





Ivan Doig  
BUCKING  
*THE* SUN

A NOVEL

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SIMON  
&  
SCHUSTER

CR / TK



To novelists who deliver the  
eloquence of the edge of the world  
rather than stammers from the psychiatrist's bin.

Roddy Doyle  
Nadine Gordimer  
Ismail Kadare  
Thomas Keneally  
Maurice Shadbolt  
Tim Winton

# BUCKING THE SUN

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## Part One

### THE SHERIFF

1938

Selfmade men always do a lopsided job of it, and the sheriff had come out conspicuously short on the capacity to sympathize with anyone but himself. No doubt ears still were burning at the Fort Peck end of the telephone connection; he'd had to tell that overgrown sap of an undersheriff he didn't give a good goddamn what the night foreman said about dangerous, get the thing fished out of the river if it meant using every last piece of equipment at the dam site. This was what he was up against all the time, the sheriff commiserated with himself during the drive from Glasgow now, toward dawn. People never behaving one bit better than they could get away with.

Die of eyelids, you could on this monotonous stretch of highway down to the dam, he reminded himself, and cranked open the window for night air to help keep him awake. He'd been up until all hours, sheriffing the town of Glasgow through the boisterous end of another week, and had barely hit bed when the telephone jangled. Catch up on sleep, the stupid saying went, but in five years as sheriff he had yet to see any evidence that the world worked that way, ever made it up to you for postponement of shuteye and all the other—

The cat-yellow shapes of bulldozers sprang huge into his headlights,

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1 causing him to blink and brake hard as he steered onto the approach to  
2 the dam. Past the bulks of earthmoving equipment parked for the night,  
3 on the rail spur stood a waiting parade of even more mammoth silhou-  
4 ettes, flatcars loaded high with boulders to be tumbled into place on  
5 the dam face. Then, like a dike as told by a massive liar, Fort Peck Dam  
6 itself.

7 The sheriff hated the sight of the ungodly pyramid of raw dirt that  
8 the dambuilders were piling across the throat of the Missouri River. He  
9 hated Franklin Delano Roosevelt for this project and its swarm of con-  
10 struction towns, if that's what you wanted to call such collections of  
11 shacks, and the whole shovelhead bunch down here who had to cut loose  
12 like rangutangs every Saturday night. Damn this New Deal crap. Wasn't  
13 there any better way to run a country than to make jobs out of thin air,  
14 handing out wage money like it was cigarette papers? The sheriff hated  
15 having to call himself a Democrat, though he knew that a person could-  
16 n't even get elected to town idiot these days without that tag.

17 By now he was nearing the floodlights, could see the workbarge with  
18 its crane arm poised and the cluster of men at the truck ramp where it  
19 must have happened. He crept the patrol car along the crest of the dam  
20 and when he parked made it a point not only to leave the car in gear but  
21 set the emergency brake, hard as he could yank it. Before heading down  
22 to the group at the water's edge, though, the sheriff stopped and took a  
23 long look east across the river, past last month's trouble here, to the  
24 bankside promontories of bluffs and badland ravines emerging in dawn  
25 outline like scissored shadows.

26 One thing Sheriff Carl Kinnick loved was his jurisdiction, his piece  
27 of the earth to tend justice on. The upper Missouri River country, or  
28 anyway the seventy-five-mile series of bends of the river that Valley  
29 County extended north from, like a castle footed into a seacoast. Kin-  
30 nick's own climb up through life began beside this river, familyless boy  
31 mucking out barns and calcimining chickenhouses, working up to the  
32 haying jobs, the alfalfa-seed harvest jobs, up and up, squirreling every  
33 loose cent away until he had enough to make his start in Glasgow, the  
34 county seat. After that there was no stopping him, of course, but he'd al-  
35 ways felt—still did feel—somehow that first lift into career, into politics  
36 (or as he preferred to think of it, law enforcement) had come from the  
37 spell of the river. As far as Carl Kinnick was concerned, the Missouri  
38 with its broad fast flow and its royal-green cottonwood groves and the  
39 deep bottomland that made the best farming in eastern Montana, the  
40 Missouri had been next thing to perfect the way it was. Until this Fort

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Peck project. Until this giant federal dike to put people to work with the excuse (*benefit*, the Roosevelters were always calling it) of stopping floods in the states downriver all the way to St. Louis. The sheriff believed it would be fitting justice if everything and everybody downriver dried up and blew away.

Duty. He picked his way from boulder to boulder down the riprap face of the dam to the cluster of men waiting for him. He nodded only to the night foreman. The owl-shift workers all had turned to watch him arrive, the bibs of their overalls fencing him in. The sheriff was the shortest by half a head in any group, and how he felt about that can be guessed.

Singling out his undersheriff, without preamble he asked what was delaying matters.

"We've about got it up, Carl, honest. The driver had a hell of a time with it in the dark down there."

The sheriff bit back an impulse to tell the big scissorbill that excuses are like buttocks, everybody's got one. Instead he folded his arms and rocked back and forth on the small heels of his boots while watching the crane at work. Its cable into the water was being reeled in by the operator on the barge, the steel strand making a steady low hum through the intricate pulleys of the boom arm, until suddenly—a lot quicker than the sheriff expected, actually—a wallowing sound came and then the splash of water falling away as the surface was broken upward by a Ford truck.

*I've seen some lulus since I got myself elected to this badge*, Kinnick thought as the vehicle dangled from the cable hooked around its front axle, water pouring from the wide cab and box as if a metal trough had been yanked straight up by one end. *But I never had to put up with them wrecking themselves on the bottom of the river before.*

For a moment he hoped the Ford's cab would be empty, then canceled that at the prospect of having to drag this river, lake, whatever this stretch of the Missouri amounted to any more, for a body. Maybe, just maybe there hadn't even been anybody in the truck when the thing rolled down the ramp and plunged into the water about an hour after midnight. The section watchman swore he hadn't heard a motor running, only the splash; then when he raced over, he'd seen only what appeared to him in the lack of light to be the cab and boxboards of a truck going under. Maybe this was only a case of a poorly parked rig that coasted loose somehow. But if there wasn't some brand of human misbehavior involved in a truck visiting the bottom of the Missouri on a

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1 Saturday night at Fort Peck, Sheriff Kinnick was going to be plentifully  
2 surprised.

3 The Ford ton-and-a-half twisted slowly in the air like cargo coming  
4 ashore. When the crane operator lowered the load as far up the face of  
5 the dam as the boom arm would reach, the men clambered to it and the  
6 undersheriff, at Kinnick's impatient nod, wrenched the driver's-side door  
7 open.

8 The body question was settled instantly. Plural.

9 The woman lay stretched behind the steering wheel but turned side-  
10 ways, facing down toward where the man had slid lengthwise off the  
11 seat, headfirst under the dashboard. Both were naked.

12 Without taking his eyes off the dead pair, the sheriff put out an  
13 arm and, even though he knew the gesture was useless, waved back the  
14 gawking damworkers behind him. This was the moment he always  
15 searched for in a case. The instant of discovery. Any witness's first view  
16 of what had happened, right there was where you wanted to start. Now  
17 that he himself was essentially the first onto the scene of whatever  
18 this was, though, the sheriff was more than a bit uncomfortable at the  
19 lack of exactitude here. An entire circus of circumstance, here before his  
20 eyes, yet somehow not as substantial as he would have liked. As if the  
21 bunch behind him with their necks out like an ostrich farm were sop-  
22 ping up, siphoning away what ought to be clearer to him than it was  
23 proving to be.

24 Kinnick got a grip on himself and tried to fix in mind every detail of  
25 how the couple lay in the truck cab, although the woman's bare white  
26 hip, the whole pale line of her body and the half-hidden side of her face,  
27 kept dominating his attention. No blood, no wounds, at least. He forced  
28 himself to balance on the running board and stick his head and shoul-  
29 ders just enough into the cab to reach across the woman to the gearshift.  
30 It proved to be in neutral, which made him uneasy; with these two peo-  
31 ple occupied with each other as they'd been, how the hell had something  
32 like that happened? He knew what he was going to find next, when he  
33 tried the emergency brake lever and it of course didn't hold at all; there  
34 wasn't a truck in Montana with any wear on it that didn't have the emer-  
35 gency brake burned out. Which made the damned gearshift situation  
36 even more—

37 A cloud of colors at the corner of his right eye startled him, making  
38 him jerk his head that direction. The wet wads of their clothing, plas-  
39 tered to the truck's rear window. The lighter wads must be their un-  
40 derwear.

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"You know them or don't you?" the sheriff demanded over his shoulder, annoyed that he had to drag it out of the undersheriff.

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Even then the undersheriff didn't say the names of the drowned two until Kinnick backed out of the cab and wheeled on him with a hot stare. The last name, Duff, the sheriff recognized from some trouble report or another—quite a family of them on the dam crew, a tribe of brothers and their wives, and a father, was it, into the bargain?—but the first names meant nothing to him. That was what an undersheriff was for.

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Thankful isn't the word in circumstances such as this, but Kinnick at least felt relieved that the undersheriff had named them off as a couple and that these river deaths shaped up as an accident, pure and plain. Terrible thing, but people were asking for it with behavior of the kind these two were up to out here in the middle of the—

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The undersheriff still was staring into the truck, rubbing a corner of his mouth with a fist the size of a sledgehammer head, as if trying to make up his mind about something. The damworkers were overly quiet, too.

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"What's the matter now?" Kinnick burst out. The little sheriff prided himself on always staying a few steps ahead in the mental department, but somehow he wasn't up with the expressions on all the rest of the men around the truck. *What's got them spooked?* It wasn't as if this dam had never killed anybody before. Naked and dead out in public wasn't good, nobody could say that. But you'd think it would take more than that to scandalize damworkers. Funny for a husband and wife to be out here going at it in a truck when they had a home of any kind, that was true. But Saturday night and all, who knew what these Fort Peckers were apt to get up to? So what could be out of kilter, if this couple was—"They're married people, right? You said their names are both Duff."

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The undersheriff hesitated. He hated dealing with this fierce doll of a man his job depended on.

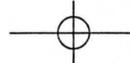
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"That's the thing about this, Carl," the undersheriff said at last. "Married, you bet. Only not to each other."

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## Part Two

### THE MISSOURI

1933—1934

Siderius always kept to the same spiel, had it down slick by now: 1  
 “Here on official business . . . kind of a hard thing, I know, but 2  
 there’s no getting around it . . . at least make you a fair offer.” Saying it 3  
 the same helped him, whether or not it did any good for these bottom- 4  
 land honyockers. But he hadn’t come up against one like this before. The 5  
 skinny man in worst workclothes was traipsing out of his riverside field 6  
 of alfalfa toward Siderius’s car in a zigzag route, taking his sweet time 7  
 about it. With each step he put his foot down in firm aim, the way a kid 8  
 playing hopscotch does. Then plotch down the other foot some other di- 9  
 rection. As he crazy-gaited closer, it dawned on Siderius that the man 10  
 was being sure to step on a grasshopper with every stride. The unmiti- 11  
 gated gall of the guy in figuring that he could stomp on enough 12  
 grasshoppers to make any difference made Siderius mad, and when the 13  
 hay farmer didn’t so much as offer a handshake, just stood off at the 14  
 fenceline to his precious field and looked him up and down, that did it: 15  
 caused Siderius to jab the nasty part right out. 16  
 “Don’t know if you’d’ve heard yet, but they’re going to be putting up 17  
 a big dam over by Glasgow.” 18  
 “What’s that to you and me and this fencepost?” 19

1 "This, this'll be under the lake."

2 "That's daft," the lofty man by the fence dismissed Siderius's asser-  
3 tion. "The Glasgow country," Hugh Duff spoke it a way Siderius had  
4 never heard, *Glazgeh*, "is a full hundred miles from here."

5 "More like a hundred and a quarter," Siderius let him know. "I just  
6 drove it."

7 "There you are, then." Still wearing his standoff expression, thin-  
8 faced, thin in every part of him, Hugh draped an arm on the fencepost,  
9 glanced back at his field of alfalfa and said as if in private amusement,  
10 "The blessed damn nature of farming is that we can always do with a  
11 dab more moisture than what we get. But we don't need it over our  
12 heads."

13 Siderius imitated Hugh Duff's measuring gaze across the field, pulled  
14 to the sight in spite of himself. The month of June was proving hard in  
15 this job, the early green height of summer and the work that went into  
16 these farms, the river-rich fields at their most promising: this time of  
17 year's habitual feel of crop and reward impended all along the bottom-  
18 land. Add on that this brisk section of the river, so far upstream here  
19 where the Missouri forgot its wandering and fed through timbered bluffs  
20 in a straightforward course, this tucked-away cleft stretch of the river was  
21 an undeniably beauty, olive in hue and jeweled with sparkles from the  
22 sun at every ripple. Here and there stood pale attendant cliffs, the foun-  
23 dations of rock and time showing through, while the river trailed fertile  
24 sleeves along its steady channel. And put on top of the natural basis here  
25 that although this farmer was a lank specimen, his farm was not skin-  
26 and-bones. You could practically count like tree rings the year-by-year  
27 progress since this piece of land was homesteaded by these Duffs. That  
28 fence was taut as piano wire, the house and outbuildings which Siderius  
29 had driven down past to reach this bottomslope field showed every sign  
30 of decent care, and the field itself, a quarter-mile-long porch of luscious  
31 soil cupped right up against the sunny side of the river, was contour-  
32 sown in a way that ought to yield a junior fortune in seed alfalfa. Ought  
33 to. By now Siderius was staring with dread, past the fenceline figure, on  
34 across the green baize field to the rattletrap Model A pickup there and  
35 the trio of people at the job, the—

36 Siderius made himself not think any further in that direction and go  
37 back to work on the snippy farmer instead.

38 "Mister, I'm here to tell you, the dam is going to back up water this  
39 goddamn far. And it's my job to make you a price for your land."

40 Hugh went up and down Siderius with his eyes again, his expression

saying he didn't care for any of what he saw. He cocked his head ever so slightly to the left. "That's a refrain we haven't heard, recent years. What, now that the banks have been on holiday, they can sneak you the backing to buy us out?"

"If you'd had your ears on, you'd know I already told you—" Halfway into his hot retort Siderius remembered he hadn't started this off as usual: *Backtrack, Chick*, he warned himself. *Sometimes to get ahead in this you need to*. Resorting to the recitation, he started in: "First off, I'm here on official—"

The dreaded smell was coming up strong from the field now on a shift of the wind: Siderius had to stop and gulp. The gulp was not a good idea. He had wondered how long his stomach could hold out, and the banana-oil odor, sweetly rotten, of what the people at the pickup were working at was finally too much. As he went sick he saw that the farmer was regarding him with more of that private amusement. Siderius put up the palm of his right hand toward the man, as if in a *halt* motion or the taking of an oath, marched behind his car and threw up. When he was thoroughly done retching and then spitting out as much of the taste as he could, he stayed hunched there with his hands on his knees, the only sound now the hail-like ping of grasshoppers hitting against all sides of the car. *This is your last one, Chick*, he had to rally himself, *the farthest up on their dam map of everything they're going to drown. Finish this one and you're done with these poor eaten-out bastards*. He straightened, mopped his mouth with his handkerchief, then went back to the waiting business at the fenceline.

"I'm not out here landhawking," Siderius this time told Hugh Duff, as if deathly tired of it all. "The government, the U.S. of A. government hired me on to do this."

From the far end of the field, the other three Duffs watched. The two of them who were mixing the next fifty-gallon batch of grasshopper poison wondered out loud.

"That's a government Chevy," Neil pronounced, and Bruce nodded as if he'd known so. They were brothers, you could practically see that in the crimp of their hats. "Must be quite the job, whatever it is," Neil pondered. "Suppose they actually pay that guy to drive around in that?"

"Who it is," came Bruce's rendition, "is Herbert Heifer Hoover, out selling the cure for grasshoppers, and the Old Man's trying to jimmy the price down a little." Inch-long hoppers batted against the pantlegs of both young men as Bruce bucketed riverwater into the mixture of sawdust,

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1 poison, and attractant while Neil stirred with a long-handled shovel.  
2 "And he better hurry up," Bruce concluded.

3 "Whoa, the stuff feels ready," Neil called off Bruce's bucket-trips to  
4 the river. "Careful how we pour, okay?"

5 Bruce asked with a bit of a smirk: "Speaking of careful, how's your  
6 love bite?"

7 "Smarts a little, is all," Neil replied shortly. A burn the size of a dime  
8 was eating at his shin where the top of his sock would normally reach.  
9 Yesterday the grasshopper bait somehow had splashed once and soaked  
10 through his pantleg, the poison inflicting itself there overnight. Nothing  
11 serious, Neil figured, although you probably would not want to make a  
12 habit of spilling arsenic on yourself.

13 "You want to know what I really like about this?" Bruce provided as  
14 they poured the mushlike mix into the spreading machine. "All this free  
15 banana-oil cologne. Women'll be able to smell us a mile off."

16 As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew he'd laid him-  
17 self open. All Neil would have to put in on him was something like *In*  
18 *your case, what's new about that much stinkum?* Nothing came, though.  
19 Bruce checked across the barrel of mix, saw the little grin on Neil, and  
20 realized with a flush that the silence had been the retort. It was as good  
21 as said, and that was good enough for Neil.

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23 *There. This is what it takes*, the woman waiting behind the steering wheel  
24 of the pickup, watching the fenceline tableau of Hugh and the govern-  
25 ment man, told herself fixedly. There were times, and this was one, when  
26 Hugh had to be absolutely hit between the eyes with a fact. For a mo-  
27 ment, seeing the car come, she had wished the news could deliver itself  
28 some more gentle way; then decided no, she didn't either. Let it get over  
29 with all at once, bango.

