NAP*, for Jack *Jack JACK!*" she nuzzled at him
36 until he reluctantly chortled. With the child corraled in her arms, Kate
37 looked over at the truck parked facing into the sun.

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

Short 39 "Hey, wait!" Bruce yelped, remembering. "I stood the Hun gun—"
Normal 40

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

"Aw, horseshit!" When Bruce scabbled the rifle up out of the grass, there was a noticeable bow in its barrel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All right, now," Bruce was abruptly all business. "Let's do some real shooting. Pair off, how about, making it interesting." He glanced toward Charlene and decided to risk his neck. "Vas you dere, Sharlie? Come on, lady, let's show this bunch how to hit a target."

Amid everybody's hesitation after that, Kate was heard from. "Neil is

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

1 the only one of you I've seen do anything special with that gun," she
2 tossed behind her as she went over and bedded Jackie down in the shade
3 of the truck. "I want to be on his side." That left Owen and Rosellen to
4 uphold the pride of the Ad Building during this gunnery, they gamely
5 agreed.

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

9 "And then for the grand finale—" Bruce in full impresario flourish
10 went to the picnic supplies in the back of the truck and pulled out his
11 lunchbox. He opened it to show them it was stuffed full of rags, and nes-
12 tled in the rags lay a blasting cap. "Followed me home from work the
13 other day," he explained.

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

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

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

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

32 Up next, Charlene heard Bruce say so softly it was intended only for
33 her: "You can do okay at this, if you let me lay out how."

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

37 "Show me, then, Sergeant York."

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

39 She and Owen were always the clotheshorses of the bunch, and she

had on nearly new gabardine slacks and a Brigham light-wool shirt much too good for wiggling around on the ground. Besides, both Rosellen and Kate had done their firing standing up, using the hood of the truck as a gun rest. Charlene made sure of Bruce for some judicious moments, then went to her knees, and silkily stretched facedown in the grass.

1
2
3
4
5
6

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

7

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

8
9
10
11
12

“Shift your—lower half out to the left,” Bruce’s voice came.

13

She maneuvered her legs in that direction.

14

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

15
16

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

17
18

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

19
20
21
22
23

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

24
25
26

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

27
28
29

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

30
31
32
33
34
35
36

“Last little tricky part next.” Now she held the rifle firmly, Bruce steadying the length of it against her shoulder and below the bone of her cheek and out to where the gunstock and its slim barrel resided in her hand, saying as he did so, “You need to plant your elbow right under the

37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

1 gun, line everything up along your arm. Feel it come to rest?" Immediately,
2 she could: the angle of her arm magically taking the weight of the
3 rifle and propping in place as firmly as strutwork.

4 "You look pretty solid," Bruce couldn't help sounding pleased. "Now
5 all you got to do is take your time and aim."

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

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

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

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

21 Charlene aligned the .22's sights by fractional movements, adjust-
22 ments as devoted as licks of love. The round pin top of the rifle's front
23 sight steadied for her into the matching notch on the rear sight. She held
24 her breath on the first shot, and it flew just high of the post. Murmuring
25 from where he squatted beside her, Bruce instantly coached that she
26 needed to take a deep breath, let it out ever so gradually, and squeeze the
27 trigger somewhere in that relaxed slide of its outgo. She drew in air as he
28 instructed, the ground meeting it under her. Her exhale coaxed the shot,
29 which with a nicking sound tore a silver splinter off the fencepost. Her
30 third shot thudded squarely into the post. So did her fourth. Her fifth, too.

31 "Okay, deadeye, hold your fire," Bruce awarded her the contest. He
32 loped across the coulee to the fencepost and carefully placed the blasting
33 cap in a split in the wood. He walked grinning back up to the picnic site,
34 where Charlene still lay prone.

35 Bruce and the others all held their breaths as she took time in sight-
36 ing, regulating herself. Then Charlene fired, and the post blew apart.

37
38 *Why now?*

Short 39 He hurried up the ridge toward the houseboat, breathing hard, his
Normal 40 tightened Adam's apple not making the process any easier.

Why in the name of the Nazarene couldn't this have waited until after . . . Of course, better if it hadn't ever happened, it's never a pretty thing when . . . But still, why now?

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

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

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

"A funeral."

Near the top of the town, overlooking the square streets of Plentywood and the bends of Big Muddy Creek and turning a paintless cheek to the new county courthouse being built with WPA largesse, the Temple of Labor was surrounded with trucks and pickups, the Packard a distinct minority among them. Proxy had burned up the miles from Fort Peck, asking Darius only once if he didn't want a turn at driving. "If I so much as hit a mosquito with Tom Harry's vehicle, I would never hear the end of it," he begged off.

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

"Sorry to hear of this, Lawrence," Darius offered, along with his hand, which instantly was lost in Mott's grip. They stood that way, oddly like first lovers holding hands, until Proxy cleared her throat significantly. Darius indicated her. "My wife, ahmm, Susannah."

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

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

1 In the front row, Aagot Mott was crying in a way that would shear
2 your heart out. It took Proxy no time to realize, though, that Darius was
3 staring beyond the sobbing mother to the catafalque and the casket it
4 supported. The cloth draped over those was the Red flag, the hammer
5 and sickle centered squarely on the casket of nine-year-old Harald Mott.

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

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

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

20 Out these windows, Mott's peeling voice intoned, you could see to
21 the sharp spot on the creekbank where Harald had fallen in.

22 Thus the swags, the proper frames through which to view a lost life
23 of promise such as Harald's.

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

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

30 There was more but Darius let in little of it, hearing instead the shift-
31 ing of bodies on chair slats and stiff dress shoes flexing against the floor.
32 Of all the audience, probably only Proxy sat still throughout Mott's per-
33 formance, and even she peeked sideways every so often at the vein ham-
34 mering blue in Darius's temple.

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

38 People reached under their chairs, then, after a moment of uncer-
39 tainty, stood up to sing. Proxy with twin indents of intentness between
40 her eyebrows flipped past "Joe Hill" and "Pie in the Sky When You Die"

to the proper page and held the little songbook over to share with Darius. He didn't bother to glance down at it.

THE WORKERS' FLAG IS DEEPEST RED,
IT SHROUDED OFT OUR MARTYRED DEAD.

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

AND ERE THEIR LIMBS GREW STIFF AND COLD
THEIR LIFE-BLOOD DYED ITS EVERY FOLD.

Proxy thought it was a hell of a note that while Darius felt free to clam up, she was expected to keep singing along with this. She gave him a notifying glower, but nothing seemed to register on him right now, so she concentrated back onto the red-covered songbook. Stiff, cold, blood; these Bolshies were as grim as Baptists.

THEN RAISE THE SCARLET STANDARD HIGH;
BENEATH ITS FOLDS WE'LL LIVE AND DIE . . .

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

THOUGH COWARDS FLINCH AND TRAITORS SNEER . . .

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

WE'LL KEEP THE RED FLAG FLYING HERE.

"This tears it," Darius rasped out on their way to the car.
"I would sure think so," Proxy concurred. "Those farmers looked like somebody shat in their hat."
He seemed not to have heard her. "You saw the expressions on them. The churchly ones you could expect it of, even though Mott didn't seem to, poor damned sad baboon. But even those who aren't Bible-habited . . ." Darius broke off. They might have swallowed Fusion, a dab

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

insert
quote marks
in song
extracts

1 of socialism-and-water, at first, these restless farmers. But undiluted
2 Communism on a funeral day was bound to set their tidy moral Scandi-
3 navian stomachs to churning. *Damn Mott, poor Mott, poor everybody in*
4 *the Red Corner now*, keened in Darius. Proxy knew his word for the
5 miles-away look on him ~~now~~, the vacancy there: elsewhere. As if to
6 himself, Darius finally murmured: "That—that in there shook them."