30 For waging war against grasshoppers, Meg Duff wore one of Hugh's  
31 old workshirts, bib overalls, and a scarf tightly tied, despite the heat in  
32 the pickup cab, to keep stray hoppers from flying into her hair. Under  
33 each edge of the bib of her overalls a neat roundness showed, as if she  
34 had an apple in each shirt pocket; with her hair tucked up under the  
35 scarf, only the little vee of origin at the back of her neck showed the in-  
36 teresting color of honeyed brunette. Her skin was not the sort that sun  
37 and wind are kind to. Her eyes, though, were the memorable blue of a  
38 Wedgwood piece (the sons produced by her and Hugh were copies of his  
Short 39 tall spare Duff build, but their eyes and hair color fetchingly took after  
Normal 40 her side) and she had a little nock in her chin, a tiny divided place like a

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Break into  
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mark of character. Long years of practice at holding herself together, otherwise known as marriage to Hugh, had made Meg her own best judge, and this minute of back and forth in herself bothered her, even scared her some. *Don't be afraid of being scared*, she bolstered herself. *This is a family that can use some sense scared into it just now.*

"Ready again, Mother," Neil came up to the cab of the pickup and told her. "Let's murder some more bugs."

"We're becoming all too practiced at it," she took the moment to tell him, "but still, Neil, be careful how you go." Her edge-of-the-bed voice, more deep and dramatic than a woman's generally reached, had the assumption that it could steer these sons of her, past casual poison as handily as it had carried them through every childhood ailment.

She put the pickup in low gear and began driving at as much speed as possible along the outside edge of the alfalfa. As she did, Bruce piled into the back of the pickup to mind the five-gallon cans of extra water, and Neil stood virtually beside her on the running board of the driver's side, an arm up inside the cab to hold him in place, and watched behind to see that the spreader was working. In sporadic sweeps, the bait spewed out the way grain falls when scattered by the panful: the watered sawdust mush, the amyl acetate "banana oil" mixed in to act as attractant, the adhering arsenic.

In the field of alfalfa beside the swath of poison, the grasshoppers amounted to a creeping acid. When the pickup wasn't running, they could be heard making a meal of everything that grew; that undersound of millions of miniscule mouths each biting through a leaf, a stem, a stalk.

Every year the same surprise, Meg silently cried the thought across the infested field to Hugh. This had been a wet year until spring seemed fully launched, no hint of the hot dry previous turns of weather that made grasshopper eggs hatch in profusion. But then came rainless days for the last of April and then May and then on into June, and the clouds of grasshoppers rose from the ground one more time. Stubborn against the evidence as usual, Hugh still maintained that the grasshoppers could not keep on being annual, just as he'd kept saying the price for a coveted seed crop such as alfalfa could not continue going down and down. *Out we climbed, and found ourselves in deeper.* The ragged chant of riddle from their schooldays in Inverley pertained exactly to this situation of them and the place, Meg was convinced, although Hugh would never admit so. Nor let himself see ahead in the family, for that matter. Of these two sons of theirs here working themselves blue in the face against

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1 grasshoppers, Neil might have stayed with the place, but Bruce already  
 2 was as good as gone. What seemed to be coming over him were runaway  
 3 impulses, in more ways than one. Men never pay attention to how their  
 4 voices carry, so Meg had heard the news through her open kitchen win-  
 5 dow one haul day. Bruce had taken a pickup load all the way over to the  
 6 seed warehouse in Glasgow—the offer price was pennies better there—  
 7 and when he drove back into the yard just before supper, there came the  
 8 slam of the pickup door, Neil's offhand asking of "How was town?" and  
 9 Bruce's proud report, "Got laid and everything."

10 In certain circumstances you would just as soon not know the be-  
 11 havior of your offspring, Meg reflected at the time, if for no other reason  
 12 than it sets up unwelcome comparisons. For all her surge of motherly  
 13 shock at Bruce, part of her already could not help but be amused by that  
 14 *everything*. It played in her mind, stayed with her like a teasing tune as  
 15 she contemplated Hugh and herself and their long tug-of-war over what  
 16 was love and what was lure and where lay the confusing ground between.  
 17 Did the everything of her and Hugh have to forever include the portion  
 18 she would sometimes like to bat out of him with a broom, as well as the  
 19 share of him that she would not have traded for all the silk in China?

20 By now not only was the afternoon boiling, so was the engine of the  
 21 pickup. Roaring along in low gear was necessary for spreading the  
 22 grasshopper bait as thoroughly as possible, but it meant she had to stop  
 23 often for Bruce and Neil to hop down and put water in the radiator. This  
 24 was everybody's least favorite chore, unscrewing the cap of a hot radiator.  
 25 All they could do, though, was for one or the other to wrap his right arm  
 26 in a coat and with a gloved hand cautiously loosen that cap a little at a  
 27 time until the pressure, and the chance of being scalded, went down.  
 28 Watching, Meg always held her breath a little.

29 Not today. She never even looked as Bruce fought the radiator cap  
 30 and compared it to the temperature of the doorknob of Hell. Across the  
 31 field, she saw Hugh drop his arm from that affectionate rest on the  
 32 fencepost, saw him stand differently.

33  
 34 "Let me get my feet under me, a minute," Hugh was saying slowly, there  
 35 at the fenceline. "Land like this, taken for a dam halfway across Montana  
 36 from here? You're sure you're on the reach of the river that you think you  
 37 are, are you?"

38 Siderius compressed his lips and simply nodded yes.

39 "I can't believe you," Hugh spoke as if telling him the time of day. "A  
 40 dam that'd—why would they do such a thing?"

"It's kind of beyond me," Siderius was forced to admit, "but they're about gonna do it." In spite of himself he shook his head at what was even harder to swallow. "With dirt, no less."

Hugh Duff's face changed radically.

Watching the man, Siderius warily got back to the part he knew by heart, "appraisal involved . . . so-much per acre . . . fair deal as possible but . . ." But none of it made a dent in the stricken look that had come over the farmer. The growl of the pickup from the far side of the field, the yelps of the two young men whenever the spreader clogged or the radiator spewed, all seemed as lost on this man Duff as Siderius's spiel.

Perplexed, Siderius decided to jump ahead of himself again and offer: "You'll get preference."

"What's that supposed to mean, preference?"

"In getting hired. At the dam project."

Hugh let out an alarming chuckle, a sound of mirth gone dry and bitter. "Man, do I look anything like a skilled hand at that sort of work?"

*You look about like any other sad sonofabitch of a honyocker who needs a job, of whatever the hell kind,* Siderius thought. *About like me.*

"Listen," he told the other. "I don't know if this helps any at all, but I been through this myself. The dam's going in right on top of me. I had a hundred and sixty acres of the best seed alfalfa you ever saw, just this side of Fort Peck."

Duff didn't even blink at him.

Siderius shrugged. "At least there's jobs with the dam, we anyway ought to be thankful for that."

Hugh studied him bleakly. "And you're right there at the head of the sugar-tit line. No wonder you puke at the sight of yourself."

"I'm at least doing something besides the grasshopper quickstep," Siderius shot back. "How many summers now you been walking that way? Three? Four?"

"I'm stepping on my own ground," Hugh said in the coldest tone Siderius had ever heard, "not on the necks of my neighbors."

Afterward, in the years of the Fort Peck Dam project, Chick Siderius stayed leery of the Duffs. By then he couldn't see that they had any gripe coming, they'd been paid the exact damn same for their land as everybody else. And they did end up with jobs, the whole slew of them, didn't they? But even when Siderius spotted one of their women—good God, their women—he would cross the street to stay out of their way. He never forgot how treacherous the exchange with that old bearcat

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1 Hugh suddenly turned, there at the fenceline, and the final flub he'd  
2 made in trying to calm things down. All Siderius had said was:

3 "At least you and the wife aren't up against this alone. If I know fam-  
4 ily resemblance when I see it, you've got a couple of sons helping you  
5 out, right?"

6 "We've three," Hugh Duff had given the government hiree that ter-  
7 rible corroded chuckle again, then swung around as if to hurl the next  
8 sentence across the field. *Haven't we, Meg.* When it came, the words  
9 practically spat from him. "But one's a dirt dam engineer."

10  
11 The sheriff later dug up the fact that, back there in '33 when the alfalfa  
12 farmers were being cleared out of the Missouri River bottomland and in  
13 turn hired to clear the dam site of brush and cottonwoods, the name  
14 *Duff* was already part of the Fort Peck vocabulary. It gave Sheriff Kinnick  
15 something more to think about, that this dogfight bunch amounted to,  
16 what would you have to say, the first family of the dam? As well as being  
17 the authors of that truck in the river. Where the Duff record was con-  
18 cerned, the sheriff spend <sup>F</sup>immense time trying to get his mind around 7  
19 the size of all the contradiction. But then, he would remind himself bit-  
20 terly, that was always the thing about the cockeyed dam. From day one,  
21 everything about Fort Peck was going to set a record.

22  
23 *W. abutment: layer cake—*

24 *glac'l till*

25 *on*

26 *alluv'l silt etc.*

27 *on*

28 *Bearpaw shale*

29  
30 The Eversharp pencil paused on the pocket notebook, then rapidly  
31 jotted down:

32 *E. abutment: badlands—*

33 *B'paw shale up the gigi*

34  
35 "So what do you think of her, Duff? You ready to make mudpies with  
36 Miz Missouri?"

37 Day one at Fort Peck for Owen Duff had come in early May of 1933,  
38 in company with a handful of other first hires specked across a bald knob  
39 on the bluff overlooking one particular crimp of the river.

40 The wind was up, naturally, and Owen could have kicked himself for

not wearing his wool-collared short mackinaw instead of trying to appear climateproof for the Army Corps of Engineers big shots. The other civilian engineers looked equally chilblained, but Owen alone had grown up in this northern Montana wind, was so habited to it that even in the High Line Hotel in Glasgow he would catch himself slanting ahead into a braced position when he felt the start of a breeze through an opened window.

*Never mind with the weather,* he instructed himself. *This is the damndest chance anybody ever dreamed of. Charlene will see. This is something we'll be able to hang our hats on for the rest of our lives.* Tucking his notebook and mechanical pencil into their accustomed pocket of his garbardine jacket, he turned and answered Sangster:

"I'm ready for any sonofabitching thing that constitutes construction."

"Uh huh," the shorter man agreed. "If the railroad cut back any more, I'd have had to figure out how to teach trains to jump creeks."

From Owen's own line of engineering there was a similar stock of standard wisecracks he could have chosen from, about trying to underbid gophers on tunnelwork, or the difficulty Montana dogs were having in burying their bones with so many unemployed dirt engineers eager to do it for them, and so on; but he didn't trouble to. Not now, not here, not worth interrupting this chance at absolutely kicking aside the Depression and its lame jokes. Instead, arms crossed and hands tucked in his armpits for warmth's sake, he walked the same few strides back and forth as he kept studying the course of the Missouri below. Owen was an even six feet tall, and thin except in the head. There, a strong forehead and Brunette eyebrows and china-blue eyes oversaw a surprisingly wide-cut mouth where the usual expression was partly quizzical, partly provocative. When that mouth was set seriously, as now, he looked a lot like a bothered Will Rogers.

"Enjoying the sights of Fort Peck?" he abstractedly asked Sangster. There was no fort to Fort Peck anymore, or for that matter, anything except the matching benches of land and the flat floor of the river valley that had beckoned up from the Corps of Engineers map as a dam site. A stockaded trading post briefly propped up by sternwheel steamboat traffic, the last of Fort Peck had been swept off its ledge at the base of this bluff by high water sometime in the 1890s; the name, though, had the lives of a cat, attaching itself to the nearby Indian reservation and now to the dam notion that had these engineers by the eyes. In this first hundred days of the New Deal, as the Roosevelt administration wheeled laws,

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1 funds, money, and projects into being, the senior senator from Mon-  
2 tana—fortuitously named Wheeler—had been right at the head of the  
3 line for a dam and ten thousand jobs here.

4 Owen and Sangster and the other fresh civvie engineers had been  
5 briefed half to death about this project already, but a good long stare at  
6 this remote stretch of the Missouri had things to tell them, too. The first  
7 of which was, on this river that scrawled from west to east for hundreds  
8 of miles across upper Montana, the axis of the dam was not going to be  
9 crosswise to that, north-south as every fiber of logic said it had to be. The  
10 river hadn't heard the logic, and as if bored with the oxbow bends it had  
11 been scrolling all the way across Valley County, here it shot out of its  
12 writhings with a notion to keep going north. It was the midpoint of this  
13 northward veer, the Fort Peck speck of geography, that presented the  
14 dam site, a narrower and higher set of benchlands than where the lazy  
15 curves were.

16 A west-east dam on a west-east river; you just had to adjust. Owen  
17 Duff thought ahead to more than a thousand days of sunrise at one end  
18 of the dam, sunset at the other, sun in the eyes of his dredgeline crews; it  
19 would make a difference in where he laid those lines.

20 "Bastardish big open country out here, isn't it," Sangster said. "Any-  
21 thing between here and the North Pole, come winter?"

22 "What," Owen now grinned fully and joined the formula of weather  
23 complaint, "you want the wind cut with something besides a barbwire  
24 fence?"

25 "Any more of a breeze than this," Sangster squinted against the per-  
26 sistent blast of air, "and this is one sissybritches engineer you'll find hun-  
27 kered down behind those cottonwoods."

28 "That's all going to go, first thing."

29 "The whole works?" Sangster glanced at him, then back to the wind-  
30 ing thicket of cottonwood trees and diamond willows that hedged the  
31 west riverbank of the Missouri as far as could be seen.

32 "Mmhmm. Clearing out the bottomland will help with the dredg-  
33 ing, the idea is. Besides causing gobs of jobs." Owen was thinking out  
34 loud now. "If I was you, I'd make sure that cottonwood doesn't get con-  
35 signed toward your bridging. These Corps guys—they know how to  
36 push a project until it squeals, but we don't want them doing it through  
37 shortcuts in procurement."

38 "Jesus no," said Sangster, realizing that Owen was seeing around  
39 bends besides the river's. "I'll goose up my specifications on all bridge  
40 timbering."

BUCKING THE SUN

"Wouldn't hurt," Owen approved, but was already back to gazing at the bluff across the river, the distant shoulder that his dam would rest against. His own tall order of engineering, so big that it needed imagining in segments.

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Think of a mile, and pile its entire length with a pyramid of earth as high as a twenty-five-story building.

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Think of another mile, do the fill again.

7

Think of a third such distance, same.

8

A fourth and final mile, equally level.

9

The mountainous amount of gravel needed for the downstream toe of a dam that size? Bring it in from the big pit at Cole, eighty miles. That wasn't so hot, Owen thought. The glacier-size quantity of rock for the upstream face? Bring it in from the Snake Butte quarry, one hundred and fifty miles. That definitely wasn't so hot. But hauling the staggering tonnages of gravel and stone into here from Hell and gone was not Owen Duff's given job. Heaping those materials correctly once they got here, along with more than a hundred million cubic yards of material dredged from these river banks down there, into a firm gentle berm across those four miles, pervious edges married onto impervious core; handling the Fort Peck earthfill, the biggest earthen dam ever tried: that was going to be his.

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*definitely*

Soon came a shout from the top of the knob, time to be briefed by the colonel. The Corps seemed to be big on briefing, all right. "Guess we better get used to it," Sangster said, "or marry money."

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23  
24

He stopped, embarrassed. He had let that out before remembering that Owen Duff was a married man.

25  
26

Owen threw him a look, but with it a fleeting expression that Sangster didn't know how to construe.

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28

"Sometimes it can be worth it," Owen told him, "even if only small change is involved."

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Charlene Duff wondered how it had come to this, that she all of a sudden was jealous of a mound of dirt.

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The Fort Peck Dam occupied Owen from the minute he heard the rumor of it. The next thing Charlene knew, the job there had plucked him away and left her rattling around the apartment in Bozeman. Housing would be flung up at Fort Peck as soon as possible, Owen kept telling her, but meanwhile he and the other engineering whizzes were hoteling it in Glasgow and she had to make do here alone. She no longer like the notion of alone. Not that she liked the sound of Fort Peck much better.

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1           *My dearest*, she began this night's letter to him, and thought, I should  
2 probably quit right there. Just write that over and over fifty or a hundred  
3 times, like a kid who has to stay after school.

4           *So glad to recv yours of last wk*, she jotted in store hand, and hurried  
5 the ink on through disposal of the weather and Bozeman's onslaught of  
6 collegians again, now that September was here. Then she and the foun-  
7 tain pen took their time, careful with the next:

8           *It is just about more than I can stand, being apart from you this way,*  
9 *sweet one. You know the song—the "Miss" in "Missouri") that's me missing*  
10 *you. Oh Owen, I wish you were here right now and—well, you know. But*  
11 *next to that, what I wanted to tell you is that I met with Prof Z downtown*  
12 *today, and he told me there is going to be a "Bozeman bunch" hired for the 2*  
13 *Columbia River dams, Grand Coulee and I forget the other one. I wonder,*  
14 *darling? If you could latch on at one of those, maybe we wouldn't have to*  
15 *wait and wait for Fort Peck to ever put a roof over our heads. . . .*

16           The Missouri River had maundered through enough of Charlene's  
17 life already. Her father had been the barber in the little riverside town of  
18 Toston, a place with none too many male heads to start with, and those  
19 there were in the habit of a haircut only about every sixth Saturday  
20 night. Her mother passed her days trying to pretend there was enough  
21 clientele among Toston's females, even fewer and more set in their hairdo  
22 habits, to justify her beauty parlor in a partitioned-off area of the barber  
23 shop. Both of these scissor merchants devoted their spare time, a nearly  
24 unlimited amount, to trying to catch every fish in the Missouri River. In  
25 short, with these parents who had about as much enterprise as pigeons,  
26 Charlene Tebbet spent her Missouri River girlhood sweeping up hair  
27 and raising herself and her younger sister, Rosellen.

28           The Missouri was only twenty miles old at Toston but already five  
29 hundred feet wide and so implacably smooth you knew it had to be  
30 deep, drownable deep. When the Tebbet sisters played along the river-  
31 bank, beneath the flight paths of fish hawks and just above the swim of  
32 muskrats, Charlene simply assumed that the responsibility for not falling  
33 in was totally hers, for both of them. Not that Rosellen was a careless or  
34 reckless child, but she could be mischievous enough that Charlene felt  
35 obliged to order her around for her own good. Rosellen took the bossing  
36 without open warfare over it, but by the time Charlene packed up for a  
37 store job in Bozeman and Rosellen was about to start high school, they  
38 both knew that the older-sister superintendence had run its course.