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

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

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

17 "Evidently you can't," he intoned, although so low she couldn't hear it.

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

21 "Why does it forever happen? Almost more damned times than I can
22 count, the movement has tripped over itself this way." Proxy had the
23 Packard floored, telephone poles flicking by like fenceposts, but she let
24 up a little to keep tabs on his expression and what he was saying. "You
25 get people halfway lined up behind the cause," he was going on, "man-
26 age to make them see what a fraud the old order is, push things to a
27 brink of getting some good done—and then it all clatters down."

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

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

35
36
37
38
39
40
The camera came to town at the end of that summer. It took a
look around, day by day, aimed by the famous photographer.
First it found a metal-hooded welder at work on a dredge cutterhead big

take out "now" —
used in previous
sentence

as a whale skull, and then a cow munching over a find in an overspilling
 garbage barrel in a spectacularly junkky back alley of Wheeler. It regis-
 tered Colonel Parmenter and Major Santee and Captain Brascoe spiffy
 and officious in their uniforms, but next Ruby Smith vigilantly eyeing
 the take in the Wheeler Inn. The camera seemed deliriously random,
 popping up on its tripod in unlikeliest places, but it knew what it knew.
 Into its film packs, on measured winks of light that would be distilled
 into famous magazine pages in New York City, were to be put Fork Peck
 Dam and the damworkers' shantytowns.

Extra early, Neil started the truck's long, low-gear climb out of the bot-
 tomland at the homestead, the morning fog off the river sealing away the
 terrain above so that only a steady amount of steep grade, about a hun-
 dred feet of sloping twin ruts, kept showing up ahead. The lugged drone
 of the truck was monotonously unchanging, too. Nonetheless, Neil
 whistled a bit, the warbly swatch of "Aura Lee" that it took a virtuoso to
 do; he could not help but feel he had the jump on the day, plenty of time
 to make this haul between now and noon when he had to go on shift at
 the dredgeline. Glad, too, to have the last of the floorboards and siding
 onto the truck and no more of these scavenger runs to the homestead.
The Old Man can kiss the place goodbye now. He palmed the gearstick
 knob beside his knee for a moment, tattoo of vibration up from the gear-
 box into his hand. The Triple A took a beating on these hilly hauls, but
 he had it in mind to snag Bruce or Owen one of these soon weekends to
 help him take down the transmission, check the gear-teeth and all.

The truck finally dug free of the fog, up toward the grass horizons of
 the ridgeland. Not quite dawn yet here, Neil was surprised to find; the
 sky was staying more inky than he expected, making him wonder if his
 watch was fast. Or maybe the fog had something to do with it. This last
 climb of the road from the homestead switchbacked into a long curve
 eastward, and even before the road topped the ridge, he saw that the lid
 of cloud lay on the river in that direction the entire way ahead. At Fort
 Peck they doubtless were cussing the damp gray morning, and he whis-
 tled some more at the prospect that the fog would burn off into a bright
 day by the time he hit the dam.

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

✓
 junky

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

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

abruptly ✓

4 Everything tipped. His hands on his eye had cost him the steering
5 wheel, the truck off the edge of the road, then he balled himself up in-
6 side the rollover, hearing the sound of houseboards avalançing.

h avalanching ✓

7
8 "What the dickens—?" Birdie Hinch flung down his shovel and got
9 ready to run, if he only knew where. "It's turning night again already!"

10 The dredgeline foreman himself appeared dumbstruck at the dark-
11 ness falling at 6:30 a.m., until he remembered.

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

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

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

21
22 Nothing broken on him. Except there in the eye, the green wound blaz-
23 ing there.

24 The power of panic drove Neil up out of the toppled truck, wrench-
25 ing the driver's-side door open into the sky overhead, then scrambling
26 out like a frantic sailor through an escape hatch. He lit on the ground
27 hard, the truck on its side hissing shrilly through its radiator. His back
28 to the sunrise, he tried clapping a hand, then both hands, over the
29 eye but it did not help any. The scald of color, the shape of a large glow-
30 worm, stayed vivid within the eye, no, *Jesus, brighter!* when he covered it
31 that way.

32 Neil grasped by now that this was not from the shatter of the wind-
33 shield, some sliver of glass. Somehow this was a slice of the sun itself dri-
34 ven into his eye. The, what was it called, corona, branded green into his
35 vision; they'd been warned about it in school every so many years, blind-
36 ness if you ever looked into an eclipse. But he hadn't even know this
37 morning there was going to be an— The thing swam, maddeningly
38 front and center, always just out from his nose. This wasn't blindness,
39 this was maybe worse, something forever there you didn't want to see,
40 couldn't stand to see but couldn't keep from seeing. Hunched, Neil

n known ✓

Short
Normal

stared down at the ground, the crooked crown of sunfire against it. His throat tightened so much he felt half-choked as he tried to think how to deal with this. My God, how could you ever even sleep with this smoldering in your eye.

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

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

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

But what, then—can't go through life like this, can't, this'd drive a person batty before— Got to do something with—

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

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

He knew nobody in his right mind could pluck his own eye out. What, though, if it drove him crazy enough to?

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

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

✓
delete
"this was"

1 there it flared. The alfalfa field, when he tried it, produced too deep a
2 green, the sun-molten one crawled floridly atop it. He snapped his gaze
3 back to the cottonwoods again.

4 Quivering with hope now, he forced himself to sit still on the river-
5 bank, knees hugged to his chest, and stare on and on into the leaves. Sur-
6 prisingly hard, to make yourself do nothing but stare. Rosellen. He
7 thought about her, craved having her here but in the next instant de-
8 cided no, how could he explain even to her what was going on in his eye.
9 He tried to occupy himself with the place, thoughts of the past life here.
10 *Cold mornings, the boy him taking his turn at the chores starting with the*
11 *milk cow, milking the first squirts onto his hands to warm them; Owen had*
12 *taught him that trick. Bruce and him, twinned in even where they slept,*
13 *those tussles the two of them waged over who was taking up too much of the*
14 *bed, until the night the Old Man came into their room and laid a cedar fen-*
15 *cepost down the center of the sheets for a boundary. The Old Man and*
16 *Mother, their long devotion to disagreement about this place. The river*
17 *chiming in, any season, road of water that the luck of a year either came on*
18 *or didn't. Their last winter here, the big freeze that left this stretch of the Mis-*
19 *souri and its tributary Go-Devil Creek like a series of ice rinks; the cows from*
20 *the Austin ranch that the Duffs were wintering on shares slipped and slid on*
21 *the ice, the calves were born backwards that hellish calving time. Then,*
22 *though, the annual hope that was alfalfa, the melt in the mountains coming*
23 *down the canyon as rapid tan water and parking into the riverbank fields to*
24 *push up the green growth. But before spring was half off the calendar, sum-*
25 *mer was crowding in, the Old Man going hermitry once more, Mother skep-*
26 *tical about everything, Bruce itching to pull out, himself trying to fathom*
27 *where things were heading. Summer of grasshoppers again. The view from*
28 *the running board during the poisoning, the tires of the pickup leaving be-*
29 *hind twin slicks of crushed grasshoppers. Then that feeb in the government*
30 *Chevy. Then the dam. And the truck. And this . . .*

31 Gradually he could determine that the green squiggle was fading, just
32 perceptibly. After many minutes, it turned to dull red. Wild with relief,
33 when he shifted his gaze off the cottonwood canopy now, after each
34 blink the glow seemed to go down a little in color.