39           *. . . I haven't had a line from Rosellen since Christmas, the little rip.*  
40 *Will write her anyway as soon as I finish this to you. . . .*

Short  
Normal

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up

zones

Bozeman put Toston so far into the shade as to constitute total eclipse. The stimulation of city traffic, two moviehouses, the Big Dipper ice cream parlor, a room to herself at the Gallatin Riverview boarding-house, the freshness of working as a counter clerk in Cunningham's Department Store, the other young women on the staff full of jokes and pranks and sass and gossip, all this and an actual salary, too—Charlene giggled more her first month in Bozeman than she had in all her previous life.

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And all of a sudden, Owen.

9

Always after, Owen maintained that if he had been content to count on his fingers instead of replacing the slide rule he had lost, he would still be a free man. He was on his way across town from campus to another of his odd jobs, night minder in a chick hatchery, when he swerved by Cunningham's for a new slide rule. He found the one he wanted and kept fiddling with it, to get used to how the middle tabular part slid, on his way to the counter. When he looked up, he saw that the clerk had coal-black hair and dark, dark eyes and carried herself like one of those hieroglyphic princesses, head tautly up, shoulders just so. Charlene, in turn, saw a strong-featured face with an engaging quizzical underline to it in the wide cut of the mouth.

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While she wrote up a sales slip for the slide rule, Owen dug a couple of silver dollars out of his pocket. Charlene took the dollars and dropped them clinking into the canister. She yanked the dispatch cord and the canister whizzed up to the balcony office where Priscilla or Janie would make change.

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This was the part that gave her the fidgets, the waiting. She always saved to now to ask, "Would you like that wrapped?"

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Owen considered. "No sense to. I'll be using it right away."

28

"Oh." Charlene fussed with the sales slip pad. What was keeping the change canister? She managed to glance over the customer's shoulder to the balcony. Pandemonium up there in honor of the tall good-looking man. Priscilla was out from behind her desk and doing a little Charleston shimmy while biting her lip suggestively. Janie, worse, was not even counting out the change yet but just leaning over the rail lapping him up with her eyes. If the customer turned around . . .

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"What does a slide rule do?"

36

He looked at her in surprise. "Just about anything. Multiplication. Long division. Logarithms."

37  
38

"You're at the college, then."

39 Short

"You bet. Engineering."

40 Normal

~~(?) =~~ (MO)

1 "That sounds ambitious," Charlene said, trying to stare the pair on  
2 the balcony into civil behavior. "I can't imagine what's holding up your  
3 change."

4 Owen laughed, an interesting grin staying on after. "Could be they're  
5 testing the silver in those dollars."

6 *Could be they're going to get their hair roots pulled out when I get hold*  
7 *of them, too,* Charlene thought to herself, just as she heard a descending  
8 *zing.* "Oh, here it comes. At last."

9 When Charlene opened the canister she saw a scrap of memo paper  
10 along with the sales slip and the change. Shielding it with her body, she  
11 peeked down and read:

12 *He's a dish! Don't let him get away!*

13 Charlene crumpled the note, turned and placed the change in the man's  
14 broad palm. Then she took a breath, uncrumpled the note and pushed it  
15 across the counter to him.  
16

17  
18 What compels love?

19 Cross-examine the Charlene of 1933 and she would never tell you  
20 that Owen's blue blaze of drive, there in his eyes and on inward to his  
21 brain and gut and backbone, had singly been enough to make him com-  
22 pulsory for her, five years back; wasn't that the likelihood, though?

23 Try the question on the Owen of then and he would swallow his  
24 tongue rather than count off such small attractions as the way Charlene's  
25 hair topped out perfectly for his cheekbone to rest against when they  
26 danced and so on; but add up enough of those and don't they become  
27 compulsion?

28 Sharing a close call can clinch the matter, too, as on the long-since  
29 night when the pair of them were in the college's hydraulics laboratory  
30 where sometimes Owen worked late on his thesis research and some-  
31 times they necked. The night watchman could be heard on his way,  
32 so Charlene, her dress mildly askew, hid down behind the nozzle cup-  
33 board. Flinging open the lab door, an aroma of moonshine brew ema-  
34 nating in with him, the watchman appraised Owen at his flow sink and  
35 recited:

36  
37 *The heights by great men reached and kept*  
38 *were not attained by sudden flight;*  
39 *but they while their companions slept*  
40 *were toiling upward in the night.*

Then slammed the door and went away.

Charlene and Owen laughed into their hands until they were sure the watchman was out of range, then really broke loose. They stayed in this silly spasm to the point of hiccups, until Owen managed to catch his breath, straighten up soberly, and say to her:

"What if?"

Her heart dropped. What if they'd been caught, he could only mean; what if he'd faced expulsion for—what did they even call something like this, violating college premises by . . .

But she saw he was smiling, not at all resembling someone about to announce that they must never neck in the hydraulics lab again.

"Charlanelene, what if that guy is right, hmm?" Owen said urgently as he reached both arms around her waist and a little below; reached and kept. "That this beats sleeping."

They stayed a steady couple on through Owen's years of college, each of his weeks dizzy with classwork and the desperate odd jobs and the details of Charlene, hers crammed with him and the ever longer hours at Cunningham's (but for gradually less pay, a personal impingement by the Depression which started her thinking about the order of things). 1928, 1929, 1930; those years sped and yet seemed endless, the waiting, waiting, waiting until Owen graduated and latched onto a job and they could get married.

Making love helped. It scared the daylights out of them, too, every time. Whenever the kissing and embracing and fondling led to more, separately and mutually they would vow afterward that they had better quit this. (Charlene did not know so, but Owen had been keeping a diary ever since he came to college, one of those five-year ones with a quintet of spaces down each page, and it was when he found himself jotting *Ch. & I again* below the previous year's identical entry that he gave up the diary.) Bleary watchman aside, there was really no one to catch them sinning away like burglars of each other's bodies, yet everything teetered when they did: if Owen made Charlene pregnant, here came premature marriage and there went her paycheck, his college trajectory, and their chance of climbing, any at all, up life's splintery rungs. They (mostly Charlene) learned just enough precaution so they could keep scaring themselves that delicious way.

She wondered even yet, pen to the page, at the risk built into love. She could remember how daring she felt when she shed Toston and tried on Bozeman, seven years ago. New to herself. Once before, some spring

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1 and early summer of her girlhood, rain for once came to Montana at per-  
2 fect times and amounts, and the ranchers from the Big Belt Mountains  
3 when they swung into town for groceries and haircuts kept saying of the  
4 unbelievable grass, "It's like Africa." That's the sort of thing she first  
5 thought about herself in Bozeman, how much taller and more lush and  
6 rare and therefore chancy her life suddenly was. Then she met Owen,  
7 and learned what a dare really meant. The geography of another person,  
8 that was where you went blindfolded and raw and in over your head.  
9 The magnitude of being apart had come into it now, too. Out the win-  
10 dows of the apartment, down the Gallatin River to the Missouri's head-  
11 waters at Three Forks, on past Toston, the distance to Fort Peck was 625  
12 miles.

13 Resentfully she eyed the hour on the clock, which somehow seemed  
14 both too early and too late to suit her. Nights now, she hated to go to  
15 bed, with no future there except sleep. She supposed bed blues like these  
16 were no more than right a first time apart in three married years, but  
17 knowing so didn't take any of the edge off the feeling. Of course, ac-  
18 cording to his hurried letters Owen had his own rankles, but of a differ-  
19 ent sort. Dispatches from a stampede, his account of life in Glasgow  
20 sounded like. Glasgow woke up at 2:30 one morning and realized that  
21 its fortune was piling into town. What unfolded first was a hotelier's  
22 dream: so many men of the Fort Peck project suddenly coming and  
23 going that rooms could be rented out twice in the same night, first to  
24 those who wanted to catch some sleep until time for the "through train"  
25 at half past two, and then to those who tumbled off the Pullman cars.  
26 When either shift climbed out of bed they wanted a meal, so the cafe  
27 owners hit it rich five and six times a day. Reasonably often the food was  
28 washed down with a few drinks, and the bars along the south side of the  
29 railroad tracks lit up. Among the swarm of Fort Peck comers and goers  
30 were quantity buyers, for either the government or the construction con-  
31 tractors, who would snap up all the axes in Glasgow one day and, the  
32 next, hire every fry cook and washerwoman. Amid this frenzy, Owen  
33 and the other engineers had to contrive the dam plans, which his most  
34 recent letter had likened to trying to sort pie tins in a hailstorm.

35 So, Owen had his own load, Charlene didn't deny that in the least.  
36 But there still was this of hers; with Owen gone these months on the  
37 Fort Peck job, this was like being married to herself.

38 *Dear one, about the other dams, she finished off the night's letter to*  
39 *him. I hope you don't mind what I had to say. I only want the world to really*  
40 *see how Goin' Owen can go.*

The next-to-last Monday in October, ordinarily a time of year when not much is underway in northern Montana except the weather sharpening its teeth, the money began at Fort Peck.

The hiring in Glasgow that morning had a carnival spirit to it. Men milled into lines, expectant, not wanting to hope too much but buoyant with the prospect of a paying job, a steady half-dollar-an-hour after the cashless bafflement the Depression had brought. Preference, Hugh Duff noted, seemed to be wholesale. From the talk of them, here were other bottomland farmers and backpocket ranchers from along the river, yes, but the streets of Glasgow had been swept to come up with some of these other specimens. He and Neil and Bruce stayed together in the crowd, for what that was worth. They had filled out employment forms, been given a brass button with an employment number (9 for Hugh, Neil 10, and Bruce inexplicably 57) to pin on a shirt pocket, and stood around waiting for the transportation which the government men told them every five minutes would be here in five minutes; the first day of anything has some wobble to it. At last they climbed up into one of the crew trucks for the jouncing ride of seventeen miles to the river. So far, Hugh thoroughly despised everything about government relief work.

The Duffs knew enough about riding in the back of a truck on rutted sectionline roads to stand up behind the cab, hanging on to the boxboards, and so while the Glasgow street denizens tried to sit and were getting their spines pounded from the base up, Hugh, Neil, and Bruce met the Fort Peck country face-on.

When their truck, in the lead, topped into the view of sprawling river plain, Neil's and Bruce's first thought was the same: that the makeshift little convoy of trucks and pickups and a couple of touring cars would turn one way or the other from this overlook and head off toward tighter terrain where the dam site must be. But there was nothing to head off toward.

Upstream and down, across and beyond, the valley of the Missouri boomed away to horizons of its own making, wide-open country split down its middle by a muscular tan channel—no, on closer inspection, two channels; the river here divided around a massive wedge of silt called Cow Island—where century in and century out these twin flows—no, honestly three flows; the third a river of timber and brush, in and of itself substantial, miles of diamond willows and stands of leafless cottonwoods along the near bank—had ebbed and swelled with the methodical might of the seasons.

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1 Everyone aboard the truck now stood and peered, calculating madly  
2 on how many man-years of wagework it was going to take to throw a  
3 dam across this, and a voice from the back put all their incredulity into:

4 "Keep a light in the window, Mother, I'm coming home to die!"

5 As their truck lurched down the bluff, Neil pointed.

6 There where the river plain met the base of the benchlands, perhaps  
7 a mile yet below the truck route, sat a farm with a stepped-roof barn, so  
8 much like the one on the Duff place that Hugh felt stabbed by the sight.

9 Neil's gesture, though, pinpointed the helpers working behind a sur-  
10 vey party, spreading sacks of lime in a white line across the ground from  
11 stake to stake. The straight streak of white narrowly missed the back of  
12 the barn, and it could be extended with the eye across the middle of Cow  
13 Island, and then across the stubble of the alfalfa fields on the opposite  
14 side of the river, and at last up out of the bottomland to where the axis  
15 of the dam would meet the far bluff.

16 Downstream from the white line, the trucks cut their engines and  
17 men piled out and stood looking around skeptically at the underbrush  
18 and big wrinkled cottonwoods that cloaked the river. During the hiring  
19 sign-up in Glasgow, the war veterans among them had been freely saying  
20 this was reminiscent of army life, all right, much commotion but little  
21 motion, so now everyone became impressed at how briskly an Army En-  
22 gineer lieutenant dealt them into three groups, one crew to saw down  
23 cottonwoods, another to clear brush, and the third to build a toolhouse.  
24 When the lieutenant strode by the Duffs, he designated Bruce to the  
25 sawyers, Neil to brushwhacking, and Hugh for the toolhouse crew,  
26 which infuriated Hugh. Who was this Army shavetail anyway, to decree  
27 that Hugh Duff was too old to do axework? He stepped out after the  
28 lieutenant and said in a stung tone, "I've fought brush all my blessed  
29 damn life and can fight it some more."

30 "If you'd really rather," the lieutenant said brusquely. He darted his  
31 attention back to Bruce and Neil. "One of you to the toolhouse detail,  
32 then."

33 Neil spoke up. "I wouldn't mind."

34  
35 Owen didn't strictly have to be there, this first day of the manual labor  
36 force descending on Fort Peck, but only death or disablement could have  
37 kept him away.

38 That morning, he stuck his head in the temporary Corps office in  
39 Glasgow only long enough to make the excuse of needing to run another  
40 porosity test on weathered shale, then caught a ride to the river on the

tool truck. There he went through the motions of sending the rock docs  
across to auger out more samples from what would be the dam's shaley  
east abutment, but mainly he wanted to view this next day one.

His brothers had already crossed paths with him, while his father de-  
liberately did the opposite, at the community hall breakfast thrown by  
the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce a few hours ago. He had only seen  
them, what, half a dozen times in the years since he took himself to  
Bozeman. Pair of unfolding kids, they'd been then, and while in a sense  
he knew each of them from the ground up—Neil who always watched  
his way as if he were on stilts, Bruce built on springs—Owen worried a  
bit that they were not ready for Glasgow and Fort Peck. In the commu-  
nity hall's thronged atmosphere, wild with passed plateloads of breakfast,  
they especially looked short of adjusted. Young men who knew plenty,  
but maybe not this particular verse. But who's to say who is out of place  
at a time like this, Owen told himself as he went over to instigate hand-  
shakes and the quizzical grins that were a Duff trademark.

Bruce couldn't help but be first into brother-talk:

"Got yourself a dam to build, Ownie, huh?"

"Not quite by myself. There'll be stuff that needs some main strength  
and ignorance, Bruce."

That hadn't come out as lightly as Owen wanted, but Bruce seemed  
to take it as teasing. "You're the expert. We're just here to fill in around  
the edges, aren't we, Neil?"

"Four bits an hour, up from nothing." Neil smiled around his words.  
"That'll be different."

"Yeah, helluva deal," Bruce backed that with an even bigger smile.  
"When did somebody come up with this wage idea, anyway? The Old  
Man never told us it existed."

"Uncle Sam is here now. You're going to see a lot that didn't exist be-  
fore five minutes ago." Owen checked his wristwatch as if that had re-  
minded him. "Speaking of which. I better say hello to Mother, then go  
try make something happen." He looked dubiously at Bruce, then Neil,  
then Bruce again. He felt oddly responsible, and half perturbed along  
with it, that these yearling brothers of his were going to be the tail of his  
eye here, from now on. "You guys—" What, though, advicewise. *Keep  
your pecker in your pocket, lest the new horde of whores on Glasgow's south  
side of the tracks flirt you into something stupid? Save your pennies for a  
rainy day, the Depression isn't over just because a federal paper-shuffler is  
handing you a job? Don't kiss a bear when you have honey on your lips?*  
What could be said that would stay heard, when they were at that age?

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1 Nothing much, Owen decided. "You guys let me know what you're up  
2 to, once in a while."

3 Before Owen could turn to go, Neil with a sweep of his head and his  
4 eyes open mock wide indicated out beyond the jampacked breakfast  
5 function to the dam project that had brought it all here, and expressed  
6 in wonder:

7 "As the Old Man would say, how does this thing do?"

8 Well might he ask, Owen thought now, traipsing in exhilaration  
9 along the base of the west bluff, past where the makeshift truck convoy  
10 had spilled out its little army of brushwhackers. Look it over casually, or  
11 even several degrees closer than that, and Fort Peck appeared to be tak-  
12 ing place all ways simultaneously. Here they were, starting clearance of  
13 the biggest dam site in the world, and test holes still were being drilled.  
14 People—well, like the Duffs—were barely out of these bottomland  
15 houses, and the white lime outline of the dam was cutting across their  
16 tracks. Even Owen had to keep systematically bringing to mind the over-  
17 laps of how it all fit together. That the thicket off ahead of him along the  
18 riverbank where the first brush and trees were being whacked down was  
19 precisely where the fleet of dredges and barges and pontoons for his  
20 dredging setup would be built. That a trellis of railroad track would  
21 emerge, straight on in from the vee of the valley ahead of him, soon next  
22 spring. That on the apron of the bluff up to his left, after the spring thaw  
23 the Corps would unroll an entire townplan onto the prairie, where he  
24 and Charlene would be able to set up housekeeping.

25 Thinking about it all—hell, *seeing* it, on the flip-pages of his mind—  
26 he didn't quite slap his sides in enthusiasm but could have. Complicated  
27 didn't even begin to say it about this showcase project of the New Deal,  
28 this fevertime of history. And he absolutely damn loved it, the jigsaw ex-  
29 citement that had swept in with Roosevelt's inauguration. The alphabet  
30 agencies, the economic pump priming—it was already legend that the  
31 Chief Engineer of the Corps had not even signed off on the Fort Peck  
32 Dam plan before the Public Works Administration had started fund-  
33 ing it.

34 He hadn't yet gained sight of his father and Bruce, somewhere in the  
35 bottomland thicket at their work of clearing-away, but he could easily  
36 make out Neil across there in the open where the toolhouse was being  
37 constructed, and threw him an exultant armwave. Then Owen stayed  
38 still a minute, listening, savoring. He knew the Fort Peck plan in its  
39 every inch and angle, yet even he almost could not believe that the dam

was now underway, *this* way, with the echoes of axes and the timber yells of men who yesterday were farmers or worse. Blueprints showed none of this.

Meg had presented herself at the kitchen in the community hall at five minutes to five that morning. Through the serving window, she saw that the volunteers were coming along nicely at setting the tables, and soon would be ready to be fed before everybody else descended. Tim Jaarala, the cook, had a baggy face of red, ruined skin. With bachelor indirectness, he spoke toward the vicinity of Meg:

"This first day you better just watch, lady. See how I need things set up for the cookin'."

His pronunciation of it as if it were the German word for cake, *Kuchen*, momentarily threw her. But then the just-watch part sank in. Owen had seen to it that, with this breakfast shindig and a Great Northern Railroad delegation to be fed at noon and then the facilities becoming an emergency cookhouse for the swelling Fort Peck workforce, she could start right in earning her own paycheck as cookhouse help. But she hadn't come here to be insulted. Meg's maiden name was Margaret Milne; Milnes had died in Prince Charlie's kilted ranks when English cannon raked the battlefield of Culloden in 1746, and Meg held the attitude that 187 years was about enough of superior forces walking over her and hers. She drew herself up and told the cook's turned back:

"I have seen a kitchen before, Mr. Jaarala, I'll have you know. I am someone who has cooked for harvest crews."

"That ain't cookin'," Jaarala said forlornly in her direction and set to work.

He started hand over hand on a flat of eggs, ambidextrously breaking each one with a soft tap on the bowl edge, seeming to squeeze the contents out and consign the eggshell halves into the garbage in the same motion. When he immediately had a few dozen yolks and whites in the bowl, he whisked them together, poured them on the grill in six identical amounts, and with quick pokes of a spatula created rectangles of omelet. Without looking he reached to his left to gather a stack of cheese and flipped the slices into the frying omelets as if dealing cards. He watched the fleet of omelets briefly, whistling to himself almost soundlessly—the stately tromp of *O Tannenbaum*, it seemed like to Meg—then flicked his spatula to crimp a seam into each end of each frying egg-cheese mass, folded those tabs over, then flipped them all, luscious

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1 packets of golden texture. Somewhere amid this, Jaarala had babied a  
2 mound of hashbrowns into perfect sizzle at the edge of the grill, and now  
3 he was manipulating another flat of eggs into his mixing bowl.

4 Meg felt slightly faint. The one thing she knew to do was to stay out  
5 of the way of this virtuoso, until she could figure out how to be any dab  
6 of help.

7 When Owen poked around the corner of the kitchen on his way out,  
8 she manufactured a frantically pleased smile and rattled a few plates as if  
9 in extreme industry.

10 After municipal quantities of omelets and hashbrown potatoes and  
11 summer sausage had been dished and dispatched to the dining tables  
12 and the hall was clearing out, the cook moved some more air around  
13 with that barely hearable set of whistling, and seemed to be thinking. At  
14 length, Jaarala provided over his shoulder:

15 "You could open some cans of vegetables for me if you want."

16 Meg glanced around trying to recognize canned goods and finally re-  
17 alized they were the gallon cans stacked like kegs beneath the serving  
18 shelf. "What kind?" she asked eagerly?

19 "Mixed."

20 "But what with what?"

21 In what seemed vast surprise, Jaarala looked over his shoulder almost  
22 at her. "Carrots go with peas, corn goes with lima beans, string beans  
23 don't go with anything. That's what 'mixed' means," he said in an in-  
24 jured tone.

25  
26 Neil could hear, even over the loudest of the toolhouse carpentry, the  
27 nearby racket of men tearing at clumps of willows, hoeing out the lesser  
28 brush with the half-axe half-pick implements called pulaskis, sawing  
29 down cottonwood trees bigger around than themselves. After the crash  
30 of a tree, the next minutes would fill with the stillness of anticipation,  
31 until the *ba-BOOM* of a dynamite stick splitting the stump, and soon  
32 the roar of a D-6 Caterpillar dragging away the big rootball.

33 He waited until noon to ask the point of it all.

34 The foreman recited that the engineers wanted the river basin cleared,  
35 it would make the eventual dredging easier, less debris and so on.

36 Neil still didn't get it. "The alfalfa fields on the other side of the river  
37 are already clear—why don't they just dredge those?"

38 The foreman grinned and didn't answer.

Short 39 "Kid, what we're doing here is making frogskins," one of the Glas-  
Normal 40 gow street bunch told Neil after the foreman left. "Money. Have you

ever heard of it?" The Glasgow man jerked his head toward the stands of willows and groves of cottonwoods. "Bucking this stuff out of here— who the Christ knows if they really need it done or not? But it gives them a way to get us some pay. Don't jinx us by asking half-assed questions about it."

*And if they don't hand out some moolah somehow*, the sheriff was mulling with a hot towel over his face, reclining in the barber chair in Glasgow as on every Monday noon since he had been elected, *if Roosevelt and his brainbust bunch don't put people on these so-called public work jobs*—well, that was moot, they surely to Christ *were* signing every man who could stagger to a crew truck onto the Fort Peck payroll. How to make wages flow: pump them out of the government treasury. The idea on high was from some fruitcake Englishman professor named John Maynard Keynes, compensatory-spending-by-the-government-to-set-the-economy-in-motion, by way of Roosevelt's alphabet-soup agencies. Make the American eagle lay dollars into hands that had forgotten the feel of a nickel. The sheriff uneasily crossed his feet, one neat little boot of handtooled leather atop the other. He couldn't argue with the need to do something about the economic side of things, although he sorely would have liked to. Out there in the street this morning while the hiring was going on, the sheriff had kept an obvious eye on the crowd and even contributed a couple of minor offenders to it, telling them he'd bounce their butts right back into jail if they didn't hang on to these jobs on a platter, and he'd managed to stay impassive at the sight of Corps officers and civvie bureaucrats busy as bees; but the Fort Peck project rankled him. Some New Dealer's finger had come down on Valley County, Montana, on a place where the Missouri River seemed a little skinnier than elsewhere, and now there was going to be five years of dam building commotion. Yet the sheriff had to look only a couple of counties away, over by the North Dakota line, for the example of how things could go if something wasn't done about the Depression. When there was enough rain, the soil of the northeastern corner of Montana grew hard red wheat. When drought came, politics of that same coloration sprouted instead. In '28, Sheridan County had elected as its sheriff a Bolshevik, no less. Calling himself a Fusion candidate but amounting to Communist and proud of it, Lawrence Mott had lost office in the Roosevelt sweep of '32 but pretty damned narrowly. (As someone who prided himself on enough gray matter to run as a Democrat if that's what it took to reach office, Sheriff Kinnick could not savvy why Mott hadn't at least called himself a

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1 Roosevelt Communist.) Mott and his—what do you call a nest of  
2 Reds—cadre still had a Communist newspaper going, over there in the  
3 Sheridan County seat of Plentywood. *The Producers News*; you bet, they  
4 knew how to produce trouble, whenever they had half a chance. At least  
5 he, Carl Kinnick, did not have to put up with that kind of Red ruckus  
6 in his county, nor would he, not even if it took—

7 “Ready to get skinned, Carl?” Shorty the barber asked as he always  
8 did while he stropped his straight razor. Sheriff Carl Kinnick didn’t  
9 strictly need a haircut every Monday and even less a barber shave, but  
10 somehow it got the week off to a decent start for him, marked a change  
11 from his heavy weekend duties. Besides, how often did a person get a  
12 chance to put his feet up and contemplate the state of things?

13 As Shorty’s steel scraped away at the sheriff’s cheeks and neck and  
14 Shorty jabbered about the haircut heaven ahead when all the Fort Peck  
15 hirees were going to need a trimming up at once, some soon Saturday  
16 night, the sheriff only barely listened, his mind still stuck on the ques-  
17 tion of this Fort Peck Dam. Depression, drought, grasshoppers, you  
18 name it, the past several years had dumped them all on nothern Mon-  
19 tana. So the sheriff had to admit that this part of the country could stand  
20 something done for it. But to it?

21  
22 Hugh was clobbering away at a jungle of diamond willows. Beating with  
23 his axe at each thumb-thick willow as if it were his personal enemy. He  
24 had gone off on his own, a little away from the rest of the brushwhack-  
25 ing crew, as there didn’t seem to be any boundaries on the amount of  
26 brush along the Missouri River. He was already tired. He had *started*  
27 tired, dragged down with a feeling which he had only been able to de-  
28 scribe to Meg, when she kept urging him to snap out of it, as the weight  
29 of circumstances. She, of all people, ought to understand the load of  
30 everything he’d been hit with. Not simply the news of the dam, the day  
31 of Siderius. The silence that said something, too. He had tangled with  
32 Meg about it as soon as he could get her alone, that day when the farm  
33 went from them.

34 “*You knew about this, did you.*”

35 “*Owen wrote, yes. That there might be a dam, but there was no telling*  
36 *when. It was up to politics, he said.*”

37 “*And you couldn’t have said anything to me?*”

38 “*A time ago,*” she had reminded him, “*you went deaf where Owen is con-*  
39 *cerned.*”

"I said," a voice came in on him again between axe strokes, "what're you now, mute?"

"Eh?" Hugh, startled, realized that Owen had come up behind him in the brush patch. Hugh barely glanced around at him and threw aside the willow strands he had just cut.

*This never goes right*, Owen thought impatiently. *But we've got to sort ourselves out somehow, now that he's here.* In genuine curiosity, he asked:

"How's it feel to be on a regular payroll?"

Hugh looked at him full-bore now. "Putrid," he said, and turned and gave the next willow a savage hack.

"Hey, give it a quit," Owen said with command sharpness.

Confused, Hugh held up with his axe and checked the particular clump of diamond willow he'd intended to attack next, then the prodigious thicket of brush to the right and left of him. "What'm I to leave off doing?"

"This happy horseshit of pretending each other doesn't exist."

Hugh took the chance to catch his breath. Panting a little, he said: "Engineers talk that way, do they. Wouldn't you think all those books between their ears would make a bigger difference."

"I figure the sooner we get this over with, the better," Owen went right on. "You're going to have to, you know. Put up with the fact that I'm here, and that I have some say in this project."

"Owen, I know you're next thing to almighty, but I wasn't told you're the one who signs my famous paycheck."

"I don't personally, but I tell Eleanor and she tells Franklin Delano, and he's liable to dock you for being snotty if you don't watch out."

The whippet mind of Owen. Once again Hugh Duff was amazed at his quick son, and immediately peeved at being caught amazed, just as much as when

*the boy was eight, at his side from daybreak to dark those summer days, the younger sons little yet and Meg forever needing to be on hand for them at the house. But Hugh couldn't have asked for better help than bladesteel Owen, who could go from one waiting chore to the next without waning. Whenever a characteristic cloud to the west warned them to head inside to wait for the rain to make its way down the canyon, father and son retreated to harness work in the barn, Hugh hammering in the gleaming new copper rivets as Owen held the leather straps steady on the anvil. This day, as the first heavy drops drummed the roof, a flock of chickadees went into feeding acrobatics in the serviceberry bush outside the barn window.*

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1        *Hugh kept at the rivetwork, but his son's holding of the harness hame-*  
2        *strap was drifty.*

3        "What're you doing, Owen lad," Hugh finally said, more sharply than  
4        he'd intended. "Counting the raindrops?"

5        "Dad, why doesn't the rain hurt the birds?"

6        "Eh?" Hugh's look shot not toward the chickadees in question but to his  
7        son. "Whyever should it? A dab of moisture?"

8        "No, the size of it compared to them, I mean. When it hits them."

9        *In a flash he saw what the boy meant. The globular raindrops, the*  
10       *thumb-size birds cavorting unbothered by such barrage. Christ on a crutch.*  
11       *Here I've been seeing that all my life and never thought anything of it.*

12       "Don't know, Ownie," he admitted. And much more: "Wish I did."

13       The grown Owen he studied now wore sharply creased tan khaki  
14       pants, short sheepskin coat with a thick wool collar, sand-colored Stet-  
15       son with a divvy crimp the same as on Bruce and on Neil. Hugh himself  
16       had taught them that; train the brim in at the front to show that you  
17       have enough sense to let the rain run off you, and let it go at that. Sweat-  
18       stains of that hat aside, Owen now was quite the picture of dam engineer  
19       swank, Hugh thought, and felt more tired than ever.

20       "Ownie, surely you have engineering things to go be at. What is it you  
21       want with me?"

22       "Just about anything short of civil war, while we're all on this project,  
23       will do nicely."

24       "Then let's try something like smoke signals. At a good distance. I  
25       know your mother will want you to be on hand to her, and I can't stop  
26       that. Your brothers, either—they can consort with you or not, it doesn't  
27       matter a brown-colored whit to me. But what's between us is still between  
28       us. And this drowner of yours"—Hugh indicated the dam site—"doesn't  
29       help matters any, does it."

30       "It's not just mine," Owen said tightly. *To hell with this noise.* "I'll  
31       take you up on that idea of smoke signals."

32  
33       After the first hour or so, when the teams of sawyers and powder mon-  
34       keys were starting to make a dent in the cottonwood grove, Bruce grav-  
35       itated to where the D-6 Caterpillar was about to start skidding out the  
36       split stumps. Each time, a cable with a logchain hook had to be noosed  
37       around the protruding trunk remnant—called setting the choker—and  
38       then the Cat would clank away with the stump uprooted and dragging  
39       behind. The foreman here, Grimwade, was also keeping an eye on the  
40       brushcutting gang and so was on horseback to commute between the

two. Bruce brazened right up beside Grimwade's stirrups and asked if he could have a crack at choker setting; helping the Old Man yank out brush year after year to make way for more alfalfa finally might pay off, he figured. Skeptical of him at first, Grimwade made Bruce show he knew his stuff as choker setter on several stumps, then nodded and rode off.

This fast vote of confidence made Bruce strut a little, acting as if it was mostly his own doing when the hefty stumps erupted from the ground. The only drawback to the job was trudging after the stump to the burn pile, in order to unhitch the choker. Then, though, inspiration came again: he began catching hold of the roots and jumping on to ride the upended stump like a bucking plough as it was being towed. The ride was rough, as each crooked comet of wood bounced across the ground, but that was the major part of the fun. Hopping off when the stump reached the pile to be burned, Bruce would undo the choker and climb up behind the catskinner for a lift back to the next stump. The other guys on the crew were laughing and calling out about Bruce not even needing a saddle, busting those stumps bareback, which confirmed to him that he had a pretty slick system going.

Until he bounded down from a stump ride and there was Grimwade frowning from his horse perch.

"What's your button number?"

"A-1," joked Bruce, still jaunty.

Grimwade leaned down in his saddle and inspected Bruce numerically. "The point of this whole shitaree is to give you guys jobs, not for you to figure out ways to break your neck. Any more antics like riding stumps, Little Mister 57 Different Varieties, and you're going to draw your walking papers instead."

Off rode Grimwade, and now the rest of the crew razzled Bruce unmercifully, offering to lay bets with him on how quick he was going to make history as the first man fired from Fort Peck. Bruce's face burned as he marched behind the skidding stumps. He watched his chance. At noon, when Grimwade tied the reins of his horse to the bumper of a crew truck and ducked into the cook tent for lunch, Bruce slipped over, took the lariat off the saddle and slung it on his shoulder, then quickly uncinched the saddle and lifted it off the horse. He had singled out an especially tall young sapling, poking out of a thick tangle of willows, and ploughed his way through the brush carrying the saddle. When he reached it, he formed a dab loop in the lariat and on his fifth upward toss caught the top of the sapling. Drawing the tree over in a bowl-like bend as far as he could, Bruce knelt on the saddle while he knotted the taut lariat

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1 in through the hole beneath the saddlehorn. He carefully got off the sad-  
 2 dle while holding down the rope and tree, then jumped back and let  
 3 them all fly, the sapling springing back into place and catapulting the  
 4 saddle up with it, like a fish on a line. Grimwade's saddle swayed there a  
 5 satisfying twenty feet in the air amid the jungle of brush.

6  
 7 After being fired, Bruce barely had his half-day's wages in his pocket be-  
 8 fore Owen collared him.

9 "I hear you treed Grimwade's saddle for him."

10 Bruce couldn't help grinning, but changed his face when he saw  
 11 Owen's. "He had it coming, Ownie. He jumped on me for no real rea-  
 12 son at all, so I—"

13 Owen hit him above his left ear, an openhanded swat but enough of  
 14 a clout to rattle Bruce's brainbox.

15 "Hey! What!—" Bruce's impulse to hit back wrinkled away under  
 16 Owen's forthright grab and twist of the throat of his shirt. In theory  
 17 Bruce knew he was too grown-up to be cuffed around like an errant bear  
 18 cub, but Owen was doing just that.

19 "This isn't tiddlywinks," Owen ground out. "What the hell do you  
 20 think you're going to do if you can't hang on to a job here? *Hmmb?*" He  
 21 tightened the twist atop his brother's Adam's apple in reiteration.  
 22 "*What?*"

23 "I—" Bruce realized he had not thought quite that far ahead yet.

24 "That's right, duckbutt, you don't have any least idea, do you. Yet  
 25 you figure you can toss away a paying job for the sake of some joke?  
 26 There's unemployed guys every damn inch of this country right now,  
 27 and it's about five minutes until winter will be here—what'd you think  
 28 you'd do then, hunt with the snow snakes? You better get yourself going  
 29 here, kid."

30 He abruptly released the shirtfront and Bruce coughed for air.

31 "This once," Owen told him, "I'm going to save your hide. I had to  
 32 talk like a good fellow to do it, but I landed you on the hammer gang  
 33 with Neil. If you mess that up—"

34 Owen left the *if* dangling, which he hoped would leave Bruce at the  
 35 mercy of his own imagination.

36  
 37 At the end of that day, Hugh stiffly eased himself down the cellar steps  
 38 in Glasgow. He sat down heavily. Next, Meg knew, he was going to sigh  
 like a punctured philosopher, and he did.

BUCKING THE SUN

"My hip pockets are dragging out my tracks. By God, Meg, if I never meet up with an axe again in my life, that'll be soon enough."