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

38
Short 39 "It's all beat to hell on that one side," Owen diagnosed the truck after
Normal 40 they had righted it with a tractor borrowed from the Austin ranch. "But

e
parking

the garage in Glasgow can bang most of that out, don't you think?" He badly wanted Neil to think that, rather than notions toward a new truck. *Charlene will have my scalp for sure if we lay out money for another damned rig.*

Going through the motions with Owen of looking over the mistreated Model Triple A, while Rosellen tried to stay at his side and yet out of the way, Neil appeared both dulled down and uneasy. He still had trouble believing what had happened here had *really* happened. There was no telling how much longer Bruce was going to keep ragging the daylights out of him for trying to teach the truck to roll over like a cocker spaniel. His mother, on the other hand, stated "These things happen, Neil," without managing to give it a reassuring sound. The Old Man had simply looked at him as if Neil had turned back into a nine-year-old. Except for Rosellen, he had only told any of them that the sun got in his eye and the truck flipped over when he lost sight of the edge of the road. He knew it was like saying he had been singed with a match when he had been jabbed by a red-hot (*green-hot*) branding iron. But how could he say to them he had been singled out by an eclipse?

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

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

She had begged to come with them on this salvage of the wreck and the interminable tow job ahead, and now she put her arm through Neil's, the way she figured a wife was supposed to furnish adhesive encouragement here, although she was close to bursting with the belief that yesterday would have been her real chance. She would have given anything to have been along with him when the sun struck his eye, when the truck somersaulted. By now she had thought up all different versions, how she would have raced on foot the five miles to the Austin ranch for help or stayed and cradled him in her arms while the thing in his eye went away, whatever was best for him. Never in a jillion years would she have said so to Neil, bunged up and feeling low as he was, but the same way she had been secretly a little thrilled by his inexplicable fistfight with the tough Swede that time, what had happened to him here put her imagination on full perk.

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

1 there was some angle to this that Neil wasn't owning up to, but it was an
2 odd damned piece of driving.

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

6 "Sure," Neil at last said, swallowing. "I guess."
7

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

23 Darius sipped thermos tea, hanging at the edge of a group of catskin-
24 ners greasing and fueling up their bulldozers. He had been up on the op-
25 posite side of the tunnel liner, bolting down a flange at the two o'clock
26 spot, when he spied the photographer coming. Now he waited, deliber-
27 ately out of the picture, impassively watching the others ride in the ten-
28 sion spiders.
29

30 Rosellen popped out of the Ad Building at quitting time, pretty as a bou-
31 quet, yanking her aquamarine scarf out of her coatsleeve to put it on.

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

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

34 "This isn't the previous Neil," she gave him a grin and glommed on
35 to his arm in a kidding way. "Coming up to a married woman in broad
36 daylight. Next thing, you'll be asking directions to my room."
37

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

Short
Normal

delete "in"
as per ms

November's evidence was in the wind, chilly on Rosellen's legs, teasing at Neil's hat. This was nifty, though, she decided, sashaying home arm in arm, his familiar long frame the warmest thing in Fort Peck's larder of wind. There was no fancier word needed for it. Nifty of him, too, to think to—

1
2
3
4
5

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

6
7
8

"Neil, no. Why?"

9

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

10
11
12

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

13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20

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

21

"Then, what? What, sweetheart?" she persisted. "Your accident? Is that what has you thinking like this?"

22
23

He bridled at her choice of words. What had happened, there with the truck, his eye, the green—he shook his head sharply. Beyond accident. Wasn't "accident" something that happened to you when you were about half-asking for it, like not checking your safety belt and climbing spikes before you scaled up a bridge piling? This other came down out of the fairy blue and slugged you. Tried to blind you.

24
25
26
27
28
29

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

30
31
32

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

33
34

How in the name of Holy Pete can a guy be expected to sort it all out, wondered Neil. What was it that Owen said, *To be a Tebbet*. Sisters didn't look to be an any more understandable proposition than brothers. Charlene would give just about anything to kiss off Fort Peck, Neil knew, and here Rosellen couldn't be budged from the place.

35
36
37
38
39 Short

They walked on home, not saying anything.

40 Normal

delete comma

. . .