"You'll toughen in," she said, although she had started wondering whether he would. No, never mind *whether*. Hugh *had* to.

He stared around the basement, the coal bin and furnace at one end and the shelves of garden canning at the other. The muddle of sagging bed and rickety chairs, in between, which amounted to their "rented room."

"I almost can't believe—" he murmured, then blinked as if coming to. He turned toward Meg. "Enough about my day at the races. Did you show that cook how to cook?"

*Suggest tell him POGOP*, Owen scrawled in the margin of a contractor's letter which cited innumerable reasons why a delay was unavoidable in that particular contracted-for portion of the dam project, and routed it back to the glass-paneled corner office they called "the cage."

Owen did not really expect squishy little Major Santee, also known as "the marshmallow in the cage," to tell the contractor, *Piss or Get Off the Pot*. But as chief of operations under Colonel Parmenter, who had never seen a schedule that was not sacred, the major was sooner or later going to have to tell the foot-dragging contractor something along that line, Owen figured.

Or was that, as the major periodically accused Owen and Sangster and the other non-Corps engineers of, "civilian logic."

Owen stretched at his desk. Atop his heaped IN box the next sheet of paper began:

FROM: DIVISION ENGINEER, MISSOURI RIVER DIVISION, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI.

SUBJECT: CONSTRUCTION OF FORT PECK DAM ON THE MISSOURI RIVER.

1. UNDER SEPARATE COVER ARE BEING FORWARDED TEN COPIES OF OPERATION PLANS PURSUANT TO THIS TOPIC.

Owen puffed out his cheeks and tried to uncross his eyes from the Corps-ese.

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2. DREDGING OPERATIONS WILL BE EXECUTED WITH A VIEW OF MAKING THE CLOSURE OF THE DAM BEGINNING 1 AUGUST, 1937.

*Yeah, well. No kidding. Here we thought we were supposed to drop FDR'S hundred million dollars directly into the river.*

3. DREDGING OPERATIONS IN THE INTERIM WILL ENTAIL A GROSS YARDAGE OF SUITABLE MATERIAL IN THE UPSTREAM BORROW PITS TOTALING 84,900,000 CU. YARDS AND IN THE DOWNSTREAM BORROW PITS 38,800,000 YARDS; OR A GRAND TOTAL OF 123,700,000 CU. YARDS.

*Jesus fiddling Christ. Look at that! Actual numbers! What's got into them back there in Kay Cee? They aren't just woofing, now.*

Owen did some rapid figuring, working out the monthly average of dredging it would take to add up to that total, allowing for 20 percent shrinkage of the fill material, winter shutdowns, and so on. He looked for a while at his result. It was a lot. It was more than plenty. But he let himself dream ahead to his dredges and their output of fill, flying through the air like mucky magic.

*First, though, Duff, back to the heavy lifting.*  
He picked up the next piece of paperwork.

Hugh had waited as long as he could stand to, a total week. By now he utterly had to drop by the cookhouse and make sure this Jaarala was as much of an old maid as Meg advertised him to be.

The cook (*big bruiser; damn near an axehandle across, there in back of those shoulders*, Hugh uneasily estimated) loomed at a kitchen counter fussing with whatever cooks fuss with, meanwhile semiwhistling a set of sounds which registered on Hugh as *yoo hoo hoohoo . . . YOOHOO HOO HOO*. Meg, though, was nowhere in sight.

*Roman*

"Hello then," Hugh announced in through the doorway. He went as if to put a foot in the kitchen. Jaarala stared down at it, and Hugh withdrew the foot.

"Help you?" Jaarala husked.

"I'm, eh—Margaret Duff's my better half. Came by to, uhm, walk her home."

"The mister, are you." Jaarala gave him an inch of nod, as if he had been expecting this misfortune, then reached behind himself to the

Short  
Journal 40

counter and with a lightning move was thrusting something at Hugh's midsection.

Hugh was glad he had stood his ground when he realized what was aimed at his middle was a platter of deviled eggs. He reached and took one between his thumb and forefinger, Jaarala's baggy flaming face hanging over him.

"Goohb," Hugh mumbled as he ate the filled egg. It was actually leagues better than good, it was mouthwateringly delectable, it was supreme art in deviled-egg form.

Jaarala nodded two inches this time.

Hugh gawked around the kitchen as if Meg might be on top of one of the cupboards. "Guess I missed her?"

"That's what you did," Jaarala concluded, presenting that expanse of back and shoulders again.

The Fort Peck Dam project kept growing so fast that its myths couldn't keep up with it. The original seventy-five men, the Octoberists who had set to work with axes and pulaskis and saws, peeked around in the brush at the end of two weeks and thought, *Holy Pete, there must be three or four times as many of us in here whaling away at this stuff*; there actually were five hundred in the bottomland workforce by then. By the end of November when they went around boasting that several hundred of them were letting daylight into the Fort Peck thicket, the thousandth man was being handed a job brass.

By then, the farms were being burned.

On each of the brush-clearing crews you could pick out the bottomland honyoickers, the alfalfa-seed farmers and those who had held small riverbank ranches, by their stance—a petrified minute of staring upward as the black geyser of smoke rose from the kerosene-soaked houses, barns, and sheds. Each time, Hugh hoped that it was the farm of that hired-out mouthpiece Siderius.

The forenoon when the stepped-roof barn next to the white line of the dam axis went up in crisp flames, Bruce poked into sight at Hugh's patch of brush and gave him a single rueful shake of the head. A moment later, Neil appeared and did the same.

Hugh attacked his work again as the boys each went back to theirs. "If we keep at it, the wages will pile up," Meg had maintained to him in their latest go-round. "It's a chance."

"So was the damned farm," Hugh had retorted. And he'd had it on the

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1 tip of his tongue to add: *So was English Creek before that. So was Inverley,*  
 2 *back before that.* Anciently fought and lost, by all concerned. Wouldn't  
 3 you think, Hugh brooded, that a man and a woman could at least agree  
 4 on the ground under their feet?

5 "Margaret, I'll do this. I'd paint the private parts of monkeys if it meant  
 6 a wage. But don't ask me to blind myself to what we're at, here. This piddly  
 7 work-by-the-hour, this coal bin we have to live in, this is all forced on us  
 8 by—"

9 "—the weight of circumstances," Meg clipped in. "Hugh, I don't even  
 10 care what is to blame, anymore. I only want something promising for us from  
 11 here on. If that has to start with an axe and a spoon, then let's."

12 Disgusted that he had let her have that last word, Hugh kept to him-  
 13 self and smashed away at the thicket which might keep him chopping  
 14 for eternity.

15 A new man, scrawny everywhere except for a notable hawknose, and  
 16 whose clothes didn't look even warm enough to work in, sidled over to  
 17 him. "Don't take this wrong, but it tuckers me out to watch you."

18 "Eh?" Hugh needed a moment to fathom the first Oklahoma accent  
 19 he had ever heard. He stood up as erect as his complaining back would  
 20 allow him, his axe still in hand. "We're being paid to work. Conse-  
 21 quently, I'm working."

22 "You go at it the long way around," the other man maintained in that  
 23 high drawl.

24 "Mister, I have chopped more ungodly damn wood than you have  
 25 ever laid eyes on, so don't be giving me—"

26 The scrawny visitor reached over to the sapling next to Hugh and  
 27 with one hand bent the small tree until it was taut and with a lazy swipe  
 28 of the axe in his other hand, severed the trunk. He gave Hugh a glance,  
 29 shrugged, and started to turn away.

30 "Wait," Hugh called. "Wait, wait."

31 He considered the cleanly sliced shaft of sapling. By comparison his  
 32 array of stumps looked like an assault by beavers.

33 "Maybe," Hugh suggested, "you could show me the doing of that?"  
 34

35 Thereafter Hugh worked devastation on his area of thicket, once Birdie  
 36 Hinch had taught him the knack of bending a sapling into tension and  
 37 then giving it a clip with the axe. The gossip mill promptly provided the  
 38 derivation of Hinch's nickname: arrest and conviction for stealing chick-  
 39 ens. ("Buggers think they're funny," Birdie drawled without rancor. "Just  
 40 because a man draws a little hoosegow time for trying to feed himself.")

Hugh also discerned that, aside from Birdie's knack with an axe and possibly with poultry, he was an absolute flub at anything requiring manual dexterity. Birdie could barely work the cork in and out of the waterbag. Hugh wondered about Birdie Hinch's prospects at Fort Peck once they were done slaughtering timber. For that matter, Hugh wondered about Hugh Duff's.

At quitting time, he and Birdie trudged together to the crew truck. They met up with Neil and Bruce, both full of bounce.

When Hugh introduced Birdie, the hawknosed man peered at the younger Duffs inquisitively.

"Be you twins, or brothers?"

The pair wrinkled their noses at each other as if making faces in a mirror, then laughed.

Neil was the one who said, "We're guilty on both counts."

*Two more sons at once, before noon on a bright September day in 1914, had multiplied Hugh Duff beyond any prior estimate of himself.*

*Giddy with pride, he carried the twin bundles around the kitchen table as if he couldn't wait to start these dazzlers going on the world. Father of three, just like that. His own father, blusterbox though he was, had only managed two; and Hugh's younger brother Darius back in Scotland had none to show. (At least his total had better be none—the scamp never had married.) No, this was family-founding with no doubt about it, Hugh Duff-style, Missouri River-style, he and his would fill this valley before they were done, work this fresh Nile to a perfection. It dizzied him, the complete turn-around from only a few years ago: this alfalfa-seed farm, sons in triplicate now, and Meg there in the bedroom having come through the birthings fine, a bit peaked but fine.*

*One of the babies began to squall, and that set off the other one. Hugh hooted with pleasure at the duet. Out of the bedroom swooped the midwife Mrs. Austin, chiding him with a scowl. Before yielding the treasures over to her, he asked, "Who's the older of these opera singers?"*

*"Can't say." This was the point of the September baby season where she always got disgusted, blaming men and December when they didn't have enough to do outdoors. "I lost track, which one came first."*

*"But that's frightful, Mrs. Austin," Hugh half pulled away from her in mock reproach, bundle of noise still held in the crook of each arm. "How will we ever know, then," he peeked from one to the other with delicious exaggeration, "which to call Pete and which Repeat?"*

*For something else to do, he started toward the bedroom to look in on*

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1 *Meg again, then remembered. He swung around, out onto the porch, and*  
 2 *called:*

3 *"Owen! Come see! Something in here for you!"*

4 *After a moment the boy materialized from the mouth of the coulee west*  
 5 *of the house. Honey-haired, alert. Even across this distance, however, Hugh*  
 6 *could see he was pinched with worry. Motioning urgently for the boy to*  
 7 *come to the house, he hurried back in to pluck the twins away from Mrs.*  
 8 *Austin again. He did not know quite everything about this multiple father-*  
 9 *ing yet, but he was determined to be the one to show Owen the amazing little*  
 10 *brothers.*

11 *Mrs. Austin was clattering at the cookstove and his father was sitting in*  
 12 *the armchair gently bouncing a wrapped-up baby in each arm when Owen*  
 13 *slipped in from outside. Two! Nobody had warned him there would be this*  
 14 *many!*

15 *"Brothers for you, Ownie. A pair for the cost of one, what do you think*  
 16 *of that?"*

17 *The boy considered the newcomers. He drew enough breath for honesty,*  
 18 *then told it out:*

19 *"They look like mice."*

20 *"Eh?" With Mrs. Austin in the same room, Hugh chose to mishear. "Yes,*  
 21 *they do look nice, don't they. Best babies ever. Why don't you trot on in and*  
 22 *tell your mother you think so."*

23 *In the bed, his mother looked tired, tireder even than after washday, and*  
 24 *she turned her head toward him as if even that was a lot of work. "Ownie,*  
 25 *did you see your brothers?"*

26 *His worried "Yes, Mama" was barely above a whisper.*

27 *She whispered back as if it was just their secret: "Aren't they funny little*  
 28 *monkeybunnies?"*

29 *Owen's heart raced with relief. She knew! Now he wouldn't need to point*  
 30 *out to her, as he'd tried to with his father, these babies' pink all over, squinchy,*  
 31 *general balled-up helpless kind of look. His mother knew they were an awful*  
 32 *disappointment, why had he ever been afraid she wouldn't?*

33 *"Ownie, they'll take some getting used to," his mother kept in a whisper.*

34 *He certainly didn't doubt that. "Uh huh."*

35 *"Sometimes they'll be a real handful for me," she whispered on. "You*  
 36 *know there are times when your daddy has to be gone. That's when I'll need*  
 37 *you to—to be my help, with your brothers. Will you do that for me?"*

38 *In the kitchen, Mrs. Austin walloped some food onto a plate for Hugh, to*  
 39 *try to get him fed and out from underfoot in the house so that she could pat*  
 40 *the situation of the new mother and twin babies into place. To look at him,*

*you would think Hugh Duff had just invented parenthood. Yet she had seen this man in town drunk as a skunk not a month ago. Which meant that his pregnant wife and the little boy Owen were here home by themselves while he was getting himself soused. True, at the time he had been at his wagon loading his groceries with the concentration of a clockmaker—no one is as overly serious as a drunkard—but Mrs. Austin gave him no marks for heading home while it was still daylight; if he hadn't he would be a brute on top of being a spree hound.*

*Her civility was in short supply, then, when she observed to Hugh that twins were no simple newcomers to a household. "The mother can't help but feel done in, for a while. I can send our girl Cora to help mind the babies and their brother some afternoons. I'd think your wife would like that."*

*Hugh rounded on her so quickly it scared her.*

*"You're a doubly adequate midwife, Mrs. Austin," he told her softly. "But you don't know thing one about Margaret Duff."*

Neither of them was ever able to pass up a mirror. And neither wanted to see any twin exactness reflected back.

Hugh and Meg Duff's double helping of sons were not identicals, that was never the question. Naturally they'd had all the mysterious pacts that twins start out with. As toddlers, Bruce and Neil, Neil and Bruce, prattled away in their private language for everything from the spoon in their mush to petting the dog. As growing boys, they were possessed of that spooky knack of always knowing what the other one was up to, even when out of sight. (Owen sometimes speculated whether they navigated off each other like bats in the dark.) But by something like instantaneous mutual decision, at about thirteen they'd had enough of being a matched set. (Their father, they already knew, was eternally going to see them that way, as two halves of the one thing—his prize workhorse team. Their mother, they equally sensed, could always catch them at their differences before they themselves could.) Bruce let the world know so by his war paint. Neil came out of the wallpaper at you.

The truth of the looking glass, though: there was no total cure for being twins. At Fort Peck they still habitually tagged around with each other after-hours, to see what that might provoke; while at the same time you could not have paid them enough of a wage to make them work side by side. By keeping some distance between them on the job, they at least could avoid the name mix-ups. Neil and Bruce, Bruce and Neil, grudgingly accepted that they shared a resemblance, but for the life of them they didn't see how anyone could think either of them was the other.

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3 **W**inter came early to Fort Peck that year—there were those who  
4 claimed it did every year—and, at least to the Duffs, felt oddly  
5 welcome.

6 Birdie Hinch and other out-of-staters for whom this was the first  
7 Montana winter thought it was cold when the temperature sank to zero  
8 or so, and the Montanans laughed at them and maintained that this was  
9 an open winter, no three-day blizzards, next thing to shirtsleeve weather.  
10 Maybe so, but the route from Glasgow to the dam site, dim excuse for a  
11 road in any season, now had ample windshield-high snowdrifts to create  
12 work for squadrons of shovelers (Bruce among them, although Neil had  
13 been picked as a carpenter's helper in the setting up of the boatyard).  
14 Teams of horses were called into use to pull out stuck trucks (briefly giv-  
15 ing Hugh something he could handle the reins of) and to draw haysleds  
16 carrying massive construction timbers, apparitions in harness trudging  
17 their load across snowy prairie to this most modern of dam sites. In Glas-  
18 gow, though, winter was simply the white calendar outside the windows  
19 while officework kept on furiously as ever (Owen, closeted with blue-  
20 prints and specifications, would have told you it blizzarded inside all that  
21 winter), as did the round-the-clock feeding (Jaarala, Meg was pretty  
22 sure, had actually smacked his lips after tasting one of her dozens of  
23 batches of dough for cookhouse Christmas cookies) and other necessities  
24 to keep up with the Fort Peck project's constant spasms of growth.

25  
26 Eight-thirty, Saturday morning, December 23rd, Charlene worked the  
27 pair of nightlock keys to let herself in the big double doors of Cunning-  
28 ham's. A nice fresh inch of damp doughy snow squelked beneath her  
29 overshoes; on that entire block of Main, about a good snowball fight's  
30 worth. Just enough to pretty the street, put a holiday cap of white on  
31 downtown Bozeman. She hoped, though, that the man sleeping it off  
32 behind the steering wheel of the muddy Ford coupe (doubtless one of  
33 the hick bachelor ranchers from the gumbo country around Maudlow,  
34 her Toston prejudice said) parked at the curb hadn't frozen to death dur-  
35 ing the night. Probably not; the coupe's windows were merely fogged up,  
36 not iced over; serve him right if he had, though.

37 She went on into the department store and turned on a side-aisle  
38 bank of lights, so she could see her way up to the cloakroom. While she  
39 still had her coat and scarf and overshoes on, she really ought to go back

out and wake up the swacked-out sleeper in the car, she knew. She considered leaving him for one of the younger salesgirls, Aggie or Wilma, when they came in at nine. Tell them there was a ready-made boyfriend waiting for them outside, just needed a little thawing out. Oh sure, and if the snoozehound froze stiff in the meantime . . . Charlene giggled; or in any other part of himself . . .

As she opened the store door and stepped back out onto the snowy sidewalk, the window of the coupe rolled down and Charlene Duff realized she was looking at another Duff.

"Bru—Neil! Isn't it?!" She crossed the sidewalk while the breath of her words still hung in the air.

"Yeah, hi, Charlene." He accomplished the feat of yawning and smiling at the same time. "Didn't know just where you lived, so I—"

*Owen!* The world fell around her. Owen had drawn Christmas duty, but was coming down next weekend to spend New Year's with her. Something had happened—Something so awful they couldn't resort to a telegram, had to send a member of the immediate—Charlene stared, glared, at Neil. She understood why olden peoples killed messengers who showed up with bad news.

"Owen's good," Neil recited, still a little sleepily. "Or was, when I left yesterday forenoon."

"Then what—why're you—" Charlene knew that her mouth was hanging open, and when other people did that she asked them if they were catching flies. "Neil, tell me what your being here—what this is about."

"Came to see if I could take you up north."

Charlene's silence seemed to fill the street. Neil fidgeted behind the steering wheel.

"I figured I'd give Ownie a kind of a Christmas present," he said, suddenly shy. "That's if you like the idea, too."

She saw immediately what Neil had put into this. Talking somebody into working a double shift to cover for him at the dam, having to pay it back later. Borrowing somebody else's car; probably that would need to be paid off, too, with extra work. Then coming all this way, presenting himself on her doorstep. Even wackier, on the department store's doorstep.

"There's one thing, though." Neil seemed reluctant to say it. "I drove all of yesterday and most of last night getting here. If I play out, can you drive some?"

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1 This was dopey. To the utmost. Owen's kid brother needed his head  
2 examined, breezing in here to cart her off to Glasgow and Fort Peck  
3 as if—

4 Charlene heard herself saying, "I can drive lots."  
5

6 "So, do you mind?" she whispered, her fingertip playing at his earlobe.

7 "I sure as hell do," he murmured. "This having to keep the noise  
8 down cramps a person's style. Hotel rooms might as well not even have  
9 walls."

10 "I meant my showing up. Out of nowhere."

11 "Out from under Neil's hat, more like. That goddamn milk-calf kid  
12 anyway." Owen laughed, Charlene joining in, the bed shaking. "What  
13 did you think, when he hung his face out that car window at you?"

14 "I thought he was crazy. Sweet, but crazy—"

15 "Huh uh. You want crazy, that's Bruce."

16 "—and then I thought, maybe he has something there."

17 "Sweet, huh? That the kind of guy you go for?"

18 "I go for Bozemaniacs, you may have noticed."

19 "I did notice something of that sort." In the semidark, Owen's hand  
20 had started up again, doing one of the things she liked done. "But that  
21 was way last night, and this's this morn—"

22 A storm of coughing announced that the occupant of the room next  
23 door had come awake.

24 They went still, trying to hold in their laughter. Owen nudged Char-  
25 lene's bare hip with his own. "Go sell that guy a box of cough drops, why  
26 don't you."

27 "Oh, sure, *me*. And what if he wants a slide rule, Mister Smartie  
28 Ownie, where would that leave you?"

29 "Never mind on the cough drops. I'll go next door and pay him not  
30 to cough."

31 They talked on in low tones, catching up on having each other so  
32 near, so available. Charlene felt as though she had somehow kidnapped  
33 herself, dared to take herself away into another custody, Owen's, Owen's  
34 *and* her own. The car trip had been more than cutting catercorner across  
35 Montana for a hurried Christmas with a husband. More like the world's  
36 longest free taxi ride, near endless but exhilarating. Neil had driven like  
37 a person newly back from blind. Like most farm kids, he could handle a  
38 steering wheel and still be seeing off in a dozen directions. She would  
39 have bet that his gaze had registered every butte, mountain, coulee, fence-  
40 post, and jackrabbit between Bozeman and Glasgow. While she con-

jured the only direction that interested her one whit, ahead, and sneaked peeks at Neil to make sure his eyelids were still up. In profile he looked startlingly like Owen at the age when she had met him and fallen for him like nobody's business, but in the next moment Neil would gawk one way or another and all she could read on him was w-e-t behind the e-a-r-s. But so what, if he had had no notion of how thoroughly he was fetching her to Owen, to Glasgow such as it was. Every minute that Neil's borrowed coupe had scooted north, she had been that much farther along in abandoning lonely. For Christmas, Charlene was giving herself Owen.

"Nobody has any real place to be," he was laying out the Duffs' holiday situation to her, "right now." *Including us*, he thought. Sangster had nobly vacated his share of this hotel room and moved in down the hall with Cody, but Cody's room partner would be back from Kansas City a few days after Christmas—Owen had half his mind going, all the time now, on where to put Charlene and himself. Did he mind that Neil had deposited her practically like a bedwarmer on Christmas Eve? No. Did he mind that he was going to have to scramble to come up with lodging for them in chockful Glasgow? He sure as hell did. Charlene's unwrapping-us-for-Christmas-Eve announcement that she had handed in her job at the department store back in Bozeman threw him for a minute. Here she was, for permanent, way ahead of schedule. In the desperate matter of housing, the only shortcut he could think of was to ask the Corps officers to use their influence. He supposed that's what colonels and majors were for.

"As far as Christmas dinner, the cookhouse is about it," he went on now. Charlene watched him from horizontal inches away. "We'll grab a table for the six of us, and Mother can get off long enough to eat with us all."

"We're on our own for Christmas Day," Charlene asked, trying not to sound relieved, "until then?"

"I have plans," Owen said. "Some of them may even take place out of this bed."

The day was cloudless, the snow brightly silken in the fields along the road to the river. They both were a little woozy and smug from their start-of-day lovemaking, and Owen honked the horn and gave a languid two-fingered wave to every truck they met, while Charlene sat over next to him so close you couldn't have put the edge of a dime between them. Wearing a capacious pair of his wool pants and one of his flannel shirts

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1 and her own heaviest coat, she felt wonderfully swaddled in clothes.  
2 Owen was spiffy all the way down, even in winter getup; she had always  
3 liked his habit of fully buckling his overshoes with his pants legs neatly  
4 bloused into them, so that he looked like something instead of flapping  
5 along buckleless like most men.

6 At the Fort Peck bluff, he pulled into a turnaround banked high with  
7 plowed snow, parked the government pickup, and with a straight face told  
8 her this was it, Mrs. Nanook, they had to mush on foot the rest of the way.

9 Charlene could tell he was kidding but not how much. The snow  
10 stood as high as her head, everywhere around. *Oh, Owen, don't do this to*  
11 *me, not when I'm trying, really I am.* Before knotting the headscarf she  
12 was putting on, she swallowed and asked: "How far?"

13 "As far as you can see," he said but grinning now. "Right there, the  
14 top of that biggest snowbank, is all. Come on, I'll give you a hand up."

15 They clambered onto the firm pile of snow, and the site where the  
16 dam-to-be had risen to Owen's eyes that spring and the bottomland  
17 farms and fields put their pattern into view for Hugh and Bruce and Neil  
18 that autumn, now stunned Charlene with stark winter river.

19 The first snow, more than a month ago, had done away with the  
20 chalked outline of the dam, but the cutting by brush and timber crews  
21 had incised the boatyard into the landscape. Work was scheduled to  
22 begin on the hull of his first dredge only two weeks from now, so the  
23 boatyard was automatically the first place Owen looked. The immense  
24 hull timbers could be seen waiting, asking to be envisioned into his 170-  
25 foot-long vessels, the white fleet of the Missouri River.

26 Beside him Charlene peered just as hard, but she could not have told  
27 you at specifically what. Ruts ran everywhere, gray muddy tracks of  
28 trucks and heavy equipment darkly streaking the snow of the bottom-  
29 land. There were giant muddy gashes along the riverbanks where timber  
30 had been torn out. War, fought with mud, this mainly looked like. What  
31 appeared to be a cross between a lumberyard and a junkyard held all of  
32 Owen's attention, she saw, in fact had him smiling wide with satisfac-  
33 tion. Yet if he were to turn to her right now and say, "Surprise! We're in  
34 a dream," or in Siberia or somewhere, she would not have been sur-  
35 prised. The Missouri, which she had been picturing as a bigger version  
36 of the stretch of the river past Toston, looked nothing whatsoever like its  
37 younger self there; this was an eternity of river, something beyond vast,  
38 winter-ugly even in the rare December sun. The split channels around  
Short 39 Cow Island were edged with ice. The color of the water, even, said *colder*  
Normal 40 *than you can imagine.*

Charlene moved around to warm up, and Owen came and put his arms around her from behind to help out. He rocked from side to side a little, her enclasped body swaying with his, as they both gazed out over the valley and the start of the damwork. Then he asked:

"So what do you think, prettypants?"

"It's lots of river."

"The bigger the better, for making people some work." He might have been commending the room capacity of paradise to her. "The PWA guys about wet their pants when they hear we can put five hundred men onto the boatyard down there, and near a thousand on the spur railroad, and on and on. This is going to be one of the population centers of Montana before we're done, know that?"

She felt him stop the gentle swaying, as if having come to what he needed to say next.

"You maybe can't tell from the looks of it yet, but it's on its way to being one sweet hell of a dam, Charlalene." He laughed, close above her ear. "I know what you're about to say—what's the sense in hanging around to build it if I've already got the thing built in my head, hmm?"

"Owen, now, I was not," she maintained. "It's just that for somebody who isn't you, it's so—so hard to put together."

"The devil is in the details, you bet. But the big thing here is pretty simple when you think about it. This is an even-steven process, really that's all in hell it is. Using the river's own water and riverbed to regulate it. Dredge the fill, pipe it to where you want to make your dam. That's the trick. You don't need to pile concrete a mile high to have a dam, or have you heard me say that before?"

He laughed once more, while she wished again she had gone to Panama and Pennsylvania with him the summer of his thesis research. Not simply because she had missed him like everything, the long days and slower nights—the half-sick flu-ey feeling that told her definitely there was no mistake, she loved Owen Duff to the base of her being—but so she might have seen with him, all along the way, the earthfill history that entranced him. From here on out, she told herself as she leaned back against him with determination, at least she could join him in his Fort Peck vision. She could begin by swallowing the fact that what looked to her like the most haggard country in the world looked to Owen like dirt engineers' heaven.

Charlene had vowed to herself she would pull her tongue out by the roots rather than tussle him about the domicile topic on the very day of Christmas, but Owen thought of it himself, glancing at her a little guiltily.

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1 "Oops, the townsite. It'll be right down over there, on that apron of  
2 land just up from the base of the bluff, see it?" She thought she more or  
3 less did. "When they get rolling on the construction next spring," Owen  
4 was assuring her, "the town'll go up so fast it'll make your head swim."

5 "They're going to name it Owentown, aren't they?" she teased to re-  
6 ward him.

7 "Hnn nn, no such luck. The Corps boys came up with something  
8 real original—the Fort Peck townsite.' But tell you what, we'll do better  
9 than that, right now."

10 Owen struck a pose, one overshoe puttee out in front of the other. "I  
11 claim this territory in the sovereign name of Charlene, the—what rank  
12 do you want?—"

13 "Empress, why not."

14 "—the Princess—"

15 "Queen!"

16 "—the Duchess of the Big Muddy prairie."

17 "Oh, swell, just what I've sat up nights wanting to be," she gave him  
18 with a poke toward his ribs. He dodged, then grabbed her in a round-  
19 house hug. They laughed at each other at extremely close quarters.

20 When they had to break their clinch or risk freezing together into  
21 nose-to-nose statuary, Owen glanced at the sun and said they'd better be  
22 heading back to Glasgow. As Charlene turned to find her footing down  
23 the snowbank, she heard him make another pronouncement:

24 "That's the family dam. Now for the damn family."

25  
26 *So, Charlalene, no matter how we set our faces for it, this is how a Duff gath-*  
27 *ering goes. Bruce won't give me the time of day, which suits me fine. The Old*  
28 *Man and I agree we're going to disagree without quite taking an axe handle*  
29 *to each other. And as you already noticed about Neil, he's got his own set of*  
30 *tracks he follows. Sometimes it's a pretty close call, isn't it, whether enough of*  
31 *us are speaking to the rest of us to get the salt and pepper passed. With a*  
32 *dozenth sideways glance Owen checked to see how she was doing. From*  
33 *the look of her, Charlene was taking it like an ace. Determined to dress*  
34 *up for Christmas dinner even if it did mean squooshing in at a cook-*  
35 *house table where the plank bench and oilcloth supported forty-two*  
36 *other fannies and sets of elbows besides those of the six Duffs, she had*  
37 *put on her green velvet outfit. It definitely paid off, Owen thought; with*  
38 *her hair gleaming dark and her arms and just enough neckline gleaming*  
39 *white, he could not remember when he had last seen her this snazzy.*

40 *Glossy as a magpie, thought Hugh, giving one more regard to Char-*

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lene's combination of ever so black hair and snowy complexion. "*Under my plumage everything prospers, sang the checkered bird.*" Better get used to marital prosperity again, eh, Owen?

*Fawncy* came to mind in Meg, the old Inverley term for those who took their tea in thin cups, although she told herself she did not like to think that of Owen's choice of a wife, really she didn't.

"—knows his stuff when it comes to Christmas presents, don't you, Neil," Charlene felt forced to carry more than her share of the dinner conversation. "Delivered me for this right on time. Now all you've got to do is go shopping for yourself. Something that comes in redhead, maybe?" She could tell that Neil, poor kid, had a crush on her, and figured the sooner she razzed him out of it the better.

One moment was going to stay with Bruce from this Christmas, which otherwise seemed to him pretty much a sad soup-kitchen affair; with the cookhouse horde for involuntary holiday company, he missed the homestead in a sizable way for the first time.

Neil was sitting next to him, more than a little unsettled from Owen's roughing his hair and asking him if he had a patent yet on coaxing women to ride in a car with him all weekend. Next to Neil, the Old Man automatically performed his "We'll come to the table as long as we're able and eat everything this side of the stable," which all but Charlene had heard him do any number of times before, and she did not seem overly impressed. Across from the Old Man, their mother seemed to be trying to make Charlene welcome for Owen's sake, but not necessarily for Charlene's own.

Here she was, then, Bruce suddenly saw—highly attractive Charlene with that black hair any man would want to bury his face in, midnight jewel among the worktanned Duffs—and yet Owen seemed a bit elsewhere. Bruce tucked that away, this first glimmer that Owen could have more on his mind than he knew what to do with.

No one in all the planning at Fort Peck had foreseen the town without limits, Wheeler.

The town that picked up the name of Montana's senior senator and dam-wangler sifted to the dam site on tradewinds as old as enterprise and lust. On a day that was neither quite the end of the winter of 1933 nor the start of the spring of 1934, one lone trailer house suddenly was parked on the prairie near the official Fort Peck townsite ("the cookie

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1 cutter town," as that Corps version of municipality already was being  
 2 called), brought in by some arithmetician who had torn out the modest  
 3 double bed and installed eight bunks for workmen weary of the drive  
 4 back and forth from Glasgow. Not much sooner was that trailer house  
 5 unhitched than here came a tavern or two or was it three; they replicated  
 6 so fast it was hard to keep track. In a dead heat, housing and houses that  
 7 were not to be confused with housing started mushrooming. Happy  
 8 Hollow, snug in a little dip at the back end of Wheeler, was the distinct  
 9 area where the houses of prostitution proliferated, under nicknames  
 10 such as the Riding Academy and the League of Nations. Some of that  
 11 particular trade also freelanced in the dancehalls that kept springing up  
 12 until downtown Wheeler was rife with them.

13 As to housing in a more domestic sense, everything was built on the  
 14 principle that temporary was good enough. When the dam was done,  
 15 Wheeler's population would pick up and move anyway. So, tumbleweed  
 16 structures built up and built up along streets that drew themselves onto  
 17 the prairie. Into your shack, shanty, lean-to, or dugout you could barely  
 18 fit such basics as bedsprings and kitchen table—all over Wheeler, family  
 19 trunks sat outside the door under a drape of canvas tarp—and for deco-  
 20 ration, a framed famous picture such as that wolf gazing down at a ranch  
 21 house on a midwinter night, his breath smoking, would suffice.

22 Squalid, flirty, hopeless, hopeful, nocturnal and red-eyed, Wheeler  
 23 almost immediately grew to three thousand strong (fifteen hundred  
 24 damworkers and fifteen hundred camp followers, the demography was  
 25 usually given as) and still burgeoning. In the midst of this, across a cou-  
 26 ple of weekends the Duffs whacked together sets of Wheeler lodging, a  
 27 rough-lumber cabin of two rooms for Hugh and Meg, and a one-room  
 28 beaverboard special for the enthusiastic new bachelor householders, Neil  
 29 and Bruce.

30  
 31 Sheriff Carl Kinnick took up the implications of the Wheeler frontier  
 32 with the county commissioners in Glasgow.

33 "I'm about to have a Klondike on my hands. What do you want done  
 34 about it?"

35 What they wanted, when translated, was for blood not to flow  
 36 openly in the Wheeler streets but the gush of damworkers' wages toward  
 37 cash registers to stay unobstructed in any way.

38 The sheriff at least shamed them into granting him another under-  
 39 sheriff. He would have told you it was coincidental that the one <sup>h</sup> hired  
 40 and assigned to Wheeler stood six feet three inches tall and looked bigger.

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Owen swung by to see his parents' new place of residence.

He sat in the government pickup a minute, determined to swallow the lump in his throat. Every day now he had been driving past Wheeler and its alley-cat aspects, but it never fully registered on him until seeing this particular clapped-together shack. Worse, he felt obscurely guilty, although it was none of his doing that the cookie cutter town of Fort Peck was being built for the Corps personnel and the civvie engineers and a big swatch of barracks for manual laborers who weren't married, while those with families were left to fend out here on the prairie—what the hell, the Corps would build anything you pointed it toward, and in this particular instance it simply had not been told to house people universally. And it wasn't as if he and Charlene were having such a swell time of it in Glasgow either, making do in one of the breadbox trailer houses out back of the temporary Corps offices.

But no two ways about this, Meg and Hugh Duff's new home was a tough looker. Rough raw boards and a couple of small windows and, as the Old Man doubtless had already said, not enough room to cuss a cat without getting fur in your mouth. Oh, Owen knew the place was still in process, his father and the twins would bank dirt around the base of the house before winter and his mother would coax out flowers, even if it was only morning glories. But he still felt burdened by what he was seeing, as he opened the door of the pickup and headed for the house.