1
 2 The camera went up in an airplane to look down on Fort Peck.
 3 Glimpses, though, were all it could manage; the dam project from over-
 4 head proved to be simply too big and sprawling and, well, unphoto-
 5 genic. The four tall gatehouses that would regulate the river into the
 6 tunnels under the dam were being erected on geography that looked rep-
 7 tilian. The curved Fort Peck townsite, in its extreme regularities, looked
 8 like sets of false teeth in a rusty basin. So it went, uncooperative earth
 9 down there. The famous photographer was considerably less than
 10 pleased, but did manage to shoot a panorama of the town of Wheeler in
 11 underexposed glowery murk, which the editors in New York would have
 12 cropped off if they had not wanted a glowering murky sky over their no-
 13 tion of Wheeler. But how bright did New York look when it was two
 14 years old?

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

19 He was on the deck of the *Gallatin*, the first dredge that had started
 20 moving fill onto the dam and thus his favorite, in a sidepool of the river
 21 where an ~~immense~~ borrow pit of dredging material had been clawed out.
 22 Exultant in every direction, he kept talking time out from everything he
 23 had to do and sneaking looks at the dam, which now stood in two dis-
 24 tinct halves, marching ramparts with a single vee of channel between
 25 them. The west side's dike section, as it was called because the fill was
 26 being banked against the low hills there, was the harder to appreciate be-
 27 cause it fit like a jigsaw into the existing geography, but that was exactly
 28 as planned. The east half of the dam, two full miles of engineered ridge
 29 with the core pool up atop it and every conceivable piece of construction
 30 equipment all over it, that eastern half was self-evidently prodigious.
 31 Owen, who had been to Gettysburg, knew that the piece of earth he and
 32 his dredges had patted into shape here was bigger than Cemetery Ridge,
 33 where entire armies fought.

34 This lovely fifth day of November, he didn't mind shutdown for
 35 1936 at all. His dredges and pipelines had moved a magnificent five mil-
 36 lion cubic yards of fill in October. They had done the same in Septem-
 37 ber. As far as Owen as fillmaster could see, they could pretty much do
 38 the same from here on, picking up in '37 at the same swift pace and pour
 Short 39 fill around on the dam like gravy onto mashed potatoes after the plug-
 formal 40 ging of the river, next summer, and keep it up right through the topping

immense
 taking

off of the dam in '38. No, never mind the airplane, and celebrating in thin air. This was where we wanted to be, this day. On the *Gallatin*. Amid the mosquito fleet of workboats, the plump booster-pump barges, the pack of power-feed pontoons, the dredgeline crews uncoupling the huge pipes from the *Gallatin* and the three other dredges, *Madison*, *Jefferson*, *Missouri*, the dredge crew here joking its way through the season's last tasks. Everywhere around him, the navy of Owen Duff.

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

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

"Why, what do they want to do?"

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

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

"Hell, I'll do it myself!"

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

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39 Short
40 Normal

he ✓
in
delete "the"

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

14
 15 The night after the election, Darius was in a mood a crocodile would
 16 have spat out.

17 He had just paid off Proxy the ten silver dollars he had bet her,
 18 against the chorus of beery jubilation roaring around them. Landslide
 19 for Roosevelt understated it, even Darius could recognize. FDR had won
 20 every state in the Union but Maine and what was that other one, not
 21 Piedmont, Vermont. Locally, if the Blue Eagle was a fair sample, Wheeler
 22 was greeting Roosevelt's re-election as though it were the civic version of
 23 the Second Coming.

24 Darius groused, "I thought you told me you do not know squat
 25 about politics."

26 Proxy gave him her wickedest smile. "I don't.

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

35 Darius passed a hand over the bottom part of his face. "I think,
 36 Proxy, that the camera is not nearly the only one who likes to lap you
 37 up—meaning myself, of course," he roughly tagged on, "and secondly,
 38 that I would like a series of drinks."

Short 39 "Don't get too plotzed to polka, later on," she decided was the best
 Jormal 40 she could do with him for now. "Listen, I have to go be dancing, this is

line 26: OK
 not to have
 close-quote mark?
 yes