"Owen! Welcome to the holy city."

The sight of his mother didn't help. She had just come off her morning shift at the cookhouse newly installed near the boatyard and while she had all the usual smile for Owen, the rooms around her resembled a rummage sale. He recognized household items from the homestead, stacked and piled into corners, with no particular order nor apparent prospect of any.

Meg gestured as if she would take care of it in a moment. "We're in, and a roof over us. That's at least something."

"I'll get Charlene to come down and give you a hand."

"Oh, that's not—" Meg said, too swiftly, then did a major repeal. "Of course, that'd be appreciated."

"She can come down with me Monday, stay the day here with you. Do her good." He grinned broadly at his mother. "Do you both good. Maybe do the metropolis of Wheeler some good, even. How's the cookin'?"

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1 "Adventurous. Those dredgebuilders of yours are on an onion-  
2 sandwich kick. One of them started it, and now Mr. Jaarala and I spend  
3 half our time in tears, slicing—Owen, whatever are you looking at?"

4 "What I'm afraid it is, is daylight."

5 He went to the back wall and felt at the join of the uneven lumber.  
6 Sure enough, he could put the end of his little finger in some of the  
7 cracks between the boards.

8 "Your father hasn't come around to accepting tarpaper quite yet," her  
9 words barely reached him. "There's time, luckily, before next winter."

10 Owen blew out a depressurizing breath to keep from saying any-  
11 thing.

12 Meg busied herself at pouring coffee, as though that would put eti-  
13 quette between them and the matter of Hugh. When she handed Owen  
14 his cup, though, his expression said they weren't done with their oldest  
15 topic. They knew each other too well. He took one sip and asked her  
16 outright:

17 "How's his behavior?"

18 "Predictable, at least." Meg laughed her laugh that played with what  
19 she had just said. Then she looked over at her prize son. "Not what you  
20 think. He hasn't gone on one of his tears since—well, it's been some lit-  
21 tle while, honestly, it has, Owen."

22 *Which means he's overdue.* He felt it traveling around and around in  
23 him again, why it had to be this way with his father, whether it might  
24 have come out differently when

25 *Hugh and the eighteen-year-old Owen were finishing the seed harvest,*  
26 *the late-summer glorious time of the year, there on the homestead. Financial*  
27 *daylight at last, Hugh was sure with a crop like this. An absolute shortcut to*  
28 *the bank: with alfalfa seed you needn't even build haystacks nor run the hay*  
29 *through sheep or cattle nor be at the mercy of livestock buyers in gabardine*  
30 *suits. You merely harvested the hay, sacked up its rich little seeds and sold the*  
31 *sackfuls. Infinitely easier than flax, which was slippery stuff to make cooper-*  
32 *ate with a binder reel, and a better payoff, much better, than oats or barley.*  
33 *By now, a decade and a half into the homestead, he had the touch for alfalfa*  
34 *seed, if he did say so himself. It takes anyone ten years to learn how to farm*  
35 *a particular piece of land. But when you got it right, learning to live with*  
36 *one year's rainfall and the next year's lack of it, figuring out the pattern of*  
37 *yield hidden in the soil, and the splendid alfalfa sprang into gallant green*  
38 *and bursting purple, which led at last to this harvest of the valuable*  
39 *buckshot-size seeds: this was as close as Hugh Duff could come to prayer.*

40 *And there would be more such fields. He and Owen simply had to keep*

at it. "We're very nearly there, Ownie. That lowlying acreage will set us up, something wonderful. The two of us can clear it and break it out yet this fall, eh?"—Owen gave a short uninflected response—"then next spring we can work it . . . What'd you just say?"

"Not me."

Hugh peered at him, trying to comprehend.

"More schooling, is what I've got in mind," Owen answered the question unspoken. Then he swallowed, and said it entirely: "College, at Bozeman."

Here again how life could change in the space of a word or two; Hugh had always hated that and forever would. Just when a person thought he had found his footing, that's when something like this caved it out from under him again.

He controlled himself to the extent necessary to say:

"I need to ask you . . . to hold off on that, a year."

Owen was ready for that one. "Then there'll be another year. Something else you need me for. No, this is quits. This year."

Hugh did not want to ask further, but had to. "Just when is it you're taking yourself off to such great things?"

"Not for a week yet." Owen had this readiest of all. "I can take care of the place while you go to town."

While you go on your bender. While you fall off the water wagon as you so regularly do. While you hide in a bottle. Owen might as well have spoken the charges every conceivable way, it would not have mattered more. What hit Hugh was his son's basic calculation, Owen's calm allowance of time for his father to behave in the expected unreliable manner.

"Throw salt on it and walk away, eh, Ownie?" Hugh spoke with fury. "That's going to be your notion of life, is it? Don't trouble yourself any here. Your mother and the twins will get by while I'm in town. Those of us who can take a knock for each other's sake will get by."

"Has he said—will he stick with the work here, do you think?" Owen asked his mother now, past his original intentions. *What the hell else can I do, when she's sitting here in a shack the wind will pour through? Damn him anyway, why is it always so rough—*

"There is no other choice whatsoever," Meg willed away his question just as she had done all the times it rose up in her.

"That hasn't always stopped him, has it?" His mother and he had always been natural allies. Yes, go, she had told him the summer of his break from home. *Have it better for yourself than we've been able to. You are special to me, Owen, and I want to see you make your way to fine things.*

"Hanging on to the homestead practically forever," Owen cited as if

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1 prosecuting in absentia, "the way he did. You saw he was throwing good  
2 money after bad, I saw it—how did he get to be the only Scotchman  
3 who doesn't know how to keep his hand around a dollar?"

4 "He's Hugh Duff," Meg said. "He takes slowly to persuasion."

5 "He'd better take the chance here," Owen said reflectively, eyes on  
6 the chinks of daylight through that back wall, "or he'll find himself  
7 sweeping out whorehouses, the damned old—"

8 "Don't!"

9 She was giving him a look that peeled him back to boy, the scold that  
10 seemed to hurt her twice as much as him. He felt his face flush. Then his  
11 mother seemed to come to herself, and smiled the apology. "I'm never  
12 going to like hearing you take on against your father, even when I feel  
13 like knocking his ears down myself."

14 "All right, I guess we better keep our priorities straight," Owen re-  
15 sorted to. "Nailing his hide to the wall isn't nearly enough to help this  
16 place any." He figured he knew just the thing that would, though.

17 The Blue Room, it came to be called, after Owen snuck back the  
18 next day with an armful of discarded blueprints and a pot of wallpaper  
19 paste. Paperhanging was not his strong point and the room's corners ran  
20 every way but square, but the heavy plan paper covered over the cracks  
21 and knotholes.

22 When Hugh came home that night, he stood for a long minute look-  
23 ing at the white-on-blue lines of the cross section of the dam, the eleva-  
24 tions and dimensions of Owen's engineering world.

25 Watching him, Meg bit her lip, wondering which way this would go.

26 It somehow went more than one. Hugh first of all said with savage  
27 satisfaction, "Have him perform a few hundred domestic miracles  
28 around here, and we'll almost be living like people again." But then he  
29 passed a hand over his face, a downcast expression following it.

30 "Hugh, wash for supper," Meg quickly urged.

31 He shook his head. "I'm going downtown. I may be a while."

32 "I wish you wouldn't." They both paused, and when he made no an-  
33 swer, she said with familiar anger, "But don't let that stop you, I suppose."

34 "It never yet has," he dropped over his shoulder as he went out the  
35 door.

36  
37 Two days later.

38 Neil and Bruce were in their cinematic period. A Wheeler entrepre-  
39 neur had deduced that people could not drink and dance 100 percent of

more  
esperms

the time, and opened a moviehouse; the two Duff brothers became instant addicts. For days after seeing George Arliss and Reed Beddow in *Squadron from the Clouds*, they piled into the crew truck with the cry, "Pilots, to your machines!" They yowled for a week after Charlotta Hoving, playing the advertising agency secretary in *Stupendous*, attained the halibut magnate's hand by thinking up the winning slogan "Lutefisk, the hominy of the sea." Night after night the pair of them goggled in the dark of the movie theater, in the congregation of hundreds like them, and swaggered out as if they'd been to harems and casinos. When they piled into their parents' house on their way home and retold that night's movie, Hugh and Meg had something to agree on—that their twin sons had not behaved this way since they were five-year-olds.

This particular end of an afternoon, Bruce and Neil were a bit ahead of themselves, as they generally were in trying to burn up their leisure time, and so decided to sample the latest sights along the main street of Wheeler until the sacred moviehouse opened. As usual the town reeked of newly cut lumber and fresh pitch, as if the community perfume were turpentine. Construction would flare up in one spot, then seem to change its mind and hop across town. This was one of the things about Wheeler, it built and built and changed and changed but wasn't nearly all in working order yet. Directly in front of them down the block, a top-heavy man in a suit and vest shot out from a vacant slapboard building, turned, and gave the fresh construction a kick. He seemed to think it over briefly, then kicked the structure twice as hard.

"I felt that from here," Bruce said aside to Neil. "If that guy keeps on, he'll be in the market for assistant kickers."

"Wait a minute," Neil said. "Let's just see." He went over to the edifice assailant. "You putting up this building, mister?"

"No," the man said with supreme disgust, "I'm just throwing money at the goddamn place for exercise."

"What's left to do?" Neil peeked into the walled-in shell of building, atop bluish Fort Peck clay. "Only the flooring? My brother and I can handle a hammer."

"Look, junior, the last jackleg sonofabitch of a carpenter left me in the lurch here. I need the real item. Every minute this place isn't making me money it's costing me money. Fort Peck's got carpenters up the gigi, and they're all out there"—he waved toward the dam site—"on Franklin D.'s payroll, God bless him."

By now Bruce had his head in the structure beside Neil's. Off behind

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1 the stack of floorboards stood a pile of cardboard boxes that advertised  
2 Mighty Mac bib overalls and Peerless worksocks and so on. "Opening a  
3 line of dry goods, huh?"

4 "Wet," came the sarcastic correction. "Buddyboy, you're looking at  
5 the Blue Eagle Tavern. Or would be, if it had a sonofabitching floor in  
6 it."

7 "We can lay your floor for you," Neil asserted. "Give us a crack at it,  
8 Mr.—?"

9 "Harry. Tom Harry." The man in the suit looked at the pair of them  
10 as skeptically as if checking the sex on new puppies. "This'd need to be  
11 done on a strict contract basis. Meet the deadline, or no pay—I can't be  
12 forking out to jacklegs who don't come through on the job. You two ever  
13 worked that way before?"

14 "All our lives," Bruce tried to testify, Neil cutting him off with:

15 "Say we do contract it, what'd be the pay?"

16 Tom Harry named his price.

17 "You're on!" Neil and Bruce told him in chorus.

18 It was Neil who cast a second look at the stack of floorboards and  
19 thought to ask:

20 "How long have we got to do this flooring?"

21 "Tonight," said Tom Harry.

22  
23 Neil and Bruce hammered while Hugh <sup>e</sup>hafted lengths of floorboards and  
24 Tom Harry sat and smoked cigarettes.

25 The hammer sounds racketed into the Wheeler night. *Wham wham*  
26 *wham*, Neil's was a steady three-beat delivery onto each nailhead; Bruce's  
27 tended to surround the matter, *WHAM wham-am WHAM-am*. While  
28 the hammers hit those higher notes, a pile driver gave bass *whumps* be-  
29 side the river. The bluffs of the Missouri here had heard din before—the  
30 bawling rumble of buffalo herds, the last-stand discourse of Sitting Bull's  
31 winter camp before the summer of the Little Big Horn, the axes of  
32 steamboat woodhawks—but there had been half a century of compara-  
33 tive silence since any of those. Now and for years to come, a river of  
34 sound waited to drown down onto the site of Fort Peck—the opera  
35 shrieks of shale saws, the incessant comings and goings of locomotives  
36 and bulldozers and trucks, the falsetto of steam whistles, the attacks of  
37 jackhammers. Tonight the Duffs began their accompaniment of that full  
38 clamor of work. Tonight the true first pinions of the Fort Peck project  
39 were being driven: the pilings of the railroad trestle, the nails of the Blue  
40 Eagle's floor.

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To the great surprise of the Duffs, the flooring proved to be hardwood, high-grade. Nice seasoned tightgrained tongue-and-groove oak; lovely, really, if you weren't trying to drive nails into it or lugging twelve-foot boards of it all night long. Hugh, at the lumber pile, had a bit of perspective that Bruce and Neil, kneeling in an arm-earnest exertion on the fresh flooring, lacked. "You could dance on this stuff."

Tom Harry blew a cumulus of blue smoke and said, "What the hell did you think the point of this is? Civil beautification?"

"Taxi dancing," Hugh identified, as if he knew the boulevards of the world. "Hate to be the one to tell you, but the Wheeler Inn has beat you to it. Half the women west of Chicago are already working that dive."

"Check out the arithmetic," Tom Harry said, unperturbed. "Soon as this dam project really gets geared up, there'll be three shifts a day—one gang working, one sleeping, and that will still leave about thirty-five hundred men off shift, any hour of the day or night. Not going to be any shortage of guys hanging around hot to trot, don't worry."

Neil tried to take the floor-laying task in little seasons. He would fit his end of a board into place, immediately drive the nails to snug it, catch his breath while Bruce whaled away at the far end, then start down the length of the wood, nailing it at every joist while Bruce similarly worked toward the middle.

Before tonight, Neil was exulting to himself, he wouldn't have said his prospect of becoming a contractor at Fort Peck was anything to write home about. He still wondered whether a handshake with Tom Harry constituted the full basis of a contract. But only as long ago as this morning, he hadn't known enough about it to even wonder, had he. One major fact stood out clearly to him: this flooring deal wasn't any so-much-per-hour as decided by somebody else, it was going to be a lump-sum payoff for Duffs working like Duffs. And wasn't that something?

Either his hammer or Bruce's consistently drowned out parts of the conversation between Hugh and Tom Harry, so that they seemed to be carrying on a grave discussion in addled shorthand:

"You really—*blam*—there'll be—*bang*—thousand people in this—*whamblam*—excuse for a town?"

"Twice that. Simple arithmetic—*blam*—thousand making a living for the dam and—*bang*—thousand making a—*whammedy-blam*—living off them."

"Where's—*bang*—good in that?"

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1 "I didn't say a—*blam*—thing about good, I'm just—*whang*—you it's  
2 going to happen."  
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4 By midnight, Bruce was convinced that his future was going to die out  
5 in nailheads. He had a vision of himself: his right arm drooping down  
6 eighteen inches longer than his left, the entire right side of his body from  
7 his cramped foot to his raw knee to his aching shoulder swollen up ir-  
8 reparably from all this hammering. He would come out of this night  
9 looking like half a gorilla, he was convinced.

10 He nearly keeled onto his face in relief when Tom Harry announced  
11 he always ate a bite at this time of night and if the Duffs were interested,  
12 he supposed they could chow down with him.

13 The saloon owner resorted to his stack of cardboard boxes, pulling  
14 one out with a grunt, then began handing around to Hugh and Neil and  
15 Bruce tin cans that had no labels.

16 One of them asked, "What've we got here?"

17 "How would I know?" Tom Harry answered. "The labels came off at  
18 some forest fire camp, that's how I was able to buy the stuff cheap."

19 The men ate, plums preceding beans. Then the three Duffs were  
20 back at the flooring.

21  
22 It was Bruce, head down, who hammered his way to the footings at the  
23 back of the building and, still on his knees, reared back with a grateful  
24 sigh to rest. He immediately found that he was looking not at the foot-  
25 ings of the back wall, but the supports of a platform of considerable size.

26 "Bandstand," Tom Harry identified it for him.

27 Even in his stupefied state, Bruce gave it a try:

28 "Now, the floor of a bandstand wasn't brought up in our deal."

29 "Floor is floor," stated Tom Harry.  
30

31 Around 3:00 a.m., Tom Harry said: "There's an outside chance you  
32 knotheds might get this done." The tavern impresario stepped over to  
33 his cardboard boxes again. Out of the top one he lifted a mounted deer  
34 head, lugged it over to the wall along the floored section, stood on a  
35 sawhorse and hung the piece of taxidermy as high as he could reach.  
36 Back to his next box, which produced the snarling head of a grizzly bear.

37 Tom Harry cradled the tremendous head, he and it glowering back  
38 at the bleary stares of the Duffs.

Short 39 "Deecor," he explained, and went off to affix the baleful grizzly above  
Normal 40 the front door.

An entire safari of stuffed heads gradually aligned the four walls of the Blue Eagle saloon, until Tom Harry came at last to a flat box. Reverently he plucked out the wadded-up newspapers protecting the picture frame, and, just above where his cash register would be, hung the campaign portrait and its bold print:

A GALLANT LEADER—  
FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

By dawn, Hugh and Neil looked done in and Bruce could barely creep, but you could have skated figure eights across the fresh floor of the Blue Eagle Tavern.

With a practiced thumb, Tom Harry riffled out the green bills of the contract price and held the money out to Neil.

"Tell you what," the saloonkeeper gruffly invited the numb trio, "come back in half an hour when I get the bar set up and a bottle opened, and I'll let you buy the first round of drinks ever served in the Blue Eagle."

"You can jitney down with me," Owen had said, reasonable as pie, "and come back on your own after you help get Mother's place kicked into shape." Here then they and the Monday morning of it were. Outside the Downtowner Cafe in Glasgow, Charlene and Owen and two dozen damworkers trooped into the first jitney bus of the day. The workers were quiet, in honor of a wife, and she could feel the generalized envy, which made her even a little more proud of Owen and herself than usual.

When the jitney drove down over the Fort Peck bluff, miles of muck and machinery sprawled across the bottomland—twice as much of everything, it seemed, since Charlene had last seen the dam site. Other jitney buses and crew trucks were disgorging workmen by the hundreds, a human chaos pouring out on top of the mechanical one. Owen again pointed out to her the preparations at the Fort Peck townsite, but she couldn't tell if there had been any real progress yet. The one sure measurement she knew how to make here was that she could see more of the river each time, the channel edge sharper as new sections of the riverbank were denuded of timber. The bus made a stop in the inexact middle of Wheeler, and Owen and she stepped off. If the Fort Peck dam site was becoming a jungle of mud and grotesque equipment, the so-called town of Wheeler was running amok like an overgrown Hooverville.

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1 Everything looked like a back alley. And from all the bottomland clear-  
2 ance effort, everyone had woodpiles the size of haystacks. (Cottonwood  
3 was about the worst firewood there was, but free wood was free wood.)  
4 It crossed her mind that a lot of Wheeler's so-called houses would be bet-  
5 ter burned in the stove and the firewood stacked up for shelter. But she  
6 kept that to herself as she and Owen picked their way to his parents'  
7 shanty.

8 "Here you go, Mother," Owen announced. "Brought you the other  
9 love of my life." Then Owen Duff strode off to engineer his dam, and  
10 Meg Milne Duff and Charlene Tebbet Duff were left to fend with each  
11 other and the long day ahead.

12 "Charlene." Meg had a way of saying the name as if it was a sentence  
13 unto itself. She keenly asked, pretty sure she knew: "How are you liking  
14 Glasgow?"

15 Charlene restrained herself to saying Glasgow was quite a place, dif-  
16 ferent, going night and day.

17 "Funny that they put that name to it, I still think," Meg seemed to  
18 muse to herself, the Scottish burr very much in her throaty voice. Char-  
19 lene was apprehensive that this was going to lead into some kind of Old  
20 Country story—old countries were part of the territory Charlene was  
21 determined to climb away from in life—and so she rapidly changed the  
22 topic to the surefire:

23 "How's everyone doing?"

24 Meg brightened right up at that, and although Charlene mainly still  
25 thought of Neil as a skim-milker and Bruce as a wild jackass and Hugh  
26 as she wasn't quite sure what, she found herself a little intrigued by Meg's  
27 blends of tart pride in each of the Duffs of the dam.

28  
29 The first dredge, the *Gallatin*, was aswarm with timberers and caulkers  
30 and shipwrights at other tasks Bruce realized he was going to have to fig-  
31 ure out in a hurry, as he reported aboard. He knew this was a break,  
32 being shifted up onto the dredge-outfitting crew, and he couldn't help  
33 looking pleased with himself as the boatyard foreman, Medwick, had  
34 him sign onto the roster.

35 Bruce cocked his head and asked, "Say, are you any relation to—"

36 "No," the stocky foreman said by rote, heartily sick of having to tell  
37 the world he was no kin to Ducky Medwick, the St. Louis Cardinals out-  
38 fielder. He wished Ducky Medwick had gone into the priesthood.

39 He took a look at Bruce and wished, too, that he had been sent  
40 somebody besides yet another drylander to help build this dredge. But

Cecil Medwick said only, "Draw your tools at the ransack shack and we'll see what we can do with you."

Now that he had been picked for the trestle crew, Neil had risen spectacularly. He had become brace monkey.

It fatigued any normal human being to watch him. Using telephone poleman's climbing spikes, he would scale a trestle piling, dragging up with him the pneumatic drill and the length of air hose that powered it. In place up there, twice as high as a house, he had to bring the hefty drill and its twenty-inch-long bit above his head, position the apparatus so that it would bore through the piling at the desired angle, and hold it there while the air pressure fed the drill into the wood. Whenever they could, Bruce and Hugh and Meg and Owen sneaked glances at Neil up there, the ribbons of drilled wood festooning down from him, the drill held overhead as if he were making a matador's stiff-armed plunge into the bull. The other Duffs knew this was out-of-this-world work, but they didn't know the half of it either, the tricks of the trade he was picking up. In the climbing, he had needed to unlearn the natural tendency to shinny and instead climb with one side of his body at a time, right leg and arm up and clamped into place, then left leg and arm up in the same clamp-step, then both right limbs again, on and on. That was the first trick, and the next, once he was up there thirty feet, was to lean back into thin air, absolutely trusting the climber's harness around his waist while he put all his strength to the pneumatic drill.

"Takes a little getting used to," was all Neil said of this.

Hugh, though. Hugh was having none of the spurious notion that there was such a thing as advancement, in make-work such as this. He would do as he was doing. Go each day in a bone-rattling crew truck a little farther into the bottomland. Hop down and head with his axe into the reachable enemy, the Missouri's army of brush. Work himself numb.

Under her report on the men's jobs, Meg was wondering about Charlene. How much time she spent on keeping her hair so perfect, and the extent to which she was kicking herself for having tossed her job in Bozeman over her shoulder, and why she and Owen were waiting so long to have children. *I wonder why I even bother to wonder, though.* Meg was not alone among the Duffs in thinking the answers were on the surface of Charlene; everything about her seemed a bit self-elevated. But, Meg had to remind herself again, if Owen—

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1 Owen's mother seemed to have a mood a minute, as far as Charlene  
2 could see. Meanwhile, Charlene was fairly itching to do something about  
3 the housekeeping in this shack, which somehow seemed gauntly un-  
4 lived-in and wildly cluttered at the same time. *Wouldn't you just know, the*  
5 *only thing in here that looks like anything is Owen's blueprints.* "Well, bet-  
6 ter put me to work," she more than volunteered.

7 They spent considerable time deploying boxes and shuffling furni-  
8 ture around before either of them realized they were putting together  
9 two opposite households. Charlene would clear a boxful ("These are all  
10 knickknacks—it's a shame you don't have space for them here") out of  
11 sight under the bed only to have Meg shortly resurrect it ("I need these  
12 where I can get at them"). They sparred through half the morning with  
13 packings and unpackings.

14 "Let's say," Meg at last said carefully, "this will do, for now."

15 "If you think so," Charlene replied with determined neutrality.

16 She couldn't manage, though, to stop glancing around the two rooms  
17 of shambles, still not sure what she was seeing here in the house of Meg.  
18 A craving for disorder? Some loco brand of order that was all Meg's own?  
19 Whichever, Charlene could have done without it in a mother-in-law.

20 Out came cups and coffee, a ritual either woman could have per-  
21 formed under ether. But instead of plain cookies, Meg produced a  
22 plateful of golden ring-shaped ones with a delicate dusting of sugar  
23 crystals. Charlene disliked sugary dustings, but went through the oblig-  
24 ation of picking up one of the things. It was so light it almost flew up  
25 out of her hand. She took a bite. The most delicious item she had ever  
26 tasted.

27 "Mmm. What do you call these?"

28 "I call them booty from the cookhouse," Meg said with a wry ex-  
29 pression, "but Mr. Jaarala calls them ballenacrunchers." Jaarala took  
30 considerable explaining, as did his cooking wizardry, both women glad  
31 to have something definite to fill the air with.

32 But when that topic ran dry, ~~both women~~ <sup>they</sup> simultaneously knew that  
33 Charlene herself was going to be their next.

34 Meg did manage to put most of a smile on it as she asked:

35 "What do you find to do with yourself?"

36 Good question. See the sights of Glasgow, by walking to the post of-  
37 fice and back. Correspond with her salesgirl chums at Cunningham's,  
38 but that had been dropping off lately, at the Bozeman end. Cook three  
39 meals a day on the trailer house's tiny shepherder stove, at least there  
40 was some challenge to that. Read. Sit. Breathe. Yawn.

"Crosswords, a lot," Charlene found to reply.

"Those puzzle thingies?" Meg could not help looking surprised, if not shocked.

"Mmhhh. You can learn a lot. New words. It kind of turns a person into a dictionary." Owen was already one, or something beyond. "*Owne, I've looked up everything on water there is—what can they possibly mean, 'shortest name for a river,' two letters?*" He thought for two seconds and said, "Po." And naturally, it fit.

"Well," said Meg, letting it stand as a full sentence. Then resorted to: "When they build that Fort Peck town and you're right here—"

"—it should be better then, yes," Charlene filled in before she could. It was bound to be better, in an actual house in a real neighborhood with all the other wives of engineers and Corps officers, close at hand to Owen's work. These days, this Glasgow captivity, the problem with watching Owen engineer the Fort Peck Dam was that she never saw Owen. *Her* Owen. The one who kept being a surprise, always putting some fresh tickle into life for her. Here and now in this session with Meg, though, she kept to "Everybody is pretty much on the run until then," loyally saving him out of it.

To her great surprise, Meg said it for her. "He can be devilishly solitary, our Owen."

Charlene nibbled at another ballenacruncher, thinking hard. Was Owen's own mother taking *her* side? If so, how far? Lord, the ins and outs of these Duffs.

"He's up to his ears in what he's doing, I imagine," Meg went on. She laughed a little, as if inviting Charlene into her rueful view of men named Duff. "They're all that sort. From Hugh on down, they don't know any other way about it but to beat a job to death with work."

"Owen maybe needs—other work," Charlene produced. She watched her startled mother-in-law and decided she might as well put the next card on the table, too. "Away, maybe."

Meg looked worse than startled. If Owen went, before the rest of them could find their footing here at Fort Peck . . .

"I just mean," Charlene brushed the sugar from the pastry off her fingers, "he can go so far, he knows such a lot, if he gets the right thing to work on."

*And you get to wish yourself someplace where you needn't to look at mud and shacks.* Meg tried, though, to be hearty with this next: "You can't mean that, Charlene—don't they keep saying this is the biggest dam of its kind, ever?"

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1 "Could be it'll be the only of its kind, too. Then what, for Owen?  
2 There's only so much you can build with earthfill. When he has to move  
3 to concrete, the engineers at Grand Coulee and Boulder Dam and so on  
4 will be years up on him."

5 "Owen has always made a way for himself," Meg's voice stepped out  
6 to his defense. "I'm surprised his own wife would hold him back from  
7 what he most wants to do."

8 "Hold him—? Just a cockeyed minute here. I only ever pointed  
9 out—" Wedding band instinct took over in Charlene, and she said flatly  
10 enough to set any mother-in-law straight: "That's between Owen and  
11 me, wouldn't you have to say?"

12 "No, actually, Charlene, I'd say it's a matter for Owen," Meg gave  
13 back to her at least as instructively. "I've never known him to put a foot  
14 wrong"—except, her tiniest pause suggested, in who he walked to the  
15 altar with—"and if he thinks this dam is the work for him, he should see  
16 it through."

17 "It's not that simple a proposition, it really isn't. Owen himself says  
18 that if Fort Peck works the way it's supposed to, it'll be a feather in his  
19 cap, yes. But if something goes wrong, it'll stick to the engineers here.  
20 Back we'll all go to cow pasture dams, he says so himsel—"

21 "Charlene. I am for Owen. I can't help that, and I won't even try."

22 "He's not just yours to be *for* anymore, though, is he. He went out  
23 and added a wife."

24 "I'm not trying to take him back from you. That's silly to even  
25 think." (*Oh, is it?*) "But he doesn't *stop* being my son just because—"

26 "Nobody *said* he has to stop being your—"

27 "Well, then?"

28 "Well then, *what?*"

29  
30 "How'd it go?"

31 Owen was perfectly cheery, chirping that out, when he got home to  
32 Glasgow after work. He could afford to be, Charlene figured, before she  
33 started on answering him; he didn't have any in-laws around.

34 "We didn't see eye to eye."

35 "On what?"

36 "You name it. Anything."

37 She saw he was going to wait her out, with not the best expression in  
38 the world on his face, so she confessed the specific.

39 "You. She and I got into it, a little, over—"

40 "Me? Goddamn it, you two. Couldn't you just unpack boxes and pat

that shack into place a bit without getting into a battle royal about—  
what'd I have to do with it, anyway?"

"What you and I have talked about, is all. Where Fort Peck is going  
to lead to, as against the other dams."

"I thought you and I agreed we'd look at that a little farther down the  
line," Owen said in the dead-level tone he employed against surprises.  
"Like when we have an actual house to live in and I have an actual dredg-  
ing operation to size up—the actual factual to judge by, on how things  
are going, then decide from there."

"I know we did. It just came up somehow, with your mother." Back  
at the department store in Bozeman, the first one to see Mr. Cunning-  
ham slip out of his office on one of his inspection prowls would always  
scribble a note and zing it down in the change canister, *Have you seen the  
big scissors?* Charlene right now felt as if the big scissors of life had  
sneaked up on her unannounced. Here she was in the second fight of the  
day and all she'd been trying to do was to cache some damn boxes.

"All right, then, those things happen," Owen said as if he didn't at all  
see why they had to. "Let's just get back to maintaining some peace."

"And what is it you think I'm supposed to do about that?"

"Maybe tone things down a bit, where the rest of the family is con-  
cerned."

"Owen, it was only a spat. It was not as if your mother and I threw  
furniture at each other."

"Listen one damn minute, Charlene, okay? I'm trying to help the  
members of my family, and my mother is the main one we've—I've got  
to team up with. The Old Man will pay attention to her, some, and Neil  
will pay attention to me, some, and among us we can maybe hogtie  
Bruce. But if you're going to be fighting with my mother, that kills it all.  
The whole bunch of them will turn their backs on you. On us. And  
that's something I can't have happen."

"You know, Owen, I only remember marrying one Duff."

"The rest get thrown in free. Charlene, this is only until they can get  
themselves squared away here. I have enough say, here and there on the  
project, that I've managed for Neil and Bruce to come up with pretty  
good jobs. I can probably even send something the Old Man's way,  
whenever he comes to his senses enough to take it. They all of them can  
keep on up the ladder, if they don't decide they'd rather put a foot in my  
face. So, all I'm saying is it'd help everybody's situation by not having my  
mother on the outs with us." Owen put a hand into her hair, stroking  
ever so lightly. "How about giving that a try for me, think you can?"

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1           What Charlene deeply thought was that the circumstances had not  
2 yet been invented, in human annals, under which Meg would ever let  
3 herself be on the outs with her perfect Owen, and that this was always  
4 going to pose a problem for a daughter-in-law of Meg Duff. But what  
5 she confined herself to saying was:

6           “Owne, I’ll make every try. But you’re letting yourself in for some  
7 real refereeing.”  
8

9           The dam’s first principle was to build not from the bottom up, but from  
10 the bottom down. To give a dirt dam builder a nightmare, merely whis-  
11 per “seepage”: water eating its way beneath, undercutting the dam’s mass  
12 of earthfill.

13           *Owen had worked the topic to death in his degree work at Bozeman,*  
14 *evaluating the performance of earthen embankment dams. Rode the rails to*  
15 *the West Coast, his last college summer, and signed on as a coal stoker on a*  
16 *freighter in order to reach Panama and explore the Gatun Dam there, which*  
17 *made use of the material moved in the cutting of the Panama Canal—*  
18 *Gatun was the biggest earthfill dam ever tried, before Fort Peck. Then the*  
19 *rest of his freighter voyage, on around to an East Coast port, and Pennsylva-*  
20 *nia to be hitchhiked across, so he could look back on the one that spooked*  
21 *everybody—the South Fork Dam, which had been above Johnstown.*

22           Fort Peck’s shield against seepage had to be steel, thirty-four million  
23 pounds of it in girder form, driven side by side straight down through  
24 riverbed’s sediment and clay into bedrock. Amid all the other fever spots  
25 of site preparation here in 1934, pile drivers were beginning to monoto-  
26 nously peg the girders into the earth, to an average depth of one hundred  
27 feet. Day by week by month, the cutoff wall, as this was called, would  
28 rise and extend as a metal palisade across the Fort Peck valley. On top of  
29 this cutoff wall would come the pyramid core of earthfill dredged from  
30 the river’s bottoms and banks, and on either side of the core the more  
31 gradual slopes of fill, all engineered with Fort Peck’s singularities in  
32 mind.

33           *“Any earth dam, to be built to permanence, must be tailor-made to fit its*  
34 *individual location,” Owen phrased it in the thesis that tipped the balance*  
35 *for him when the hiring was done for Fort Peck.*

36           Taken together, then, the watertight cutoff wall and the impervious  
37 core and the vast pervious buttresses of fill would form the heavy lid to  
38 hold back the river water, permanently.

39           *Two thousand two hundred and eighty people died at Johnstown, when*  
40 *that less than permanent dam went out in 1889.*

Colonel Parmenter's decision to name Owen Duff as the fillmaster, overseeing the dredging and mounding of a world-record quantity of earthfill, was the kind of jump a career needed only once.

"He's young for it," Major Santee objected.

"He'll get over that quick enough," the colonel said.

It was not even Saturday night yet, mere Thursday, when Hugh dragged himself home from fighting brush and found himself invited right back out. By Meg, who was telling him:

"I thought we might both go downtown tonight."

"You don't want to do that, Meggedy," he said uneasily. "Just a lot of drinking and carrying on, there."

"Hugh, I do too want to."

That tone let him know she meant it, and it threw him. For one thing, he was much less than sure that Bruce and Neil, who were in their bowling period now, were actually at the bowling alley this very night rather than draped over a taxi dancer apiece. For another, Hugh couldn't think where his and Meg's next move could possibly be, if she took a look at Wheeler in full howl and vetoed staying here.

"I'll go alone," she was declaring, "if I have to."

*There is no alone in Wheeler,* Hugh thought, *that's the point of this place.* Aloud, though:

"Put on your madhouse clothes, then, and let's go."

They could hear the downtown activities long before they were there, the din of the big Wheeler Inn the loudest of all, and so Hugh steered Meg into the Blue Eagle instead. It too was packed with drinkers and dancers, but Hugh had in the back of his mind that Tom Harry did not seem the kind to tolerate total riot. Indeed, the interior of the Blue Eagle hummed and jangled—a solo piano was providing the taxi dance music this night—but there were none of the bloodcurdling shrieks the Wheeler Inn seemed prone to.

Hugh with his effective elbows managed their way to the bar, Meg as close as possible behind him with a fixed expression of gameness. She had Charlene to thank, or not, for this excursion. Determination had been building up in Meg, ever since their set-to over standing by Owen, to sally out with Hugh to his nether side of life; show him she stood by him, even here, even in this deepest precinct of the *everything*, if that's what it took. Such was Wheeler. People, Margaret Duff to name one, who would have sworn they hated the roistering side of life now found themselves practically aswim in it, just from residence in this town.

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